

4 killed, 5 wounded in Medina as bombers target three Saudi cities

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Riyadh: Four security officers were killed and five others wounded after a suicide bomber detonated his vest outside the Prophet's Mosque in Saudi Arabia's Medina where Mohammed is buried, what is believed to be one of Islam's holiest sites.

Blast near Prophet's mosque

Saudi Arabia witnessed three suicide attacks on Monday- first near the U.S. Consulate in the western city of Jeddah followed by a blast outside a Shiite mosque in Qatif on the other side of the country and third at Medina where thousands of worshippers were about to hold sunset prayers in the mosque.

The mosque in Medina is visited by millions of Muslims from around the world annually performing pilgrimage in Mecca.

Saudi's interior ministry statement, carried Monday on the state-run al-Ekhbariya news channel, said the attacker set off the bomb after security officers raised suspicions about him. The attack took place in a parking lot outside the sprawling mosque complex.

The secretary general of the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which is headquartered in Saudi Arabia, says the attacks are an attempt to destabilize the kingdom. Iyad Madani says the kingdom's security is "the cornerstone of security and stability in the region and the Islamic world."

No group has claimed responsibility for the blasts, which also struck outside a Shiite mosque in the kingdom's east and near the U.S. Consulate in the western city of Jeddah.

Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have condemned blasts in Saudi Arabia, including an explosion outside the Prophet Muhammad's mosque in Medina.

Egypt's Foreign Ministry says the reported attack during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan near one of Islam's most sacred places confirms that terrorism "knows no religion or belief or any meaning of humanity."

A Foreign Ministry official in the UAE was quoted in the state-run WAM news agency as saying the stability of Saudi Arabia "is the main pillar of the stability of the United Arab Emirates and the whole of the Gulf Arab region."

The Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah has condemned a reported suicide bombing near the Prophet Muhammad's mosque in the Saudi Arabian city of Medina.

Saudi media reported an explosion just outside the sprawling mosque earlier Monday, citing unnamed sources as saying it was caused by a suicide bomber.

Hezbollah said the reported attack near one of Islam's holiest sites in the final days of Ramadan was another sign "of how these terrorists disregard all that is sacred to Muslims and all that which they agreed to respect."

The group said attacks in recent days in Turkey, Iraq, Bangladesh and Lebanon confirm "that this dangerous epidemic needs a serious and different treatment."

It called on the world to unite against terrorism and not to use it in "political score-settling which only reflects negatively on all without exception."

Hezbollah is a bitter opponent of the Sunni monarchy's policies in the region and is battling Saudi-supported rebel groups in Syria's civil war.

Saudi Arabia's state-run news channel is airing live video of thousands of worshippers praying inside the Prophet Muhammad's mosque in Medina, hours after local media reported that a suicide bomber detonated his vest outside the mosque's sprawling grounds near a security building.

Al-Ekhbariya showed worshippers praying shoulder to shoulder inside the mosque Monday evening.

The mosque was packed with pilgrims and visitors from around the world for the final days of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. The Interior Ministry has not yet issued a statement on the explosion and could not be immediately reached for comment.

Qari Ziyaad Patel, 36, from Johannesburg, South Africa, was at the mosque when he heard a blast just as the call to sunset prayers was ending and people were breaking their fast. Many at first thought it was the sound of traditional, celebratory cannon fire, but then he felt the ground shake.

He says "the vibrations were very strong... it sounded like a building imploded."

State-linked Saudi news websites say an explosion has gone off outside one of Islam's holiest sites in the city of Medina, the same day that two suicide bombers struck different cities in Saudi Arabia.

Sabq news site reported that the explosion took place Monday evening. Other sites showed images of what appeared to be a fire outside one of the buildings overlooking the Prophet's Mosque. It was not immediately clear if anyone was killed or wounded.

The sprawling mosque where the Prophet Muhammad is buried is visited by millions of Muslims from around the world each year during pilgrimages to Mecca. The area would have been teeming with pilgrims for prayer during the final days of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which ends this week.

A resident in the largely Shiite eastern Saudi Arabian region of Qatif says a suicide bomber and a car bomb have struck a neighborhood there, but that no injuries were immediately reported.

Mohammed al-Nimr told The Associated Press the bomber detonated his suicide vest Monday evening when most residents of the neighborhood were at home breaking the Ramadan fast.

Qatif is heavily populated by Shiites, who are a minority in the Sunni-ruled kingdom. Al-Nimr says that near the body of a suicide bomber was a car bomb that also went off around the same time.

The attacks struck next to a Shiite mosque. The Islamic State group has in the past attacked Shiite places of worship in Qatif.

A suicide bomber carried out an attack early on Monday near a U.S. diplomatic site in the western Saudi city of Jiddah,

according to the Interior Ministry.

The ministry said the attacker detonated his suicide vest when security guards approached him near the parking lot of a hospital. The attacker died and two security men were wounded with minor injuries, according to the ministry statement, which was published by the state-run Saudi Press Agency. Some cars in the parking lot were damaged.

Interior Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Mansour al-Turki was quoted in the statement as saying the attacker caught the attention of the security guards, who noticed he was acting suspiciously at an intersection located on the corner of the heavily fortified U.S.

- (AP inputs)