

JERUSALEM CHURCH HIT BY ANTI-CHRISTIAN GRAFFITI

JERUSALEM: Anti-Christian graffiti has been sprayed on a wall of a Jerusalem abbey built where tradition says the mother of Jesus died, police said yesterday, in an incident similar to previous acts blamed on Jewish extremists. The graffiti written in Hebrew on an outside wall of the Dormition Abbey included phrases such as "kill the pagans" and "death to the Christian unbelievers, enemies of Israel", a spokesman for the Catholic Church in the Holy Land said.

Police said the graffiti had been discovered during a patrol and an investigation had been opened. The Benedictine abbey is located on Mount Zion across from east Jerusalem's Old City and next to the site where Christians believe Jesus's Last Supper

occurred. It was previously hit in 2014, when furniture and wooden crosses were burned.

"This time it amounts to a real call to murder Christians," said church spokesman Wadi Abu Nassar. Jewish extremists have targeted Palestinians, Christians and even Israeli military property in "price-tag" attacks—a term that indicates there is a price to be paid for moves against Jewish settlers.

Earlier this month, two Israelis, including a minor, were charged over the 2014 incident at the Dormition Abbey as well as an arson attack at the Church of the Multiplication on the Sea of Galilee. That church is located where Christians believe Jesus performed the miracle of loaves and fishes. The most

prominent suspected Jewish extremist attack recently was the July firebombing of a Palestinian home in the West Bank that killed a toddler along with his mother and father.

On January 3, an Israeli court charged two suspected Jewish extremists over the firebombing, including the minor accused in the 2014 arson at the Dormition Abbey. Vatican efforts to negotiate greater rights at the neighboring Upper Room, where the Last Supper is believed to have occurred, have sparked opposition from nationalist and Orthodox Jews, who revere part of the building as the tomb of King David. Pope Francis celebrated a mass at the Upper Room during a visit in 2014. — AFP



JERUSALEM: Father Nikodemus Schnabel spokesperson of the Dormition Abbey points towards anti-Christian graffiti in Hebrew, daubed on the Church of the Dormition, one of Jerusalem's leading pilgrimage sites. — AFP

NUCLEAR DEAL WILL INTENSIFY IRANIAN INFIGHTING BUT RELAX FOREIGN POLICY

RESTORING TIES WITH 'GREAT SATAN' NOT ON AGENDA

ANKARA: Iran's success in winning an end to international sanctions will only intensify a power struggle among the faction-ridden elite, and President Hassan Rouhani cannot count on domestic political support from the supreme leader before two critical elections. However, Tehran's leadership has now decided on a less confrontational foreign policy than in the past, although a restoration of full ties with the "Great Satan" — the United States — remains out of the question, officials say.

The scrapping of most US, European Union and United Nations sanctions on Saturday under a nuclear deal with six major powers should strengthen both the economy and Shi'ite Iran's hand in a Mideast region torn by sectarian strife. Rouhani, a pragmatist whose 2013 election cleared the way for the thaw in relations with the outside world, owes his success to Iran's top authority: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei endorsed the nuclear agreement, overriding hardliners who oppose dealing with Washington.

"Every move by the government was approved by the leader. The leader protected us against hardliners' pressure," said a senior Iranian official, involved in the talks with the six powers which led to Tehran curbing its nuclear program in return for an end to the sanctions crippling its economy. But hardliners, wary of Rouhani's growing influence and popularity, have already taken off the gloves to display the limits of the president's power at home where they oppose any political liberalization.

They fear that voters, hopeful living standards can rise with the end of sanctions, will reward pro-Rouhani candidates in elections next month to parliament and the Assembly of Experts, a clerical body with nominal power over the supreme leader. "Rouhani has gained even more popularity compared to 2013 because of his nuclear success. This will help his allies greatly to win a majority in the elections," said another senior official. "People know that Rouhani's policy ended Iran's isolation and their economic hardship. He is their hero."

The elections to the Assembly of Experts are likely to be crucial in determining the future path of Iran, the top Shiite Muslim power which plans to pour large amounts of crude oil on to the global market now that the sanctions are gone. Khamenei underwent prostate surgery in 2014 and should the 76-year-old supreme leader be unable to continue through illness, the Assembly would have to select his successor.

Leaders at loggerheads

Rouhani's growing clout could put him at loggerheads with Khamenei, and any change in the balance of Iran's complex power structure might force the supreme leader to cut the president's domestic claws.

"Rouhani's political power will increase because of economic advances and this balance will be restored by more domestic pressure," said political analyst Hamid Farahvashian. "Without Khamenei's blessing, Rouhani cannot confront his rivals," Khamenei — who took over in 1989 from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic — has always made sure that no group, including among his own hardline allies, gains enough power to challenge his authority.

"On the nuclear issue, Rouhani and Khamenei are in the same boat. But Khamenei will back hardliners in their political disputes against moderates," said a former official. As well as the Guardian Council, which vets laws and election candidates,



TEHRAN: Iranian President Hassan Rouhani speaks during a press conference yesterday in the capital after international sanctions on Iran were lifted — AFP

Khamenei controls the judiciary, the security forces, public broadcasters and foundations that control much of the economy.

The hardliners are likely to resort to a tactic they have successfully adopted in the past: finding grounds to disqualify pro-Rouhani candidates. "I expect stormy days before the elections. Pressure will mount on Rouhani and his allies, including moderates' mass disqualifications," said political analyst Saeed Leylaz.

Hardliners have stepped up their calls to suppress dissenting voices since September, when Khamenei warned of "infiltration" by Iran's enemies. They may also target political campaigners and reporters sympathetic to the president. "They will compensate for Rouhani's victory by more arrests of activists and more journalists will be summoned by the courts," said a pro-reform journalist, who asked not to be named for security reasons.

Opposition leaders Mirhossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi remain under house arrest following street protests against what activists say was a rigged presidential election in 2009. Rights groups and the United Nations have accused Iran of severely restricting freedom of expression, religion and the media as well as criticizing its high number of executions. Some analysts say Rouhani, who represented Khamenei at the Supreme National Security Council for over two decades, lacks the will to resist hardliners' pressure preventing the kind of social reforms that many young Iranians demand. Rouhani has occasionally criticized the crackdown but has done little to stop it.

Foreign policy moderation

Iran's internal struggle is unlikely to be fought out over foreign policy, where the leadership appears to have agreed on a less confrontational line. Its decision to release five Americans, including a Washington Post reporter, a few hours before the lifting of sanctions displayed this change of approach.

Tehran also swiftly ended an incident on Wednesday when it freed 10 US Navy sailors a day

after detaining them aboard their two patrol boats in the Gulf. "It was a decision made by Iran's top authorities. It shows that there is a consensus over foreign policy among our decision-makers," said a senior security official.

Similarly hardline and pro-Rouhani authorities alike have condemned the storming of Riyadh's embassy in Tehran early this month by protesters reacting to the execution of Shiite Sheikh Nimr Al-Nimr, an outspoken opponent of the ruling Al Saud family. Dozens were arrested, according to state media.

"Iran has already adopted a moderate foreign policy. Even the hostility with the US has transformed to a controlled one," said Leylaz. "We witnessed it during the sailors' capture and the Saudi embassy storming." With Rouhani willing to improve ties with the United States, Tehran and Washington will continue to cooperate on the regional crisis including the rise of Islamic State, often known to its enemies by the Arabic name of Daesh.

"Iran and America need to work together in the region ... the taboo is broken and this channel of communication will remain open between the two countries," said the second senior official. Tehran and Washington cut ties shortly after Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution and radical students stormed the US embassy in Tehran, taking 52 Americans hostage for 444 days.

The official made clear there were limits to the rapprochement between Iran and the United States. "They have common interests and enemies ... Iran's fight against Daesh in Iraq and Syria is a clear example of it." However, the official added: "Full restoration of ties will not happen." The elite Revolutionary Guards and its affiliated Basij militia forces have been leading Iran's effort against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. "In his public speeches and in private meetings with the government officials, Khamenei has made it very clear that the US and will remain Iran's foe," said Farahvashian. Under Iran's constitution, Khamenei, and not Rouhani, has the last say on all state matters. — Reuters

US SENATE TO TAKE UP BILL FOR MORE ARAB REFUGEE SCRUTINY

WASHINGTON: The Senate will consider new rigorous screening procedures for Syrian and Iraqi refugees seeking to enter the United States as national security looms large for voters in an election year. Propelled by the Islamic State group's attacks in Paris, the GOP-backed legislation raced through the House last November with 289 votes. That veto-proof margin included 47 Democrats despite the Obama administration's opposition to the measure.

The legislation will have a much harder time making it through the Senate in the week ahead. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky, needs at least six Democrats to join all 54 Republicans to approve a motion clearing the bill for final passage in the 100-member chamber. The Senate's top Democrat, Harry Reid of Nevada, said last year that was not going to happen. Even if it did, President Barack Obama has pledged to veto the bill if it got to him.

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What the house bill does

IS controls territory in Syria and Iraq. As a result of the extremists' harsh, uncompromising rule, people in those areas have tried to flee and make it to the United States. The House-passed American Security Against Foreign Enemies Act is rooted in concerns the current process of screening refugee is inadequate and could allow a terrorist to be admitted into the United States.

The legislation would order FBI background checks for Syrian and Iraqi refugees and require that the FBI, Homeland Security Department and the director of National Intelligence certify that each refugee is not a security threat. The bill's requirements would effectively suspend admissions of Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

Republicans pointed to the arrest this month of two Iraqi refugees with suspected links to terrorism as one more example of the flawed vetting system. Over the past few months, voters' concerns about terrorism have

surged and their confidence in the government's ability to defeat IS and other extremist groups has plummeted, according to a national survey conducted in December by the Pew Research Center. "I think there's a sense we need to do everything we can to demonstrate we take seriously the responsibility to protect the country," Republican Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, a member of the GOP leadership, said last week at a party retreat in Baltimore.

A promise to veto

The White House said Obama would veto the House bill. The legislation "would provide no meaningful additional security for the American people," it said in a Nov. 18 statement. Refugees of all nationalities, including Syrians and Iraqis, already face a demanding screening process, and the legislation "would unacceptably hamper our efforts to assist some of the most vulnerable people in the world," the statement said. The White House said more than 2,100 Syrian refugees have been admitted to the United States since 2001 and not one has been arrested or deported on terrorism-related grounds.

After the House passed the bill Nov. 19, Reid predicted it would die in the Senate. "Don't worry, it won't get passed," Reid told reporters. A final decision on how the Democrats will proceed is expected on Wednesday at their weekly caucus meeting. Without support from Democrats, the math doesn't work for McConnell. He needs a half-dozen Democrats to pass a motion to proceed and eventually allow a vote on the legislation. Thirteen more Democrats would be needed to reach a veto-proof tally. Despite Reid's optimism, the House vote demonstrated that opposing the legislation can be dicey for Democrats facing tight 2016 elections. Before the House vote, White House aides went to the Capitol to win over Democrats. Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney, D-NY, told them, in a forceful exchange, that voting "no" could hurt Democrats at the polls.

Sen Jack Reed, D-RI said other steps should include addressing illegal immigration more broadly and barring the sale of guns to people on federal terrorism watch lists — a move the Senate recently rejected. — AP



WASHINGTON: In this Sept 16, 2015 file photo, Senate Majority Leader Sen Mitch McConnell of Ky, (center) accompanied by Sen John Thune, R-SD (left) and Sen Roy Blunt, R-Mo speaks during a news conference on Capitol Hill. — AP

PAKISTAN PM TO VISIT SAUDI AND IRAN 'TO EASE TENSION'

ISLAMABAD: Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif will lead a high-level delegation to Saudi Arabia and Iran this week to try to ease tension between the Muslim countries, a minister said yesterday. Information minister Pervez Rashid told AFP Sharif would travel to Riyadh today and Tehran on tomorrow and would meet Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani.

Foreign ministry spokesman Qazi Khalilullah said Sharif would exchange views on regional and international issues and try to reduce tension between the two countries. "Pakistan is deeply concerned at the recent escalation of tensions between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran," the spokesman said in a statement.

He said the prime minister has called for the peaceful settlement of differences in the larger interests of Muslim unity. "The purpose of the visit is to mediate and to end the standoff

between the two countries," a third government official told AFP, requesting anonymity. Sunni Muslim Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran are already fighting a proxy war in Yemen and support opposing sides in the Syrian conflict. But tensions have reached new heights in the past two weeks.

Saudi Arabia and a number of its Sunni Arab allies cut diplomatic ties with Iran after protesters angry at Riyadh's execution of a prominent Shiite cleric on January 2 sacked its embassy in Tehran. Local media said Pakistan's powerful army chief General Raheel Sharif would accompany Premier Sharif. Pakistan is a majority Sunni country but 20 percent of the population is Shiite. Its decision this month to join Saudi Arabia's 34-country coalition against extremism sparked a domestic protest by the main opposition parties, who called for negotiations between Riyadh and Tehran and put Islamabad under pressure to mediate. — AFP

IS ABDUCTS OVER 400 IN SYRIA AFTER ASSAULT

BEIRUT: Jihadists from the Islamic State group have abducted more than 400 Syrian civilians after capturing new ground in a major assault on the city of Deir Ezzor that left dozens dead. The shock attack comes despite a Russian air campaign targeting the group that began in September, and more than a year of strikes by a US-led coalition against the jihadists in Syria.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said IS had killed at least 135 people in the multi-front attack that began on Saturday. The dead included 85 civilians and 50 regime fighters, according to the monitor, which said yesterday that IS had also kidnapped more than 400 civilians from captured territory.

"Those abducted, all of whom are Sunnis, include women, children and family members of pro-regime fighters," Observatory chief Rami Abdel Rahman said. He said they had been taken to areas under IS control in the west of Deir Ezzor province and to the border with Raqa province—the main IS stronghold in Syria—to the

northwest.

The monitor said at least 42 IS fighters had been killed in the attack, adding that fighting was ongoing yesterday, with regime forces backed by Russian air strikes trying to recapture lost ground. Syria's state news agency SANA said at least 300 civilians, "most of them women, children and elderly people," had been killed in the assault. It denounced the deaths as a "massacre".

History of mass murders

The IS assault puts the group in control of around 60 percent of Deir Ezzor city, which is capital of the surrounding province of the same name, an oil-rich region that borders Iraq. The jihadist group already controls most of the province, but regime forces have clung onto part of the city and a neighboring air base despite repeated IS attacks.

If confirmed, the death toll in the assault would be one of the highest in a single attack by IS, though the jihadists have carried out mass murders before. In 2014, its fighters killed hundreds of

members of the Sunni Shaitat tribe in Deir Ezzor province after they opposed the jihadists. And in August 2014, the group massacred some 200 Syrian soldiers when it overran the Tabqa military base in Raqa province.

The jihadists have also carried out mass abductions before, seizing more than 200 civilians from central Homs province in August 2014, and at least 220 Assyrian Christians from villages in the northeast of the country months earlier.

Some of those abducted in those incidents have been freed in small batches, in some cases reportedly in exchange for ransoms. The assault came despite a Russian air campaign that began in September in support of the government, which Moscow says targets IS and other "terrorist" groups.

IS under pressure

The Russian strikes have so far killed at least 808 IS fighters, according to the Observatory, though they have also killed moderate and Islamist fighters and

civilians, it says. More than 3,700 IS jihadists have also been killed in US-led coalition strikes that began in Syria in September 2014.

Yesterday, the Observatory said 40 civilians including eight children had been killed in strikes on the IS bastion of Raqa city. The monitor said it was unclear if the strikes were carried out by regime or Russian planes. In recent months, IS has come under pressure particularly from Kurdish fighters backed by US strikes, and more recently regime forces supported by Russian air raids.

On Saturday, at least 16 IS fighters were killed in a failed attack on a government position in Aleppo province, where loyalist troops and pro-regime fighters have been advancing towards the group's stronghold of Al-Bab. Regime forces are now within 10 kilometers of Al-Bab, and are seeking to sever IS-held territory in Aleppo province from that held by the group in neighboring Raqa. More than 260,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict began in March 2011 with anti-government protests. — AFP