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<http://au.news.yahoo.com/world/a/-/world/13788290/tunisian-salafi-islamists-riot-clash-with-police/>

Tunisian Salafi Islamists riot, clash with police

Tarek Amara, Reuters Updated May 26, 2012, 9:40 pm

TUNIS (Reuters) - Hundreds of Salafi Islamists attacked bars and shops and clashed with security forces in a Tunisian town on Saturday in the latest incident to raise religious tensions in the home of the Arab Spring uprisings.

Police and witnesses in the northwestern town of Jendouba said hundreds of Salafis - followers of a puritanical interpretation of Islam - began rioting to protest the arrest of four men in connection with previous attacks on alcohol vendors.

Police responded with tear gas, breaking up the crowd, but clashes had yet to die down, witnesses and police said.

"This morning, four men were arrested in connection with attacks on alcohol vendors in recent days," Interior Ministry official Lutfi al-Haydari told Reuters.

"So hundreds of Salafis attacked the security base, pelting it with rocks and petrol bombs before they were dispersed by tear gas. They also set fire to a police station and attacked three shops in the town ... they are now in the centre of town and are being dealt with."

He said police had fanned out across Jendouba to protect shops and public buildings from attack. One witness in the town said the rioters numbered about 500 and were armed with petrol bombs, terrifying residents.

"Masked Salafis armed with swords, petrol bombs and rocks attacked shops in the town and destroyed the goods inside and then set fire to the police station," said the witness, who declined to give her name, fearing a backlash from the Salafis.

"The whole town is in a state of alarm and fear because of these clashes."

DIVISIVE

The incident comes a week after Salafis fought with alcohol vendors in the central town of Sidi Bouzid, prompting the justice minister to promise they would be punished.

Many Salafi Islamists were in jail or underground before the 2011 uprising that ousted secular strongman Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali. But they have since become more assertive.

While Islamists did not play a major role in the revolt, the struggle over the role of religion in government and society has since emerged as the most divisive issue in Tunisia, which for decades was considered one of the most secular countries in the Arab world.

Ennahda, a moderate Islamist group, won Tunisia's first elections since the revolt but formed a coalition with two non-religious parties and has promised not to ban alcohol, impose the veil or name sharia, or Islamic law, as the basis of law.

More conservative Salafis want a broader role for Islam, however, alarming secular elites who fear they will seek to impose their views and undermine Tunisia's nascent democracy.

Since the revolution, violent incidents involving Salafis have increased. Salafis have attacked a television station and a cinema that aired films they deemed blasphemous.

(Writing by Lin Noueihed; Editing by Sophie Hares)