



From Mollified Occupation to Jubilant Resistance

Jerusalem 1948-2014

By Ali Qleibo



Jerusalem is a city of overwhelming emotions. It exudes religious excitement and spiritual pleasure, and provides contemplative space. It is an exhilarating experience that captures the energy of momentous events and personalities that have shaped both the Christian and Muslim experience: the Passion of Christ, the Night Journey of Prophet Muhammad, King David, Herodian glory, Hadrian's imprint, the everlasting presence of the Caliph Omar, Saladin, Richard the Lionheart, Solomon the Magnificent, and General Allenby. The narratives spun of these events to discerning percipients impart a particular aspect to their perception.

"Palestine is lost," *rahat falasteen*, is a solemn local lament that acknowledges the *Nakba* and the *Naksa*. Whereas the *Nakba* describes the forced exodus of the majority of Palestinians from their historical homeland, the *Naksa* describes the post-1967 defeat and the on-going silent forced transfer of the Palestinians.

Laura Baramki describes Jerusalem following the *Nakba* in 1948: "Palestine was like a beautiful tapestry, with myriad brilliant colours all tightly woven together with communities living together in harmony. Alas, we came back to a ravished tapestry, all torn, its threads scattered all over the country, indeed countries."

Jerusalem following the *Nakba* was a sad city. *Al-huzon*, nostalgic melancholy, permeates every step that Jerusalemites take. The spectre of solitude hovers over each home; not a



Al Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem.
Photo from Palestine Image Bank.

single family has been spared the wounds of separation. People's major preoccupation is waiting; waiting for the return of peace, for the return of loved ones, and for the return home.

As the decades of insidious Israeli occupation dragged on, the poetic melancholy that had shrouded the grief of the surviving Jerusalemites flared up into violent resistance during the first Intifada. The siege imposed on Jerusalem since 1992 is an Israeli ploy to undermine its Arabic character. Israeli politicians have forbidden Palestinians access to their respective holy sites. Except for Jerusalemites, neither the Palestinian Christians who want to celebrate Sunday mass in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre nor the Muslims who want to pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque are allowed to enter Jerusalem. As long as the status quo regarding the integrity and sanctity of the Church and Noble Sanctuary was maintained, the Palestinians remained mollified.

Israeli hegemony is enforced through intensifying Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem, building suburban settlements to encircle the city, and restricting building permits for

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Israeli antipathy towards the Palestinians stems from a fundamental unwillingness to accommodate the other. Palestinians have no defined status within the Zionist state, which annexed Jerusalem but not the natives. In their homeland Palestinians have become alien residents.

Arabs, thereby gaining demographic superiority. The lack of economic development in the Arab sector, the under-development of the Arab neighbourhoods, the failure to provide adequate municipal services on par with Jewish quarters, high taxation, and low income have all become institutionalised. Successive Israeli governments in their effort to create an exclusively Jewish state continue to erroneously believe that their brutal anti-Palestinian measures will make us disappear.

Officially Palestinians cannot breach the impasse of the 47 years of the annexation of Jerusalem by establishing a platform that represents rights in the Jerusalem municipality on the grounds



Settlers on rooftops of the Old City of Jerusalem. Photo from Palestine Image Bank.

that this would normalise occupation. Unofficially, Palestinian politicians, dignitaries, economic entrepreneurs, and major capital holders benefit from individual privileges and conclude personal transactions with the Israeli authority for personal profit. The issuing conundrum further complicates the scene, leaving the majority to individually face up to Israeli encroachments. The on-going leaderless uprising to protect the sanctity of Al-Aqsa as a Muslim shrine from Jewish incursions is symptomatic of the malaise that afflicts the Jerusalemites and, by extension, the Palestinians as a whole.

The Night of Destiny, Thursday the 26th of Ramadan, ushered in a reversal of time. Forty-seven years of occupation in which coexistence was obliquely advocated dissolved as scores of Israeli soldiers were deployed, filling every street corner of Jerusalem's Old City. It was open warfare against Gaza, and the Israelis had imposed a full siege on Arab Jerusalem. Moreover they had forbidden the Palestinians free access to the Dome of the Rock to celebrate the Night of Destiny, *Laylat al-Qader*, the culminating sacred night of Ramadan that punctuates the revelation of the Qur'an. The carnage in Gaza, in the

wake of the Israeli rampage in the West Bank, added an awry spectre to the spirit of Ramadan. Qalandiya

checkpoint, the main artery that connects Jerusalem to Ramallah, was closed to traffic. In Jerusalem all streets that lead to Al-Aqsa Mosque were cordoned off, access to major parking garages around Damascus Gate were sealed up, and fully armed soldiers set up innumerable checkpoints to forbid access to the Noble Sanctuary.

"I am over fifty years old," I explained in Arabic to the first soldier who denied me entry on foot past the vacated parking lot facing Damascus Gate.

"This is the State of Israel. Only Hebrew is spoken here," grumbled belligerently the helmeted, fully armed soldier blocking the side street I tried to take to gain access to the Noble Sanctuary.

I had barely crossed the first checkpoint, having bypassed the throngs of baffled pilgrims who were forbidden entry, when I was stopped by a second

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Notwithstanding Al-Aqsa's paramount theological significance in Muslim theology, Jerusalem has developed a political value for modern Arab states. Corollary to the newly forged axis of Israeli and Arab nations' alliances, in the wake of the Arab Spring, the religious value of Jerusalem has faded into the background. In fact, many Arab states have cancelled the Night Journey as an official holiday and, by extension, have marginalised Jerusalem.

Moslem worshippers denied entry to Al-Aqsa Mosque.





blockade. Once again I had to prove my age. A third checkpoint was set up at the crossroad leading to Al-Wad St. In front of the Austrian Hospice stood yet another – a fourth – military barricade. I could not move any farther. A big crowd of jeering outraged Jerusalemites huddled together forming one single impenetrable body.

Sound bombs were thrown at the protesting crowd. I took shelter in a shop. As the smoke settled down I sought another entrance to the mosque only to be engaged in another argument with the querulous Israeli soldier who pointed out that the language of Jerusalem is Hebrew!

The pent-up frustrations of the crowds who were denied entry to the Noble Sanctuary had escalated to bloody confrontations. This was the first Ramadan ever in which

Jewish fundamentalists protected by Israeli armed forces and police were unleashed to pray in the Dome of the Rock in lieu of Muslims. The taking over of Al-Aqsa/the Noble Sanctuary was the last straw. Confrontations have since escalated, threatening a third Intifada.

One cannot underestimate the religious and theological value of the Noble Sanctuary. In Al-Aqsa Mosque, legend, myth, and ritual meet. In Muslim narratives, Jerusalem was known as the first direction of prayers in the formative years of Islam, the focal point of the miraculous Night Journey, and one of three mosques to which Prophet Mohammed enjoined pilgrimage. In orthodox Sunni Islam, the city of Jerusalem, the Holy Rock, stands as the axis mundi and a point of connection between heaven and earth.

Because of its centrality in Muslim thought, Jerusalem serves as a definitive image and symbol of a sacred place parallel to Mecca and Medina. The basis of its sanctity reflects hierophany—to use a concept favoured by Mircea Eliade—which refers to the eruption of the sacred. The rock beneath the spectacular Dome of the Rock assumed its centrifugal symbolic character as witness to the Night Journey.

Muslim beliefs about Al-Isra wal-Miraj define what the concept of the sanctity of Jerusalem entails. And the Israeli notion of the Palestinian and of the Muslim determines how that concept will be applied to Al-Aqsa Mosque. The recent Israeli desecration of Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem – amply illustrated in the press – is not an isolated event. Over the past seven decades the

Israeli government has systematically implemented such measures as the appropriation of Palestinian space (e.g., Mamilla cemetery in Jerusalem), the obliteration of Arab historical presence, and the usurping of the original Arab identity of the landscape and culture. All salient elements of Palestinian identity – from *hummus* and *falafel* to entire villages, towns, wheat fields, citrus orchards, vineyards, olive and fruit groves – are subject to systematic appropriation and falsification, thereby undermining Palestinian geography, culture, and memory.

By revising history through changing the architectural topography of Jerusalem and the appellation of Al-Masjid al-Aqsa to fit with Hebrew Scriptures, Israel seeks to supersede Palestinian historical presence and to reinforce Zionist ideology for long-term political purposes by creating facts on the ground. Two motivations lie behind the insidious Israeli exercise of power; namely, to shape ideological influence and to exert political hegemony. Within this context the Noble Sanctuary in the heart of Jerusalem stands as a surviving archive that attests to Jerusalem's historical Arab identity in contradistinction to the Zionist claims. This expansive monumental Muslim shrine that asserts Jerusalem's Muslim character and is directly administered by the sovereign of Jordan is highly coveted by Israeli nationalists. Since the second Intifada the repeated Jewish encroachments have been continuously rebuffed. The new plan to take over Al-Aqsa has unleashed local resistance. The escalation of daily confrontations between residents of Jerusalem who fight to foil the Israeli attempts to de facto use the mosque to perform Jewish prayers has given way to an unprecedented violent daily battle.

Israeli disregard of the sanctity of Al-Aqsa attested in its repeated desecration by the Israeli army and police is rooted in the Zionist attitude towards Palestinian identity that originated with

a definition of the Palestinian as an alien in the Zionist Jewish state. Defining Palestinians as aliens places them outside the usual rights and privileges of society and lumps them together as a singular group that is denied an identity except in relationship to Israelis. Corollary to the "otherness" of the Palestinian is the sinister objectification and dehumanising, patronising attitude. The Palestinians as other are constituted as terrorists, liars, untrustworthy brute savages who have usurped the land.

Despite the bleak political situation and the on-going siege imposed on Jerusalem, Friday is welcomed with great rejoicing and a corollary renewal of violent confrontations between the Muslims, who are forbidden access to the mosque, and Jewish self-glamorising Israeli politicians and fanatic usurpers under Israeli military protection. The jubilant struggle for Al-Aqsa has exploded into daily open resistance throughout Arab Jerusalem, beyond the Green Line, and in the West Bank.

American intervention has alerted the Israelis to the fact that the takeover of the Noble Sanctuary would threaten the Jordanian, Egyptian, and Israeli political status quo. Israel recanted. Consequently Muslims of all ages from Jerusalem are allowed once again to access the mosque and pray.

Nevertheless, the political legal status of the Palestinians in East Jerusalem remains undefined. Recognised as neither Israeli nor Palestinian nationals, Jerusalemites ironically must depend on a courtesy Jordanian passport that does not even allow its carrier long-term residence in Jordan.

"I have acquired Israeli nationality and an Israeli passport," Ibrahim, a 40-year-old former student, confessed to me. "The legal recognition of Jerusalemites as Israeli nationals and not as mere alien residents cannot be resolved on the municipal level but within the Ministry of Interior. It is the only way to ensure our survival here."

For decades, the idea of applying for Israeli nationality and passport has been taboo and had not exceeded 10 percent of the total 350,000 East-Jerusalemites. Consequent to the war on Gaza the Israel Ministry of Interior has been flooded with applications amounting to an estimated 50 percent of the Arab population.

The threat of ethnic cleansing, population transfer, and a Jewish takeover of Al-Aqsa remains imminent. Through US intervention the Israeli ploy to acquire sovereignty over Al-Aqsa Mosque has been temporarily deferred. Though the political status quo has been preserved, the fear lingers.

In the overwhelming sense of the sacred, the resistance and present stressful challenge of this summer/fall crisis is reduced to a footnote in the discourse of Muslim Jerusalem.

Dr. Ali Qleibo is an anthropologist, author, and artist. A specialist in the social history of Jerusalem and Palestinian peasant culture, he is the author of Before the Mountains Disappear, Jerusalem in the Heart, and Surviving the Wall, an ethnographic chronicle of contemporary Palestinians and their roots in ancient Semitic civilisations. Dr.Qleibo lectures at Al-Quds University.