

# A Space Where Religion and Politics Meet

Nabi Musa as an Example of Islamic Festivals in Palestine



By Mahmoud Abu Eid

***O Jerusalem we've come to visit you in a celebration  
At a festival that was built upon the shoulders of real men.  
Your love is in our Hearts and minds  
And it raises a fire in my heart [even if we are] far away from you.  
Muhammad visited you and Jesus lived in you.  
In you, the cross created its brotherhood with the crescent,  
In you, the light of the Church of Resurrection is a candle,  
And the minarets of Al-Aqsa are like the branches of beauty.  
The walls of the city welcome everyone.  
The Prophet said, to Al Aqsa we will head  
And if I am far from you, my eye will not sleep.***

*Verse of a song that pilgrims sing on their way to mawasem (regional festivals).*

Similar to other Levant countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt, Palestine has established over time many collective social activities. Their aim is to gather people from all over the region in order to celebrate a common narrative or strengthen values that have roots in the life of the society. The participants in these activities come from various groups within society, and each group has tried to utilize such gatherings for its own interest. On the one hand, this phenomenon asserts the diversity and multicultural nature that characterize the adherents of the different religions and the entire people of the Levant, in general, and Palestine in particular. On the other hand, it is an indicator of the good relations between the rulers and the people, the faithful of various religious groups, and even of different social



Sufis gathering in Nabi Salih in order to join the procession that leaves the Al-Aqsa Mosque for the Nabi Mousa Festival (at a shrine near Jericho), 2014.

classes. With this background in mind, one appreciates the importance of the variety of gatherings that Palestinians hold every year with the aim to combine social life with political and religious dimensions. Some of us call them *mawasem* (plural of *mawsem*, literally meaning season), others consider them feasts or religious festivals, and they take place throughout Palestine and during different seasons throughout the year. Among them are Nabi Musa in Jericho, Nabi Saleh in Ramleh, Nabi Rubin in Jaffa, and Al-Mintar in Gaza.

In the year 1187, Salah el-Din ibn Ayyub (Saladin), the founder of the Ayyubid Dynasty, conquered the Holy Land by defeating the Crusaders, which opened a new chapter in the history of our country. Historians generally have paid attention mainly to Salah el-Din's political and military plans, stressing that he wanted to expel the Crusaders and intended to bring back to the whole region Islamic rule, culture, and traditions after 88 years of Crusader rule. Although Salah el-Din did not succeed in accomplishing his aims, his strategy became a central policy for the Mamluks, who took over

leadership in Palestine, Damascus, and Egypt 70 years after Ayyubid rule (1260). The Mamluk policy was more radical towards the Crusaders, and the agreement that Salah el-Din had signed with them in Arsouf in 1191 was terminated by the year 1292.

While the Mamluks destroyed every fortress the Crusaders had built along the Mediterranean shore to strengthen their hold on the country, they gave a large role to locals in the defense of the land and the main roads, especially those that were used by pilgrims on their way to Mecca. They furthermore understood the importance of religion in keeping social unity among the peoples they were ruling and devised special policies to this end, among them the establishment of *mawasem*. These traditional celebrations were continued during the Ottoman Period, the British Mandate, and under Jordanian rule, but they were banned from 1967 until the signing of the Oslo Agreement. Since then, true efforts have been invested to return the *mawasem* to their old form.

The *Maqam* (literally: place) of Nabi Musa (prophet Moses) lies in the desert

on a main road that used to connect the east with the west, located eight kilometers south of the city of Jericho and around twenty-five kilometers east of Jerusalem. It was considered initially to be the place where Moses saw the Promised Land that he was not allowed to enter, but in time became known as the place that holds his tomb. The Mamluk Sultan al-Zahir Rukn al-Din Baybars al-Bunduqdar, nicknamed Abu al-Futuh (Father of Conquest) for his many victories, built the first building in 1270. An inscription above the *maqam*'s entry reads as follows:

"The construction of this *maqam*, [erected] over the grave of the prophet who spoke to God, Moses, is ordered by his Majesty Sultan Zahir abu el-Fateh Baybars in the Hijri year 668."

During the reign of al-Zahir Baybars, the main body of the present shrine was built, as well as the mosque, the minaret, and some of the rooms. Pilgrimage to this site started at that time; a yearly procession from Jerusalem to Nabi Musa brought thousands of faithful who subsequently camped at the site for a whole week. In 1410, a hospice for pilgrims and a minaret were built. To accommodate the yearly increase in the number of pilgrims, the complex was extended to its present spacious dimensions during the years 1470 to 1480.

Covering an area of 5,000 square meters, the *maqam* is the third largest Islamic complex in Palestine (after the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem and the Ibrahim Mosque in Hebron). It represents a typical example of Islamic architecture of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. Surrounded by a wall, the compound houses rooms on two floors that are topped by a complex of domes and encloses an open central courtyard. Along its western wall lies the main mosque with its minaret. Inside, a *mihrab* (niche) points towards Mecca next to a *minbar* (pulpit) from which the Imam leads the prayer. A wall divides the main room into two

parts: the eastern section is designated for men whereas the western part is for women. To the right of the main entrance to the mosque, another door leads to a smaller room that houses a shrine symbolic of the coffin of Moses. The fine minaret affords a view of the compound, the Jordan Valley, and the desert hills beyond.

A double-domed structure two kilometers to the south of Nabi Musa is identified by Muslim tradition as the tomb of Hasan Al-Ra'i, the shepherd of Moses. The site also contains a cemetery for the Muslim faithful who died during the festivals.

In 1820, having restored the dilapidated buildings, the Ottomans encouraged a revival of the seven-day pilgrimage. Traditionally, the Mawsem Nabi Musa began frequently on the Friday before the Greek Orthodox Good Friday, roughly between March 22 and April 25, and lasted for an entire week. According to many historians, this timing was important: Muslims wanted to demonstrate their number and unity at the time when Christians were celebrating one of their main feasts, Good Friday, with lavish processions. Furthermore, it connected the population of the northern city of Nablus with the people from Hebron in the south. The faithful from these cities used to come to Jerusalem in special processions on different, agreed-upon days, each with their own rituals and *ahazij* (special songs for the occasion). On the Friday morning of the first day of the *mawsem*, pilgrims from all over the country met at Al-Aqsa Mosque for prayer, after which the main mufti together with the *a'ayan* (notables) of important families of Jerusalem led them in a grand procession. Singing religious songs, dancing, and playing flutes, pilgrims processed for an entire day until they reached Maqam Nabi Musa. Prayers, celebrations, and games continued for five more days around the shrine.

The following *ahazij* (songs) have been handed down over generations to celebrate the *Mawsem Nabi Musa*.

### Opening

*Say your prayer upon the chosen prophet, the source of lights, Mohammad, whose beauty is reflected in and beautifies your eyes like natural kuhol.*

*— Had it not been for you, Musa, we would not have made the effort to come, we would not have walked on gravel or sandy roads. Have a blessed evening Musa, son of Imran, dweller of the Jordan Valley and City of Houran.*

*—Maqam Prophet Musa, how dark are your stones! Happy is whoever visits you. This celebration is not our only source of joy, nor is the circumcision of the boys; the greatest joy is in visiting Musa, prayers and peace be upon Him.*

### The Song for the Nation

*Our country is the heaven of the world, our dear blood, our every dear thing; it is the homeland of my father and of the father of my father; we were raised here and so are our children. O Homeland, you planted in us the spirit of humanity. We stood resilient on the rock of the knight and persevered. This olive tree from Roman times, planted with the force of our arms, to take it from the hand of my son or from my own is betrayal, and we would rather die than accept [such theft]. This strong, green, good tree is our symbol and source of livelihood. It is where we work and where we harvest in the summer. It is the work we inherited in our home from our ancestors. My homeland and my land are ours; rich hills with treasures that come to us alone.*

### Song of the Servants of the Shrine

*Be most welcome! We receive you with perfumes of joy, you blessed noble ones, the good people we pride. Who will ever forget our gathering here today? In the cups pour the black coffee and let the horses march the streets in masses. The horses lined up at the gate and the house came to life in your presence. O star in the sky, guide the lost to this land so that every tribe will reunite with the beloved ones, with the friends and neighbors.*

*Sufi whirling, a physically active practice of meditation.*

Noble families from Jerusalem were given special posts in the festival during the Ottoman Era, although these connections may date back to the previous century. Thus, the procession is led by bearers of *bayareq* (banners) of various families of Jerusalem. First, there is the distinctive Nabi Musa *bayraq* (banner), which the al-Husseini's conserve for the annual occasion in their *Dar al-Bayareq* (literally house of banners, a special room dedicated for this purpose in the al-Husseini home). Two flags are carried by the two families of Younis-al-Husseini and al-Husseini; the Al-Qutub family raises another two, the Dawoudi and Dajani families each raise the flag of their *maqam* (literally: place, home of an extended family with rooms arranged around a central courtyard) located on Mount Zion, and another flag is carried by the Qleibo family. In the middle of these is the banner of the Mufti. The Disi and Qazaz families follow the lead with their *mazaher* (rhythm bands) that feature drums and bronze instruments. The procession is furthermore accompanied by singers who sing the *muwashahat* (a special type of traditional song) of the Prophet, with many of the faithful singing along. In the late nineteenth century, the al-Husseini family was appointed as official custodians of the Nabi Musa Maqam and hosts of the festival. On arrival at the shrine and throughout the *mawsem*, the al-Husseinis together with the Younis-al-Husseinis carry the responsibility of providing one meal every day for all worshippers. They provide about twelve lambs, together with rice, bread, and Arabic butter, for a daily communal meal.

The Mawsem Nabi Musa, just like all the other *mawasem* throughout Palestine – some of which were only celebrated in the past, whereas others have been revived and are celebrated today – form a tradition that represents a space in the social life of our people. It is important to remember that our past is our heritage in which we must take pride and which we must preserve in all its social, religious, and even political dimensions.

The festival was also an opportunity to fulfill promises made to Allah for answered prayers, to perform circumcisions, and to cut children's hair for the first time, which is usually done at the age of one. Once their vows were taken, or vows previously taken were renewed, they were offered to the festival.



*Mahmoud Jamil Abu-Eid was born in Jerusalem and has been an official tour guide since 2011. Mahmoud worked on programs involving civic education in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. In 2008, he co-founded the Jerusalem Tourism Cluster, which promotes tourism that highlights the Palestinian identity in Jerusalem. Mahmoud was also a correspondent of several Arabic newspapers. He specializes in archaeology, history, anthropology and sociology.*

*Article translated by Rania Filfil Almbaid.*

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*The photos are courtesy of Nabhan Albabli, head of the Refayie branch of Sufism in Palestine.*