

## JERUSALEM: A COMPLEX TAPESTRY OF RELIGIONS AND HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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*Manuscript has been submitted on 24.02.2025, sent for review on 25.02.2025,  
accepted for publication on 29.04.2025.*

### Abstract

*Jerusalem, one of the world's most historically and religiously significant cities, embodies a complex tapestry of cultures, faiths, and geopolitical dynamics. As a sacred city for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it has been a focal point of spiritual devotion, political disputes, and cultural exchange for millennia. This article explores the multifaceted history of Jerusalem, tracing its evolution from ancient times to the present day. It examines the city's role in shaping religious identities, its contested status in international politics, and the interplay between historical narratives and contemporary conflicts. Special attention is given to the impact of colonial interventions, territorial divisions, and demographic shifts on the city's unique character. Furthermore, the article highlights key religious landmarks, including the Temple Mount, the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, underscoring their significance in both historical and modern contexts. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the study analyzes Jerusalem's position as both a unifying symbol and a source of division, reflecting broader regional and global tensions. By understanding the city's past and present complexities, this article aims to contribute to a more nuanced discussion of its future, emphasizing the need for dialogue and coexistence in a city revered by billions worldwide.*

**Keywords:** Jerusalem, Temple Mount, Jewish Quarter, Old City, UN resolution, West Bank, Palestinian Authority.

### Introduction

Jerusalem stands as one of the most historically and religiously significant cities in the world, deeply intertwined with the spiritual and cultural identities of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Its complex history, spanning over three millennia, has made it a focal point of religious devotion, geopolitical tension, and cultural heritage. This article seeks to explore Jerusalem's religious,

historical, and political significance, particularly emphasizing its role within Jewish history and identity, as well as the broader Arab-Israeli conflict.

The Jewish connection to Jerusalem dates back to biblical times, with its prominence cemented as the capital of the ancient Kingdom of Israel under King David. The construction of the First and Second Temples established the city as the epicenter of Jewish worship. Despite multiple conquests and periods of exile, Jewish communities have maintained an uninterrupted presence in Jerusalem. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jews have constituted the majority of the city's population. However, political disputes and conflicting territorial claims have made Jerusalem one of the most contentious issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Beyond its Jewish heritage, Jerusalem holds profound significance for both Muslims and Christians. For Muslims, the city is home to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, associated with the Prophet Muhammad's Night Journey. Christians revere Jerusalem as the site of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, with numerous holy sites attracting pilgrims from around the world. These overlapping religious claims, coupled with historical events and political rivalries, have fueled debates over the city's governance and sovereignty.

This article critically examines various aspects of Jerusalem's history, including demographic changes, religious significance, and political disputes. It challenges common misconceptions about the city's past and present by analyzing historical records, religious texts, and international policies to provide a comprehensive understanding of Jerusalem's enduring importance. Ultimately, the discussion underscores the city's unique role as a religious and cultural epicenter, while highlighting the complexities that continue to shape its status in the modern world.

### **Jerusalem's Population. Arab or Jewish City?**

For over three millennia, Jewish communities have continuously resided in Jerusalem, constituting the largest demographic group since the 1840s. The city is home to the Western Wall, a remnant of the ancient Temple Mount and the most sacred site in Judaism. Despite its historical and religious significance for the Jewish people, Jerusalem has never served as the capital of any Arab entity. Under Muslim rule, it functioned as a peripheral administrative center rather than a primary seat of governance. While the entirety of Jerusalem holds profound religious importance for Jews, for Muslims, the primary revered site is the Al-Aqsa Mosque. As British historian Christopher Sykes observed, there exists a marked distinction in the religious significance attributed to Jerusalem compared to the centrality of Mecca and Medina in Islamic tradition (Lewis, 1968).

In 1844, Jerusalem's population consisted of 7,120 Jews, 5,000 Muslims, and 3,390 Christians, with a total of 15,510 people. By 1876, the Jewish population grew to 12,000, the Muslims to 7,560, and Christians to 5,470, bringing the total population to 25,030. In 1896, there were 28,112 Jews, 8,560 Muslims, and 8,748 Christians, resulting in a total of 45,420 people.

By 1922, Jerusalem's population had increased to 33,971 Jews, 13,411 Muslims, and 4,699 Christians, totaling 52,081. In 1931, the Jewish population reached 51,222, Muslims numbered 19,894, and Christians grew to 19,335, with the total population at 90,451. In 1948, the Jewish population surged to 100,000, Muslims to 40,000, and Christians to 25,000, bringing the total to 165,000.

In 1967, the Jewish population had increased to 195,700, Muslims to 54,963, and Christians to 12,646, resulting in a total of 263,309. By 1987, the number of Jews reached 340,000, Muslims 121,000, and Christians 14,000, making the total population 475,000. In 1990, the population increased to 524,400, with 378,200 Jews, 131,800 Muslims, and 14,400 Christians.

By 2009, Jerusalem's population had grown to 476,000 Jews, 247,800 Muslims, and 15,200 Christians, totaling 760,800. In 2011, the Jewish population reached 648,900, the Muslims 302,600, and Christians 16,400, bringing the total to 967,900. Finally, in 2012, the population consisted of 660,200 Jews, 310,700 Muslims, and 16,500 Christians, with a total of 987,400 people (Oesterreicher & Sinai, 1974).

A prevailing misconception is that the Temple Mount has always been an exclusively Muslim holy site. During the 2000 Camp David Summit, Yasser Arafat denied the historical presence of a Jewish temple at this location (Hume, 2002).

Similarly, the Palestinian Authority-appointed Mufti of Jerusalem, Ikrima Sabri, asserted in an interview with *Die Welt* that there was no historical evidence linking the site to Jewish heritage (Reiter, 2008). These claims, however, stand in contrast to earlier Muslim documentation. Sheik Raed Salah, a leader of the Islamic movement in Israel, has stated: "The Zionist movement has invented that this was the site of Solomon's Temple. But this is all a lie" (J. Uris & L. Uris, 1981, p. 13).

A 1930 publication by the Supreme Muslim Council, titled *A Brief Guide to al-Haram al-Sharif*, explicitly acknowledges the Temple Mount's association with Solomon's Temple. The guide described the site as one of the oldest places of worship, affirming its sanctity since ancient times. It also referenced the historical account of Josephus, who documented the site's use during the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE (Supreme Muslim Council, 1925). Further supporting this historical link, the Quran itself acknowledges Solomon's

construction of the First Temple (34:13) and the destruction of both the First and Second Temples (17:7).

Jerusalem's centrality to Jewish identity and spirituality extends back over three thousand years. According to biblical tradition, Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, now identified as the Temple Mount. The First Temple housed the Ark of the Covenant and was the epicenter of Jewish religious and communal life until its destruction by the Babylonians. The subsequent Second Temple, rebuilt in the same location, remained the focal point of Jewish worship until its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE. Control over the site changed hands numerous times, and in the seventh century, early Muslim rulers constructed the Dome of the Rock atop the ruins of the Jewish temples.

Throughout history, Jerusalem has remained the heart of Jewish aspirations. The city occupies an unparalleled position in Jewish culture, religion, and national consciousness. Even during centuries of exile, Jerusalem continued to symbolize spiritual fulfillment and national renewal for Jews worldwide. Former Mayor of Jerusalem Teddy Kollek encapsulated this sentiment by asserting that Jerusalem serves as the singular, definitive symbol of Jewish history (Kollek, 1990, pp. 19-20).

A common argument suggests that Jerusalem does not need to be the capital of Israel. However, the city has held this status since King David established it as Israel's capital over three thousand years ago. It remains the focal point of Jewish prayer and veneration. Traditional Jewish liturgy reinforces this connection, with prayers expressing a longing for the return to Jerusalem recited multiple times daily. The Psalmist's declaration, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her skill" (Psalm 137:5).

Contrary to another widespread misconception, the Arab leadership did not support the 1947 United Nations recommendation to internationalize Jerusalem. While the Jewish leadership reluctantly accepted this proposal in hopes of preventing conflict, Arab states vehemently opposed it. In May 1948, Jordan invaded and occupied East Jerusalem, forcibly expelling its Jewish residents and restricting Jewish access to holy sites, including the Western Wall.

Consequently, the UN partition plan, including its proposal that Jerusalem be internationalized, was overtaken by events. As Winston Churchill said: "You ought to let the Jews have Jerusalem; it was they who made it famous" (Shuckburgh, 1987).

The subsequent division of the city persisted until the 1967 Six-Day War, when Israel reunified Jerusalem. Some have proposed internationalizing Jerusalem as a solution to competing territorial claims. However, no precedent exists for such an arrangement. During Jordanian rule (1948–1967), there was

little international advocacy for the city's special status, despite severe restrictions on Jewish and Christian religious freedoms. Furthermore, the idea of an international city has proven problematic in practice, as seen in post-World War II Berlin.

Another misperception is that Jordan ensured freedom of worship for all faiths during its control of East Jerusalem. In reality, Jordan violated the 1949 Armistice Agreement by denying Jewish access to religious sites. Jewish graves on the Mount of Olives were desecrated, and synagogues in the Old City were systematically destroyed. Christian institutions also faced restrictions, including limitations on the establishment of new schools and religious land purchases.

Following the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967, Israel abolished these discriminatory policies and enacted laws protecting religious freedom for all groups. Under Jordanian rule, "Israeli Christians were subjected to various restrictions during their seasonal pilgrimages to their holy places" in Jerusalem, noted Teddy Kollek. "Only limited numbers were grudgingly permitted to briefly visit the Old City and Bethlehem at Christmas and Easter" (Kollek, 1990, p. 15).

In 1955 and 1964, Jordan enacted laws that significantly curtailed the autonomy of Christian schools, imposing stringent government controls. These measures included restrictions on the establishment of new institutions, state oversight of school finances, government authority in the appointment of teachers, and a mandate for the teaching of the Quran. In addition, in 1953 and 1965, Jordan passed legislation that revoked the right of Christian religious and charitable organizations to acquire real estate in Jerusalem (Bard, 2017, p. 212). Further illustrating the oppressive nature of these policies, in 1958, the Jordanian authorities forcibly removed the **Armenian Patriarch-elect** and deported him, facilitating the election of a patriarch aligned with King Hussein's regime. As a consequence of such repressive actions, a significant number of Christians emigrated from Jerusalem, with their population decreasing from 25,000 in 1949 to fewer than 13,000 by June 1967 (Kollek, 1990, p. 16).

These discriminatory laws were subsequently repealed following the reunification of the city under Israeli control in 1967.

During Jordan's occupation of Jerusalem from 1948 to 1967, significant desecration of Jewish holy sites occurred under King Hussein's regime. One of the most notable acts of desecration was the construction of a road to the Intercontinental Hotel across the Mount of Olives cemetery, resulting in the destruction of hundreds of Jewish graves. The highway, which could have been routed elsewhere, led to the desecration of these sacred sites. The gravestones, which had honored the memory of prominent rabbis and sages,

were repurposed by the Jordanian Arab Legion's engineering corps as paving material and latrines for army camps. The inscriptions on the stones remained visible until Israel's liberation of the city in 1967 (Bard, 2017, p. 213).

In addition, the ancient Jewish Quarter of the Old City suffered extensive damage. Fifty-eight synagogues, some of which were centuries old, were either destroyed or severely damaged. In some cases, these synagogues were repurposed as stables and chicken coops. Furthermore, slum dwellings were constructed in close proximity to the Western Wall, further exacerbating the erosion of Jerusalem's Jewish heritage during this period (Kollek, 1990, p. 15).

### **The Christian Heritage in Jerusalem: Armenian and Greek Religious Influence**

For Christians, Jerusalem is revered as the place where Jesus lived, preached, died, and was resurrected. While the Church emphasizes the heavenly Jerusalem, numerous sites mentioned in the New Testament have drawn pilgrims for centuries. Key locations include the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Garden of Gethsemane, the site of the Last Supper, and the Via Dolorosa, home to the fourteen Stations of the Cross. Jerusalem holds an unparalleled significance in Christian history, serving as the sacred heart of Christian faith, traditions, and pilgrimage. Among the many Christian communities that have left their mark on the city's spiritual and cultural landscape, the Armenian and Greek traditions stand out due to their deep-rooted historical presence, religious institutions, and contributions to the preservation of Christian heritage.

### **The Armenian Christian Legacy in Jerusalem**

The Armenian presence in Jerusalem dates back to the early centuries of Christianity. Armenia was the first nation to adopt Christianity as a state religion in 301 AD, and Armenian monks and pilgrims soon established a strong presence in the Holy City. By the 5<sup>th</sup> century, an Armenian Patriarchate was formally established, making Armenians one of the oldest Christian communities in Jerusalem.

A key aspect of Armenian heritage in the city is the **Armenian Quarter** – one of the four quarters of the Old City. Unlike other Christian communities, Armenians have maintained a distinct and self-contained religious and cultural presence, centered around the **St. James Cathedral** – one of the most beautiful and historically significant churches in Jerusalem. The Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem remains an important religious authority, preserving Armenian Christian traditions and manuscripts (Mutafian, 2022, p. 25).

Armenian monks and scholars have also played a crucial role in preserving Christian heritage by producing illuminated manuscripts, theological writings, and historical records. Their contributions to the arts, including mosaic work and religious iconography, have enriched Jerusalem's Christian artistic traditions.

### **The Greek Orthodox Presence in Jerusalem**

The Greek Orthodox Church is one of the most influential Christian denominations in Jerusalem, tracing its roots to the earliest Christian communities. Since the Byzantine era, Greek clergy and monastic orders have played a central role in maintaining and administering Christian holy sites, particularly the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre**, one of the most revered places in Christianity, believed to be the site of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection (Zeidan, n.d.).

Under Byzantine rule (4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries), Greek influence expanded significantly. The construction of major churches, monastic institutions, and theological schools in Jerusalem helped shape Christian worship and pilgrimage traditions. Even after the Islamic conquests and the Crusader period, Greek clergy maintained control over key religious sites, including the **Patriarchate of Jerusalem**, which remains the custodian of many sacred places.

Today, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem continues to oversee numerous churches and monasteries throughout the Holy Land. Greek Orthodox liturgy, iconography, and monastic traditions remain central to the Christian character of the city. The Greek language is still used in many religious services, maintaining a direct connection to early Christianity and Byzantine heritage.

### **The Interwoven Christian Heritage**

While the Armenian and Greek Christian traditions in Jerusalem have their distinct characteristics, they are deeply interwoven through shared religious sites, pilgrimages, and historical events. Both communities have contributed to the preservation of the **Church of the Holy Sepulchre**, along with other Christian denominations, maintaining a delicate but historically significant balance of custodianship over the site.

Additionally, both the Greek and Armenian communities have faced challenges throughout history, including political upheavals, wars, and demographic shifts. Despite these obstacles, they have remained steadfast in their mission to uphold Christian traditions in one of the most sacred yet contested cities in the world.

## **The Relationship between the State of Israel and the Christian Communities of Jerusalem**

The relationship between the State of Israel and the Christian communities of Jerusalem is complex, shaped by historical legacies, political dynamics, and religious considerations. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948 – and especially after the 1967 Six-Day War, when Israel took control of East Jerusalem – Christian communities have had to navigate a challenging and evolving relationship with Israeli authorities. This relationship is influenced by issues related to governance, religious freedom, property rights, demographic changes, and geopolitical factors:

1. **The historical context of Christian communities in Jerusalem**
2. **Religious freedom and governance under Israeli rule**
3. **Visa and residency issues: Some foreign clergy members, particularly those from Arab countries, report difficulties obtaining long-term visas, limiting their ability to serve Christian communities in Jerusalem.**
4. **Challenges faced by Christian communities**

Christian communities in Jerusalem have been steadily shrinking due to emigration, driven by economic hardship, political instability, and pressures related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Christians, who once constituted a significant percentage of Jerusalem's population, now represent less than 2% of the city's inhabitants. Many Palestinian Christians cite difficulties in obtaining housing, employment opportunities, and residency rights as contributing factors to their departure. Christian institutions, particularly the Greek Orthodox and Armenian Patriarchates, own significant properties in Jerusalem. However, disputes over land ownership have arisen, especially regarding controversial property sales to Israeli settler groups. One high-profile case involves the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, which has faced legal battles over the sale of properties in the Old City, leading to tensions between church authorities and Israeli courts.

5. **Religious tensions and attacks on the clergy. Relations with the government and diplomatic efforts**

There have been occasional reports of harassment or attacks against Christian clergy and institutions by radical Jewish extremists. Some churches, monasteries, and cemeteries have been vandalized with anti-Christian graffiti. Christian leaders have periodically called on Israeli authorities to ensure better protection and uphold Jerusalem's religious diversity.

Despite tensions, Israel maintains diplomatic engagement with Christian institutions:

- **The Status Quo Agreement:** The Israeli government upholds the historical "Status Quo" agreement regulating Christian holy sites,



ensuring that various denominations retain control over their respective properties.

- **Relations with the Vatican:** Israel and the Holy See have formal diplomatic relations, with ongoing discussions about taxation, property rights, and the legal status of Christian institutions in Jerusalem.
- **Interfaith and Tourism Initiatives:** The Israeli government promotes Christian pilgrimages and tourism, recognizing the importance of Jerusalem as a global Christian center. Thousands of Christian pilgrims visit Israel annually, particularly during Easter and Christmas celebrations.

## **6. Christian perspectives on Jerusalem's political future**

Christian leaders often advocate for a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that ensures religious and political stability in Jerusalem. Many churches, particularly the Latin Patriarchate and the World Council of Churches, support a negotiated settlement that protects Christian heritage and guarantees access to holy sites for all.

The issue of Jerusalem's status remains central. Christian leaders emphasize the need to preserve the city's multicultural, multi-religious character. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, security restrictions, and settlement expansion in East Jerusalem continue to impact Christian communities, influencing their future in the Holy Land.

Despite claims that Israel restricts religious freedoms in Jerusalem, Israeli law explicitly upholds these rights. The government ensures access to religious sites and entrusts their administration to respective religious authorities. The Muslim Waqf, for instance, manages daily affairs at the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Israel's legal system enforces stringent protections for religious access, stipulating severe penalties for obstructing worship. The US Department of State has consistently recognized Israel's commitment to religious freedom within Jerusalem (US Department of State, 2016).

Additionally, the assertion that Israel limits Muslim and Christian access to their holy sites is unfounded. Since the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967, hundreds of thousands of Muslims and Christians, including those from countries hostile to Israel, have freely visited their places of worship in the city. Even during periods of heightened security concerns, access to religious sites has been largely maintained (Jackson, 2023).

In Islam, Jerusalem holds particular importance due to its association with the Prophet Muhammad's miraculous journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, from where he ascended to heaven. The Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa Mosque, both constructed in the seventh century, solidified Jerusalem's identification as the "Remote Place" referenced in the Quran, thus securing its status as the

third holiest site in Islam after Mecca and Medina. Muslim rights to the Temple Mount, the site housing these shrines, have remained intact.

From an Israeli perspective, Jerusalem is indivisible, and its sovereignty is non-negotiable. As Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin emphasized: “Jerusalem was ours, will be ours, is ours, and will remain as such forever” (Bard, 2017, pp. 207-225).

Following the Six-Day War, Defense Minister Moshe Dayan allowed the Islamic Waqf to continue its civil authority over the Temple Mount, despite the site’s significance to Judaism. The Waqf maintains control over day-to-day operations, while Israel ensures access to the Temple Mount for people of all faiths. Arab leaders, including Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1977, have been free to visit Jerusalem for prayer. Although security concerns occasionally prompt temporary restrictions on access, the right to worship has remained unimpeded, with mosques continuing to be accessible even during periods of high tension.

The legal framework defining Christian custodianship of holy places in Jerusalem was established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the Ottoman Empire’s rule, and was maintained under the British Mandate. This “status quo arrangement” continues to govern Christian holy sites in Israel today.

A common myth suggests that Israel has refused to negotiate a compromise regarding Jerusalem’s future. However, the fact remains that Jerusalem has never been the capital of any Arab entity. While Palestinians seek Jerusalem as their capital, Israel recognizes the city’s significance to Muslims and the large Palestinian population residing there. Israel has considered potential compromises on the sovereignty of the city to mitigate conflict with Palestinians, although reciprocal acknowledgment from Palestinian leaders regarding the Jewish connection to the city and Israel’s capital status has been lacking.

Yasser Arafat’s statement that “Anyone who relinquishes a single inch of Jerusalem is neither an Arab nor a Muslim” reflects the heightened political and religious sensitivities surrounding the city’s status. The Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles (DoP), signed in 1993, left Jerusalem’s final status unresolved, specifying it as one of the issues to be negotiated in permanent status talks (Bard, 2017, p. 215).

Although the majority of Israelis oppose the division of Jerusalem, efforts have been made to explore potential compromises. Notably, during the period when the Labor Party was in power, Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin proposed a tentative agreement allowing Palestinians to claim the city as their capital without Israel relinquishing sovereignty over its own capital. His proposal included the establishment of the Palestinian capital in the West Bank

suburb of Abu Dis, where the Palestinian Authority subsequently constructed a parliament building.

Regarding Jerusalem's political status, it is often argued that Israel has been inflexible in negotiations. However, multiple Israeli leaders have proposed compromises concerning the city's future. During the 2000 Camp David Summit, Prime Minister Ehud Barak suggested that Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem could serve as the capital of a future Palestinian state, while the Palestinian Authority would be granted control over Muslim holy sites on the Temple Mount. This proposal was ultimately rejected by Yasser Arafat. In 2008, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert extended a similar offer, which Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas declined.

The historical and religious significance of Jerusalem, particularly in the context of Jewish heritage, is well-documented and enduring. Efforts to challenge this narrative frequently contradict both historical records and Islamic sources. The city remains central to Jewish identity, national history, and religious tradition, making it a unique and irreplaceable component of Israel's sovereignty and cultural heritage.

Now about the myth, that Israel has restricted the political rights of Palestinian Arabs in Jerusalem. The fact is that Palestinian Arabs in Jerusalem enjoy extensive political rights, in addition to religious freedom. Following Israel's reunification of Jerusalem in 1967, Arab residents were granted the option to apply for Israeli citizenship. While the majority initially chose to retain their Jordanian nationality, recent years have witnessed a growing number of applications for Israeli citizenship. This trend reflects an increasing preference among Palestinian residents to integrate into Israeli civil and political frameworks. Regardless of their citizenship status, Palestinian residents of Jerusalem retain the right to participate in municipal elections and engage in the city's governance (Lubell, 2015).

Even in the event of the establishment of a Palestinian state, a significant portion of Palestinian residents in Jerusalem would opt to remain under Israeli sovereignty. According to a poll conducted by the Palestinian Center for Public Opinion in June 2015, 52% of Palestinians residing in East Jerusalem expressed a preference for Israeli citizenship, whereas only 42% indicated a desire to become citizens of a prospective Palestinian state. These findings suggest that, despite political tensions, many Palestinian residents perceive advantages in Israeli governance, including economic opportunities, social services, and political stability (Pollock, 2015).

Regardless of whether they are citizens, Jerusalem Arabs are permitted to vote in municipal elections and play a role in the administration of the city. "I'll urge the Muslims to launch jihad and to use all their capabilities to restore Muslim Palestine and the holy al-Aqsa Mosque from the Zionist usurpers and

aggressors. The Muslims must be united in the confrontation of the Jews and those who support them” said the Saudi king Fahd (Bard, 2017, p. 216).

There is another myth that under UN Resolution 242, East Jerusalem is considered “occupied territory”. But the fact is that one drafter of the UN Resolution was US ambassador to the UN Arthur Goldberg. According to Goldberg, “Resolution 242 in no way refers to Jerusalem, and this omission was deliberate... Jerusalem was a discrete matter, not linked to the West Bank”. In several speeches at the UN in 1967, Goldberg said, “I repeatedly stated that the armistice lines of 1948 were intended to be temporary. This, of course, was particularly true of Jerusalem. At no time in these many speeches did I refer to East Jerusalem as occupied territory” (Bard, 2017, p. 217).

Because Israel was defending itself from aggression in the 1948 and 1967 wars, former president of the International Court of Justice Steven Schwebel wrote, it has a better claim to sovereignty over Jerusalem than its Arab neighbors (Schwebel, 1970, p. 346).

US President George H. W. Bush declared “The basis of our position remains that Jerusalem must never again be a divided city. We did not approve of the status quo before 1967; in no way do we advocate a return to it now” (Bard, 2017, p. 217).

A common misconception suggests that East Jerusalem should be incorporated into a future Palestinian state on the grounds that no Jewish communities have ever resided there. However, historical evidence contradicts this assertion.

Prior to 1865, the entirety of Jerusalem’s population lived within the confines of the Old City walls, which today is considered part of eastern Jerusalem. As the city experienced population growth, both Jewish and Arab communities expanded beyond the walls, establishing new neighborhoods.

By the time of the United Nations Partition Plan in 1947, a well-established Jewish community resided in the eastern part of Jerusalem, particularly in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City. This area also encompasses numerous sites of profound religious and historical significance to Judaism, including the City of David, the Temple Mount, and the Western Wall. Additionally, significant academic and medical institutions, such as Hebrew University and the original Hadassah Hospital, were founded on Mount Scopus, located in eastern Jerusalem.

The only period during which East Jerusalem was exclusively inhabited by Arabs occurred between 1949 and 1967, following Jordan’s occupation of the area. During this time, the Jewish population was forcibly expelled, and access to Jewish religious sites was restricted.

This historical overview demonstrates that Jewish presence in East Jerusalem has been continuous for centuries, with the exception of the period

of Jordanian control. Therefore, any assertion that Jews have never resided in East Jerusalem is historically inaccurate.

A common misconception is that the United States formally recognizes Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. However, international law establishes that sovereign states have the authority to determine their own capitals. Despite this principle, Israel remains the only country among the 190 nations with which the United States maintains diplomatic relations whose capital was not officially recognized by the US government. The US Embassy, like those of most other nations, is situated in Tel Aviv, approximately forty miles from Jerusalem. However, the United States operates a consulate in East Jerusalem, which provides services to both Israeli Jews in Jerusalem and Palestinians in the surrounding territories. Notably, this consulate functions independently of the US Embassy, reporting directly to Washington, and its consul general is not accredited to the Israeli government. Furthermore, a set of diplomatic protocols has been implemented to avoid any implication of US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital (Bard, 2017, p. 218). These measures include prohibiting official vehicles from displaying the US flag in the city and listing the birthplace of Americans born in Jerusalem as simply "Jerusalem", rather than specifying "Israel".

*On June 1, 2017, President Donald J. Trump signed a presidential waiver in accordance with the provisions of the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995, thereby postponing the relocation of the United States Embassy to Jerusalem for an additional six-month period (US Department of State, 2017). Subsequently, on December 6, 2017, President Trump officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel, marking a significant shift in longstanding U.S. foreign policy in the region ("The White House", 2017).*

In addition to refusing to establish its embassy in Jerusalem, the United States actively discouraged other nations from doing so. In 1990, the US Congress passed a resolution affirming that "Jerusalem is and should remain the capital of the State of Israel" and that it "must remain an undivided city in which the rights of every ethnic and religious group are protected" (Public Law 104-45, 1995).

During the 1992 US presidential campaign, Bill Clinton expressed his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's undivided and eternal capital, along with his support for relocating the US Embassy to the city. However, once in office, President Clinton did not reaffirm this position, and official US policy remained that the final status of Jerusalem should be determined through diplomatic negotiations. "I would be blind to disclaim the Jewish connection to Jerusalem" said the Sari Nusseibeh, president of Al-Quds University (Bard, 2017, p. 218).

In an effort to change this policy, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995. This landmark bill declared that, as a statement of official US policy, Jerusalem should be recognized as the undivided, eternal capital of Israel and required that the US Embassy in Israel be established in Jerusalem no later than May 1999. The law also included a waiver that allowed the president to essentially ignore the legislation if he deemed doing so to be in the best interest of the United States (Bard, 2017, p. 218).

Successive US presidents, including President Clinton and his successors, have exercised their authority to waive legislation mandating the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital when deemed necessary for national interests. Critics argue that congressional efforts to compel such recognition could harm the peace process. Former Mufti of Jerusalem Ikrema Sabri declared, "There was never a Jewish temple on Al-Aqsa (the mosque compound) and there is no proof that there was ever a temple" (Seid, 2007).

However, proponents contend that a clear US position affirming that Jerusalem, or at least West Jerusalem, should remain under Israeli sovereignty could temper Palestinian expectations and thereby facilitate a final agreement.

### **The Allegation: Israel Seeks to Destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque Historical Context and Recurring Accusations**

Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, claims that Israel seeks to destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque have been used to incite unrest. In 1929, the Mufti of Jerusalem spread rumors of Jewish plots against Muslim holy sites, leading to violent riots in which 135 Jews, including eight Americans, were killed, and more than 300 were wounded. This marked the first instance during the British Mandate in which religious tensions played a direct role in fueling conflict in Palestine a pattern that has since been repeated. That is why Bassam Tawil remarked: "We all know perfectly well that Al-Aqsa mosque is in no danger. Ironically – I am ashamed to admit it – thanks to the Israel Police, Al-Aqsa is the safest mosque in the Middle East" (Bard, 2017, p. 218; Tawil, 2015a).

More recently, calls to "liberate Al-Aqsa" have become frequent. On September 29, 2000, the Palestinian Authority (PA) used its official radio station to call on Palestinians to "defend Al-Aqsa Mosque", resulting in widespread rioting and the eruption of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Similarly, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi of the Muslim Brotherhood has framed Al-Aqsa as an existentially threatened site, asserting that Muslims worldwide must defend it as part of a broader struggle (Bard, 2017, pp. 219-220).

### **Archaeological Research and Political Tensions**

Excavations in Jerusalem, particularly those conducted near the Western Wall, have often been met with accusations that Israel seeks to undermine or destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Despite rigorous archaeological standards aimed at preserving all historical layers of the city, opponents argue that such research may uncover evidence affirming the Jewish historical connection to Jerusalem, contradicting narratives that seek to deny such links.

Paradoxically, some of the greatest threats to the Temple Mount's stability have come not from Israeli authorities but from actions taken by the Islamic Waqf, which administers the site. In the mid-1990s, the Israeli Islamic Movement initiated extensive construction at the site known as Solomon's Stables, converting it into a mosque (Shragai, n.d.). Similar projects have raised concerns about the destruction of archaeological evidence.

Often the Palestinians will regurgitate the libel even when Israel is engaged in activities outside the Temple Mount and nowhere near the mosques. For example, an Islamic group protested Jewish activities in the nearby village of Silwan because it is "the gateway to Al-Aqsa Mosque". The group also believed that the Jews planned to destroy the mosque and rebuild the Temple (Bard, 2017, p. 220).

### **Political Manipulation and Incitement**

Accusations concerning Al-Aqsa are frequently leveraged for political purposes. In 2010, the restoration of the Hurva Synagogue in the Jewish Quarter – far from the Temple Mount – was nevertheless framed as part of a supposed plot against Al-Aqsa, leading to two days of rioting. The 1996 inauguration of an exit from the Western Wall tunnel sparked violent protests, despite the fact that the project did not directly affect the Temple Mount. Palestinian leaders, including Mahmoud Abbas, have consistently called for mass protests, framing Jewish visits to the Temple Mount as acts of desecration.

Although the construction had been ongoing for some time, the catalyst for widespread rioting and international condemnation was Prime Minister Netanyahu's decision to open an exit from the Western Wall tunnel at a location along the Via Dolorosa in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem. Prior to this development, visitors to the tunnel had to retrace their steps through a narrow corridor, which barely allowed passage for individuals traveling in the opposite direction. The new exit, however, provided an alternative route, enabling thousands of additional visitors to access the site without the need to backtrack.

The factual context was largely disregarded by those seeking to criticize Israel and demonstrate solidarity with Arabs and Muslims. The Arab League



erroneously claimed that “Israel’s aim in opening this gate is to cause the collapse of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, so that it can build the Third Temple in its place” (Bard, 2017, p. 221). As a result, Palestinians engaged in violent riots, leading to attacks on soldiers and civilians, which ultimately caused the deaths of fifteen Israeli soldiers.

Since 1967, Jews, like other non-Muslims, have been visiting the Temple Mount, though the Israeli government places restrictions on their access. Non-Muslim visits are permitted only during designated hours, with an expectation that visitors show respect for Muslim traditions by dressing modestly and refraining from bringing sacred Jewish objects.

The Israeli Supreme Court has affirmed that Jews have the right to pray at the Temple Mount, but police have the discretion to prevent any actions that could provoke unrest. Extremist Jewish groups suspected of plotting against Muslim shrines are either barred from the Temple Mount or closely monitored by law enforcement. Those who have been found conspiring against the mosque have been arrested.

Despite Jews’ legal right to visit their holiest site, Palestinians often resort to violence under the guise of defending the mosque. In 2013, tensions intensified as Palestinians began protesting and, in some instances, attacking Jewish visitors with stones, bottles, and other projectiles. They falsely accused the visitors of desecrating the site and planning to build a Third Temple there.

The recurring accusations, which seldom reflect the actual behavior of Jewish visitors, are typically employed for political ends, such as rallying support, inciting violence, or diverting attention from unpopular actions taken by Palestinian leadership, such as re-engaging in peace talks without meeting preconditions.

The inflammatory rhetoric extends beyond Jerusalem, with Israeli Muslims holding an annual “Al-Aqsa is in Danger” festival. The 2013 rally in Umm al-Fahm, attended by thousands, featured a speech by Sheikh Raed Salah, who condemned any perceived concessions regarding Al-Aqsa, equating them with treason. As geopolitical tensions in the Middle East have drawn attention away from the Palestinian cause, leaders have continued to invoke the “Al-Aqsa libel” to garner support. For example, in July 2015, PA Minister of Religious Affairs Sheikh Yusuf Ida’is claimed on official PA TV that Israel was intent on destroying the Al-Aqsa Mosque to build the alleged Temple. This rhetoric is further exacerbated by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who called for a ban on Jewish entry to the Temple Mount, asserting that the site is a “Noble Sanctuary” and that Jews have no right to desecrate it (Bard, 2017, p. 222).

Many Muslims, with the approval or even encouragement of the Waqf and the Palestinian Authority, have desecrated their own holy places, turning them



into armories and using them as sites to incite violence against non-Muslim visitors and the police protecting them. Middle East scholar Bassam Tawil has noted that the real desecration of Islamic holy sites comes not from Jewish visitors, but from those who bring explosives, stones, and firebombs into Al-Aqsa. Tawil further emphasizes that the desecration stems from violent actions by Muslim youth, not the actions of Jews visiting the Temple Mount (Tawil, 2015b).

Palestinian violence at the Temple Mount is often strategically orchestrated to provoke an Israeli response, which can then be used to tarnish Israel's reputation. Palestinian leaders are seen as benefiting politically from these riots, as they can accuse Israel of suppressing "innocent" Palestinians and garner international sympathy. The political motivation behind these actions is clear: to embarrass Israel and draw attention to Palestinian grievances.

The invocation of the "Al-Aqsa libel" is also a means of galvanizing the Muslim world against Israel, particularly as other pressing issues in the region have taken precedence over the Palestinian cause. The Palestinian plight has increasingly been sidelined by other regional crises, including Iran's nuclear ambitions, the rise of ISIS, and the Syrian conflict.

The irony lies in the failure of international and Muslim leaders to condemn and prevent the abuse of Islamic holy sites by Palestinians, who are more focused on using Al-Aqsa as a military stronghold than as a place of worship.

### **The Role of Violence and Internal Palestinian Politics**

The use of Al-Aqsa as a rallying point extends beyond political rhetoric. Palestinian rioters have repeatedly used the mosque as an armory, stockpiling stones and incendiary devices. Some analysts argue that these actions are designed to provoke an Israeli response, thereby providing an opportunity to depict Israel as an aggressor. Political leaders in Ramallah, meanwhile, have been accused of encouraging such unrest to bolster their domestic standing or distract from governance challenges.

Moreover, as broader geopolitical crises – such as Iran's nuclear program, the Syrian civil war, and the rise of ISIS – have diverted international attention from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Palestinian leaders have resorted to the "Al-Aqsa is in danger" narrative to rekindle support and reassert their cause on the global stage.

### **The Abraham Accords and Jerusalem**

The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 between Israel and several Arab states – primarily the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, followed by Sudan and Morocco – marked a historic shift in Arab-Israeli relations (Makovsky, 2020). While the agreements centered on diplomatic normalization and

strategic cooperation, the status of Jerusalem remained a latent but significant concern (US Department of State, 2020). The accords were signed in the aftermath of the US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in 2017 and the subsequent relocation of its embassy in 2018 – actions that generated considerable opposition in the Arab and Islamic world (United Nations, 2017). Despite this, the Arab signatories proceeded without securing commitments regarding the Palestinian claim to East Jerusalem, thereby departing from the long-standing Arab Peace Initiative 2002, or Abdallah plan which conditioned normalization on the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital (Chtatou, 2022). The Accords were thus criticized by the Palestinian Authority and others for undermining Palestinian interests and sidelining Jerusalem's contested status. Nonetheless, signatory states argued that normalization could offer new leverage to moderate Israeli policies and foster regional stability.

How the Accords relate to Jerusalem?

- **No Concession on Jerusalem:** Although normalizing ties with Israel, the Arab states did not gain any concessions on the status of Jerusalem or progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.
- **Palestinian Response:** The Palestinian leadership strongly opposed the Accords, arguing that they bypassed the Palestinian issue and weakened the Arab consensus (as laid out in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative) that normalization should follow a resolution to the conflict, including the status of East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state (Al-Ketbi, 2021).
- **UAE's Justification:** The UAE argued that the deal helped prevent Israel's planned annexation of parts of the West Bank, which indirectly protected Palestinian interests – though this claim was debated (Abdulla, 2021).
- **Religious Sensitivities:** Some Arab and Muslim leaders and communities were concerned that normalizing relations with Israel without addressing Jerusalem's status and access to Islamic holy sites would undermine Islamic claims and stewardship over the city.

### **Conclusion**

The recurring assertion that Israel seeks to destroy Al-Aqsa remains a central theme in regional discourse, yet a critical examination of historical and contemporary evidence suggests that this narrative is largely politically motivated rather than grounded in verifiable fact. The Israeli government has consistently enforced strict regulations concerning access to the Temple Mount, including limitations on Jewish visitation and prayer, in an effort to preserve the site's religious integrity and avoid exacerbating tensions. These

measures demonstrate an official policy aimed at maintaining the delicate status quo rather than undermining the sanctity of Al-Aqsa.

Nevertheless, the use of Al-Aqsa as a political symbol continues to shape both Palestinian internal dynamics and broader regional conflicts. Various factions within Palestinian politics, particularly those seeking to bolster their legitimacy or rally public support, have strategically employed the claim that Al-Aqsa is under existential threat. This rhetoric often serves as a mobilizing tool, reinforcing collective grievances and fueling periods of unrest. Additionally, regional actors, including state and non-state entities, have leveraged this narrative to advance geopolitical agendas, sometimes intensifying hostilities rather than fostering dialogue.

Given the deeply entrenched historical and religious significance of the Temple Mount, any discussion regarding its status remains inherently sensitive. While tensions surrounding the site persist, a nuanced and evidence-based approach is essential to disentangling political manipulation from factual realities. Future diplomatic efforts aimed at reducing conflict over Al-Aqsa must acknowledge the intersection of religious sensitivities, national identities, and geopolitical strategies that continue to shape its contested status. While the Abraham Accords did not directly change the legal or political status of Jerusalem, they shifted regional dynamics in a way that marginalized the centrality of Jerusalem and the Palestinian question in Arab-Israeli diplomacy. This normalization without addressing the core status of Jerusalem marked a departure from traditional Arab policy, though Jerusalem remains a critical and unresolved issue in the broader peace process.

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