



In the Shadows of al-Haram al-Sharif: Ibrahim Dakkak Remembers

JQF occasionally provides profiles of personalities who have made significant contributions to Jerusalem and Palestine. For this issue, Laura Fragiaco interviewed Ibrahim Dakkak, a well-known Jerusalemite and a member of JQF's advisory board, who has served as an architect, engineer, and political activist. In this interview, Dakkak shared his childhood memories of Jerusalem and spoke of his duties as a protector of the Old City's heritage.

"Al-Haram al-Sharif remains unchanged to me," he says. As a secular Muslim Jerusalemite, Ibrahim Dakkak's attachment to al-Haram and its surrounding areas is not of a religious nature. Instead, he relates to the city **more as a living habitat**. Dakkak remembers how Jerusalem was before 1948 - before West Jerusalem became fully "judaicized" and its Arab character largely

erased. He has seen even the Old City change in many ways: before, the markets catered to local residents, whereas now, they serve mostly the tourists and non-residents. In Dakkak's childhood, al-Haram al-Sharif, at the heart of the Old City, was the center around which most of his life revolved, and it has remained a spot that, despite the flux occurring around it, never changed.

Al-Haram al-Sharif played a pivotal role in his childhood; most of his free time and school hours were spent playing with his peers in what he remembers as the tranquil environs of al-Haram. His schools were located near it, and during lunch, he would eat his sandwiches in the compound. On Friday, Dakkak would attend the main prayers with his father in al-Haram, which would be then transformed, particularly during the summertime, from a holy place of prayer into a community-gathering place. "We'd linger on for hours after completing the prayers, catching up with friends and neighbors, and finding out the latest news."

Dakkak's elementary school years were spent initially in the Islamic School, which now serves as a school for disabled children. Later, he spent four years at the Omariyeh School, near the First Station of the Cross: "Back then, it was called *Rawdat al Ma'aref al Wataniyyeh* (National Kindergarten of Knowledge)." At the time, his school was probably one of the most important of its kind; it was a place where Muslims, and some Christians also, were taught civics with a solid background in Arabic history and literature.

We thought that we would be the future leaders of Palestine. Our

school was one of a kind, run by Arabs, and was viewed as a competitor to other schools managed by the foreign missionaries: for example, the Terra Sancta and Bishop Gobat schools.

One of his fondest childhood memories is of the Nabi Musa (the Prophet Moses) festivities. Muslims from the farthest reaches of Palestine would conglomerate in the al-Aqsa Mosque to commence the celebrations; after the prayers, the crowds would proceed on a pilgrimage to the shrine where Moses was reputedly buried near Jericho.

For Dakkak, as for many Palestinians, the march to the Tomb of Moses had religious, political, and personal associations. The annual Nabi Musa pilgrimage would always fall on the week preceding Easter; thousands of Muslims from all over Palestine would converge on Jerusalem on Good Friday, which also coincided with the Jewish Passover holiday. This is the only Islamic holiday or festivity that follows the western (Gregorian) calendar and was part of the religious rites that every Muslim was expected to perform.

The pilgrimage dates back to the time of the liberation of Jerusalem by Salah al-Din, who, in a show of Muslim strength and good will, allowed the Crusaders and other western pilgrims to visit the Christian holy places at Easter time. It was revived in the 19th century by the Ottoman authorities who wanted to encourage a large Muslim pilgrimage to coincide with the European pilgrims, mostly Russian Orthodox, who had begun flooding into Jerusalem for Easter.

It was a political action that took the form

of a religious rite: "This was an opportunity for us to express our ideas, and we felt no one could stop us, not the British, not the Jordanians." Throngs of people would join in, marching and cheering together. Whatever regime was in place would feel threatened. Today, the Nabi Musa festivities are still a part of the collective memory of Jerusalemites - especially the old ones, for younger ones do not really remember how it feels.

Dakkak describes the joyous atmosphere - people singing and dancing in prayer, horse racing, and games continuing for days around the shrine. His memories of the celebrations by the shrine of Nabi Musa are vivid; his maternal uncles - the Husseinis - belonged to one of the two Jerusalem families who owned buildings at the shrine, and Dakkak and his cousins had the privilege of staying with them.

I remember the huge kitchen where we, the kids, would run to get some of the food the cooks were distributing for free to the pilgrims, or we'd just go to the kitchen to join in on the lines of debka dancers.

After the festivities were over, the pilgrims, who included most of the Old City's inhabitants, would return home.

Al-Haram al-Sharif was central to the lives of the Old City's inhabitants and other Jerusalemites. But, as the third holiest site in Islam after Mecca and Medina, the al-Aqsa Mosque also attracted Muslim pilgrims from throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Al-Haram compound, with the al-Aqsa Mosque, was a focal point for all Muslims to come visit; as part of the *hajj* (the annual pilgrimage

to Mecca by Muslims), pilgrims would pass through Jerusalem.

I remember seeing pilgrims from Damascus, Morocco and Africans as well. Many would end up settling in Jerusalem, for example in the Harat al-Magharibah (the Moroccan Quarter), and to this day we have families named after them - 'Shami,' and 'Maghrabi.'

Others would come just for the day: before 1967, Beirutis would fly into Jerusalem for prayers and then return to Lebanon the same night.

A life-long Palestinian activist, Dakkak was always motivated by the ever-volatile political situation to become involved in supporting the plight of his people. Since the 1960's, he has been active in numerous professional and national organizations, including the Arab Thought Forum.

In 1969, his attachment to al-Haram al-Sharif became a professional one after he was asked to head the newly formed Restoration Committee of al-Aqsa Mosque, which had been severely damaged in an arson attack by a Christian Zionist from Australia. "Until then, I'd viewed al-Haram as being more part of my social life, but after the arson, in which the unique *mihrab* (pulpit) was destroyed, my relationship with the compound transformed into one of duty," he recalled.

Ever since Israel's annexation of the Old City in 1967, Palestinians and Muslims everywhere have felt a tangible Israeli threat against al-Haram. "We were all afraid. The arson only confirmed this fear. When I took the job as the director in 1969, I felt my

professional ambition blend with my desire to challenge the Israelis."

Palestinians and Muslims knew that the Israelis wanted the sanctuary, but, regardless of what they said about wanting to rebuild the Temple, this was not Dakkak's problem. "My problem was how was to keep the Israelis away from the entrance, and to carry on with the renovations and excavations in order to strengthen the mosque's foundations." There were so many issues to contend with, including local and international public opinion: "One cannot ignore that everyone has a stake in this place."

Dakkak recalls how a rabbi arrived at al-Haram with a group of people, praying for the rebuilding of the Temple. He also remembers a visit by then Israeli Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan. "He came a couple of times to observe the excavations we were conducting. He was an amateur archeologist, you know." Once, Professor B. Mazar, a renowned Israeli archeologist, came along with Dayan:

Mazar's eyesight was rather feeble, and he had to walk up closely to any object he wanted to scrutinize. At one point, the two of them were standing near an excavation that was cordoned off. Professor Mazar looked down and saw a small wall that we had uncovered. From eight meters away he cried out: 'Look here, these are the remains of the Second Temple!' Fortunately, his assistant (who incidentally had excellent eye-sight), standing next to him replied, 'Sir, this is an Ummayyad

wall, and not one from the Second Temple period.'

Once, Dakkak recalls, Teddy Kollek, Jerusalem's mayor at the time and a frequent visitor to al-Haram, was asked whether the third temple would be built: "His rather diplomatic answer was that it would definitely be rebuilt, but only when the Messiah comes! 'So far,' Kollek said, 'the Messiah has not arrived - and we are still waiting...'"

In recent months, right-wing Israeli groups have petitioned the Israeli High Court to halt immediately any renovation work or excavations the Palestinians are conducting on al-Haram al-Sharif, claiming that these works are destroying artifacts from the Temple Period. Dakkak feels this is a political ploy, since he says that it is a well-known fact that Israel has destroyed other archeological artifacts - and even contemporary constructs, including Palestinian homes and entire neighborhoods.¹ "So one cannot say that the Israelis are driven by their care for artifacts," he insists. "We know very well what they did to other quarters and places, whether in Jerusalem or other places in Palestine."

On a political note, Dakkak feels that the visit by Ariel Sharon, a secular Jew, to al-Haram al-Sharif was a clear attempt to win the support of religious Israelis and settlers. Dakkak goes on to explain that, within Israel, there is a rift between Jewish groups on the role of the Temple Mount (the Jewish name for al-Haram al-Sharif). Many Orthodox Jews are adamantly against the idea of "reclaiming the Temple Mount," for they

¹ About, Tom "The Moroccan Quarter: A History of the Present," *Jerusalem Quarterly File* No. 7 (Winter 2000): 6-14

believe that it will only be rebuilt when the Messiah comes. However, other groups stray from this biblical interpretation in order to achieve political goals, such as Israeli sovereignty over as many areas as possible.

What should the response of Palestinians be? Ibrahim Dakkak affirms that the one thing they can do is to stubbornly continue to maintain and restore al-Haram al-Sharif. "Now is the time to do this, while at the same time, we must make the world aware of the very real danger - not only that is befalling a Muslim shrine, but that is threatening a jewel of our human heritage."



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