

The al-Aqsa Mosque Library of al-Haram al-Sharif

By Yusuf Natsheh

The al-Aqsa Mosque Library is located in al-Haram al-Sharif compound's southwestern corner. It constitutes the eastern part of an exquisite rectangular hall overlooking archeological excavations situated to the south of the mosque. This area reveals the remnants of a building complex, dating back to the reign of al-Walid (705-715) of the Umayyad era.¹ The western part of the hall forms the second component of the Islamic Museum, adjacent to the library, and is most probably a Crusader structure, built as a refectory for the Templar Knights.

This is the most recent site of the library,

¹ The building complex (*dar al-immara*) was a palace that housed the Jerusalem governor during the Umayyad period.

to which it moved in early 2000. Since its establishment in 1923 by the Supreme Muslim Legislative Council, under the leadership of the mufti of Palestine Hajj Amin al-Husseini, the library has been accommodated in different sites within al-Haram compound. When it was founded, the library bore the name *dar kuttub al-masjed al-aqsa* (literally, house of the books of the Aqsa Mosque). The name has a remarkable implication: it was hoped that this "house of books" would become as important to Islamic studies as *dar al-kuttub al-masriyya fi al-qahira* (the National Library at Cairo) and *dar al-kuttub al-zahirrya fi dimishq* (the National Library at Damascus 'al-Zahiryya').

However, the prevailing political circumstances during the British Mandate (1917-1948) and the *nakba* (or catastrophe) following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War stifled the development and growth of the al-Aqsa Library's collection.

After a long period of inactivity from 1948 to 1976, the Awqaf Administration decided to revive the library in early 1977. A professional librarian was appointed, modest furniture provided, and a microfilm machine with reader acquired. The library's collection was moved from the Islamic Museum to the ground floor of the monumental Ashrafiyya *madrasa* (or religious school) built by Sultan Qaitbay in 1480, described by the well-known historian of Jerusalem, Mujir al-Din, to be the "third jewel in al-Haram." [The first two are the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa Mosque.]

The collection focuses on various subjects related to Islamic and Arabic studies and

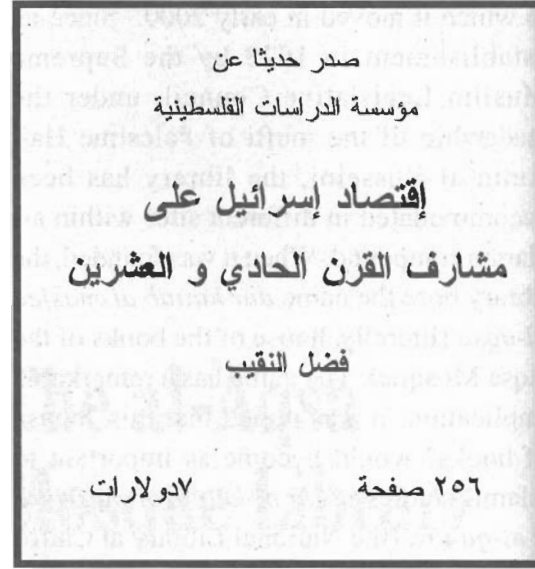
consists of two main sections - manuscripts and published works. The former is very important and only researchers have access; it covers numerous subjects such as *tajwid* (the art of reciting the Qur'an), *tafsir* (exposition of Qur'an), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *falak* (astronomy), *hisab* (arithmetic), *miqat* (timing for prayers, fasting and pilgrims), *jinn* (demons), *tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism), history, and Arabic language. So far, the chief librarian Khader Salameh has compiled three major indexes on the manuscripts, some of which are quite rare.

The library is intended to meet the needs of researchers and students from Jerusalem and other Palestinian cities who frequent al-Haram al-Sharif; and its focus is geared toward on the Islamic history of the Haram, Jerusalem, and Palestine. Unfortunately, the collection is still quite modest. Most of the library's publications are in Arabic or English, arranged in open-shelved rows with Arabic headings. Although the collection's index is not yet computerized, and the signs and the index are in Arabic, the efficient and helpful librarian will always ensure that the non-Arabic speaking visitor is able to access the library.

The library is open to the public between 9am and 1pm, from Saturday to Wednesday. However, it closes for noon prayers, which hinders many students from fully utilizing the collection. Furthermore, in recent days, there is one more frustrating obstacle that confronts any visitor to the library - an extensive security check at one of al-Haram's gates. But even getting this far is not guaranteed, given the innumerable

checkpoints located around Jerusalem's periphery that bar entry to all West Bank Palestinians. Therefore, since the beginning of the enforced separation between Jerusalem and other West Bank cities in 1992, most students have been unable to reach the library.

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الدراسات الفلسطينية

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حوار مع محمود درويش
عن الشعر والسياسة وتجربة الموت

بينما الانتفاضة مستمرة
جمود سياسي ومستقبل غامض
فيصل حوراني

الملف

تأثيرات الانتفاضة
في الهجرة والمزاج العام
في إسرائيل
(ترجمات من العبرية)

مقارنة بين التجريبتين التفاوضيتين
الفلسطينية والفيتنامية
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