

Book Reviews

Reiter: Jerusalem and Its Role in Islamic Solidarity

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Sanctifying the Holy City/ A Review of Yitzhak Reiter's "Jerusalem and Its Role in Islamic Solidarity."

Jerusalem and Its Role in Islamic Solidarity,

By Yitzhak Reiter. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008

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The dynamic (re)imagining of Jerusalem, as the epicentre of the Islamic world – in creation, apocalyptic judgement and violent religious struggle (*Jihad*) – is the focus of Yitzhak Reiter's latest work, *Jerusalem and Its Role in Islamic Solidarity* (2008). Although mythological debates and discourses are not entirely under-researched in the field of Jerusalem studies¹, Reiter offers a detailed, well documented account, which explores both the historic rise of a new Islamic understanding of the city, and also its complex antithetical relationship with Jewish-Israeli discourses. Drawing on a rich array of Arabic sources; books, fatwas, articles, websites and media interviews, from around the Muslim world, he explores the elevation of the sanctity of 'al-Aqsa mosque' (chp. 2) and the emergence of a radical islamizing ethos (chp. 4), which valorises conflict (chp. 5) and seeks to mobilise the wider Muslim world (chp.6) in the liberation of Jerusalem. His analysis, while affirming much of the dominant Israeli scholarship on Islamic 'Al-Quds', which problematizes Arab historicity, the politicisation of religious symbols and reinterpretation of sacred traditions; yet offers valuable insights into how Islamic texts/ discourses on Jerusalem impact public consciousness, shape political agendas and stand as a 'religious barrier' to future peace.

Despite being revised and adapted from its previous Hebrew form ('From Jerusalem to Mecca and Back' 2005), this book reads like a synthesis of thematic papers and articles drawn from Reiter's experience as a commentator and political advisor on Palestinian affairs. The work is persuasively grounded in empirical research and archival studies; however, it is let down by a somewhat disjointed style, numerous repetitions and unorthodox structure. The reader is informed over six times that Ikrima Sabri was a Arafat appointed former PA Mufti; five times that the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC) comprises 57 states and three times that Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi's book is entitled *Jerusalem is the Problem of Every Muslim*. Also some of the content overlaps in chapters two and five; while the discussion on Islamic actors and groups (chp.6) would have added greater clarity and fluency if introduced earlier in the book.

Nevertheless, these stylistic weaknesses do not detract from the force and substance

of Reiter's overwhelming contention, that the changing Islamic discourse on Jerusalem, whether inspired as a 'mirror syndrome' (pg.98) to counter Jewish Settlers Messianic nationalism or mobilised as a form of resistance to oppose Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem, has now become a global rallying call, warning of Israeli encroachments on the 'Haram al-Sharif,' and affirming that 'Al-Aqsa is in danger'. He delineates this new Islamic imagining into three concentric circles: the sanctified Al-Aqsa mosque, Jerusalem 'the Holy City' and the blessed land of Palestine. First he explores the growing focus on Al-Aqsa mosque rather than the whole Haram compound, which he believes to be an attempt to reaffirm its sacred Qur'anic credentials and its need for pan-Islamic protection. Secondly, he examines how Jerusalem's sacred Muslim status has been built upon a growing trend to deny any Jewish connection to the Haram as a site of the ancient Temple and to disavow Jerusalem as a historic capital of an Israeli kingdom. Instead Jerusalem is revered as an 'Islamic defensive stronghold' (pg.33) - the scene of historic liberation under Caliph Umar and Saladin – and the site for future deliverance and Islamic restoration.

Finally, Reiter investigates how the holiness of Jerusalem has been extended to the whole of Palestine as generic Islamic *Waqf*; eternally sacred, non-transferable and not subject to any historical, political or religious claims.

Although Reiter handles these themes with skill, there is room for deeper analysis and theoretical probing. His assumptions on how religious discourse shapes political policy and public perception must also be observed in reverse. How are contemporary Israeli policies (settlements, separation barrier, closure of PA in Jerusalem) influencing Palestinian and Muslim discourses on the city's holy sites? The final chapter, while offering a useful summary of how these changes impact the ongoing peace process, requires a more detailed examination of what he proposes, in the way of third-party intervention and supervision of Jerusalem's Old City. Reiter's work remains a fascinating and timely account of the processes through which symbols of faith and sanctity are employed in a political struggle.

Endnotes

- 1 Bar, Gideon. 2008. "Reconstructing the Past: The Creation of Jewish Sacred Space in the State of Israel, 1948–1967." *Israel Studies* 13(3):1-21; Eliav, Yaron Z. 2005. *God's Mountain: The Temple Mount in Time, Place, and Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; Gonen, Rivka. 2003. *Contested Holiness: Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Perspectives on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem*. Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House; Ross, Marc Howard. 2003. "Competing Narratives and Escalation in Ethnic Conflicts: the Case of the Holy Sites in Jerusalem." *Sphera Publica* 3:189-2008; Dumper, Michael. 2002. *The Politics of Sacred*

Space: The Old City of Jerusalem in the Middle East Conflict. London Boulder, Co., Lynne Rienner Publishers; Bowman, Glenn. 1986. "Unholy Struggle on Holy Ground: Conflict and Interpretation in Jerusalem." *Anthropology Today* 2(3):14-17; Peters, Francis E. 1985. *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.