

## Editorial

# The Haram al-Sharif at the Eye of the Storm

Writing on “Five Decades of Subjection and Marginalization” of Palestinians in Jerusalem in the previous issue of *Jerusalem Quarterly* (62), historian and Jerusalemite Nazmi Jubeh warned of increasing Israeli control over access to the al-Aqsa/Dome of the Rock mosque compound – the Haram al-Sharif or Noble Sanctuary – including the pattern of provocative “visits” by Israeli right-wing activists and politicians, accompanied by police and border guards. The Noble Sanctuary is “one of the last remaining Palestinian strongholds in Jerusalem and the embodiment of many religious and national symbols.” At present, Jubeh presciently added, it is a “powder keg.”

As we go to press, in mid-November, clashes at the Haram al-Sharif that erupted when armed Israeli police entered the mosque compound a month earlier in the wake of a visit by far-right Israeli Minister Uri Ariel have spread throughout Jerusalem neighborhoods and refugee camps, villages and towns in the rest of the occupied West Bank and along the Gaza border, as well as inside Israel itself. All that can be said with certainty is that Palestinian protest over Israeli actions at the Haram al-Sharif was inevitable, that the direction and duration of the conflict is unpredictable, and that the surge of Palestinian protest is fueled by Israeli actions at the Haram, but embraces the multiple violations of Palestinian rights and lives.

Commentators appear fixated on whether to label the present events a “third intifada” rather than addressing the fundamental issues of the denial of rights to Palestinians in Jerusalem, the continuing occupation of Palestine, and Israeli refusal to negotiate a just peace. Youthful protesters risking their lives at Israeli checkpoints have repeatedly told journalists that they have seen no progress towards rights and freedom in their lifetime:

they are “fed up.” There is no doubt that the trigger for this latest upheaval was the events at the Haram, particularly the attempts by Israeli settlers and official figures to challenge the status quo of religious worship and the Islamic Waqf administration of the holy sites at al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock. But another recent trigger was certainly the brutal murder by fire of the Dawabsheh family in Duma by settlers, and other acts of settler violence. At present, daily clashes between young people and Israeli armed forces are recalling the first days of the first and second intifadas. This time the encounters are not at the center of world attention, marginalized by civil wars and external aggressions in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. Nonetheless, the global and regional implications are salient.

Israeli sources have tried to link the current protests and accompanying violence with the speech made by President Mahmoud Abbas at the UN, in which he threatened to annul terms of the Oslo Accords, and to withdraw security cooperation with Israel. However it should be noted that the seething rage among the youth that took to the streets preceded Abu Mazen’s speech, and was often in response to provocations by settlers on village fields, village mosques, and more recently with the attempts to change the status quo in the Haram. At the end of the first week of the current uprising Abbas made the telling statement (attributed in the Palestinian daily *Al-Ayyam* on October 7 to his chief advisor, Nimer Hammad) indicating his, and the government’s, opposition to the escalating violence, and his desire that the protests remain non-violent. This has been the traditional position of Abbas, and has always distinguished him from the mobilization style of Arafat during the outbreak of the second intifada. But this position in the current political stalemate begs the question. Where is this “intifada” going? What is the political leadership that can give it direction? And what are its political objectives?

The leading articles in this issue address the background to these events in Jerusalem. Throughout its history, the city was often seen as the center of the world. Although such a view emerged from various theological interpretations it nonetheless often reflected changing geographical realities. Maps from earlier periods presented the city as the topographical center of the world. Now we know that the world has no geographical center, though at times it has a geopolitical one. Still, the view of the centrality of the city was (and continues to be) an indicator of its location in the *imaginaire* of peoples far and near. Holy to three religions with a landscape filled with sacred and historical sites, Jerusalem occupies a special place in the hearts of so many. But rather than leading to Jerusalem as a site of human interconnectedness, the city’s recent history features the expulsion, exclusion or marginalization of the city’s Palestinian residents.

Since the city was divided in 1949, the ideal of interconnectedness has not been the norm, with the expulsion of over 30,000 of its Palestinian inhabitants from its western sections during the 1948 war. Instead of finding ways to heal the wounds of 1948, following Israel’s occupation of the eastern part of the city, the situation became even worse. Attempts to transform Jerusalem into an exclusive Jewish city never ceased. The so-called unification of the city, since the occupation of 1967, undermined this claim and achieved the complete opposite of unity. Over the last five decades or so since its occupation, the various Israeli authorities that controlled the city did their utmost to undermine the rights of the Palestinian inhabitants and to transform the

ethno-geographical and diverse religious landscape of Jerusalem. Policies that included expulsions, restrictions of movement, stifling of national and individual rights, closure of institutions, and so much more have been implemented ever since day one of Israel's occupation. The Oslo Peace Accord signed between the Palestine Liberation Organization and the State of Israel did nothing to preserve at least the status quo that existed at the moment of the signing of the agreement in 1993. The number of Jewish-Israeli settlers increased dramatically since, and Palestinians from the city's vicinity have been banned from accessing it. The building of the so-called "security wall," often referred to as the "Apartheid Wall," sealed Jerusalem off from its natural, social, and national context. Attacks on and acquisition of buildings, homes, entire neighborhoods, and religious places became the norm ever since Israel destroyed the Moroccan Quarter of the Old City during the 1967 war and laid an exclusive claim to the area known as the Western ("Wailing") Wall which could have been a shared space for both Jews and Muslims as it once was before the 1948 War. Since then, the many religious sites sacred to members of more than one religious group were claimed as Jewish-only centers of worship. The Tomb of David inside the Old City and that of Rachel near Bethlehem are only two examples.

At the time of writing this editorial, the first steps towards what could be full Israeli control of the Dome of the Rock and al-Aqsa mosque are underway. Calls for "sharing of time and space" – or dividing – the earliest standing Muslim building in the city – built in the 690s CE – between Jews and Muslims and the visits of settlers every morning to the site guarded by dozens of soldiers and police could possibly pave the way for a partition of the compound as has occurred in the Ibrahimi Sanctuary in Hebron – and that is certainly what many Palestinians fear.

This issue of *Jerusalem Quarterly* highlights the recent configurations at the Haram area with a contribution by Marian Houk that outlines the current tensions in the city and Israeli attempts to change the status quo at the Haram al-Sharif. We also include selections from "The Status of the Status Quo at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade" issued recently by the International Crisis Group, with a critical introduction by Michael Dumper, a renowned authority on the politics of sacred sites in the city.

The issue also includes various studies and contributions related to the history of Jerusalem and Palestine. Two contributions focus on the role of important Palestinian thinkers from the late Ottoman and the British Mandate periods in Palestine: Khalil al-Sakakini, by Emmanuel Beška; and 'Isa al-'Isa, by Samuel Dolbee and Shay Hazkani. Reecia Orzeck examines the colonial vision of the Jewish Agency via an album that the agency presented to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine in 1947. Ahmad Joudah, author of the biography of Zahir al-'Umar, the eighteenth-century ruler of Akka and the Galilee, has recently published an expanded second edition of his history. He delves into the eighteenth-century period to examine the role of Zahir al-'Umar and his attempt at breaking Palestine away from the Ottoman Empire. Issam Khalidi examines the relation between sports and nationalism via the example of the scout athletic activities in the 1930s. Vicken Kalbian reflects on the photographs of a field military hospital at the southern front of Palestine during the period of The Great War, and Alex Shams revisits

the halted Nabi Rubeen festival that used to take place in Palestine until 1946, two years before the Palestinian catastrophe.

In the documentary section of this issue, we re-print a series of enhanced maps, provided by OCHA (the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs) indicating the substantial Israeli intervention in Jerusalem and its outer perimeters, in terms of zoning, morphologies and demographic reworking of the cityscape. If earlier maps of Jerusalem as the center of the world are telling about the city's spiritual importance, these maps offer evidence of a city and its Palestinian population in physical, social and political peril.