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Transformations in Islamic Pilgrimage Patterns and Meanings: Piety, Politics, Resistance, and Places of Memory in Islamic Pilgrimage Sites in Israel/Palestine

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Abstract: This paper explores recent transformations in Islamic pilgrimage patterns in Israel/Palestine. The meanings assigned to traditional Muslim sites, and the conduct and practices of the dwindling number of pilgrims who visit them, are the struggling victims of strategic socio-political erasures caused by dramatic geo-political changes. Since 1948, the hegemony of the State of Israel has perversely politicized sacred Islamic sites beyond their traditional religious functions. Muslim pilgrims, for their part, engage in rituals that have become a counterweight to Israeli ethnocratic imperatives. The reconstruction of an Islamic pilgrimage map presents a shared imaginative landscape as *lieux de mémoire* that undergird political and social resistance. The dogged survival of Islamic pilgrimage comprises a counterweight to state power. Muslims fight to affirm Palestinian identity, reclaim heritage spaces as anchors for identity, and actively engage with land claiming.

Keywords: Islamic pilgrimage; ethnocracy; hegemony; resistance; *lieux de mémoire*; politics of place; Israel/Palestine

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1. Introduction

In recent years, interdisciplinary pilgrimage studies have broken new ground in the analysis of political pressure, economic influences, tourism, travel patterns, investment in heritage projects, the influence of new technologies and social media, and the imperatives of nationalization and globalization (Bianchi 2004; Coleman and Eade 2004; Eade and Katić 2014; Maddrell et al. 2015; Eade and Coleman 2018). Changing patterns of Islamic pilgrimage in Israel/Palestine bring to light new meanings, rituals, and socio-political processes which have pitted traditional sites against power structures. Nationalistic programs transformed the region with improved road systems and public transportation, as well as the pervasive use of social media (Collins-Kreiner and Luz 2018). The emergence of Israel as the dominant agent in the region has only deepened Israeli–Palestinian tensions. Maqam Abu al-Hijja, a site of local Islamic pilgrimage in the village of Kawkab in Galilee, has clearly manifested these changes over the past two decades. During the early 2000s, pilgrims visited weekly. Now, hardly anyone visits. The reasons were summed up succinctly by S., a woman in her late twenties. When I learned she resided in Kawkab, I asked her if she ever made a pilgrimage to the Maqam. Not only had she never visited the place, but she also hardly knew anything about it: "I think we have changed, and my generation simply does not go to those places anymore" (personal communication, 15 June 2022). This is surely not a unique case, and I documented similar responses from others of her age group in that village and elsewhere. This is the outcome of a plethora of processes on multi-scalar levels, which are examined thorough this paper.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, hundreds of settlements, mostly Palestinian, have been demolished, destroyed, and uprooted, which also amounted to the eradication of hundreds of local pilgrimage sites from the landscape (Khalidi 1992). To

explain these changes and understand these processes in this paper, I describe the transformations that have taken place to Islamic pilgrimage sites in the region since the modern period, during which the conflict in Israel/Palestine morphed into a national one. Surely, one cannot fathom these changes in isolation from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Thus, under the British Mandate (1920–1948)—with greater vigor since the emergence of the State of Israel as a Jewish state, and, surely, since 1967, when Israel gained direct control of Palestinian territories in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (Dowty 2005)—momentous changes took place, not only concerning pilgrims' routes and destinations, but also in the meanings assigned to them and in the way they are produced and perceived among their respective Islamic–Palestinian communities. This has been particularly true from the 1970s to the present, decades during which Palestinian communities have been heavily involved in numerous activities (not necessarily religious in nature) revolving around pilgrimage sites. This has to do with the termination of the military regime Israel imposed on its Arab citizens until 1966, processes of academization from the late 1960s onwards, and the establishment of the Israeli Islamic Movement in the early 1970s (Rabinowitz and Abu-Bakr 2005).

This paper examines these fundamental changes in pilgrimage patterns, pilgrims' activities therein, and the variable meanings assigned to these sites. To that end, I first briefly theorize the role of Israel's ethnocratic regime, to explain decolonizing and counter-hegemonic aspects found in Islamic pilgrimage in the region. This is followed with an outline of the development of Islamic pilgrimage sites as they emerged from the early Islamic conquest in the 7th century until the modern era and the beginning of the Israeli–Palestinian national conflict. This serves as a blueprint against which I analyze the changes occurring in recent decades. To begin, I look at the emergence of local pilgrimage sites as sites of memory, engaging with Nora's conceptualization of *lieux de mémoire*. Next, I examine the transformations of Islamic pilgrimage sites into spaces of resistance against the hegemony of the Jewish majority society and state agencies. The final part addresses the emergence of the most significant pilgrimage site, the Haram al-Sharif (often translated as "the Noble Sanctuary"; known also as the Temple Mount among non-Muslims) in Jerusalem as an iconic religious–national symbol. Focusing mostly on the activities of the Israeli Islamic Movement therein, I show how a simple act of pilgrimage and praying on site has indeed become an act of defiance and is perceived as contributing to the Palestinian national struggle. To conclude, I revisit my main argument and central claims, emphasizing the transformation of these sites into anti-colonial spaces that challenge the current hegemony.

2. Contextualizing Islamic-Palestinian Pilgrimage against the Impacts of Israel Ethnocratic Logic

Arguably, the most significant geopolitical change in the region has been the emergence of the State of Israel as the major force operating in Israel/Palestine since 1948. Against the Jewish-Zionist national project, the local Arab population promoted its own national project (Muslih 1988). The tension between these two opposing groups and ideological movements continuously escalated and, once the British Mandate withdrew from the region, a full-scale war broke out between the Jews (soon to be the State of Israel) and their Arab counterparts (Laqueur 2001). As a result of the war, Israel was established as a Jewish-democratic state, while effectively imposing an ethnocratic logic (explained below) within its sovereign territory, now covering circa 78% of the area of the Mandate (Yiftachel and Ghanem 2004). Consistent with its ethnocratic logic, Israel began a concentrated project known as "the Judaization policy" (Benvenisti 2000). In this undertaking, not only were Palestinian villages erased and massive tracts of land confiscated, but also—and pertinent to the current article—many local pilgrimage sites ceased to exist.

As previously argued, analysis of the shifting pattern in Islamic pilgrimage in the region cannot be disengaged from the existing power structure and geometries of power. The main mobilizer of socio-political processes in Israel/Palestine is the logic of ethnocracy enforced by the State of Israel since its inception. Ethnocracy is a concept that implies

a political regime that facilitates expansion and control by a dominant ethnicity within a modern national state. Although declaring itself as democratic, rights and access to common goods and state resources are allocated primarily based on ethnic origin, namely, ethnocracy (Yiftachel 2006). In Israel/Palestine, the primary manifestation of ethnocracy has been a concerted strategy by the state through its various agencies and manifestations to Judaize the region, that is, to assume control over the land by the Jewish state and for the Jewish ethnic group. The imposition of this political logic over a heterogeneous territory composed of different groups (which do not share the majority group's understanding, nor do they have the inclination to do so) is likely to cause conflicts (Yiftachel 2002). Claims and counterclaims to the same territory amount to conflictual views and, hence, contestations over allocation of resources, power, and prestige (Akenson 1992). Since ethno-nationalism is enmeshed in the definition of the state and its prevailing logic, marginalized minorities are usually barred from, or extremely limited in, access to land and common goods, as well as representation in the public sphere.

These developments have had dramatic effects on Islamic pilgrimage, both spatially and socially. The initial Islamic pilgrimage map emerged and was consolidated for the most part while Islam was not only the religion of the majority but also of the central government. The geopolitical changes that occurred during the 20th century changed the former equilibrium and transformed local Muslim communities into subaltern minority groups. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that many Islamic pilgrimage sites in the region have become arenas of conflicts, contestations, and counter-hegemonic spaces. They allow the now subaltern Islamic groups to challenge the hegemonic Jewish majority and develop alternative socio-political visions (Gramsci 1971). In that sense, my discussion of Islamic pilgrimage sites tracks the ways the hegemonic project is challenged by alternative identity projects within the religious sphere. Thus, I am connecting the Gramscian conceptualization of hegemony (Gramsci 1971) with post-colonial theories (Yiftachel and Roded 2010), which enables me to explore the sites in question as spaces in which the subaltern groups can not only resist hegemonic processes, but also suggest and deploy alternatives and decolonized visions.

3. The Emergence of an Islamic Pilgrimage Blueprint in Israel/Palestine

Islam arrived in a region which was already saturated with both Jewish and Christian pilgrimage sites. With the growth of Islamic communities in the area, together with the general acceptance of former traditions (both Jewish and Christian), new Muslim pilgrimage sites began to appear. Some of these sites emerged as part of the growing rivalry with Christian and Jewish communities (Luz 2002). With the increasing importance of the area in Islamic theology, particularly the revered status of Jerusalem, Islamic rulers felt compelled to express their piety by constructing and taking care of pilgrimage sites in this otherwise insignificant region. Jerusalem, with its holy center, became a focal point for pilgrims, not just from the region, but also from the four corners of the Muslim world (Elad 1995; Meri 2002).

Jerusalem's pivotal status as a pilgrimage destination notwithstanding, other pilgrimage routes were also developed. According to Muslim pilgrims' descriptions, on the eve of the Crusader conquest in 1099, an array of Muslim pilgrimage sites was already in existence (Meri 2002). A notable example is Hebron, which became a desirable destination for pilgrims, hosting numerous sacred places centered around the Cave of the Patriarchs (Arabic: al-Haram al-Ibrahimi) compound, which is also known as the Tomb of Abraham (Sharon 1986). These visits were scrutinized by the 14th-century travel writer al-'Abdari, also a renowned religious scholar, who took issue with the pilgrimage to these holy graves, as he regarded this as a forbidden innovation (Arabic: *bid'a*):

> And he who visits al-Khalil [Abraham's title, which also became the town's name in Arabic—NL] may only visit outside the compound as was the custom in the early days of Islam and will be very careful not to visit inside the compound because this is a very dangerous act. . . And if entering the compound poses grave

> danger, one can only imagine it is all the more so what is done nowadays, when [pilgrims] are singing and dancing after the evening prayer within it, woe unto us and woe to us (al-'Abdari 1972, vol. 4, pp. 258–59).

This description clearly demonstrates the power of local folk religion and the devotional practices that developed among local Muslim communities and pilgrims arriving in the region, shaping the Islamic geographies of pilgrimage both collectively and individually. It was rare to find a village without a pilgrimage shrine, and multiple sites often existed within the territory of a single village (Canaan 1927). These places served mostly for short-term pilgrimages of a local nature.

This process had a strong local, popular, and folkloristic character, largely influenced by the changing needs of these communities. Towards the end of the Ottoman period, as the influence of foreign powers expanded in the region, the social network of Muslim pilgrim movements began to change with the disappearance, degradation, or decline in activity at these sites (Canaan 1927; Frantzman and Bar 2013). Reasons include gradual alterations in the cultic needs of Muslim communities. More notable was the establishment of the State of Israel, which launched dramatic changes in regional geopolitics and forced modernization (Luz 2013a). The ethno-national Israeli–Palestinian struggle led to fundamental changes in pilgrimage patterns and the significance of these sites. Following the 1948 war, the ensuing Judaization process brought about the destruction of some 500 Palestinian villages. Most of their pilgrimage loci ceased to exist, or their rituals faded after the dissolution of the resident community or suppression of the cult itself. Some urban sites were taken from former residents and contested by the displaced only years later. In some cases, the shrines, or the land where they once stood, were begrudgingly returned to former residents, after which rituals resumed (Luz 2008b; Luz and Stadler 2019). After nearly 1400 years, during which Muslim communities were not only dominant in the region but also generally supported by governing authorities, in the face of Israeli dominance, the remaining inhabitants were forced into a state of subordination and marginalization.

4. Islamic Pilgrimage Sites as *Lieux de Mémoire*

The construction of places of memory occurs when certain events and their physical environments are embedded in the ways a group knows and experiences them. The transformation of these events may, at some later stage, become incorporated into regional history through archival documentation, legal status, and social framing through performed acts. In the earliest stages, the memory environment is carried by the living. The remembering group does not require prompting or concrete representations of the prior moment. Later on, as time passes and eyewitnesses—as authentic memory agents—disappear, cultural institutions are established with the purpose of sustaining memory. This is especially true when disruptive events occur at rapid intervals. Nora (1989) refers to these institutions, and, in terms of this essay, the targets of pilgrimage themselves. Communal remembrance is an ongoing and deliberate endeavor that requires the commitment of any society (Litvak 2009; Halbwachs 2020). The processes of memory construction intensify when there is a sense of a real danger of altering the significance of the past or even failing to recall it. There may be grave concern for the potential destruction or confiscation of a group's heritage. These sites, whether tangible, symbolic, or functional for performance of ritual, become essential components of collective memory because they make specific information or a certain understanding of reality tangible. They become highly suggestive for the construction of an anti-hegemonic group identity. The current catastrophe suffered by the Palestinian people since the establishment of a Zionist-Jewish state project is undoubtedly the most consequential and traumatic circumstance affecting Muslim pilgrimage sites and activities in these territories (Khalidi 1992; Benvenisti 2000). Since the geopolitical transformations after 1948, hundreds of settlements, community practices, and ancient holy sites, which had been hubs of cultural-religious activity for centuries, have vanished (Masalha 2012). The systematic erasure of the fabric of Palestinian life reshaped the Muslim faith geography in Palestine and transformed a significant number of locales into sites of memory, some

material, others merely virtual. These places encapsulate loss and trauma. They lend themselves to serving as the basis for creating alternative histories and repositories of collective memory. Many Muslim shrine sites only endure as sites of memory where the collective Palestinian trauma becomes acute. This dynamic is narrated by Prof. Nadeem Ruhana about places of yearning and nostalgia. As a self-professed secular Palestinian, they are still symbols of his religious heritage, enduring culture, and the contemporary society to which he belongs. Their significance for him lies in the way they validate a continuity of Palestinian existence within physical spaces. They safeguard a collective Palestinian memory:

> The holy sites of Islam are more important to me than the holy sites of Christianity. When I walk in cities like Acre or Jaffa and see a mosque, I immediately connect with the mosque and the place much more than I would connect if I were walking on Hanevi'im Street in Haifa where there is a Latin Christian church built after 1948. And why? Because the mosque in Jaffa and Acre and the mosque in the destroyed village of Hittin are symbols of the continuity of Palestine. Because if a mosque were to be built here, it would be pleasant for me (interview with author, 18 August 2002).

Ruhana clarifies how Muslim holy sites have become part of the complex politics of Palestinian memory. Just as Nora pointed out, in this way, pilgrimage sites become territories of mediated memory that evoke national trauma and Palestinian history prior to the dramatic geopolitical changes and the transformation in the status and condition of Palestinians in the Israeli–Palestinian landscape. Different estimates can be found regarding the number of pilgrimage destinations where activity ceased due to geopolitical changes and the intensified efforts of the State of Israel to reshape the landscape. However, it seems that the exact number is not crucial for understanding the process, within which the activity in hundreds of religious sites was halted, either due to deliberate destruction or due to lack of use and neglect. In some cases, the state denied their memory communities access to them (Kay 2004). That said, it is well worth mentioning that this process is also connected to the improved socio-economic conditions and a surge in the numbers of Muslim Palestinian–Israeli citizens, who benefitted from better access to education, and the growing numbers of holders of academic degrees (Hager and Jabareen 2016). Important as this aspect may be, a more exhaustive analysis far exceeds the scope of this paper.

The loss of these sites and their transformation into central elements in the Palestinian collective trauma associated with the Nakba and its consequences was carefully documented in a series of voluminous works, as befitting their emergence as sites of memory (Dabagh 1972; Khalidi 1992; Arraf 1993; Abu-'Amar et al. 2014). The virtual online space, i.e., social media, websites, and so forth, also occupies an important place in this process, where numerous sites dedicated to textual, visual, and sometimes even ethnographic documentation of visits to various sites can be found. Islamic organizations play a central role as agents of memory of these pilgrimage sites.

Islamic organization surely take the lead in the commemoration and documentation of these sites. A notable example is an association that was established in 1984 under the name Al-Aqsa Association for the Preservation of Holy Places. The association was founded by Sheikh Kamal Riyan, a member of the Israeli Islamic Movement, who served at the time as the head of the local council of Kufr Bara (interview with author, 14 October 2002). Under his leadership, the association engaged in the restoration and renovation of abandoned tombs, ruined mosques, and pilgrimage sites. Concurrently, the association began the process of commemoration and documentation of Muslim sites (Luz 2013b). As there are no national agencies which allocate funding for such endeavors, these activities were mostly funded by donations, either from within local communities or, at times, from Muslim countries such as Qatar, Egypt, or Morocco (Luz 2013b; interview with Kamal Riyan, 14 October 2002; interview with Mahmood Khatib).

In 1996, the Israeli Islamic movement split into two factions, usually referred to as the southern and northern branches. The northern branch used to publish a weekly journal

by the name of *Sawt al-Haqq wal-Hurriya* (Arabic: Voice of Justice and Freedom), until the movement was outlawed by the Israeli government in 2015 (Nasasra 2018). The journal frequently published articles and reports on Muslim sacred sites in Israel/Palestine. Thus, the Islamic movement managed to herald the role of Islamic pilgrimage and continuously presented and revitalized the map of pilgrimage sites as sites of memory. Most of the sites in question have long ceased to function and pilgrims do not visit them, nor are any rituals performed in them. As opposed to this dearth of pilgrimage and rituals, the sites emerged as containers of memory and mnemonic devices.

The transformation of pilgrimage sites, in the absence of pilgrims and the impossibility of conducting worship and religious practices in them, into sites of memory is also associated with an increasing and ongoing emphasis on these locations as Palestinian heritage sites. This trend is not necessarily a novelty, as, already in the comprehensive survey conducted by Canaan during the British Mandate period, a significant decline in religious activity in these sites was already registered (1927).

A contemporary case in point is the previously mentioned local pilgrimage shrine: Maqam Abu al-Hijja (Luz 2013a). The site was destroyed by a fire that broke out in February 2016 and consumed all the paraphernalia that had accumulated over the years, among them, volumes of the Qur'an, embroidery, praying beads, pictures, and other mementos. This also included the ornamented green cloth, which covered the two graves that were the main reason for pilgrimage to the site (fieldnotes, 13 February 2016). The village council of Kawkab decided on a restoration project. However, once the restoration was completed, the site did not resume its former position as an active shrine. It would seem that the new appearance of the Maqam only intensified the already existing process of transformation of this pilgrimage destination into a heritage site. Put bluntly, the renovation of the place exacerbated the process of the museumification of the shrine. This was easily discerned during a 'Heritage Day' organized for an elementary school in the village. During that day, the students were taken, amongst other places in the village, to the Maqam and engaged in various activities under the motto "Kawkab through the ages" (Arabic: *Kawkab 'abr al-'usur*), which was also printed on special T-shirts they all wore. Following a short lecture about the site from the regional archeologist, which was, by and large, a mere historical–architectural analysis, they all entered the Maqam. As I watched them, I was astounded to see that no one was removing their shoes, as per the custom in Muslim shrines. This needs to be read as another indication of a process of forsaking the religious importance of the place and regarding it solely as an historical landmark of Palestinian heritage. This could also be inferred from the lack of any ritual performed at the Maqam and the absence of a single communal prayer throughout the field day (fieldnotes, 20 March 2018).

These changes are certainly not endemic to Kawkab and, instead, reflect fundamental changes in Palestinian Muslim societies on both sides of the Green Line. Along with the growing influence of the fundamentalist-Salafi position that categorically prohibits pilgrimage to sacred places save those approved by the Prophet Muhammad, this society is also experiencing growing impacts of modernization and secularization (Abu Oksa Daoud 2016). These two seemingly opposing trends cause changes in the activities performed at pilgrimage sites and the ways they are perceived. An exhaustive recent survey of sacred places conducted in the Palestinian Authority arrived at similar conclusions regarding the heritagization and folklorization of these sites. The survey revealed a significant decrease in religious activities in those places and a transformation in the ways they were perceived; specifically, the Islamic component is played down or totally ignored (Lecoquierre 2019).

Thus, in response to the traumatic situation of Islamic-Palestinian communities, pilgrimage and sacred sites are indeed becoming *lieux de mémoire* where alternative visions of the past can be imagined. In what follows, I address yet another response often found at these sites as they become places of resistance.

5. When Pilgrimage Becomes Resistance

Resistance is typically reactive and cannot be understood apart from domination and power relations. It relates to those behaviors and cultural practices applied by subordinate groups that contest hegemonic social formation and threaten to unravel strategies of domination (Haynes and Parkash 1992). It is also the ability of people to alter situations and realities through a multitude of tactics and behaviors. Resistance is, therefore, the weapon of those occupying subordinate positions who are, thus, less likely to influence or change their spatiality. Accordingly, resistance is a collection of behaviors and cultural practices of minority groups that challenge the dominant social norms and even threaten to change the prevailing control strategies, even if these actions are not always carried out with full awareness (Pile 1997). In general, resistance is an expression of an alternative perception of the existing power structure and the prevailing cultural, political, and economic values. The existence of resistance, and the geographies of resistance, teach us, more than anything else, about the unequal positioning of people in space as a result of complex systems of power and control (Pile 1997). The process of resistance is an expression of the human need to change, challenge, and reshape existing power relations in a manner more equitable for the oppressed group. Resistance is always spatial and, thus, has a clear physical dimension, taking place in specific locations. This has been manifested in recent years in numerous pilgrimage sites throughout the region, where subaltern Palestinian communities are trying to regain control over those sacred places that were taken from them following the war in 1948.

A pertinent case in point is the longstanding struggle over the Mosque of Beersheba, which, since 1948, no longer serves a role for religious activities nor receives pilgrims from the region. On 30 March 2000, Nuri al-Ukbi, a longtime activist for Bedouins' rights in the Israeli Negev (the semi-arid region in the south of the country) spraypainted the words "The Grand Mosque of Beersheba" on the closed gate of the Ottoman Mosque of Beersheba (Nir 2001). The timing of this act of defiance and civil protest was not chosen at random and was part of the unique day of commemoration called *yawm al-ard*, literally meaning "Land Day," which is celebrated annually by Israeli-Palestinian communities on March 30 (Nakhleh 2011). It commemorates the general strike held on 30 March 1976 among Palestinian communities in Israel to protest government plans to appropriate Israeli-Palestinian citizens' land in the Galilee. Since then, this day has come to symbolize the Palestinian struggle against Israeli plans, policies, and discriminatory practices against Palestinian communities and their determination to remain steadfast on their land (i.e., *sumud*). Al-Uqbi's protest is but one episode in the ongoing struggle of Muslim citizens in the town of Beersheba and the surrounding communities to reopen the closed mosque and renew its former purpose as a Muslim house of prayer and regional pilgrimage site.

The mosque was constructed in 1906 as part of the creation of a new and modern city by the Ottoman authorities (Luz 2008a). Its unique architecture, extraordinary size, and central location in the city's downtown area have made it one of the most significant religious sites in the Negev. That was the case until 1948, when, following the war and the entry of Israeli authorities into Beersheba, religious activities and control shifted to the state authorities (Reiter and Lehrs 2013). Beginning in 1974, the Committee for Bedouin Rights has sought to restore its original function and reuse it as a mosque and a regional pilgrimage site. Eventually, after a public and legal struggle that reached Israel's Supreme Court, various requests were rejected, and a decision was made to convert the building into a museum dedicated to Islamic culture (Supreme Court 02/7311). When asked about his incentive to be active for so many years in the struggle to restore the mosque, al-Uqbi answered: "This is my history... The mosque symbolizes the history of the Bedouins and the fact that the Negev belongs to the Bedouins. Israel is trying to erase all traces of us, and that's not okay" (Reiter and Lehrs 2013).

The connection al-Uqbi made between a religious symbol and a socio-political struggle is surely not unique. In recent decades, numerous struggles have been taking place across the region to restore pilgrimage sites to their original communities. Some of them have

resulted in the restoration of religious activities to these sites, while others have seen the state successfully maintain the prevailing status quo (Rabinowitz 2001; Reiter 2017). Resistance, as it seems, not only takes place, but also seeks to appropriate place (Chivallon 2001). In recent years, Muslim pilgrimage sites have become arenas of defiance and conflict, and, most of all, spaces of resistance to the hegemonic position of the state and the Jewish majority therein. This is certainly the case of the most holy and venerated Islamic compound in Jerusalem, as is analyzed in the following section.

6. Nationalizing the Ultimate Pilgrimage Site in Israel/Palestine: Recent Developments at al-Haram al-Sharif

"We must nationalize our beliefs, should rebuild our customs so they reflect our national life" (cited in Bowman 1993). This "nationalization" of religion, as expressed by a Muslim schoolteacher from the occupied territories during the days of the First Intifada (Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation), clearly indicates transformations in the field of religious belief—specifically, in its capacity to adapt and respond to changing socio-political circumstances. It is also an expression of the needs of Palestinians to create a unified narrative as an "imagined community", in its Andersonian conceptualization, while confronting the Israeli colonial project (Anderson 2006). This process is to be found on both sides of the Green Line and can also be observed among Muslim Israeli-Palestinian communities. The nationalization of religion and religious rituals and customs necessitates not only fundamental changes in the religious field and construction of new theological conceptualization, but also in the practices taking place at pilgrimage sites. This transformation involves constructing pilgrimage sites as Palestinian national symbols.

The central site encompassing most efforts and attention is the al-Haram al-Sharif compound (the Temple Mount, in a different terminology) in Jerusalem, which, time and again, has served as the focal point of the ongoing national struggle (Larkin and Dumper 2012; Luz 2021). This already had its origin during the British Mandate, when Hajj Amin al-Husseini made substantial efforts, in his capacity as the Head of the Supreme Muslim Council of Palestine, to make the site such a focal point (Kupferschmidt 1987). Al-Husseini successfully transformed the pilgrimage to the holy compound in Jerusalem into a nationalistic display and battle ground for confrontations with Jews who were performing their own rituals by the Wailing Wall (Cohen 2017). Following the 1967 war, during which Israel gained direct control of Jerusalem as part of the West Bank, the site once again became a contested site of pilgrimage and perpetual confrontations between Palestinians and the State of Israel. In what follows, I address mostly current developments concerning the compound, while focusing on the activities in recent years of the Islamic Movement under the leadership of Sheikh Raid Salah.

The veneration of al-Haram al-Sharif by its Islamic-Palestinian pilgrims as the most important religio-national landmark (Reiter 2008; Luz 2014) is vividly described by Umm Majid, a Muslim Palestinian woman who is a member of a group called *Murabitat al-Aqsa*:

> The Jews want Jerusalem as their capital. They want a capital without Palestinians. So, Jerusalem became like a war zone... we are living under siege, and al-Aqsa is at the center... the heart. Al-Aqsa is more than our religion. It is our sacred space, our love, our home, and our identity as Palestinians (cited in Ihmoud 2019, p. 518).

The Murabitat are a group of Palestinian women who, since the 2000s, have arrived at the compound of the Haram al-Sharif daily to gather, pray, study together, and mostly (as they proclaim), defend the holy place from Israeli incursions and the deepening presence of Jewish settlers (Schmit 2020). These goals are achieved daily and take corporeal shape at the site and its perimeter in the Old City of Jerusalem, pending police restrictions. They perceive their activities as not only defending their most revered pilgrimage site but, in fact, as defending the nation, as succinctly put by a devotee who arrives at the compound on a daily basis:

> They want to divide al-Aqsa between us and them. They want to take it away. But al-Aqsa is for us; it is our place. . . my role in protecting al-Aqsa is my presence. Every time we hear there is a threat, or if al-Aqsa is empty, we come and sit to show them we are here all the time. . . our presence is protection (O'Toole 2016).

Arguably, the most influential and active organization that promoted the compound as an Islamic-Palestinian symbol was the northern branch of the Israeli Islamic Movement and its charismatic leader Raid Salah (Luz 2013b). This was carried out from 1996 to 2015 through numerous initiatives and special projects, all of which aimed to keep the compound constantly in the public eye as a site that not only needed to be constantly defended against Israel's control, but also as one on par with the nation. Such activities included organizing donations for olive trees to be planted at the site, promoting learning sessions in mosques on the site's history, and, mostly, funding visits for pilgrims from across Israel. This unique program was promoted under the heading *shadd al-rihal* (Arabic: "fasten the saddles"), which echoes a tradition related to the Prophet Muhammad that claims Jerusalem is a legitimate pilgrimage center, equals in its importance to Mecca and Medina (Kister 1969). Salah was successful not only in formulating his actions as resistance to Israel, but also in constructing a new post-colonial discourse. This is to be found in his numerous speeches during the rallies he organized under the slogan "al-Aqsa is in Danger," as well as in his weekly op-ed in the movement's journal. The following is a rather typical excerpt:

> This is the destination of the Prophet's nocturnal journey (*isra'*) and from here he ascended to heaven (*mi'raj*). This place witnessed the conquest of Jerusalem by 'Umar ibn al-Khattab and the liberation of Jerusalem from the hands of the Crusaders by Salah al-Din. . . and because it is so important it is beyond negotiation and no voice will rise higher than the voice of al-Aqsa. And to those of feeble character that say that America is stronger than them, the blessed al-Aqsa answers and says: God is stronger. And the Western Wall from within and from without is part of al-Aqsa and so are the other buildings and mosques within it, including al-Musalla al-Marwani. This being the true nature of al-Aqsa, we will renew our covenant with God and our covenant with al-Aqsa and we will pin our hopes on our Islamic *umma* and our Arab world and our Palestinian people and reiterate: We shall redeem you in spirit and blood (Salah 2002a).

Salah wove Islamic fundamentalist rhetoric into the Palestinian national discourse and, through the many activities he initiated regarding the compound, he managed to challenge the Israeli colonial project greatly through this central pilgrimage destination. Thus, for the hundreds of thousands of Muslim Israeli-Palestinians who visit the compound annually, performing pilgrimage becomes an act of Palestinian patriotism and defending the most important religious–national icon. This is the outcome of the counter-hegemonic stance Salah promoted regarding the compound, which is also anti-colonial in essence, as it allows the colonized to suspend, even if temporarily, the might of the colonial regime. In his relentless efforts and various projects, Salah very skillfully connected the local, the regional, and the global scales embedded in the pilgrimage to the Haram al-Sharif. This may be seen in the following excerpt from an op-ed that featured in his movement's weekly magazine: "The Mosque of al-Aqsa is an Islamic, Arab, and Palestinian property and no one save them, regardless of their identity and who they are, and particularly the Jews, have any rights over there until the end of days. Whoever accepts their right on even a stone or anything else there is a traitor!" (Salah 2002b). Salah almost single-handedly transformed the pilgrimage to the compound to a regional and global religious–political issue throughout the Muslim world. When incarcerated in Israel in August 2017, a campaign demanding his release was launched in Turkey with the support of Muslim activists from around the Middle East. The late Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the most renowned Islamic leaders, spoke on his behalf at a rally in Istanbul. The media campaign was conducted under the slogan "We are all Shaykh al-Aqsa". Yunus Abu Jarad, the media coordinator for the campaign, was quoted as saying, "Sheikh Ra'id Salah is the icon of al-Aqsa. Until now, they [Israel] has not found

a clear accusation or charge against him—they merely want to shut him down. . . his arrest is not just a Palestinian issue, but an Islamic one as well" (al-Tahan 2017). Ultimately, and following his exceptional success in transforming the pilgrimage to the compound into a real challenge to the State of Israel, in November 2015, the Israeli government outlawed the northern branch of the Israeli Islamic Movement, which terminated some of the activities I addressed above (Nasasra 2018). In the years that have passed, no decrease was registered in the numbers of pilgrims arriving at the site, nor was any diminishing in its unique status observed. The pilgrimage to the compound remains the epicenter of Islamic devotion, as well as the most significant act of "defending the nation" (Luz 2021).

7. Concluding Remarks

In this analysis-cum-survey on Islamic pilgrimage in Israel/Palestine, several main trends could be identified which characterize the changes in pilgrimage pattern and assigned meaning taking place in this contested region. To begin with, there has been a constant decline in religious activities at the concerned sites since the early 20th century. This general trend was exacerbated after 1948, which marked the commencement of the eradication of a significant number of sites, both due to the political circumstances and the current power structure, as well as the changes in the communities' attitudes towards these sites and pilgrimage at large. The emergence of the State of Israel—entangled with its Judaization project—was a contributing factor to the uprooting and disappearance of many former pilgrimage destinations.

Be that as it may, while a decline in purely pilgrim activity is registered and the visitations to these sites (Arabic: *ziyarat*) and the occurrence of seasonal pilgrimages (Arabic: *mawasim*) have decreased, the tangible loss of Palestine (al-Nakba) and the hegemonic position that was once the domain of Muslim-Palestinian communities has led to the transformation of these places into sites of memory. Thus, even in the face of declining religious activities carried out in these once frequented locations, a surge in significance is noticeable as they emerge as highly important symbolic landmarks that extend far beyond the religious field. As part of this process, pilgrimage sites are acknowledged and perceived more and more as heritage and folklore sites, contributing to the construction of a Palestinian ethos which addresses and responds to the trauma and loss. Furthermore, the importance of pilgrimage sites in the strengthening of national identity in the context of the conflict has risen sharply. More specifically, as part of the geopolitical changes brought forth by the 1948 and 1967 wars, the struggle between the parties has deepened and its effects can also be observed in the process of the Palestinization of Muslim pilgrimage sites.

The centrality of the Israeli regime as the dominant power controlling Palestinians on both sides of the Green Line has led to an increasingly prevalent use of the sanctity assigned to the sites in question as a platform for resistance. This conceptualization of pilgrimage sites as counter-hegemonic devices is highly visible at the Haram al-Sharif. In the face of the erasure of the Palestinian-Muslim past through the Judaization project, in recent decades, we have witnessed a growing number of struggles revolving around pilgrimage sites. The Haram al-Sharif stands at the forefront of this process, as the pivotal location combining religious devotion with resistance and counter-hegemonic steps against the might of the Israeli state. It would seem that parallel processes are unfolding in this compound: its transformation into a Palestinian national site combined with its eminent position as the most iconic pilgrimage site. This was achieved mostly through the successful projects undertaken by the northern branch of the Israeli Islamic Movement, until it was dismantled by the Israeli government in 2015. In the time that has elapsed, no indication was found of a decline in this site's importance and the activities therein.

This paper adds to the current literature on pilgrimage mostly by expanding on the socio-political aspects involved in contemporary pilgrimage. This follows the recent understanding by Eade and Coleman, challenging us to see pilgrimage as far more than merely a popular religious activity; indeed, they serve as a dynamic sphere where varied forms of controls are practiced by various stakeholders and, surely, as activities where different

subordinate and subaltern social movements can spatialize numerous political goals (Eade and Coleman 2018). Furthermore, this paper advances Maddrell et al.'s theorization of pilgrimage in that it adds spatialized, and inherently political, dimensions by focusing on landscape and heritage (Maddrell et al. 2015). Attending to landscape and to the spatial aspects of pilgrimage affords a consideration of wider contexts. In this paper, I focused mostly on the political implications of these processes as pilgrimage becomes spatialized in this contested region. Arguably, the insights and theoretical considerations discussed herewith can be furthered in other contexts and, certainly, in different pilgrimage landscapes.

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