Joint Jewish and Muslim Holy Places, Religious Beliefs and Festivals in Jerusalem between the Late 19th Century and 1948

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Abstract: Whereas the conflict over Palestine's' holy places and their role in forming Israeli or Palestinian national identity is well studied, this article brings to the fore an absent perspective. It shows that in the first half of the 20th century Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem shared holy sites, religious beliefs and feasts. Jewish–Muslim encounters of that period went much beyond pre-modern practices of cohabitation, to the extent of developing joint local patriotism. On the other hand, religious and other holy sites were instrumental in the Jewish and Palestinian exclusive nation building process rather than an inclusive one, thus contributing to escalate the national conflict.

1. Introduction

Historians debate when the Israeli/Zionist-Palestinian conflict started. The 1929 Wailing Wall riots (Intifadat al-Buraq as the Palestinians call it) that spread from Jerusalem to other mixed cities and Zionist settlements, argues Hillel Cohen, changed both the function and the perception of Palestine holy sites in general and those in Jerusalem in particular from shared platforms to areas of national struggle. Accordingly, religion flamed the escalating conflict and injected high motivation into each sides' devoted nationalists. Jerusalem, and especially the Temple Mount (al-Haram al-Sharif), became actual and symbolic centers for each of the Zionists' and Palestinians' exclusive national claims (H. Cohen 2015). Roberto Mazza, however, argues that the Nabi Musa riots of 1920 were point zero where the conflict started. The 1920 riots were not spontaneous but organized and structured. Those events mark the transformation of Jewish-Arab violence from communal to national. In 1920, Jerusalem transformed from the Ottoman era of communal identities and shared space to a conflict zone (Mazza 2015). Beyond debating on the formative event and its date, the two views agree that a Jerusalem holy site is the place where the conflict started and that religion is inseparable from exclusive Zionist or Palestinian national claims.

Without declining these conclusions, this article brings to the fore different perspective. Instead of studying the evolution of the Zionist/Israeli-Palestinian divide, this article asks if also a joint identity existed. It shows that in the first half of the 20th century Muslims and Jews in Jerusalem shared holy sites, religious beliefs and feasts. Jewish-Muslim encounters of that period went much beyond pre-modern practices of cohabitation, to the extent of developing joint local patriotism. I show that horizontal Arab-Jewish identity existed in Palestine since the late 19th century, i.e., prior to the establishment of the Arab national movement or Zionism. The escalating conflict between Zionists and Arab Palestinians in 1929 and the mid-1930's, eroded but not terminated this identity. This happened between the end of World War II in 1945 and the 1948 War. Thus, it is wrong to conclude that religion just supported exclusive national identity, as its wrong to conclude that from the outset

of modern times, i.e., from the late 19th century, animosity determined Jewish-Arab relations in Palestine, or that the local society was fully polarized along ethno-national lines.

The Palestinian case is not unique in this context. Religious festivals, religious institutions and holy sites were instrumental in national awakening and building common imagination in many other places, for instance in India (Telikicherla Chary 2009, pp. 108–9; Chakrabarty and Pandey 2009, pp. 34–35), and in East and Central Europe (Obstat 1998). Similarly, each of the two national movements, the Zionist and the Palestinian one, used and still employ religious sites as political and national tools to base on them their legitimacy. Yet not enough attention was put on the role of joint Palestine's religious sites, festivals and costumes in building joint Jewish — Arab local identity.

Studies on Palestine (i.e., the area that since 1922 is called Palestine) in late 19th century-early 20th century conclude that either local patriotism did not exist or was the weakest identity compared with Arab nationalism or Ottoman loyalty. According to this school, which I call here the mainstream approach, the establishment of Palestinian national movement in the 1920's was more a default choice imposed by external circumstances, the alimentation of the Ottoman empire and the Arab regime Emir Faisal established in Damascus in 1918 that was abolished in 1920 with the French occupation, rather than organic emergence of a local identity. Moreover, according to this school external Arab and Ottoman identities centered far from Jerusalem were more attractive than local identity. The mainstream approach argues that before WWI only Arab elite members from Jerusalem and Jaffa developed a weak local patriotism. The British Mandate established political framework through which the urban elite introduced Palestinian nationalism top—down to the masses. Finally, non-Zionist Jews, writes Khalidi (1997, p. 60), "Were very largely isolated from most of the Palestinian society as result of language and religious barriers, and in some cases by choice. They thus had a relatively limited impact on the intellectual and cultural life of most of the Arab inhabitants of Jerusalem". As I show below, Khalidi's conclusion is not supported by Israeli and Palestinian primary sources and studies. In conclusion, mainstream studies focus on ethnic and class division rather than looking at territorial inclusiveness, i.e., identity that includes all residents, Jews and Arabs alike, on a given territory. (Porat 1974; Muslih 1989, pp. 155–74; Campos 2011, pp. 200–24; Khalidi 1997, pp. 19, 21, 28–44, 63–88). The mainstream approach was recently questioned (Jacobson and Naor 2017; Lemir 2017; Klein 2014a, 2017).

In the 21st century, historians move from political history and history of elites to every-day life encounters between Jews and Arabs in Palestine mixed cities. As they expand their sources from political documents to ethnography and popular memories, new light is shed on the period between the late 19th century and 1948 war. Jews and Arabs, they argue, imagined and practiced their togetherness in everyday life: joint neighborhoods and residential compounds, market places, modern schools and coffee shops, as well as in their dress, the language they spoke and joint religious festivals. Jews and Arabs maintained horizontal relations based on a set of everyday life customs creating an imagined community of belonging. In contrast, vertical-hierarchical relations define the classical Islamic relations between a Jewish subject and his or her Muslim administrative establishment. (Klein 2014b; Jacobson 2003, 2011a, 2011b; L. Levi 2008; Tamari 2009, 2013; Lemir 2017).

At the end of the Ottoman period, none of the Jerusalem quarters were homogeneous. The neighborhood residents shared times of joy and occasions of mourning and exhibited consideration toward one another's religious sensitivities. No mental boundary separated the Muslim and the Jewish areas. The barriers of language and culture posed few impediments, and whoever ventured into the physical sphere of the "other" felt quite at home there (Shohat 2006; Shenhav 2006; Stillman 1998; Jacobson 2011b; Shabi 2009; Baskin 2012; T. Levi 2012. L. Levi 2008; Behar 2017; Behar and Ben-Dor Benite 2013; Evri and Behar 2017; Gribetz 2014; Lemir 2017; Tamari 2002).

Jaffa, a city that is beyond the premise of this study, had additional dimension absent in Jerusalem Old City. Jaffa was a Palestinian national, political, and media center. For the educated elite active in these areas, the joint identity was a textual fact as well. For example, over the decade from 1899 to 1909, Shimon Moial translated the rabbinic classic *Pirkei Avot* [Ethics of the Fathers] into Arabic, adding his own commentary (Jacobson 2011a). Jaffa's holy site was Nebi Rubin and its festival lasted a month compared to the one-week celebration in Nebi Musa. Moreover, Nebi Rubin was more a summer holiday retreat rather than religious festival (Klein 2014b, pp. 87–90).

Finally, this article deals with Jewish-Muslim holy sites and religious festivals but not with Christian ones. There was no joint Jewish-Christian holy place or religious festival in Palestine in general and in Jerusalem in particular. Moreover, theologically and historically, Jews were closer to Muslims than to Christians. Jerusalem Christians, indeed, were an integral part of the new local identity as Jews and Muslims were. Certain holy sites were shared by Jews and Muslim but not by Christians, for instance Nabi Samuel. However, Christians attended Muslim feasts such as Nabi Musa welcome reception in Jerusalem or the Jewish feast of Shim'on HaTzadik. In these occasions, the feast had a Muslim or Jewish core, but the non-Jews were more Arabs or Palestinians than Muslims or Christians per se. When Jews joined them, I argue, the feast became an inclusive local-patriotic, Palestinian, celebration. In other words, the Ottoman millet categories were only partly relevant when the barriers between the three denominations eroded and national identities emerged. At first British Mandate authorities used religious categories to classify their subjects. Acknowledging in 1931 that nationalism is taking over, they start using 'Arabs' instead of 'Muslims' and 'Christians'. However, following the Balfour Declaration of 1917 that the League of Nations included in the Mandate it gave to Britain in 1922, the latter continued using the title 'Jews' as a synonym to 'Zionists' (Robson 2011, pp. 106–9). In this article I differ between the two.

2. Holy Shrines

Generations long Jews and Muslims throughout the Middle East shared holy sites. The sites functioned as centers where residents of nearby towns and villages met physically and symbolically. Jews and Muslims shared those places, which in most cases were local saint's graves (Driessen 2012; Boum 2012; Carpenter-Latiri 2012; Ben-Ari and Bilu 1987; Bilu 2000, 2005). Arab Jew identity that I discuss below is different from medieval Jewish – Muslim coexistence. It ascended in the context of modernization and emerging national movements whereas the medieval Golden Age of Jewish – Muslim cohabitation was part of religiously based order. Rather than a religious identity that subsumes distant regions and various patterns of life under the category of "Jew" or "Muslim", Palestinian Arab Jew was a local phenomenon that brought the two together. The Jews' inferior status as defined by official Islam did not predetermine the pattern of ongoing relations between Jews and Arabs, nor did it create a firm barrier between the two communities. True, the Ottoman central administration was still committed to the official position, placing a special tax on the Jews and discriminating against them by law. Yet the reality of everyday life was different. The following fact is noteworthy: testimonies about the close relationships between Jews and Muslims in Palestine emanate from the party that should have been the inferior and discriminated one, had the principles of the official religion been applied to everyday life. Most are testimonies submitted by the Ottoman Empire Jews rather than by privileged European-born Jews who enjoyed the protection of their consulates. Relations were certainly not idyllic and religious differences surfaced at moments of national tension and conflicts. Yet these were moments within the many hours of familiarity and shared life experiences. This was expressed also in Arabic terms and Palestinian collective memory. Palestinians publishing in late 19th and early 20th century or reflecting back on these early times, write on *al-yahud al-'arab* (Arab Jews), *yahud awlad 'arab* (native Arab Jews), *al-yahud al muwalidun fi Filastin* (Palestine-born Jews), *al-yahud al-'asliin* (original Jews) and *abna al-balad* (local Jews) (Jacobson and Naor 2017, p. 8; Klein 2014b, p. 21).

Nebi Samuel, a site north to Jerusalem identified since the 12th century by Jews and Muslims as the tomb of the prophet Samuel, was one of those joint places. Indeed, other places to further north were also identified as the prophet's last rest, but believers prefer the present place (Meri 2003). The belief that the prophet could assure the arrival of the rains was held by all the region's inhabitants. At the beginning of the rainy season and later as well, if the year was a dry one, Jews and Muslims would go to the tomb and pray side by side for the prophet's intercession. Jews also visited the tomb on the 28th of their month of Iyar [=May], the traditional day of the Prophet Samuel's death. The Ottoman authorities allowed them to spend the entire night and day praying there.

A similar role was played by the Jewish Shimon HaTzadiq [Simon the Pious] site in Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem. Shimo'n Bar Yohai [Simon the son of Yohai] festival on Lag BeOmer [a day in May]

in the Galilee near Safed attracts annually a big crowd. Jerusalem Jews compete with the northern celebration by establishing their local Simon festival at the very same day. The Palestinian Jawhariyyeh family took part, along with other Muslim and Christian families, in the pilgrimage to the tomb of Simon the Just in Sheikh Jarrah. In his diary, Wasif Jawhariyyeh describes it as a springtime family picnic. The pilgrimage in 1892 was attended by everyone in the nearby neighborhoods, Jews and Muslims of all classes, including black slaves (Tamari and Nassar 2003, p. 74). During the Mandate period, according to another memoir, "masses of Arabs" celebrated "the pilgrimage, just like the Jews, with food and sweets." (Sasson 1981, pp. 200-1). Another festival of Simon the Just was held in the fall, on the traditional date of his death. The custom then was to pray for his intercession in bringing rain during the coming winter (Shiryon 1943, p. 397; Lev-Tov 2010; Tamari and Nassar 2003, p.74).

3. Sharing Beliefs and Festivals

Micro-history primary sources lead to the conclusion that in the late Ottoman period and early 20th century, religious barriers between Jews and Muslims were low also outside holy places due to rapid modernization, the great number of Western tourists arriving to visit Palestine and foreign institutions established in its main cities, the decline of the Ottoman power and the Capitulations. These developments affected mostly Jerusalem and Jaffa, the main cities in Palestine. Low religious barriers are found in Jaffa where Jews were just about ten percent of the population and in Jerusalem where they were the majority (Klein 2014b, pp. 9, 32–33, 53, 65). As a boy, Wasif Jawhariyyeh took part in the jovial Purim celebrations held in his Jewish neighborhood, dressing up in a costume just as they did. With the arrival of spring, the young people of all religions would go out for a picnic on the lawn at the edge of al-Haram al-Sharif (Tamari 2009, pp. 82–92). Arabs would often make a point of reciting the appropriate Jewish blessing when they were served a cup of water or a piece of cake. "They were well-versed in the Jewish holidays and took part in their neighbors' celebrations," writes Ya'akov Elazar, who was born and raised in Jerusalem Old City (Elazar 1980, p. 129). Both Jews and Muslims believed that rabbis could work wonders, and that demons and spirits residing around or in their common courtyards could hurt them. In this context, the members of both faiths, of all ages, shared their fears and their ways of coping with them. When Arab youths wanted to persuade their Arab-Jewish neighbors of their sincerity, another Jerusalem Old City native, Ya'akov Yehoshua, wrote, they did so "by swearing in the name of Moses and the holiness of the Ten Commandments, and we were convinced" (Yehoshua 1977, p. 136). When Muslims returned from their pilgrimages to Mecca, their Jewish neighbors congratulated them and the Muslims shared with them dates from the holy city.

4. Nebi Musa

Even though Nebi Musa lay in the desert, on the way to Jericho, about twelve miles from Jerusalem, its pilgrimage festival was very much a Jerusalem celebration. The Nebi Musa celebration institutionalized Jerusalem's centrality and its relations with Hebron and Nablus and the villages around them. It started as an anti-Christian identity demonstration and in the early 20th century the Nebi Musa celebration combined both political and religious goals. In the context of building national identity it helped in placing Jerusalem at the center of Palestinian identity. Jerusalem made Nebi Musa part of the holy city. The place was built and the pilgrimage initiated in 1268 on orders of the Mamaluk Sulatan Zahir Baybars following local traditions from the 12th century on identifying it as Moses lasting rest place (Asali 1990, pp. 10, 87–89; Amitai 2006). Local traditions, however, originate the pilgrimage to Salah a-Din. After the defeat of the Crusaders in 1187, this new Muslim king permitted Christians to visit their holy sites in Jerusalem. As a counterweight to the Easter celebrations in Jerusalem and to Christian visits to baptismal sites on the Jordan River, he initiated the Nebi Musa pilgrimage from Jerusalem to the shrine. That resulted in participants coming from outside Jerusalem arriving first to the city, and returning home via Jerusalem when their celebration was over. Since its establishment, Nebi Musa went through periods of abandonment, restoration, ruin and reconstruction. It took its current form only in 1885 (Aubin-Boltanski 2003). The Nebi Musa

pilgrimage was not assigned a date on the Muslim calendar, nor was it associated with an agricultural season. It was held in accordance with the Orthodox Christian church's calendar, so as to coincide with Easter. The Muslim festival began precisely a week before the Orthodox Easter and ended on the eve of Good Friday. Since it was both a counter-celebration and a Jerusalem-Muslim one, it could not escape a connection with al-Haram al-Sharif. Before descending the road to Nebi Musa and when they came back the pilgrims ascended to the al-Aqsa mosque. Upon arrival the pilgrims walked from the al-Aqsa plaza to the governor's residence, from which they took the prophet Moses's standard and palanquin. These two were placed before the standard and palanquin of Abraham that the pilgrims from Hebron brought. Similar ceremonies and routes took place when they returned (Asali 1990, pp. 101–32; Yazbak 2010, 2011; Halabi 2006).

The participants came from as far away as Hebron in the south and Nablus in the north and since the 1920's also Haifa, Ramleh, Jaffa and Gaza residents were represented. The event brought together different social classes: elite members, urban middle classes and blue collars, rural peasants and Bedouins. The festival, then, attracted the entire population of Palestine's interior country and even expanded to several coastal plain areas. The event was a platform in maintaining national cohesion and mobilizing political support. The national movement leadership and the British administration used Nabi Musa celebrations to gain legitimacy whereas the opponents expressed their protest (Halabi 2002, 2009).

These people celebrated in a different way than their Jaffa coastal brethren did in Nabi Rubin [see below]. The former, especially those who lived in holy cities, preferred religious gravity. True, hawkers and peddlers worked the crowds at Nebi Musa, and horse races were held on the plateau where the mosque was located, but those were the only entertainments available. Otherwise, only religious dancing was allowed. Even the horse races had a religious rationale—according to tradition, they began when Salah a-Din resolved to display Muslim might for Christian pilgrims. Nebi Musa was not a spring festival but rather a religious event and a show of Muslim power to the Christians celebrating Easter in Jerusalem. The different atmosphere was not the only contrast with the Nebi Rubin pilgrimage. It was also a much briefer event—a week, as opposed to a month (Yazbak 2011; Halabi 2006).

The Jerusalem-based notable Husayni family that headed municipal and religious institutions was the primary patron of the Nebi Musa celebration. The founder of the dynasty, 'Omar al-Husayni, claimed as his family's founding father Sheikh 'Abdallah ibn Yunus, who had received from the Mamluk Sultan Baibars the post of overseer of the Nebi Musa Waqf, and ever since the Husayni family had managed it. Income from Waqf properties paid for the costs of the festival. After taking the festival's green flag from the Husayni family home, the mufti of Jerusalem would lead the pilgrims to the holy site in a procession that was both colorful and chaotic. Many of the participants waved swords and sticks in the air. The green flag was returned to the Husayni home at the end of the pilgrimage. The fact that members of this family filled the post of mufti of Jerusalem and served in the city administration further enhanced the importance of the festival and Jerusalem's position as a focal point for all of Palestine.

Jews did not follow Nebi Musa festival participants to the place. However, Jews participated in the festival celebrations in Jerusalem and Hebron. Moreover, they did not watch the celebrators as external observers but took a sympathetic view of the festival and its Arab participants. According to Ya'akov Yehoshua, Jews displayed a combination of indulgence, arrogance, and understanding for the Muslim tradition that this was the site of Moses's burial. According to the Torah, Moses never crossed the Jordan and his burial site is unknown. The Jews nevertheless found a place for the Muslim tradition in their own lives, and to a large extent identified with it, making it part of their common experience with their Muslim neighbors. Jerusalem's Jews felt a special tie to the pilgrims from Hebron. "We imagined," Yehoshua wrote, "that the inhabitants of Hebron and its surrounding villages, who, according to [a Jewish] legend, were the descendants of the Jews who had remained in the Holy Land after the destruction of the Second Temple, were making their pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem." (Yehoshua 1977, p. 24; Amit 1991). It should be noted that the Zionist leaders David Ben Gurion and Itzhak Ben Zvi used the popular view on the Jewish origins of Muslim Falah [peasants] to promote their Zionist claims. Ben Zvi republished this argument in many quasi-

academic studies along the first half of the 20th century. Interestingly, Ya'akove Yehoshua uses the same popular belief in the opposite way. Whereas Ben Zvi and Ben Gurion claim Jewish exclusive belonging to the land through Jewish origins of those who cultivate it, Yehoshua sees both Jews and Muslims as indigenous. Moreover, according to Ben Gurion and Ben Zvi, nomad Bedouin are unqualified to belong to the land since they do not settle in one place, but Yehoshua does not exclude them from Nabi Musa celebrations that he endorses.

Like many of Jerusalem's inhabitants, they watched the procession as it passed through the city's streets when the convoys of pilgrims arrived from the south and north. This was followed by an official reception to which the city's most important personages were invited, including the leaders of the Jewish community. Hakham Bashi (Chief Rabbi) Nissim Danon and other Jewish leaders took part in the ceremony in 1919, when Arab nationalism was already on display during the festivities [see below]. Jews feared walking by the Tomb of the Holy Sepulcher in the Easter season, dreading they would be attacked by Easter Christian pilgrims, but at the Nebi Musa festival "a warm and happy atmosphere prevailed among us. We knew that they were honoring the memory of a prophet and man of God whom we also accepted." (Yehoshua 1979, pp. 66–67).

Hebron's Jews also turned out to welcome the Muslims returning from Nebi Musa. Led by their leading citizens—those families claiming descent from the prophet Mohammad—Hebron's inhabitants met the pilgrims and strode with them along Hebron's streets, singing and dancing. "As the *birq* [the banners of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, kept in the Tomb of the Patriarchs and taken out for this event] crossed the city's streets, all the inhabitants, Arabs and Jews, stood along the way. The procession entered the Makhpelah Cave where a special service was held, and the celebrants dispersed," Menasheh Mani of Hebron wrote. "When the pilgrims returned home, an atmosphere of festivity spread through the city, in the Jewish compound and outside it, and the Jews would then go out to walk along the main road to Jerusalem, and along the roads, on the hills, clusters of families ate and drank." (Mani 1963, p. 74).

What had begun as a counter-Christian event was added new meaning as tensions with the Zionists and British grew and as feelings of Palestinian national identity waxed stronger. The national conflict co-opted religious identity. Unlike many of his contemporaries, the Jerusalemite educator Khalil Sakakini was profoundly opposed to the merging between nationalism and religious fanaticism. Palestinian patriotism and Arab nationalism, he thought in 1920, did not have to be anti-liberal, fundamentalist, and devoid of universal values. He advocated an uncompromising national stance but at the same time respected his Jewish counterparts and maintained good relations with them. As an Arab patriot, in April 1920 Sakakini participated in the reception for the pilgrims returning from Nebi Musa. He gazed out at the 70,000 fellow citizens in front of the Jerusalem municipal building and saw a political demonstration. Religious and nationalist tension hung in the air that Friday, which was both Good Friday and the eve of the Jews' Pesach holiday.

The tension was caused, first, by what the Arabs viewed as Britain's betrayal of its commitments to Faisal and his Hashemite clan. The Hashemites had helped the British war effort by leading in 1916 an Arab rebellion against Turkish rule. In exchange, as the Hashemites understood it, the British had promised to support their aspiration for a pan-Arab kingdom under their leadership. But when Faisal declared an Arab kingdom in Damascus, the British offered no help. On top of this, the British demonstrated that they were intent on keeping their promise to the Jews, made in the Balfour Declaration, to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. (Porat 1974, p. 78). The heated atmosphere prompted Sakakini to compare the singing of the Muslims to battle hymns and their flags to spears. He was right. Incendiary political speeches invoked anti-Jewish motifs from Islamic tradition. 'Arif al- 'Arif, later a writer of history and mayor of Jordanian Jerusalem (1950–1955), then editor of the newspaper *Surriya al-Janubiyya*, declared: "Palestine is our land, the Jews are our dogs!" (Segev 1999, p. 128; al-Sakakini 1990, pp. 125–26, 137). The demagogic speeches fired up the Hebronites, who rioted and looted Jewish stores in Jerusalem. The fanaticism infected young people like the 25-year-old Hajj Amin al-Husayni, as well as his 67-year-old uncle, Jerusalem's mayor Musa Kazim al-Husayni, who had generally been one of the moderate voices in the Palestinian national movement. Sakakini, writing in his diary of that day's events, put his feelings succinctly: "I am disgusted and depressed by the madness of the human race." (Al-Sakakini 1990, p. 137). Tensions were so high that

it took only one small incident to set off a large-scale confrontation. It took the British three days and a series of firm political moves to halt the cycle of mutual bloodshed and violence that left five Jews and four Arabs dead and 216 Jews and 23 Arabs wounded. Storrs ousted Musa Kazim al-Husayni from the mayor's chair and appointed in his place a member of the most important rival clan—Raghib al-Nashashibi (Pappe 2002, pp. 171–72, 219–26; Segev 1999, pp. 109–10, 117).

In 1919–1920 Jewish feelings were mixed. They "remembered the old times," Ezra HaMenachem related, when "youths and old men reported in the early morning to the gate in the wall to receive the celebrants with cheers. Their procession, displaying many flags, passed through the Jewish alleys to the sound of drums and cymbals. The Jews cheered as they came and sprinkled rose water on them." But in 1919–1920 the Jews, apprehensive, kept their stores half-closed and quickly shut them when the procession turned violent and anti-Jewish. "Just a few days went by," he wrote, after spirits had been fired and violence broke out, "and life got back on track. Jews and Arabs again met with each other and both apologized for the spilt blood." (Hamenachem 1988, pp. 49, 51)

The violent confrontation of 1920 was a local manifestation of Palestinian and Arab nationalisms, melded with religion, launched at a traditional ceremony, and intended to express opposition to the British, Jews, and Zionists. It was carried out in the name of Palestinian patriotism, while also expressing allegiance to Faisal as the Arab sovereign of Damascus. In 1929, the disturbances bore a much clearer Palestinian nationalist imprint. Politically, they were centered on Palestine, not on Damascus. They were of a religious-political nature, but the focus was not Nebi Musa but the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif. Its geography was Jerusalem and from there spread all over the country.

5. Conclusions

In the late 19th and early 20th century, religious differences between Jews and Muslims still existed but with limited divisive power than earlier due to rapid modernization and the political—military decline of the Ottoman Empire. The escalating Jewish–Arab conflict in Palestine changed the way holy places function from platforms for inclusive local identity to places of exclusion and conflict. Whereas in pre-modern times holy sites did not play a role in national imagination, in the late 19th–early 20th century they served Jews and Arabs in developing joint local patriotism (i.e., identity of belonging to the land and sharing it with compatriots). With the escalation of the conflict over Palestine, each of the two rivals, Zionism and the Palestinian national movement, used Jerusalem holy sites as symbolic profit to base on its exclusive claim of belonging. The conflict changed the function of those places from platforms of inclusiveness to sites of exclusion and domination.

In holy places and religious festivals, Palestinian Jews and Muslims managed two types of encounter. First, they shared joint saints as the cases of Simon the Pius and Prophet Samuel show. Second, Jews were active participants in main Muslim religious festivals of Nebi Musa. Moreover, the empathy Jews expressed to the Nebi Musa celebration is a powerful expression of local patriotism and identity. Thus, religious feasts were not just platforms for anti-Zionist and anti-British demonstration as mainstream studies suggest, but also occasions where joint Jewish–Muslim local patriotism was expressed.

These encounters were suspended at times when the national conflict over Palestine escalated and each of the two national movements used religious feasts and holy sites to gain legitimacy and popular support. After 1948 Simon the Pious, Nebi Samuel, and Nebi Musa lost their function as platforms for joint identity. Instead, they became tools of exclusive national interests and control claims.

When Israel conquered Nebi Samuel in the month of Iyar/May 1967, religious Jews saw this as a sign from heaven, an invitation to return to the tomb, reestablish it as a Jewish site, and push the Muslim presence to its margins. In 1995 Israel converted a large area around the tomb, one that included Palestinian homes, into a national park, imposing considerable restrictions on the daily lives of the residents. The separation fence built by Israel during the 2000s circles around Nebi Samuel, placing it on the Israeli side of the structure even though the site was never formally annexed by Israel. The Muslim site was thus cut off from its surroundings and local Palestinians do not have free access to it.

After the 1948 war Nebi Musa lost its Palestinian national status and became a small festival. Neither the Jordanians, that ruled the place between the 1948 and 1967 wars, nor the Israelis that have occupied it since June 1967, were interested in helping the Palestinians to base their national movement on Nebi Musa. Although after the 1967 occupation Israel did not formally forbid Nabi Musa feasts, Israel de facto made it impossible. Israel included Nabi Musa in a large security zone reserved for military exercises. The PLO, on the other hand, did not need Nebi Musa to base on its national claim in its formative years. It used other sources of legitimacy such as Arab nationalism, armed struggle doctrine and later on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. Oslo agreements of 1993–1994 transferred Nebi Musa from Israel to the Palestinian Authority. Following, in 1997 the Palestinian Authority through the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Waqf, revived the pilgrimage. The Authority wanted to co-opt the religious feast for its political needs and goals: to gain legitimacy and national unity, and to show that the nation is united behind it and its leader Arafat against Hamas claims. However, contrary to the past the pilgrimage attracted less people; Israel limited the celebration to a narrow area adjacent to the sanctuary, and did not allow it to start and end in Jerusalem (Aubin-Boltanski 2003; A. Cohen 2006).

Joint Jewish-Arab local identity expressed in holy sites and religious festivals is part of the past, not of the present. Yet this past has a clear lesson. It shows that the popular deterministic perception on religious causes behind the Israeli-Palestinian national struggle is wrong. Religions as such did not create the problem or motivate it due to their doctrines, belief systems and imperatives. National movements, however, dragged holy places into the escalating conflict.

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