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Eran Tzidkiyahu* / "Whose surroundings we have blessed"¹: The Islamic Movement in Israel Unites around the Al-Aqsa Mosque

The current wave of violence did not spring up *ex nihilo*; it should be situated in a broader context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general, and is related to the tensions involving the sacred sites to Jews and Muslims, specifically the sites in Jerusalem. The wave of stabbings appeared in early October but it was preceded by a considerable worsening of tension and violent incidents on the Temple Mount/ al-Aqsa Mosque esplanade. The deterioration began with the *Tisha B'Av* incidents in the same place, and the tension that triggered these events had continued and escalated through the Jewish High Holiday period. One of the responses of Israeli authorities was to outlaw the groups called *Murabitun* and *Murabitat* operating in Al-Aqsa Mosque. (*Ribat* is to voluntarily defend Islam from external enemies. This Islamic term goes back to the Muslim-Christian 8th century encounter in North-West Africa. Its original meaning was a fortification post on the frontier with the infidels. Those who volunteered to station those posts, combining holy war with a pious way of life, were called *Murabitun* and for woman *Murabitat*. Today this term carries more complex meanings, such as inner-spiritual struggle of the believer against mundane challenges. Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa mosque are often described as places of *Ribat*, and the current use of the term in al-Aqsa, describing groups of Muslims who stay at the al-Aqsa compound, study Quran and confronts religious Jewish visitors at the site, echoes back the original meaning of *Ribat*).

The Outlawing of the *Murabitun* and *Murabitat* was accompanied by additional changes, which were considered by the Palestinians as deviations from the status quo in the holy esplanade, and a significant first step toward dividing prayer time there between Jews and Muslims, in a manner similar to the schedules instituted by Israel in Hebron's Cave of the Patriarchs/al-Haram al-Ibrahimi following Baruch Goldstein's murder spree there in 1994. Efforts to put an end to the violence through police tactics and legislation backfired and contributed to the spillover of violence beyond the holy esplanade into the Old City of Jerusalem, and from there to the streets of the city and the entire country.

Brief Background

Any person walking up to the Temple Mount/ al-Aqsa Mosque compound in recent years cannot help but notice the conspicuous changes that have been taking place at this site; groups of men, women, and children sit in the esplanade studying Quran and demonstrating an increased Muslim presence there. These groups have responded harshly and even aggressively toward the tourists and non-Muslim visitors to the site, especially visitors whose outward appearance seems Jewish. Another sign of escalating religious radicalism is the application of a strict dress code to Muslims and non-Muslims alike by Waqf guards.²

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¹ Quran, Surat al-Isra' [The Nocturnal Journey] 17:1, on the al-Aqsa Mosque.

² The waqf is the Islamic endowment that administers the site.

These changes should be understood as a response to the increased presence of religious Jews on the Temple Mount. Since late 2005, the sight of yeshiva students, police officers, and Waqf staff following each other around and scrutinizing each other's moves has become common at the sacred site. Since 2010, this tragi-comic scenario has been accompanied by raging masses of hundreds of Muslim men, women, and children of all ages, who spend time studying the Quran in groups, and whose function is to bellow "Allahu Akbar" (in Arabic: "God is the greatest") every time a visibly religious Jew passes. Lately, as tensions increased, these calls have expanded to target all Jews and tourists on the Temple Mount.

In April 2001, shortly after Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount and the outbreak of the Second Intifada (also known as the al-Aqsa Intifada), the Northern Faction of the Islamic Movement in Israel launched its *Masirat al-Bayariq* (Flag Parade) project, which was designed to bring worshippers from all parts of the country to the al-Aqsa Mosque. The Southern Faction of the Islamic Movement in Israel conducts a similar project called *Shad a-Rihal* (Fasten the Saddles [for a pilgrimage]). Both terms originate from Islamic traditions that emphasize the sanctity of the al-Aqsa Mosque.³ Since initiating these projects, the Islamic Movement has brought tens and possibly even hundreds of thousands of worshippers to pray at al-Aqsa every year. Sociologist Nohad Ali notes that the slogan "al-Aqsa laysa wahidan" (al-Aqsa is not alone) has become common among the supporters of both factions of the Islamic Movement in Israel.⁴ Moreover, the Association for the Revival of Al-Aqsa and the Holy Places (*Mu'assasat - 'Imarat al-Aqsa wal-Muqaddisat*), which operates the project on behalf of the Northern Faction of the Movement, considers the project "the al-Aqsa Mosque's first line of defense."⁵

A documentary disseminated by the Islamic Movement in Jerusalem explains that the *Masirat al-Bayariq* project provides free transportation, which encourages worshippers from all the villages and cities within pre-1967 Israel to come and pray at al-Aqsa.⁶ The filmmakers stress the project's significance in reinforcing al-Aqsa's role in Palestinian-Muslim culture in Israel, in weakening what they call "the Israeli siege on the al-Aqsa Mosque," and in revitalizing the Palestinian economy in Jerusalem. This last is due to the fact that Israel, contrary to the past, has prevented since the Second Intifada West Bank and Gaza residents from reaching the city and the al-Aqsa Mosque.⁷

In 2010, the Islamic Movement operated another project *maṣāṭib al- 'ilm fī al-masjid al-Aqsā* – Quran study circles. Initially, 30 students attended, but after three years this has expanded to more than one thousand and counting. These study circles constitute an increased Muslim presence in the al-Aqsa courtyard during all hours of the day, and especially during times when the holy esplanade is open to non-Muslim visitors. The project emerged as a response to the reduced Muslim presence in al-Aqsa following the construction of the Separation barrier around Jerusalem and the city's subsequent isolation from the West Bank. The amplified presence of Muslim citizens of Israel at al-Aqsa also represents a response to the steady increase in the number of

³ Nohad Ali, "Religious fundamentalism as ideology and practice: The Islamic Movement in Israel from a comparative perspective," doctoral thesis, Haifa University, 2006, pp. 73-74.

⁴ <http://www.pls48.net/?mod=articles&ID=1192735#.VcoJ9vmqkqo>

⁵ *Masirat al-Bayariq* is another name for the Nabi Musa festival, a parade that the Muslims of Palestine used to hold around Easter toward the al-Aqsa Mosque, and from there to Makam Nabi Musa situated on the road to Jericho. *Shad al-Rihal* alludes to the hadith that urges Muslims to make a pilgrimage only to three mosques: The mosque in Mecca, the Mosque of Prophet Muhammad in Madina, and the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. See the association's website: <http://www.aqsai.com>.

⁶ For a link to the film, see the website of the Islamic Movement in Jerusalem <http://bit.ly/1HEfSdq/>.

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4vA4BZ1Lc5I#t=28>.

Jewish visitors to the Temple Mount. In an interview to the London *al-Quds al-Arabi* newspaper in November 2013, project director Hikmat Na'amna described the study circles as “a way to undermine the plans to Judaize al-Aqsa.”⁸ Na'amna explained the project's strategy: continuous Muslim presence on the mountain in the form of Quran study circles of men, women, and school children, dispersed over the length and width of the compound, at increased concentrations along the routes of the Jewish visitors – who, due to restrictions of Jewish law, follow a relatively fixed route along the perimeter of the Dome of the Rock. In this manner, from their positions in the study circles, the Muslims can track the Jews' movements and respond in real time to any act that they consider a provocation. The Association's website expressly describes the study circles as “the first line of defense of al-Aqsa Mosque.”⁹

The dynamics of exclusion and radicalization

The Oslo Accords, the Camp David Summit (2000), the subsequent Second Intifada and its implications, and even the 2005 Disengagement from Gaza Program gradually eroded the Jewish Orthodox religious taboo against entering the Temple Mount. This was followed by the erosion of the political taboo on dealing politically with the status quo on the Temple Mount. In Parallel to the growing religious Jewish interest regarding the Temple Mount, the institutional process of expelling the Palestinian Authority from Jerusalem and weakening the local Palestinian leadership in the city took place. The construction of the Separation barrier along the “Jerusalem envelope” effectively detached East Jerusalem from the Bethlehem-Ramallah metropolitan area and from the West Bank in general. The absence of Palestinian leadership in the city, East Jerusalem's physical isolation, and the escalating messianic discourse and increasing traffic among religious-nationalist Jews occurred coincidentally, within a brief period. All these developments evoked a Muslim response, at the international Arab-Islamic level, as well as at the regional and grassroots level.¹⁰

The Islamic Movement in Israel has stepped into the aforementioned vacuum. In response to the declining number of Palestinian Muslims from the West Bank who visit the city, the Islamic Movement intends to reinforce and expand the presence in Jerusalem and al-Aqsa of Palestinian Muslims who are citizens of Israel. Indeed, since 2001, tens and sometimes hundreds of buses arrive from the Galilee, the Negev, and the Triangle every Friday, and sometimes in during the week as well. These buses carry thousands of Muslim men and women who come to pray at al-Aqsa and then visit the Old City markets, and have a meal. Thus, the visitors at once reinforce the Muslim presence at al-Aqsa and also support the Palestinian shopkeepers in the Old City of Jerusalem, whose trade has declined because of the Israeli Fence, separating the West Bank from Jerusalem, or because of the crisis in tourism. Thus, many of the Old City merchants are grateful to the Islamic Movement.

⁸ *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, November 6, 2013. <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=100785>; Interview with Na'amna for Palestinian Television, July 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ai0N8JOEnYI>.

⁹ <http://www.aqsai.com/?mod=articles&ID=264>; March 15, 2014.

¹⁰ Dotan Halevi and Eran Tzidkiyahu, “The Temple Mount/Al-Aqsa: Two side of the same coin,” May 6, 2015: <http://bit.ly/1JSNaM2>; Eran Tzidkiyahu, “Ziara and politics in Jerusalem,” May 17, 2012: <http://bit.ly/1Kg2w9o>; Idan Volkan, “On the way to a confederation? An agreement between Jordan and the Palestinian Authority determines Jordanian trust over Jerusalem,” Megaphone, April 6, 2013: <http://bit.ly/1MiaYsY>.

Between Earthly Jerusalem and the Capital of the Caliphate

Through a series of alliances with clerics and other figures, Sheikh Raed Salah, head of the Islamic Movement's Northern Faction, managed to erode the dichotomy created by the Green Line border. These allies included former Mufti of Jerusalem Sheikh Ikrima Sabri, and others such as Yusuf Mukhaymar,¹¹ resident of Ras Khamis in East Jerusalem (beyond the Separation barrier) and President of the *Murabitun* Committee in Jerusalem.¹² Sheikh Salah thus managed to challenge Israel's policy of division in the Occupied Territories, and to position the al-Aqsa Mosque as the unifying factor of the Palestinian people. The Islamic Movement's intense involvement with the al-Aqsa Mosque cause and in East Jerusalem in general, can be traced to the Western Wall Tunnel Riots in 1996. At the time, the Movement became involved in the restoration — in conjunction and collaboration with the Awqaf — of the "Marwani prayer hall", established in Solomon's Stables (located in the lower part of the southern Temple Mount), and even began to organize mass rallies in Israel in a campaign known as "al-Aqsa is in danger."¹³ A decade later, in late 2005, the Movement's activities swelled considerably when the stream of Jewish visitors to the Temple Mount increased and Sheikh Salah returned to Jerusalem after a 30-month absence.¹⁴

The Islamic Movement's organizational skills, its success as a champion of Jerusalem, and its placing of the al-Aqsa Mosque at the center of Palestinian national-religious consciousness transformed the Movement into one of the city's most dominant forces. According to the vision of Sheikh Raed and his deputy Kamal Khatib, the role of the capital of the future Islamic Caliphate is reserved for Jerusalem,¹⁵ although, as Hillel Cohen notes, in contrast to the Liberation Party,¹⁶ Khatib and Salah believe that "yearning for the Caliphate cannot replace political action."¹⁷ Until the vision of salvation is realized, the Movement has positioned itself as the main organization that assists Palestinians in East Jerusalem to cope with life's hardships.¹⁸ Since the Movement operates in an area subject to Israeli civil law, and is thus not subject to the

¹¹ <http://www.panet.co.il/article/362543>

¹² *Ribat* is literally a military outpost. In many traditions, *Ribat* is a border city on the terrestrial boundary between the Islamic world and the non-Islamic world. The *ribat* commandment is observed by staying in a frontier city and combining worship of god with a holy war. Today, due to what Muslims perceive as the political and religious threats to Jerusalem, the city is considered a *ribat* in the Islamic world, and extended stay in a specific place, such as the al-Aqsa Mosque, is considered to be a *ribat*. Men and women who observe the *ribat* commandment are called *Murabitun* and *Murabitat*, respectively. See for example Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "Al-Quds Qadiyat Kull Muslim" (Cairo, 2000), p. 14. Available online at: http://imcpal.ps/new/alquds_book/14.pdf.

¹³ Yitzhak Reiter, "From Jerusalem to Mecca and back: Muslims Rally around Al-Aqsa," 2005, p. 91. Nimrod Luz astutely described this process: "Haram al-Sharif in Arab Palestinian discourse in Israel: Identity, collective memory, and modes of construction," Floersheimer Institute for Policy Studies, 2004, p. 56.

¹⁴ He was arrested and imprisoned for 26 months and was prohibited from entering Al-Aqsa for an additional four months. Hillel Cohen, *The market square is empty: The rise and fall of Arab Jerusalem* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute for Israeli Studies, 2007), p. 121.

¹⁵ <http://www.pls48.net/?mod=articles&ID=1188641>.

¹⁶ The Islamic Liberation Party (*Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami*) is an international Islamic movement that was established in the 1950s in Jerusalem under Jordanian rule by Taqi al-Din al-Nubhani, a Palestinian born in the village Ajzim (now the site of Kerem Maharal), a qadi in the shari'a court of Jerusalem at the time. The organization's goal is to renew the Caliphate, and believes that this goal supersedes jihad. Organizational supporters do not generally participate in armed struggles. During 2006-2007, the organization gained strength in the West Bank and Jerusalem. For additional information see http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/data/pdf/PDF_07_166_1.pdf.

¹⁷ Cohen, 2007, p. 123.

¹⁸ Eran Tzidkiyahu, "Education doesn't interest me," The Forum for Regional Thinking, October 29, 2014: <http://bit.ly/1weIKI5>

restrictions that apply to Palestinians in the Territories, it enjoys relative freedom of action in Jerusalem. In fact, the Islamic Movement operates both in al-Aqsa and in the Old City and other East Jerusalem neighborhoods through a host of associations and non-profit organizations devoted to development and welfare, which run an intricate network of websites and presence in social media.¹⁹

The Islamic Movement operates in Jerusalem and at the Al-Aqsa Mosque through volunteers whose numbers include Palestinian citizens of Israel, residents of Jerusalem and residents of the Territories. Many contribute through their labor, while others help by providing construction materials or funds. Mass transport from the Negev, the Galilee, and the Triangle to Jerusalem is offered at no charge, but all participants are invited to contribute by becoming “bus trustees” (*Kafil Hafila*).²⁰ The Movement has also proved that it tied strongly to the al-Aqsa Mosque as any other Palestinian organization. Through these actions, the Islamic Movement has proven its ability to influence the events on the ground more than any other entity. Sheikh Raed Salah has consequently become a popular figure in East Jerusalem and earned the title of “Sheikh al-Aqsa.”

Unity Rather than Division

Over the past decade and a half, Arabs in Jerusalem have lacked local leadership. Hamas’ ability to act greatly diminished since 2006 (in the West Bank in general, and specifically in Jerusalem), the Palestinian Authority is regularly excluded from city affairs, the local Jerusalem leadership collapsed after the death of Faisal Husseini in 2001, and it seems Israel acts in the eastern part of the city without any hindrance. Still, Arab MKs of the Joint List, including members of the Southern Faction of the Islamic Movement, such as Talab Abu ‘Arar and Mas‘ud Ghanaim, participate in Knesset debates on the Temple Mount and regularly visit al-Aqsa. Other factions of the Joint List have involved themselves as well. MK Ahmad Tibi visits the holy esplanade regularly, and a delegation of Arab MKs, including ostensibly ‘secular’ Arabs as Ayman Odeh, recently visited the Mount.²¹ In contrast, Palestinian-Israeli MKs refrain from deeper, more intense involvement in East Jerusalem affairs including issues related to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, based on their belief that the site is occupied territory that belongs to the Palestinian Authority or is under Jordanian responsibility. Yet the Palestinian Authority is not permitted to operate in the city. Both factions of the Islamic Movement in Israel identified and entered this lacuna, successfully realizing the city’s potential. The Movement’s Northern Faction, which boycotts the Israeli political system, has effectively stepped into the shoes of the weakened Hamas, and demonstrates strong presence in the Mosque and its East Jerusalem surroundings through dynamic organizational efforts and socio-religious activities, study circles, events for children, and mass Iftar feasts during Ramadan. The Northern Faction has established maintenance crews for the al-Aqsa Mosque,

¹⁹ See for example: <http://www.iaqsa.com/>; <http://www.aqsai.com/>; <http://www.foraqsa.com/index.php>; <http://pls48.net/?mod=print&ID=1156169>; <https://www.facebook.com/0202updates/posts/1443043285990526>

²⁰ Ali 2006, p. 74. Based on his experience of these trips, Ali (ibid) notes that “most of the travelers donate between NIS 20-50 per trip, an amount that covers the costs of the bus [...] there is no obligation to make a donation. Movement members and supporters always donate generously, other donate less.”

²¹ On Joint List MKs’ ascent to Al-Aqsa, see Shabtai Bendet, “After the Tisha b’Av riots: Members of the Joint List ascend to Al-Aqsa,” July 28, 2015: <http://news.walla.co.il/item/2876521>. See NRG June 26, 2016, Arnon Segal, “Confrontation between Zahalka and Gal blows up Internal Affairs Committee meeting”: <http://www.nrg.co.il/online/1/ART2/702/457.html>.

funds a massive transportation project that reinvigorates the city's markets and the Mosque, monitors the events in al-Aqsa, among other activities. As a result, the Northern Faction is considered the primary force influencing events related to al-Aqsa and East Jerusalem at large. Due to its "al-Aqsa in Danger" rallies and the mass transportation project, Muslims in Israel — who live within the Green Line Border and hold Israeli citizenship — have gained a renewed sense of ownership of the al-Aqsa Mosque and strengthened their ties to the holy place.

The Islamic Movement in Israel enjoys civil and legal status in Israel. Consequently, it operates with relative freedom in East Jerusalem, unlike Palestinian factions in the West Bank. While sections of the Palestinian people are invariably separated from each other, the Islamic Movement identified the potential that Jerusalem offers, and has channeled religious-national sentiment to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Thus, it has transformed the site into a powerful symbol of Islamic-Palestinian unity²².

²² As a reminder, this article was written before the recent outlawing of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement. The full consequences of this act on the Movement's activity in East Jerusalem are yet to be seen.