

Religion and Violence at the Mosque in Jerusalem

by Michael Curtis



After the conclusion of the Six Day War, on September 1, 1967 the Khartoum Declaration was issued by eight Arab states with its "framework of the main principles by which the Arab states abide." It listed the combative three NOs: no peace with Israel, no recognition of it, no negotiations with it. Fifty years later, on July 25, 2017, the Palestinian Fatah movement, protesting against Israeli efforts to ensure security of its citizens by metal detectors and security cameras, issued a new three NOs: no to the occupation, no to the metal detectors, no to the cameras.

Once again, Palestinian leaders and organizations, and Muslim leaders in other countries have misused the religion of Islam as a political weapon to explain the unsatisfactory social and economic condition of their people, as well as their refusal to accept the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Religious texts promote an extreme political agenda.

Prominent among these leaders is Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, though preoccupied with arresting journalists in his country, animosity against the Kurds and plans to annex Northern Cyprus, nevertheless found time to comment on July 25, 2017 on the Jerusalem issue. He urged Muslim worshippers to “protect the holy sites in east Jerusalem, because Israel, using terrorism as an excuse, is trying to steal the al-Aqsa mosque from Muslims.”

The Israeli stealing was not apparent in the events starting on July 14, 2017 when three Arab Palestinian terrorists smuggled handguns into the al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and killed two Israeli Druze policemen at this site, known to Jews as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Noble Mosque. As a result Israel closed the site to Muslim men under the age of 50 during Friday prayers, an action which in turn caused a weekend of bloodshed. Israel then set up metal detectors and more cameras at the site, after which thousands of Palestinians protested on the excuse it was undermining the holiness of the shrine.

Two things are pertinent to the events. One is the call by Palestinian leaders to continue the violence. President Mahmoud Abbas, now approaching the 12th year of his four year term and seemingly converted into a democrat, called for Palestinians to “intensify the popular struggle” over the Temple Mount. He has encouraged religious authorities to “defend your land and your honor.” The other matter is the curious silence and no “popular struggle” over the metal detectors providing security in the Vatican, in Mecca for the Hajj, in Egypt, in Bihar, India, and Lahore, Pakistan. Wherefore are they different from those in Jerusalem?

Administration over the disputed site is in the hands of the *Waqf*, the Jordanian controlled Islamic religious authority, which called on Muslims not to visit it until the cameras were removed. In any case, for many years only Muslims have been allowed to pray at the site. The meaningless response of

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to the metal devices was not to discuss a solution to the surveillance but to call for cutting all ties with Israel until the issue is resolved. The boycott of the shrine would continue.

Israel on July 25, 2017 did remove the metal devices from the entrance to the mosque, and attempted to put in less offensive surveillance methods such as cameras. For Muslim officials this was insufficient. Some appear to have undergone instant conversion to democracy. One spokesperson, Sheikh Raed Dana of the *Waqf* was equivocal on whether worshippers should end the protest and return to the shrine; " this movement is a movement of the street...we as the *Waqf* listen to the street ."

In this view the *Wafd* would act as the "people" decided. Inadvertently, he was agreeing to a conclusion that the whole supposed religious crisis was a political event, having little connection with religious principles. Moreover, the Muslim call is extreme. Jews should be banned not only on the Temple Mount, but also at the Western Wall, part of the Old City, which Palestinian leaders claim belongs to Muslims.

There is no secrecy about the misuse of Islam. President Abbas on July 23, 2017 praised Palestinian terrorists, asserting that each drop of their blood that was spilled in Jerusalem is "pure blood" as long as it is for the sake of Allah. The essential problem is that Palestinian authorities have made the Temple Mount a base for operations not simply for supposedly protecting the site but also as the place for the struggle against Israel and Jewish history in the area. It is distressing that Jewish archeological treasure have been destroyed. The Palestinian leadership inflamed its people by saying that the mosque is in danger. The diatribe by Abbas on September 20, 2015 is familiar: "al-Aqsa is ours and so is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre."

For those interested in policy in the area two matters are relevant. One is to emphasize the political misuse of the

Islamic religion, and to base policy proposals on factors on the ground. The other matter, accompanying the first, is to become familiar with the analysis on this contentious Middle East area coming from impeccable sources.

Since 2002 a series of reports of Arab Human Development (AHDR) written by independent Arab scholars have provided an objective and accurate picture of the political, social, and economic trends that influence the Arab region. Among other things they comment on the role of Islam in hindering development. At that time in 2002 the GDP of the whole Arab League was less than that of Spain.

The first AHDR report indicated three areas of shortcoming: the Arab states lacked full respect for human rights and freedoms; they suffered from lack of empowerment of women; they lacked knowledge. Subsequent AHDR reports emphasised existing deficiencies – “the need for freedom of opinion, speech and assembly; high quality education; affirmative action for women; popular representation, lack of democracy; lack of scientific research and informational technology; high level of illiteracy, about 65 million, two thirds of whom are women.

The sixth, most recent, report in 2016 considers the situation of youth, a subject important for the whole Arab Middle East and directly pertinent to the riots and demonstrations of Palesinians. For a considerable time average population growth rates in the area have been among the highest in the world, and thus exert great pressure on existing institutions, though the growth has slowed somewhat in recent years.

The Arab population in 1970 was 124 million, in 2010, 350 million, and on current projections it will be 604 milion in 2050. To help understand the July 2017 events in Jerusalem, the crucial fact is that over 60% of the Arab population is under 30: young people between 15 and 29 account for one-third of the population, while those under 15 account for another

one-third.

The lack of development stems not from Israeli alleged activity in the Temple Mount, but from poor education, lack of employment, poor health, lack of empowerment in economic, political, and social life, inadequate representation in public life, and conflicts. In 2002 five Arab countries were affected by conflicts; in 2016 11 Arab countries were involved and 250 million live in areas vulnerable to conflict.

For youth, there is a lack of suitable job opportunities, partly because of nepotism. Youth unemployment in the Arab area is twice the global average; it is 24% for young men, and 47% for young women. The area does not embrace the concept of equality, especially for women.

Yet, in spite of the reality and magnitude of all these problems, the cause of the Palestinians remains the largest and most serious existential threat in the region according to the 2015 report of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. About 75% of respondents believe the Palestinian cause is not only a Palestinian issue but also an Arab one. Some 85% oppose diplomatic recognition of Israel by their countries.

Logically this is inexplicable in an area that accounts for 25% of global conflicts since 2010. The consequences of those wars are dire: in Syria, more than 250,000 deaths and one million injured, 4.8 million refugees and 7.6 million internally displaced; in Libya, fighting has led to over one million dead and wounded; in Iraq, more than five million are refugees, internal and external. The area is home to 47% of the world's internally displaced people and 58% of all world refugees.

A sane point of view would suggest that Arab countries would benefit by enhancing the capacities of their young people and pursuing development. It is a disgrace that the official

communique of Fatah on July 21, 2017 is that everything that is happening is a toll for the blessed al Aqsa mosque. That is not the road for development.