



Status Quo at Al-Aqsa: An Insider's Perspective

A special feature published by the Civic Coalition for Palestinian Rights in Jerusalem, October 2015

As of late, the Al-Aqsa Mosque has once again become a focus of popular Palestinian protest, broad public attention and concern. This report provides background information clarifying the “status quo” in relation to access, worship and jurisdiction over Al-Aqsa and explains why Palestinians and the Muslim community at large fear Israeli plans to take over control.

The report also features excerpts from an interview with a Palestinian who lives in the Al-Aqsa compound. He shares insights into daily life inside Islam's third most holy site and explains why Al-Aqsa is not only a site of religious worship but also a center of Palestinian social, cultural and political life.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque is the third most holy site in Islam. Together with the Dome of the Rock, it forms a spacious compound located in the Old City of Jerusalem. According to Jewish religious tradition, one of the compound's walls is the Western Wall of an ancient Jewish temple, the most holy site in Judaism, which stood in the place of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound and was destroyed in the Roman period.



Al-Aqsa Mosque compound (Andrew Shiva / CC-BY-SA-3.0)

From 1948 – 1967, eastern Jerusalem, including the Old City, was ruled by Jordan, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound was administered by the Jordanian Islamic Waqf (Trust). Non-Muslim visitors were permitted to enter, but non-Muslim prayer was forbidden. As Israel and Jordan remained in a state of war, movement across the ceasefire line that divided Jordanian-controlled eastern Jerusalem and Israeli-controlled western Jerusalem was generally prohibited for both Israelis and Palestinians, and religious Jews were prevented from worshiping at the Western Wall.

The Status Quo resulting from the Israeli Occupation

In 1967, Israel occupied and unilaterally annexed East Jerusalem, including the Old City and the Al Aqsa compound. This annexation has [not been recognized](#) by the international community because acquisition of territory by force is absolutely prohibited under international law. Therefore, the international community considers Israel to be an occupying power in East Jerusalem. As such, Israel is to respect the rules of occupation (Hague Regulations, Fourth Geneva Convention) and must, inter alia, abstain from making permanent changes to the status, laws and institutions in occupied East Jerusalem.

Immediately after the occupation, however, [Israel destroyed the Mughrabi \(Moroccan\) Quarter](#), an entire Palestinian neighbourhood in the Old City in order to create a large plaza for Jewish worship in front of the Western/Wall. Soon after, Israel enacted its 1967 [Protection of Holy Places Law](#) which stated, “The Holy Places shall be protected from desecration and any other violation and from anything likely to violate the freedom of access of the members of the different religions to the places sacred to them or their feelings with regard to those places.”

Based on this new situation created by the Israeli conquest, Israeli occupation forces protected Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall and coordinated access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound with the Jordanian Waqf, which retained responsibility for security and administration inside the compound. Israel facilitated entrance of non-Muslim visitors and abided by Jordan’s requests to ban certain Jewish fundamentalists and settlers it considered provocative. Religious or political demonstrations were prohibited and visitors were often limited to entering in groups of five or less.

This status quo remained largely in force from 1967 until the 1990s, even after Jordan officially rescinded its claims to the occupied West Bank (including East Jerusalem) in response to the PLO’s declaration of independence in 1988, and after the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty was concluded in 1994. Following the Israeli-Palestinian interim agreements (Oslo agreements) in the mid-1990s, the Palestinian Authority joined the operations of the Jordanian Waqf in the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. The fact that the Palestinian Authority was prevented from openly operating in occupied East Jerusalem under the Oslo agreements obstructed a formal and clear division of roles between the two, Jordanian and Palestinian, institutions.

The Gradual Erosion of the Status Quo

In 1982, Israeli occupation forces failed to prevent a [Jewish Israeli extremist](#) affiliated with a racist settler movement, Kach, from shooting the Jordanian security guard protecting the gate of the Al-Aqsa compound next to the Western Wall. The extremist successfully entered the compound and opened fire inside the Dome of Rock, killing 2 and injuring 9 Palestinians. This terrorist act gave Israel reason to intervene. Israeli police started to control the gates and the movement of people inside the Aqsa Mosque for alleged security reasons.

In 1996, the first Netanyahu government authorized the opening of a tunnel to the Western Wall underneath the foundations of the Old City and the Al-Aqsa compound with the declared aim of asserting Israeli sovereignty. The project triggered a popular Palestinian uprising and the first armed clashes between Palestinian Authority police and Israeli security forces. It also marked the beginning of extensive, Israeli government-sponsored archaeological digs in the vicinity of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, which are operated by Jewish settler organizations and have been a cause of Palestinian outrage until today.



*Israeli settler-operated Davidson Archaeological Garden
(Oren Rozen / CC-BY-SA-3.0)*

In 2000, then Israeli opposition leader [Ariel Sharon](#) sparked the Second Intifada with a provocative visit to Al-Aqsa. In this context, Israel ended its coordination of access with the Waqf, which had been a central component of the status quo until 2000. Although the Waqf is still able to work with Israeli police to enforce the ban on non-Muslim prayer, it can no longer determine the size or rate of entry of Jewish groups, nor can it bar the entry of specific persons. Israel has sometimes allowed groups of up to 50 Jewish provocateurs into the compound, including individuals in army uniforms, which had previously been forbidden.

Settler Organizations

The [Temple Mount Faithful](#) seeks to move Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock to Mecca and build a Jewish Temple on the site.

[Elad](#) operates archeological digs and tunnels underneath the Old City, including Al Aqsa, claiming exclusive Jewish ownership of the land.

Since the spring of 2014, government-backed Jewish fundamentalist settler groups have invaded the al-Aqsa Mosque compound, claiming a right to control part of the Muslim sanctuary and build a place for Jewish worship in the alleged site of the ancient Jewish temple there. Palestinian worshippers are frequently denied access and assaulted verbally and physically by settlers and Israeli police.

These developments explain why Palestinians have been rallying for the protection of their holy site in the popular rebellion against Israeli oppression that started in October 2015.

Insights From Within

Moussab Abbas is one of a very select group of people. He lives inside the Al Aqsa Mosque compound in the Old City of occupied East Jerusalem.

Tell us about yourself

I am 42 years old. I have a BA and Masters in Sociology. I was a political prisoner in Israel for some years. I worked for most of my life after prison as a youth worker because I believe deeply in education and that changing our education is a good step to change our situation. I believe that my role in life is to protect Jerusalem and work in Jerusalem, especially with kids and teenagers.

How did your family end up living at Al-Aqsa?

My father was an orphan and lived at an Islamic school for orphans in Jerusalem when he was young. He became a teacher in the school and eventually became the headmaster. They gave him this house out of respect for his role in the school.



Moussab Abbas



Moussab Abbas's house located in the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound

One of the wisest decisions my father made was to let us live in this house. My home is a special home. It is eight hundred years old, built in the Mamluk period. Living inside this house lets you feel your identity, that you are related to your culture and your heritage. We have lived in this house now for around seventy years.

There are ten of us in my family, eight brother and two sisters, as well as my mother and father. But now most of my brothers live south of Jerusalem in their own houses. I currently live at Al-Aqsa with my mother, my two sisters and my brother.

How would you describe the significance of Al-Aqsa for Palestinians?

Its religious significance is well known: the Al-Aqsa Mosque is the third most holy site in Islam; Muslims believe that the Prophet Mohammed came to Al-Aqsa to pray, and then God took him to visit heaven.

But it is not only about religion. Al-Aqsa and Jerusalem are embedded deeply in our Palestinian culture, which contains elements of Islam, Christianity and Judaism. For us Palestinians, Jerusalem, with its holy sites, is one of the most important parts of Palestine. I also think that a large portion of the world's people look to Jerusalem for their identity. We Palestinians who live in Jerusalem, especially the Old City, feel proud that we are in a place so unique.

So Al-Aqsa is more than an important place of worship for Palestinians?

Yes, certainly. Most people may not know that the Al-Aqsa compound is a center of social and cultural activity for Palestinians, in particular the residents of the Old City. In addition to the mosques, there are two high schools and an Islamic museum located in the compound. Many people also come in the

afternoon to take lessons. There are many kinds of lessons you can choose from: lessons for religious people, for people who care about social issues, and many others.



Children playing at Al-Aqsa (بلال الدويك / CC-BY-SA-3.0)

For kids in Jerusalem, Al-Aqsa is a main place for playing, meeting, and having adventures because it is a big area, and there is a large space with trees on the Eastern side. I think most children in the crowded Old City like to come there to adventure and play. If you ask any Palestinians living inside the Old City, they will tell you Al-Aqsa played a role in their childhood.

Around the age of fourteen, many children are trying to discover their identity. Many of the teenagers in the Old City like coming to Al-Aqsa to practice their religion and keep their identities related to Islam. If someone is not very religious, he or she will at minimum come on Friday and during Ramadan, the Islamic holy month. People also like to volunteer inside Al-Aqsa, cleaning, caring for the trees, or assisting guests who come from outside of Jerusalem.

Elderly people come because it is not easy for them to walk in the Old City. There are many steps in the Old City, and you need to expend a lot of energy to get around. They come to the Aqsa Mosque to sit and talk, like at a social centre.

For women, the Dome of the Rock is the central place. From my experience, most of the women from middle and lower classes, those not in a good economic situation, come to the Dome of the Rock to spend time outside the house because houses inside the Old City of Jerusalem do not have much open space.



Women at the Dome of the Rock
(© Lilly M / Wikimedia Commons / CC-BY-SA-3.0/ GFDL)

And then, of course, in all of the Palestinians' modern history, the Al-Aqsa Mosque has been a political centre. Every time there was a critical situation for Palestinians, there would be organizing and protests inside Al-Aqsa. I remember clearly when there was the Israeli invasion in Lebanon in the early 1980s, and when the Israeli army had besieged the PLO and Palestinian refugees in Beirut, political activities were happening every day in Al-Aqsa, especially on Friday.

What has Israeli control over security at Al-Aqsa meant in practice?

As far as I remember, Israeli police began to enter Al-Aqsa and repress Palestinian protests in 1982. With time this has become worse and worse. Israeli control has also become stricter. They surrounded Al-Aqsa with electronic sensors which monitor the area every night after the mosque is closed. They also started to close the doors to the Mosque compound after the last prayer each night. We Palestinians do not get to determine when the doors are opened and closed, only the Israelis.

There are two schools in the compound, which youth attend. Many days, they are unable to go to school because the area is closed off for "security reasons".

How does Israeli control affect your daily life?

It is very hard living inside Al-Aqsa. You feel tired all the time. For example, my sister is a teacher; she needs to be at work before 8:00 am. How can we explain to people that we cannot go outside our home because the Israelis closed it today? Today they opened the doors at 9:30 am. They change our daily life.



*Israeli border police in the Old City
(Jim Greenhill / CC-BY-2.0)*

I have to be home before the Israeli guards close the gates to Al-Aqsa. It is like a prison. It is not normal. And this feeling that you cannot leave or return to your home when you want makes you feel like your home is a jail. Electronic sensors surround my home, and I cannot be on my roof at night, which is very beautiful, all for “security reasons.” And that makes you feel angry and worried about the future.

It is very hard for old people. My mother, for example, when she needs a doctor, finds it very difficult. If you want internet, or to get food to eat, or to do anything, you have to coordinate with Israeli security. For example, in the kitchen we use a gas stove to cook. Whenever we have to change the gas container, it is a very complicated process with Israeli security. I cannot bring in a laptop because they do not allow you to have a laptop or Ipad inside the Al-Aqsa compound. This is nonsensical because they allow you to bring in a smart phone. One day my PC desktop broke down and I had to take it for repairs. After that, Israeli security took the computer from me for three days for a security check.

I have a big family. When we have a family gathering in our culture we have to have lunch and to eat a lot. But you are not allowed to bring a large amount of food into Al Aqsa Mosque. We have to explain to them that we are having a large event in our home; it’s crazy. Sometimes I want to spend time with my friends, but I always need to return home by a certain time each night. It is not easy.

What reasons do Israeli soldiers give for imposing all these restrictions?

Well, the term that they use all the time is “security.” For example, today I told the officer, “I have to work. I have to leave my home.” I knew what the answer would be before he said it, and he told me, “We have a security situation now. We cannot open the doors.”

The first time I wanted internet access in my home, I had to tell security that I wanted wireless. It took me more than three weeks of negotiations to get them to understand that I needed this in my home. It’s my life! They never say anything except, “There is a security situation.”

So who is allowed visit Al-Aqsa, and how has that changed?

In principle, everyone can come to visit, but formal worship is permitted for Muslims only. The problem for the Palestinians is that most of the Jewish visitors are not coming as tourists. Everyday there are tourists in the Al-Aqsa Mosque, and, in general, the people in Jerusalem like tourists, but they are coming as settlers and religious

Ibrahimi Mosque, Hebron

In 1994, a Jewish settler killed 29 Palestinians in the Ibrahimi Mosque during Friday prayers. Subsequently, Israel divided the site into separate sections for Muslims and Jews, and reserved the main access street for Jewish settlers only - all for “security reasons”.

fundamentalists who say, “This place is ours and we have the right to this place.” It’s clear to me, and I think to many people, that Israel wants to take control of at least part of the Aqsa compound, in order to establish a place for Jewish worship. I think they may divide the place like what they did with the Ibrahimi Mosque in [Hebron](#).

Miri Regev, Israeli Minister of Culture and Sport

“We will reach a situation where the Temple Mount will be like the Cave of the Patriarchs [Ibrahimi Mosque], days for Jews and days for Muslims”

As I see it, this extreme right wing Israeli government works closely with these groups of Jewish settlers and religious fundamentalists in order to gain more control. And they have a long-term strategy. On the one hand, they won’t let us rest. All the time I see them invade Al-Aqsa, and every day they use force. Every day they harass and arrest young people and women. On the other hand, Israel is promoting a narrative which claims that this is a “religious” conflict, as if Palestinians were racist, rejecting the Jewish faith and simply not wanting to see Jews in Al-Aqsa.

Have the Jordanian or Palestinian authorities been able to help on the ground?

The Jordanian Waqf administration of Al-Aqsa is really without power. The situation has become more complicated after the Oslo agreements because there are now two administrations inside Al Aqsa: Jordanian and Palestinian.

When we have problems with Israel, it is difficult to know who we should turn to: the Jordanian Waqf or the Palestinian Authority? None of them have intervened effectively to protect us from Israeli settler and police violence. We Palestinians in Jerusalem, especially in the Old City, feel that we are alone.

So what have Palestinians done to protect Al-Aqsa, and how has this led to “clashes” with the Israeli occupation forces



Mourabitat protesting Israeli incursions (aljazeera.info)

When Israel started its policy of letting settlers inside the Al-Aqsa compound, it became clear that neither Palestinians nor the Jordanian Waqf had the power to prevent this. In this situation, Palestinians organized a kind of civic protection: groups of people coming to Jerusalem each day to stay in the Aqsa Mosque. They call themselves “[Mourabitoun](#)” and “Mourabitat”, which mean “those who are steadfast.”

These groups, which consist mostly of women, come and sit inside the compound, and when the settlers come inside, they protest without violence;

they only stand in their way and speak. But Israel doesn’t want this. It has [outlawed](#) the Mourabitoun, and Israeli police uses force against them every day. I have seen them capture many of these women

and take them to jail. They also ban the women from entering the Old City or Al-Aqsa for a period of time like ten days or one month. However, these women, and also men and youth, generally succeed in getting inside each day.

Every day the settlers come and the protesters come, and every day I wake up to the sound of clashes. My room is nearby, and I hear the sound bombs. It is crazy and is very dangerous.

Where do you see this leading in the longer term?

I feel very sad about the way in which the Israeli government supports these fundamentalist Jewish settlers who try to conquer what they call “the Temple Mount”, and claims that this is an issue of religious freedom. I don’t believe that this conflict is about religion. That is a big illusion which is making our people, especially the young, very confused. When I see young people watching the Jews as they come into Al-Aqsa by force, it is difficult to explain to them that the conflict is not about religion.



Israeli soldiers harass a Palestinian child (aljazeera.info)

I believe Israel will continue its policy of taking control of Al-Aqsa, because they have the power to do so. I see this as part of the broader plan to tighten Israeli control of Palestinian Jerusalem, and to brand the Old City and al-Aqsa as a place of Jewish heritage. Of course, this will make the situation even more difficult. The Palestinian people will certainly continue to struggle for their freedom. People in Jerusalem have a strong Palestinian identity, and I feel that the new generation, teenagers and youth, are not afraid of the challenging Israeli oppression.

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