

# **Muslim Tourism to Jerusalem after the Normalization Agreements**

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- A first look at the new and different Muslim tourism expected to reach Israel following the peace treaties with the UAE and Bahrain.
- The controversy that has been dividing the Muslim world for years around visits to “occupied” Jerusalem and how the normalization agreements re-shuffled the cards in this Muslim domestic debate.
- What do rabbis think of Muslim tourism to what is also Jews’ holiest site?
- Expectations and the potential – what did Muslim tourism look like before the peace accords, and what would it look like after them?
- How should Israel prepare for the Muslim wave of tourism in order to create a success story and prevent the Palestinians from disrupting this unprecedented tourism?

For generations, residents of the Middle East have been left behind because of old conflicts, hostility, lies, and deception. So many things have set them back, like the lies that Jews and Arabs are enemies and that the al-Aqsa Mosque is under attack. They kept saying the mosque was under attack. These lies have been passed down from generation to generation, creating a vicious cycle of violence and terrorism in the region and all over the world.

The historic Abraham's Accords have proved that residents of the Middle East can break out of the failed attitudes of the past.

The Abraham Accords also open the door for Muslims around the world to visit the historic sites in Israel and to peacefully pray at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam.

*– U.S. President Donald Trump at the signing ceremony of the Peace Treaty between Israel and the Emirates, September 15, 2020.*

The agreement will create a reality in which the mosque is open to all Muslims for prayer, and they can also reach it... The extremists and the Iranians will try to say that al-Aqsa is in danger, but it is our great achievement that we have opened it up to all Muslims.

*– Jared Kushner, advisor to U.S. President Donald Trump, in a briefing call to journalists, August 14, 2020<sup>1</sup>*



## Introduction – Tourism of Conflict or Tourism of Peace?

One of the dramatic changes that the peace treaty with the Emirates and Bahrain carried on its wings is “religious normalization” in the form of Muslim tourism to the Temple Mount and Jerusalem, which will come from countries that have no formal ties with Israel. According to the new accords, the Temple Mount, the epicenter of the ongoing conflict between Judaism and Islam over many years, is supposed to become a place of bridging and connecting, with Jewish and Israeli visitors and tourists from all over the world mingling at the holy site with tourists from the UAE and later perhaps from Saudi Arabia, Morocco and other countries. Muslim pilgrims from Islamic countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, which do not recognize Israel, have been visiting in recent years. This is the power of Al-Aqsa tourism.

According to U.S. President Donald Trump and his advisor Jared Kushner (see introduction), Israel and the Emirates have agreed to establish between them a stream of Muslim tourism to Israel. Naturally, the primary concern of these tourists is the holy places to Islam in the Land of Israel, and first and foremost – the al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount, with its nearby Dome of the Rock (the holiest site for the Jewish people), and the third most holy place for Muslims after Mecca and Medina. As a holy city, Jerusalem is enshrined in the Muslim tradition, alongside Mecca and Medina, and is one of the three destinations that every Muslim is tasked with visiting. This commandment is derived from the “*Hadith*” of the three mosques named for “Prophet Muhammad”: “Do not leave but to three mosques, the sacred mosque (Mecca), mosques (al-Medina), and al-Aqsa Mosque.”<sup>2</sup>

This new development has already revived an old bitter debate that crossed through Islam and the Arab world, many years before the recent agreements were signed: Is it right and permitted, from a Muslim-Koranic canon point of view and/or political-political perspective, to visit the Temple Mount and Jerusalem when they are



Arab normalizing delegation from the Emirates visits Al Aqsa mosque under Israeli protection  
(Quds News Network, qudsnen.co)

under non-Muslim rule and especially under Israeli sovereignty? In other words, do such visits promote normalization, which is still disqualified by parts of the Muslim world, or do they strengthen the Palestinians who oppose normalization and the recent agreements with Israel?

The news of Muslim tourism on its way to the Temple Mount has already resulted in a number of incidents on the Mount, when delegations and the first visitors from the Emirates who visited were booed by Palestinian crowds, suffered curses and jeers, and were actually expelled.

The possibility that we will soon witness crowds of Muslims visiting Jerusalem and the Temple Mount requires the State of Israel to prepare itself: to examine the expected potential of Muslim tourist visits to the Mount; to prepare the conditions that will enable the realization of al-Aqsa tourism, in such a way that there will be tourism of peace and will not become tourism of confrontation and debate. This development also invites a discussion of the possible effects on the Jewish presence on the Temple Mount today, its character, and its future. This short essay deals with all of these.

## Political Background – from the “Plan of the Century” to the Peace Agreement

The document “Peace to Prosperity, A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People” (“Plan of the Century”), published by the United States on January 28, 2020,<sup>3</sup> had only a vague reference to the possibility of visits by members of all religions on the Temple Mount. The program’s documents say, among other things:

Jerusalem’s holy sites should remain open and available for peaceful worshippers and tourists of all faiths.

People of every faith should be permitted to pray on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, *in a manner that is fully respectful to their religion, taking into account the times of each religion’s prayers and holidays, as well as other religious factors.*

The document mentioned tourism “of all faiths,” but in a precedent and unusual way, insofar as it is a position of American administrations, it also mentioned for the first time the possibility of Jewish prayer on the Mount. The mention surprised many, since the “status quo” that Israel itself established and maintains on the Temple Mount – a status quo designed in the first days after the Six Day War by then-Defense Minister Moshe Dayan – Jews were allowed to visit the Mount, but they were banned from praying within its confines. Dayan’s view (later adopted by all Israeli governments) was that Jews praying on the Mount may lead to an interdenominational conflict between Islam and Judaism, and for this reason, the right of Jewish prayer may not be exercised there today.

The prospect that the Trump plan had opened up the Mount to “peaceful worshippers and tourists of all faiths” (i.e., Jews) to pray on the Temple Mount was seemingly at odds with the “Kerry Understandings” from October 2015. These understandings between the United States, Israel, and Jordan were mediated by U.S. Secretary

of State John Kerry during President Obama's administration. Kerry got involved because of the tensions and violent events that took place at the time on the Mount.

As part of the understandings' framework, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged to the Secretary of State that Israel would continue to enforce its longstanding religious worship policy on the Mount, by which Muslims may pray at the location and non-Muslims are only allowed to visit. It was the first time Israel publicly and officially announced that Jews could not pray on the Temple Mount and that this option was reserved only for Muslims. Until then, only the status quo policy dictated by Moshe Dayan – unofficial and unstated – was enforced. It was also the first time that a public announcement had been made – by the United States and Jordan in coordination with Israel – acknowledging that Jews could visit the Temple Mount (but not pray there).<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, in the written wording of the normalization and peace agreements between Israel and the Emirates and Bahrain, the issue of Jewish prayer on the Mount was no longer mentioned, nor was there mention of Muslim tourists visiting there or the Muslim tourism that is expected to arrive.

In the peace treaty with the Emirates presented to the Knesset on October 15, 2020, and in the peace treaty with Bahrain presented to the Knesset on November 10, 2020, neither the Temple Mount nor al-Aqsa were mentioned at all. The only appendix to the agreement with Emirates submitted to the Knesset, which includes sections on various economic matters, does not mention the issue of the Temple Mount at all, including in the "Civil Aviation" and "Tourism" sections. In response to a question from M.K. Bezalel Smotrich of the Yemina Party, Prime Minister Netanyahu said that the agreement had no secret appendices on the issue of the Temple Mount.

Nevertheless, Israeli officials confirmed to this writer that the issue of religious tourism to al-Aqsa and the Temple Mount is an "understanding" that will be put in writing with more details by

government officials in accordance with the guidelines set by the leaders of the United States, the Emirates, and Israel.

The officials refused to reply or did not know whether Israel once again pledged to adhere to the existing “status quo” on the Temple Mount, limiting Jewish presence there only for visits and prohibiting the exercise of their right to pray there. The officials also refused or did not know whether, as part of those “understandings,” there was a reference to the possibility that Jews could exercise their right to prayer in the Mount in the future.

U.S. President Donald Trump’s adviser, Jared Kushner, went further in August 2020, when he said that “the agreement with the Emirates has largely solved the issue of the Temple Mount.”<sup>5</sup> This is an overly optimistic statement. The Mount was and remains a sensitive and explosive place in the relationship between Islam and Judaism and between Arab and Muslim elements. Jordan and Saudi Arabia have a longstanding rivalry over influence there, as does Hamas versus the PA, or the Muslim Brotherhood, against extremist movements such as *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Islamic Liberation Movement).

However, the normalization agreement and the “al-Aqsa tourism” derived from it – assuming it is indeed implemented – represent the potential for moderating the conflict between Jews and Muslims on the Temple Mount. These tourists are a different kind of Muslim visitor to the Mount, coming from within the framework of declared normalization, which, even if it does not formally recognize Israeli sovereignty applied to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount,<sup>6</sup> may present a *de facto* reality. The potential for a de-escalation of the conflict on the Mount has already been reflected in the conciliatory statements made by some of the leaders of Temple Mount movements in relation to new Muslim tourism. These statements differ in nature from those heard from the *Waqf* and its personnel who are considered hostile to the presence and visits of Jews to the Mount.

## Muslim Tourism since the Second Intifada until Now – A Serious Internal Muslim Dispute

In 2000, 100,000 Muslim tourists visited Israel, but the second intifada broke out later that year, which resulted in a steep drop in the number of visitors to Israel, including the number of Muslim tourists. Only in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century did the numbers rebound and even surpass those of 2000. In 2011-2012, the number of Muslim visitors, including those to Israel proper, reached a peak of more than 110,000, but in 2013, there was again a precipitous 43% drop in the number of Muslim visitors to Israel, with a total of only 54,000.<sup>7</sup>

After the second intifada, an average of 2,600 Egyptian tourists arrived in Israel per year, and a similar number arrived from Morocco. Some 16,000 tourist entrances per year were registered from Jordan, and tourist visits were also made from non-Arab Muslim countries. Their average numbers per year were approximately 14,500 tourists from Turkey, 9,200 from Indonesia, 1,300 from Malaysia, 3,000 from Uzbekistan, and 5,000 from Kazakhstan. Since 2008, there has been a moderate increase of Muslim tourists from countries with diplomatic relations with Israel, including India, South Africa, and Mauritania.<sup>8</sup>

In 2015, 26,000 tourists from Turkey arrived in Jerusalem, the highest number of all Muslim countries,<sup>9</sup> and three years later, in 2018, 98,000 Muslim tourists visited Jerusalem. Muslim tourists' three favorite sites are the al-Aqsa Mosque, the Mosque in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, and the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

## The Potential for Muslim Tourism to Israel, Jerusalem, and the Temple Mount

There is a large gap between the view of the Emirati tourist experts and the view of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism regarding the extent of tourism to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount from the

Emirates in the near term. Experts in the Emirates talk about 750,000 tourists a year arriving in Israel, following the establishment of relations between the two countries.<sup>10</sup> According to Doron Paskin, a commentator on the politics of the Middle East and the economy of the countries in the region, “From the moment the process starts, it will take three to four months for the tourism movement to begin realizing its potential.”<sup>11</sup>

In the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, however, estimates are more modest.<sup>12</sup> The ministry’s staff predict incremental tourist numbers. In the first year, 20,000 Emiratis will come, 50,000 in the second year, about 80,000 in the third, and in the fourth year, about 100,000. The Ministry of Tourism considers Emirate tourism as a potential factor for an excellent economic gain, as the United Arab Emirates’ spending on international trips is among the top 20 countries in the world. According to the Ministry of Tourism, this spending totaled \$17.1 billion in 2016. Every tourist from the Emirates spends an average of between \$2,000 and \$20,000 per trip abroad. As of 2019, on the eve of the Corona crisis, the number of residents from the UAE leaving the country for tourist purposes was estimated at 3.4 million tourists a year.<sup>13</sup>

The peak potential of Muslim tourism to Israel, considering the agreements with Bahrain and the Emirates and the opening of Jordanian and Saudi skies to Israeli flights, reaches two million people a year, according to Israeli tourism experts. However, this estimate is based on a long-term projection contingent on the tourists from the Emirates being joined by tourists from other Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia or Morocco. In that case, we will witness a large number of Muslim tourists coming to Israel.

An examination of UAE residents’ tourist habits has already been conducted by the Ministry of Tourism.

Most UAE citizens fly to vacations at least twice a year. The vacations are divided into short stays of approximately three days and longer ones with an average of 14 days. Most short excursions are taken during

Islamic holidays, while long ones occur in the summer season from June to September. For most short holidays such as Eid al-Fitr or Eid al-Adha, they prefer to fly within the Arabian Gulf region, especially to neighboring Oman or the less expensive Bahrain. On the other hand, summer holidays are long and are aimed at escaping from the extreme heat in the country for the following popular destinations: Malaysia, Thailand, Egypt, the U.K., and India.

“Religious Islamic holidays,” the Ministry of Tourism believes, “are of great importance to the characteristics of tourism from the UAE. For example, during Ramadan, many of the citizens fly to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, and it is certainly hoped that many of them will spend part of the fasting period at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Most short vacations are characterized by religious visits, and in this respect, Jerusalem can be a very important destination for such vacations.”<sup>14</sup>

Two other areas for tourism development from the Emirates, beyond the religious direction, which are currently being considered by the Ministry of Tourism are medical and hi-tech tourism.

According to an Israeli Ministry of Tourism analysis, “The Arab Gulf States have been investing huge sums in recent decades to develop medical tourism in their countries. Besides local tourism, these countries are working to collaborate with hospitals around the world. For example, Abu Dhabi established a medical center in Cleveland, intended for Emirati citizens. Despite these countries’ attempt to establish their own tourist medical centers, at least 30 percent in the Gulf are more likely to seek private medical treatments in hospitals, and in this respect, Israel can be an essential destination for medical tourism.”

“The aspiration for economic diversification for fear of over-dependence on the oil and gas market,” reports another analysis, “brings many in the Arab Gulf business community to seek new economic opportunities. As a result, there has been a sharp increase in business tourism coming out of this area. For example, Israel’s

"Where the nations go to worship" is the caption on this 1914 photograph from the Underwood archives.



economic diversity and its role in the global high-tech market, as well as its innovative image, can encourage many of them to visit the country.”<sup>15</sup>

## **Normalization with Morocco and its Impact on the New Muslim Tourism to the Temple Mount**

Since the end of the second intifada, from 2005 to the present, some 30,000 tourists from Morocco have visited the Temple Mount or about 2,000 tourists a year.

The U.S.-brokered normalization agreement between Morocco and Israel, announced on December 10, 2020, combined with

Morocco's traditional involvement in Jerusalem affairs and the Al Aqsa Mosque, could significantly increase that number. It is still early to assess the tourist cross-section's nature and its weight in the new Muslim tourism framework, but it is safe to assume that Morocco will show great interest in al-Aqsa tourism.

Morocco has a special relationship with the al-Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem. In 1969, the Islamic Conference, which later changed its name to the Organization for Islamic Cooperation, was established in Rabat, Morocco, and one of the committees founded was the Jerusalem Committee, headed by the Kings of Morocco, both the current one, Mohammed VI, and his father, Hassan II. Morocco has been interested in the Temple Mount for many years. The



Morocco's Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita visits the Dome of the Rock. (Facebook, Arab 21)



Morocco's Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita visits a cave under the Dome of the Rock's Foundation Stone. (Screengrab, Al Jazeera)

country donated dozens of carpets to the mosques on the Mount and transferred funds via the Jerusalem Committee to restore houses and enclosures in the Old City and the Western Wall area.

In March 2018, Morocco's Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita visited Jerusalem. Today, he is recognized as the central figure in securing the understandings and agreements with Israel.

Morocco is expected to show interest not only in tourism to the Temple Mount but also in influencing what happens there. Its proximity to Saudi Arabia and the countries' coordination may produce a new Muslim axis of power on the Mount, which will compete with Jordan for the future for Muslim hegemony at the shrine. Morocco may even seek to partner in future arrangements concerning the site.<sup>16</sup>

## Who Does al-Aqsa Tourism Serve, Israel or the Palestinians?<sup>17</sup>

The controversy in the Muslim world surrounding Muslim visits to Jerusalem and the holy places "occupied" by Israel is not new and goes back to 1967 when Israel conducted a defensive war to protect Jerusalem and captured it from the Kingdom of Jordan (which held it for 19 years). Over the years, many *fatwas* [religious rulings] have been published in the Muslim world, prohibiting the *ziyarat* [pilgrimage] to Jerusalem because of its "occupied" status and the fear of normalization (in Arabic: *tatbiyah*) with Israel.

Decades after the Six Day War, many Muslims are still adhering to honored clerics in the Sunni world on this issue. The most prominent among them was the head of the World Association of Muslim Clerics, Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who believed that the damage from Muslims visiting Jerusalem outweighed the benefits. Al-Qaradawi ruled that visiting Jerusalem should wait until Jerusalem is liberated by Jihad. He argued that "it is better to wait for the city to regain full Muslim Arab control." In his book *Jerusalem, The Issue of Every Muslim*, al-Qaradawi clarified: "What

is known as “normalization with Israel” must be rejected on any political, economic, or social level....And it is forbidden for a Muslim to travel to Israel, even if he asks to pray at the al-Aqsa Mosque.”

However, the sharpening debate over the Mount led to a wide breach in the wall of compliance to the religious rulings of this strict school, as increased visitations began to be perceived as an act that aided the Palestinians in their struggle against Israel, not the other way around. At a conference held in Doha, Qatar’s capital, in 2012, Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmoud Abbas called on Muslims from around the world to come to Jerusalem to support the Palestinian struggle against the city’s Judaization. His call was supported by Muhammad Ahmad Hussein, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, and by the Palestinian Minister of Endowments, Mahmoud al-Habash. Mahmoud Abbas emphasized in his remarks the “efforts of the Israeli government to Judaize Jerusalem” and the “excavations under al-Aqsa Mosque.”<sup>18</sup>

To illustrate the separation between a visit to al-Aqsa and normalization, the parties used the “prisoner and warden” parable: Jerusalem and al-Aqsa were the “prisoner,” and the Israeli “occupation” was the warden. “A visit to the prisoner,” Mahmoud Abbas stressed in his speech in Doha, “aids the prisoner, and it cannot be implied by any significance of normalization with the warden.”

## Muslim Solidarity with Jerusalem

Many delegations from Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Jordan, and the Gulf States have visited al-Aqsa over the years, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who played a key role in funding and organizing “al-Aqsa tourism,” launched an information campaign aimed at drawing many Muslims to Jerusalem and al-Aqsa.

In Spring 2017, the Turkish president called on Muslims to come to Jerusalem *en masse* to support the Palestinians. “We must visit al-

Aqsa much more,” Erdogan declared. He noted with disappointment that “only 26,000 tourists” from Turkey arrived in Jerusalem in 2015, the highest number of all Muslim countries, but much lower than the hundreds of thousands of Americans, Russians, and French who visited the city and al-Aqsa. “Why don’t hundreds of thousands of Muslims also visit al-Quds [Jerusalem],” Erdogan wondered. “These visits will be the greatest support for our brothers there.”

Leading the advocates for Muslim visits to al-Aqsa in “occupied Jerusalem” then were Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. Dr. Abdullah Kanaan, secretary-general of the Jordanian Royal Committee for Jerusalem Affairs, who supported the visits, explained that the visits “constitute a kind of resistance to the Israeli

Emirati singer Walid al-Jasem arrived at Ben-Gurion Airport on December 3, 2020, at the start of a three-day visit.  
(Twitter)



occupation that wants Jerusalem to be its eternal capital when it is empty of Arab-Muslims and Christians.” From the other side, former Egyptian Mufti Abdel-Halim Mahmoud (who refused to accompany President Sadat on his visit to Jerusalem and al-Aqsa in November 1977) claimed that the visits to Jerusalem “legitimized the occupation and the oppression that seeks to eliminate all Muslim and Christian characteristics as well as Islamic history” and that “the occupation’s strenuous attempts to achieve normalization are heinous and enormously damaging.”

The “Road to Jerusalem” conference that convened in Amman in April 2014 was attended by many clerics and politicians from Jordan, the Palestinian Authority (PA), Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. At the end of three days of discussions, the participants issued a *fatwa*, which was, in fact, a compromise between the opponents and the advocates of the visits, with a clear tendency in favor of the advocates. The *fatwa* allowed a small portion of Muslims to visit al-Aqsa. It limited visits only to Palestinian or Muslim visitors with citizenship in countries outside the Muslim world. It effectively lifted Sheikh al-Qaradawi’s blanket ban, but refrained from allowing visits to Jerusalem for all Muslims, as the PA and Jordan were encouraging at the time.

## The Fatwa Has Spoken

The following are excerpts from the *fatwa*, which is important for understanding the position of the Muslim world even today, as well the internal debate within it on the issue of normalization with Israel and Muslim visits to al-Aqsa:

There is nothing wrong with visiting the blessed al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem by the following groups:

1. Palestinians who are in or out of Palestine, whatever their citizenship.
2. Muslims citizens of countries outside the Muslim world.

The *fatwa*, however, placed restrictions on those allowed to visit al-Aqsa, and said Muslims who visit there must observe the following rules:

- A. This will not bring about normalization with Israel, which could damage the Palestinian issue.
- B. The visit will assist the Palestinians and not the occupier...
- C. The visits will be conducted as much as possible within Palestinian or Jordanian tourism groups...
- D. It is better that the visits occur during the Hajj or Omra (pilgrimage not at the time of the Hajj) as much as possible. It should be conducted collectively and with the aim of influencing. It should realize the critical *Sharia* interest, support the Palestinian economy, in general, and the Palestinian economy in Jerusalem, in particular, as well as support them politically in order to protect al-Aqsa Mosque and the holy sites.<sup>19</sup>

## Changes in the Attitudes in the Muslim World Following the Normalization Agreements

The normalization and peace agreements between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco have re-shuffled the cards in the internal Muslim debate over visiting Jerusalem. The big supporters of Jerusalem as a travel venue presented them as visits to aid the Palestinian struggle, such as the Palestinian Authority and its clerics, as well as Turkey. Hamas has expressed strong opposition, but that is not new. Hamas expresses the same view it had even before the agreements.

The switch from supporting travel to Jerusalem to disapproval stemmed from the realization that the planned visits were part of the normalization process with Israel and therefore could no longer be seen as “aiding the Palestinian struggle.” As of now, the new Muslim tourism to Jerusalem and al-Aqsa will come via Ben-Gurion



The Saudi national soccer team visited the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, October 14, 2019. (Arab News, social media)<sup>20</sup>

Airport, not the Jordan bridges, making it even more difficult for Turkey and the PA to support them.

The first opponent to speak out against new Muslim tourism to al-Aqsa was the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem and Palestine, Sheikh Hussein Muhammad Ahmad, who, until the agreements, supported Muslims' visits from around the world to al-Aqsa. On August 18, 2020, Hussein published a *fatwa* in which he had to explain his previous 2014 ruling that supported Muslim visits to al-Aqsa. In this new publication, the Mufti re-drafted the terms for visits to the Mount, in the age of normalization agreements:

- Understand that going on a journey to the al-Aqsa Mosque under the patronage of the occupation is different from embarking on this journey with a sense of liberty and security.

- If Muslims understand their responsibility and duty to Palestinian land, Jerusalem, and the holy places, then there are no *sharia* grounds to prevent the visit, within the following rules:
  1. Opposition to commemorating the occupation situation of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa;
  2. Refraining from any step that serves the normalization of Muslim relations with the occupation, which has taken captive our land, our people, and our al-Aqsa;
  3. Coordination of the visit will be made with the Palestinian officials charged with visits to the occupied land;
  4. Visiting Palestinian land dictates proving its Arab and Islamic identity and opposition to the occupation.

### The Mufti emphasized:

Prayer at al-Aqsa Mosque is open to those who come via the legal, Palestinian gate or through Jordan's sister government, which has guardianship of the holy places of Islam in Jerusalem, and not via those who normalize relations with Israel and use this matter to cooperate with the nefarious "deal of the century." Normalization with Israel is one of the conditions of this deal, and anything that results from it is forbidden and religiously canceled....No Palestinian should accept or contact those seeking normalization.<sup>21</sup>

The Palestinian resistance to the visits came not only from the spiritual direction. On October 10, 2020, a member of the Revolutionary Council of Fatah, Muwaffaq Matar, used the pages of *Al Hayat al-Jadida*, a Palestinian Authority newspaper, to attack the visit of a UAE delegation to al-Aqsa Mosque three days earlier. He accused them of "betraying the spirit of Islam" and claimed that their fake prayers were like a false ritual to the Zionist idols. Israel, he claimed, had turned members of the delegation into a virus "BEN Z3," a hint aimed at Abu Dhabi's heir-apparent, Mohammed bin Zayed, who promoted normalization with Israel.

The secretary of the Fatah movement in Israel, Shadi al-Mayor, also issued a statement against the visit of the Emirati delegation to the Temple Mount, presenting the occasion as “a new incursion into al-Aqsa Mosque, which is no different from the repeated incursions by the occupation soldiers and settlers, who desecrate the concourses of the al-Aqsa Mosque, under the auspices of the occupation soldiers.”<sup>22</sup>

Not to be outdone, Abbas Zaki, a member of the Fatah’s Central Committee, declared that if Saudi Arabia normalized its relations with Israel, “there will be no more *Kaba* (holy shrine in Mecca), and there will no longer be a Prophet’s Mosque [in al-Medina], and its future will be murky.” The statement was quickly disavowed by PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, among the Muslim clerics who ruled out the *fatwa* of the Palestinian Mufti, former Deputy Sheikh of the revered al-Azhar mosque/university, Abbas Chouman, made it clear that the *fatwa* published by the mufti was not legitimate because it was not based on *sharia* principles. He emphasized that the mufti “does not treat Turkey and Qatar the same despite their relations with Israel.” He even defined the *fatwa* as “selective and illegitimate,” explaining: “Turkey is known to have had ties to Israel since 1949, and it was the first Islamic State to recognize Israel.... Qatar has trade ties with Israel, and we haven’t heard about banning Qataris from prayers in al-Aqsa, and we don’t want to hear it.”

Members of the UAE’s Religious Rulings Council defined the Jerusalem mufti’s *fatwa* as “audacity towards Allah and a violation of the Prophet’s orders.” The UAE’s Religious Rulings Council member, Dr. Amr Habtoor al-Deri, said it was “one of the strangest and most eccentric *fatwas*,” and clarified, “the mosques belong to Allah.” Similar statements were made by Dr. Ahmed al-Haddad, head of the legal ruling directorate at the Department of Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities in Dubai. He claimed that the *fatwa* published by the Jerusalem mufti “altered the course of the rulings towards the slippery slope of politics.” The president of France’s

Imams Conference, Hassan Chalghoumi, also clarified that “al-Aqsa belongs to all Muslims and not just to Palestinians,” declaring, “It is forbidden to prevent a Muslim from entering al-Aqsa Mosque, as it is no one’s personal property.”<sup>24</sup>

## Jewish Attitudes on Muslim Visits to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount

Two of Israel’s chief rabbis have expressed *halachic* opposition and reluctance in the past to Muslim tourism on the Temple Mount. The late Rishon LeZion Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi Doron was asked by a Jewish businessman about 25 years ago following the peace treaty with Jordan whether he was allowed to operate a society to encourage religious Muslim tourism in Israel, knowing that it would focus on the Temple Mount. Rabbi Bakshi Doron published his answer in his book, *Father’s Building*:

Encouragement of this tourism causes severe harm to the commandments of the settlement of Eretz Israel, and perhaps, God-forbid, even cancellation of the commandment of settling the Land. As the Muslims’ adherence to Jerusalem and the site of the Temple increases, their struggle and demands to evict us from the site will intensify. If we encourage tourism of Muslims who adhere to their faith on the Temple Mount, not only do we harm the “awe-inspiring Temple site,”<sup>25</sup> but with more far-reaching foresight, we must fear that by doing so, we single-handedly endanger our existence in our country. Hundreds of millions of Muslim believers may be attracted more to the Temple site and become attached to it, and subsequently, demand the most sacred place for themselves, God forbid, and also the entire country.<sup>26</sup>

(Incidentally, Rabbi Bakshi Doron also opposed *Jewish* visits to the Temple Mount for various *halachic* reasons.)



The President of Israel, Chaim Herzog, welcomed Saudi Sheikh Shuha Ishak Idris to his official residence. On the right, Israeli businessman, Yaakov Nimrodi. (*The Dan Hadani Collection, National Library of Israel*)

The Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, also published similar remarks in the *halachic* journal *Tchumin*, and in his closing remarks, he wrote:

It is clear that non-Jews should not be encouraged to enter the Temple Mount....Surely Ishmaelites [Muslims] should not be encouraged to enter the Temple site, and it is enough for us to regret that the first ones are those who enter by themselves. Why should we add and encourage the entry of others?<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, a few weeks after the peace agreement with the Emirates was issued, Rabbi Chaim Ozer Chait, head of the Migdal HaTorah Yeshiva in Modi'in, published an essay implying support for Muslim tourism to the Mount. Chait devoted a section to the value of peace

in Judaism, suggesting that under certain conditions, “peace can be achieved on the Temple Mount.”<sup>28</sup>

Tom Nisani, head of the Student Movement for the Temple Mount, wrote:

The Emiratis, the Bahrainis, and the rest of the peacemakers recognize the right of the Jews on the Temple Mount. With their help, without the Waqf and the Palestinians, it can be a house of worship for all.<sup>29</sup>

Ofir Dayan, another member of the Student Movement for the Temple Mount, wrote in *Israel Hayom* in the same spirit:

It is time for Arab-Jewish cooperation on the Temple Mount, not between Israel and the Palestinians or the Jordanians, but between Israel and moderate, peace-seeking Muslims, who believe in the right of all religions and all nationalities to pray and visit the Temple Mount as they please. Who knows, perhaps redemption will come to Jerusalem from the Gulf States.<sup>30</sup>

## Putting It to the Test: Can Israel Create the Conditions for the New Tourism to Jerusalem and al-Aqsa

The first visits by Muslim tourists and visitors from the Emirates to al-Aqsa, after the signing of the peace accords, did not bode well. In mid-October 2020, a large economic delegation from the Emirates was brought to Israel by the Netafim Company, and they visited the Temple Mount. The Emirati civilians prayed at the al-Aqsa Mosque, but the visit incurred the wrath of Palestinians at the site who expelled them from the Mount with cries of “garbage, garbage!” A smaller delegation of visitors from the Emirates, who visited the Mount a few days later, was also expelled in the same style and with similar calls.<sup>31</sup> These events came after the burning of Emirati flags on the Temple Mount and in the West Bank two months earlier.<sup>32</sup>

Palestinian Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Shtayyeh addressed these events and clarified: “Those going to the blessed al-Aqsa enter from the main gate and not from the gate of occupation [the Mughrabi Gate – through which non-Muslims enter the Mount]. It is sad that some Arab delegations entered through the Israeli gate, preventing Muslim worshippers from entering the mosque to conduct their prayers there.” [Shtayyeh’s claim has no basis. Muslim worshippers are not prevented from entering the mosque to pray there – N.S.]<sup>33</sup>

The events during the visit of delegations from the Emirates to the Temple Mount were reminiscent of earlier similar events. In 1991, businessman Yaakov Nimrodi founded the company *Ziadeh* to encourage Muslim tourism in Israel. Some of the tours organized by Nimrodi went well. For example, the visit of Saudi Sheikh Shuha Ishak Idris in May 1992 was successful, but there were also some that ended differently.

When a delegation of pilgrims from Libya visited al-Aqsa in May 1993, they were greeted at the scene with shouting, swearing, and shoving. A similar fate recently befell Saudi blogger Mohammed Saud, who was chased from the Mount in July 2019, while Palestinians threw plastic chairs and various objects at him. The man was part of a delegation of six members of the media from Saudi Arabia and Iraq who were guests of the Israeli Foreign Ministry.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, from time to time in the past – with curses and scuffles – more Jordanian and Egyptian visitors, some of them high-ranking, were chased from the Mount. The claim by the visits’ advocates that even the Prophet Muhammad’s “Night Journey” to al-Aqsa took place when the mosque was under Byzantine rule had no impact on them in these cases.

## Israel's Necessary Preparations for the Expected Muslim Tourism to Jerusalem and the Temple Mount

A. At least in the first stage, it will be necessary to allocate large forces and means for observation and intervention that will provide security for the new Muslim tourism, both at the gates at the entrance to the Temple Mount and at the gates at the exit, as well as within the mosques and their courtyards. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu alluded to this issue in an interview given to *Sky News* in Arabic when he said that Israel would “make special arrangements for Muslims coming from the UAE and the Gulf to pray in mosques on the Temple Mount.”<sup>35</sup> Among other things, it will be necessary to open talks with the Muslim Waqf and with its envoys in Jordan in an attempt to reach understandings with them that will enable these visits to take place safely. Israel has enough levers of pressure on Jordanian rule and the Waqf on the Temple Mount to achieve this.

The first step in this direction was already taken at a meeting held in mid-November 2020 between representatives of the Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan, and the PA. The meeting concluded that tourists from the Emirates and Bahrain who visit the Temple Mount would enter through the “Jordanian-Palestinian” gates, meaning through the seven gates used by Muslims, and not through the one gate used by Jews and tourists (the Mughrabi Gate).<sup>36</sup>

It is inevitable that against the backdrop of the attempt to calm the furies on the Mount, we will witness financial involvement in the form of generous donations by the Emirates for various Muslim monuments on the Temple Mount. These, too, will probably improve the atmosphere regarding tourist visits from the Emirates. For example, in 2004, the Emirates donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to renew and preserve the ceramic tiles decorating the Dome of the Rock.<sup>37</sup>

- B. It will be necessary to deal differently with the extremist elements on the Mount and, if necessary, even issue restraining orders against them to keep them from the Mount on the grounds of “danger to public safety.” First, for limited periods and, if necessary, in the face of ongoing provocations or violent events, issue such orders even for more extended periods. Such orders are frequently issued on the Temple Mount, both against Jews from the Temple Mount movements and against radical Muslim clerics, such as Sheikh Akram Tsabari, who often stirs up the atmosphere on the Mount.<sup>38</sup>
- C. Consider keeping the extremists from the radical *Hizb ut-Tahrir* (Islamic Liberation Party) movement from the site. They openly strive to establish a global Muslim Caliphate centered in Jerusalem on the ruins of the State of Israel. They frequently express their desire to harm and sometimes even to kill Jews, Americans, and Europeans. Only recently, one of their spokesmen on the Mount, Sheikh Issam Amira, declared that the beheading of the French teacher who presented his students with a cartoon of Muhammad brought honor to Muslims.<sup>39</sup>
- D. Amira’s remarks got him banished from the Temple Mount for six months, but another spokesman for the movement, Ali Abu Ahmed, spoke a few days later at al-Aqsa Mosque, saying that the answer to French President Macron, who “supported the publication of cartoons offending the Prophet Muhammad,” was the re-establishment of the Islamic caliphate and the “demolition of Paris to the ground by Muslim armies.”<sup>40</sup> It may therefore be necessary to keep *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, its spokesmen, and activists away from the Temple Mount, as was done several years ago with members of the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel headed by Raed Salah, when they made repeated provocations on the Temple Mount, and later, even resorted to terrorism with an attack on the Temple Mount in July 2017.

- E. Another sensitive issue is adapting the security check-in stations at Ben-Gurion Airport for visitors from Arab countries. News archives have been filled over the years with reports and claims – some more justified and some less justified – about alleged “degrading security checks” required by Arabs who entered or left Israel through its international airport. The security necessity of such inspections is understandable, but they must be carried out modestly, not before the eyes of the passenger public, and with professionalism, not to shame the guest being examined, and to maintain procedures that will honor the passenger.

It is also advisable that the security personnel at Ben-Gurion Airport speak Arabic and are familiar with the customs of Muslim countries and guests. A special team of testers must be trained for this purpose. Just one or two incidents at Ben-Gurion Airport will echo all the way to the Gulf States, give Israel a bad name, deter many Muslim tourists from coming to Israel, and give a propaganda “weapon” to opponents of normalization.

Another step to take as part of the preparations for a wave of Muslim tourism is to train suitable Arabic-speaking guides to accompany the groups coming from the Gulf. It is especially crucial to prevent the indoctrination of the Palestinian narrative by Palestinian guides who are hostile to Israel and present Jerusalem and other sites in Israel as places with only Muslim and Palestinian history.<sup>41</sup> Israeli guides must present the full, accurate, and historical picture to new Muslim tourists, without eliminating periods in Jerusalem’s history or misinforming, as Palestinian guides periodically do. They should refrain from imitating the Palestinians’ indoctrinating narrative. This kind of fair conduct will buy Israel much more credibility.

- F. Past experience shows that Muslim tourists also visit alone on the Temple Mount, as well as Bethlehem, Hebron, and Nabi Musa, and many Muslim visitors have entered Israel through the Allenby Crossing and they have visited, among other places,

sites within the Palestinian Authority. Against the backdrop of tensions between the Palestinians and the PA and the UAE, It must be assumed that – at least in this first stage – visitors from the Emirates and the Gulf will be less likely to visit within the PA, preferring sites within Israel. Tourism from the Gulf is expected to enter Israel mainly through Ben-Gurion Airport.

Proper preparations can provide a range of sites for them to see in Israel: Acre and its Al Jazar Mosque in the north of the city, as well as the local market; Ramla and its “Grand Mosque;” Abu Ghosh, where the second largest (after al-Aqsa) four-minaret mosque in Israel was established a few years ago; the Grand Mosque in Beersheba, and Mount *Karni Hittin* [Horns of Hittin] near Mount Arbel, where the Crusaders were destroyed by Saladin’s army. This battle symbolizes the end of the Crusader kingdom in the Land of Israel. Jewish sites such as Masada, or the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial, or the waterscapes in the north – the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, and the Golan streams – should, of course, be considered.

Naturally, tourists from the Gulf are also expected to visit eastern Jerusalem. Against the backdrop of the acute economic crisis and the plunge in tourism due to the coronavirus, they are expected to be received there with curiosity and even a hearty welcome. A hint of this approach can be found in the comments of Sami Abu Daya, a Palestinian businessman from eastern Jerusalem, who owns four hotels and a tourist agency: “Forget politics. We need to survive.”<sup>42</sup>

- G. Another aspect is the food-catering sector, which must be prepared to make “*halal*” food available to tourists from the UAE according to the rules of Islam. Muslim law defines its own rules for *hallal* slaughter and prohibits the eating of pork and drinking of alcohol.

H. Israel must also pay attention to the inventory of hotel rooms and accommodations in Jerusalem, and especially eastern Jerusalem. According to an updated report by the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Studies,

Jerusalem operates approximately 185 lodging establishments, including 110 hotels, 19 condo hotels, 25 hostels, and 31 Christian hospices. In total, there are approximately 13,600 rooms in these lodging establishments, of which about 11,400 are hotel rooms. In addition, some 3,500 apartments and short-term rental rooms for tourist purposes are available for rent in Jerusalem, adding more than 7,000 guest rooms to the city's tally. In total, the lodging status in Jerusalem is nearly 20,700 rooms.<sup>43</sup>

The share of Muslim tourists visiting Jerusalem so far has been low, only 2 percent of all visitors, compared to 63 percent Christians.<sup>44</sup> According to an appendix to the book *Urban Tourism in Jerusalem*, issued by the Jerusalem Institute for Policy Studies in 2015, at the time, there were only 2,854 hotel rooms in eastern Jerusalem, about a quarter of all hotel rooms in the city. This ratio has not changed until today. Since 1967, few new hotels have been built in eastern Jerusalem. Given that new Muslim tourism will rely, among other things, on hotel stays in the west of the city, there will also be an increase in demand for accommodation in the eastern part of the city. Attention and resources should be paid to increasing the number of hotel rooms in the east of the city for this tourism.

In this context, it should be mentioned that nearby Bethlehem is competition for Jerusalem in the fields of tourism and hotels.

## Notes

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