

**Diagnosis: Historical Amnesia**  
**Is the Dome of the Rock a Mosque?<sup>1</sup>**

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The Dome of the Rock is the iconic symbol of Jerusalem, depicted by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim artists in their representations of the city over the centuries. Yet its meaning nearly has been lost as the result of politically expedient historical amnesia. This article seeks to help Muslims, Christians, and Jews to remember what the Dome of the Rock traditionally meant to Muslims.

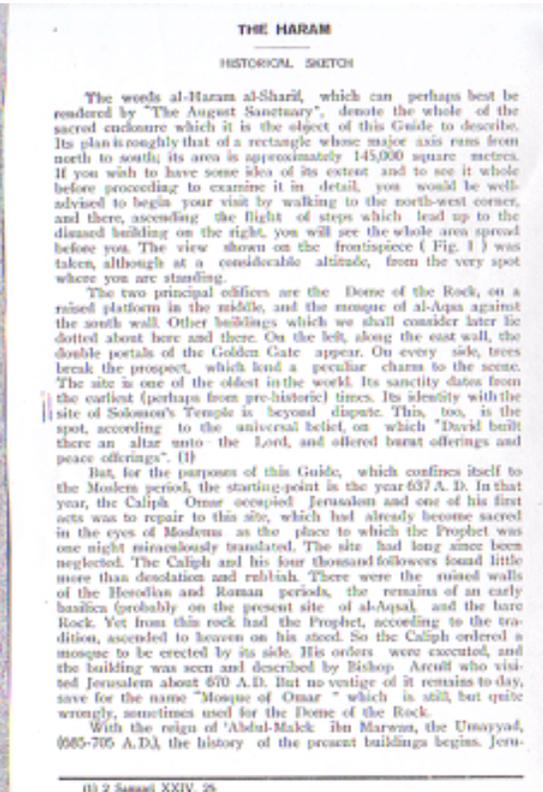
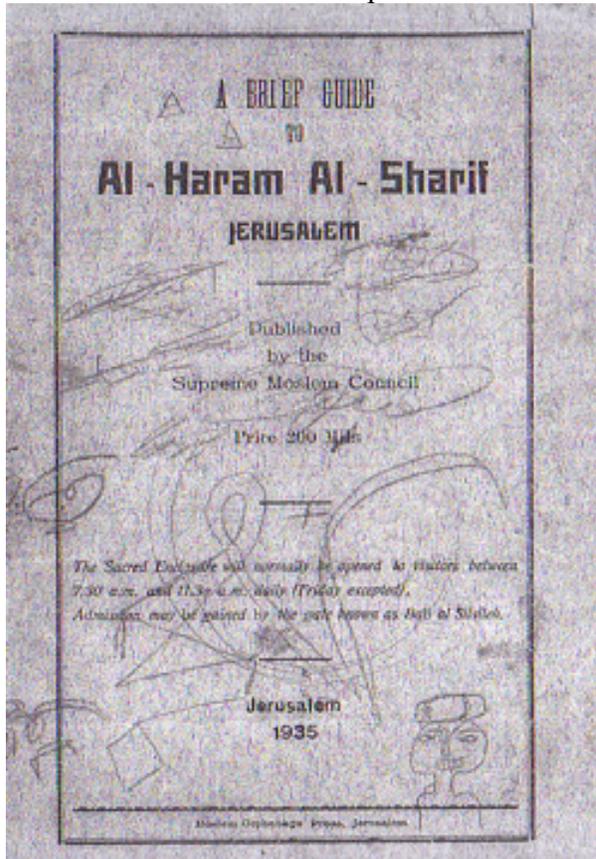
**A Historical Malady**

Media pundits frequently blast Muslim leaders for not condemning terror. Unfortunately, these so-called experts don't do their research, as some traditional Sunni clerics (*ulama*) post their opinions online, despite the grave danger that they themselves

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<sup>1</sup>This article was first published in *Sacred History Magazine*, January 2006. This is a revision of the original.

may become the targets of radical jihadists. Abdul-Hadi Palazzi, formerly Secretary-General of the Italian Muslim Association and Director of the Institute of the Italian Islamic Community, famously called for “a revitalization of traditional Sunni Islam”<sup>i</sup> and criticized the “historical amnesia” of Salafism Palazzi, writing about the decline of traditional Islamic teachings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, took Ikramah Sabri, the *mufti* of Jerusalem to task about Jerusalem from 1994-2006, for claiming that “There is no evidence that Solomon’s Temple was in Jerusalem; probably it was in Bethlehem or in some other place.”<sup>ii</sup>



According to Palazzi, this statement, made by the chief Muslim official in the Palestinian Authority, is representative of those who repudiate “... the Jewish heritage [of Islam] as a whole, with the clear attempt even to remove it from historical memory.” Palazzi asserts that this statement points to the sad fact that Muslims are so ignorant of their own history that they are “really inclined to take these words for granted, notwithstanding the fact that they contradict both historical evidence and Islamic sources.”

This ignorance among Muslims about the meaning of Jerusalem and the Dome of the Rock is the result of a century of political change in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Traditional Sunni authorities lost their legal preeminence as the result of reforms in the nineteenth century reorganization (*Tanzimat*) of the Ottoman political system. These reforms brought the Sunni legal authorities under the direct control of the Sultan, ending their independence as a check and balance against his power. At the time, these reforms aimed at modernizing the legal bureaucracy. One of the consequences since then has been Arab historical amnesia, the result of the rejection of the Ottoman Empire as a legitimate form of Islamic government by Islamist

fundamentalists. The fundamentalists castigate traditional Sunni scholars, like Palazzi, “who are interested in developing the spiritual, ethic and gnostic dimension of the Islamic faith,” accusing them of being “deviated *sufis*.”

By the same token, most Christians also do not understand the political history of Jerusalem. The establishment of the Constantinian Empire resulted in the destruction of the indigenous Jewish-Christian culture in Palestine. The supersessionist Byzantines sought to erase all memory of the Jewish history of Palestine by asserting their control over the sacred architecture of the Holy Land. And Jews forget that the Muslim conquest of Syria twice allowed for the rebirth of the Jewish community in Jerusalem.

The dynamism of Islamic history is best understood by focusing on the Dome of the Rock. Muslims have interpreted the sanctity of the *Haram al-Sharif*, the “Noble Sanctuary,” known also to Muslims as “Al-Aqsa,” the “Farthest Mosque,” in a variety of ways.<sup>iii</sup> Muslims, like the Byzantines before them, appropriated Jerusalem to develop, legitimize, interpret, and contest ideas about political legitimacy in the Holy Land.

Before we can turn to what the Dome of the Rock means today, however, we must take a look at the problem of political legitimacy and religious authority in modern Arab history.

### **The Case of Historical Amnesia in Modern Arab History: Diagnosis**

The decline and fall of the Ottoman Empire left not only a political void, but an intellectual void in the Middle East. In the late nineteenth century, European and Arab intellectuals came to think the Ottomans barbarous, their treatment of religious minorities criminal, and their economic resources ripe for the picking. Why?

In the Balkans, inspired by the Napoleonic Wars, the Christian Serbs and the Greeks fought for their independence from their Muslim masters. The Ottomans found themselves on the defense, losing territory and facing greater and greater challenges from the ascendant Russian Empire.

From these battles emerged Muhammad Ali, who not only defeated Napoleon in Egypt, but also the Wahhabis in Arabia and the Greeks in the Peloponnesus for his master, the sultan of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans deployed Muhammad Ali to suppress the Wahhabis, whom he successfully defeated in 1813. Muhammad Ali mutinied against the Ottomans after their disastrous defeat in the Battle of Navarino on October 20, 1827. Resolved to build a modern state, Muhammad Ali and his son Ibrahim Pasha invaded and occupied the entire Levant (Palestine, Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan), creating a neo-Sunni regime that could compete militarily and economically with Europe. Ultimately, a European coalition beat him back to Egypt at the behest of the Ottomans. Nevertheless, Muhammad Ali, more than any other Muslim leader, did the most to destroy the preeminence of Sunni Islam, paving the way to its complete marginalization in the Arab world of the twentieth century.<sup>iv</sup> He destroyed the autonomy of the Sunni religious authorities, bureaucratizing them and extending his personal control over them.

He is considered the first modern leader of the Arab world for several reasons: he militarized the Egyptian state, monopolizing all of its production and markets for his personal profit; he created a modern army and navy; he brought all agricultural land into his personal control, wiping out the previous religious and private landholders; he shifted the administration of religious institutions and endowments under his own control, and massacred all of his political rivals. His was the first totalitarian state in the Middle East, mobilized for war in an age of colonialism and imperialism.

The Ottoman Empire, until the late nineteenth century, was the most highly articulated expression of Sunni Islam in world history. Adherents to the Hanafi legal school, the Ottomans established their government on the foundation of the rule of law, with even the Sultan required to rule with justice. In 1839, the Ottomans began to reform their government and sought to transform its Christian and Jewish subjects into Ottoman citizens. As progress was being made at the parliamentary level toward the creation of Ottoman citizenship, the sultan became more and more absolute, turning to Islam for his personal legitimacy. No longer was he controlled by religious constraints. Islamic officials had been bureaucratized and no longer could check his autocratic powers, Sultan Abdul Hamid II aborted the nascent Ottoman constitutional movement in 1878. Under this cruel tyrant, the situation of Muslims and Jews in the Empire deteriorated, and Christians in Anatolia, the Balkans, and Armenia were massacred as enemies of the state.

When the Ottoman Empire dissolved during the First World War, the political organization of the Middle East rapidly underwent massive change. New ideas about national self-determination, secularization, progress, and modernization mixed with disgust at the Ottomans, who were characterized by their Islamic and nationalist critics as corrupt, venal, and un-Islamic.

The twentieth century assault against the memory of the Ottoman Empire in the Arab provinces by the fundamentalist, ahistorical Salafiyah movement on the one hand, and the secularized socialism of the Baath party on the other, has robbed the Arabs of their connection with the Sunni legal tradition of the classical Ottoman Empire and its reformers. Neither the Salafists nor the Secularists consider the historical development of Islamic political history legitimate. Instead, the Salafists aim at returning to the mystified Golden Age of the *Rashidun*—the four “Rightly Guided Caliphs” whom they consider their ancestors—the *Salaf*. They declare all other forms of Islamic government as heretical—*kafirs*—and are also known as “*Takfiris*”—those who declare others “infidels.”

In the aftermath of the First World War, Arabs and Turks, for entirely different reasons, repudiated the Ottoman Islamic legacy. Embracing secular, nationalist ideologies, the Arabs sought to erase the memory of oppressive Turkish rule in the Middle East. Great Britain sided with these critics of the Ottoman Empire, actively supporting the idea of Arab nationalism. The British nurtured monarchies ruled by scions of two rival clans—the Saudis and the Hashemites. They supported the claims of the former ruler of Mecca and Medina, the Hashemite clan at the same time that they supported their enemies, the Wahhabi Saudis. Attracted by what they perceived as the austerity and purity of the Wahhabi sect, the British established the Saudis as the rulers of the Hijaz—the Muslim heartland with its two holy cities, Mecca and Medina. They moved the Hashemites out of Arabia, appointing them the monarchs of Syria, Iraq, and Transjordan, which at the time included Jerusalem.

Sunni Arab opponents of British imperialism responded to these developments by developing a new political movement. Taking root in the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, the Salafiyah movement, which had first arisen in eighteenth century Arabia, emerged following the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 as the most enduring anti-colonial movement in the Middle East in the twentieth century.

The Salafi movement is based upon the thought of Ahmad Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), a Sunni who lived in the aftermath of the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258. Ibn Taymiyyah, a Hanbali judge who fled to Damascus, was explicitly anti-Shi'ite, anti-Sufi, and anti-Christian. His polemics antedate the Crusades, polemics calling for the restoration of Islamic rule as it was practiced in Mecca in the days of the Prophet and the first four Caliphs, the Rashidun—"the Rightly Guided Ones," Abu Bakr, Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali. Only by recreating the Muslim community (*umma*) of Medina and Mecca, thought Ibn Taymiyyah, could the deteriorating condition of the Muslim polity be rectified. His modern heirs include not only the Wahhabis, and the Muslim Brotherhood, but also Hassan al-Turabi, the tutor of Osama bin Laden, and thus also al-Qaida, Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and all of the *takfiri* groups which adhere to this ahistorical vision of Muslim utopia and consider all of the existing Arab states illegitimate.

Socialist Arab nationalist parties, rooted in the aftermath of the French Revolution, developed alongside the Pan-Islamic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century under the pressures of European imperialism and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. In the 1890s and throughout the First World War era, Turkish nationalists forced non-Turks out of the territories that would become modern Turkey. Christians, who sought a shared identity with Muslims, found common ground with the Arabs, who had also been left behind by the historic collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Indigenous elites had begun to adopt European education, military organization, commerce, industry, and political ideas. When the Ottoman Empire disintegrated at the beginning of the twentieth century, Sunni Islam had already been decimated. Over the following century, Arab regimes struggled to legitimize their rule by adopting nationalist and secular ideologies ranging from revolutionary socialism to totalitarianism, finding support from Germany and the Soviet Union. Ultimately, these ideologies failed to win the battle against Zionism in the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, during the twentieth century, the Wahhabi doctrine remained at the heart of Saudi Arabian identity. Although the Saudis recognize the four traditional schools of Islamic law (Hanbali, Shaafi, Maliki, and Hanafi), they marginalized all but the Hanbali school. They repressed the Shi'ites of the Kingdom, in line with Ibn Taymiyyah's condemnation of Shi'ism as heresy. Benefiting economically from their vast oil resources, they funded *madrasas*, Islamic schools, throughout the Muslim world, teaching the doctrines of the Salafi movement to young Muslims everywhere. They supported the Muslim Brotherhood, which spearheaded Muslim opposition to Zionism in the 1930s. They have influenced the teaching about Islam even at the university level in the United States and Europe, marginalizing all other forms of Islam worldwide.

The Saudis bulldozed the Ottoman architectural legacy in the Balkans and Arabia, erasing the Islamic history of those regions, and with it the memories of Sunni orthodoxy under Ottoman rule. This foreshadowed the destruction of pre-Islamic sites, like the tombs of Jonah and Seth in Syria and Iraq by the neo-Sunni al-Nusra Front and ISIS in July. For years, the Saudis have been revising Islamic history, calling all of the dynasties that have ruled Islamic lands over the centuries illegitimate. Only in very recent times—since 9/11 have the Saudis recognized the dangers the Salafi movement represents to themselves.

Like other moderate Muslims, Palazzi sought the redemption of Sunni theological orthodoxy. He condemned the Salafi and Arab nationalist movements as twisted ideologies. He lamented that Mecca and Medina, whence spread Islam, no longer serve as centers for the transmission of the Sunni Islamic sciences. Rather, he blamed Saudi Arabia for marginalizing Sunni Islam by emphasizing what he referred to as “a primitive and literalist cult” propagated “through violence and coercion.” The Saudis established a “world center of Wahhabi propaganda in Mecca...the final result of a project whose goal was replacing orthodox Islam” with the heretical “Salafi school.” “From the second half of the nineteenth century CE, Salafis identified the opponent to be silenced with the University of al-Azhar al-Sharif in Egypt and with other traditional center[s] of ... Sunni teaching, always alert ...[to] new theories and individual theological interpretations.”

Palazzi singled out the Muslim Brotherhood as the “main instrument for the “Wahhabisation of the Arab milieu.” He considered its founder, Hassan al-Banna, “from a religious point of view...a ‘reformer’... (but [one] no[t] so advanced in Islamic sciences), ...from a political point of view he...was radically anti-Ottoman. Members of the Brotherhood, the basic militants of Islamism “are – from a religious point of view– laypersons who generally [lack training in] the basic... Islamic sciences, but [who are still] appointed as “imams” of important mosques, especially in democratic countries, [where] there is no “Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs” to check their orientation and where imams having a regular *ijazah shar’i* (*sic*) [diploma in Islamic law] are rare exception[s].

He explains,

From a theological point of view, [Salafi] beliefs were refuted by Sunni scholars of the Ottoman period but, after World War II, King Faysal of Saudi Arabia was in need of allies against secular Nasserianism, and the Egyptian leader of the Brotherhood, Sayyed Qutb, received ... worldwide financial support. From that time on, the vast majority of the Muslim Brotherhood adopted the Wahhabi belief.

Thus, Saudi Arabian clerics have propagated Ibn Taymiyyah’s teachings throughout the Islamic world. The Saudis have bulldozed architecture monuments from the later Islamic dynasties because they judge them to be un-Islamic.<sup>v</sup> Sunni Islam, particularly in its Ottoman expression, rejected the exclusivist teachings of Ibn Taymiyyah.

There was room in Ottoman political philosophy for peaceful, diplomatic relations with non-Muslim powers, and for non-Muslims to have legal rights protected by the precepts developed by the three other great schools of Islamic law: the Maliki, Shaafi, and Hanafi schools because they were interpreted by Sunni thinkers, like the famed jurist Abu Yusuf (d. circa 866-873), the great theologian and mystic al-Ghazzali (1005-1111), and the renowned philosopher of history Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), who shaped the interpretation of Ottoman Islam.<sup>vi</sup> Like al-Ghazzali, Palazzi called for the revivification of the Islamic sciences in order to halt the proliferation of the *takfiri* groups in the Arab world bent on the destruction of non-Islamic history.

### **Antidote: A Dose of History**

So, what is the Dome of the Rock? Why is Jerusalem holy to Muslims? What is the conflict over the holy place about? Today, opposing claims to the right to control the Dome of the Rock threaten to perpetuate conflict in the Levant for years to come. For many Christians, its destruction will be the undeniable, apocalyptic, eschatological sign of the end of this age. No other single building in the world is as powerful a symbol as the Dome of the Rock. Why is this so?

The beginnings of Islamic Jerusalem lie in the ruins of the Second Temple. After the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus in 70 A.D., the Emperor Hadrian (76-138 CE), built the new Roman city of Aelia Capitolina centered upon a temple to Jupiter, Juno and Minerva on ruins of Temple constructed sometime after 129. Hadrian forbade Jews to live inside the walls of the city by imperial decree, a restriction that lasted throughout the Byzantine period. During that time, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher replaced the Temple Mount as the most sanctified site in Jerusalem. According to Byzantine tradition, Helena, mother of Constantine, discovered Christ's burial place and dedicated church in 335, at the former site of Hadrian's temple to Aphrodite.

There was one attempt to rebuild the Temple, during the reign of Julian the Apostate in 363. Julian, opposed to Christianity, invited the Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. They returned to the city and began to undertake the reconstruction. Workmen gathered building materials, but as soon as construction began, frighteningly strong winds began to buffet the crews, tremblors shook the ground, and balls of lightning flashed all around the mount. Terrified, the workmen scattered, and the project was completely abandoned.

Two great powers had dominated the Middle East in the fourth through the first part of the seventh century. The Sassanians in Persia threatened the Greek Orthodox Byzantine Empire. Between them stretched the Fertile Crescent. 570, the Year of the Elephant, so-called after an important battle, is the traditional year of Muhammad's birth. Islam was thus born in a power struggle between Byzantium and the Sassanian Empire. The Sassanians stole the "true Cross" from Jerusalem in 614 which the Byzantines regained only in 629.

Arab tribes allied with one or the other of the two, and Jews, who had been favored in Sassanian Persia, allied with the Persians against the Byzantines who reviled them as rejected by God. Meanwhile, local Christians resented Byzantine control and taxes. Jews in Arabia viewed Islam as means to overthrow the Byzantines, and apocalyptic expectations relating to Islam led Jews to convert to Islam or to support the Muslim conquest of Holy Land. When the Muslim armies moved west towards Byzantium, Jews rode with them. The Persian Empire collapsed under the Muslim assault, but the Byzantine Empire stood. When the Muslims arrived in Jerusalem, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was the finest monument in the city. The Temple Mount lay buried in garbage.

### The Dome of the Rock and the Conquest of Jerusalem

The Muslim relationship to the Rock is based upon the Quranic chapter entitled "*Isra*, The Night Journey, Children of Israel," Chapter 17: 17.

Glory to God (Allah) Who did take His servant for a journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque whose precincts We did bless, in order that We might show him some of Our signs: for He is the One Who Heareth and Seeth.<sup>vii</sup>

Who is this Allah, whom the Muslims regard as their God? As documented by Irfan Shahid, Georgetown University Professor Emeritus of Arabic Language, Christian Arabs in the Byzantine Period used the word “Allah” to translate the word “God” in inscriptions and texts.<sup>viii</sup> It nearly goes without saying that Muslims, Jews, and Christians do not agree about the nature and character of God. The differences among the People of the Book are not about who He is, but rather about how He has acted in history. The People of the Book agree that God is the creator of the universe, the sovereign ruler of the universe. While Muslims and Jews see God as completely transcendent, totally unlike man, Christians understand Him as personally involved in history, so involved that He condescended to become a man to better communicate His love for His creatures. The following verses, translated by Said Nusseibeh, contain both Quranic material and pious phrases, prayers, and comments which rebuke heretical Christian teachings circulating in the region during the seventh century.<sup>ix</sup> We must remember that in those days, most biblical teachings were delivered orally, people did not have a handy pocket bible to check Scripture. The mosaic epigraphy inside the Dome of the Rock attests to these differing interpretations of God. These verses also repudiate ideas about Jesus that imply a carnal understanding of his birth.

In the name of God.  
The Beneficent, the Merciful...  
No god exists but God alone,  
Indivisible without peer.  
Say, God is One,  
God is central—  
Birthing no child, nor birthed in turn—  
Nothing and no one is comparable.  
Praise be to God who never fathered a child.  
No peer exists in all of creation,  
Nor has God need of counsel.  
In every way elevate and magnify God!

The Lord giveth life,  
giveth death—  
the power of all things made possible.

When God ordains a matter  
God merely says to it, “BE,”  
and it is.

God is indeed my Lord as well as your Lord.  
So serve and worship your Lord:  
this is the straight path of righteousness.

Verily God witnessed: there is no God but God!  
The angels and those endowed with knowledge of fairness  
declare: No god exists but God alone,  
all-cherished, all-wise!

Lord of two worlds—  
All praise goes to God.

The religion before God is Surrender:  
the people who were given the Books  
did not argue about this until after receiving knowledge  
and they became envious of one another.

The verses regarding Jesus are pointed:

So believe in God and all the messengers,  
and stop talking about a Trinity.  
Cease in your own best interests!  
Verily God is the God of unity.  
Lord Almighty! that God would beget a child?  
either in the Heavens or on the Earth?

God alone is the best protector.  
O People of the Book!  
Don't be excessive in the name of your faith!  
Do not say things about God but the truth!

The Messiah Jesus, son of Mary, is indeed a messenger of God:  
The Almighty extended a word to Mary,  
and a spirit too.

Neither Christ nor the angels in heaven  
scorn servitude and worship of God.  
Whosoever looks upon worship,  
considering it something beneath him...  
they will be swept unto God in the end.

O God, bless your messenger  
and servant, Jesus son of Mary.  
Peace be upon him  
the day he was born  
the day he dies,  
and the day he is raised again.

Say only the truth about Jesus over whom you dispute:  
he is the son of Mary!

It is not fitting that God should beget or father a child.  
Glory be to God!

Muhammad's centrality in the Islamic faith is attested, too, putting him in the continuous line of prophets from Adam on...

Whoever denies the signs of God...  
God is swift in judgment.  
Muhammad is a messenger of God,  
The Lord God bless him,  
And God's angels and all the messengers  
bless and invoke peace upon him,

by the grace of God.

Angels and God, all praise the Prophet.  
So you who consider yourself a believer,  
go ahead, honor and pray for him too.

Muhammad is a messenger of God.  
May the Lord God bless him  
and, come the Day of Resurrection,  
accept his intercession  
on behalf of his own community.

Muhammad is a servant and messenger too!  
Angels and God, all praise the Prophet.  
So you who consider yourself a believer,  
go ahead, honor and pray for him too.  
God has prayed for the Prophet Muhammad,  
so peace and God's blessings be upon him,  
by the grace of God.

Jerusalem was the first direction of prayer designated by the Prophet. Jerusalem's significance to Islam was cemented by *al-Isra*, the Night Journey of Muhammad from Mecca to Jerusalem and *al-Miraj*, the Ascension of the Prophet Muhammad to heaven, where he met with Moses and other Jewish prophets. Muhammad, rode on the back of al-Buraq—the winged creature which transported him to the Farthest Mosque—from where he was sleeping next to the Kaaba in Mecca.<sup>x</sup> It was during his ascension that Moses and Muhammad agreed that Muslims should pray five times a day. Islamic sources agree on the point that this ascension started from the Rock, mostly identified with the Stone of Foundation (*Evn Shetiyah*, in Hebrew) dealt with in Jewish sources. Sufis claim that this Rock is a living being. This is proved by the fact that, after *al-Isra* and before *al-Miraj*, the Prophet Muhammad...greeted it by saying, "Peace be upon you, o Rock of Allah."

According to al-Tabari, the tenth century Abbasid chronicler,

On the authority of Raja ibn Hiwan, on the authority of an eyewitness: When Umar came from al-Jabiya to Aelia...he said, "Bring me Kaab!"<sup>xi</sup> And he was brought to him, and Umar asked him, "Where do you think we should put the place of prayer?"

"By the rock," answered Kaab.

"By God, Kaab, said Umar, "you are following after Judaism. I saw you take off your sandals."

"I wanted to feel the touch of it with my bare feet," said Kaab.

"I saw you," said Umar. "But no. We shall make the forepart a qibla [direction of prayer], as the Prophet of God, may God bless and save him, made the forepart of our mosques their qibla. Go along! We were not commanded concerning the rock, but we were commanded concerning the Kaaba!"

So Umar made the forepart the qibla. Then Umar went up from the place where he had prayed to the heap of garbage in which the Romans had hidden the temple in the time of the children of Israel. And when this place came into their hands, they uncovered part of it and left the remainder.

Umar said, "O people, do as I do." And he knelt by the heap and knelt on a fold of his cloak.<sup>xii</sup>

Palazzi asserted the traditional Muslim view, that Umar's "first desire in entering Aelia (Jerusalem) was to find the place of *al-Miraj*, whose features he had learned directly from Prophet Muhammad's telling, and to build a mosque there..."

And what of this rock? The Muslims considered the rock (*al-Sakhra*)—the site of the Jewish Temple, which Umar had learned "directly from the Prophet Muhammad"—was on Mount Moriah, which towered over the city.

Indeed, in 1935 even the Supreme Moslem Council of Palestine headed at the time by the mufti Al-Hajj Amin Al-Husayni, published a pamphlet which stated that the site of the Dome of the Rock

... is one of the oldest in the world. Its sanctity dates from the earliest (perhaps from pre-historic) times. Its identity with the site of Solomon's Temple is beyond dispute. This, too, is the spot, according to the universal belief, on which "David built there an altar unto the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings."<sup>xiii</sup>

Accordingly, Umar ordered the mosque to be built on the southern side, the result being that while praying in Masjid al-Aqsa, Muslims face toward Mecca with their backs toward the Rock. Umar and Kaab's points of view regarding the significance of the Rock reflect two attitudes, each of which emphasizes – respectively – "hiatus or continuity" between Islam and the message of the Prophets before Muhammad. "In their respective collocation, both of them are rooted in reality, and have more or less influenced the development of Islamic canonical expertise," suggests Palazzi. The one tradition emphasizes Islam's continuity with the revelation of the Jewish prophets, while the other tradition emphasizes Islam's unique claim to the Rock.

Thus, the Dome of the Rock (*Qubbat al-Sakhra*) was built in 691 by the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik for two reasons. The first is that Umar, according to Islamic

tradition, had identified the rock as the site of Solomon's Temple and also as the place whence Muhammad had ascended into heaven during the Night Journey. The second was polemical. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher, known in Arabic as *Kanizat al-Qiyama*, the Church of the Resurrection, was juxtaposed with the ruined site of the Temple, covered in "refuse", hence *Al-Qumama*. The Muslims in turn called the church "*Al-Qumama*" to denigrate the former rulers of the city who had so denigrated the Judaic origins of the Christian faith. By restoring the sanctity of the traditional site of Solomon's Temple, the Umayyad dynasty protected the Rock from further abuse.

Umar (Omar) al-Khattab, the Third Caliph, went to Jerusalem in 638 to accept the surrender of Sophronius, the Byzantine Bishop. Historian Steve Runciman recounts the conquest of Jerusalem:

On a February day in the year A.D. 638 the Caliph Omar entered Jerusalem, riding upon a white camel. He was dressed in worn, filthy robes, and the army that followed him was rough and unkempt; but its discipline was perfect. At his side was the Patriarch Sophronius, as chief magistrate of the surrendered city. Omar rode straight to the site of the Temple of Solomon, whence his friend Mahomet had ascended into heaven. Watching him stand there, the Patriarch remembered the words of Christ and murmured through his tears: "Behold the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet."

Umar refused Sophronius' condition for surrender, which involved continuing the prohibition for Jews to reside in Jerusalem. As a result of his encouragement, the Jews of Tiberias returned to live in the Holy City.

Thus it was that the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik hired Greek Orthodox masons and artisans to construct the monument as a *mashhad*, or "place of witness"—a "*martyrium*"—a commemorative building in the shape of an octagon. This was the Byzantine architectural symbol for marking an important place where an event in Jesus' life had transpired. Only one structure of this type is still visible, in the Galilean village of Capernaum. There, the octagonal foundation of a Byzantium *martyrium* marks the location of the house of Peter's mother, with whom Jesus stayed, and whom He healed. The house itself was preserved inside a *domus ecclesias*, or house church, where Jewish-Christians worshipped until the time of the Council of Nicea, when the Byzantines took over the site, and built the octagonal church of The Prince of the Apostles, preserving the house, as reported by Egeria in the late fourth century. In 382, Theodosius built an octagonal *martyrium* called the Church of the Apostles, on Mount Zion in Jerusalem.<sup>xiv</sup> Theodosius probably built the monument in Capernaum at about the same time, part of the process of the destruction of Jewish-Christian culture and the assertion of Byzantine supercessionism in Palestine. The Church of the Apostles may have still stood in Jerusalem at the time of the Islamic conquest, though it may have been damaged in the Persian-Byzantine war of the sixth century.

Strictly speaking, then, the Dome of the Rock is not a mosque. Instead, it "witnesses" the miracle of Muhammad's Night Journey and Ascension. The *mashhad* was built to embody the Islamic triumph over the Byzantines, using the Byzantine's own architectural vocabulary. The Dome of the Rock dominates the Jerusalem skyline, the crown of the first capital of the first Sunni dynasty, the Umayyads. Like the Byzantines, who had demonstrated their supercession of Judaism, the Umayyads extended their power over Christianity by reasserting the sanctity of the site of the Jewish Temple.

The decorations inside the Dome of the Rock are highly significant. Lavish mosaics are primarily gold, and are original to the seventh century structure. Depictions of pearl and gem drenched crowns, lush gardens, flowing water, stately palms and trees of all kinds, and radiant cities combine to convey a heavenly garden. The absolute sovereignty of God, His majesty, and His goodness are signaled through the richness of these shimmering mosaics. The verses date from the earliest years of Islamic rule in Jerusalem. The polemical nature of these epigraphical ornamentations makes the purpose of the building unmistakable. Just as the architecture of the monument trumpets the triumph of Islam over Christianity, its mosaic embellishments admonish mankind to serve a completely transcendent God.

The importance of the site was so great that the Umayyads built palaces adjacent to the Temple Mount. This Sunni state was engaged in an ongoing jihad against Byzantium. The first Umayyad caliph, Muawiya, declared his caliphate in Gethsamane, according to Irfan Shahid, and the beginning of the “Praises of Jerusalem” literary genre in Arabic dates from this period. When the Umayyads lost control of Mecca and Medina, Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock to emphasize their control over the Holy Land, and that Jerusalem, as an alternative to the now inaccessible Mecca, made Jerusalem a pilgrimage center. When Walid al-Malik reasserted control over Mecca, Jerusalem’s position as a pilgrimage site was eclipsed, he built the Al-Aqsa Mosque to emphasize the Night Journey instead of the Rock, diminishing the importance of the Abrahamic legacy in Islam. He transferred the Umayyad capital to the more important city of Damascus in 661. Al-Aqsa, “The Furthest Mosque,” was built as a Friday Mosque for congregational prayer in 705 over the Golden Gate.

Jerusalem became known as “*Thalith al-Haramayn*” the “Third of the Two Holy Places”—Mecca and Medina. The term “*Haramayn*,” meaning “The Two Sanctuaries” has been applied to Jerusalem alone, because it was administered as a part of the *Haramayn*. In later years, when different rulers governed Jerusalem and the two Hijazi cities, the term came to be used for Jerusalem and Hebron, and lately even for the Dome of the Rock and Al-Aqsa.

Taking these traditions even further, Palazzi writes,

To remember the historical milieu compels every sincere observer to admit that there is no necessary connection between *al-Miraj* and sovereign rights over Jerusalem since, in the time when the Prophet... consecrated the place with his footprints on the Stone, the City was not a part of the Islamic State – whose borders were then limited to the Arabian Peninsula – but under Byzantine administration. Moreover, although radical preachers try to remove this from exegesis, the Glorious Quran expressly recognizes that Jerusalem plays for the Jewish people the same role that Mecca has for Muslims. We read in *Surah al-Baqarah*: “...They would not follow thy direction of prayer (*qiblah*), nor art thou to follow their direction of prayer; nor indeed will they follow each other’s direction of prayer....”

All Quranic annotators explain that “thy *qiblah*” is obviously the Kaabah of Mecca, while “their *qiblah*” refers to the Temple Site in Jerusalem. To quote just one of the most important of them, we read in Qadi Baydawi’s *Commentary*:

“Verily, in their prayers Jews orientate themselves toward the Rock (*Sakhrah*), while Christians orientate themselves eastwards....”

Palazzi concluded,

As opposed to what sectarian radicals continuously claim, the Book that is a guide for those who abide by Islam—as we have just now shown—recognizes Jerusalem as Jewish direction of prayer.... After...deep reflection about the implications of this approach, it is not difficult to understand that separation in directions of prayer is a mean[s] to decrease possible rivalries in [the] management of [the] Holy Places. For those who receive from Allah the gift of equilibrium and the attitude to reconciliation, it should not be difficult to conclude that, as no one is willing to deny Muslims...complete sovereignty over Mecca, from an Islamic point of view... there is not any sound theological reason to deny an equal right of Jews over Jerusalem.

In these troubled times it is difficult to imagine that the majority of Muslims could concede this point. At the very least, however, Muslims should be proud of their contribution to world civilization, especially their part in preserving the memory of God’s work in history. Those Muslims who seek to deny the historic legacy of Islam to world history are distorting the character and nature of their faith. Those who resist radical interpreters of Islam risk their very lives as they take a stand for historical truth. The contested meaning of Jerusalem in Islamic history is a starting point for the denial of the Islamic interpretation of sacred history.

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<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, a *mufti* is a religious authority, or jurisconsult, who issues decisions relating to Islamic law. The British Mandate transformed this traditional consultative role into the highest Muslim office in Palestine, with disastrous results. They appointed Amin al-Hussayni, one of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood, and an ally of Hitler, to the office. His policy of jihad shaped the Palestinian resistance to Zionism until the 1960s, when secularists took over the resistance with the help of the USSR.

<sup>1</sup> I have dropped all diacritical marks in Arabic words to spare our readers.

<sup>1</sup> I have examined the themes in this article more deeply in the following, "The Beginning of the End of Sunni Preeminence: Muhammad Ali and Jerusalem," *Arab Studies Journal*, Spring 1996, 86-95; "The Palestine National Authority and the Death Sentence," *The Cultural Lives of Capital Punishment*, edited by Austin Sarat, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005; "Mehmed Ali as Mutinous Khedive: The Roots of Rebellion," *International Journal of Turkish Studies*, 2002, 8; *Sacred Law in the Holy City: The Khedival Challenge to the Ottomans as seen from Jerusalem, 1829-1841*, Leiden: Brill, 2004.

<sup>1</sup> Andras J. Riedlmayer, "The Bosnian Manuscript Ingathering Project," In: Markus Koller and Kemal Karpat (eds.) *Ottoman Bosnia: A History in Peril* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004): 27-38; *Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1992-1996: A Post-war Survey of Selected Municipalities*. Expert report commissioned by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (The Hague, 2002); "From the Ashes: The Past and Future of Bosnia's Cultural Heritage," In: Maya Shatzmiller (ed.) *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002): 98-135; "Convivencia under Fire: Genocide and Book-Burning in Bosnia," In: Jonathan Rose (ed.) *The Holocaust and the Book: Preservation and Loss* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001): 266-291; "Monument and Crime: The Destruction of Historic Architecture in Kosovo," *Grey Room* 1 (2000): 108-122. (with A. Herscher)

<sup>1</sup> Rood, "Culture of Death"

<sup>1</sup> After Yusuf Ali.

<sup>1</sup> “Two Pre-Islamic Arabic Inscriptions from Hira (Iraq)” Lecture at Claremont Graduate University, March 11, 2003. See also Timothy George, *Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

<sup>1</sup> Translations and interior photos are by Palestinian photographer Said Nuseibeh, and are taken from Oleg Grabar and Said Nuseibeh’s magnificent volume entitled *The Dome of the Rock* (New York: Rizzoli, 1996). I have changed the word “Allah” to “God” for emphasis in some places.

<sup>1</sup> F.E. Peters, *The Monotheists: Vol. I, The Peoples of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 95-6.

<sup>1</sup> In Palazzi’s words: Kaab al-Ashraf, “was a rabbi converted to Islam who, because of his learning...was regarded as the Caliph’s special counselor for all matters connected to the history of Israel.”

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Islam: Religion and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 3, excerpted from Al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-Rasul w’al Muluk*, ed. M.J. de Goeje et al (Leiden: Brill, 1879-1901). Palazzi notes in his footnote 14: Cf. Muhammad Ibn Jarir at-Tabari, *Akhbar ar-Rusul wa al-Muluk* (History of Messengers and Kings), especially the chapter dealing with *al-Miraj* of "Bab Sayyidna Muhammad" and "Bab ‘Omar.” See also Jalal al-din as-Suyuti, *Tarikh al-Khulafa* (History of the Caliphs) and Mujir al-Ayn al-Muqaddasi, *Al-uns al-jalil fi tarikh al-Quds wa al-Khalil* (The Noble Society in the History of Jerusalem and Hebron, manuscript, al-Azhar Library).

<sup>1</sup> This article will not delve into the archeological studies of the location of the Jewish Temple. Here we are concerned only with the traditional Muslim understanding of the significance of the site, based upon the reports of Jews present in Jerusalem at the time of the Islamic conquest.

<sup>1</sup> The *Biblical Archeology Review* website is an excellent resource for the archeological research and controversies relating to the Cenacle, as it is the later structures on Mt. Zion are called. (<http://www.bibarch.com/ArchaeologicalSites>)

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<sup>1</sup> Abdul-Hadi Palazzi, “Antizionism and Antisemitism in the Contemporary Islamic Milieu,” <<http://village.flashnet.it/users/fn034463/racism.html>> downloaded March 30, 2003.

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<sup>v</sup> Andras J. Riedlmayer, "The Bosnian Manuscript Ingathering Project," In: Markus Koller and Kemal Karpat (eds.) *Ottoman Bosnia: A History in Peril* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004): 27-38; *Destruction of Cultural Heritage in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1992-1996: A Post-war Survey of Selected Municipalities*. Expert report commissioned by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (The Hague, 2002); "From the Ashes: The Past and Future of Bosnia's Cultural Heritage," In: Maya Shatzmiller (ed.) *Islam and Bosnia: Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy in Multi-Ethnic States* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2002): 98-135; "Convivencia under Fire: Genocide and Book-Burning in Bosnia," In: Jonathan Rose (ed.) *The Holocaust and the Book: Preservation and Loss* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001): 266-291; "Monument and Crime: The Destruction of Historic Architecture in Kosovo," *Grey Room* 1 (2000): 108-122. (with A. Herscher)

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