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»The Temple Mount Is in Our Hands!« Temple Mount and Wailing Wall between National and Religious Interests

Prologue: 1990, The First Intifada

On October 8, 1990, during the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles and in the third year of the First Intifada, the Palestinian uprising against the Israeli occupation, rumors circulated that the national religious Jewish group »Temple Mount Faithful« wanted to lay the foundation for the Third Jewish Temple on the plateau of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Palestinian Muslims took this announcement very seriously. And although the Israeli police assured that they would deny the »Temple Mount Faithful« entry to the plateau, there were violent confrontations between Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli security forces; at least seventeen Palestinians were killed. Among the dozens of injured were members of the Arab rescue forces that had been called in for help, as well as Jewish worshippers on the square in front of the Wailing Wall, located directly beneath the plateau, whom the demonstrators had pelted with stones.¹ It was one of the bloodiest incidents of the First Intifada, and it shook Palestinian society to its core. The confrontations resulted in a further radicalization of the conflict: Three days later, the Islamist Hamas movement announced that they would conduct the already violent battle against the Israeli occupation not only against Israeli soldiers and settlers but expressly see Israeli civilians outside the occupied territories as legitimate targets.²

In conflicts, holy sites often serve as crystallization points for religious and/or national identity, and contribute significantly to giving the conflict a religious and/or national frame of reference. Especially in the »Holy Land,« there are numerous sites which are considered sacred by several sides and are thus associated with divergent interests—be it freedom of religion, physical presence, sovereignty, control, or possession. Outstanding in this regard is the area around the Temple Mount and the Wailing Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem. The Temple Mount is venerated by Jews as the site of the First and Second Jewish Temple. For Muslims, the plateau, with the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, is the »Noble Sanctuary,« the starting point of the Night Journey and Heavenly Ascension of Muhammad.³ The Wailing Wall, or »Western Wall« according to the Jewish interpretation, is the western wall of the foundation of the Second Temple. At the latest with the beginning of the modern era, it became the central place of prayer for the Jews.⁴ For Muslims, it is the site on which Muhammad tied his miraculous riding animal Buraq before he ascended to Heaven.

Within a larger national or religious conflict, multiple claims to holy sites are often understood as being mutually exclusive, which is, in some cases, accom-

1 Cf.: Nadav Shragai, *Har ha-Meriva. Ha-Ma'avaq 'al Har-ha-Bait* (Jerusalem, 1995), pp. 340–63. This description of the incidents is based on statements made by the police.

2 Hamas pamphlet from October 11, 1990.

3 Qu'ran 17:1.

4 Cf.: Nadav Shragai, *Ha-Kotel ha-Ne'elam* (Jerusalem, 2016), pp. 64, 72.

panied by lines of reasoning that dispute the claim of the opposing party: in this case, for example, the argument that the Jewish temple had never stood in Jerusalem, or that Jerusalem is not mentioned in the Qu'ran. (It is hardly surprising that these feigned counterarguments are not based on a religious framework, but rather on dubious archaeological evidence or historical-critical text research.) What is more, the holy sites often also function as factors of distinction between rival groups within the same religious community, who use them to distinguish themselves as being, for example, more strongly religious or more strongly secular, or strive to make a stand against a religious »establishment,« such as the Jewish »Women of the Wall,« who oppose orthodox claims and promote a more egalitarian prayer practice at—at least parts of—the Wailing Wall.

1929, Wailing Wall Riots

In most of its manifestations, Zionism was not a religious movement. Although it is based on the religious tradition of a longing for Zion (Jerusalem), its leading tendencies were secular and areligious—in some cases even antireligious. Jerusalem was not the focus of early Zionism, since, with its religious denizens, the city strongly represented the negative image of the »Jewish diaspora.« This changed with the Balfour Declaration and the beginning of British rule in 1917, when Jerusalem became increasingly important as the seat of the British administration in Palestine.⁵ Muslims and Jews became conscious of the claims to the holy sites and strove to consolidate their respective ambitions. A remnant of the Ottoman era was the so-called »status quo rule,« which, for example, allowed Jews to pray at the Wailing Wall, but not to bring or leave objects there (not even temporarily), since this could be interpreted as a claim to the wall, which, at the time, was property of a Muslim trust. The collision of incompatible claims to the wall led to the situation that the ostensibly banal positioning of a partition wall between men and women on Yom Kippur in 1928 became a catalyst for provocations.⁶ Muslims reasserted their claim of ownership by opening the narrow lane in front of the wall for traffic and erecting a Muslim house of prayer immediately next door. The secular leftist Zionist workers' movement, which was dominant at the time, had already warned of a religious conflict: »[...] we must not forget: Other values play a key role in the revitalization of the Hebrew people—immigration, work, land. [...] We are prohibited from lending [the conflicts] a religious character, which would unite the Arab people, who are divided and disrupted today.«⁷ For his part, the Muslim mufti Amin al-Husseini attempted to establish contacts to Muslim movements in order to draw the attention of Muslims throughout the world to the alleged danger for the Temple Mount.⁸ Many Muslims feared, namely, that the Jewish claim to the Wailing Wall would be followed by a claim to the Temple Mount and thus lead to the destruction of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque.⁹ In 1929, members of Jewish—actually secular rightist Zionist—movements held a loud demonstration at the wall by singing the Zionist hymn »Hatikvah« and blowing shofar horns: a deliberate appropriation of religious symbolism by nationalist forces.¹⁰ This demonstration is considered the trigger for the hitherto most violent riots and pogroms throughout the land, with 249 deaths and nearly 500 casualties, particularly among the traditional, non-Zionist Jewish communities of Hebron and Safed. Hillel Cohen interprets the incidents of 1929 as the effective start of the

5 Cf.: Tamar Mayer, »Jerusalem In and Out of Focus. The City in Zionist Ideology,« in: Tamar Mayer and Suleiman A. Mourad (eds.), *Jerusalem. Idea and Reality* (London, 2008), pp. 225–27.

6 Cf. the text by Stuart Charmé in this publication, pp. 263.

7 *Davar*, August 6, 1929.

8 Cf.: Gudrun Krämer, *Geschichte Palästinas* (Munich, 2002), p. 261.

9 Cf.: Hillel Cohen, *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929*, (Waltham, 2015), p. 78.

10 Cf.: Ann Mosely Lesch, *Arab Politics in Palestine 1917–1939* (Ithaca, 1979), pp. 208–10; Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, *Civil Religion in Israel* (Berkeley, 1983), p. 78.

Israeli-Palestinian conflict¹¹ The confrontations also attracted great international attention. The conflict was interpreted at the time as being basically a conflict between religions, but the echo was even greater on a nationalist level; from this point on, solidarity with the Palestinians became a key crystallization point of the expanding Arab national movement in the Arab countries.¹²

1967, Israel Capturing the Old City of Jerusalem

In the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the Old City of Jerusalem, with the Temple Mount and the Wailing Wall, fell to Jordan; the Jewish residents of the Old City were expelled to the newly founded state of Israel. Nineteen years later, during the »Six-Day War« in June 1967, Israel was able to gain a surprising military victory. During this war, Israel conquered a territory that was larger than its national territory at the time, including the Old City of Jerusalem. After the victorious war, the radio message by the Israeli commander Mordechai Gur—»The Temple Mount is in our hands!«—and a photo depicting three Israeli soldiers standing reverently in front of the just captured Wailing Wall became iconic expressions of euphoria. The unexpected victory was interpreted by a large share of the Israeli public as divine-messianic,¹³ which was not least of all reflected in the name of the war, which recalls God's creation of the world in six days. This messianic interpretation laid the roots for a new ideological and political direction in Israel, which would evolve since the 1970s and would often be called »Neo-Zionism.« It is characterized by a linking of nationalism and religion; in contrast to »classical,« secular Zionism, a secular national state is no longer the goal, but rather merely an intermediate form on the path to a religious renaissance.¹⁴ The national-religious movement—which includes the religious settler movement—would become the most recognizable protagonist of this ideology.

At the Wailing Wall, swift action was taken to reinforce Israeli claims to the sacred site. Immediately after the Old City had been conquered, the buildings in front of the wall were torn down to make way for the large square still found there today. More difficult, however, was the question as to how the Temple Mount and the Muslim sanctums located there should be dealt with. The Israeli Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, decided to make the Wailing Wall a Jewish site and to place the Temple Mount under Israeli sovereignty, but to leave the supervision of the area (including the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque) in the hands of the (Jordanian) Muslim trust authorities. Jews were to be given the right to enter the area—but not, however, to pray there.¹⁵ This ostensible »surrender« of the Temple Mount was made easier by the traditional Jewish-religious prohibition of setting foot on the temple plateau due to its extreme sanctity—a prohibition which ultra-orthodox Judaism (with few exceptions) continues to emphatically defend to this day.¹⁶ Within the national-religious camp, however, there were opposite standpoints: Shlomo Goren, then chief rabbi of the Israeli army, regretted that the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque had not been immediately demolished and called for the site to be made available for Jewish worshippers.¹⁷ In the decades that followed, various temple movements formed, the different demands of which ranged from the right to pray on the Temple Mount to the erection of a Third Jewish Temple.¹⁸ In 1984, Israeli intelligence uncovered the so-called »Jewish Underground,« which was comprised of radical representatives of the settler movement.

11 Cohen's title is programmatic: »Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict.«

12 Cf.: Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands in Modern Times* (Philadelphia, 2003), pp. 94–8.

13 Cf.: Yona Hadari, *Mashiach Rakuv 'al Tanq* (Jerusalem, 2002), pp. 94–139.

14 Cf.: Uri Ram, *The Globalization of Israel* (New York, 2008), pp. 231–34.

15 Cf.: Gershon Gorenberg, *The End of Days. Fundamentalism and the Struggle for the Temple Mount* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 102–4.

16 Cf.: Amnon Ramon, »Delicate Balances at the Temple Mount 1967–1999,« in: Marshall J. Breger and Ora Ahimeir (eds.), *Jerusalem. A City and Its Future* (New York, 2002), pp. 321–32.

17 Cf.: Shragai, *Har ha-Meriva*, p. 29.

18 Cf.: Moti Inbari, *Jewish Fundamentalism and the Temple Mount* (Albany, 2009).

The members of the underground planned the demolition of the Dome of the Rocks not only in the hopes that this would put an end to the peace agreement with Egypt, but because they also wanted to lay the foundation for the Third Temple and, with this, to drive the messianic process of salvation forward.¹⁹ Whereas, in the beginning, the temple movements were merely marginal, in the past few years their demands have spread continuously.²⁰

2000, The Outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada

When, on September 28, 2000, the Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon visited the Temple Mount with a massive contingent of security forces, this was conceived as an emphasis of Israeli sovereignty over the plateau. This signal was directed primarily toward the Israeli electorate. On the one hand, Sharon strove to boost his profile vis-à-vis his party rival Benjamin Netanyahu and, on the other hand, he protested against the offer for negotiation extended by Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to the Palestinian President Yasser Arafat:²¹ Whereas the issues of East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount had hitherto been excluded from the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations because they were considered to be too difficult, Barak had in the meantime offered to transfer the administration of the area to the Palestinians or to grant them an additional sovereignty (ancillary to that of Israel). Arafat wanted full sovereignty over the Temple Mount, but was prepared to concede the Wailing Wall and the Jewish Quarter of the Old City. The question regarding the Temple Mount was in fact the key issue that led to the breakdown of the negotiations.²² Against this backdrop, Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount was seen by many Palestinians as a threat for the Muslim sites on the plateau. The visit thus became the catalyst for the Second Intifada, the so-called »Al-Aqsa Intifada,« in which frustration and disillusionment over the lack of success of the peace process culminated in a spiral of violence.

Since the First Intifada, Palestinian society has been marked by a strong polarization between secular-nationalistic and Islamist movements. On the one side, Fatah (Palestinian National Liberation Movement) dominates, founded in 1959 and the leading force within the PLO since 1967. On the other side stands the Islamist Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement), founded in 1987. Hamas used Islamic terms, cited Islamic sources, referred to Islamic holidays, and emphasized the significance of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem for Islam. In contrast, the PLO made use of a secular, leftist-revolutionary rhetoric, referred to national memorial days, and emphasized the importance of Jerusalem as an *Arab* city. The PLO almost always mentioned the Al-Aqsa Mosque in connection with the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulchre in order to stress the supra-denominational character of the movement.²³ With the Al-Aqsa Intifada, which now made the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque central elements of the uprising, Islamists and nationalists came closer together in terms of their symbolism. The Fatah movement thus called its most important militia in this uprising the »Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades« and, in its logo, combined the Palestinian flag with the Dome of the Rock, thus making use of the same graphic elements as the Hamas logo.

Whereas, during the course of the Intifada, the rhetorical and symbolic »Islamization« of the Palestinian movements was predominant, the harmonization is now also going in an opposite direction: In the new charter, which the Hamas adopted in 2017 (and in which, in Article 19, a *de facto* but not *de jure* recognition

19 Cf.: Ehud Sprinzak, *Brother Against Brother* (New York, 1999), pp. 161–65.

20 Cf.: Eliav Taub and Aviad Yehiel Hollander, »The Place of Religious Aspirations for Sovereignty Over the Temple Mount in Religious-Zionist Rulings,« in: Marshall J. Breger et al. (eds.), *Sacred Space in Israel and Palestine* (London, 2012), pp. 139–43.

21 Cf.: Idith Zertal and Akiva Eldar, *Lords of the Land* (New York, 2007), pp. 405–7.

22 Cf.: Galia Golan, *Israeli Peacemaking Since 1967* (London, 2015), pp. 148–49, 156.

23 Cf.: Jean-François Legrain, *Les voix du soulèvement palestinien* (Le Caire, 1991). For Jerusalem in particular, see the flyers of the Hamas from March 13, 1988 and the Unified National Leadership (=PLO) from May 21, 1988 and June 22, 1988, reprinted here on pp. 84, 150, and 178 (Arabic section).

of Israel as it existed before 1967 is at least not excluded as a possibility), it states in Article 10: »Jerusalem is the capital of Palestine ... Its Islamic and Christian holy places belong exclusively to the Palestinian people and to the Arab and Islamic Ummah [=community]. Not one stone of Jerusalem can be surrendered or relinquished.«²⁴ (Not only the integration of »Christian holy places« is worth noting, but also the lack of any mention of Jewish sites.) The Fatah politician Jibril Rajoub recently announced his intention, within the frameworks of a peace settlement, to accept the status quo of Israeli sovereignty over the Wailing Wall, if the Palestinians are granted full sovereignty over the Temple Mount. Although, with this, he did not go beyond Arafat's offer during the peace negotiations in 2000, inner-party criticism forced him to withdraw his proposal.²⁵

Conclusion

The Wailing Wall and the Temple Mount stand at the center of national and religious claims of Israelis and Palestinians, Jews and Muslims. Time and again, they were the sources of disputes and the places where existing conflicts culminated. Whereas the conflicts at the Wailing Wall in 1929 were interpreted primarily from a religious perspective, from then on it was a matter of two national claims that stood in opposition to each other. An important turning point for the Near East is represented by the war of 1967. The unexpected victory of Israel was interpreted messianically by sectors of Israeli society—a form of sacralized nationalism. Large contingencies of the National Religious Party, as well as some members of the Likud party, adhered to this interpretation. In sectors of Arab society, in turn, the defeat of 1967 was interpreted as a failure of the predominant ideologies of socialism and nationalism. This was countered, as an alternative, with the ostensibly inherent, that is Islam, which was now transformed into a political ideology in the form of Islamism. In Palestine, the hitherto apolitical movement of the Muslim Brotherhood became politicized with the First Intifada and entered the political stage as the Islamist Hamas. The Second Intifada ultimately also provided a religious boost for the nationalist Palestinian forces.

National claims are always negotiable; with religious claims, however, this is far more difficult. When Yasser Arafat said during his discussions with Ehud Barak that he could not negotiate the status of the Temple Mount, since he did not have a mandate from the Muslims of the world, he argued within a religious frame of reference.²⁶ Barak was also not prepared to completely relinquish Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount, presumably in light of the significance of the area for Jews. The solution to a conflict defined as religious can only be found within this frame of reference, which means that religiously founded concepts must be developed and implemented. This should now be the task of the actors in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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²⁴ The text of the charter is translated into English on the website of the Hamas. See: »A Document of General Principles and Policies,« May 1, 2017, <http://hamas.ps/en/post/678/a-document-of-general-principles-and-policies> (last accessed on August 29, 2017).

²⁵ Cf.: *Haaretz*, June 4, 2017; available online at: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.793502> (last accessed on August 24, 2017); Dov Lieber, »Abbas's religious adviser: Every stone of Western Wall must be under Muslim control,« in: *The Times of Israel*, June 12, 2017; available online at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/abbas-religious-adviser-western-wall-must-be-under-muslim-control/> (last accessed on June 24, 2017).

²⁶ Cf.: Golan, *Peacemaking*, p. 149.