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***From Jerusalem to Mecca and Back***  
***The Islamic Consolidation of Jerusalem***

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## *Abstract*

Since 1967, when Israel took over East Jerusalem with its Old City and sacred places, the Islamic perspective of Jerusalem has changed dramatically. A Muslim campaign for liberating Jerusalem from Israeli control was launched in August 1969 following the fire, which was started by an Australian non-Jewish tourist to the structure of the al-Aqsa Mosque. Over the last decade, this campaign has been conducted under the banner “Al-Aqsa is in Danger” with the claim that Jerusalem is “captive” of Jews and therefore Jihad should be carried out to liberate it. This campaign aims to influence the religious emotions and the political awareness the Arab and Muslim communities in the world and mobilize them for political ends. The campaign, which began in Jerusalem, was disseminated to the heart of the Muslim world, which is symbolized by Mecca, and rebounded back by an echo from “Mecca” influencing the political struggle over Jerusalem in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the struggle for “cognition” over Jerusalem, one particular space — the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa compound is in the eye of the storm. This space epitomizes the national strife between two peoples, two nations, which to a great extent is also an ideological battle between two cultures and two religions. Although this most sacred place is administered in practical terms by the Muslim Waqf authorities, Muslims view it as being continuously threatened by the Israeli-Jewish side of the conflict. Jews as well as Muslims regard it as a bone of contention, because it is such a central symbol of identity. For Jews, the Temple Mount is the utmost sacred place, with its outer Western Wall (Hakotel) symbolizing the original structure of the Second Temple (destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE). In their daily ritual and liturgy, it is a place that during 2000 years of exile they have aspired to return to and re-build. For the Muslims al-Aqsa is mentioned in the Quran as the destination of the Prophet Muhammad’s nocturnal journey and being interpreted and identified with the place of the rock (or foundation stone) in Jerusalem. According to tradition Muhammad ascended to heaven from this place, and the first direction of prayer before Mecca. Nowadays, for both communities, Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Muslims regardless of the level of their religious observation this compound has become a central symbol of identity which both political and religious actors seek to mobilize to achieve their political ends.

This study addresses the question of whether the issue of Jerusalem and the holy places are an unsolvable component in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It also asks: to what extent religious symbols and the religion per se are obstacles hampering the accomplishment of peace. Using 62 academic and semi-academic books published in Arabic in nine countries, most of them from the Middle East, as well as Islamic internet web sites, legal opinions (*fatwas*) and the press leads to the conclusion that in the last 35 years a new Islamic ethos of Jerusalem was developed in the Muslim World.

The current ethos is based on three processes which have developed simultaneously : first, there is a strong trend of elevating the sacredness of the al-Aqsa compound and Jerusalem as a whole in contemporary Islam; second, the denial of the Jewish “ “other’s” theological and historical affiliation to the city and to its sacred places; and third, constructing and “imagining” a new Jerusalem-based ancient history as a primordial element of identity according to which the ancient Yebusites who established Jerusalem as “Yevus” were Arab (some say: Palestinian) tribes who roamed the country, thousands of years before the Hebrews arrived in Canaan - ancient Palestine. One of the new myths developed in this Islamic discourse is a belief in the cyclic trend of history of which Saladin is an image for an Islamic re-liberation of Jerusalem from the new “Jewish Crusaders”.

Some of the phenomenon of using religious symbols for political consolidation reflects a mirror image of the Israeli Jewish side, and the study also points to Jewish challenges that exacerbated the Islamic campaign for Jerusalem. However, the author concludes that whereas in the Israeli camp this process characterizes only radical Jewish groups, analyzing the current public discourse of religious figures, politicians, academics and journalists in the Muslim World leads to the conclusion that the new ethos today reflects the mainstream in many Islamic communities around the world.

Is Jerusalem an obstacle to achieving peace? From the Islamic point of view, there are four main factors: first, the consistent Palestinian position which rejects any attempt to introduce Jewish worship on any inch of the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa compound; second, the Palestinian-formed message according which Jerusalem belongs to the entire Muslim nation; third, the position expressed by many Islamic religious organizations that there can be no compromise on Jerusalem; and finally, the mis-evaluation of both Israelis and Palestinians of the position of

the other side, of the supreme esteem the “other” feels toward its sacred places as not only a place of worship but as a central symbol of identity, and of the expectation that the “ other’s real position is more flexible, whereas, in reality, it is not. Palestinian politicians believe that in the final analysis, Israelis would agree to a trade-off between Jewish administration of the Western Wall and the Jewish Quarter in exchange for complete Muslim sovereignty over the al-Aqsa compound and the rest of the Old City. Israelis, on the other hand believe that the Clinton parameters of July 2000 of a residual Israeli sovereignty over the Temple Mount or a spatial division could be accepted by the Palestinians. The fact that Israelis raised this option at the second Camp David summit is one example of the Israeli mis-evaluation of the Palestinian preparedness to compromise, which is almost zero. Therefore, a spatial or a functional division of the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa compound between Israelis and Palestinians is apparently not possible.

Having said this, one should remember that in the precedents of signing peace accords between Israel and Arab entities, there were always Islamic high-ranking religious figures, who have supported political decisions with a theological legal opinion. The author concludes by recommending further investigation in two directions which he sees as a key to resolve the conflict: one, the involvement of a third party in monitoring or controlling the Old City for at least a transitional period; two, the development and public dissemination of texts, traditions and beliefs that give legitimacy to the importance of Jerusalem and its holy places to all three great religions.