

The History of Jerusalem's Occupation and Destruction

The closure of Al-Aqsa Mosque by the Israeli occupation regime and the new wave of violence towards the Palestinians in Jerusalem have once again raised worries over the city's future.

The western part of the city having been occupied in 1948, the eastern part of Jerusalem where Al-Aqsa Mosque is located became part of the area occupied by Zionist Israel in 1967. Having begun a systematic implementation of its plans regarding the city from this date on, the occupation regime made its first large-scale move on August 21, 1969.

They led a group of Zionists under the leadership of a fanatic Jew who sabotaged and devastated large parts of the mosque. The process came to a halt when following this, all the leaders of the Islamic world protested the atrocity and forced the United States, which had important (!) military ties with these leaders, to pressure Israel.

Before long, a tunnel began to be dug beneath the walls surrounding Al-Aqsa Mosque under the pretext of archaeological excavations from 1970-1972. The excavations began on the southern and western parts, and advanced into the mosque's grounds, creating cavities about 13 meters below ground level. New excavations started on the western side and continued from 1974-1976, destroying the Muslim cemetery where the graves of the Sahabah, Ubada ibn as-Samit and Shaddad ibn Aws, had been located among others. The excavations that began in 1977 under the pretext of searching for the remains of Solomon's Temple made their way underground reaching as far as the women's section of the mosque.

Continuing their excavations from the direction of the Wailing Wall, in 1979 the Zionists divided the underground section of Al-Aqsa Mosque into two with a tunnel that stretched eastward and westward. Following the official inauguration that same year, a small Jewish temple was opened for use in the tunnel.

Thus, having continued to pursue its policy of the destruction of Al-Aqsa Mosque, an important symbol of Jerusalem, in a systematic and devious manner for the first decade of the occupation, the occupation regime used the pretext of archaeological excavations to either completely destroy the historical sites (mosques, cemeteries, madrasahs, fortifications, Islamic lodges and inns) within or around Al-Aqsa Mosque or to cause permanent damage to them.

As part of the second stage of excavations and destruction that began after 1982, some houses in the area inhabited by Arab residents were either expropriated or given directly to Jewish settlers. (among those Jews who became homeowners for free was Ariel Sharon).

The plan, "Jerusalem 2020", adopted by the Zionist Jerusalem Municipality in 1994, accelerated the process of evicting the Muslim population concentrated around Al-Aqsa. Official discussions about turning the Al-Aqsa Mosque into Solomon's temple were introduced to the Israeli public opinion in January 1999, ushering in a period of future provocations. Before long, in July 2000, the Knesset assembled and adopted a law declaring Jerusalem "Israel's eternal capital".

Without delay, Jerusalem Municipality intensified its lobbying efforts so that the right to worship in the area of Al-Haram Ash-Sharif would be granted to Jews. Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to the Al-Aqsa in September 2000, remembered as one of the most daring desecrations of the mosque, sparked the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Over 5,000 Palestinians lost their lives in this process. Even though this movement warded off the imminent threat, it could not prevent altogether subsequent visits from Jewish groups.

From that day on, Jewish groups with security support have been allowed access to the haram section of the mosque during certain hours of the day. The ongoing destruction around the Mughrabi Gate, situated to the west of the mosque, from 2007 onward, has not been completely brought to a halt despite having slowed down after global reactions and the negative report by a team of experts that briefly went to the area from Turkey. It is still continuing slowly.

Having started the expulsion of residents from the neighborhoods around Al-Aqsa Mosque from late 2008

onward, the Zionist administration ordered the eviction of many houses belonging to Muslims in the neighborhoods of Silwan, Sheikh Jarrah, and Al-Bustan. In 2009, Jerusalem Municipality announced that 25% of Palestinian houses in East Jerusalem would be demolished for not having permits. Acting on the possibility of these demolitions starting in the neighborhoods around Al-Aqsa, fanatical Jews accelerated their provocative actions, using models of the temple.

Indeed, daily tours for Jewish groups in the haram section started at that time. The Arab Spring of 2011 presented the occupiers with a golden opportunity. The Zionist occupiers' actions regarding Jerusalem were encouraged by the fact that the international public was distracted with the escalation of events to a tragic level and that the Islamic world was preoccupied with ways to avoid conflicts within its own territory. Amid intensifying policies of physical destruction and settlement of people, US President Trump's latest visit in May 2017 was taken as a kind of approval for Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet. The occupation government cabinet soon made a show of its recklessness by holding a meeting in the tunnel beneath Al-Aqsa Mosque.

The site has currently been turned into a prison by the occupying soldiers who have advanced step by step into the mosque and equipped the whole haram section with security cameras. Any Muslims found to be objectionable are prohibited from worshipping and the mosque is thus being depopulated.

Given the fragmented situation of the Islamic world, the possibility of any serious sanction coming from Muslim countries to stop the Israeli brutality and to protect Jerusalem seems questionable. For this reason, it would be beneficial if Islamic countries, and especially Turkey, started new discussions within the UN and UNESCO to mobilize the honorable and sensitive politicians, few though they are within the current international system.

For the protection and maintenance of sites considered holy by Christians and Muslims, jurists must give support to the ongoing efforts of the Jerusalemites. Existing international regulations should be put into operation. The article on "the protection of holy sites for their place in human history" of the Hague Convention of 1904 and the article on "the prohibition of the blockade and bombardment of places of worship" of the Hague Convention of 1907 are appropriate points to set off from.

In conjunction with this, an international committee led by Turkey can be formed for the protection of Ottoman and Islamic artifacts in Jerusalem. In an effort at least to prevent further exacerbation of the situation, a dialogue can be started for the protection of holy sites in Jerusalem.

It has been clearly understood by now that leaving the Muslims living in the city to struggle on their own for Jerusalem will not create any solution. For this reason, a global campaign led by civil initiatives and jurists is imperative.