

# AL-AQSA MOSQUE SOVEREIGNTY AND THE DEAL OF THE CENTURY

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**İNSAMER**  
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IHH HUMANITARIAN AND SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTER  
مركز البحوث الإنسانية و الاجتماعية

To cite this article: Sağlam, Büşra Betül. "Al-Aqsa Mosque Sovereignty and the Deal of the Century", İNSAMER, 24.11.2020.



Analysis

Many states have fought against each other for the sovereignty of the holy city Bayt Al-Maqdis (Jerusalem), which has its significance internationally, politically, geopolitically, and at most religiously. As many civilizations ruled this land, they entitled the land according to their values to leave a trace from their authorities. Hence Bayt Al-Maqdis was also named as Al-Quds, UrShalim, Yebus, Aelia, and the Holy City all of whom have different symbolic meanings to different people. (El-Awaisi, 2019) Various buildings have also been constructed on this land over the centuries. (Al-Ratrout, 2004)

Bayt Al-Maqdis is home to many sites deemed sacred to the three divine religions, and it is called by many as "the holiest city in the world", due to structures such as the Dome of the Rock, Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Buraq Wall, and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. (Berzak, 2014) First of all, the significance of the Al-Aqsa Mosque

stems from its roots that date back to the times of Prophets. For the Jews, the Holy City is the land where Moses led and save the Israelites from Pharaoh's tyranny during their slavery in Egypt. According to the Jewish belief, its significance comes into prominence after the Jews reached the Holy Land because of a belief that it was the promised land. Then this process continued with a belief that they entered these lands under the leadership of King David and built a temple during the time of King Solomon. Meanwhile, for Christians, Bayt Al-Maqdis is the land where Jesus was born, preached, lived, and crucified. However, although the Holy Land is of central importance according to the Christian faith, the exact location of today's Masjid Al-Aqsa never had a special place in Christianity. (Al-Ratrout, 2004) Apart from this, the Holy Land houses the holiest place for Christianity, the Church of Holy Sepulcher, which today is the



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central point of *Via Dolorosa* as the last stop. It is believed that the church is the site of the crucifixion, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. As for Muslims, the significance of the Al-Aqsa Mosque is not restricted to the time of Prophet Muhammad, but it dates back to the time of the first Prophet Adam. Masjid Al-Aqsa is significant not only due to Isra and Miraj, but also because it is the second most important Masjid built to worship Allah after Masjid Al-Haram. Therefore, one can conclude that Masjid Al-Aqsa was constructed on earth after Masjid Al-Haram; thus, the Qiblah (direction of prayer) of Al-Aqsa Mosque was oriented towards Makkah Al-Mukarramah, which is another point that indicates the significance of Al-Aqsa Mosque for Muslims.

Al-Aqsa's western wall is named the "Buraq Wall" referring to the miraculous journey of Prophet Muhammad. "Buraq" was the name of a heavenly steed on which Prophet Muhammad rode on his night journey Isra and Mi'raj from Makkah to Bayt Al-Maqdis; and he tied Buraq to this wall before ascending to the heavens. This miraculous event obviously refers to the significance of the Al-Aqsa Mosque not only as a medium of the relation between the earth and heaven but also as a hub of a relationship between humankind and the Creator. (Nor, 2006) Furthermore, this event also points to the physical link between Makkah and Bayt Al-Maqdis even before the birth of Prophet Muhammad, which is confirmed by the orientation of Al-Aqsa Mosque, including the direction of its southern wall. (Al-Ratrout, 2013) Moreover, Masjid Al-Aqsa is also the first Qiblah of Muslims since Muslims prayed towards the Masjid Al-Aqsa before the Kaaba. Thus, starting from the first creation until the time of Prophet Muhammad, this holy city of Bayt al-Maqdis and Al-Aqsa Mosque have been part of Islamic revelation. Last but not least, according to the holy Qur'an, Bayt Al-Maqdis in general and specifically Al-Aqsa Mosque is the source of blessing bestowed to the land long before the immigration of Prophet Abraham. (El-Awaisi, 2007) Throughout the centuries, the land on which Al-Aqsa Mosque was built

and its surroundings have been a hub for many prophets, and all of them are highly respected in the Islamic faith.

As a matter of fact, it is important to highlight that the historical and archaeological evidence indicates that not only the Buraq Wall but also the present area of the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound remained desolate during the Roman period. (Al-Ratrout, 2004) In addition, when the structural development of Al-Aqsa Mosque before the Islamic *fath* (liberation) of Bayt Al-Maqdis is considered, the results of the excavations indicate that the earliest tangible archaeological traces revealed that Al-Aqsa Mosque was a built-up area in the Roman period, which does not mean that it was Romans who established the al-Aqsa enclave. (Al-Ratrout, 2013) Archaeological studies indicate that there was no Jewish temple in the Masjid Al-Aqsa compound in the Roman era, which also proves that Buraq Wall is not a remnant of the Second Temple as it is alleged. This reality is another indication that the importance of Masjid Al-Aqsa for Muslims in terms of both structure and area cannot be violated.

As for the importance of this region for the Jews who claim the place of Masjid Al-Aqsa today, the matter of the first and the second Jewish Temple seems more related to mythology rather than archaeology given the size, shape and location of the Jewish Temple in relation to the present area of Al-Aqsa Mosque are controversial among biblical references and Israeli scholars. (Al-Ratrout, 2004) According to Old Testament scriptures, King Solomon had built a temple for worship in the current Masjid Al-Aqsa site. This is a religious manipulation of the Zionists to put a claim for the destruction of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. This claim was refuted through excavations in Bayt Al-Maqdis, and around Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa, for more than a hundred and fifty years. In other respects, it is also highly contradictory for the Zionists to claim that the Buraq Wall is a remnant of the Second Temple, even though they were unable to find any trace of the Second Temple by digging under the Masjid Al-Aqsa platform.

Apart from religious considerations, in the face of the archeological excavations, today the whole compound of Al-Aqsa Mosque, especially the Buraq Wall, has become the center of Zionist sovereignty claims. By the rise of the Zionist movement in the early 20th century, the wall became a center of conflicts between Muslim and Jewish communities. During the British Mandate era on Palestine, the visits of Jews to the Wall increased. As Muslims realized the danger, they responded with a revolution on 23 August 1929, in which dozens of Muslims were killed and many momentous places were demolished by the Jews. Amid the struggles to take control of the sovereignty of the Al-Aqsa compound, after 1948 Arab–Israeli War the eastern portion of the city of Islamic Jerusalem was subdued by Jordan. Under Jordanian control Jews were expelled from the Old City including the Jewish Quarter, and they were barred from entering the Old City for 19 years. This period ended on 10 June 1967, when Israel took control of the Al-Aqsa compound following the Six-Day War. Three days after establishing control over the Buraq Wall, the Moroccan Quarter was bulldozed by Israeli authorities to create space for what is now as the Buraq Wall plaza. (Jubeh, 2019) As a result, Israel’s struggle for sovereignty, which had taken control of the land through religious rhetoric, has not fully ceased. Nevertheless, Muslims continue to struggle to protect their historical and religious rights, namely their sovereignty in the Al-Aqsa Mosque.

## Trump and Palestine

Since 1948 the US has been involved in the Palestine-Israeli conflict as a mediator, and its policy to the Palestinian territories is to promote a two-state solution within this land. It appears that the conflict has become more complicated since both parties are struggling to hold the sovereignty over Bayt Al-Maqdis and Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, primarily based on their religious and historical backgrounds, and due to the US’ biased mediating strategies. Today, the Trump administration, which deals with the US’

earlier policies towards West Asia with more explicit rhetoric, has caused more questioning of its role in the region.

During his campaign, Trump always portrayed himself to prefer a less hawkish foreign policy than his opponent. But after his presidency, his policies appeared threatening to peace and prosperity and to the liberal international order. (Payne, 2017) Many scholars, diplomats, policymakers, and journalists do not evenly agree on Trump’s foreign policy priorities and many critics argue that the Trump administration’s 21st-century version of America First will destroy a well-established liberal international order grounded in free trade, multilateralism, and alliances. (Adri, 2020) It would be safe to say that the Trump administration, whose mission is to end the conflicts in West Asia and provide political stability in the region, has driven conflicts in the region to a greater stalemate.

US President Donald Trump declared the Deal of the Century three months after he was elected in 2016. On 6 December 2017, Trump announced US’ recognition of Bayt Al-Maqdis as Israel’s capital and his plans to move the US embassy to this land. Moreover, after his threats to cut aid to the Palestinians in a series of Twitter posts, citing their unwillingness “to talk peace”; the US government cut more than half its planned funding to UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees that caters to more than five million registered refugees. (Lieberman, 2019) Afterward, the US Embassy to Israel was officially opened in Bayt Al-Maqdis on the same day as Palestinians commemorate 70 years of Nakba or the “Catastrophe” - the ethnic cleansing of Palestinian cities and towns by Zionist paramilitaries in 1948 - at the same time on the eve of the date when the state of Israel was established on 14 May 2018. (Abu Shammalah, 2019) After that, on 25 March 2019, Trump recognized Israel’s 1981 annexation of the occupied Golan Heights, reversing decades of US policy. On 20 June 2019, the US revealed its proposal to create a

global investment fund for the Palestinians and neighboring Arab states, designed to be the economic engine of the US' "Middle East Peace Plan". After all, Trump released a long-promised "Peace to Prosperity" plan for Israel and the Palestinians on 28 January 2020, with the support of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Netanyahu's main political rival Benny Gantz. (Zanotti, 2019) It is obvious that the Trump administration with his inconsistent and even incoherent rhetoric (Payne, 2017) has often adopted a self-assertive approach to the Palestine-Israeli conflict, and mostly stands up for exclusively pro-Israeli policies. The fact that Trump has always emphasized improving relations with Israel because of the lack of an active Israeli policy during Obama's tenure in the previous US administration demonstrates this biased political stance. (Thompson, 2018)

As Trump promised to put an end to the Palestine-Israeli conflict in his campaigns; when he assumed presidency, he created a team to lead the peace process. Accordingly, he appointed his Jewish son-in-law Jared Kushner as leader of the peace plan. He also assigned David Friedman, supporter and donor to illegal settlements on occupied Palestine, as US Ambassador to Israel; and Jason Greenblatt, his former lawyer to this "peace team". However, the pro-Israeli stances of Trump's team on the conflict eliminated the hope that they would address the issue impartially as leading the peace process and further challenged the ability of the US to act as an impartial mediator. (Wermenbol, 2019)

In terms of the Deal of the Century - defined as "Peace and Prosperity" by the White House - there are certain key points of the plan; borders and settlements, security, Palestinian refugees, Palestinian statehood, and the status of Bayt Al-Maqdis and the holy sites. It should be noticed that the Trump administration hands over nearly the ultimate sovereignty over not only Bayt Al-Maqdis but also the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound to Israel. According to David Friedman, besides legitimizing the Israeli claims to Bayt Al-Maqdis, the Golan Heights, West Bank territory, and most of the Jordan Valley; the status quo of Al-Aqsa

Mosque prohibiting non-Muslim worship in the mosque vicinity would continue, along with Jordan's custodial role regarding Muslim holy sites. (Zanotti, 2019) However, in the text of the Deal, this is not explicitly clarified. Instead, the Deal defines Israeli claims on the land as valid as an ancestral homeland by eliminating the defense system of Palestine, which is seen as a threat to the existence of Israel.

"Withdrawing from territory captured in a defensive war is a historical rarity. It must be recognized that the State of Israel has already withdrawn from at least 88% of the territory it captured in 1967. This Vision provides for the transfer of sizeable territory by the State of Israel -- territory to which Israel has asserted valid legal and historical claims, and which are part of the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people -- which must be considered a significant concession." (US Government Document, 2020, p.8)

As for the matter of sovereignty, the Deal transfers the sovereignty of the region to a large extent to Israel, as an "ultimate ruler" over the region. On the other hand, regarding the sovereignty of Palestine, implicit statements are used:

"Sovereignty is an amorphous concept that has evolved over time. With growing interdependence, each nation chooses to interact with other nations by entering into agreements that set parameters essential to each nation. The notion that sovereignty is a static and consistently defined term has been an unnecessary stumbling block in past negotiations. Pragmatic and operational concerns that affect security and prosperity are what is most important." (US Government Document, 2020, p.9)

As to the status of Al-Aqsa Mosque, it uses the "Temple Mount" term for the whole compound of the Masjid. Moreover, using this term not only justifies the Jewish claims on the Masjid but also neglects the historical and even the archeological evidence based on the ongoing excavations around it:



“The issue of Jerusalem’s holy sites, particularly the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif should be treated with the utmost sensitivity. The State of Israel has been a good custodian of Jerusalem. During Israel’s stewardship, it has kept Jerusalem open and secure. Jerusalem should be a city that unites people and should always remain open to worshippers of all religions.” (US Government Document, 2020, p.9)

These statements ignore the fact that today the Israeli government restricts Muslims from freely performing their worship at Masjid Al-Aqsa. At the same time, there are serious statements indicating that the custodian and stewardship, namely the sovereignty, of the Masjid will be on the Israeli government. Furthermore, the statement that the Masjid will be open to people from all religions gives rise to other questions about the continuity of the Masjid.

Another statement in the agreement on the status of the Masjid stands out within the part where the importance of Bayt Al-Maqdis is mentioned in terms of the three religions:

“For Judaism, Jerusalem is where Mount Moriah is located. According to Jewish tradition, it was there that Abraham nearly sacrificed his son, Isaac, until God intervened. Centuries later, Jerusalem became the political center of the Jewish people when King David united the twelve tribes of Israel, making the city the capital and spiritual center of the Jewish people, which it has remained for nearly 3,000 years. King David’s son, King Solomon, built the First Temple on Mount Moriah. According to Jewish tradition, inside the Temple, within the Holy of Holies, were stored the original Ten Commandments, revealed by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. The First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The Second Temple was built atop the same mountain and stood until it was destroyed by the Romans in 70 A.D. However, Jerusalem never lost its holiness to the Jewish People: It remains the direction to which Jews throughout the world turn in prayer and the destination of Jewish pilgrimage. Every year, on the 9th day of the Jewish month of Av, Jews fast, mourn and commemorate the destruction of the

two Temples. Although Jews pray today at the Western Wall, which was a retaining wall of the Second Temple, the Temple Mount itself is the holiest site in Judaism. There are nearly 700 separate references to Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible. For 100 generations the hopes and dreams of the Jewish people have been encapsulated by the words “Next Year in Jerusalem.” (US Government Document, 2020, p.15)

The manner on how these statements are documented within the Deal is interesting in terms of the justification of the Jews presence on the Holy Land and for their rhetoric towards Al-Aqsa Mosque. It is obvious that the Jewish narration is put forward by deliberate terms within the text like Mount Moriah is the current place of Qubbat As-Sahra, which is not proved scientifically (El-Awaisi, 2020). However, although there is still no scientific evidence that the Western Wall is the remnant of the Second Temple or if a Jewish temple was built there; it is interesting how the treaty sought to defend Jewish rights in this region with such statements. In this context, the Deal of the Century purported to bring peace and prosperity to the Holy Land and puts an end to the conflict between Palestine and Israel is simply not true; considering the balance of rights between the parties, and how it privileged the Jews. This is another fact that shows that the historical reality behind the important attribute to the region according to Jewish belief has been ignored. Because when the same part of the issue within the text is reviewed, the statements regarding the importance of Bayt Al-Maqdis for Muslims are both illusive and insufficient:

“For Islam, Jerusalem acquires prominence as stated in the Holy Koran: “Glory to Him who made His Servant go by night from the Sacred Mosque (al-Masjid al-Haram) to the Farthest Mosque (al-Masjid al-Aqsa) whose surroundings We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs.” According to Islamic tradition, the verse refers to the Prophet Muhammad’s nocturnal journey from Mecca to Jerusalem (al-Isra’); he arrives at the area of the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, where

he ascends to Heaven (al-Mi'raj), to meet the earlier prophets and receive the commandment of prayer. In early Islam, when Muhammad had taken his followers from Mecca to Medina, he established Jerusalem as the direction of Islamic prayer before later changing the direction of prayer to Mecca. There have been Muslim rulers who also emphasized the religious importance of Jerusalem. The Ummayyad Caliphate, based in Damascus, offered Jerusalem as an alternative place of pilgrimage when Mecca was controlled by a rival caliphate. The victory of Saladin over the Crusaders in 1187 led to a revival of Islamic interest in Jerusalem, and in 1517, Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent rebuilt its walls and religious sites. Today, it is widely considered the third holiest site in Islam.” (US Government Document, 2020, p.16)

When this part of the agreement is considered, the significance of Masjid Al-Aqsa for Muslims is limited only to Isra and Miraj, which also means that the importance that Muslims attribute to the region is restricted to the time of Prophet Muhammad. To limit the importance of Masjid Al-Aqsa for Muslims only within this miracle and to ignore its predecessors means distorting the truth in both the historical and religious context as previously explained. This could be understood that the importance of Masjid Al-Aqsa and therefore Jerusalem for Jews stems from a period far before the Muslim era. This implies that Muslims violated the existence of the Jews in the region, or that the rights of the Jews to have the sovereignty of the region are much stronger since their existence there dates back much further and it is incomparable in this sense.

The document of the Deal clearly projects which state will keep the sovereignty and status quo of Masjid Al-Aqsa in the future:

“Unlike many previous powers that had ruled Jerusalem, and had destroyed the holy sites of other faiths, the State of Israel is to be commended for safeguarding the religious sites of all and maintaining a religious status quo. Given this commendable record for more than half a century, as well as the extreme sensitivity

regarding some of Jerusalem’s holy sites, we believe that this practice should remain and that all of Jerusalem’s holy sites should be subject to the same governance regimes that exist today. In particular, the status quo at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif should continue uninterrupted.

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.” (US Government Document, 2020, p.16)

According to the document, the claim that states before Israel destroyed the Holy Land does not exactly reflect the historical fact. Because prior to the British Mandate, which laid the groundwork for the establishment of the state of Israel in the region, the prosperity established by the Ottoman administration of four centuries proves this claim completely wrong. The city witnessed a long period of political stability and economic prosperity as well as an academic and architectural renaissance not only during the Ottoman reign but also under the reign of previous Islamic civilizations. (Abu Shammalah, 2019) The Crusaders’ period, which was the greatest massacre witnessed by the Holy Land, has been repeating in the Holy Land with its physical, political, economic, and religious dimensions eight centuries later by the Zionist project. (Abu Shammalah, 2019) In this context, the first thing Israel did when it seized all of Jerusalem in 1967 as part of the “Judaization of the Holy Land” project, which began with Israel declaring its presence in the region, was to demolish the historic Magharibah neighborhood (Moroccan Quarter) adjacent to the western side of Al-Aqsa Mosque, including its endowments, mosques, schools, and *zawiyas*. (Abu Shammalah, 2019) Therefore, to state that Israel has established security in the region and maintained religious and political stability would be an assessment that contradicts many historical cases. Moreover, the statement that

the future administrative authority of Masjid Al-Aqsa will continue to be entirely under Israeli control indicates that this destruction and Judaization project will continue. The fact that this document definitively increases and supports Israel's authority over Masjid Al-Aqsa also raises serious doubts over whether Masjid Al-Aqsa will continue to exist as a structure in the future. This is because the most important goal for Israel is to destroy Masjid Al-Aqsa, which is the symbol of Bayt al-Maqdis, and to build the Temple of Solomon in its place. According to the agreement, the fact that in the future Masjid Al-Aqsa will be transformed into a tourist destination open to all religions shifts the function of the Masjid for Muslims hence provides the basis for Israel to rebuild the Temple of Solomon.

Once again, the Deal of the Century released by the Trump administration manifests that Israel would have sovereignty over most of Bayt al-Maqdis, with the Palestinians able to obtain some small areas in the eastern part of the city on the other side of an Israeli security barrier. At the same time it provokes the idea that it is up to the Palestinian people to achieve a comprehensive peace by accepting the Deal and its state of affairs wholly, which conceals those who ignore historical and religious facts in the region and manipulate authentic facts according to their political agenda.

In the end, one can conclude that Deal of the Century is an instrument serving the annexation plan of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the rest of the territories of Palestine by handing over the sovereignty of the Holy Land to Israel.

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