

# **Chapter 3**

## **Defending Islamic Jerusalem: The Debate over the Muslims' Sacred Journey and Arab-Israeli Normalization**

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### **1. Introduction**

In the wake of the Arab-Israeli normalization in 2020, many analysts have made a huge effort to find out the immediate factors for that move. However, there has been a tendency to ignore what seems to be indirect or irrelevant in a quest for a lean description about the transformation in the Arab-Israeli relationship. In this presentation I would like to discuss the case of the debate on Muslims' visits to Israeli-occupied Jerusalem.

Since 1967, when Israel occupied the eastern part of Jerusalem, whether Arab Muslims would be allowed to visit their holy sites there has been a topic of debate. The majority of Arab Muslims believed that they should avoid such visits, which might be misinterpreted as their acceptance of the Israeli authority over occupied Jerusalem. However, in the 2010s, some Muslim thinkers and politicians began initiatives to urge Arab Muslims to visit Jerusalem's holy sites in order to give assistance to the local Palestinians who were oppressed by the Israeli occupation policies. While initially such callings were heavily criticized, in the middle of the 2010s, the idea of visiting Jerusalem under the Israeli rule gained status as one legitimate option. By reviewing the debate of the 2010s, I intend to reveal an overlooked dimension of the

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Arab-Israeli rapprochement and attempt to describe the changes in their relationship in a broader sense.



Figure 1. Al-Aqsa Mosque

Source: Author

As many of you know, in September 2020, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Israel inked a peace treaty at a ceremony held at the White House in Washington. Following this two more countries, Sudan and Morocco decided to make peace with Israel too, and it seems more countries will join. Such moves have been explained by the common factors like the necessity of security cooperation, or an interest in building a better relationship with the US government, and even further the need for economic and commercial ties, which have been developed covertly since the 1980s.

These are certainly the direct factors toward Arab-Israeli rapprochement, but on the other hand, these immediate elements to explain the causes of Arab-Israeli rapprochement may not be sufficient to understand the changes in the Arab-Israeli relationship in a comprehensive way. So in other words, there is a risk of narrowing our perspective and a tendency to ignore the topics that are not evidently relevant to diplomatic rapprochement. For instance, prior to

the governmental rapprochement seen in 2020, Arab-Israeli contacts in sporting events, for example, started to be seen sporadically such as in the competitions of judo or bicycle racing. So such a cultural phenomenon would not be directly linked to or directly related to the governmental rapprochement, but it should not be overlooked in order to identify the transformation in the Arab-Israeli relationship.

Then what is required is not only to find the immediate causes of Arab-Israeli normalization in a sophisticated way, but also to reexamine that move broadly like a crustal movement or a crustal change of the earth.

In this context, this chapter deals with the debate on whether Muslims are allowed to visit Jerusalem under occupation. First of all, in Islamic tradition, visiting Jerusalem has been highly recommended throughout history. But since 1967, when the Israeli Forces occupied the eastern part of Jerusalem, visiting there has long been avoided. because such visits by the Muslims would amount to their recognition of the Israeli authority.

Nevertheless, the opposition to visiting Jerusalem under Israeli occupation has diluted or waned in Arab Islamic discourses since the 2010s. I will attempt to explain how the opinion about Muslims visiting Jerusalem was changed, and how such a taboo was broken in the 2010s. Such a transformation in the Muslims' way of thinking did not reach to the Arab-Israeli diplomatic rapprochement directly, but it would deserve attention as a part of the intra-Arab dynamics. These dynamics indicate the changes in the Arab-Muslim view or attitude towards Israel, or their views about the relationship with Israel. So, through this change in the debate, the dilution of the boycott can be seen as one symptom of Arab-Israeli rapprochement. This is the main thesis or main argument of this presentation.

## **2. Logic of Opponents: Boycott and Anti-Normalization**

In this section, I will use the term “opponents” for those who stand against the Muslims’ visit to Israeli occupied Jerusalem, and I will call those who stand for the visit to Jerusalem “advocators.”

Historically, some Azhari scholars expressed their opposition to visiting Jerusalem under the occupation. The first example is ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud (1910–1978) who served as Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar from 1973 to 1978. When Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt, visited Jerusalem to make peace with Israel in 1977, Shaykh Mahmud declined to accompany him. The details of this anecdote are not clear, but many people today regard Shaykh Mahmud as a forerunner of the opponents to visiting Jerusalem under the occupation.

Additionally, Jadd al-Haqq (1917–1996), who served as Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar from 1982 to 1996, articulated his opposition to Muslims visiting Jerusalem under the occupation. He said, “The Muslim who goes to Jerusalem is guilty,” and a priority for Muslims is to refrain from visiting Jerusalem until it is returned to its native people, the Palestinians. This remark came on the occasion of the Oslo Accords in 1993, between Israel and the PLO, when some Muslims began to think about visiting Jerusalem in a peaceful mood. However, Shaykh Jadd al-Haqq refuted such an idea.

Further, al-Azhar has repeatedly issued its official statement as an institution that opposes the visit to Occupied Jerusalem. For example, Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi (1928–2010), who was Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar from 1996 to 2010, declared that visiting Jerusalem will not take place as long as it remains under Israeli occupation, and he said this applied to all Azhari scholars. Sayyid Tantawi considered visiting would amount to a recognition of the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation of

Jerusalem. In this way, al-Azhar has persistently been against visiting Occupied Jerusalem, and this fact seems to have had a huge significance in the Sunni world until today.

The next case is that of Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926-2022), who was one of the most famous scholars of this time. He opposed visiting Occupied Jerusalem more harshly than the shaykhs of al-Azhar, and it was al-Qaradawi who was seen as a staunch enemy by the advocates.



Figure 2. Yusuf al-Qaradawi

Source: Getty Images

In 1997, in the al-Jazeera television program “Shariah and Life,” al-Qaradawi expressed his opposition to visiting Jerusalem under the Israeli occupation. He stated, “As long as Jerusalem remains under the spears of the Israelis and under its control, the one who visits it must take permission from Israel. So from the perspective of shari‘a this is

not permissible, because al-Qaradawi said this visit would mean our recognition of the Israeli rule.”

And also in his book concerning the question of Muslims visiting Jerusalem, al-Qaradawi begins his fatwa by stating that it is required for Muslims to reclaim their usurped lands by sacrificing their fortune and themselves, and he added that if the Muslims cannot take them back, then Allah imposes on the believers to boycott their enemy. Following this he finally stated, “the visit to Jerusalem is clearly illegal, even if it is called religious tourism.”

Here we can see, despite the question being about visiting Jerusalem, al-Qaradawi started his fatwa by explaining the legal rules on usurped Muslim lands. This is because he sees it as a political issue related to war and occupation, rather than a religious issue related to the pilgrimage. This is al-Qaradawi’s understanding which is similar to the understanding of all the opponents.

### **3. Birth of the Advocators: Individual Callings and Dawn of Heated Controversy**

Already since the 1990s, though sporadically, some figures have called for visiting Jerusalem, but these were pushed to the margins in the past. However, since the 2010s, the longstanding stance in opposition to visiting Jerusalem has been reexamined in the Arab-Islamic world. The debate over the permissibility for Muslims to visit Jerusalem began with the remarks made by Mahmud ‘Abbas (1935–), the President of the Palestinian Authority since 2004, and Mahmud al-Habbash (1963–) who was their religious advisor. In February 2012, in an international conference about Jerusalem, ‘Abbas urged Arabs and Muslims worldwide to visit Jerusalem in order to support the resistance of the local Palestinians. He expressed, “Visiting the prisoner is a

support for him, it does not mean normalization with the prison guard.” So he compared Occupied Jerusalem to the prisoner and Israel to the prison guard.

‘Abbas made these claims based on his own religious and historical understanding. He stated that it’s not forbidden to visit Jerusalem. He said there is no word either in the Quran or the Hadith today to prohibit the visit, so no one prohibited the visit throughout history, even when Jerusalem had fallen under foreign occupation, such as to the Crusaders. On this point, he issued a quasi-fatwa and this received much criticism.

Also, totally agreeing with ‘Abbas, Mahmud al-Habbash played a major role in building a rationale for advocating the visit to Jerusalem even under the Israeli Occupation, and he explained his stance from both religious and political points of view.

Concerning the religious basis, al-Habbash considered the visit to Jerusalem as a command by the Prophet and expressed it as a legitimate religious right. So, in his understanding, no one can prevent the visit to Jerusalem except an oppressor.

Regarding the political context, al-Habbash claimed that the Muslim visit would confirm Arab Islamic rights over Jerusalem and contribute to reviving the local Palestinian economy through the visitors’ purchasing activities. In order to justify the visit to Jerusalem under the occupation, al-Habbash referred to some historical evidence. He used the example of the Hadith about when Prophet Muhammad asked to visit Jerusalem. At that time Jerusalem was under the authority of the Roman Empire, but the Prophet did not impose any condition on Muslims visiting Jerusalem. So al-Habbash confirmed it by such an example, and his thesis is that visiting Jerusalem is permitted or remains permitted, even under the Israeli occupation today.

Appeals to visit Jerusalem by ‘Abbas and al-Habbash in 2012 received a great deal of attention, chiefly because, coinciding with

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their appeals, two internationally renowned religious figures visited Jerusalem. In April 2012, a famous Sufi leader, al-Habib ‘Ali al-Jifri (1971–), visited Jerusalem, and two weeks later ‘Ali Jum‘a, the Grand Mufti of Egypt at that time, followed him. Their visits had a major impact on the Arab Islamic world, which brought about a heated controversy.



Figure 3. ‘Ali Jum‘a, the Grand Mufti of Egypt  
Source: Getty Images

First, ‘Ali al-Jifri visited Jerusalem escorted by a Jordanian Prince, and according to his statement, al-Jifri visited Jerusalem with longing for the Holy City. He explained, “I asked Allah for guidance whether or not to visit al-Aqsa mosque and my heart became delighted for this decision.” Against the critics, he justified his visit by citing the historical evidence similar that of al-Habbash, and further, he emphasized the need to show solidarity with the Palestinians, and espoused the political and economic benefits for them by visiting Jerusalem.

Then, two weeks later, ‘Ali Jum‘a visited Jerusalem, and this time he was invited and accompanied by the Jordanian Prince Ghazi bin Muhammad, the religious advisor of King Abdullah II. His visit sparked



a controversy widely. Al-Qaradawi once again issued a statement banning the visit to occupied Jerusalem, while on the other hand, al-Habbash and 'Ali al-Jifri praised the visit of 'Ali Jum'a, and after he came back from Jerusalem, Jum'a recounted that his visit was an informal one and did not represent his official position as a Grand Mufti. He stated that he did not consider his visit to be an act of normalization because he said, Jordanian authorities arranged all his visit and there was no Israeli hand involved in his visit.

Further, he justified his visit by saying that by our failure to visit Jerusalem and by leaving it to the Israelis, the Israelis consider the city is theirs. So such are the claims by 'Ali al-Jifri and 'Ali Jum'a, and also Mahmud al-Habbash and Mahmud 'Abbas. These are the starting ideas of the advocates.

#### **4. Growth of “Advocators”: Consensus-Building and Endorsement of an Official Body**

After these callings, there was a growth of advocates through consensus building sentiment and the endorsement of official bodies. The move to break the traditional taboo to visit occupied Jerusalem gained more force by the conference entitled “Road to Jerusalem” “al-Tariqa ila al-Quds” in Arabic, which was held in Amman in 2014. There were over 150 Islamic scholars and politicians, as well as lawyers from Jordan, and al-Habbash also participated, with most of the participants being from the advocates block, with only a few opponents present.

The final resolution of this conference was issued as a form of collective consensus building like a collective fatwa. Firstly, this resolution sets out some segments among the Muslims who are specifically encouraged to visit Jerusalem. The resolution said that there

is no difficulty for the following people to visit al-Aqsa mosque. The first segment is Palestinians, regardless of their nationalities, and the second is Muslims with passports from countries outside the Islamic world. There is no further explanation about these words, but it may mean Muslims living in the US or Western countries. So this resolution did not necessarily encourage the Muslims to visit on a full scale. Such an idea of segmentation was unprecedented in the previous individual campaigns.

Secondly, this conference made some conditions to be followed when visiting Jerusalem. For instance, the resolution urged the Muslims to go shopping and stay in hotels sponsored by Palestinian or Jordanian tour groups, and the underlying idea was that visiting Jerusalem can be permitted insofar as it serves the public interest of the local Palestinian society and thus clarified by this point, the visit will not become a form of normalization from their perspective.

Therefore, it was a remarkable breakthrough, in that a fatwa to permit Muslims visit to Jerusalem was issued in the form of a collective consensus by an academic conference, making this a huge accomplishment by the advocates. Such consensus building on the permission to visit Jerusalem was eventually developed into an official endorsement and Islamic tourism promotions by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Firstly, in November 2014, Iyad Madani, the Secretary General of OIC declared that Jerusalem was selected as the Islamic tourism capital for 2015. Then, as early as January 2015, he himself visited Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Mosque. There, Madani called for cooperation between the tourism ministers in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Palestine, in order to connect the Umrah, the minor pilgrimage to Mecca in Saudi Arabia, with the visit to Jerusalem. Madani wanted to connect Muslim travelers through religious package tours; he also famously stated in Jerusalem,

“Coming to al-Aqsa Mosque is a right for me as well as every Muslim.”

Madani’s controversial visit was followed by a fatwa in 2015, issued by the International Islamic Fiqh Academy affiliated to OIC, which declared that a legal verdict on the visit to Jerusalem is recommended and desirable, but it also stated that there was a debate on the interests and disadvantages that would be incurred by the Muslims’ visits, and that the academy would leave such evaluation to the politicians of Muslim countries.



Figure 4. OIC Journal

Source: OIC Website <[https://issuu.com/oic-journal/docs/oic\\_journal\\_issue\\_28\\_en](https://issuu.com/oic-journal/docs/oic_journal_issue_28_en)>

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So this fatwa did not prohibit the visit, but the statement in the fatwa was used as the advocates' fatwa for Muslims to visit Jerusalem under the occupation. We can see how binary the controversy is. There is no middle point stance in this debate, only "for" or "against."

Additionally, OIC held several promotional activities to encourage Muslims to visit Jerusalem in the framework of Islamic tourism. In November 2015, OIC organized a workshop on the religious tourism of Jerusalem, in which the main participants were the Palestinian and Jordanian ministers for tourism and religious affairs. The final recommendations based on the fatwa of the Fiqh Academy encouraged the Muslims to visit, especially those who had no visa problem when entering Palestine, such as European residents. Further, it was recommended to visit Jerusalem through Jordan as part of one's Hajj or Umrah, and to visit for the intention of benefitting the Palestinian economy. So these decisions are apparently similar to the fatwa of the Road to Jerusalem Conference in 2014.

Consequently, from the conference in Jordan and related activities, or from OIC, visiting Jerusalem, even under the Israeli occupation, suddenly obtained a position as one of the legitimate options, if not the mainstream, and so 2015 can be seen as a watershed for the advocates.

Here, I'd like to add a few words concerning the resistance towards Muslim tourism. The government of Israel did not state its specific opinion on this debate, but the government may welcome the advocates as far as they seem to remain just as tourists and not as political activists, because in many cases, this very government has tried to depict Israel as a religious tourism country. Additionally, the mayor of Jerusalem had once expressed his wish to have the city become a destination for religious tourism by members of the three Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, of course under the Israeli sovereignty.

In reality, there have not been many Muslim tourists coming to Israel

until today. Indeed, since the 2010s, the number of Muslims has gradually grown, but they are mainly coming from Indonesia or Malaysia, or some Western countries. The number of Arab tourists in particular still remains comparatively small, which implies that the idea of visiting Jerusalem has never taken root in the public domain, even after the advocates' bloc got some support in the sphere of Arab Islamic discourses.

## **5. Persistent Stance and Partial Compromise of “Opponents”**

The advocates have enjoyed significant momentum since the 2010, and their ideas are no longer seen as strange nor heretical, so in this last section, I would like to discuss a sign of partial compromise among the opponents block.

One remarkable example is Ahmad al-Raysuni (1953–), who serves as the head of IUMS (International Union of Muslim Scholars), which was founded by Yusuf al-Qaradawi.



Figure 5. Ahmad al-Raysuni

Source: Official Website <<https://raissouni.net/>>

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In 2019 Ahmad al-Raysuni suddenly called on Muslims around the world to visit Jerusalem and support the Palestinian Jerusalemites financially and morally. He stated that not everyone who visits Jerusalem is a normalizer, and he pointed out that the important thing is the intention and the objective of the Muslim visitor to Jerusalem.

Al-Raysuni thought that the visit to occupied Jerusalem itself was not equal to normalization, a way of thinking similar to the advocates and quite the opposite to the traditional understanding of IUMS and al-Qaradawi, so the callings made by al-Raysuni surprised his followers and caused a serious controversy among them.

However, his remarks did not appear out of nowhere. Already in 2016, among the scholars of IUMS, there had been a momentum to revise the fatwa. Some scholars are inclined to allow Muslims in general to visit Jerusalem and try to limit the ban to just public figures. The aim is to provide the Palestinians with economic support and make their lives sustainable. This move can be seen as a sign that the idea of the advocates was gaining support to some extent, even among the longest standing opponents.

And another example is the statement of ‘Abbas Shuman, the deputy Shaykh of al-Azhar, which showed a sign of changes in al-Azhar’s long standing position of opposing the Muslims visiting Jerusalem. In 2018, there was an international conference on Jerusalem organized by al-Azhar, and Shuman confirmed that there is no dispute about the religious virtue of visiting Jerusalem, and he also clearly affirmed that the official stance of al-Azhar is to refuse the visit to Jerusalem under the occupation, because there is no benefit in that. However, following these remarks, interestingly, Shuman also stated the benefits and disadvantages that would be made by a Muslim’s visit should be assessed by the local Palestinians and the political leaders of other Islamic countries. Further, he emphasized the need for more discussions and studies on the topic of

Muslims visiting occupied Jerusalem.

In other words, Shuman did not permit the Muslim visit to Jerusalem right away, but he indicated that al-Azhar's stance could be changed at some point after discussion. He did not see the opposition stance of al-Azhar as a fixed one and he left the final opinion open ended. This may be a slight but remarkable change in the position of al-Azhar that has long firmly and categorically opposed to Muslims visiting occupied Jerusalem.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, visiting Jerusalem under the Israel occupation, which was once taboo, gained a certain status as one of the legitimate options in just a few years during the 2010s. Among the circle of advocates, two things were emphasized. The first was the necessity of supporting the local Palestinians economically and morally, or politically, or by any means necessary, and the second point was the religious importance of visiting Jerusalem, which is very apparent from the arguments of Mahmud al-Habbash.

The process of the advocates gaining power was formed as shown in Figure 6. Firstly, it was initiated by individual campaigns or callings, and soon it became known around the world by the visits of internationally famous figures like 'Ali al-Jifri and 'Ali Jum'a.



Figure 6. Advocators Gaining Power

Source: Author

Secondly, in the form of international conferences, these individual efforts were transformed into a collective consensus building, and eventually the idea to visit Jerusalem was endorsed and promoted by the official body, the OIC. While the opponents of this idea are still persistent, some of them have started to show a partial compromise or self-criticism.

Thus, while the idea of visiting Jerusalem has certainly never been popularized in the streets of Arab countries because there have not been so many Arab visitors coming to Israel, it has taken its own place in Arab Islamic discourses, and the long standing collective norm of the Arab boycott to visiting occupied Jerusalem has certainly waned since the 2010s.

In this author's opinion, this may show a tendency for Arab Muslims to be less hesitant to get involved with Israel, and such a dilution of the boycott can be seen as one symptom of Arab Israeli rapprochement in a broader sense, even if it has no direct relation to a move of governmental or diplomatic rapprochement.

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