

Israel's Ban on the Muslim Call to Prayer in Jerusalem is the Tip of the Iceberg

By [Prof. Kamel Hawwash](#)

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Something is in the air in Jerusalem and if Israel has its way it soon won't be; the Muslim call to prayer – the adhaan – is under threat. The state which is built upon the ethnic cleansing of the majority of the indigenous Palestinian people is inching its way towards banning the call for prayer, which was probably first heard in Jerusalem in 637 AD. That was the year in which Caliph Umar Ibn Al-Khattab travelled to Palestine to accept its surrender from Patriarch Sophronius, bringing a six-month siege of the Holy City to a peaceful end.

The required respect for people of other faiths was exemplified by one of Caliph Umar's first acts upon entering Jerusalem. He understood the sensitivity surrounding religious sites and the potential danger of changing the status quo. He thus declined an invitation from Sophronius to pray in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre lest Muslims turn it into a mosque. Instead, he stepped outside the Church to perform the midday prayer; a mosque named after him was later built on the site and exists to this day. This is in sharp contrast to the establishment of Israel in 1948, when 750,000 Palestinians were driven from their homeland at gunpoint. Villages and towns were ethnically cleansed and wiped from the face of the earth, and their mosques were also [destroyed](#) or turned into synagogues or museums; at least two became cafes and one became a cowshed.

Israel captured East Jerusalem in 1967 and one of Israel's first acts as the occupying power was to raze the 770-year old Moroccan Quarter of East Jerusalem in order to improve access to Al-Buraq Wall, which Jews call the Western ("Wailing") Wall, in order to facilitate their prayers there. Just a year after issuing the Balfour Declaration in 1917, Britain had actually dismissed attempts by Chaim Weizmann to vacate the Moroccan Quarter and to place the Western Wall under Jewish ownership. Fifty years later, Israel had no qualms about bulldozing the Shaikh Eid Mosque which had stood since the time of Saladin.



Christian sites

Churches continue to come under attack by the Israelis. Benzi Gopstein, the leader of extreme right-wing Jewish group Lehava, voiced support for [arson](#) attacks against Christian churches in 2015; he has also called Christians [“blood sucking vampires”](#) who should be expelled from Israel.

Jewish extremists have on a number of occasions targeted churches in what are called [“price tag”](#) attacks. There was a particular rise in these in the lead-up to Pope Francis’s visit to the Holy Land in 2014. A top Catholic official received death threats and Hebrew graffiti appeared on the wall of the Notre Dame of Jerusalem Centre, the local headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church: “Death to Arabs and Christians and to everyone who hates Israel”.

At the end of last month, the Israeli flag was raised at the Eastern entrance to the [Church of the Holy Sepulchre](#), enraging the Christian community and raising serious concerns about Israel’s commitment to protecting Christian sites. The Church fought a [two-year battle](#) with its water supplier which threatened to cut the supply due to unpaid bills, which was settled in 2012. Add to this Israel’s restrictions on visits by Christians to the holy sites in Jerusalem, and on Christians from Gaza visiting either Jerusalem or Bethlehem, and the difficulties faced by Palestinian Christians becomes clear.

Muslim sites

The situation for key Muslim sites in the occupied Palestinian territories is even more precarious than those of Christians. When East Jerusalem was occupied in 1967, the Israeli flag flew for a short time over the holiest site, Al-Aqsa Mosque. The mosque was set alight in 1969, reportedly by an Australian tourist; the damage included the complete destruction of a 1,000-year old pulpit.

An agreement between the Israelis and the Jordanian custodians of the holy sites, which covers the whole of the area on which Al-Aqsa Mosque stands, stated that the Jordanian *Waqf* would administer the compound and that Jews would be able to visit but not pray. The status quo has largely stood the test of time but in recent years has come under great strain, particularly since Ariel Sharon's "visit" to the Noble Sanctuary of Al-Aqsa in 2000, which triggered the Second Intifada. The visit seems to have given Jewish extremists the green light not only to dream about praying on what they call the "Temple Mount" but also to plan to build a Jewish temple thereon; the plans include the destruction of Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock Mosque.

Recent years have seen an upsurge in the frequency and extent of incursions by extremists during which the use of the sanctuary by Muslim worshippers is restricted. This practice has increased tensions and prompted fears of a change to the "status quo", moving the Jordanian government to act by withdrawing its ambassador from Tel Aviv in protest. Clashes have erupted frequently between Israeli security forces and Palestinians devoted to protecting their mosque. Israeli forces have also harassed worshippers, banning some from entering the Noble Sanctuary or withholding their Jerusalem ID cards, without which they struggle to move around the territories. Such practices were a major contributory factor to the ongoing year-long uprising in which individual Palestinians have attacked mainly security forces but in some instances Israeli civilians in what has been termed the "knife intifada".

Another city that has suffered disproportionately, probably due to its religious significance, is Al-Khalil (Hebron). The city is home to 120,000 Palestinians whose lives are blighted by the planting of 700 particularly extreme Israeli settlers in the centre of the city; they are protected by hundreds of Israeli soldiers and a system of closed military zones and checkpoints. The city is home to the Ibrahimi Mosque which Jews call the Cave of the Patriarchs. The mosque was the scene of a terrorist attack in 1994 by a Jewish American-Israeli named Baruch Goldstein who killed 29 Muslim worshippers while they were praying; although the murderous attack was condemned by the Israeli government it was – and is – applauded by some Israelis, particularly the extreme right-wing settlers. [Israel's response](#) was – perversely – to impose greater restrictions on Palestinians and to divide the Ibrahimi Mosque physically, as well as to open it up exclusively to Jews for ten days of the year and to Muslims for another ten days.

Restricting the call to prayer

Israel's restrictions on access to the holy sites in Jerusalem and Hebron have recently been complemented with bans on the daily call to prayer. In Hebron, the practice has been ongoing for a number of years and included the call being silenced 49 times in [January 2014](#), 52 times in December 2015 and 83 times [last month](#).

The practice seems to be spreading to Jerusalem. Israel recently banned three mosques in [Abu Dis](#) from broadcasting the morning call. Lawyer Bassam Bahr, head of a local committee in Abu Dis, condemned the "unjustified ban", saying that "Israel attacks Palestinians in all aspects of their lives." It seems that the ban was a response to complaints from illegal settlers in nearby Pisgat Zeev who complained to Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat about the "noise pollution" coming from local mosques. Both Barkat and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu are clearly set on applying the "unbearable noise" law to the call for prayer.

The mayor and prime minister know the importance of the call to prayer to the Muslim community; their plan to eradicate it from the air of Jerusalem to appease illegal settlers shows that neither has the wisdom of Caliph Umar. Their plan has not only enraged Palestinians, but also damaged yet further attempts to create a climate that will lead to peace; it is most definitely part of Israel's attempts to Judaize Jerusalem and empty the Holy City of its Islamic and Christian heritage. The ban is, in fact, just the tip of the Judaisation iceberg.

As far the settlers objecting to the Muslim call to prayer are concerned, there is an easy solution. They could leave the houses that they have built — illegally — on land stolen from its Palestinian owners and either go back to where they came from in North America or Europe or live within the internationally recognised borders of the state whose citizenship they carry. That would be the most moral of solutions, although it is doubtful if they know what morality is.

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Articles by: **[Prof. Kamel Hawwash](#)**

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