Narratives of Jerusalem and its Sacred Compound
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Introduction
While theorists of nationalism have described the masses as followers of elites who imagine or invent identities for them, Hedva Ben-Israel believes that the creators of nations have had to act within the framework of the popular culture and consciousness. They must be acquainted from the outset with religious, linguistic and cultural traditions and have to contend with them before they can begin to shape them according to their aims. Religion is thus an effective cultural element, one which nation-builders employed during the pre-modern era as well. Religious symbols, declarations of the homeland as sacred territory and processes of sanctification of the nation, the nation’s founding fathers, national heroes, and areas of the military front, have been effective tools via which nationalist elites have, consciously or unconsciously, imagined composed narratives, and activated and mobilized their nations. This article deals with the employment of religious symbols for national identities and national narratives by using the sacred compound in Jerusalem (The Temple Mount/al-Aqsa) as a case study.

The narrative of The Holy Land involves three concentric circles, each encompassing the other, with each side having their own names for each circle. These are: Palestine/Eretz Israel (The Land of Israel); Jerusalem/al-Quds and finally The Temple Mount/al-Aqsa compound. The innermost circle – the sacred compound in Jerusalem — is the paramount issue. It is a central symbol of national and religious identity for both sides, and therefore the element of greatest conflict. The battle over the myths and narratives surrounding this compound, as well as the middle circle of Jerusalem as a whole, serve as a vehicle to support the meta-narrative of both Israelis and Palestinians over the outer circle – the right to the Holy Land, to Palestine/Eretz Israel.

Within the struggle over public awareness of Jerusalem’s importance, one particular site is at the eye of the storm – the Temple Mount and its Western Wall – the Jewish Kotel – or, in Muslim terminology, the al-Aqsa compound (alternatively: al-Haram al-Sharif) including the al-Buraq Wall. From both the Jewish and the Muslim points of view, the Foundation Stone, the Rock adorned with the golden dome, is the “Rock of our existence” – a symbol of religious-national identity – and thus also (as it were) the “stone” of contention. The site’s status as a sacred space makes it the natural focal point of the power struggle, including claims to sovereignty, efforts to exclude the opposing group and to claim recognition and inclusion. This situation is all the more true when the site in question lies at the center of a national conflict between two peoples who also represent, to a great extent, two essentially different religions and cultures. “Al-Aqsa” for the Palestinian-Arab-Muslim side is not merely a mosque mentioned in the Qur’an within the context of the Prophet Muhammad’s miraculous Night Journey to al-Aqsa, which according to tradition concluded with his ascension to heaven (and prayer with all of the prophets and the Jewish and Christian religious figures who preceded him); rather, it also constitutes a unique symbol of identity, one around which various political objectives may be formulated, plans of action drawn up and masses mobilized for their realization.
Thus, Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims are actors in the field of religiously-inspired political activity. The Jewish party to the conflict is active in this area on several planes: the first plane is that of ideology. Zionism as a national movement bears an inherent religious message which poses a challenge to Arabs and Muslims. Zion is Jerusalem and the return to Zion – as well as the ingathering of exiles in the Holy Land – is based on historical justifications taken from sacred writings (God’s promise to Abraham) and has been granted legitimacy by the Christian world which accepts the Old Testament – to widespread Muslim displeasure. The second plane is that of the struggle for the Holy Land and for the holy sites. Despite the Israeli government’s secular nature, one can not overlook the post-1967 nationalist-messianic wave and the Jewish settler movement in the Palestinian territories as religiously-motivated phenomena that reflect Israeli mainstream positions. They are concerned by aggressive Jewish control exerted over places that, they claim, are holy to Muslims as well, such as Rachel’s Tomb, the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, the Western Wall plaza and other sites, and by the activities of the Temple Mount and the Jewish Temple movements. Thirdly, since the Oslo process there has been a significant rise in Israeli-Jewish awareness (including Jews who are not religiously observant) of the Temple Mount as a vital symbol of national and cultural identity. According to a poll conducted in February 2005, only 9% of the Jewish public is willing for sovereignty over the Temple Mount to pass entirely into Palestinian hands, while 51% insist on exclusive Israeli control of the site and 36% are prepared for joint-Palestinian-Israeli control. Ariel Sharon’s demonstrative Temple Mount visit in September 2000, as well as the attempts of right-wing Knesset members to visit the site just prior to the implementation of the Disengagement Plan from the Gaza Strip, are two examples that illustrate the Temple Mount’s upgrading as a national Jewish site. Jewish Temple Mount-related activity sends a message to the Arab-Muslim religious and political echelons that they are being confronted with a religious challenge no less than with a political rival, and they react within the twilight zone that lies between religion and politics.

a. Jewish Narrative
The Jewish narrative of Jerusalem is based on both the Biblical and the rabbinical texts (the traditions of the Mishna and Talmud, and Chazal). In addition to these traditional texts, Jewish scholars draw on archaeological findings. Particularly in the rabbinic texts, Jerusalem is often known by the name “Zion”, which is the mountain where King David’s fortress was said to be built and where, according to legend, David was buried. Although there are different Jewish historical interpretations and narratives, one can highlight a meta-narrative which is accepted by the majority of the Jewish people and by Israeli official authorities, which is based on the following chronology:

a 1. Jerusalem’s Antiquity
The official website of the current Jerusalem Municipality states: “Archaeological findings show that Jerusalem has been inhabited since 4,000 BCE. The city of Shalem is mentioned in ancient scrolls as early as 2,500 BCE”. Archaeological excavations reveal the antiquity of the human urban presence in what is called today Jerusalem since the middle-bronze age, between 3,300 and 2,200 BC. The existence of the city was mentioned in ancient Egyptian scripts and in the Tel al-Amarna correspondence. The Israeli narrative, thus, admits that there was an urban presence in the ancient space of today’s Jerusalem, which existed before the emergence of Judaism and
before the ancient Hebrews crystallized as a given people or nation. It was called Shalem and Yevus before the Hebrew era. However, the Israeli story stress on the event that turned the ancient pagan urban space into a central city, a political capital – on a founding event which is purely Jewish: King David’s conquest of Yerushalayim or the City of David (Ir David), which then became the focal center of the Jewish nation.  

a 2. Ca. 1000 BC – The City of David

The Israeli meta-narrative of Jerusalem underlines 3,000 years from its establishment of the holy city. In 1995 Israel announced plans to celebrate 3,000 years of the Jewish connection to Jerusalem. A special series of three postal-stamps indicating “Jerusalem” as a Jewish city was issued showing David, the Temple and the Knesset, indicating the historical continuity of these events over the three thousand years.

a 3. The First and Second Temples

According to the biblical narrative, the First Temple was built around 960 BC by David’s son, Solomon, and the united Israeli kingdom lasted until ca. 928 BC, when the Hebrews divided into two kingdoms: the southern kingdom of Judea and the northern kingdom of Israel. The First Temple existed 374 years until it was destroyed in 586 BC and the Hebrew elite were expelled to Babylon. It was there that the psalm, By the Waters of Babylon was believed to have been composed – ‘If I forget thee, Oh Jerusalem, may my right hand lose its cunning’. Following the defeat of the Babylonian Empire by Cyrus the Great of Persia, the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem 48 years after their expulsion, in 538 BC. 22 years later, in 519 BCE the building of the Second Temple was completed by Governor Zerubavel and the Hebrew returnees from Babylon. The Second Temple survived some 589 years. The presence of the Hebrews in the Holy Land from the thirteenth century BCE until their expulsion by the Roman general, Titus, in 70 CE lasted about 1,400 years. Judea survived as a Hebrew province under the Persian, Ptolemaic and Seleucid Empires. For about one century between 152-63 BCE, Judea enjoyed self-rule under the Hashmoneans. After Herod’s death in 4BCE, the Romans took over direct rule of the colony of Judea, with the Jews undertaking two great revolts against their oppressive rule, in 67-73 CE and 132-135 CEE. The second revolt of Bar Kochba against the Romans ended in a disastrous defeat in 135 AD. The Jews who were estimated as a people of 1.3 million people in Palestine lost half of its population during the revolt. Hadrian changed the name of the province of Judea into Syria-Palestina – a name which later on was known as Palestine, and as the Arabic Filastin. In addition, Hadrian rebuilt Jerusalem as a pagan city, renaming it Aelia Capitolina and forbidding Jews to enter except on Tisha B’Av, the Ninth of Av, the date commemorating the destruction of the two Temples.
4. Under the Romans and Byzantines - From Jerusalem to Tiberias

Even after the Bar Kochba Revolt, the Jews remained the majority of the people of the Holy Land, but their center of gravity moved to the Galilee – first to Usha, then Tzippori and later Tiberias. The Jews were recognized as a people and a cult under the Roman Empire and they had enjoyed autonomous political institutions (ha-Nesi’ut – patriarchy of the community), theological institutions (Sanhedrin), local municipal authorities and intra-community tax collection both in the land of Israel and the Diaspora. However, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the position of the Jews deteriorated as they became subject to anti-Jewish legislation. In the early fifth century they lost their autonomy and institutions of nationhood as the patriarchy and the Sanhedrin ended. Because of Christian persecution, the center of Jewish life moved to Babylon by the middle of the fifth century and Jews were no longer the majority in the land.

When the Muslim Arabs conquered Palestine in 636 CE, Jerusalem was populated by Christians, who had continued the Roman policy of excluding Jews. The Israeli narrative claims that throughout the entire period, from David’s conquest in 1,000 BCE until 636 CE, Jerusalem was Judaism’s spiritual center, even after Jews were excluded from entering (after 70CE) and central parts of Palestine, such as Judea, Samaria and the Galilee were mostly populated by Hebrew Jews. It admits that during the Byzantine period Jerusalem lost its Jewish gravity in favour of the Christians, but it argues that Jews were still substantially present in the Holy Land.

5. Under Muslim Rule (including the Crusader period) 636-1917

The Caliph `Umar b. al-Khattab received the surrender of Jerusalem from the Christian Patriarch Sophronius. According to the Muslim tradition, he re-located some Jewish families in Jerusalem. Under the Muslim dynasties from the Ummayads to the Ottomans, the Jews were considered an inferior community, which enjoyed the protection of the Muslim state (Dhimma) and also were granted internal autonomy. Their situation varied, depending on the political leadership, vacillating between toleration and discrimination. Only under the Crusaders were Jews excluded from Jerusalem. Indeed, during the first crusade, all the Jews living in Jerusalem were gathered together in the main synagogue which was then set alight, destroying the whole Jewish community in Jerusalem at the end of the twelfth century. Thus, Jews supported the Muslims in their battle against the Christian crusaders.

The Jewish narrative tells of their continuous presence in Palestine as a whole and in Jerusalem in particular throughout the centuries under Islam to present time. Whereas research accounts for the Jewish group as a minority in Jerusalem until the second half of the nineteenth century, Jews’ popular narrative maintains that they consisted a significant proportion of the population from the period of Saladin to the present, whilst recognising that centers in the Galilee, particularly Tiberias and Safed, were more important in the latter medieval period.

The current Jerusalem municipality website states that after English-Jewish leader and parliamentarian, Sir Moses Montefiore, purchased land in 1855 and established the first neighbourhood outside the walls called “Mishkenot Shaananim” “By 1900 there were 60 Jewish neighbourhoods outside the walls” of Jerusalem.
a 6. Jerusalem and the Temple in Exile
Jerusalem was the only capital of the Jewish people in their history and is considered as the holy city in Judaism. The Jewish meta-narrative tells of the yearning and longing of Jews in exile for 2,000 years to return to Zion, to re-build Jewish Jerusalem and to resurrect the Jewish Temple. Jerusalem assumes an important place in Jewish spirituality, in Jewish liturgy as seen in the words of the psalm ‘If I forget thee oh Jerusalem’, in daily prayers, and in the central feasts and worship and in the writings. The narrative highlights that the Jewish connection to Palestine remained consistently steadfast throughout the ages, with ongoing efforts to return, even if only to die and be buried on the Mount of Olives. All Jews, both in the holy land and the Diaspora, pray in the direction of Jerusalem; they mention its name constantly in their prayers, and end the Passover service with the words: “Next Year in Re-built Jerusalem”, The return and rebuilding of Jerusalem is mentioned at least four times in the blessings recited at the end of each meal. The destruction of the Temple looms large in Jewish consciousness: remembrance takes such forms as a special day of mourning, Tisha B’Av, which next to the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) is the only 25 hour fast day in the Jewish calendar, a corner of a house left partially unfinished, a woman’s makeup or jewellery remaining incomplete, and a glass smashed during the wedding ceremony. As well, when a person is buried, they are buried with some soil from the holy land to strengthen their connection to Zion.

a 7. British Mandate
The national political strife between Palestinian Arabs and Zionist Jews erupted at the beginning of the twentieth century and was exacerbated after the Balfour Declaration and the British conquest of Palestine in 1917. During the Mandate, Jews did not claim rights to the Temple Mount but only to its outer remnant of the Second Temple - the Western Wall. The Jewish claims and actions to establish their rights to public prayer (including a divider between the sections for male and female worship at the Wall) in this particular site was the trigger for the 1929 riots, in which dozens of Jews were massacred by Arabs in Hebron and elsewhere. The Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif was exclusively ruled by the Supreme Muslim Council headed by Haj Amin al-Husseini. Husseini convened a World Islamic Congress in Jerusalem in 1931 and employed the Western corridor of the Haram to bury high-ranking Muslim figures. The British Mandate government respected the Ottoman status-quo and the immunity of this shrine. The investigation committee of the Western Wall incident concluded that although the Western Wall plaza is Muslim-owned, the Jews had over time established rights of access and prayer at the site. However the Jews were ordered to refrain from expanding their ritual facilities.

a 8. Jordanian Jerusalem
East Jerusalem and the Old City were restored to Muslim rule following the 1948 War and the Rhodes Ceasefire Agreement of 1949. However, the Jordanians failed to make any arrangements to safeguard Jewish access to the Western Wall and the Mount of Olives Jewish cemetery. Jordan decided not to name Jerusalem as the Hashemite United Kingdom’s capital, and actually favored Amman over Jerusalem in almost every aspect. Israel declared Jerusalem as its capital. One should also remember that King Abdallah was assassinated in July 1951 by a pro-Husseini group while entering the al-Aqsa Mosque.
a. Since 1967
After Israel took over Jerusalem in June 1967, the situation of the city and of the Temple Mount compound was profoundly changed. The Western Wall was appropriated by the State in addition to its plaza and the Jewish Quarter; the Temple Mount was left for the Waqf administration, but the Israeli Police Force guards its surroundings and inside the site. Israelis retain two strategic assets of the compound: the keys to the Western Gate and the Mahkama building, overlooking the site, is occupied by the police. Shortly after the 1967 War, Jerusalem’s municipal boundaries were expanded to include Jordanian Jerusalem and its rural periphery (28 villages). Since then, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has focused more on issues related to the future of the city and its holy places. Israel, in its 1994 Peace accords with Jordan, committed itself to give priority to the Jordanian role with regard to the holy shrines of Islam in future peace negotiations with the Palestinians.

b. Jewish Denial of the Muslim Affiliation to Jerusalem
The Jewish-Israeli meta-narrative, based on the writings of Israeli Orientalists, denies the importance of Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa compound for the Muslims and Arabs. It emphasizes the fact that Muhammad changed the direction of prayer (qibla) from Jerusalem to Mecca (“while facing Mecca Muslims from our area are turning their back to Jerusalem”), and it stresses that the only period when Jerusalem was important to Muslim Arabs was the relatively short Ummayad rule between 661 to 750 CE, and particularly under Caliph `Abd al-Malik who built the Dome of the Rock on the site where Solomon’s Temple stood, and the al-Aqsa Mosque on a Byzantine church, towards the end of the seventh century CE. The Israeli meta-narrative ignores the numerous Islamic monuments and artefacts – madrasas, pilgrim hostels, sufi centers, and public kitchens established by the various Muslim rulers throughout their rule in Palestine. They argue that since the time of the Abbasids, who moved the political center from Damascus to Baghdad, Jerusalem was never a political center for any Muslim dynasty. Al-Aqsa, which is mentioned in the Qur’an, could not have been in Jerusalem which, during the Prophet Muhammad’s life time, was still in Christian Byzantine hands. Many Israelis believe that terming the Temple Mount compound “al-Aqsa” is a modern Muslim invention. In addition, they claim that whereas Jerusalem is mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible, it is not mentioned by its name even once in the Qur’an. Even after Saladin’s “liberation” of Jerusalem from the Crusaders, the Ayyubid al-Malik al-Kamil ceded Jerusalem in 1299 to the German Emperor Friedrich II – an event used by Israelis and Jews as a proof of how Jerusalem was not important for Muslims. After Saladin’s conquest, they argue that the city lapsed into obscurity and economic backwardness. Although high-ranking governors and rulers donated money and properties in order to establish monuments and Islamic learning institutions in Jerusalem, these were neglected and deteriorated in conjunction with the city’s economic decline.

In sum, most of Israeli Jews do not deny that the Muslims consider Jerusalem and al-Haram al-Sharif as their third holy city and shrine, however they believe that the holy status of the city and the al-Aqsa compound is a late development aimed at achieving points in the political arena.

c. Muslim Narrative via Israeli Eyes
Israeli Jews are aware of the fact that Palestinian Muslims belittle the Jewish affiliation to the holy sites and to Jerusalem, and of their tendency to deny any
authentic Jewish connection to Jerusalem. Despite this, Yasser Arafat’s denial of the existence of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem at the Camp David II talks genuinely shocked the Israeli public.\textsuperscript{32} The Muslim claim that the Western Wall was al-Buraq – identified with the beast that carried prophet Muhammad according to Muslim tradition on its nocturnal journey to al-Aqsa (Isra’) challenges the Jewish connection to this place.

Now, I shall move to survey the Arab and Muslim meta-narrative of Jerusalem based on the following sources: the official websites of the Arab League (AL)\textsuperscript{33} consisting of 22 Arab states, the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC)\textsuperscript{34} which comprises 57 Muslim countries, the OIC’s al-Quds Committee, and the al-Quds University website (The Jerusalem Studies Center).\textsuperscript{35} By analysing the Arab-Muslim narrative I will emphasize the major divergent issues between the two religious and national groups.

One can classify the diverse narratives between the Jewish and Arab narratives into three main themes: The primordial antiquity of the city, that is: who established the city, who populated it originally and what was its character; the importance of the city for the Muslim dynasties from the Abbasids until the Ottomans; and the denial of the affiliation of the “other” to the city and to its central holy places.

c 1. Primordial Antiquity
The common Arab-Muslim narrative tells of the ancient history of the city.\textsuperscript{36} In contrast to the Jewish narrative of 3,000 years for the City of David, the Arab-Muslim narrative clings to 5,000 years to Arab Yevus. The AL website states that “The Arab Canaanites migrated from the Arab Peninsula to al-Quds 5000 years ago”. They claim that the many names of the city reflect its history long before the Jews arrived Canaan and King David’s subsequent conquest and establishment of his capital in the city. The Jebusites and Canaanites are identified as Arab tribes who roamed the region 5,000 years ago (alternatively put: “45 generations ago”), and that the Arab Jebusites were those who built the city some 2,500 years BC. The “Arab” founding myth of Jerusalem aims at emphasizing that Arabs preceded the ancient Hebrews in the city in particular and in Palestine in general.\textsuperscript{37} The same chronology appears on the OIC website.\textsuperscript{38}

c 2. Muslim Dynasties
The dispute within Islam over Jerusalem’s sanctity ended with the victory of those who identified al-Quds as sacred and third in importance after the holy places of Mecca and Al-Madina, although there were long periods in which Jerusalem was relatively neglected by the central Muslim ruling authorities, mainly from the time of the Abbasid Caliphate, beginning in 750, until Saladin’s jihad to conquer it from the Crusaders at the end of the twelfth century, and again during most of the Ottoman period.\textsuperscript{39} The “fada’il al-Quds literature” (literature in praise of Jerusalem) and the traditions that were developed and disseminated by the Umayyads were preserved within the stock of obscure Islamic texts. Those currently seeking to resurrect Jerusalem’s importance in Islam and to elevate its level of sanctity are scouring this huge sea of texts and delving into forgotten traditions from it, redeeming them from oblivion and placing them at the center of public consciousness and discourse, in order to restore al-Quds within Muslim tradition to its former glory.
Those involved in upgrading Jerusalem’s sanctity within Islam have to contend with, among other things, the writings of the thirteenth and fourteenth century Hanbali legal scholar Taqi al-Din ibn-Taymiyya. He ruled that the rock in Jerusalem upon which the Dome of the Rock was built is a *qibla mansukha*, that is, a direction of prayer that was cancelled (in order to distinguish Muslims from Jews), and whose sanctity was thus revoked.\(^{40}\) The attempt to sanctify the rock, according to Ibn Taymiya, stemmed from the fact that Caliph Abd al-Malik wished to divert the *hajj* from Mecca to Jerusalem. He argued that if Jerusalem was to be sanctified, then the more important spot would be that in which the first Caliph Umar prayed [according to various traditions, the Mosque of Umar next to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Y.R.]. Ibn-Taymiya condemned the traditions claiming that Umar Ibn al-Khattab, the second Caliph, or members of the Prophet’s generation visited Jerusalem, because, according to him, al-Quds was not considered to be holy.\(^{41}\)

Nearly all of the Arab writings that I have seen on the subject of Jerusalem avoid mentioning Ibn-Taymiyya, despite the fact that this Muslim legal authority is an important source of inspiration for fundamentalist Islam and that Islamic movements make use of other texts of his.

The official Arab-Muslim history underlines the Abbasid Caliphate’s connection to the city by maintaining that the Caliph al-Ma’mun visited the city and ordered to cast coins with the Arabic name of the city “al-Quds” instead of former “Iliya (Aelia Capitolina)”. The numerous Islamic monuments in Jerusalem are living symbols of the importance of the city to all rulers. They claim that Jerusalem was an administrative center since the Mameluke period in order to counter the Jewish claim that the city was never a political capital under Muslim rule.\(^{42}\)

Since 1967 a new Islamic ethos of Jerusalem has developed, at the center of which lies a re-writing of Jerusalem’s history. Its main features are claims of an Arab-Islamic past that significantly pre-dates the ancient Hebrews’ arrival in Palestine and the Davidic and Solomonic monarchies; an emphasis on the city’s Islamic character; and, primarily, an attempt to attribute to the city a status of political importance in Muslim history, to claim that Jerusalem and Palestine are one and the same, and that Jerusalem’s sanctity is a reflection of the sanctity of Palestine as a whole.\(^{43}\) The new ethos aims at elevating the importance of al-Aqsa and al-Quds and is based on the following elements: Jerusalem’s antiquity and its association with monotheism in its primordial sense; the historical “seniority” of the Arabs and Muslims, who are identified with the Jebusites who inhabited Jerusalem before the Israelites; the strong connection to Islamic history and to important figures and events in Islam, such as the Prophet Muhammad’s Night Journey which linked al-Aqsa with the Ka’ba Mosque in Mecca; the first Caliph Umar’s conquest of the city and its later liberation from the Crusaders by Saladin; a cradle of other prophets and personages in Islamic history; the city’s function as the scene of battle and defense of *Dar al-Islam*; traditions which emphasize Jerusalem’s religious function: its status as the first direction of prayer, the greater value placed on prayer at al-Aqsa over prayer at other mosques, the duty to visit al-Aqsa in which the site is included in the holy triangle of the Mecca and al-Madina sites, and, finally, Jerusalem’s association with apocalyptic traditions.\(^{44}\)

The various elements involved in the process of Jerusalem’s elevation in sanctity are not new. The traditions in question developed during the Middle Ages and appear in
the extant *fada’il al-Quds* literature and in the *hadith* literature. Four main innovations in content can, however, be identified: the abandonment of the term *al-Haram al-Sharif* in favor of the Qur’anic name “al-Aqsa”; the emphasis on the site’s antiquity; the designation of Jerusalem as the defensive stronghold of Islamic territory; and the call to jihad to liberate Jerusalem. The remaining items mentioned above are expressions of the activities aimed at renewing, emphasizing and marketing to the masses the various traditions that existed in medieval Islamic literature. The most significant innovation that characterizes the current Islamic campaign for Jerusalem is the introduction of these traditions into the forefront of public discourse, and the extent and intensity of their use.

d. Muslim Denial of Jewish Temple and Western Wall

Within the context of the current conflict, the political-religious-historical controversy over Jerusalem demands of the Arab-Muslim side that it contend with a number of factual challenges. The first of these is the fact that Jerusalem, one of whose Hebrew names is Zion, lies at the heart of the Zionist idea, which also includes within it the religious aspect of Jewish-Zionist national identity. The second challenge is the international recognition enjoyed by the Jews and the State of Israel within the Western (Christian) world, due to the historical-religious connection with Jerusalem in particular and with Palestine (Eretz Israel) in general. This recognition represents a major obstacle to the Arabs and Muslims in their struggle for Palestine and for Jerusalem. An example of this is President Bill Clinton’s reaction to Saeb Erekat’s assertion at the second Camp David summit that the Jerusalem Temple is a Jewish invention: “Not only do all of the world’s Jews believe that the Temple is located on the Temple Mount, but most Christians believe it, too.”

The third challenge in the battle for world opinion is the need to refute the claim made by Jewish scholars and statesmen that Jerusalem lies at the center of Jewish experience, while for Muslims Jerusalem was a prayer-direction cancelled by the Prophet Muhammad in order to avoid resembling the Jews: Jerusalem was originally instituted as the qibla (direction of prayer) when the Prophet Muhammad was seeking to attract the Jews of al-Madina to his faith, but the honor was revoked after it became clear that the Jews were not going to join his camp. Jerusalem is not mentioned by name in the Qur’an or the early *hadith* literature – “Bait-al-Maqdis” is a translation of the Hebrew “Bett ha-Mikdash (the Holy House/Temple).” The city has been called “al-Quds” – “the Holy City” – only since the tenth century; the name al-Aqsa, that which is mentioned in the Qur’an, refers, according to some Muslim interpretations, to a heavenly mosque and not to the one in Jerusalem; Jerusalem is only the third city in importance to Islam after Mecca and al-Madina and has never been an Islamic political capital. The Jordanians also failed to make Jerusalem their capital city when they annexed the West Bank after 1948. Muslims, it must be said, regard the writings of Jewish scholars on this issue as a campaign aimed at denying Islamic faith and Islamic history. Dr. Hasan Silwadi of al-Quds University has published an article in which he inveighs against “Jewish experts in Middle Eastern affairs who try to detract from al-Aqsa’s sanctity.”

In response to these challenges, Islamic nationalists, be they clerics, academics or politicians, seek to refute the claims regarding Jerusalem’s centrality to Judaism; they deny the Jewish Temple’s existence in Jerusalem and assert that the Western Wall is not an authentic remnant of the Temple’s external supporting wall, but rather the al-Aqsa compound’s western wall – the place identified today with al-Buraq, the
amazing steed upon which Muhammad was borne to Jerusalem and which the Prophet is said to have tethered to the wall in question.

What is most conspicuous about the way in which Muslims refer to the Jewish Temple (Haykal, or Haykal Sulayman – Solomon's Temple) is their frequent addition to the word al-Haykal (the Temple) of the term “al-maz`um,” whose literal meaning is “alleged”, which serves automatically to negate the “claim,” that is, the very existence of the Temple, or to express non-recognition or de-legitimization of the Temple.\(^{50}\)

As an example, the website of the AL identifies the Western Wall as “The South Western part from the wall of al-Haram al-Sharif…it is called Al-Buraq Wall because it was the place where Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) tied Al-Buraq during the Night Journey and Heavenly Ascent…at the present time the Jews are using it as a Temple as they consider it part of the alleged temple [underline added]. This contravenes the facts, the reality and history in an attempt to hold possession of it”.\(^{51}\) While accounting the chronology of Jerusalem under the Persians and Romans the AL website narrates the burning down of the city but there is no indication of the destruction of the Jewish Temple or any mention of the Jews. The chronology also skips over the Jordanian rule in Jerusalem (1948-1967), which is not mentioned at all.\(^{52}\)

The OIC website admits that Jerusalem was holy before Islam to both Judaism and Christianity, adding that the Christians had the upper hand in the city. By citing the Archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon’s finding that Jericho was not destroyed as described in the book of Joshua, the OIC narratives aims at undermining the Bible as an historical source.\(^{53}\) It is also argued that the Kingdom of David never ruled the entire land of Palestine, and underlines its short existence.\(^{54}\) The Arab-Muslim narratives goes on to claim that after the Jewish revolts against the Greek and Roman Empires, the Jews were expelled from Palestine and only a tiny group was left in Safed and Tiberias. Therefore, Jerusalem was conquered from the Christians (and not from the Jews).

The al-Quds University website underlines in the chronology of the city that the Jews ruled Jerusalem for only 73 out of 5,000 years.\(^{55}\) Other Muslim sources claim that the Jewish period in Palestine accounts for some 400 years only (977-586BC), the period of the First Temple, while the period of the Second Temple and the continued Jewish connection with the land from the Diaspora are completely discounted.\(^{56}\)

Thus, the Arab-Muslim meta-narrative tries to deny any legitimate connection of Jews and Judaism to Jerusalem and the land.

**Conclusion**

The current Jewish and Muslim historical narratives of Jerusalem are a mirror image of each other. In pre-modern time they were developed independently of other, reflecting the ultimate religious and collective-identity and outlook of each of the two peoples. Since the nineteenth century they have crystallized to respond to national challenges. The historical debate was intensified after 1967, when the eastern part of Jerusalem, including the holy shrines, were conquered by Israel.
The major conflicting elements of the two current narratives center around the following issues: first, the question of antiquity and presence, i.e. who was present first in Jerusalem. In other words, is today’s city an expression of 3,000 years of the Jewish City of David or is it a continuation of 5,000 years of Arab Yevos and Islamic Bayt al-Maqdis?

The second issue is the question of the Jewish First and Second Temples, including their very existence and their location on the site where Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock, as well as the related problem of what exactly is the Western Wall? Is it the remnant of the Jewish Second Temple, or is it part of the Haram and the al-Buraq Wall?

The third debated issue centers on “national” presence and continuity, as well as the character of the city, whether it was Jewish of Muslim. Each of the two parties to the conflict claims a longer and continuous presence in Jerusalem.

The fourth matter at issue is the religious importance of the city to each of the two religious denominations. The fifth point of divergence is the historical/political centrality of the city to each of two nations. Sixth is the debate over the question of freedom of access, i.e. who prevented whom from the right of access to the sacred compound, and when.

In conclusion, the new historical outlook of Muslim Arabs since 1967 addresses the challenges that are being put forward by the Jewish and Israeli narratives, involving issues of antiquity, religious and political importance, continuous presence and control, sentimental connection and religious practice, and restriction of access to the sacred compound.

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1 Hedva Ben-Israel, p. 292.
2 Hedva Ben-Israel, pp. 283, 291.
3 See al-Qaeadaawi and Pipes as an example.
4 See Luz.
5 See articles by Ramon and Inbari.
Israel Finkelstein, an Israeli expert on archaeology from Tel-Aviv University who believes that the David and Solomon’s kingdoms were not a monumental empires is a minority opinion among Israeli scholars. See Finkelstein.


See Avi-Yonah.

See http://www.jr.co.il/pictures/stamps/jrst0001.jpg. Interestingly the Argentine Post Service issued a special post stamp on May 10 1996, commemorating “the third millenium of the city of Jerusalem…since when King David made that city the capital of his kingdom”. The stamo design reproduced a mosaic from VII Century found in Madeba, in which a map of Jerusalem appears. See http://www.raoulwallenberg.net/?en/interfaith/986.htm.

Sefer Yerushalayim, p. 131.

From the clan of David, nominated by Daryavesh as Governor of Judea in 520 BCE.


Harsgor and Stroum, pp. 22-88.


On the Jewish perspective see Raphael Jospe,

Ibid. passim.


Ibid..

Raphael Israeli, p. 148.


Daniel Pipes summarizes in his article many of these claims.

Hasson; Sharon, Sivan.

Harsegor and Stron, p. 125, On Abd al-Malik’s considerations see Elad’s book.

Hasson.

Daniel Pipes

Ibid.

Reiter, From Jerusalem to Mecca and Back, p. 142 and note 165..


See www.bma-alqods.org/englishsite/histor03.htm.

See www.jerusalem-studies.center.org.

On the Palestinian canaanite and Jebusite myths see Zilberman.

www.arableagueonline.org/arableague/index_en.jsp.

www.bma-alqods.org/englishsite/histor03.htm.

Pipes.


Palazzi, a prominent leader of the Italian Muslim community, also believes that the Jerusalem site does not have the status of haram, and that its sanctity extends to only the two buildings (the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque). Palazzi, p. 16

www.bma-alqods.org/englishsite/histor03.htm. See also Talhami; Tibawi.

Reiter, From Jerusalem to Mecca and Back, p. 61.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Pipes.

For a discussion of Muslim interpretations that do not view al-Aqsa as being in Jerusalem, see Hasson, “Jerusalem from the Muslim Perspective.” (Hebrew)

50 Reiter, From Jerusalem to Mecca and Back, p. 35. See the claims of Qaradawi and Sabri.

51 www.arableleagueonline.org/arableleague/index_en.jsp.

52 Cf. Ghawsha.

53 See Kanyon’s books on Jerusalem in the list of references.

54 www.bma-alqods.org/englishsite/histor03.htm.

55 See www.jerusalem-studies.center.org.

56 Qaradawi.