



Countdown to Armageddon

A review of Israeli Regional Planning Commission Activities

Marian Houk

Tensions may be about to heat up again about Israeli reconstruction plans for a damaged ramp leading from the Western Wall Plaza in the Old City of Jerusalem, where Jewish worshippers pray at Judaism's most sacred and revered site, up to the Mughrabi Gate entrance to the Haram as-Sharif mosque esplanade, the third holiest site of Islam.

The whole site is one of the most sensitive religious flashpoints on earth. The plateau on which the mosque esplanade is located is known to Jews as the Temple Mount, the site where the two destroyed and lamented Jewish Temples are believed to have stood. The inner sanctum (or Holy of Holies) of the Temples housed the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Ten Commandments and the Torah. The Second Temple was demolished on orders from Rome in 70 A.D.

Two mosques with special religious significance, Al-Aqsa and the Dome of the

Tourists visiting the Haram ash-Sherif esplanade - 12 June 2008.

Source: Marian Houk

Rock, are located on the Haram as-Sharif plateau. They have been in continuous use for Muslim prayer for the past 1400 years.

The Western Wall, composed of huge slabs of quarried and cut stone, is believed to be part of the second (if not also of the first) Temples. It forms part of the support structure of the Haram as-Sharif plateau.

In the immediate aftermath of the Israeli conquest in the June 1967 war, the crowded Mughrabi Quarter in front of the Western Wall in East Jerusalem's Old City was razed to create a large plaza for Jewish worshippers.

Palestinians still recall with pain what happened: nearly one thousand residents of the Old City, many of whom were 1948 refugees either from the region near Lod, or from West Jerusalem, were made homeless, and became refugees for a second time. Many moved to the Shuafat refugee camp on the northern outskirts of East Jerusalem, or to Anata – both of which have now been effectively banished to the West Bank by checkpoints and the planned route of The Wall which is being constructed in and around Jerusalem.

The stated policy of the Israeli government is that the Western Wall Plaza will be open to visitors of all faiths. The Western Wall plaza is also used for state events, including Israeli Defense Force ceremonies for induction, promotion, and commemorations.

A still-existing though some believe now eroding “de facto” arrangement worked out just after the 1967 war by Israel's Defense Minister at the time, Moshe Dayan, gave authority over the Haram ash-Sharif mosque esplanade to Jerusalem's Islamic Waqf (trust foundation), while Israel proclaimed itself in full charge of the site's Western Wall and the plaza created where the Mughrabi Quarter previously stood.

The Rabbi of the Western Wall, Shmuel Rabinowitz, said that “the entire Temple Mount, like the rest of Jerusalem, is under Jewish authority. Jerusalem has been important to us for generations, for thousands of years, wherever in the world Jews found themselves”.

He noted that his own grandfather was expelled from the Old City when Jordanian troops moved in during fighting that surrounded the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

“The current agreement, made in 1967, for the Waqf to take care of the Temple Mount, is in place until today”, the Rabbi said. “They are in charge of the Temple Mount, and we are in charge of the Western Wall. The excavations on our side are open to the public, but we do not know about everything that's going on up there”.



View of excavations under ramp leading up to Mughrabi Gate - 12 June 2008. *Source: Marian Houk*

Excavations carried out on the esplanade directly under Al-Aqsa Mosque to create more prayer space have been a source of anguish for many Israelis, who believe that valuable antiquities were removed and tossed out carelessly.

Rabbi Rabinowitz said he believes Jewish law prohibits Jewish visits to the Temple Mount. He explained that the prohibition of visits to the site is “not because it is not ours. It is ours. But it is because of the sanctity of the place. It is where the Holy of Holies stood. Jews who go there must purify themselves with the [sacrifice of the] Red Heifer, which we do not have now”.

The ramp – leading to the Mughrabi Gate – is the only entrance to the Haram ash-Sharif for non-Muslims – including Jews. Though the traditional rabbinate has held that Jewish visits to the Temple Mount were prohibited by religious law – and a sign stating this position has been in place at the site since 1967 – a more recent variant ruling by rabbis close to the Israeli national-religious settler movement holds that such visits may be permissible if they avoid certain specific areas, such as where the Holy of Holies might have been located. Visits by growing numbers of Jewish national-religious activists now arouse particular anxiety.

The other entrances to the Haram ash-Sharif are normally reserved for Muslims.

The ramp was damaged by the elements, and heavy rain and snow in the winter of 2004 eventually caused the collapse of what is called the “northern wall” of the structure, which was then declared unsafe.

Three years later, Israel began “salvage” excavations – which it also described as “preventive archeology” – on the site, in accordance with requirements of the Israel Antiquities Law. These excavations, which now seem to have halted, aroused controversy and great suspicion, all the more so because Israel was acting unilaterally, as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) said in a report on the controversy in the spring of 2007.

The structures tucked under the ramp include part of an ancient madrasa and mosque as well as parts of homes from various historical periods, including the Ottoman, Mameluk, and Ommayad eras, according to Israeli Attorney Daniel Seidemann, who has been working to improve the plan to reconstruct the ramp leading to the Mughrabi Gate. UNESCO reported that there were “several strata of archaeological structures (from the Herodian times to the British Mandate period) and of earth and rubble”, while the Rabbi of the Western Wall said he believed the structures were very recent. The original Israeli plan to renovate the ramp suggested the removal of all or part of these structures in order to allow an enlargement of the prayer area reserved for Jewish women in front of the Western Wall – a proposal that aroused great alarm elsewhere, and which has now been ruled out.

The Waqf maintains its claim to title of the damaged ramp and the archeological artifacts from the former Mughrabi Quarter, and considers them part of its property in Jerusalem, but it will not negotiate directly with Israel because it does not want to recognize the occupation.

Israel, too, is unwilling to negotiate because it regards the site as an area of Israeli sovereignty. But, in a sort of “non-negotiation”, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has working behind the scenes to “coordinate” between the various parties concerned – who in this case are Israel, the Waqf in Jerusalem, and Jordan. “UNESCO has been able to get a good deal of convergence, but had there been negotiations, there could not have been a deal”, Seidemann said. He said that Israel’s Regional Planning Committee appears to have at least taken into consideration the views of the other parties, and he believes “there were clear instructions from the political echelons to handle the situation responsibly”.

A revised Israeli design to rebuild the ramp is expected to receive Israeli government approval imminently.



Israeli Border Police checkpoint at entrance for Muslims going to Al-Aqsa - 21 June 2008.

Source: Marian Houk

Rabbi Rabinowitz confirmed that a decision on the new ramp design is now being finalized. He described the design as “a bridge in the air”, and said he liked the revised plan. “I hope that by September or October we will start building”, the Rabbi said. “The design was arrived at after a lot of thought, and the plans are very aesthetic”.

Seidemann presented objections to both the original and the revised designs before open meetings at the Jerusalem Municipality, and at more recent meetings of the Israeli Government’s Regional Planning Committee for Jerusalem, on behalf of Ir Amim, an NGO working for the equitable sharing of Jerusalem, which it calls a city “of two peoples and three religions”. Seidemann says that the revised plan taking shape appears to be a big improvement over an earlier Israeli plan that had been approved by all levels of government – up to and including Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in January 2007 – but which, Seidemann said, reflected “hidden agendas” and “ulterior motives”.

Seidemann’s major concerns had been over what further areas around the damaged ramp might be razed, and whether or not the idea to turn Islamic-era artifacts – unearthed in excavations under the ramp carried out in the past couple of years according to Israeli

antiquities laws – into Jewish prayer halls would be retained. This would have been “very problematic, inflammatory and dangerous”, according to Seidemann.

At a hearing in early July, the Regional Planning Committee asked for further changes in the ramp redesign. Seidemann reported that his objections had been accepted in large part, but not totally.

Another revised plan is now being prepared by Jerusalem architect Eli Ilan, while Ada Carmi, who drew up the original redesign plan, apparently remains architect of record.

“Where we were successful is that the Committee ordered the preservation of artifacts including from the Ottoman and Mandate periods, which includes the remains of the Mughrabi Quarter”, Seidemann said, whereas last November the government indicated that it wanted to raze all artifacts dating later than 1700 A.D.

The Committee also rejected the proposal for construction of Jewish prayer vaults under the ramp, he reported.

The biggest remaining problem, according to Seidemann, is the Committee’s ruling that the Western Wall Plaza can be expanded – though less than in the earlier proposal, he said. The Committee directed, however, that the redesign would have to “take into account” the archeological artifacts that are all that remain of the Mughrabi Quarter razed by Israel in June 1967 – but this leaves a lot to discretion, Seidemann said.

He predicted that the Mughrabi Gate ramp redesign project *could* become a model for working in such a culturally and religiously-sensitive site, depending on the final design. But, he cautioned, there is also the potential to revert back to fighting that could cause “an interreligious conflagration”.

There was a deadly clash between Muslims and Jews at the site in 1929, during the first decade of the British Mandate. From fighting that erupted in May 1948 after the proclamation of the State of Israel, until the June 1967 war, the site was under Jordanian control. Within the first year after Israel extended its law and administration over Jerusalem, there was an arson attack on Al-Aqsa mosque in 1968. A 1990 attempt by the “Temple Mount Faithful” to lay a cornerstone for the “Third Temple” on the Haram as-Sharif, followed by repeated warnings of possible further attacks since then, have kept Muslim nerves on edge. The 1996 excavation of the Hasmonean tunnel running under and alongside the Western Wall, and the ostentatious visit by Ariel Sharon on 28 September 2000, shortly after the breakdown in Camp David peace talks – a failure for which the Palestinians were blamed – were brutally suppressed by Israeli security forces. There were a number of Palestinian deaths during each of these events, which also provoked Muslim protests worldwide.



Full frontal view of Western Wall - men and women prayer areas- Dome of Rock to left - part of Mughrabi Gate and Al-Aqsa on rig. *Source: Marian Houk*

Adnan Hussein, a former head of the Waqf in Jerusalem, who is presently an advisor on Jerusalem affairs to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, said that “what is needed is to stop any intervention or threat coming from the outside”. But, he noted, the Israeli police who are not only at the entrances but on the mosque esplanade itself, now are more concerned with controlling the Muslim worshippers, “instead of controlling the settlers”.

Hussein said that the settlers are “very extreme” and have engaged in “violence in and around the Old City”. And, he said, “when the settlers enter the Mosque, they try to pray”. They are coming “not under the umbrella of religion, but with political goals, to change the status of the place, and the police are allowing it. This is a provocation”. Hussein added that the settlers want “to change this Mosque into a synagogue and to pray there. But touching religious issues creates troubles and hatreds”.

Hussein said the Mughrabi Gate ramp redesign plan is not available, until now, “for the public”.

He complained that the Israelis announced their original plan through the Jerusalem Municipality, and held meetings – which Palestinians apparently did not attend, so as not to confer legitimacy on the occupation – to discuss the design.

The Israelis have also shown the plan to the United Nations Educational, Cultural, and Scientific Organization (UNESCO), Hussein said.

The situation appeared to have cooled somewhat since the involvement of UNESCO in the Mughrabi Gate dispute following Muslim protests in 2007. The organization has acted to encourage consultation and dialog among the concerned parties, Seidemann said, and added that he felt “the role of UNESCO has been very positive, fair, and evenhanded”.

UNESCO inscribed the Old City of Jerusalem on its World Heritage Site list for protection in 1981 – and in 1982 on a list of World Heritage Sites in danger.

Though Israel has often had a tendentious relationship with many UN bodies and agencies, it appeared to have no qualms or objections in this case. Israel’s relationship with UNESCO appears to have improved after the declaration of parts of Tel Aviv as a World Heritage Site in 2004. The recent addition, on 8 July, of the Baha’i holy sites in Haifa and Acca to the World Heritage Site list, also pleased the Israeli government.

Under its umbrella, UNESCO has now formally brought Jordan back into the picture concerning the Mughrabi Gate excavations and ramp renovation. Seidemann said that “Neither the Waqf nor the Jordanians ever formally participated within the Israeli approval process, though they did participate in the UNESCO deliberations”. Jordan also presented an alternative plan to UNESCO.

Jordanian personnel headed the Waqf until Israel occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank in 1967. After a period of stronger Palestinian influence in the 1990s, Jordan once again now exercises control of the Waqf’s top post, while the Palestinian Authority is in charge of nominating the Mufti.

Israel, in its 1994 Peace Treaty with Jordan, stated that it “respects” Jordan’s “special role” in the “Muslim Holy shrines in Jerusalem” (but not, however, in management of the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron, for which Jordan also reportedly wanted a special status during the peace treaty negotiations). The 1994 Peace Treaty also says that Jordan’s “historic role” in the Jerusalem shrines will be given “high priority” when “negotiations on the permanent status” [i.e., between Israel and the Palestinians] “will take place”.

The Rabbi of the Western Wall said that UNESCO and the Waqf have had an opportunity to give input into the design, but “both did not come two times to



Mughrabi Gate entrance to Haram As-Sherif - 12 June 2008. *Source: Marian Houk*

meetings, and the third time UNESCO sent only low-ranking officials. Their objections were political and not actually about the design or the way it will be built”.

The Turkish Government also initially protested the Israeli actions vocally and visibly when the controversy blew up in early 2007. A technical mission sent by Turkey visited to examine the site, and wrote a highly critical report. Recently, however, the Turkish government seems to have all but disappeared from view on the issue.

The Jordanian plan featured the construction of containment walls to hide the Islamic artifacts now being excavated under the crumbling ramp, Seidemann indicated.

Seidemann said that the revised Israeli plan, which was the only one presented to the Regional Planning Committee, is very close to the original route of the ramp, and he said he considers it “reasonable”. It might be some 20 meters longer than the stone and earthen ramp, which was 75 meters long, Seidemann said, but the location, slope, and overall size are “much improved” over the original redesign proposal for a ramp that would have been some 200 meters long.

Husseini, however, said that he was concerned that Israel was not paying attention to the negotiations conducted last February by UNESCO, and was just using the fact that these

meetings had been held “as an umbrella to get to their target”. The whole story, he said, is about Israel’s intention to enlarge the prayer area in the Western Wall Plaza, even if it means the destruction of up to 1400 years of history. “We ask UNESCO to take a serious role”, Hussein said. “This is an entrance to our Mosques, and it [the ramp as well as the archeological remains] is Awqaf property”. He urged UNESCO to take a position, and be firm and clear – and not just allow Israel “to show a picture of having discussed the issue with others, while in the end imposing everything on the ground”.

An assessment prepared by a UNESCO technical commission last year recommended that the original ramp structure should be conserved and repaired (rather than reconstructed); that the “cultural, religious and symbolic aspects” of the Mughrabi “pathway” should be valued in addition to its “archeological structures”; that the involvement of the Jordanian Government “would be most appropriate”; and that the process should be supervised by “an international team of experts”.

The Mufti of Al-Aqsa, Muhammed Hussein, denounced the whole reconstruction project during his sermon during Friday prayers at Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Old City of East Jerusalem on 13 June. The Mufti reportedly told worshippers that information now available indicates that the temporary wooden bridge that allows non-Muslim tourists and visitors to the Haram ash-Sharif (Mosque Esplanade) is to be replaced by a “steel bridge”.

This structure, the Mufti reportedly complained, would allow easier and faster access for the Israeli police and security forces, and would also expand the area currently available for Jewish women to pray in their separate section in the southern area of the Plaza facing the Western or Wailing Wall, which is below the southern end of the Mosque Esplanade.

In fact, some Palestinians in Jerusalem say, the proposed ramp appeared (in the original Israel plan) designed mainly to serve the Israeli security forces, and was wide enough for an armed vehicle to get quickly up into the Haram ash-Sharif if riots break out.

Seidemann said that there were proposals for a structure strong enough to hold 300 Israeli police standing on the ramp at one time, in full gear.

However, he added, agreement has now been reached that the new ramp should not be a new security tool, but should instead restore the “status quo ante” – meaning that the ramp should provide only pedestrian access, and that it should not substantially change the physiognomy of the site.

While the new design may give somewhat better access for Israeli security forces, Seidemann said, it will also provide greater accessibility for the handicapped, for the



Mughrabi Gate entrance to Haram ash-Sherif - 12 June 2008. *Source: Marian Houk*

first time – including for Muslims with disabilities.

The Regional Planning Committee, Seidemann said, appears to be “trying to do the right thing ... Their public hearing was very civil and intelligent”. By contrast, according to Seidemann, the non-binding hearings held earlier at the Jerusalem Municipality had been “hostile, primitive, and racist”.

The Haram ash-Sharif is “the volcanic core of the conflict, and fundamental extremists on both sides are trying to take advantage of the situation”, he said.

So, Seidemann noted, “This is not over”. The Regional Planning Committee still has to sign off on the revised plan before a building permit is issued, he said, and the revised plan could be “upgraded to something close to what is acceptable to Jordanians, the Waqf and UNESCO, or it could degenerate into something close to the original plan”.

The next developments will require continued attention, monitoring and vigilance, Seidemann added, and “To fall asleep at the watch now would be exactly the wrong thing to do”.