

“Our Weapon Here Is the Prayer Rug”:

Popular Protest at al-Aqsa

Abd El-Raouf Arnaout

In the past five decades of conflict with the Palestinians, Israel has experienced several forms of armed, popular, and economic Palestinian resistance. But recently, Israel faced for perhaps the first time resistance by mass prayer. It began with hundreds then quickly expanded to thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of Palestinians from all over Jerusalem – and beyond – who took control of space around the al-Aqsa compound for thirteen continuous days, performing the five daily prayers. Hundreds performed dawn and noon and after noon prayers in the tiny road leading to the Council Gate (Bab al-Majlis in Arabic, also known as Bab al-Nadhir, the Inspector’s Gate) in the western wall of al-Aqsa Mosque, while Lions’ Gate (Bab al-Asbat) outside the northern wall was the favorite for thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of people during the evening prayers. People flooded the streets with prayer rugs on their shoulders, and Palestinian factional flags completely disappeared from the scene. “The Israelis were shocked and surprised because they had never witnessed such popular peaceful protests. They didn’t know what to do about it,” Ahmad Qurai‘, head of the Jerusalem Affairs department of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), told *Jerusalem Quarterly*.

The new Palestinian resistance has confused the Israeli police, which was heavily deployed in Jerusalem. On the one hand, they did not dare prevent prayers, and there was the sense that suppression of prayers would lead to the eruption of anger not just in Jerusalem, but perhaps in the rest of the Palestinian territories. On the other hand, Israeli police threw stun grenades and shot rubber bullets at the people on a daily basis, claiming that stones were being thrown at them. Mahdi Abdul Hadi, head of the Jerusalem-based Palestinian Academic Society for the Study

of International Affairs (PASSIA), told *Jerusalem Quarterly*: “If the goal was to limit the number of people, the answer was always more worshippers.”

It was not only the Israelis who were surprised, but also the Palestinians. Wearing the traditional uniform of Islamic clergy, Shaykh ‘Ikrima Sabri, head of the Islamic Supreme Committee in Jerusalem, told *Jerusalem Quarterly*: “It was a nice surprise, frankly. We were not expecting it.” He added, “People were fearing that Israel wanted to take over al-Aqsa, so they responded en masse to say, ‘The mosque is ours’.” Sabri noted in this regard the statement of Israeli public security minister Gilad Erdan, who claimed that “sovereignty is for Israel.”

How It Began

In the early morning of 14 July, three Palestinian citizens of Israel from the city of Umm al-Fahm opened fire and killed two policemen outside Remission Gate (Bab Hutta) before being chased down and killed by policemen inside al-Aqsa Mosque. Immediately afterward, Israeli police evicted worshippers and guards from the mosque, before closing it completely for two straight days, including for Friday prayers on the day of the incident, during which worship and the adhan were banned for the first time in five decades.

On the morning of 16 July, Israeli policemen were already installing metal detectors at the entrance of three of nine doors in the wall of the mosque. “No entrance through metal detectors!” shouted Wasif al-Bakri, acting chief justice of Jerusalem’s Islamic courts, that morning, surrounded by thousands of Palestinians outside Lions’ Gate. *Allahu akbar* (God is Great) echoed everywhere and immediately noon prayers began in the street, led by Shaykh ‘Umar Kiswani, director of al-Aqsa Mosque.

Birth of a New Leadership

Soon, Shaykh al-Bakri and Shaykh Sabri, together with the head of the Waqf Council in Jerusalem, ‘Abd al-‘Azim Salhab, and the grand mufti of Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories, Muhammad Hussein, were the stars of the protests. The sign of their unified leadership appeared for the first time on a statement titled “The Religious Institutions in Jerusalem,” which the four Muslim clerics issued from inside the shari‘a court in Jerusalem. “It was important not to do it from a hotel, but rather from one of the Waqf headquarters. It is not appropriate to lead the street from a hotel,” said Abdul Hadi who was actively involved in meetings and drafting statements for the religious institutions in Jerusalem.

The statement read, in part: “In case the imposition of electronic gates at the entrances to al-Aqsa Mosque persists, we call our people to pray and worship in front of the mosque’s gates and in the streets and alleys of Jerusalem.” Palestinians in Jerusalem considered this a command and before evening prayers worshippers carried the four

Muslim clerics on their shoulders as a sign of support. “For the first time in years, this was a sign of respect for a local leadership in Jerusalem,” Abdul Hadi added. He noted that “the shaykhs were carried on the shoulders, their decisions were obeyed, and it was they who lead the prayers, creating a unique relationship.”

The Palestinian Authority (PA) and the PLO have several leaders in Jerusalem, but none have earned the same degree of trust from the city’s residents. Shaykh Sabri said, “We were listening to the youths. It was very important to earn their respect for our decisions.”

Metal Detectors

Palestinians refrained from entering al-Aqsa Mosque through the Israeli metal detectors, but insisted on their right to pray in the streets. In most cases, especially in the evenings, the large number of worshippers led to the closure of main streets around Lions’ Gate. “It was unprecedented,” the grand mufti, Shaykh Muhammad Hussein told *Jerusalem Quarterly*.

In the streets of Jerusalem the feeling was similar. Rami Natsheh, 49 years old, who was awaiting prayers outside Lions’ Gate, said he had “never seen such a thing, not in the first intifada or the second. I’m proud of it.” He added, while watching tens of thousands of worshippers, “This is huge.” Ahmad Shareef, 29 years old, said with pride: “Our weapon here is the prayer rug. We put it on the street and pray.”

For some, it was the first time to perform prayers. Youths were noticed asking elders about what to say during prayers and how to perform ablution (*wudu*’).

One Family

In the Old City, Palestinians behaved like one family. With the lack of public toilets, families offered help for people from outside the city. People donated cold bottles of water, while others offered food and sweets. “You didn’t have to ask for donations, people were bringing water and food and sweets everyday,” said Nasser Qos, a local activist in the Old City.

The African community in Bab al-Majlis played central role in helping people during the day. Christians in Jerusalem, and in the Old City in particular, also showed solidarity with the worshippers. A delegation from the Christian Quarter in the Old City visited the worshippers at Bab al-Majlis and Christian religious leaders also visited the Muslim clergy leaders several times. One Friday, Nedal Abboud, a Christian from Jerusalem, came to Salah al-Din Street wearing a cross and holding the Bible and stood in line with the worshippers.

Religious War

Palestinian leaders warned that the Israeli Right is pushing toward turning the political conflict into a religious one. In recent years, rightwing Israeli leaders began talking publicly about dividing the mosque between Muslims and Jews. Calls for dividing the mosque have come from Israeli ministers, including Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked, and members of the Knesset, including Likud member Yehuda Glick. But these calls reached a peak when Israeli minister of public security Gilad Erdan stated, the same day the metal detectors were installed, that “Israel has the sovereign right to make and implement any decision at the Temple Mount.”

In reaction, Shaykh ‘Ikrima Sabri said, “The people felt that al-Aqsa is in real danger, especially when Erdan declared that Israel has sovereignty over the mosque.” This feeling was reflected at times in the slogans that people chanted during the two weeks, such as: “O Khaybar Jews, the army of Muhammad is returning.” But the general feeling after two weeks was that Israeli attempts to divide the mosque are not over, but merely delayed. Adnan Husseini, PA minister of Jerusalem Affairs, told *Jerusalem Quarterly*: “No doubt, what happened delayed Israeli plans to divide the mosque between Muslims and Jews, but the attempts are not over yet.” He added: “The developments in the course of the two weeks gave Jerusalemites the confidence that they can block these attempts with their unity and mass presence. This was one of the main lessons of the incidents.”

Bloody Friday

The situation looked tense at times, but it became especially bloody on the second Friday after the closure of the mosque. For the first time since 1967, the religious institutions in Jerusalem ordered the closure of small mosques in the city during the Friday prayers so as to gather the maximum number of worshippers possible around al-Aqsa. Tens of thousands of people responded and gathered in many streets throughout the Old City, which was heavily surrounded by thousands of Israeli policemen. “We are going through special circumstances, to pray in the streets and at the gates of al-Aqsa Mosque, but these conditions will not continue and we will return to pray in al-Aqsa Mosque,” Shaykh Hussein told a crowd of thousands of worshipers in Wadi al-Jawz.

Three Palestinians were declared dead and dozens wounded in clashes that erupted after the prayers in al-Tur, Ras al-‘Amud, and Abu Dis. Fears of more clashes the following Friday accelerated the diplomatic efforts by the Jordanian and Palestinian leadership in contact with the Israelis and Americans. After midnight on 24 July, Israeli police removed the metal detectors from outside the doors of the mosque, but kept metal bridges over some of the gates in preparation for installing cameras.

Victory

Palestinians insisted that everything be removed and that the situation be returned as it was on 14 July. Tens of thousands of Palestinians declared victory when the Israeli police removed everything the second day. Thousands took to the streets after midnight, fireworks lit up the city sky, car horns were heard blaring all over the Jerusalem, sweets were distributed, and young people chanted for al-Aqsa and Palestine. “After the long pain, it is time to celebrate,” said Rawhi Abu Sneineh, 49 years old, adding, “I never seen such a crowd in the streets of the city at this time.”

Celebrations continued in the streets of the Old City and its surroundings from midnight until afternoon prayers on Saturday, which were arranged by the religious institutions to allow the masses to enter al-Aqsa Mosque. But while tens of thousands of people were waiting outside Lions’ Gate to enter, news spread that the police were insisting on keeping Remission Gate (Bab Hutta) closed. “No entrance while Bab Hutta is closed,” shouted the crowd. A young man approached Shaykh Salhab. “Please, if we enter now they will never open it. Let’s wait, we are not in a hurry. We were here for fourteen days, we can wait one or two days more.”

Thunderous applause mixed with calls of *Allahu Akbar* was heard when the Muslim clerics decided not to enter until Remission Gate was reopened. Minutes later, the sound of the adhan was heard, accompanied by a crowd carrying Shaykh Hussein on their shoulders, signaling by hand that Remission Gate was opened. People rushed to Remission Gate, entering it for the first time in two weeks, with mobile phones high in the air to photograph and film the historic entrance. Dozens of people were seen kneeling on the ground of the mosque, thanking God for returning to the mosque; others began hugging each other, while some distributed sweets. The Islamic Waqf in Jerusalem estimates that around 100,000 entered the mosque at that moment.

A Trap

But the joyful moments soon turned to anger when Israeli policemen stationed at Mughrabi gate began throwing stun grenades and shooting rubber bullets at the large crowd. Women, children, and elderly people were seen running to the gates, which were closed by the police before they launched their attack on the worshippers. Some managed to get out through Lions’ Gate, the only open gate at that time. “Don’t fear them, we are heroes,” a woman told her daughter while leaving the mosque. Gradually, the police reopened the doors of the mosque and lifted age restrictions.

The incident has reenergized many Jerusalemite Palestinians, who have suffered mightily under Israel’s rule. “Before the incidents, I used to see a few people praying with the guards in the evenings, but nowadays they are more than five thousand daily, thank God,” said Shaykh Kiswami, the mosque’s director. Still, Kiswami warned: “This is a partial victory. Don’t forget that Jerusalem and al-Aqsa are still under occupation.”

Abd El-Raouf Arnaout is a Palestinian journalist resident in Jerusalem.