



Granite Journal

The University of Aberdeen Postgraduate Interdisciplinary Journal

ENGAGING THE PUBLIC: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The Western Wall during the British Mandate of Palestine: Politics, strategies, struggles

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Abstract: This paper briefly examines the conflicting perspectives created by the British, Jewish, and Arab authorities to use and control the Western Wall of Jerusalem during the British Mandate of Palestine. Based on the archival documents from the Mandate period, this paper explores the dynamics not only of the Arab-Jewish confrontation over the status of the Western Wall but also of the success and failures of the public strategies to adapt or suppress the rules created by the Mandate Administration in the 1920s. It begins with a current account of the significance of the Western Wall to open a discussion about the controversy that existed over the site's character. Then, it explores the history of conflicts to reveal social and political contexts, power structures, and the choices and decisions of those who valued the Western Wall's sacred, historical, or national significance. Finally, focusing on the disturbances that occurred around the Western Wall in the 1920s, this paper argues why the conflicting sacredness of the Western Wall escaped the control of the administrative authorities and how it was reconstructed along with the evolution of Palestinian society.

Keywords: Western Wall, British Mandate of Palestine, History, Conflict, Jews, Arabs



1 Introduction: an historic visit to the Western Wall

On May 22, 2017, US President Donald Trump visited the Western Wall of Jerusalem and thus became the first sitting US president to visit the site (Foreign Policy, 2017). Unlike his other visits to Jerusalem, during the tour of the Western Wall, high-ranking Israeli diplomats did not accompany him. Instead, he was accompanied only by Chief Rabbi of the Western Wall, Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, and the Western Wall Heritage Foundation Director, Mordechai (Soli) Eliav. This was a continuity of time-honoured diplomatic tradition under which foreign dignitaries who visit the Western Wall are not chaperoned by any high-ranking Israeli diplomats, to avoid anyone misinterpreting their presence as an attempt to strengthen Israeli claims to the Western Wall.

According to Israeli sources, the Western Wall is part of the retaining walls of the Temple Mount where ancient Jewish Temples once stood. The Jewish people have a deep historical and religious connection to the Wall and the surrounding area. It has long been considered one of the most sacred places where Jews can pray (Auerbach, Bahat, & Gilboa, 2007, pp. 24–27) and a symbol of Israeli heritage and national power (Azaryahu, 2002, p. 31; Schwartz, 2017). However, many Palestinian Muslims have long denied any Jewish historical connection with the Wall, arguing that the Israelis falsely claim that it is a Jewish heritage. The Muslim claim is that the Wall is an integral part of the Al-Haram Ash Sharif/The Noble Sanctuary area, and so is a Muslim property (see, for example, Middle East Media and Research Institute, 2000). Moreover, in Muslim tradition, it is the place where the Prophet Muhammad tethered his steed, Buraq, during his miraculous overnight journey from Mecca to Jerusalem in the 7th century (Khalidi, 1997, p. 216, footnote 25). For this reason, for the Palestinian Muslim community, as Reiter explains (2013, pp. 126-127), the Wall is regarded as the Al Buraq Wall of Al Aksa Mosque, a significant part of the third most sacred place in Islam.

While the Western Wall is mainly known as Judaism's most sacred monument, there is no worldwide consensus about the roots of its sacredness due to different histories and interpretations (see, e.g., Loewenberg, 2017). This also seems to be very much a part of the larger social and political problems surrounding the Wall. This



complex history has long been the focus of excruciating tensions between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims. During Trump's visit, his administration was aware of these tensions. The continuation of the diplomatic tradition can, therefore, be interpreted as reaffirming the longstanding international view that no action should be taken at the Western Wall without full regard to the historical and political concerns of all parties. However, just about six months after this historic visit, his administration decided to break this tradition by officially stating that the Western Wall would remain part of Israel under any agreement with the Palestinians. This marked a significant shift in US foreign policy on Israeli claims to the Western Wall and countered the international consensus about the sensitivity of its historical status.

2 A classical recipe: The Western Wall as a point of contention

In March 2019, two years after President Trump's historic visit to the Western Wall, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited the Western Wall accompanied by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. This was the first-ever visit of a high-ranking US official to this sacred place with an accompaniment of a high-ranking Israeli government official. Prior to this visit, Pompeo told reporters, "it's symbolic that a senior American official go there with a Prime Minister of Israel" and then astutely emphasised that the Wall is "a place that's important to many faiths". However, large sections of the international community, as well as the Palestinians, interpreted this symbolic presence, in fact, as a challenge to the different faith groups of Jerusalem's society, because, for decades, all US officials refrained from visiting the Wall with Israeli leaders or top government officials to avoid the appearance of recognising Israeli claims of sovereignty over the Western Wall.

US officials stated that during their visits to the Wall, both Trump and Pompeo carried no political baggage; their respective aims were only to highlight the unity and peace among the different religious faiths. However, the different views of Israelis and Palestinians reveal that their presence reflected a longstanding political conflict between Israeli Jews and Arab Muslims. For example, according to Saeb Erekat - a long-time Palestinian diplomat and peace negotiator with Israel- their political action was "the same classical recipe for conflict between Palestinians and Israelis for another



century" (Erakat, 2019; Straits Times, 2019). He conceived it as an attempt to brush aside a century of Arab Muslims' claims over the status of the Western Wall to help Israelis nationalise and restructure its sacredness. There is no question; therefore, these visits may start a new political conflict in which the status of the Western Wall will once again become the centre of growing tensions.

Many scholars studying the history of the Palestine conflict already emphasise the Western Wall is a significant point of contention among many other possible sources. (Cohen-Hattab, 2010; Lundsten, 1978; Mattar, 1983; Wasserstein, 2001, p. 317). From the end of the 19th century to the present, it has been a source of conflict between Jews and Muslims. Even within the Jewish community, there have been diverse interpretations of the Wall and how its sacredness is experienced, which have occasionally constituted a source of conflict between Orthodox Jews and secular Zionists (Orr, 1983, p. 193). The political tensions at the Western Wall refer to both present needs and historical situations, particularly the historical role of the communities and the strategies employed by public figures and the authorities. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the Western Wall's significance lies not so much in being one of the primary sources of the conflicts, but in historically linking these conflicts with the complex ideas, plans and regulations for its control and use by the British, Jewish, and Arab authorities during the beginning of the 20th century.

3 Towards an Historical Analysis of the Western Wall

Both Trump's and Pompeo's visits to the Western Wall can easily be analysed as a confirmation of Israeli Jews' interpretation of its sacredness. Still, as this paper's argument suggests, it is not possible to fully comprehend the relation between these visits and broader political and religious discussions without an understanding of, for instance, how Jewish politics shifted the emphasis from the religiosity of the Western Wall's sacredness to its national significance during the beginning of the 20th century (Saposnik, 2015; Winder, 2012). Fortunately, the location of the Western Wall in a troubled neighbourhood with a long history of controversy can easily afford a researcher various sources of information to draw upon in developing an historical analysis to understand such disturbances. However, the controversial history of the Western Wall's



sacred status would make conducting an in-depth historical case study challenging. To employ a historical approach to the Western Wall without being lost in the large volume of materials that analyse the history of Palestine is to start by first examining two specific historical events. These include the escalation of the Jewish-Arab dispute over the use and control of the Western Wall during the beginning of the 1920s and the Arab Riot that occurred at the Western Wall in 1929.

Briefly summarised, the history of events surrounding the Western Wall is as follows: Through the end of the WW1, the Jewish community pressured the British Mandate Administration to establish a favourable environment in Palestine, which then resulted in a violent reaction from the Arab community, and the result was a riot in Jerusalem in 1920. The Administration then attempted to act as a mediator, but this only accelerated the unravelling of the divided Jerusalem community, and the result, once again, was an Arab Riot that took place at the Western Wall in 1929 (Abboushi, 1977: 23). Therefore, focusing on this specific period is to examine the British Mandate Administration's political decision-making and the relationship between the Administration and the competing groups of Jerusalem regarding the use of sacred places and facilitating or maintaining communal activities and religious practices at the Western Wall. In doing so, an attempt will be made to explore the dynamics not only of the Arab- Zionist confrontation over the status of the Western Wall but also of the successes and failures of the public strategies to adapt or suppress the rules introduced by the Mandate Administration in the 1920s.

4 Competing claims over the Western Wall

The Western Wall has played several different roles throughout history. The surrounding areas of the Wall was primarily a place of religious significance during the Ottoman era for both Jews and Muslims. However, during the early years of the British Mandate, a nationalistic trend grew in Jerusalem alongside religious conflicts (Saposnik, 2009: 165-94), and a battle for the use and the status of the Western Wall between Muslim and Jewish communities, and between the community leaders and the policymakers, became an inescapable problem for their future. After the British captured the city from the Ottomans at the end of 1917, the Jewish community led by



Zionist leaders aimed to build a new political status for the Jews in Palestine, and as a symbolic attempt to achieve their plan, one of the most prominent leaders of the Zionists, Chaim Weizmann promised "the handing over of the Wailing [Western] Wall," which he thought was "in the hands of some doubtful Moghrabi religious community," to the Jewish people (Tibawi, 1969: 18). This attempt on the part of the Jewish community to purchase the Wall was firmly rebuked by the leaders of the Muslim community, such as the mufti of Jerusalem, Kamal al-Husseini (Wasserstein, 2001, p. 395), and marked the beginning of the political and religious conflicts of the Mandate period.

In the following years, as British rule was being established over Palestine, political concern for the use and the status of the Western Wall was always kept alive by the competing groups of Jerusalem (see, for an extensive and reasonably objective analysis of the Mandate period, United Nations, 1978; Cohen, 2014). At the beginning of 1920, for instance, the Jewish community led by Zionist leaders began complaining to the British Administration about repairs that the Muslims were making on the Wall, arguing that the repair aimed at disturbing Jews who prayed there (FO 371/5151/13, 1920). The British Administration responded by giving assurances that the works carried out by Muslims would be put under the control of the British Inspector of Antiquities and the requirement for permission to be sorted (CO 733/132/2, 1927). However, because such efforts were aimed at improving the Jewish position at the Western Wall, Arab leaders registered a protest with the British Administration. At the same time, the Mandate police began to be called in to investigate Jewish charges that the Muslim residents began assaulting Jewish worshippers on several occasions. These instances resulted, for instance, that a Zionist paramilitary organisation of the Jewish community, Haganah, claimed credit for bombing an Arab home near the Wall, as a response to Arab harassments (CO 733/132/2, 1927). Such tensions between Jews and Arabs eventually culminated in the outbreak of violence, and the lack of public consensus on law and order of the British Administration further worsened the situation in the following years.

The conflicts that existed during the beginning of the 1920s amplified during the end of the 1920s. During the first half of 1929, as competition between Jews and Arabs over the control and the use of the Western Wall and the surrounding areas intensified, the Jewish community sought to maximise their political and religious presence in



Jerusalem. To prevent them from strengthening their position in locations that were the subject of dispute with the Muslims, the British Administration positively responded to some of the complaints about Jewish attempts to change the status quo of the Western Wall by changing the character of the place in favour of Muslim residents (Lofgren et al., 1996: 403-403). Considering the Wall as a test of the British Administration's willingness to accept Jewish public opinions about the Western Wall's historical status, the Zionist leaders began dramatising its national and religious significance. One of the prominent figures of the Zionist movement, Israel Cohen (CO 733/160/57540, 1928), for instance, argued that "If Jews cannot be guaranteed unrestricted rights of public worship... in their own National Home, of what value is the Palestine Mandate?"

The Muslims' response to the controversial Jewish arguments was to request the Administration to reject the Jewish claims over the Western Wall. In September 1928, for instance, the Muslims who had gathered for prayers at al-Aqsa Mosque sitting above the Western Wall were encouraged to sign petitions alerting the Administration that Jewish leaders were "attempting by equivocation" to claim possession of the Western Wall (CO 733/160/57540, 1928). Consequently, the Western Wall began to pose an open test of the Arab and Jewish' strategies for the future of the Mandate of Palestine. As a result, during the beginning of August in 1929, thousands of Jewish people vowed to shed blood, if necessary, to regain the Western Wall (Hirst, 2003: 223), and a march to the Wall by the Jewish Beitar group on August 15, 1929, irreversibly increased the tension between Jews and Arabs. Just a day later, as a response, Muslims held a counter-march, attacking worshippers at the Wall and tearing and burning Jewish prayer books. However, the height of the conflict intensified a week later, and on August 23, with the eruption of one week of rioting, hundreds of people were killed and hundreds more injured in both communities (Dumper, 1997: 200). This was one of the most significant points in the history of the Mandate period that disrupted the credibility of the British Administration and marked the beginning of an irreconcilably violent phase that continues today.

(continued overleaf)



5 Conclusion

As can be seen with Trump's visit to the Western Wall, the recent discussions surrounding the old city of Jerusalem often refer to the violent conflicts surrounding the Western Wall area during the British Mandate of Palestine. Considering how these conflicts have been waged are inescapable issues of the current concern in Palestine, this paper briefly re-examined several instances of the historical struggle surrounding the Western Wall. In conducting this examination, it can be seen that British Administration policies during the first years of the Mandate were carefully framed so as not to turn the Western Wall into a source of tension between the different communities in Palestine. Unfortunately, however, the desire to balance a wide array of values and find common ground for the Jerusalem community turned into a never-ending political and historical battle with its diverse approaches and backgrounds. But this does not mean that the history of the conflicts surrounding the Western Wall needs to be perceived as proof of the unworkability of a common solution, in which Muslims and Jews guarantee to each other certain communal rights. On the contrary, the history of these conflicts illustrates the dynamics not only of the Muslim-Jewish or Arab-Israeli confrontation continuing over the century but also of the learning process which occurs in any conflict as opposing sides and the rulers revise their strategies based on public consensus. Therefore, the outbreak of rioting in 1929 resulted in a prolonged period of reflection on the future of the Mandatory Administration in Palestine; it constituted a decision to reinforce connections between the Administration and the contributing members of the Jewish and Muslim community. Such a connection always needs to be in place and even nurtured to prevent growing antisemitism and rampant Islamophobia, which characterise Palestinian politics today.

(continued overleaf)



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