

The Importance of Visiting Masjid al-Aqsa

Glory be to Him Who carried His servant on a journey by night from Al-Masjid Al-Haram to Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa; the environs of which We have blessed, that We might show him some of Our signs. Indeed He is the Hearing, the Seeing.
Qur'an Al-Isra' [17:1]

Over recent years, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land has intensified and Masjid al-Aqsa has suffered as a result. Israel continues to carry out excavations which have weakened the foundations of buildings within the sanctuary, and it severely limits Palestinian access to the Masjid al-Aqsa. Palestinians remain firm and defiant in defending and protecting the al-Aqsa sanctuary, which is recognized under international law as occupied Palestinian land. However, it is vital that Muslims across the globe equally extend their support and protection.

In recent years there have been debates within Muslim communities and societies regarding whether Muslims around the world should visit Masjid al-Aqsa. This brief article will set out the position of FOA on this complex issue. In compiling our advice, we take a pragmatic approach which is guided by Islamic principles. It should be noted that there is no right answer to this issue – but rather it requires us to reason intellectually in reaching a decision. Primarily, we seek to take a long-term strategic view over short-term benefits.

At the outset, it is necessary to make a distinction between two groups of people: those who reside in Muslim majority states and those that do not. FOA encourages Muslims who live in predominantly Muslim nations to refrain from visiting Masjid al-Aqsa, while we encourage all other Muslims to visit as often as possible. This position will be explained further below.

1. Why Muslims Should Visit Masjid al-Aqsa

There are number of reasons why Muslims should visit Masjid al-Aqsa:

A. Islamic Teaching

Muslims are encouraged to visit Masjid al-Aqsa and this is evident from the following ahadith:

Abu Hurayrah رضي الله عنه relates that the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم said, “You should not undertake a special journey to visit any place other than the three Masajid with the expectations of getting greater reward: the Sacred Masjid of Makkah, this Masjid of mine, and Masjid al-Aqsa (of Jerusalem)”. In another narration the wording states, “For three Masajid a special journey may be undertaken: The Sacred Masjid (Ka’bah), my Masjid, and the Masjid of al-Quds (Jerusalem)”.

Sahih al-Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, and Sunan Abu Dawud

Umm Salamah ؓ, Umm al-Mu'minin, relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "If anyone puts on ihram for Hajj or 'Umrah from the Masjid al-Aqsa and then proceeds to the sacred Masjid, his former and latter sins will be forgiven, or he will be guaranteed Paradise". The narrator 'Abdullah doubted which of these words he ؓ said.

Sunan Abu Dawud

Abu Darda' ؓ relates that the Prophet ﷺ said, "A prayer in Makkah is worth 100,000 times, a prayer in my Masjid (Madinah) is worth 1,000 times, and a prayer in al-Aqsa Sanctuary is worth 500 times more than anywhere else".

Al-Tabarani, al-Bayhaqi and al-Suyuti

Maymunah bint Sa'd ؓ relates that she asked the Prophet ﷺ, "O Prophet ﷺ! Inform us about Bayt al-Maqdis (Jerusalem)"? He said, "Visit it for prayer". She further asked, "If one of us cannot visit it, what should we do"? He said, "If you cannot go for prayer then send some oil to be used in its lamps; whosoever gives oil for its lamps, will be as if he has prayed in it".

Imam Ahmad, Ibn Majah, Sunan Abu Dawud and al-Tabarani

B. Solidarity with Palestinians

At present, the Palestinian people are carrying the enormous obligation of ensuring the safety and sanctity of Masjid al-Aqsa and they are shouldering this responsibility on behalf of the ummah. They have had to endure extreme hardship under the Israeli occupation for decades, but have remained steadfast in their dedication and commitment to protect Masjid al-Aqsa despite the challenges they face.

By visiting Jerusalem and Masjid al-Aqsa, Muslims from around the world empower the Palestinians and provide them with the support and strength to continue their struggle. This support is vital, and every visitor to Jerusalem lifts the spirits of each Palestinian they encounter. For Palestinians, the simple fact that they have not been forgotten gives them the incentive to continue in their struggle. Muslim visitors to the city of Jerusalem also emphasize the importance and status of Masjid al-Aqsa in Islam.

C. Understanding the dangers faced by Masjid al-Aqsa

Since the Israeli occupation of Masjid al-Aqsa began in 1967, Palestinian Jerusalemites have faced threats and violence, to themselves and to Masjid al-Aqsa. Attacks within the Masjid have targeted worshippers as well as centuries-old structures within the sanctuary. One example is the 1969 arson attack in which the mimbar of Salah al-Din was destroyed. More recently, trespassing onto the site and attacks on Palestinians have become a routine occurrence. With every trespass by extremist Israeli settlers or police, Palestinians are prevented from entering the area.

The sanctity and safety of al-Aqsa is undermined by a number of factors including:

- Tunnelling and excavations (beneath al-Aqsa sanctuary);
- Repeated and sometimes daily trespasses by extremist Israeli settlers and Israeli Politicians, police,

and others. Palestinian worshippers face physical assault and some are barred from entering the holy sanctuary.

- The ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian Muslims residing around Masjid al-Aqsa within the Old City of Jerusalem. This has continued since 1967.
- The isolating of East Jerusalem and Masjid al-Aqsa from the rest of Palestine by the Wall, road blocks, checkpoints and restrictions. Palestinians living in the West Bank face extreme difficulties in accessing al-Aqsa, with many being denied access altogether. Palestinians in Gaza have absolutely no access at all.
- The history, heritage and character of Jerusalem is being deliberately altered to create a new Israeli account. Arabic Street names are being changed to Hebrew names and the consequence of such moves is the wiping out of the Islamic history of the area in favour of a manufactured Jewish one, based on ancient biblical claims.
- In 2013, a building dating back to the Ottoman era which stood outside al-Aqsa was demolished to pave the way for the building of a Jewish Museum, ironically called the 'Museum of Tolerance'. Building projects such as these, attempt to make Jerusalem take on a more Jewish character at a cost to its Palestinian (Muslim and Christian) history and heritage.

D. Why Muslims are encouraged to visit Jerusalem and Masjid al-Aqsa:

- To fulfill the sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ and the pious predecessors.
- To comply with the teachings of Islam with the hope of earning reward in the hereafter.
- To nurture love for Masjid al-Aqsa as the land Allah ﷻ blessed and to which the Prophet ﷺ travelled on the Night Journey, and to do everything possible to protect it.
- To understand the plight of the Palestinians and become a part of their struggle by visiting their land and supporting their efforts.
- Become ambassadors for the cause of Masjid al-Aqsa.

2. Why Muslims from Arab/Islamic world should refrain from visiting Masjid Al-Aqsa

Whilst the above is applicable to all Muslims, there is nevertheless a need for strategic political means to be employed in order to oppose Israeli occupation policies. Thus, those living within Muslim majority states can adopt a different approach due to the ties their respective governments carry with Israel.

The unfortunate reality is that despite verbally stating their dismay over Israel's treatment of Palestinians and of Palestinian holy sites, many leadership from Muslim majority states are committed to largely unknown economic and diplomatic relations with Israel. The different Arab countries have varying degrees of engagement with Israel. Indirect Israeli exports to the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman) were estimated at \$6 billion in 2011. Trade also takes place with Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia and even Iran where it was revealed that the Allot Communications of Israel was selling Internet surveillance and monitoring equipment to Iran over five years through a Danish distributor.ⁱ Exports to Jordan and Egypt, in 2011, amounted to about \$200 million each. The firm, Netacs Ltdⁱⁱ, founded and co-owned by an Israeli reserve Major-General Danny Rothschild, has the following Jordanian Banks as its clients: the Bank of Jordan, Jordan Ahli Bank, and Cairo Amman Bank. In

2008 the Centre for Strategic and International Studies showed that Syria purchasedⁱⁱⁱ arms from Israel and joint Turkish-Israeli military training initiatives are well-known. The Egyptian army's close ties with Israel are universally recognised and the recent military coup in Egypt was celebrated in Israel. There is close co-operation between Israel and Saudi Arabia regarding marshalling attacks against Syria^{iv} and Iran^v.

Therefore Israel must be isolated diplomatically, economically and socially on the world stage and citizens of Muslim majority states are in a powerful position to make their frustrations known to their respective governments. We would recommend those of Muslim-majority states avoid going to Jerusalem as doing so would normalize their countries relations with Israel and allow their respective governments to be more open and forthright with any future trading agreements. By refraining from visiting Jerusalem (which is controlled by Israel), they are ensuring that they do not allow their 'political leaders' to forget the occupation and completely normalize their otherwise covert economic, diplomatic and political relations with Israel. If the citizens of Arab/Muslim world also begin visiting Jerusalem, then Israel's occupation becomes accepted as the status quo, and there will be nothing to compel change. FOA further encourages citizens of Muslim majority states to lobby their respective governments in order to drop any ties they have with Israel.

The difference between visitors from countries such as the UK and those from Muslim majority states is that those from the UK already have governments which operate under normalized relations with Israel. Rather, the purpose of their visit is to advocate for Palestinians on their return, and to offer support and solidarity with the cause. The Muslim majority states however operate under far more covert agreements with Israel for fear of the ties becoming known amongst their citizens and causing backlash. If citizens of Muslim majority states visit Jerusalem, their respective governments are potentially more likely to feel secure in their relations with Israel and thereafter pursue greater normalized relations.

Israel has worked for decades to create facts on the ground which force the international community to accept its claim over Jerusalem, but ordinary citizens can ensure that this is not allowed to continue. By refusing to visit until the occupation ends, these Muslims have the power to sway their leaders.

3. Historical Precedence

Jerusalem has come under threat in previous times. During the crusader period, Jerusalem was under occupation for almost a century. However, scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah and Imam Al-Ghazali did not stop Muslims from visiting the holy city. The reason for the difference in approach is that during that time, there was a fully fledged military plan in action to liberate Jerusalem to which all the Muslims were called to participate. Today, circumstances are different and we are compelled to use diplomatic, economic and social boycott as a tool to isolate Israel and force it to respect the rights of Palestinians and their land. We understand the difficulties in recommending that that Muslims from Muslim majority states refrain from visiting Masjid al-Aqsa, however, we make this statement only as a long term strategy to encourage Muslim majority states to be steadfast and sincere in opposing Israeli occupation.

4. Conclusion

Individual Muslims should therefore do whatever they can in their own capacities to help liberate Masjid al-Aqsa. For those Muslims residing in the Arab world this can be achieved by refraining from visiting Masjid Al-Aqsa and pressuring their leaders against normalising relations with Israel. While for Muslims in the rest of the world, they should visit as frequently as possible, highlighting the plight of the Masjid al-Aqsa and promoting the cause of justice.

We pray that it will soon be possible for all Muslims to enjoy the benefits of visiting Jerusalem and this will become possible if each individual plays his/her part to lobby respective leaders to break all diplomatic and economic relations with Israel until Israel ends its occupation.

We pray Allah ﷻ reward the efforts of those who are striving to liberate Masjid al-Aqsa with the same reward as those who pray in Masjid al-Aqsa.

ⁱ <http://www.haaretz.com/business/the-badly-kept-secret-of-israel-s-trade-throughout-the-muslim-world-1.408103>

ⁱⁱ <http://electronicintifada.net/blogs/ali-abunimah/palestinian-firms-listed-clients-israeli-general-who-fled-war-crimes-arrest>

ⁱⁱⁱ http://csis.org/files/publication/100629_Arab-IsraeliMilBal.pdf

^{iv} <http://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/7231-saudi-and-israel-share-interest-in-action-against-syria-and-iran>

^v <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/mossad-chief-reportedly-visited-saudi-arabia-for-talks-on-iran-1.304032>