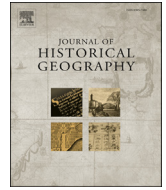




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Between Muslim and Jewish sanctity: Judaizing Muslim holy places in the State of Israel, 1948–1967

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the roots of the Judaization of Muslim holy places during the early years of the State of Israel. By using documents from Israeli archives it examines the legal methods and various means that the Ministry of Religions used, in collaboration with other Israeli authorities, to take possession of Muslim holy places and turn them into Jewish sites. Parallel to the state-led institutional process of the Judaization of David's Tomb in Jerusalem and Elijah's Cave in Haifa, a spontaneous process of conversion of sacred sites by Jewish immigrants from Islamic lands took place in the coastal plain and Galilee. The Judaization of these holy places is understood as part of a broader process whereby the State of Israel made every effort to develop a new symbolic landscape.

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In early January 2013 the site of David's Tomb on Mount Zion in Jerusalem was vandalized. The vandals systematically smashed ceramic tiles from the seventeenth century that covered much of the walls of the holy site.¹ Although the case remains unsolved, it appears that the aim of the attack was to erase any remnant of the Muslim past from the tomb. This event is part of a broader process – which began in 1948 and received institutional support from the Israeli state – of expropriating Muslim holy places and turning them into active sites of Jewish prayer. This phenomenon has been the subject of only partial research analysis to date.²

Discussion has intensified concerning sacred sites that are

common to different religions and the conflicts surrounding them.³ Various scholars have examined how war and other hostilities affect sacred spaces and sites, and how these holy sites are transformed into places of worship for other religions.⁴ These processes can be identified in various places around the world. For example, in the wake of the British withdrawal from the Indian subcontinent and the establishment of India and Pakistan, Muslim and Hindu populations relocated across the border and numerous conflicts arose concerning sacred sites.⁵ The Balkan region, with its diverse religions and ethnic groups, is also known as a space filled with national and religious conflicts. Christian and Muslim sacred sites

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¹ N. Shalev-Khalifa, In the outskirts of the magical forest – the painted tiles of King David's Tomb, in: D. Amit, G. Stiebel and O. Peleg-Barkat (Eds), *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and its Region*, volume 3, Tel Aviv, 2009, 67–73 (in Hebrew).

² A. Rubin Peled, *Debating Islam in the Jewish State*, New York, 2001, 75–96; M.J. Breger, Y. Reiter and L. Hammer (Eds), *Holy Places in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: Confrontation and Co-existence*, London, 2010; M.J. Breger, Y. Reiter and L. Hammer (Eds), *Sacred Space in Israel and Palestine: Religion and Politics*, London, 2012.

³ R.E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds*, Ithaca, 2009; G. Bowman (Ed.), *Sharing the Sacra: The Politics and Pragmatics of Inter-Communal Relations around Holy Places*, London, 2012.

⁴ R. Hecht and R. Friedland, The bodies of nations: a comparative study of religious violence in Jerusalem and Ayodhya, *History of Religions* 38 (1998) 101–149; R. Hecht, Changing places: Jerusalem's holy places in comparative perspective, in: D. Levi-Faur, G. Sheffer and D. Vogel (Eds), *Israel: The Dynamics of Change and Continuity*, London, 1999, 200–225; F.T. Schipper, Holy places – contested heritage: dealing with cultural heritage in the region of Palestine from the Ottoman period until today, in: J.D. Kila and J.A. Zeidler (Eds), *Cultural Heritage in the Crosshairs: Protecting Cultural Property During Conflict*, Leiden, 2013, 263–286; S. Ferrari and A. Benzo, *Between Cultural Diversity and Common Heritage: Legal and Religious Perspectives on the Sacred Places of the Mediterranean*, Farnham, 2014.

⁵ J. Bajaj (Ed.), *Ayodhya and the Future of India*, Madras, 1993; P. Baccheta, Sacred space and conflict in India: the Babri Masjid affair, *Growth and Change* 31 (2000) 255–284; C.W. Ernst, India as a sacred Islamic land, in: D.S. Lopez (Ed.), *Religions of India in Practice*, Princeton NJ, 1995, 556–563; A. Bigelow, *Sharing the Sacred: Practicing Pluralism in Muslim North India*, Oxford, 2010.

changed hands during the upheavals in this region during the twentieth century.⁶ The conflict between Turkey and Greece also separated Orthodox Christians and Muslims from their holy sites, and many churches and mosques were destroyed, appropriated or re-expropriated.⁷ Similarly, the partition of Cyprus into two separate states led to a strict division between the religious sites of Muslims and Christians.⁸

In many ways, therefore, the process that Muslim holy sites underwent in the State of Israel resembles that of other places in the world where sacred spaces were transformed due to political and military upheavals. Yet the process in Israel was unique for several reasons: the multifaceted history of the space; the fact that there were numerous sacred sites; and the complexity of the demographic situation following the 1948 War when hundreds of thousands of Arabs were expelled or left their settlements and relocated outside the State of Israel.⁹

Although nearly every aspect of the 1948 War has been investigated, scholars have shown limited interest in the fate of destroyed Arab settlements (neighbourhoods, villages and cities) in the State of Israel.¹⁰ Likewise, Arab sacred sites located within the borders of the newly declared State of Israel have not attracted scholarly interest. The Arab and Palestinian scholars who have studied the 1948 War's impact on Arab society have touched upon this topic only tangentially, focusing upon the culture and history of sacred tombs in Muslim Palestinian society.¹¹ For example, Walid

Khalidi's book on Arab villages prior to 1948 and other works briefly mention these tombs.¹² The scholarly lacuna regarding Muslim sacred sites in the State of Israel and their physical neglect is underscored by the existence of in-depth studies on Christian holy sites and institutions, which were more carefully maintained by Israeli authorities after 1948.¹³

The period covered in this article, the first two decades of the State of Israel, is unique in the development of Jewish holy places. Mandatory Palestine was divided in the wake of the 1948 War into two separate areas of rule. Consequently, the Jewish population in the State of Israel was cut off from most of its sacred sites. In addition to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the central and most important Jewish holy place, a number of other sites (including the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron and Rachel's Tomb) were under Jordanian rule and inaccessible. On the other hand, the flight and expulsion of the Arab population from the territory of the State of Israel created a situation in which many Muslim holy places were left without an Islamic community to visit them. This made it very easy to institute Jewish ritual practices in some of them. As this paper shows, these momentous military events and political changes enabled officials from Israel's Ministry of Religions, led by its director-general Shmuel Zangwill Kahana, to create an alternative map of Jewish holy places within the jurisdiction of the State of Israel.¹⁴ Though the ministry was not established to develop, create or invent Jewish holy sites, Kahana invested great efforts in this endeavour. He renewed and invented many Jewish traditions that he linked to the holy sites the ministry nurtured, based in part on sites that were sacred to the Muslim population prior to 1948. For Kahana, the Jewish religious history of the Land of Israel – the official name during the Mandate period was Palestine EY (Eretz Yisrael) – served as a foundation for an Israeli national claim to the territory. For him, ancient Jewish history and Jewish religious texts – the Bible, Mishnah and Talmud – provided a type of religious and ideological deed of ownership, justifying the expropriation of sacred Muslim buildings and graves, which were turned into Jewish and, consequently, Israeli sites.

In addition, during the same decades, hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants settled in the newly founded state. While many of these immigrants came from Europe, others came from Arab and Islamic countries. Besides taking part in the rituals in the holy places that the Ministry of Religions developed, they also adopted and developed holy places that were used before 1948 by the local Muslim population. This occurred mainly in the social and geographical periphery of Israel, in regions and places where the immigrants were settled by the Israeli establishment. In need of accessible holy sites near their settlements, the immigrants adopted as Jewish sites such places as the Tomb of Rabbah Gamliel in Yavneh, the Tomb of Judah in Yehud, and the Tomb of Benjamin (Nabi Yemin) near Kfar Sava.

The Six Day War in June 1967 engendered another enormous change in the map of Jewish holy places. The return of Jews, who now possessed an Israeli identity, to the Western Wall, and to other sacred sites they had last visited prior to 1948, dramatically changed the geography of Jewish ritual practice during the ensuing decades. Since the late 1960s, the Judaization of Muslim holy places has continued in the different regions of the State of Israel, but public and institutional attention has concentrated on East Jerusalem and the occupied territories of Judea and Samaria. In those areas, Israel's military government and civil administration, along

⁶ K.J. Detling, Eternal silence: the destruction of cultural property in Yugoslavia, *Maryland Journal of International Law and Trade* 17 (1993) 41–75; R.M. Heyden, Antagonistic tolerance: competitive sharing of religious sites in South Asia and the Balkans, *Current Anthropology* 43 (2002) 205–231; G. Bowman, Orthodox-Muslim interactions at 'mixed shrines' in Macedonia, in: C. Hann and H. Holtz (Eds), *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, Berkeley, 2010, 163–183; J. Eade and M. Katić (Eds), *Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-Making in Eastern Europe: Crossing the Borders*, Farnham, 2014; D. Henig, Contested choreographies of sacred spaces in Muslim Bosnia, in: E. Barkan and K. Barkey (Eds), *Choreographies of Shared Sacred Sites: Religion and Conflict Resolution*, New York, 2015, 130–160.

⁷ D. Pentzopoulos, Description of the Turkish-Greek dispute and its effects on the region's population, in: D. Pentzopoulos, *The Balkan Exchange of Minorities and its Impact upon Greece*, London, 2002 (orig. 1962) 199–219; R. Hayden, H. Sözer, T. Tanyeri-Erdemir and K. Erdemir, The Byzantine mosque at Trilye: a processual analysis of dominance, sharing, transformation and tolerance, *History and Anthropology* 22 (2011) 1–18; G. Tsimouris, Pilgrimages to Gokceade (Imvros), a Greco-Turkish contested place: religious tourism or a way to reclaim the homeland, in: Eade and Katić (Eds), *Pilgrimage, Politics and Place-Making in Eastern Europe*, 37–55.

⁸ Republic of Cyprus Press and Information Office, *Flagellum Dei: The Destruction of the Cultural Heritage in the Turkish-Occupied Part of Cyprus*, Nicosia, 1997; M. Jansen, *War and Cultural Heritage: Cyprus after the 1974 Invasion*, Minneapolis, 2005; C. Chotzakoglou, *Religious Monuments in Turkish-Occupied Cyprus: Evidence and Acts of Continuous Destruction*, Nicosia, 2012.

⁹ D. Bar, Wars and holy space: the influence of the 1948 War on sacred space in the State of Israel, in: Breger, Reiter and Hammer (Eds), *Holy Places in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, 68–92.

¹⁰ M. Brawer, Transformation in Arab rural settlement in Palestine, in: R. Karak (Ed.), *The Land that Became Israel*, Jerusalem, 1989, 167–180; M. Benvenisti, *Sacred Landscape: The Buried History of the Holy Land Since 1948*, Berkeley, 2000; A. Golan, The transformation of abandoned Arab rural areas, *Israel Studies* 2 (1997) 94–110; Y. Paz, Preserving architectural heritage in deserted neighborhoods after the Independence War, *Cathedra* 88 (1998) 95–134 (in Hebrew); A. Shai, The fate of the uninhabited Arab villages in Israel, *Cathedra* 105 (2002) 151–170 (in Hebrew); N. Kadman, *Erased from Space and Consciousness: Israel and the Depopulated Palestinian Villages of 1948*, Bloomington, 2015.

¹¹ S. Araf, *Prophets and Saints in the Holy Land*, Tarshiha, 1993 (in Arabic).

¹² W. Khalidi, *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*, Washington DC, 1992; W. Khalidi, *Before their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians 1876–1948*, Washington DC, 1984; G. Falah, The 1948 Israeli-Palestinian war and its aftermath: the transformation and designation of Palestine's cultural landscape, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86 (1996) 277–281; A. Key, *Sanctity Denied: The Destruction and Abuse of Muslim and Christian Holy Places in Israel*, Nazareth, 2004; N. Masalha, *The Zionist Bible: Biblical Precedent, Colonialism and the Erasure of Memory*, Abingdon, 2013.

¹³ U. Bialer, *Cross on the Star of David: The Christian World in Israel's Foreign Policy, 1948–1967*, Bloomington, 2005.

¹⁴ D. Bar, Reconstructing the past: the creation of Jewish sacred space in the State of Israel, 1948–1967, *Israel Studies* 13 (2008) 1–21.

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