

# Gulf pilgrims about to upset Al-Aqsa status quo

Despite their absence in both the peace agreements signed between the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Israel, and the Abraham Accords, which presented a vision of mutual respect and religious freedom for the Middle East, the sites in Israel holy to Muslim believers are about to undergo a major shift – an upheaval offering great opportunities and significant dangers.

Despite the official documents' silence, weeks before the White House ceremony, U.S. National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien announced the outcome of secret negotiations between the U.S., Israel, and the UAE over the past few months: that the signing of the accords would enable "Muslims who wish to pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque" to "fly from Abu Dhabi to Tel Aviv, where they will be welcomed."

When Israel and Bahrain announced the normalization of relations, their joint statement included the affirmation by Israel that "all Muslims who come in peace may visit and pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque."

The Old City of Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa compound, also known as the Haram al-Sharif and to Jews as the Temple Mount, is the third holiest pilgrimage site in Islam after Mecca and Medina, marking the destination of Mohammed's night

journey in Muslim tradition. In theory, Muslim pilgrims who land at Ben-Gurion International Airport will within an hour be able to visit Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem and pray at the Al-Aqsa mosque.

We don't yet know how the relations between the countries will develop and whether, parallel to Israelis traveling to Dubai, significant numbers of Gulf state citizens will travel to Israel. But in any case, it is evident that visits by Muslim believers from the Gulf states will further complicate the complex reality surrounding the Haram al-Sharif.

The State of Israel is highly conscious of the need to preserve the delicate state of affairs at the site, aware that it is a powder keg that can explode at any moment – as it has done in the past. What will happen when the first busload of Muslim pilgrims from the Gulf arrives in Jerusalem?

The answer to this question is very complicated, and is connected to the delicate balance of relations in the entire region.

Although the State of Israel, having annexed east Jerusalem in 1967, has sovereignty over the Old City, which includes the Temple Mount, the Palestinian Waqf (a Muslim religious trust) de facto controls the Mount.

Any change in the status quo can trigger violent riots. That happened in 2000 with Ariel Sharon's walkabout

there (the start of the second intifada) and in 2017, with the installation of metal detectors at the entrance to the compound.

Although it seems clear that the Israeli police will permit Gulf pilgrims to access the Mount, it is uncertain as to whether the security guards of the Waqf, a Palestinian body partly funded by Jordan that is effectively the civil administration of the area, will permit them to enter the holy sites.

The Jordanian royal court and government are fearful that the new agreement will

ly. For Palestinians living in the West Bank, on the other side of the security fence or in Gaza, there are multiple limitations on traveling and accessing the Haram al-Sharif.

Saudi Arabia is also involved in this tangled web of interests. In the 7th century, the Umayyads, who ruled from Damascus and this region, developed Jerusalem as a new focus of sanctity in Islam. They attempted to divert the flow of pilgrims from Mecca to Jerusalem and convince Muslims to make their pilgrimage there. Abd al-Malik ibn Mar-

Muslim world.

There is yet another complicating factor: the significance of the same area in Jewish history and religion. The Mount is Jews' holiest site, the location of both the First and Second Temples, and the direction to which Jews orient their prayers. There are different kinds of restrictions on Jews praying on the Mount: both longstanding tradition, based in Jewish religious law, and in contemporary limitations imposed by both the Israeli security services and by the Waqf.

Although the Israeli police have been very strict about enforcing the prohibition against public Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount, nevertheless nationalist religious rabbis have recently been accelerating an established campaign to encourage Jewish pilgrimage to the site.

The timing of what could be a ground-breaking change is also relevant. We are now on the verge of critical elections in the U.S., and the Trump administration is constantly seeking to shore up the support of evangelicals and the proportion of the U.S. Orthodox Jewish community that backs him.

The evangelical community strongly supports Jewish settlement in the territories, the expansion of Jewish rights in Jerusalem and the issue of religious (particularly "Judeo-Christian") freedom. They would cer-

## The peace accords with the Gulf states now create the possibility that part of the Muslim world will prefer Jerusalem as a pilgrimage site over Mecca and Medina.

damage the Hashemite family's distinctive historical status in Jerusalem. The Palestinian Mufti of Jerusalem has issued a fatwa, or Islamic legal ruling, banning those supporting normalization with Israel from praying at Al-Aqsa, a clear broadside at Gulf Muslim pilgrims.

Unofficially, the Jordanian government strongly discourages its citizens from visiting the State of Israel, and both Jordan and Israel have toughened their entry requirements recent-

wan, the fifth Umayyad caliph of the dynasty, built the splendid Dome of the Rock primarily as an alternative pilgrimage site to Mecca.

The signing of the peace accords with the Gulf states now creates the possibility that part of the Muslim world will prefer Jerusalem as a pilgrimage site over Mecca and Medina. That might even act as a trigger for the Saudi royal court to participate more openly in the normalization process to preempt losing religious-political primacy in the Sunni



A man walking by the Dome of the Rock.

Ammar Awad/Reuters

tainly be pleased if, parallel to the opening of Haram al-Sharif to Muslim pilgrims from the Gulf, there would be public recognition of the right to Jewish public prayer on the Temple Mount.

In contrast to these multi-layered restrictions, both self-imposed and not, to Muslim pilgrimage to Jerusalem, an entirely new phenomenon is about to appear: many thousands (if not more) of Muslims, Gulf citizens, able and willing to freely visit the Al-Aqsa compound and the rest of Israel.

The web of interests and power relationships in the Middle East is more intricate than in any other place in the world, with the holy sites being possibly the most volatile and complex element. Any change in the status quo connected to the holy sites can ignite a formidable conflict – tangible, but symbolic, too.

For Palestinians, the Al-Aqsa compound is a prime symbol of national and religious identity. Any encroachment by the Gulf – whether institutionally or demographically – may well be seen as a form of unwelcome interference, if not usurpation.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided an unexpected hiatus in international air travel, not least for incoming visitors to Israel, now in the depths of a second major national lockdown. But that hiatus could also provide the breathing space for Israel to endeavor to advance agreements with all those involved in the holy sites in Jerusalem and those countries who will have vested interests in the future, in the form of significant pilgrim numbers – before the pilgrim flows begin.

That includes not only the traditional custodian, Jordan, but also the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and perhaps other countries on course to signing normalization agreements with Israel.

It is possible that for the first time in our region's history, the holy sites in Jerusalem will serve as a platform for interreligious and international cooperation, even friendship. But that requires careful planning, the recognition of threats and sensitivities, and a form of coordination that has never been attempted in the 21st century Middle East. There is a lot to play for – but a heavy price to pay for failure, too.

That includes not only the traditional custodian, Jordan, but also the Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and perhaps other countries on course to signing normalization agreements with Israel.

It is possible that for the first time in our region's history, the holy sites in Jerusalem will serve as a platform for interreligious and international cooperation, even friendship. But that requires careful planning, the recognition of threats and sensitivities, and a form of coordination that has never been attempted in the 21st century Middle East. There is a lot to play for – but a heavy price to pay for failure, too.

Prof. Doron Bar is the president of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, a lecturer in Land of Israel and Jerusalem Studies, and a historical geographer who specializes in the study of the development of popular and national holy sites in Israel.