

Mussala al-Marwani: An unrecognised Palestinian triumph?

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In the midst of recent tensions and controversies surrounding the access of non-Muslims to the Haram al-Sharif, may observers and researchers may have overlooked the significance of a remarkable achievement that has occurred in Jerusalem: the restoration and rehabilitation of Mussala al-Marwani, or the Marwani Mosque. The opening of this mosque under the Haram al-Sharif in 2000 may have triggered increased Israeli surveillance and intervention on the site, but, nevertheless, the work probably constitutes the largest and most ambitious project undertaken since the Ottoman period. The Marwani Mosque, sometimes referred to as the Marwani Prayer Hall, is located in the south east corner of the Haram al-Sharif in an area also known as Solomon's Stables. It was named after the father of the builder of the Dome of the Rock, Caliph Abd al-Malik although some sources question the connection to Caliph Abd al-Malik and prefer to emphasize the link with the Crusader use of the site as stables, comprising some 500 square metres.

The Mosque itself was were created out of subterranean vaults supported by eighty-eight pillars and divided into twelve galleries in rows. During the Crusader period the vaults were used as stables by the King of Jerusalem, Baldwin II (1118-1131 CE) but were subsequently sealed off by Salah Ed-Din after his conquest of the city in 1187. Between August 1996 and March 2001, the Waqf Administration carried out extensive rehabilitation work. They also received the cooperation of the Islamic Movement inside Israel which mobilised funds and supplied Palestinian volunteers. The underground site was transformed into one of the largest mosques in the world (4000m²/ 1 acre). On the one hand the work generated popular Palestinian support but on the other it also provoked widespread Israeli opposition with running battles with the police, legal petitions by pressure groups and critical reports by the Israeli Antiquities Authority.¹ Nevertheless, the rehabilitation work greatly enhanced the standing of both the Islamic Movement and the Waqf Administration in the Islamic world.²

On a tour of Musalla al-Marwani halls in February this year, I was very much struck by the achievement of the Waqf Administration in completing this project. I have visited the Halls during various phases of excavation and rehabilitation so am familiar with their lay-out. On this visit however, which was after quite a period of absence, it sunk in what has been

¹ Most notably the Committee for the Prevention of Destruction of Antiquities on the Temple Mount and the Temple Mount Faithful; Gideon Avni and Jon Seligman. *The Temple Mount 1917-2001: Documentation, Research and Inspection of Antiquities*. The Israeli Antiquities Authority (Jerusalem: Keter Press Enterprises, 2001), 42; Nadav Shragai, 'The Breach of the Temple Mount: a Swift Kick at Jewish History', *Ha'aretz*, February 12, 1999.

² See Nimrod Luz, 'The Glocalisation of al-Haram al-Sharif Landscape of Islamic resurgence and national revival: Designing memory, mystification of place' (September, 2009), 1-39.
http://www.ntnu.no/eksternweb/multimedia/archive/00051/Nimrod_Luz_51579a.pdf

accomplished at this site. The galleries inside the Mosque quite awe-inspiring in their beauty and proportions, reminding one of the grace and elegance of the admittedly much more delicate Mosque in Cordoba in Spain, yet the size and grandeur is quite astonishing. I am not a conservation architect or a historian but surely it is not inaccurate to conclude that this project, however contentious, must be the most ambitious and largest activity undertaken on the Haram al-Sharif since the Ottoman period. I am not aware of a project of equal scale and magnitude. One can see how in the light of all the other recent controversies concerning the Status Quo of the Haram al-Sharif and the question of access for prayers to non-Muslims, the scale and scope of this work has not been recognised. What is astonishing is that such a monumental renovation and expansion of public space for the Muslim community has been undertaken in full sight of the Israeli security and antiquity authorities. I would argue that Palestinians and the Muslim community have been so focused on the erosion of their control over the Haram al-Sharif by the Israeli authorities that they themselves have not appreciated what has been achieved. One could argue that failing to portray the rehabilitation of Musalla al-Marwani as a dramatic triumph in the face of the overwhelming power of the Israeli state is an opportunity missed to convey this example of Palestinian skills, expertise and competence.

One could go further. One should also acknowledge that together with the renovation of the al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock in the 80s and 90s (which attracted international acclaim and an award by the Aga Khan Foundation) and the renovation work carried out by the Palestinian Welfare Association and the Waqf Administration of Mamluk *madrasas*, *turbas* and *hamams* etc, in the Old City itself (which also received an Aga Khan Award) Palestinian public space has made a great deal of progress. In the midst of so many difficulties in asserting a Palestinian identity under Israeli occupation in East Jerusalem, these are great examples of what can be achieved.