

## **International Crisis Group, *How to Preserve the Fragile Calm at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade* (See [link](#)). Middle East Briefing No 48.**

As in my responses to previous ICG Briefings,<sup>1</sup> I am impressed by the research, the quality of the data, the clarity of the writing and the judiciousness of the analysis. Reports such as these set a high benchmark for policy-oriented research.

Developments regarding the Haram al-Sharif (referred to as Holy Esplanade) are very fluid and the Briefing captures the facts and evolution of challenges to the Status Quo very well. As a snapshot of what is happening, what is at stake and what the main trends and challenges are, I think the piece is accurate.

There are four areas that the Briefing might have explored further:

- 1) My understanding is that Israeli Palestinian MKs played an important role in dissuading King Abdullah from installing the cameras in the way Israel would have liked, that is, inside the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock itself with direct feeds to an Israeli monitoring room. They were amongst those invited to the Palace in Amman with the community leaders of East Jerusalem to discuss this proposal but were much less deferential in their criticisms of the scheme. In fact, I am told, there was quite an argument between the King and them. It may be that they are taking up an opportunity to display their nationalist credentials or it may be that they are filling the slight vacuum opened up by the restrictions placed on the Islamic Movement (Northern branch) by Israel. In any case, if their intervention continues, it will be interesting to see how their role develops politically, particularly over the Passover period.
- 2) The role of the *murabitun*, or more precisely, the *murabitaat* may have been played down too much. I do not mean this in terms of impact on who controls the site, but more in terms of the internal debate within the Palestinian Muslim community. My understanding is that their actions have galvanised a more broad-based resistance which gives the role of women much more prominence which, in turn, has generated a rethinking of tactics and the role of non-violent resistance and gender.
- 3) A rather tangential point to the Briefing but one which may give a richer context is the phenomenon of Musalla al-Marwani, or the Marwani Mosque. On a tour of the halls in February this year, I was struck very strongly by the tremendous achievement of the Waqf in completing this project. I have been several times to the halls during various phases of rehabilitation and 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 accomplished. This project must be the most ambitious and largest activity undertaken on the site since the Ottoman period, almost eclipsing the renovation of the al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock (which attracted international acclaim and awards) in the 80s and 90s. The scale and scope of the project has not been recognised, I would argue, because much more attention has been placed on the political events surrounding the Haram al-Sharif and the controversies over the Status Quo. What is astonishing is that such a monumental renovation and expansion of public space for the Muslim community was undertaken in full sight of the Israeli security and antiquity authorities. How Israel let this happen must be further explored. Perhaps it is this

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Power, Piety and People*, website:

<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/politics/research/projects/powerpietyandpeople/jerusalem/publications/>

lapse in scrutiny which has angered Israeli politicians so much. An additional point is that Palestinians are so focused on the erosion of their control over the site that they themselves have not appreciated what has been achieved. The re-use of this area and structure could be portrayed as a dramatic triumph in the face of the power of the Israeli state and an example of their skills and competence and you could argue that it is an opportunity missed on their part. Whatever happens next, in the light of renovations not only of the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock but also of the numerous sites in the Old City, this generation of Palestinian historians, architects, archaeologists has surely left an impressive if unrecognised legacy which has been obscured by the current tensions.

- 4) Finally, the tone of pessimism as to whether the set of personalised arrangements between Netanyahu and the King will last is accurate. My understanding of the Jordanian position is that there is absolutely no sliver of trust in Netanyahu by the King. He will not risk his throne or family reputation on Netanyahu's proven unreliability. The basis of these arrangements is very threadbare and will not last long at all.