

THE FARTHEST MOSQUE

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Silver dome of Al-Aqsa Mosque, built on top of the Temple Mount, known as Haram esh-Sharif in Islam and wall of old city of Jerusalem, Israel.

Ariel Sharon's infamous visit to al-Aqsa compound in 2000 was the trigger point of the violent second intifada, which lasted for years. Last year, an Israeli police raid of the mosque in the occupied East Jerusalem's Old City prompted rocket firings from Gaza, the blockaded and impoverished Palestinian enclave that's controlled by the Islamist Hamas, triggering an 11-day war in which 250 Palestinians and 13 Israelis were killed. Tensions returned earlier this month after a wave of attacks killed 14 Israelis. In the subsequent Israeli crackdown on the occupied West Bank, 15 Palestinians were killed.

Tensions spiralled into al-Aqsa when Israeli forces raided the mosque on April 15 to prevent what they called stone pelting and other attacks. Wider clashes erupted immediately, which also saw rocket firing from Gaza and retaliatory air strikes by Israel, reviving the memories of last year's deadly conflict.

For years, al-Aqsa, the third holiest place of worship in Islam after Mecca and Medina, has remained a flashpoint in the Israeli-Palestinian tensions. Muslims call the compound, which also houses the Dome of the Rock, the Dome of the Chain, four minarets and the Western Wall (Wailing Wall) Haram esh-Sharif, or the Noble Sanctuary. For Jews, it's the Temple Mount, the holiest place in Judaism where the Jewish temples once stood. Jews believe the ancient limestone wall is part of the Herod-era expansion of the Second Biblical Temple. According to Jewish tradition, the first Temple, built by King Solomon, was destroyed by the Babylonians. The Second Temple, built in 516 BCE, was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The wall is the only remains of the destroyed structure.

The modern story of the compound is equally complicated. The Palestinians see East Jerusalem as the capital of their future state, while Israel considers the whole city, including the western half that is its seat of power and the occupied eastern half, as their "eternal capital".

The Night Journey

According to Islamic traditions, the Prophet Mohammed was transported from "the sacred place of worship" (the Great Mosque in Mecca) to the "farthest place of worship" (Jerusalem) during his Night Journey (*al-Isra*) on a winged horse called al-Buraq. Later, on the same night, the Prophet is believed to have ascended to heaven (*al-Mi'raj*) with archangel Gabriel from the place where the Dome of the Rock now stands.

Umar, the second Caliph of the Rashidun caliphate, erected a prayer house at the place on the mount where the Prophet was believed to have led prayers during *Isra* , after the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in the seventh century. This became al-Aqsa mosque (literally, the farthest mosque). It was rebuilt and expanded by the Umayyads. The Umayyad-built structure was destroyed in earthquakes and the mosque was rebuilt and renovated several times by the following Caliphates, including the Abbasids and Fatmids.

After the crusaders captured Jerusalem in the 11th century, they turned al-Aqsa into a palace and the Dome of the Rock, which was originally built by the Umayyads, into a church. But Saladin, the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty who recaptured the holy city from the crusaders in

the 12th century — which is depicted in the Ridley Scott movie *Kingdom of Heaven* — restored the mosque.

The city would remain in the hands of Muslims until the British General Edmund Allenby entered Jerusalem on foot through the Jaffa Gate on December 11, 1917 after his troops defeated the Ottomans.

Israeli capture

In the first Arab-Israel war that broke out after the state of Israel was declared in May 1948, the Israelis captured western Jerusalem and Jordan the eastern half of the city, along with the West Bank. In the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel would seize East Jerusalem and the West Bank from Jordan, the Sinai Peninsula and Gaza from Egypt and Golan Heights from Syria. Later, Israel annexed East Jerusalem, but al-Aqsa would remain under the administration of an Islamic *waqf* with the Hashemite monarchy of Jordan being its custodian.

So, the third holiest mosque in Islam exists on a compound that Jews believe once hosted their sacred temples in a city occupied by the Jewish state of Israel which the Palestinians living under the Israeli occupation see as the legitimate capital of their future independent state. It's a place where faith, history, disputes, power and politics are all intertwined, making it extremely difficult to find peace.

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