

SIGNIFICANT EVENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Islamicjerusalem (*Bait al-Maqdis*) as a Model for Peaceful Co-existence and Mutual Respect for all Humankind

Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim,

Tan-Tan Sri, Dato-Dato Seri ...

Excellencies, dignitaries, distinguished guests, Professors, ladies and gentlemen,

Assalamu 'Alaikum Wa Rahmatullahi Wa Barakatuhu

It is a great honour for me to address the distinguished audience here this morning on an issue which all Muslims around the world bear in the core of our hearts with great love, reverence and sympathy. It is nothing but the Islamicjerusalem or Bait al-Maqdis itself. Islamicjerusalem has an immense significance in the divine texts as well as the glorious traditions of Islamic history. The Holy Qur'an has termed the place and its surrounding area as 'blessed land' in at least two instances. In Surah Isra (chapter 17), verse 1 it is mentioned:

“Glorified be He (Allah) Who took His servant for a journey by night from Al-Masjid-al-Haram (at Makkah) to Al-Masjid-al-Aqsa (in Jerusalem) – the neighbourhood whereof We have blessed – in order that We might show him of Our signs. Verily, He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer.”

At another instance, in Surah al-Anbiya (chapter 21), verse 71, the Holy Qur'an reads:

“And We rescued him (Ibrahim) and Lut to the land (*Bait al-Maqdis*) which We have blessed for the world.”

The second verse illustrates an historical backdrop, when Ibrahim a.s. was persecuted in his own land – Iraq – he was ordered to migrate to the 'blessed land' – the land of Kan'aan or present day Palestine. It is the land of hope, where he settled down and later became the centre figure of the three monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

On a similar background, when the oppressions and persecutions against the last messenger Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.) was intensified in Makkah, Allah s.w.t.

granted him solace through the night journey to Bait al-Maqdis. It was at the Bait al-Maqdis where he led all the previous prophets in a congregational prayer – thus signifying the eminence of the place. It was again the same Bait al-Maqdis from where Allah s.w.t granted him the *mi'raj* – ascension to the heavens. Therefore, Islamicjerusalem or Bait al-Maqdis and its sanctity is beyond any question.

There is probably no other city on the face of the earth which witnessed the presence and dwelling of as many prophets of Allah s.w.t as Bait al-Maqdis. Great Prophets like Dawud and Sulaiman (a.s.) ruled from Bait al-Maqdis, so as the Jews have their reverence for the land. Prophet Isa (a.s.) was born in Bethlehem – which is in the vicinity of Bait al-Maqdis, as such the Christians consider the city a sacred one! And we Muslims believe in all the above mentioned prophets as part of our faith. Above all, Bait al-Maqdis was the first *qiblah* – the religious centre for the Muslims. Therefore, Bait al-Maqdis is as sacred to us as it is to the Jews or the Christians.

Unfortunately, the land of Islamic jerusalem did not enjoy the same esteemed privilege during the Persian and the Byzantine rule before the *fath* (opening) of Umar ibn al-Khattab in 16AH/637CE. The Jews and Christians of Islamicjerusalem had experienced severe torturous treatments and were subject to an exclusivist policy under the Byzantines. Despite the fact that the Byzantines were also Christians like the Monophysite Christians of the Islamicjerusalem, their theological differences held them apart, to the extent that the Monophysites were persecuted for having a faith closer to the Islamic monotheism. The Mount Temple was turned into a garbage dump by the Byzantines in order to harass and belittle the Jews and Christians, and restrict them from their worship.

When Khalifah Umar ibn al-Khattab arrived in Islamicjerusalem to receive the key of the city from the Patriarch Sophronius, he was warmly welcomed by the local Jews and Christians. A Jewish writer named Ben Zeev mentions that the Jews of Syria were patiently awaiting the arrival of the Muslim armies to rescue them from the cruel and tyrannical subjugation of the Byzantines.¹ Jews were thus allowed to settle in Islamicjerusalem five hundred years after they had been expelled by the Romans in 135CE.²

Upon witnessing the disgrace of the Mount Temple, Umar himself took charge to clean the area along with others, and re-instated the sanctity of the sanctuary. When he was offered to pray at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, he refused to do so in fear of it being later turned into a masjid by the Muslims, and thus depriving Christendom from one of its holiest sites. Thus Umar established an inclusive model of a religious sanctuary.

In fact, it was his treaty with the Patriarch Sophronius which is historically known as the 'Pact of Umar' (or *al-'uhdah al-'Umarriyyah*) ensured full rights in detail for the non-Muslim residents of Islamicjerusalem. The treaty could be

considered as a model for an “inclusive, peaceful co-existence and mutual respect among the people of all faiths.” It will not do justice if I do not read a few lines from the ‘pact of Umar:’

“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is the assurance of safety which the servant of God, Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, has given to the people of Jerusalem. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and healthy of the city and for all the rituals which belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited by Muslims and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted.”
[Tarikh Tabari]

With such a pact, Umar did not only recognise the presence of the Christians and the Jews, he rather went on further to ensure that justice, freedom, equality, protection, safety and security for their lives, properties and religion are well maintained. Thus, cultural, religious and demographic diversities were all accommodated within the one boundary of Islamicjerusalem.

Referring to the historical ‘Pact of Umar’ and its assurance of peace, equality, honour and identity, Karen Armstrong claims:

“The Muslims had established a system that enabled Jews, Christians, and Muslims to live in Jerusalem together for the first time.”³

The Christians and the Jews continued enjoying the same privileges throughout the Muslim rule of Islamicjerusalem. For instance, Ahmad ibn Tulun, the Turkish commander of Egypt (from 868-904CE) under the Abbasid Caliphate, appointed a Christian as the governor of Islamicjerusalem. He also allowed a new Jewish sect to establish in the region.⁴ The Christians and the Jews enjoyed so much prosperity that they were at the upper hand in many instances. Karen Armstrong also claims that the Muslims had always been the minorities in Islamicjerusalem until the Crusades.⁵

Considering Umar’s pact as a model for peaceful conflict resolution, and mutual respect among the faiths, a contemporary Muslim scholar of Islamicjerusalem, Abd al-Fattah M. El-Awaisi observes:

“Umar’s assurance of Aman not only rejected the notion of the supremacy of one people or race over others but presented Islamicjerusalem as a model both for peaceful co-existence and mutual respect; and for conflict resolution. As one of the main characteristics of Islamicjerusalem is its competing political and religious claims, it could be argued that it should be

presented as a model for conflict resolution through ‘constructive dialogue’ and positive negotiation with its conflicting parties.”⁶

Islamic Jerusalem belongs to the Muslims as much as it belongs to the Jews and the Christians. There can never be a peace accord while excluding the rights of any of the three great faiths. Before we conclude, we would like to mention Abd al-Fattah M. El-Awaisi once again for his relentless efforts in Islamic Jerusalem studies, who argues:

“... Islamic Jerusalem had always held the key to war and peace in the region. Whenever it had been blessed with peace, the whole region has enjoyed peace, security and stability. There is no doubt that settling the issue of Islamic Jerusalem in a way that ensures justice and restores the rights of its people holds the key to world peace and regional stability.”⁷

An inclusive approach to accommodate adherents of all faiths under the Islamic Jerusalem would guarantee world peace. Having said so, the model of peace, security, and protection of life, religion and property assured by the Umar ibn al-Khattab could be considered as a basis for adapting a new world model for ‘peaceful co-existence and mutual respect for all humankind.’

With this, Thank you and *Wassalamu 'Alaikum Wrt. Wbh.*

Notes

1. Ben Zeev (Abu Zuaib), *Ka'ab al-Ahbar: Jews and Judaism in the Islamic Tradition*, Jerusalem, 1976, 35, cited in Abd al-Fattah M. El-Awaisi, “A Muslim Model for Peaceful Co-Existence and Mutual Respect,” *Politics and Religion*, no.1, Vol. VIII, 2014, 69.
2. Abd al-Fattah M. El-Awaisi, “A Muslim Model for Peaceful Co-Existence and Mutual Respect,” *Politics and Religion*, no.1, Vol. VIII, 2014, 70.
3. Karen Armstrong, *A History of Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*, HarperCollins Publishers, London, 1996, 246 cited in Abd al-Fattah M. El-Awaisi, “A Muslim Model for Peaceful Co-Existence and Mutual Respect,” *Politics and Religion*, no.1, Vol. VIII, 2014, 64.
4. Karen Armstrong, *A History of Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*, HarperCollins Publishers, London, 1996, 254-55, cited in Abd al-Fattah M. El-Awaisi, “A Muslim Model for Peaceful Co-Existence and Mutual Respect,” *Politics and Religion*, no.1, Vol. VIII, 2014, 71.
5. Karen Armstrong, Sacred Space: The Holiness of Islamic Jerusalem, *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies*, Vol.1, No.1, 1997.
6. Abd al-Fattah M. El-Awaisi, *Introducing Islamic Jerusalem*, Al-Maktoum Institute Academic Press, Scotland, 2007.
7. Abd al-Fattah M. El-Awaisi, “A Muslim Model for Peaceful Co-Existence and Mutual Respect,” *Politics and Religion*, no.1, Vol. VIII, 2014, 72.