

OPINION

No, Israel Is Not Planning to Take Control of Al-Aqsa | Opinion

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Muslim worshippers gather in front of the Dome of the Rock after the morning prayer on the first day of Eid al-Fitr, which marks the end of the holy fasting month of Ramadan.

AHMAD GHARABLI/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

Picture this: it's 1929, almost 20 years before Israel's founding. Grand Mufti Hajj Amin Al-Husseini, prominent Muslim leader in Jerusalem and well-known

Hitler associate, has just fabricated a claim that Jews plan to take control of the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Spurred by his antisemitic campaign, Arabs throughout the Holy Land brutally murder 133 Jewish men, women, and children with guns, clubs, and axes.

Over the century that followed, Jerusalem underwent many significant transformations. After Israel's 1948 War of Independence, the city was split between Jordan and Israel, and in 1967, it was unified as Israel's capital after the Six Day War. Its population has since expanded tenfold. But remarkably, though so much has changed, Al-Husseini's lie has survived it all.

Jerusalem is always a magnet for tourists, pilgrims, and lovers of history, particularly during major religious holidays. This year, a rare convergence of Passover, Ramadan, and Easter brought an unprecedented influx of worshipers to the city's ancient core.

At the center of this spiritual maelstrom is the Temple Mount complex, a site sacred to both Judaism and Islam that houses the Al-Aqsa Mosque. Despite its small size, during Ramadan the area accommodates hundreds of thousands of Muslim pilgrims within its ancient walls. One of those walls is the renowned Western Wall, a millennia-old Jewish prayer site, which also sees tens of thousands of worshipers during Passover.

With only an ancient stone wall separating these two massive groups, tensions are understandably high. That's why long-standing security measures designate separate visiting hours for Jews and Muslims at the Temple Mount to prevent conflict. But recent years have seen another component of Al-Aqsa-related incitement aiming to obstruct visits by Jews to their holiest site, the Temple Mount, portraying them as "taking over" and "defiling" the area with their "filthy Jewish feet" and encouraging Palestinian youth to "defend" against fabricated Israeli threats.

In fact, visits by Jews are conducted in accordance with agreed-upon limits placed on all non-Muslims; Jews can only visit the Temple Mount at fixed times, cannot enter Al-Aqsa Mosque and may not even pray at their most sacred site. Statistically, their visits are also minimal: last year, 1.25 million Muslims visited the Temple Mount during Ramadan alone, while Jewish visitors in all of 2022 were fewer than Muslim worshipers on a single Ramadan Friday.

But impressionable young Muslims, less capable of discerning this fable's falsehood, heeded the call to "defend Al-Aqsa" by barricading themselves inside the mosque overnight, armed with rocks and incendiary fireworks. Their goal? To attack Temple Mount visitors the next morning during non-Muslim visiting hours and to threaten Jews assembling by the thousands at the Western Wall below.

Under these circumstances, Israeli police had no alternative but to enter the mosque to remove the rioters. Nobody wants to see law enforcement in a place of worship, let alone conflict there. However, when the safety of worshipers is jeopardized, it is the police's responsibility to address the threat and ensure true freedom of worship for all faiths.

Fortunately, no one was critically hurt. However, it didn't take long for the same anti-Israel instigators who provoked the violence in the first place to use the incident for further harm. It became clear what the plan had been all along: over the next few days, Israel's enemies launched a coordinated attack on four fronts. A wave of Gaza rockets and terror shootings rocked Israel. And in an unprecedented development, Iran-backed terrorists attacked with rockets from Syria and Lebanon—borders that have been mostly peaceful since 2006.

These attacks had tragic consequences. Amid the terror wave, a Palestinian terrorist fatally shot British-Israeli Lucy Dee and her daughters Maia and Rina on an Israeli highway. Just a few hours later, another terrorist rammed into a crowd in the middle of Tel Aviv's boardwalk, killing Italian tourist Alessandro Parini.

Removing any doubt about the connection between these events, the Hamas terror group labeled the attacks "a natural response to the occupation's ongoing crimes against Al-Aqsa," demonstrating that deceitful claims of a Jewish takeover of the Mosque are still indeed leading to Jewish deaths in Israel.

Passover blood libels are nothing new, but their dissemination through social media has intensified their potential for harm. It is essential to counteract the rapid spread of falsehoods with an equally effective campaign that reveals the truth. The media plays a critical role in delivering accurate and impartial information, preventing the perpetuation of deceptive rhetoric and false narratives that only make things worse.

Every year, there are claims of a Jewish takeover of Al-Aqsa, which amount to crying wolf. One would expect that by now, the world would recognize that if such an event has not occurred, it is likely not true.

On a more positive note: Ramadan ended this week, and marking the event, last weekend Jerusalem experienced its largest assembly in recent memory. On the final Friday of the holy month, 130,000 Muslims united in peaceful prayer at Al-Aqsa Mosque. And Saturday showcased remarkable images from the Holy Fire ceremony, as Orthodox Christians observed Easter in harmony at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. These instances of togetherness provide a vision of the potential that exists when we dismiss the lies that perpetuate division.

Coexistence is within our grasp, achievable as soon as we cease perpetuating false narratives about one another. Jews, Christians, and Muslims had been living in Jerusalem for thousands of years and none of them are leaving any time soon. It is imperative that we collaborate in constructing a future that benefits everyone, rather than clinging to the false, divisive, and dangerous animosities of yesteryear.