

Jerusalem in Arab and Muslim History by S. Rami

History of Palestine

Adapted from a lecture by Dr. Khairiya Kasmiyyeh-Damascus University

Before the advent of Islam, the Arabs had known that Palestine was the closest land to the Hegaz in the Arabian Peninsula as the trade caravans of it were mentioned in the Holy Koran- The Summer Journey sura or chapter.

There is a historic evidence of Arab tribes living in Belad El Sham (Syria, including Palestine) in the first millennia B.C. until the Islamic liberation of Palestine from the roman invaders. Some of these tribes had lived in Jerusalem and its surroundings. According to the Roman historian Strabo (19 A.D.), the Arab Nabataeans had established an Arab kingdom SE of Palestine and were dwelling south of Jerusalem. Christian Arabs were living in Jerusalem, among them were two Arab clerics who came to Jerusalem from Palmyra in the third century B.C., as well as another Arab cleric, an engineer, who undertook a work of ornamentation for the holy tomb of Jesus during the reign of Constantine 336 A.D.

In addition, a reference was made to an Arab tribe, near Jerusalem after the city had espoused Christianity and became the seat of the patriarch and later the archbishop.

Many Arab tribes had lived in Palestine; most prominent of them were Lekhem, Juzam, Kendeh, Qais, Kenanah and the subdivisions of other tribes descended from the Qahtani.

Consequently, the Islamic conquest was not the beginning of the Arab existence in Palestine, but rather affirming it in a manner that such Arab presence had actually facilitated the Islamic conquest in the first Hegira (H) century/ seventh century A.D.

The Muslim historian Ya'acoubi (260 H/ 872 A.D.) says that the land of Palestine (the name the roman gave to the south part of Syria) was liberated from the Roman occupation in 16 H/ 637 A.D. after a lengthy siege. The population of Jerusalem insisted that they surrender only to the Caliph Omar Ben Al Khattab. Omar guaranteed the people of Jerusalem safety for themselves and their properties and churches. It can be understood from the writ of surrender that the city at the time was empty of the Jews, who were banned by the Roman occupiers to live there.

Omar's visit to Jerusalem was an indicative to its paramount significance for the Arabs.

With the Islamic Arab conquest, Jerusalem became affiliated with Jund [soldiery-or location of army] of Palestine, one of five military districts of Belad Al Sham [Syria].

Following Omar's historic journey, a large number of the Prophet's Companions and the

Emirs (military princes or leaders) of Muslim armies, as well as the clerics and pilgrims began flocking to Palestine. Consequently, Jerusalem became a center for science and a sanctuary for pilgrims, and the city was fully adapted to the pattern of Arab life, language and civilization. Many Arab tribes moved to Jerusalem after its liberation to live permanently. Nine of the Prophet's companions died and buried in the vicinity of the Haram Sharif (Noble Sanctuary).

The third Muslim Caliphate Othman Ben Affan, who succeeded Omar, paid attention Beit al-Makdis, Jerusalem, and endowed the Arab village of Silwan for the poor of the liberated city.

But the Umayyad Caliphs (14-132 H/ 660- 750 A.D) paid special attention to Beit al-Makdis and the city was visited by Caliph Muaweya, Abdel Malik, Omar Ben Abdul Aziz, Walid Ben Abdel Malik and Suleiman Ben Abdel Malik; all of them had left his imprint on the city. The greatest trace the Umayyad had left behind them in Beit al-Makdis was the edifices the constructed in the courtyard of Haram Sharif; Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock; they spent a lot of money for rebuilding the holy city and paving the roads from Damascus to Jerusalem, to make the latter accessible for the visitors.

The Abbasids (132-359 H/ 750-970 AD) were no less interested in the holy city-- albeit its remote location from Baghdad --than their Umayyad predecessors. Their first Caliphates traveled to Jerusalem, including the Caliph Al Ma'amoun who renovated the Dome of the Rock.

The Fatimayyad period (359-463 H/ 969-1070 AD) had witnessed notwithstanding the unrest works of reconstruction in Al Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. Two foundations were established : Al Fatimy Bemarestan[hospital] and Dar El Elm [Home of Education] near Bab Al Asbat [Asbat Gate].

When the Crusaders occupied Jerusalem in 492H/ 1099 AD, "Islam had never face a catastrophe in such magnitude", according to the historian Ibn Al Atheer, adding that the invaders embarked on killing Muslims for one week and as much as 70,000, including cleric, Imams, Sufis, and ascetics were killed in Al Aqsa (meaning Harm Sharif).

For ninety years, the crusaders ruled Jerusalem without quelling the people's resistance, especially the peasants rebelled against the feudalist princes of the Franks, as the crusaders were called by the Arabs.

Nour e Din Zinki, the mentor of Salah e Din who liberated Jerusalem from the crusaders, used to dispatch Fedayeen to raid the outskirts of the Jerusalem Kingdom and to gather information on the enemy; traces of these Fedayeen's names were found in an old cistern in Wadi el Joz. " He has gone asking God to gain martyrdom".

Salah e Din extracted Jerusalem from the hands of the Franks, expelling them on Friday

27th of Rajab 583 H/ October 1187, in the anniversary of Al Israa [the nocturnal journey of the Prophet to AL Aqsa Mosque].

Salah e Din wrote to the Caliph in Baghdad on the news of his legendary triumph saying in particular : " the Muslims have recovered a heritage that was once at large".