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Prologue

“Al-Aksa is in danger” is a classic libel that was embroidered in the first half of the twentieth century against the Jewish people, the Zionist movement, and, eventually, the State of Israel. The state and its institutions—so, in brief, the libel claims—are scheming and striving to destroy the mosques on the Temple Mount and build in their stead the Third Temple. The longer the libel lives, its delusive variants striking root, the more its blind and misled devotees proliferate. The libel is ramifying, taking hold of the academic, religious, and public discourse of the Arab, Palestinian, and Muslim world as if it were pure truth. Absurdly, it strikes at the Jewish people and the State of Israel precisely in the place where the Jewish state has made the most generous gesture, the greatest concession, ever made by one religion to another—on the Temple Mount, the holiest place of the Jewish people and only the third place in importance for the Muslim religion.

The libel greatly intensifies fear and hatred between the State of Israel and the Arab world, and between Jews and Muslims all over the world. It also well serves those who initiated it, or in recent decades have carefully cultivated it, and it seems also to offer the best proof of the well-known adage that if a lie is repeated often enough, it is accepted as truth.

We will consider the sources, motivations, and various manifestations of the libel, and later go on to refute it. First, it is worth surveying three recent events that illustrate how extensively the libel has been disseminated and how widespread are the fears that stem from it among the Palestinian leadership, the Muslim masses, and the Muslim elite.

In December 2000, only two months after the outbreak of the Second Intifada, Mahmoud Abu Samra, an intelligence officer at the rank of colonel in the Fatah movement,¹ sent a letter to his president, Yasser Arafat, who at that time ruled from the Mukata compound in Ramallah. Abu Samra, who was then head of a body called the Jerusalem Center for Information, Research and Documentation, requested that Arafat be apprised of a “Zionist plan to destroy the Al-Aksa Mosque with an artificial earthquake.”²

“Military and American reports that were recently published by the newspaper *Arab Star*,” wrote Abu Samra to Arafat,

say that an Israeli committee was formed whose members were scientists from these places: the Haifa Technion, the Weizmann Institute in Rehovot, and the Negev Institute in Beersheba. This committee authored a plan to destroy the Al-Aksa Mosque without leaving a fingerprint by means of: a. creating an artificial earthquake; b. using colliding sound waves (which come from outside a wall and push it inward); c. using the creation of an aerial vacuum; d. creating artificial local lightning storms.

Abu Samra added:

Most of the experiments were conducted already in 1999 under the waters of the Dead Sea and also in the Negev desert. The reports point to the fact that the underground foundation of the mosque has been hollowed out by the Israeli [archeological] excavations. The Zionist experts expect the structure to collapse as a result of damage to the balance between the external air pressure and the internal pressure. I request your guidance and instructions.

Abu Samra's letter was found by Israel while taking control of Orient House in eastern Jerusalem during the 2002 anti-terror Defensive Shield operation. The letter also bears an inscription by Arafat affirming that it had reached its target. Arafat, it turns out, related to Abu Samra's report in full seriousness. He ordered in writing³ that the information be conveyed to a group of people including eastern Jerusalem leader Faisal al-Husseini, Sheikh Yusuf Salama, member of the Palestinian cabinet Ziad Abu Ziad, and the governor of the Jerusalem district of the Palestinian Authority, Jamal Otman.

December 2000. Letter from Palestinian intelligence officer Col. Mahmoud Abu Samra to President Yasser Arafat accusing Israel of planning "to destroy the Al-Aksa Mosque by creating an artificial earthquake." Arafat ordered that the letter be distributed to key Palestinian leaders in eastern Jerusalem.



The second event, seemingly of marginal significance, was made public by Dr. Hillel Cohen in his book *Kikar Hashuk Rekah*⁴ but did not attract much notice. It occurred in April 2006 and well illustrates with what ease one can assemble masses of Muslim believers to "protect the Temple Mount from the Jews" without voicing even a single cry of incitement. At the time the incident occurred, a new computerized public address system had been installed at the Al-Aksa Mosque and the muezzin Nagi al-Kazaz was recorded making the call to prayer. The system was programmed such that if, because of a delay, the muezzin did not make the call to prayer, it would function automatically and al-Kazaz's voice would be heard by many.

However, the Jewish engineer who programmed the system for the Wakf did not know the Muslim prayer hours, and the call to the noon prayers was mistakenly set for the hour of 12:45 a.m. And indeed at that hour, on the first night after the system was installed, the voice of the muezzin was suddenly heard summoning the believers to prayer. Thousands of residents of the Old City and its surroundings, who heard the call and knew this was not the prayer hour, assumed it was a call to go and defend the Temple

Mount. Many came to the place, some armed with sticks. Only after extensive efforts did the Wakf guards succeed to explain the error to them and send them home.

The third incident is also seemingly trivial, but it too illustrates the extent to which Israeli rule of the Temple Mount mosques affects millions of Muslim believers all over the world, some of them thousands of miles distant, and from what sensitive soil grow the beliefs, feelings, as well as distortions and libels concerning the mount. This story was told to the Middle East scholar Prof. Yitzchak Reiter by an Egyptian intellectual at a conference in Amman in 2000.⁵

“We are modern Muslims who do not keep the basic commandments, and we were never really religious,” the Egyptian intellectual said, but

last year, at the end of the first year of mourning for my father, my mother, who had already reached an exalted age, requested to carry out the Haj [pilgrimage to Mecca] commandment....When we stayed for a night at the court of the Kabaa [the most holy Muslim site, in Mecca], sermonizers and preachers appeared one after another. One of them began to speak about Al-Haram al-Sharif [the Exalted Holy Place, as Muslims call the Temple Mount] in Jerusalem; he discussed the place’s importance to Islam, the history of Jerusalem, and the fact that in the past the site fell into the hands of the Crusaders and was liberated by Saladin. Finally, he spoke at length about the current situation of Al-Haram al-Sharif, which is under Israeli occupation. As the sermonizer’s description progressed, I noticed that the listeners were seized by great emotion, and some even broke out in bitter cries. Even I and my mother, who a few years earlier had visited Al-Haram al-Sharif, which was familiar to us in reality and not just as the sermonizer depicted it, were swept away in emotion and tears flowed from our eyes. For us that was the most moving event of the pilgrimage to Mecca.⁶

Abu Samra’s letter to Arafat and Arafat’s reference to the “Zionist plan to destroy the Al-Aksa Mosque by creating an artificial earthquake”; the thousands who gathered to “protect the Temple Mount” on hearing the recording of the muezzin that was mistakenly played in the middle of the night; and the tears that flowed from the eyes of the Egyptian intellectual in Mecca, when confronting the supposedly grim fate of Al-Haram al-Sharif under Israeli occupation, are a kind of introduction to the story of the “Al-Aksa is in danger” libel.

Today the libel permeates the masses of Muslim believers through caricatures, films, children’s stories, quizzes, sermons, print and Internet publications, ceremonies, demonstrations, and religious and purportedly academic literature, but primarily through the altering of the Muslim narrative about Jerusalem, the creation of a new Muslim myth about the city, and a redating of its history. The second main element of

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this new narrative is the denial of the Jewish connection to the places that are sacred to them in the Land of Israel in general and in Jerusalem and on the Temple Mount in particular. This denial is now the central theme of the discourse on Jerusalem in the contemporary Muslim world.

Muslims worshipping on the Temple Mount in the month of Ramadan, 1992. Under Israeli rule full religious freedom is maintained on the mount. (Moshe Milner, Government Press Office)

