

How Muslims Now View a Pilgrimage to Jerusalem

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Brief Analysis

This week's unusual public visit to Jerusalem by Omani foreign minister Yusuf bin Alawi called attention to an intriguing recent trend. At the [meeting \(https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=1699&refID=1073\)](https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=1699&refID=1073) of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul on December 13, 2017, convened in response to President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the U.S. embassy there, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan [called \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8jbpVkoUrg\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8jbpVkoUrg) for Muslims from around the world to travel to Jerusalem and specifically to visit the al-Aqsa Mosque. While Erdogan's most recent call was billed as a response to Trump's announcement, the record shows that this announcement did not precipitate the trend of rising Muslim—and especially Turkish—travel to Jerusalem.

In fact, Erdogan had been encouraging Turkish Muslims to travel to Jerusalem for several years before Trump's Jerusalem decision. As early as [2014, 10-15,000 \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/turkish-tourism-group-aims-to-send-100000-to-jerusalem/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/turkish-tourism-group-aims-to-send-100000-to-jerusalem/) Turkish citizens traveled to Jerusalem, according to the head of the Association of Turkish Travel Agencies (TURSAB), Basaran Ulusoy. In February 2015, Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs included the al-Aqsa Mosque in the Turkish pilgrims' program—some would travel to Jerusalem before continuing to Mecca and Medina. *Haaretz* reported that in just the first two months of [2015, 10,000 \(https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-j-lem-tourism-gets-boost-from-muslim-visitors-1.5348437\)](https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-j-lem-tourism-gets-boost-from-muslim-visitors-1.5348437) tourists entered Israel from Muslim countries, probably mostly from Turkey. A year later, in [2016, Palestinian police spokesman Louay Azriqat reported that 15,846 \(https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html) Turkish citizens traveled through the West Bank to Jerusalem and that between [early 2017 and late October of 2017, 23,312 \(https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html) Turks made that journey. *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* claimed that in 2017, a total of [40,000 \(http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/tuerkei-sendet-pilger-zum-jerusalem-tempelberg-15423299.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_0\)](http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/tuerkei-sendet-pilger-zum-jerusalem-tempelberg-15423299.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_0) Turks traveled to Jerusalem.

Similarly, at the International Forum on al-Quds Waqfs [conference \(http://www.kudusvakiflari2017.org/\)](http://www.kudusvakiflari2017.org/) in 2017, Erdogan claimed that a total of [26,000 \(http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/08/middleeast/erdogan-muslim-visits-jerusalem/index.html\)](http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/08/middleeast/erdogan-muslim-visits-jerusalem/index.html) Turkish citizens traveled to Jerusalem in 2016. But the Israeli Tourism Ministry cites the

much higher figure, including arrivals at Ben Gurion Airport, near Tel Aviv, of 100,000 Turkish visitors that year, out of 115,000 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-pilgrims/palestinians-vie-with-israel-over-muslim-pilgrims-to-jerusalem-idUSKCN1BB1K4>) Muslim tourists (and nearly 4 million other, mostly Christian tourists overall). This rise in Turkish visitors is perhaps due to new offers from Turkish Airlines of **\$159 round-trip flights** (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-pilgrims/palestinians-vie-with-israel-over-muslim-pilgrims-to-jerusalem-idUSKCN1BB1K4>) and package al-Aqsa Mosque pilgrimage tours.

Erdogan continues to call for increased Muslim travel to Jerusalem for a number of reasons. First, he often references the **historical significance** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html>) of Jerusalem to Turks, citing the presence of Ottoman artifacts and buildings and the need for these remnants to be continuously **cleaned and purified** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html>). But more fundamentally, Erdogan says he wants to block what some Muslim leaders refer to as the "**Judaization** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/jordans-king-says-amman-preventing-judaization-of-holy-sites-in-jerusalem/>)" of Jerusalem, by calling to "**strengthen the Islamic heritage and character** (<http://www.meforum.org/6831/turkey-erdogan-obsession-to-take-jerusalem>)" of the city.

In addition, Erdogan's encouragement of Turkish Muslim travel to Jerusalem involves stated considerations of the economy and development. When Turkish Muslims visit the city, they are encouraged to stay in **Palestinian hotels and purchase goods in Palestinian shops** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html>). Furthermore, Turkey has specifically created development projects and organizations that work with Palestinian groups and promote Palestinian development within the city. The **Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html>), **Mesale International Student Association** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html>), so-called Qanadeel International Institution for Development and Humanitarian Relief, and even the **Turkish government** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html>) have worked closely with Palestinians and Palestinian organizations such as the **Burj al-Luqluq Social Center Society** (<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/11/turkish-project-following-footsteps-abdul-hamid-jerusalem.html>). The enhanced ties between Palestinians and Turkish Muslims enable greater Turkish influence over Palestinian affairs. The **Brookings Institution** (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/07/31/tensions-over-jerusalem-expose-vulnerability-of-turkey-israel-relations-one-year-after-normalizing-ties/>) and the Israeli newspaper *Israel Hayom* also **cite** (<http://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/485555>) Erdogan's relationship with Sheikh Ekrima Sabri—former **mufti** (<http://www.meforum.org/6831/turkey-erdogan-obsession-to-take-jerusalem>) of Jerusalem—and Sheikh Raed Salah, **leader** (<http://www.meforum.org/6831/turkey-erdogan-obsession-to-take-jerusalem>) of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel. Erdogan's ties to the Islamic Movement's Northern Branch—as well as to Qatar and Hamas—call into question whether the "**more moderate front** (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/07/31/tensions-over-jerusalem-expose-vulnerability-of-turkey-israel-relations-one-year-after-normalizing-ties/>)" involving Jordan, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority truly "[calls] the shots in East Jerusalem (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/07/31/tensions-over-jerusalem-expose-vulnerability-of-turkey-israel-relations-one-year-after-normalizing-ties/>)."

In addition to Turks, the majority of Muslim tourists come from other non-Arab states such as **India, Indonesia, and Malaysia, plus select groups from Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, and the Gulf states** (<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-j-lem-tourism-gets-boost-from-muslim-visitors-1.5348437>): in 2014,

Haaretz accounted for travel to Israel as a whole involving 26,700 tourists from Indonesia, 23,000 from Turkey, 17,700 from Jordan, 9,000 from Malaysia, and 3,300 from Morocco (<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-j-lem-tourism-gets-boost-from-muslim-visitors-1.5348437>). Some Muslim pilgrims also travel from European countries (<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-j-lem-tourism-gets-boost-from-muslim-visitors-1.5348437>).

But Muslim leaders from countries other than Turkey have proffered mixed messages, in recent years, on the issue of Muslim travel to Jerusalem. Many predominantly Muslim countries still issue travel restrictions and enforce legal repercussions (<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/abbas-urges-arabs-to-visit-jerusalem-1.696323>) for those who visit the Jewish state. Islamist leaders, like Qatar-based Egyptian Sunni cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-pilgrims/palestinians-vie-with-israel-over-muslim-pilgrims-to-jerusalem-idUSKCN1BB1K4>), have generally continued to call for Muslims not to visit Jerusalem, for fear of normalization and validation of Israeli control over the city. Hamas, too, opposes such travel (<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-j-lem-tourism-gets-boost-from-muslim-visitors-1.5348437>) on the basis that it would "amount to de facto recognition of Israel."

Ironically, however, political and religious leaders of the Palestinian Authority (PA) have for several years spoken out in favor of Muslim visits to Jerusalem. PA president Mahmoud Abbas at the OIC meeting encouraged Muslim leaders to "show...solidarity in the face of Trump's decision. We beg you not to leave us alone...Do not disappoint us (<http://www.dw.com/en/palestinian-leader-abbas-calls-for-arab-solidarity-against-trumps-jerusalem-decision/a-42178749>)." Grand Mufti Muhammad Ahmad Hussein (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-pilgrims/palestinians-vie-with-israel-over-muslim-pilgrims-to-jerusalem-idUSKCN1BB1K4>) and Sheikh Mahmoud Habbash, two leading PA-affiliated clerics, have issued similar declarations. The former cited "[a]n increasing number of Muslims [who] are visiting al-Aqsa. Maybe the numbers are not as high as we had hoped, but we hope they will increase in days to come." Indeed, Abbas has called (<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-j-lem-tourism-gets-boost-from-muslim-visitors-1.5348437>) on Muslims to travel to Jerusalem since 2012.

This view may be gaining some traction lately among other Arab officials. For instance, the chairman of the Gulf Forum for Peace and Security, Fahed al-Shelaimi (<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/abbas-urges-arabs-to-visit-jerusalem-1.696323>), and the OIC's envoy to Palestine, Ahmad Ruwaidi, have stated that they support Muslim travel to Jerusalem with the intention to bolster the local economy and enhance diplomatic support for Palestinians.

The Israeli response to this emerging phenomenon has likewise been mixed. Eitan Naeh (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-palestinians-pilgrims/palestinians-vie-with-israel-over-muslim-pilgrims-to-jerusalem-idUSKCN1BB1K4>), Israel's envoy to Ankara, recently stated that "we will always be glad to warmly welcome Turkish tourists to Israel and our capital, Jerusalem." Yet privately, Israeli officials in Jerusalem voice concern about Turkish pro-Hamas agitation inside their capital city. And Israel maintains strict security for all visitors, whether entering through Ben Gurion Airport or the Allenby Bridge (<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-j-lem-tourism-gets-boost-from-muslim-visitors-1.5348437>), across the Jordan River. At the latter border, according to the owner of HLA Tours, a Bethlehem-based travel agency that brings groups of Muslim tourists to Israel, they may undergo an eight- to ten-hour security inspection (<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-j-lem-tourism-gets-boost-from-muslim-visitors-1.5348437>), which he described as "difficult (<https://www.haaretz.com/.premium-j-lem-tourism-gets-boost-from-muslim-visitors-1.5348437>)."

In this mixed picture, one intriguing recent trend stands out clearly: the number of Muslim pilgrims to Jerusalem, particularly but not only from Turkey, has been on the rise for at least the past four years. Much less clear, however, are the implications of this trend. Conceivably, it could contribute, if only modestly, to the warming climate of "normalization" between Israel and its many Muslim neighbors. At the same time, increasing numbers of Muslim,

and particularly Turkish, visitors to Jerusalem could produce security or other incidents that might actually point in the opposite direction, radicalizing some of the participants and onlookers. Thus, instead of fostering tolerance, the new stream of foreign visitors could actually aggravate tensions in this holy but hotly contested pilgrimage destination. ❖

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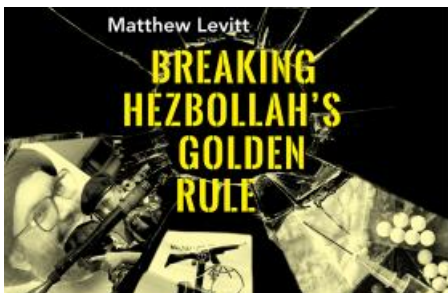
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