

The Unexpected Episode at Al-Aqsa Mosque

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28 December 2003



The episode of the Egyptian Foreign Minister's visit to Al-Aqsa on the 22nd December 2003 was a shock in terms of the place in which it happened, the visitor in question and the message it sent out.

1. **The Place.** It is no secret that today there is no Palestinian leadership in Jerusalem. The PA is very weak and barely visible, save for the occasional movement of employees, and the elected representatives of Jerusalem are busy with their own agendas. During the fasting for Ramadan in October and November we were shown the strength of the Islamists and their anger and frustration. The Islamic Waqf establishment (i.e. The Director of Waqf, the Mufti and the Islamic Council) has lost its constituency and is little more than an 'employee' of the PA and the Jordanian Government.

I have to disagree with any attempt to compare the episode of Sharon 's visit in September 2000 to the events of December 22nd . You cannot compare an occupier who seeks total control over the Holy Places, with a diplomat bringing a message of normalization and reconciliation. Maher's visit is more accurately compared with that of French President Jacque Chirac a few years ago. On this occasion the Israeli security escort closed in around him so tightly that he declared, "If you don't allow me to move I shall cancel the visit!"

2. **The Visitor** . The arrangement was that the Egyptian Foreign Minister would enter the site accompanied by the Waqf establishment personnel (the Director and other Sheikhs) from the Bab al-Asbat (Lion Gate). The Egyptian Consul was waiting with the Waqf Director and others at that gate. The Egyptian Charge d'Affairs was accompanying the Minister in the car on the way to the mosque, and he realized that the Israelis had changed the route and were taking them to a different entrance, the Bab al-Magharbeh (Dung Gate), instead. The Egyptian diplomats could not at the last minute object to or refuse the new arrangements, and contacted the waiting delegation by phone telling them to meet the Minister at the door of the mosque.

The Maghreb Gate has been under direct Israeli control since 1967 against the will of the Palestinians. It has been the entrance for the 'unwelcome visitors' – i.e. the Jewish settlers since June 2003. The fact that the Foreign Minister entered the Holy compound via this gate annoyed everybody and provoked some. When they saw an Egyptian official pursuing 'normalization'; i.e. meeting Sharon while the killing continues in Nablus and Rafah, and the 'Wall' is still being built, many people were angered and disillusioned. Further more his choice of entrance to the Al-Aqsa compound suggests acceptance and recognition of Israeli control over that gate and the Holy compound. The Israelis want to interpret this as legitimizing such control.

Of course the original arrangements were made with the Mufti's Office, and he is not in the country at present. His mediocre staff did little while the Director of the Waqf was caught between two fires; on the one hand he had to facilitate the visit, and on the other unify the various positions of the groups around him. The Director has asserted that after the visit to the Egyptian embassy on December 23rd, he could confidently say that there is a conflict not just between two Palestinian 'addresses' (the Mufti's Office – PA appointee, and Al-Waqf Administration – Jordanian appointee) but also poor communication between the two Egyptian diplomats. The Israelis are aware of the divisions between the PA personnel and the Egyptians and exploit them to their advantage.

For the last two years, a first class and active diplomat, who is both visible and knowledgeable about the Jerusalem issue, as well as committed to serving the Palestinian cause in general, has headed the Egyptian presence in Israel/Palestine. He has frequently visited the Al-Aqsa Mosque, following the hardship and constraints facing the Palestinians, and reports regularly to Cairo but without positive feedback. The episode on December 22nd shocked him personally and Egyptian's in general, and it will take time to recuperate.

It is worth mentioning that on that particular day the Israeli Police arrested dozens of young Palestinians who were on the site to guarantee the security and safety of the visitor.

When a few Palestinians shouted at the visitor accusing him of collaboration and declaring that he was unwelcome, he could have stayed in the mosque to perform the prayer or, as he decided to do, left the compound after the verbal insult, but the Israelis stormed into the sight surrounding their visitor and making a scene. One must conclude that this highly experienced diplomat put his fate in the hands of amateurs and did not have the wisdom to realize what was happening. I doubt that he was briefed about the previous 'visitors' or about the sensitivity of entering via Maghreb Gate, a point which was made very clear during the visit by the Pope in 2002 when a few angry young Palestinians were there throwing stones at the Papal delegation which was surrounded by Israeli guards. The Israeli Government always tries to make an issue out of any visit to the site for political reasons.

3. **The Message** . There is no escape from admitting that in the absence of leadership and strong national institutions, there will always be angry 'spoilers' eager to hijack events at the Holy sites. In the Al-Haram compound there has been a group of 'Hizb Tahrir' (Islamic Liberation Party) who are politically retarded, angry people, obsessed with a message of rejection and denial since the fifties. They call for the return of the Islamic 'Khalifa' (Caliph) and the founding of an Islamic state, but they pose no threat to the Israelis. It has been impossible to talk to them, as there is a lack of a common language. They have always been isolated from the rest of the Islamic movement, but the fact is that they are there and they can disrupt and distort the image of Palestinian society.

An important point to note is that in the current leadership vacuum, the mosque has served as a venue for the Palestinian community to come together, but has yet to provide a clear political message or consensus.

The Director of the Waqf and others went to the Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv to apologize for what happened and the local papers have been full of condemnations of this ugly affair including from the PA establishment. In addition, Arafat delegated Farouq Qadoumi (executive committee member in Tunis) to head an official delegation to apologize directly to Cairo . The irony in this apology is that Mr. Qadoumi is not only far away from the scene and hardly knowledgeable of the current crisis in the OPT's, but he has also been criticized by Jerusalemites for his statement to the media last year in which he claimed that the PLO will consider internationalization of Jerusalem. He later withdrew the remarks.

At the official level Palestinians and Egyptians may be able to kiss and make up, but the two societies remain separated from one another. If there is a lesson in this episode then it is that now is the time to build strong ties between our respective civil society institutions, and to have the courage not to brush problems or mistakes under the carpet, a tactic that is favored at the official level.

The Al-Aqsa episode has caused significant harm and it is more than just a slap in the face for the Egyptian officials – it is a sign of the 'street's' rising resentment and dissatisfaction that is shared by the Islamic movement as a whole. The Palestinian 'street' is sending a signal through the Egyptian Minister saying that they are angry with the weak and undignified Arab regimes. These regimes have adopted a defensive position in order to survive in today's hostile climate, and are seeking to normalize relations with Israel and the US whilst Palestinians are bleeding. I guess the Egyptian, and many others, underestimated the scale of public anger to this acquiescence and the poor man received the shock of his life.

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Jerusalem , 28/12/2003