

On Monday 20 April 2020, PASSIA organized and hosted a virtual roundtable discussion on 'Islamic Holy Places in Times of the Coronavirus Pandemic', with Professor Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway of Al Quds University as keynote speaker.

The preliminary remarks began with the status of Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Islamic worldview. Al-Aqsa Mosque is one of the three Mosques that have extra merit and to which one can initiate travel as in the Hadith of the Prophet (Narrated by Al-Bukhari and Muslim in their respective compendia of Hadith, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, and *Sahih Muslim*)

Al-Aqsa Mosque is the earthly destination of The "Journey at Night" (*Al-Isra*):

"Glory be to (Allah) Who did take His Servant for a journey by night from *Al-Masjid Al-Haram* to *Al-Masjid Al-Aqsa* whose precincts We did bless, in order that We might show him some of Our Signs: for He is the One who hears and sees [all things]." (The Holy Qur'an, 17:1).

The holiness and blessedness of Al-Aqsa Mosque is that of the space with all its four dimensions. Neither its space nor time should be tampered with. Al-Aqsa Mosque is the name for all the 144 dunums (about 36 acres) Mujir Al-Din Al-Hanbali (d. 1522) wrote *Al-Uns Al-Jalil fi Tarikh Al-Quds wal-Khalil*, a book on the history of Jerusalem and Hebron in the year 900 AH/1495, in which he offered the following definition:

"Verily, 'Al-Aqsa' is a name for the whole mosque which is surrounded by the wall, the length and width of which are mentioned here, for the building that exists in the southern part of the Mosque, and the other ones such as the Dome of the Rock and the corridors and other [buildings] are novel (*muhdatha*)." (Vol.2, p. 24)

Dr. Abu Sway also mentioned the hadith of Maimuna about Al-Aqsa Mosque. She said: "O Messenger of Allah! Inform us about Bayt Al-Maqdis!"

He said: "It is the land where people will be gathered and resurrected [on the Day of Judgment]. Go and pray in it, for a prayer in it is the equivalent of a thousand prayers in other [mosques]."

I said: "What if I couldn't reach it?"

He said: "Then you send a gift of oil to it in order to be lit in its lanterns, for the one who does so is the same like the one who has been there."

Dr. Abu Sway explained this hadith in terms of the spiritual relationship with Al-Aqsa Mosque, and that the gift of oil is about taking care of it on all levels, which is a challenge under Israeli occupation, which impedes the work of Waqf, and prevents free access to Muslim worshippers.

The Discussion touched on the contemporary issues that Muslim and Christian communities in Jerusalem are facing during this time of worldwide coronavirus pandemic. Specifically, the roundtable addressed concerns amid the city's somber Easter celebrations of last week, and the growing fears regarding how the holy month of Ramadan will pan out in this new reality of social distancing.

Dr Abu Sway reiterated the merits of attending the Qur'an recitation and the *Tarawih* night prayers at the mosque during the holy month, and of breaking the fast with the community. These sacred religious practices are shared by Muslims in Jerusalem with millions around the world, and the spread of coronavirus has certainly threatened the continuity of such traditions.

However, the discussion focused on the classical 5 aims of Islamic law (*Maqasid al-Shari'ah*) including the protection of religion, life, intellect, progeny, and property. Dr. Abu Sway stated that protection of the environment should be added to these classical aims.

Applying the aim of life protection means adopting social distancing, confinement and quarantine in the interest of the community at large. Prophet Muhammad set the example by asking Muslims not to enter a plagued city, and those there not to leave. He also asked there should be no visitations between the healthy and the sick.

The Islamic *waqf* Council of Jerusalem announced that it would postpone entry to Al-Aqsa / Al-Haram al-Sharif for the congregation until further notice, but that ritual prayers will continue to take place by employees of the Waqf Department including Imams and guards. This decision mirrors the protective measures that have been put in place in the other two holiest places in Islam: The Noble Sanctuary in Mecca and the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina.

The roundtable discussion also celebrated the evident demonstrations of solidarity among the Palestinians Christian and Muslim communities, that have been working together to support the poorer families and those in need. Clearly, the Palestinian civil society is still going strong in this time of crisis.

Participants in the discussion raised the question of the possibility of organizing digital religious celebrations, and the speaker noted the theological debates as to what extent one can move certain activities to virtual reality. Many religiously oriented lectures and circles of learning moved online during the month of Ramadan.

When asked if and why the case of Jerusalem / Al-Quds was so unique, it was noted that unlike anywhere else, the reality of the Israeli illegal occupation of the city poses additional threats. The question of closing the Al-Aqsa Mosque / Al-

Haram al-Sharif is not so straightforward. It involves careful consideration of the ulterior motives and political implications, since Israel continues to undermine the internationally recognized *Status Quo* which applies to all religious sites of Jerusalem, and the custodianship of HM King Abdullah II of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Dr. Abu Sway concluded the roundtable discussion with the following prayer:

A Supplication of a Muslimⁱ During the Coronavirus Pandemic

In the Name of God, Most Merciful, Most Gracious

“And your Lord says, “Call upon Me; I will respond to you.” ...”

(The Holy Qur’an, chapter 40: verse 60)

Praise be to God, Most Sublime! May His Blessings and Salutations be upon all His Prophets and Messengers.

We are beseeching You, our Lord, because you are God, The Omnipotent, The Omniscient, in Whose hands is the destiny of everything. We ask you by Your Beautiful Names to set us free from all burdens. Our human family is plagued with the deadly coronavirus and we seek refuge in You, from all calamities, tribulations and pandemics.

You have created disease and medicine! Guide us to find the medication and to avail it to all. Guide us to heal the brokenness in our midst, to heal our bodies and souls alike.

Our Lord! If this pandemic befell us because of our shortcomings and sins, to You we repent. We turn to You for forgiveness and healing.

If this pandemic is because we have corrupted the environment, guide us to stop destroying it and to have the appropriate relationship with nature, until we hear everything in the universe that praises Your Name.

Help us to find solutions to our problems, to render help to those in need across national and cultural divides! Help us change course to build hospitals and functioning healthcare systems, not military industries. Help us elect ethical and conscientious officials who understand science and listen to the professional medical experts.

Guide our women and men who serve and worship You, and guide our scholars, to pledge to a theology that protects life the way physicians do when they take their Hippocratic

Oath! Instil in their hearts kindness and care for everyone, translating Your Oneness into reclaiming the one human family, with dignity for all.

Help us understand our priorities in this life, and to put our resources where they should be. Help us establish social and economic justice, to walk the talk in addressing poverty and disease. Guide us, O Lord, to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor, the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere. Let us realize that giving is far more superior than amassing wealth, and hoarding commodities.

Let there be no shanty towns with no fresh water or sanitation. Let there be no people that go to bed hungry, afraid of another day of uncertainties, with no food or medicine.

We have been deprived from prostrating ourselves in Your Houses of Worship, bring O Lord the end of this pandemic, so that we could again pray there.

We long to socialize again with our families and friends. Make it, O Lord, possible in a post-pandemic context, in a way that pleases You and will always keep us safe.

Our Lord! Bless the hands of all of those in the frontline fighting the coronavirus and every adversary. Protect them, and render support to them. Unite them, safe and sound, with their families.

Nothing in our prayers escapes Your Knowledge, for You Are Omniscient. Accepting our prayers will not diminish anything in Your Dominion. You are Omnipotent, and if You decree something it is a matter of “Be”, and it will *be!*

ⁱ Prof. Dr. Mustafa Abu Sway

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