

Jerusalem and the Palestine Question: With Special Attention to the Islamic Movement

Year: 2015

Place of fieldwork: Jordan and Israel

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- Research background

My research topic is the formation and present development of the conflict over sacred spaces in Palestine/Israel. Specifically, the study focuses on how Palestinian Muslims conduct their resistance in the conflict over Jerusalem.

Although the so-called Jerusalem Problem contains many kinds of issues, my research concentrates on disputes over the custodianship of and access to the sacred spaces. These continue to be hot issues, and the interest in the outcome is worldwide, not restricted to the Israeli government and the Palestinians.

- Research purpose and aim

My research interest is the Islamic movement inside Israel, which is one of the actors in the Jerusalem Problem. The research question is what kinds of roles the movement plays in Jerusalem.

In this conflict, the Palestinians have historically not been prime actors; instead the Jordanian government has administered Islamic sites. Since the 2000s, however, the Palestinian Islamic movement inside Israel has grown up from the grassroots level, and today the Israeli government is quite cautious in its dealing with the movement.

- Results and achievements of the fieldwork

I conducted my fieldwork mainly in institutions of the Islamic movement and visited some sacred spaces that are venerated by both Muslims and Jews.

First, I visited the al-Aqsa association for Waqf and Heritage, which specializes in sacred sites issues. I found that its recent activities are centered on the renovation of old mosques and graveyards inside Israel. It is also concerned with the contentions over access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam (see figure 1). The leader of the association says Muslims should continue to visit it and carry on the knowledge of the excellence of the sacred sites from generation to generation.

Secondly, I visited the tomb of King David (figure 2) in Jerusalem and the (Lower) Cave of Elijah (figure 3) in Haifa to observe the behavior of the believers. These two sacred sites have been entirely controlled by Israeli government for a long time, and their ornamentation (in the tomb of King David particularly) is largely Jewish. Elijah's Cave did have some signs in Arabic and even pictures describing past religious deeds by Muslims and Christians. These examples showed me that there is some diversity in the mixed sacred places under Israeli control.

- Implications and impacts on future research

This field research was mainly centered on the Islamic movement. Many researchers and the media tend to pay attention to the political aspects of this movement, and the social activities, such as renovation of mosques, are overlooked. Further research will be needed on this dimension of the movement. I have conducted preliminary research on the present development of the sacred sites for some religions. I feel that future research should combine the social movement and the activities of ordinary believers to understand the whole image of the conflict.



Figure 1. A confrontation between Muslims trying to go into the Al-Aqsa Mosque and Israeli security apparatus (Old City of Jerusalem, October 2, 2015).



Figure 2. Jewish worshippers in the tomb of King David (Jerusalem, October 10, 2015).



Figure 3. A series of pictures illustrating religious traditions of three monotheist religions in the Lower Cave of Elijah (Haifa, September 30, 2015).