

ORIENTALISTS AND ISRAELI SCHOLARS' PORTRAYAL OF MUSLIM TREATMENT OF NON-MUSLIMS IN ISLAMIC JERUSALEM

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Introduction

The phenomenon of western, Jewish, and Israeli Orientalism had passed through a number of stages as is argued by Abu-Hashim.¹ The first stage started very early as a result of the Muslim conquest of Andalusia in 711 CE, some of the Mediterranean islands and southern Italy and ended with the end of the Crusades campaign to the East in 1291 CE. The second stage started after the Crusades and extended to the middle of the eighteenth century. The third stage started in the middle of the eighteenth century and continued to the end of World War II in 1945. Finally, the fourth stage started after the Second World War and is still continuing. In this stage, another kind of Orientalism emerged, it was Jewish Orientalism, and Orientalists which marked the character rather than the nature of European Orientalism, but it did not differ much from them. Those new Orientalists had a significant impact on the enrichment of the Zionist perception about the Islamic world and its civilisation.

Abu-Hashim continued to argue that Jewish Orientalism is a part and parcel of the western Orientalism project, as there is a common denominator between the two, where there is a need for knowledge about Islam and the Muslim world to help them plan well for their future projects. Jewish Orientalism began in Palestine at the hands of Goitein. It was then developed at the

hands of Ma'ar Yakov Caster, who took Orientalism in an important direction by concentrating on studying issues related to Palestine and IslamicJerusalem in particular. For example, the literature on virtues of Muslim cities, the importance of IslamicJerusalem in Islam, the change of the *Qiblah* from IslamicJerusalem to Makkah, the Muslim conquest of IslamicJerusalem, the night journey, building the Dome of the Rock and many other issues related to IslamicJerusalem were thoroughly studied and analysed.

Despite the fact that the first Muslim conquest of IslamicJerusalem in 16AH/637 CE was "an event both remarkable and long-lasting in its effect", which can be considered as a hallmark, not only in the history of that region, or in Muslim history, but as an event which reshaped relations between the followers of the different religions who were living in the region. The consequences of this conquest clearly contrasted dramatically "with the destruction, killing, and displacement that characterised" the history of this region before the arrival of Muslims (El-Awaisi 2007:55). Moreover, it was argued that the Muslim conquest liberated the Christians from the domination and persecution of Byzantine rule, and allowed Jews to return to the city after being expelled for nearly five hundred years. This attitude of Muslim conquerors created a model atmosphere of tolerance and peaceful coexistence among the followers of different religions, and enabled Christians and Jews to live side by side peacefully after centuries of tension (Abu-Munshar 2007: 1). A different stance was taken however by a number of Orientalists and Israeli scholars.

The aim of this article is to present a critical analysis of some of the Orientalists' and Israeli historians' narratives and reports about the Muslim treatment of non-Muslims in IslamicJerusalem i.e Jews and Christians, during the first Muslim conquest of the region. Especial attention will be paid to the appointment of a new Patriarch in IslamicJerusalem.

Orientalists, Israeli Scholars and the Conquest of Islamic Jerusalem

Like other important incidents within Islam and Muslim history, the Muslim conquest of Islamic Jerusalem has been given an extensive coverage in the literature of the Orientalists and Israeli scholars. This coverage ranges from being totally biased against Muslims and the conquest to being fair or neutral. Libraries around the world have received and are still receiving such works mostly written in English or translated into English from other languages. A quick read through some of these texts proves, as El-Awaisi is arguing, that the history of Islamic Jerusalem during this period has suffered from falsification and alteration (Al-Ahlas 2004: 7-9), and has been strongly attacked by a number of authors who consider that Muslim policies contained much oppression and aggression towards non-Muslims.²

There is no doubt that the negative attitude of those Orientalists and Israeli scholars towards the first Muslim conquest of Islamic Jerusalem was and is part and parcel of the vigorous and intense efforts towards a pre-planned goal to play down the sanctity of Islamic Jerusalem and its place in Islam. Furthermore, this attitude has been a mechanism to affirm the ideological attachment of Jerusalem to Jewish people. In this article, the intention is not to deal with what the well-known Orientalists and Israeli scholars such as Ignaz Goldziher, Shelomo Dov Goitein, Judith Koran, Leo Aryeh, Yehuda Nevo and many others have discussed in their writings about Islam in general, the prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an and its revelation, the prophetic traditions and their compilation, the Muslim direction of prayer (*Qiblah*), the building of the Dome of the Rock ... etc. The principal concern will be only about what has been claimed by some of the above scholars about the way in which Muslims treated non-Muslims in Islamic Jerusalem during the first conquest.

The first Muslim conquest of Islamic Jerusalem and 'Umar's Assurance of Safety to people of Aelia (Islamic Jerusalem) were considered by a large number of Muslim and non-Muslim historians and scholars as turning points in the history of the

region. It seems that this conquest had posed a dilemma for many Orientalists and Israeli scholars, especially those who were seeking to play down the status of IslamicJerusalem in Islam and its attachment to Muslims, and those who confirmed and accepted the occurrence of this conquest for many reasons. We see that many scholars from the first group discussed the circumstances of the conquest and tried their best to cast doubt on it by using, as al-Tel (2003:4) argues, the inaccuracies, contradictions and the confusion in some of the Muslim historical sources to create a negative impression about the authenticity of these sources in general and on the whole process of the conquest. Al-Tel (2003: 4-5) went further by adding that those Orientalists and Israeli scholars claimed that the Muslim conquest of IslamicJerusalem is embellished with imaginary myths and legends. In addition, they denied the historical fact of the caliph 'Umar's visit to IslamicJerusalem 16AH/637CE. Moreover, al-Tel (2003:19) discussed some of the arguments and claims put forward by a number of Orientalists and Israeli scholars, dividing them into two groups; the first is represented by Goiten, Gil, Busse and others. This group devoted most of their studies to casting doubt on the authenticity of the early Muslim sources and therefore, denying the importance of these sources. Al-Tel (2003: 19) added that those scholars had described the Muslim conquest of IslamicJerusalem as legend and myth. The second group according to al-Tel acknowledged the authenticity of the early Muslim sources in general but have not discussed the Muslim conquest of IslamicJerusalem except in a few lines or paragraphs in their writings. Al-Tel (2003: 19) named some of the scholars in this group as Levin, Donner, Gabrieli, Peters, Mure, Kaegi, Jandora and others.

As a result of unsuccessful efforts to deny the first Muslim conquest and its consequences, some of the Orientalists and Israeli writers such as Goiten, Elliott Green, Bat Ye'or and many others deliberately twisted and manipulated many Islamic historical incidents and religious texts to create a negative image about Muslims and the way they treated non-Muslims in IslamicJerusalem and elsewhere in the Muslim state. Most of them found, in the

Islamic literature on Dhimma pact and Jizyah tax, an opportunity to attack Islam and Muslims. Elliott Green for example believes that Jews should aware that Muslims were not good towards Jews. According to him, the Jews had suffered greatly after the conquest of the region. In his words, Green claims that:

Many Jews and Zionists are generally and deplorably unaware of conditions for Jews in the Land of Israel after the Arab Conquest [634-640 CE]. Many believe that Arab-Muslim rule was benign for the Jews, not merely compared with conditions in Christian lands. Further, many used to believe even a few decades ago that the conflict with the Arabs over the Land of Israel was strictly a matter of competing nationalisms...³

Likewise, Bat Ye'or, who was called unfortunately by the British historian Martin Gilbert (1999: 127) as "the acknowledged expert on the plight of Jews and Christians in Muslim lands", has published many books and articles dealing with the issue of non-Muslims under Muslim rule in Islamic Jerusalem and elsewhere, such as: *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude*; *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide*; *The Third Choice: Islam, Dhimmitude and Freedom*; and *the Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam*. It is obvious that the writings of Bat Ye'or are repetitions of each other. It seems that she was aware of this problem and therefore she tried to deny it by stating, "A reader unfamiliar with this area of history might consider some aspects of the following chapters as a repetition of my earlier writings..." (Bat Ye'or 2002: 21). This statement of Bat Ye'or is still unconvincing since the signs of repetition in her works are clear and they were meant to draw a dark picture about Islam as a religion and Muslims by using the case of non-Muslims life under Islam. Again, Bat Ye'or tried to refute this fact by saying "A few critics have described my books as anti-Muslim..." (Bat Ye'or 2002: 23), and "...My publications are in no way concerned with either theology or Islamic civilization as a whole" (Bat Ye'or 2002: 23). Simply, Bat Ye'or is contradicting herself and her publications without any doubt clearly reflect an anti-Islam attitude. It is very interesting to read that in a review of Bat Ye'or's book, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: from Jihad to Dhimmitude*, the American

historian Robert Betts commented that the book dealt with Judaism at least as much as with Christianity, that the title was misleading and the central premise flawed. Betts added that "the general tone of the book is strident and anti-Muslim. This is coupled with selective scholarship designed to pick out the worst examples of anti-Christian behaviour by Muslim governments, usually in time of war and threats to their own destruction (as in the case of the deplorable Armenian genocide of 1915). Add to this the attempt to demonize the so-called Islamic threat to Western civilization and the end-product is generally unedifying and frequently irritating" (Betts 2002: 200-203). Finally, Goitein was also one of those Israeli Orientalists who utilised some historical happenings in Islamicjerusalem to blame Muslims and hold them responsible, and to portray the Muslim conquest as an act of barbarism. This will be thoroughly discussed in the following section.

Contrary to the claims of Green, Bat Ye'or and others, it can be argued that throughout Muslim history, Muslims have never had problems with non-Muslims in Islamicjerusalem except for a few incidents that can be classified as non-Islamic or which were provoked by the non-Muslims themselves. This was confirmed by many European Christians and Jewish scholars, for example, Bernard Lewis (1974: (II) 216) the well-known Orientalist and pro-Zionist scholar. In his book "*Islam*" he began a chapter entitled "the non-Muslim in an Islamic State" by stating:

The Dhimma on the whole did well. The non-Muslim managed to thrive under Muslim rule, and even to make a significant contribution to Islamic Civilization. The restrictions were not numerous and were usually less severe in practice than in theory.

Appointing a New Patriarch in Islamicjerusalem

Among the essential pillars in the way that Muslims should treat non-Muslims is the freedom of religion. A very serious matter was pointed out by Goitein (1982: 174) who claimed that the patriarchal seat in Aelia (Islamicjerusalem) was vacant for some time after the death of Sophronious -Patriarch of Jerusalem- in 638

CE. He claims that the conquest threw the Christian community of Aelia into complete disarray and it remained a flock without a shepherd (Goitein 1982: 174). He notes that after Sophronius's death no new patriarch was appointed until 706 CE (Goitein 1982: 174), and appears to suggest that the reason was Muslim interference in Christian religious matters. I disagree, on grounds that it could indicate the opposite – that the Muslim government could well have been complying with the freedom of religion guarantee, and also because other reasons have been suggested for the vacancy. As I mentioned above, this allegation by Goitein is very serious and needs to be addressed to see if Muslims were indeed the cause behind this vacancy in the patriarchal seat in IslamicJerusalem.

The well-known Jordanian historian, Jasir (1989: 59-62), whose book contains a list of the names and duration of every patriarch in Aelia from 451–1106 CE, confirms the vacancy of the patriarchal seat in IslamicJerusalem for almost seventy years, until John V was enthroned in 706 CE (Jasir 1989: 59-62). Why was a new patriarch not appointed for such a long period? Under 'Umar's Assurance, the Muslims were forbidden to interfere in the religious affairs of Christians in the city. The right to appoint patriarchs belonged only to the Christians. Did the Muslims breach the terms of the Assurance? I suggest that the long vacancy could be evidence not of Muslim interference, but of non-interference, even though the post was politically important to the Muslim state. It is also certain that any interference by Muslims forcing the Christians to appoint a new patriarch would have been recorded, and this is not the case.

'Athaminah (2000: 144) argues that the reason for this long vacancy was the ongoing religious dispute between the Christians of IslamicJerusalem, the majority of whom were Monophysites, and the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople. After the Muslim conquest, the Christians tried to eliminate the influence of the Byzantines after expelling them from the city. It seems that each group firmly stood its ground. 'Athaminah (2000: 144) adds that when this theological problem was resolved, a new patriarch was

appointed. He concluded that the Muslims did not hinder the filling of this post.

Hamilton attributes the long vacancy in the patriarchate to another conflict – the ongoing war between the Muslims and the Byzantine Empire (Hamilton 2003: 216). This so preoccupied Byzantium's religious and political leaders that local matters were overlooked, even in [Islamic] Jerusalem. During this period the church of the Holy Sepulchre was supervised by a number of priests whose authority was limited, since they represented the patriarchate and not the patriarch himself (Jasir 1989: 61).

Contrary to Goitein, I would like to argue that when 'Umar conquered Aelia, the status of the Christians underwent an immediate change, and rights were granted in their favour. One consequence of the Muslim conquest was that the non-Chalcedonian churches (those who did not accept Christ's dual nature and were therefore opposed to the Orthodox and Roman Catholic beliefs) were able to establish themselves in Islamic Jerusalem on terms of parity with the Orthodox Church. The Armenians appointed a bishop there in 650 CE, and the presence of a Jacobite (Syrian Monophysite) bishop was attested from 793 CE (Hamilton 2003: 216)

Finally, Christian pilgrimage to the holy places in Islamic Jerusalem was not interrupted as a result of the conquest. Tibawi (1969: 11) argued that the flow of Christian pilgrims from the days of St Helena (250–330 CE) continued when Aelia fell under Muslim rule. 'Athaminah (2000: 144) agrees, adding that the pilgrims were not hindered. Nevertheless, their number decreased as a result of hostile relations between the Muslims and the Byzantine empire. Such a drop in number would be normal, as pilgrims would be nervous of travelling in an atmosphere of war. Jasir (1989: 184) quotes Niqula Ziyadah, a Christian historian, as saying:

The liberation of Jerusalem by the Muslims did not stop the Christian pilgrims from visiting the Holy places in Jerusalem. They encouraged them to come and visit.

After my critical analyses to the claims of Goitein and other Orientalists and Israeli scholars, it is essential to discuss some of the statements mentioned by some of the European Christian scholars and others about the way the Christians in Islamic Jerusalem looked at the Muslims and the conquest. The reason behind doing that is to see to what extent Goitein and other Israeli scholars were right in their allegations.

Steven Runciman (1987(I) 20) maintains that the Christians in Aelia greatly welcomed the Muslim conqueror, as the Muslims had saved them from the persecution they had endured under the Byzantines. He quotes from the Jacobite patriarch of Antioch, Michael the Syrian, in the days of the Latin kingdoms, who reflected on the situation of his people at the time of the first Muslim conquest:

The God of vengeance, who alone is the Almighty ... raised from the south the children of Ishmael [the Muslims] to deliver us from the hands of the Romans (Runciman 1987: (I) 20-21).

Runciman (1987: (I) 20) adds that the Greek Orthodox community:

Finding themselves spared the persecution that they have feared and paying taxes that, in spite of the jizyah demanded from the Christians, were far lower than in the Byzantine times, showed small inclination to question their destiny.

Al-Azdi (1970:111) says that one of the signs of welcome from the Christians was when the Muslim army reached the Jordan valley and Abu 'Ubaydah pitched camp at Fahl [in today's Jordan], whereupon the Christian inhabitants of the area wrote to the Muslims, saying:

O Muslims, we prefer you to the Byzantines, though they are of our own faith, because you keep faith with us and are more merciful to us and refrain from doing us injustice and your rule over us is

better than theirs, for they have robbed us of our goods and our homes.

Caetani (1910 : (3) 813-814), the well-known Italian Orientalist, took the view that the fear of religious compulsion by the Emperor Heraclius, coupled with a strong aversion to Byzantium, made the promise of Muslim tolerance appear more attractive than the connection with the Byzantine empire and a Christian government. He went further, saying that after the initial terror caused by the arrival of an invading army, a profound turnaround took place in favour of the Muslim conquerors. For this reason, Armstrong (1996: 232) agrees, concluding that it was not surprising that the Nestorian and Monophysite Christians welcomed the Muslims and found Islam preferable to Byzantine rule.

Butler (1978: 158) quoted Ibn al-'Ibri – a well-known Christian historian – when he was describing the extent of intra-Christian disagreement and the ensuing Christian optimism towards the Muslim armies:

When our people complained to Heraclius, he gave no answers. Therefore the God of vengeance delivered us out of the hands of the Romans by means of the Arabs. Then although our churches were not restored to us, since under Arab rule each Christian community retained its actual possessions, still it profited us not a little to be saved from the cruelty of the Romans and their bitter hatred against us.

Interestingly, Butler (1978: 158-159) comments how melancholy it was to read that the welcome by Christians of Muslim rule was seen as providential and a deliverance from the rule of fellow Christians. He adds that this in itself shows how impossible the emperor's scheme was for church union, and that it contributed to his downfall.

Runciman (1987: (I) 21) discusses how, after the first Muslim conquest, Christians, Zoroastrians and Jews all became *dhimmis* under Muslim rule. They were allowed freedom of religion and

worship in return for paying *jizyah*. He adds that each denomination or sect was treated as a "semi-autonomous community" in Islamic Jerusalem, with the religious leader of each being responsible for the group's good behaviour under the caliphate. Armstrong (1996: 246) goes further, contending that the Muslims established a system that enabled Jews, Christians and Muslims to live together in the city for the first time. She says this was a result of the inclusive vision developed by the Muslim rulers of [Islamic] Jerusalem, a vision that did not deny the presence and devotion of other religions, but respected their rights and celebrated plurality and coexistence (1997: 19).

Conclusion

In short, I totally reject the claims and the allegations of some Orientalists and Israeli writers that Muslim treatment of non-Muslims in Islamic Jerusalem was oppressive or violent, and that Muslim teachings contain hatred and injustice toward non-Muslims. On the contrary, this study found that Muslim policies and behaviour in Islamic Jerusalem enabled Muslims to live in peaceful coexistence with Christians and Jews.

There is no doubt that the attitude of those Orientalists and Israeli scholars' towards the first Muslim conquest of Islamic Jerusalem in general and the way Muslims treated the followers of other religions in the region did not arise out of a vacuum, but was inspired mainly by religious and political motivations. I agree with El-Awaisi (2007: 135) that the bias shown by the above Orientalists and Israeli writers "is not based on any rational academic analysis or objective criticism" of the Muslim historical and religious sources, but "on religious and political reasons linked to the struggle of the political institutions ruling in Israel to gain control of Islamic Jerusalem and to lend their establishment a historical legitimacy".

The negative attitude mostly articulated by Israeli scholars was intensified shortly after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Before that, many Orientalists with and without Jewish backgrounds had published numerous pieces of works dealing with

the Muslim conquest and rule over IslamicJerusalem. Most of these writings were⁴ aiming to cast doubt and to underestimate the importance and the holiness of IslamicJerusalem to Muslims. In addition, to refute the long period of peace and tolerance that the region enjoyed under Muslim rule, or at least to show that the Muslim conquest was no different from other conquests which IslamicJerusalem had witnessed during its history and that Muslim tolerance towards the inhabitants of IslamicJerusalem is a myth rather than a reality.

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¹ Abu- Hashim, Abd al-Latif. Adab Fada'il al-Mudon fee Dirasat al-Mustashriqin al-Yahud. <http://www.alquds-online.org/index.php?s=13&id=680>. Viewed on 25 October 2010.

² See for example any publication of the Israeli scholar Bat Ye'or.

³ Green, Elliott A. The Forgotten Oppression of Jews under Islam and in the Land of Israel. <http://www.think-israel.org/green.islamoppressedjews.html>. Viewed on 1 March 2011.

⁴ For example see Goldziher, Ignaz. Muslim Studies. S.M Stern (ed.), C.R Barber & S.M Stern (Trans). With a Major Introduction by Hamid Dabashi (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009); Goitein, Shlomo. 1982. Jerusalem in the Arab period (638–1099), in *The Jerusalem Cathedra. Studies in the History, Archaeology, Geography, and Ethnography of the land of Israel*, ed. Levine, L. I. Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi Institute. Busse, Herbert. Omar's Image as the Conqueror of Jerusalem. *Journal of Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*. Vol. 8 (1986); Gil, Moshe, A History of Palestine: 634-1099 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).