

## HASTENING ARMAGEDDON: THE FUTURE OF AL-AQSA MOSQUE IN THE 'DEAL OF THE CENTURY' WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF CHRISTIAN ZIONISM

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**ABSTRACT:** *Al-Aqsa Mosque, Bayt al-Maqdis, and the fate of Palestine have emerged as central topics in the Deal of the Century (DoC), presenting a one-sided viewpoint deeply loaded with a biased political, historical and religious narrative. This paper examines the visions of Christian Zionists concerning the future of al-Aqsa Mosque as outlined in the 'deal'. Primarily, it is concluded that the Deal proposes a major change in the status quo of al-Aqsa Mosque by temporally dividing and allocating it only to Jews and Christians on their respective holidays. Secondly, it lays the foundation for spatial division giving Jews exclusive use of parts of al-Aqsa Mosque, as implemented in the Ibrahim Mosque in Hebron. The third phase, implied but not explicitly stated, revolves around the Zionist ideology of the construction of a 'Jewish Temple' over the site of al-Aqsa Mosque. This inference is drawn from the impact of Christian Zionism on American politics and the anticipation of Christ's Second Coming. Furthermore, the inclusion of the entire area of al-Aqsa Mosque within the target of the 'Jewish Temple' plan, in accordance with the idea that Jesus Christ would enter the site and particularly from an unsealed Bab al-Rahma or the Golden Gate. As a result, the DoC proposes the division of time, space and the sharing of the mosque as a starting point, in line with evangelical plans; the successful completion of which will see the construction of a 'Jewish Temple' to hasten the advent of the apocalypse. This endeavour reflects Christian Zionists' fervent efforts to reshape the world order by forcing the 'Hand of God', and bringing about their long-held desire for Armageddon, through the instrumentalisation of Jews for the fulfilment of their scheme.*

**KEYWORDS:** Al-Aqsa Mosque, Deal of the Century, Second Coming, evangelism, Armageddon, Jewish Temple.



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## INTRODUCTION

Today, one of the most contentious disputes in the region and the world at large has been centred around Jerusalem, with the al-Aqsa Mosque compound becoming the focal point of conflict. It has become the centre of competing claims based on history, culture, and, most crucially, religion. Whether or not al-Aqsa Mosque, which has maintained its structure for more than a millennium, will be able to sustain its existence in the future is a topic of worry and debate in light of the current developments. Christian and Jewish Zionists have aspired to destroy the al-Aqsa Mosque and establish a 'Jewish Temple' on its site. Evangelicals, particularly in the US, have been pushing this idea for some time. Some of the most crucial developments that have ignited these debates today arose when Donald Trump was President of the United States (from 2017 to 2021), and the ramifications are still being felt today. The Trump administration made headlines for its unequivocal support of 'Israel' and went the extra mile, taking steps that no other president dared to take; leaving a clear imprint on history with the publication of the 'Deal of the Century', (hereafter, DoC). With Trump in office, questions about US support for 'Israel', raised in the past, have moved to the forefront of the debate, and the impact of Christian Zionism on American politics became increasingly more obvious.

The DoC proposed by the Trump administration completely accepts the Zionist perspective while concurrently questioning and undermining the Muslim one. The DoC is still relevant today as it had been drafted in accordance with the position of 'Israel', particularly regarding the al-Aqsa Mosque. Trump's term left an irreversible mark on American politics through the substantial privileges afforded to 'Israel', by means of relocating the US Embassy, recognising the annexation of occupied territories, and announcing the Deal of the Century. The Deal not only acknowledges "Israel's' sovereignty over the al-Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem but also goes further in forging a new reality and bringing an end to the long-standing *status quo*. 'Israel' immediately capitalised on these gains and started creating a new *de facto* reality over al-Aqsa Mosque. This cannot be seen just as concessions given to 'Israel' for purely political reasons, rather Trump was clearly appealing to his evangelical constituents and their aspirations. The current right-wing Israeli government is pushing the limits on the matter. This paper will thus systematically evaluate the DoC within the framework laid down in Christian Zionist ideology, critically analysing what awaits al-Aqsa Mosque in the plans envisaged by Christian Zionists, and how the DoC serves these plans. It also considers whether the DoC's promised 'peace and prosperity' could be in reality translate into a declaration of 'war and destruction'.

## RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SITE OF AL-AQSA MOSQUE

Al-Aqsa Mosque is a prominent site which constitutes one sixth of the current old city of Jerusalem. The holy city, which has a major significance in many respects, including globally, politically, geopolitically, and, most importantly, religiously, has been the subject of several nations' competing claims for control over it. Many

civilisations that dominated this area gave it names that reflected their ideals and left a mark of their dominance. As a result, in addition to the name Bayt al-Maqdis, other names for the holy city include UrSalim, Yebus, Aelia, al-Quds and Jerusalem; each of which has a unique symbolic value to different people (El-Awaisi, 2019a). Within its ancient walls several buildings, monuments and shrines have been constructed over millennia to reflect people's connection, many of which have survived to this day. The holy city of Bayt al-Maqdis has become home to numerous sites and locations revered by followers of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. As a result of such monuments, such as al-Aqsa Mosque (and within its Dome of the Rock and al-Buraq Wall), and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, many refer to it as "the holiest city in the world" (Berzak, 2014).

Primarily, al-Aqsa Mosque is the most significant because of its long history, with associations dating back to the period of the early Prophets. This area has always been holy to the people living there for millennia, even though, contemporary archaeology has opposing claims to theological and political claims over the site, only dating it back to the Roman period. Moreover, it is generally accepted by archaeologists that the Canaanites were the first to settle in this holy city, as is also suggested by the Bible (El-Awaisi, 2019a: 20). Historically, the Canaanites or even the Natufians thousands of years earlier, may have been the original inhabitants of the area; nonetheless, the region is most often associated with a single prominent character in the religions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity; Prophet Abraham. According to Hebrew tradition, Jews who consider themselves to be descendants of Abraham believe their lineage continues with Isaac, ignoring Ishmael; while on the contrary, Christians believe that they themselves are the rightful heirs of Abraham as followers of Jesus. Abraham, on the other hand, cannot be a Jew as Judaism originated with Moses a millennium later, and cannot be a Christian because Christianity commenced with Jesus. Furthermore, when we take into consideration how the Qur'an clarifies this argument, it resolves this conflict by clarifying that the Prophet Abraham cannot belong to religions and revelations subsequent to him (Q 3:65), and what is imperative is following the message of submission to God (Islam) brought by Abraham (Q 3:67-68), and not the case of descent (Levenson as cited in El-Awaisi, 2019a: 22).

For Jews, this land is where Moses led them, after he freed the Israelites from Pharaoh's oppression in Egypt. Having reached the Holy Land, in the belief that it was their 'Promised Land', its significance grew in the eyes of the Jews, according to their belief. Nevertheless, it is also well-known according to religious sources that the Jews, even under Moses' guidance, refused to enter this land and were lost in the wilderness for forty years. A few centuries later they entered into the holy city under King David's leadership and a 'Temple' was constructed during King Solomon's reign. Moreover, the site of the current al-Masjid al-Aqsa (al-Aqsa Mosque) is supposedly referenced in the Second Book of Samuel, when David attempted to purchase it from Arnona the Jebusite (II Samuel 24:18-25), and it is

even said that Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek, the Canaanite King of Jerusalem and priest of God Most High, was on this revered site. Thus, according to the Biblical account, even before the time of David and Abraham, this had already been a site where locals were paying importance to. Interestingly, Jews believe that the foundation of Judaism begins with Moses in the Sinai Peninsula, where he received the Ten Commandments from God; therefore, it is surprising that they would choose Mount Zion in Jerusalem rather than Mount Sinai as their spiritual centre (Armstrong, 1997).

For Christians, the holy city of Bayt al-Maqdis is revered as the location where Jesus was crucified and risen from the dead (Armstrong, 1997). The holiest site in all of Christianity, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, is located at the end of the Via Dolorosa and marks the spot where Jesus is believed to have been crucified, buried, and raised from the dead. Jesus's life and prophecies played an important role in the Christian mind and their perceptions of the city. The New Testament asserts that in the teachings and prophecies of Jesus, while on the Mount of Olives, that Jerusalem and its 'temple' would be completely destroyed (Matthew 24:2). However, despite the fact that the Holy Land is regarded as one of the most significant locations in the Christian religion, the area that is now al-Masjid al-Aqsa has never been seen as a particularly significant location by Christians (Al-Ratrout, 2004). Rather it was seen as the site where the prophecy of Jesus, "not one stone here will be left on another", was realised and thus should be left derelict. In addition, for Christians after Jesus's crucifixion and ascension to the heavens, his body became the new 'temple'; it was now a concept of a heavenly Jerusalem and a heavenly temple, rather than an earthly one.

On the other hand, in the eyes of Muslims, the importance of al-Aqsa Mosque does not begin and end with the time of Prophet Muhammad; rather, Muslims trace it back all the way back to the time of the first human, Prophet Adam. The al-Aqsa Mosque is thus not significant only due to the incident of *Isra and Miraj* (Night Journey and Ascension), but also because it is the second Masjid built on earth for the worship of God after the Ka'bah, besides being the first *Qiblah* for Muslims and earlier prophets. As a result, the holy city of Bayt al-Maqdis and al-Aqsa Mosque became an integral part of Islam, with its roots traced back to the very start of creation, continuing through the time of the last Prophet Muhammad and into the future to the Day of Judgment. According to the Quran, al-Aqsa Mosque is the source of the blessing (*Barakah*) and is the centre of the Land of *Barakah*, which has been bestowed upon it long before the migration of Prophet Abraham (El-Awaisi, 2007).

When the second Muslim Caliph 'Umar took Bayt al-Maqdis peacefully in 637, he proceeded to the site of al-Aqsa Mosque, cleansed it and built a structure within it. In actual fact, there is substantial historical and archaeological evidence showing that the area had been deserted for at least 500 years prior to the arrival of Muslims in the seventh century, when al-Aqsa Mosque was rebuilt by Muslims (Al-Ratrout, 2004). The city and the site of the mosque were completed

annihilated and raised to the ground twice in the first and second century CE by the Romans. The foundation's that remained date back to when it was rebuilt again during the reign of Emperor Hadrian in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE (Al-Ratrout, 2013). Thus, the site of the Masjid has no archaeological remnants prior to that, and therefore disproves the claim that the Buraq Wall is a relic of a 'Jewish Temple'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Jewish interest in this wall is rather more recent and together with the advent of Jewish Zionism and the start of the occupation, it turned into both a national and religious symbol.

Since the inception of the Zionist movement in the 1880s, Jewish nationalists have believed Zion to be the spiritual and political heart of the Jewish people (Ma'oz, 2014). Nonetheless, the size, form, and placement of the 'Jewish Temple' in relation to the existing territory of al-Aqsa Mosque are contested amongst biblical scholars and even Israeli archaeologists, making the topic of the first and second 'Jewish Temples' appear more linked to mythology than archaeology (Al-Ratrout, 2004). This theological deception by the Zionists to stake a claim for the demolition of the al-Aqsa Mosque is based on the belief that King Solomon established a 'temple' on the existing location of the Mosque. Despite more than 150 years of subterranean excavations at al-Aqsa Mosque and the surrounding area, this claim has not been proven. In this respect, the Zionist assertion that the Western Wall is a part of the temple is very inconsistent, especially given that there is no hard-archaeological evidence of the temple in the area surrounding the platform of the Mosque. Even until the late Ottoman era and the British intervention in the region, the alleged 'Wailing Wall' or the western al-Buraq Wall of al-Aqsa Mosque held no significance for the Jewish community. The international commission appointed by the British government to look into the claims to this wall during the 1929 Buraq Revolt determined that the Western Wall and the surrounding area belonged solely to the Muslims and is a Waqf property, subsequently being approved by the League of Nations in 1931 (International Commission, 1999). Last but not least, in order to uncover the mystery of the ideological narratives ensuring the collaboration between Jewish and Christian Zionism and the relationship based on mutual interests, reflected in the DoC, it is also necessary to take into consideration the significance of the site of al-Aqsa Mosque from a Christian Zionist perspective. Christian Zionism, often known as 'Christian support for Zionism' or 'political philo-Semitism', places a great value on the existing location of al-Aqsa Mosque due to the belief in an impending 'Jewish temple' that would soon be built there. A contemporary Christian Zionist, Randall Price (2006), argues that the Jewish people are obligated by the Torah to 'restore the temple' as soon as they are able to do so and it heralds that when the Messianic Age comes to fruition, all of Israel will be saved and brought back to their homeland. Additionally, during this time period, the temple will once again stand complete with its Levitical priesthood, and a righteous descendant of David, the Messiah, will rule from Jerusalem (based on Jeremiah 33:14-18, Exodus 25:8).

Despite the fact that archaeological and historical narratives are developing contrary to current Jewish Zionist claims, it is interesting to see how many modern Israeli practices, such as the annexation and colonisation of Palestinian owned land, are justified by Christian Zionists on the grounds of their beliefs that Jews remain as God's chosen people. It must be noted that the concept of a Zionist client-state, established to further Western interests in the area, predates Jewish Zionism and was encouraged by Christian Zionists (El-Awaisi, 2019b). This particularly urged the return of Jews to Palestine and facilitated it. Christian Zionists encouraged Western governments to support this, and more recently, actively advocated for the moving of their embassies to Jerusalem and the official recognition of Jerusalem as the everlasting and undivided capital of Jews and 'Israel'. Those who believe that the Bible foretells the rebuilding of the 'temple' and the restoration of the priesthood and sacrifice system provide varied degrees of financial and moral support to Jewish 'Temple Mount' groups working toward these ends. Peter Wagner, James DeLoach, Terry Reisenhoover, and Doug Kreiger are only some of the Christian Zionist leaders who have played a key role in mobilising substantial American funding for extremist Jewish groups like 'Gush Emunim' and the 'Temple Mount Faithful' (Sizer, 2006: 172). To Christian Zionists, any advocate for Israeli compromise with Islam or coexistence with Palestinians is to identify with those destined to fight God and 'Israel' in the approaching battle of Armageddon; hence there is no hope for genuine peace between Jews and Muslims (Sizer, 2006: 8). For this reason, in the language of Christian Zionists, the 'Temple Mount' is "*the most contested 35 acres on the planet*" and the single most essential key to future predictions (Lindsey as cited in Sizer, 2006: 172).

Accordingly, it is worth noting that US politicians who were elected with the help of evangelicals' views on both domestic and international issues have adopted their positions. In this setting, religion (in the evangelical sense) is kept on the agenda at practically every opportunity, and religious jargon dominates US political vocabulary. The context in which Bush used religious language, such as 'forces of evil' and 'Crusade', in reference to political and military actions carried out by the United States and its allies in the 'Middle East', is one such example (Gündüz, 2018). In addition to Reagan, Bush, and George W. Bush; Trump has been added to the list of American presidents who have had evangelical influence on their policies; with Reagan expecting the predicted War of Armageddon to take place during his administration. Therefore, efforts to demolish al-Aqsa Mosque, which is part of achieving the ambitions of Christian Zionism, and building the privileged 'Jewish Temple', have reached the highest level in directing American politics, which has evolved under the influence of evangelicalism, with the Trump administration coming to the forefront. Consequently, having established the significance of al-Aqsa Mosque to various faiths and ideologies as an introductory section of this paper, this context is essential to the subsequent assessments, namely providing a ground for examining American politics, primarily the DoC, from a broad perspective consistent with the goals of Christian Zionism.

### TRUMP'S STANCE ON RESOLVING THE CONFLICT & HIS DEAL OF THE CENTURY

Supported by Christian and Jewish Zionist lobbies, the Trump administration played a significant role in bolstering pro-Israeli measures, which are unparalleled in the history of US foreign policy towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The United States has long portrayed itself as a mediator in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and officially supported the establishment of two states. Though it may seem that a resolution could be achieved through intermediary states, ending the quest for dominance in the Holy Land based on their respective national, religious and historical narrative, the United States' pro-Israeli policies have only served to exacerbate tensions in this region. For instance, the United States was the first country to officially recognise 'Israel' in 1948 (Ross, 2015); US foreign aid to 'Israel' saw a significant increase beginning in the early 1960s under John F. Kennedy making 'Israel' the largest recipient, surpassing Egypt by more than \$60 billion (Cavari and Nyer, 2016); and overall, the United States has viewed 'Israel' as both a strategic and a friendly *de facto* ally amidst the tumultuous 'Middle East' (Ross, 2015). The Trump administration, renowned for its explicit statements on US policy towards West Asia, has contributed to a surge in potential differences and disputes regarding the United States' involvement in an area beleaguered by conflicts for over a century.

Trump consistently portrayed himself as less hawkish on foreign policy than his opponents during his campaigns. However, his but his presidency's actions have been seen as detrimental to global peace and the liberal international order (Payne, 2017). Critics argue that the Trump's version of 'America First' undermined the established liberal international order (Adri, 2020). The Trump administration's policies aimed at ensuring political stability in West Asia, and the overt favours granted to 'Israel' in contrast to previous American presidents, have stoked the flames of conflict, plunging the region deeper into crisis. During his presidential campaign, Trump pledged to bring an end to the Palestinian-Israeli issue. Once in office, he established a team to facilitate peace talks. To that end, he designated his Jewish son-in-law Jared Kushner as his special envoy to execute a peace plan. Additionally, he appointed David Friedman as US Ambassador to 'Israel', as well as Jason Greenblatt, his former attorney, to this 'peace team', both of whom have been vocal supporters and financial backers of illegal Israeli settlements on occupied Palestinian territory and who are also Jewish. Alongside these appointments, President Trump had an evangelical Vice-President Mike Pence and an evangelical Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. However, the assumption that Trump's team would approach the matter impartially was tainted by their pro-Israeli stance on the conflict, and cast a shadow of doubt over the United States' ability to act as an impartial mediator (Wermenbol, 2019).

In May 2017, Trump included 'Israel' in his first overseas visit as president, and was the first sitting US president to visit the Western Buraq Wall. His administration announced on 6 December 2017 that the United States recognised 'United Jerusalem' as the capital of 'Israel' and would relocate the US embassy

there. Moreover, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Palestinian *Nakbah* or the ‘Great Catastrophe’, and the day ‘Israel’ was established in 1948, the US formally inaugurated its embassy in Jerusalem on 14 May 2018, against global opposition (Abu Shammalah, 2019). On 25 March 2019, Trump reversed decades of US policy by recognising Israel’s annexation of the occupied Golan region. Furthermore, the US unveiled a proposal on 20 June 2019 to establish a global investment fund for the Palestinians and neighbouring Arab states as part of the US’s ‘Middle East Peace Plan’. Furthermore, following his threats to stop assistance to the Palestinians in a series of tweets, blaming their inability to ‘talk peace’, the US government cancelled more than half of its projected funding to UNRWA, the UN organisation for Palestinian refugees (Lieberman, 2019).

Along with this, on 28 January 2020, Trump made his most high-profile polemical move as president when he finally released the long-promised ‘Peace to Prosperity’ plan for ‘Israel’ and the Palestinians (Zanotti, 2019). The Trump administration has been consistently aggressive in its stance on the Palestinian issue and has consistently supported solely pro-Israeli measures (Payne, 2017). Any remaining optimism that Trump would have adopted a neutral posture, particularly in policies towards the Holy Land, has been dashed by his repeated emphasis on the need to restore ties with ‘Israel’ in light of Obama’s lack of an active ‘Israel’ policy during the former US administration (Thompson, 2018).

The US plan, dubbed as ‘the Deal of the Century’, was unveiled in its economic component in the capital of Bahrain, Manama, in June 2019; and was fully unveiled by Donald Trump and Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House on 28 January 2020. This plan is an attempt to legalise Israel’s illegal presence in the occupied territories by disregarding the internationally binding decisions adopted by the United Nations Security Council in the past which demand ‘Israel’ to withdraw from the occupied territories such as the West Bank, Gaza and the Golan, and also by disregarding the Oslo process, that resulted in various agreements (Yetim, 2020).<sup>2</sup> At this point, although the announcement of annexing some areas in the occupied West Bank region by ‘Israel’ is contrary to all the agreements and international law, the ‘Deal of the Century’ leads ‘Israel’ to such an undertaking. On the other hand, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who blames the US for the oppression of the Palestinian people, has criticised President Trump’s peace proposal for the ‘Middle East’ as the ‘Slap of the Century’ and instead reaffirmed his commitment to establishing a Palestinian state with ‘East Jerusalem’ as its capital within the framework of the 1967 borders in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 242 (Sawafta & al-Mughrabi, 2020).

The DoC clearly presented what ‘Israel’ aspired to achieve from the US, and nothing that the Palestinians wanted. This is not surprising as one of the key architects of the plan, Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law, is actually Jewish. He stated to the media, while trying to justify the DoC, that: “*I’ve been studying this now for three years, I’ve read 25 books on it...*”. Many of the books he supposedly read present the Zionist narrative, including works by Jonathan Schanzer, Vice



President for Research at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (Middle East Eye, 2020; Pink, 2020), a US based pro-Zionist think tank, which is part of the Israeli lobby. Kushner's views have been recently exposed in his autobiography, *Breaking History: A White House Memoir*, in which he discusses what has shaped his dogma (Kushner, 2022). He reaffirms some of his sources, stating for instance, that an event reminded him of what he had read in *Fight for Jerusalem: Radical Islam, the West, and the Future of the Holy City*. This book was authored by Dore Gold, who had worked for Ariel Sharon, presenting the ultra-nationalist politics of the Israeli Likud party.

The rest of Kushner's 'small' team was composed mainly of Jews with orthodox upbringing, namely Avi Berkowitz, Jason Greenblatt and David Friedman (Kampeas, 2019), in addition to Coptic Christian Dina Powell, due to her knowledge of Arabic (she left a few months later), and Catholic Brian Hook, due to his strong stance on Iran, which was needed when he met Arab leaders to convince them of the plan.<sup>3</sup> Kushner does not disguise the Jewish background of his team; he even boasts about it. He notes how he met Berkowitz during Passover in 2011 and Greenblatt being Trump's lawyer and the campaign's liaison to the Jewish community. As for Ambassador Friedman, Kushner was well aware of him not only being a pro-Israel hawk but also having strong connections to the evangelical and Jewish right wings, something Kushner saw as an 'asset' in this endeavour (Kushner, 2022, 111). Trump in unveiling the DoC, threatened the Palestinians that *"this could be the last opportunity they will ever have"*, stating the first reason for that is there will never be a team like this which, *"We have a team of people that love the United States and they love Israel, and they're very smart and very, very committed"*, naming the four in the team Friedman, Greenblatt, Berkowitz and Kushner, but excluding Hook, whom Netanyahu did not forget in his speech (Trump & Netanyahu, 2020).

The team, with such backgrounds, connections, and being vocal supporters and financial backers of 'Israel' shows a clear bias. Moreover, Israel's official involvement in the drafting of the deal, as Kushner boasts writing; *"We had spent two years haggling over every line, and we had created a thoughtful plan that Bibi believed could actually work"*, is telling. Trump, at the unveiling of the DoC, said he delivered his vision for peace only a few days before the launch. Kushner, however, adds that the night before the announcement both he and Netanyahu went through the final version before it was announced; *"Bibi was careful to make sure that not a single word of the plan would put any Israeli at risk and was understandably nervous about how it could affect the upcoming election"* (Kushner, 2022, 286-287). Their background, together with Israel's official involvement and even making changes until the last minute, is clear testimony not only of bias but of presenting Zionist aspirations. Netanyahu, in the unveiling of the deal said, *"it's a great plan for Israel"* (Trump & Netanyahu, 2020). In this respect, the significance of al-Aqsa Mosque and changes to its status, announced in the context of this deal, needs to be read against this background.

As a consequence, it is obvious that the plan fits the definition of a matter of coercion rather than a peace for reasons such as the proposal of Jerusalem to 'Israel' as a single and inseparable whole, proposals to turn the site of al-Aqsa Mosque into a multi-religious tourist destination, denying the inherent right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes, and supporting the annexation initiatives. Accordingly, we can say that it is a document in which Palestine is excluded and therefore arises from the intersection of a two-way alliance of interests. Besides the gains 'Israel' was making, it benefited the Trump administration in consolidating the support of Jewish and evangelical lobbies in the US. In this regard 'Israel' made use of the current national, regional and global context with the aim of putting into practice its illegal and occupation-based expansionist initiatives. This was reflected in Netanyahu's attempt to secure more concessions from the US during the unveiling of the plan by pushing the idea of further annexation in the West Bank in accordance with the new map in the DoC. This reflects the more concessions given to the Zionist state, the more it would want to acquire. This last episode even made Trump "feel dirty", as Netanyahu was "giving a campaign speech" for the looming elections (Kushner, 2022, 292).

### **The Significance of al-Aqsa Mosque in the Deal**

The White House's *'Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People'* plan, dubbed as the 'Deal of the Century', centres on a unilateral resolution of a host of contentious issues, including those pertaining to borders and settlements, security, Palestinian refugees, the status of the Palestinian state, Jerusalem, and holy sites, primarily al-Aqsa Mosque enclave. This document is a direct outcome of Trump's pro-Israeli actions, and it's significant to note that in doing so, Trump accorded 'Israel' full recognition of its control over the entirety of Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Mosque. Furthermore, a 'sovereign' Palestine, perceived as a threat to the survival of 'Israel', is thus dismissed as part of the DoC, thereby further bolstering Israel's claims to the area as its purported 'ancient homeland' (White House, 2020, p.8).

Regarding the status of al-Aqsa Mosque, the document denotes the entire mosque complex by the Zionist/Biblical term 'Temple Mount', instead of the term 'al-Aqsa Mosque'. This indicates that the site's significance as a Muslim place of worship is being deliberately disregarded. The terminological preferences are alternatives to overt justifications as seen in numerous points in the text. Consequently, it can be discerned that Trump's plan prioritises the significance of the 'Temple Mount' over al-Aqsa Mosque, largely adopting a Zionist perspective, although adding a latter term 'Haram al-Sharif'. Moreover, the preference for specific terminology not only legitimises the Jewish Zionist narrative concerning the existing location of al-Aqsa Mosque but also ignores historical and archaeological evidence based on continuing excavations surrounding the mosque's complex. In the opening section entitled "Jerusalem's Holy Sites", 31 holy sites are listed; 17 are Christian, 13 are supposedly Jewish and only a mention of 'the Muslim Holy Shrines' is made without naming a single site from the hundreds within the Old

City. Furthermore, new Jewish holy sites are seemingly invented in the city, which previously held no sacred status in Judaism, aligning with a new narrative advocated by settler groups and successive right-wing governments. The plan does not distinguish between “central holy sites and peripheral sites or sites that are of varying importance to more than one religion” (Emek Shaveh, 2020).

The statements within the text of the DoC reveal a clear bias; it claims that since 1967, “the State of Israel has been a good custodian of Jerusalem. During Israel’s stewardship, it has kept Jerusalem open and secure” (White House, 2020, p.9). This assertion does not seem to reflect the reality on the ground. Prior to the Zionist occupation, Jews, Christians, and Muslims around the world had the right to visit this holy city. However, there is an evident discrepancy between what is stated in the text and what is actually practised. Today over two billion Muslims have restricted access to their holy sites in the Holy Land. The stipulations outlined in the DoC regarding how “the State of Israel is to be commended for safeguarding the religious sites of all ... Given this commendable record for more than half a century... we believe that this practice should remain, and that all of Jerusalem’s holy sites should be subject to the same governance regimes that exist today”, not only overlooks the real circumstances such as the numerous constraints imposed by the Israeli government on Muslims and Christians to freely practise their worship at their holy places, but also raises questions regarding how ‘Israel’ will manage to keep Jerusalem open and secure for all worshippers while it is the one desecrating its sanctity.

In this context, grave claims have also been made that the Israeli government would become the mosque’s keeper and administrator, thereby granting them full jurisdiction over the site. This is asserted within the DoC’s text, as it intends to end Muslim religious autonomy over the site and, therefore, terminate the *status quo*, which the document contends should be preserved! It maintains:

Jerusalem’s holy sites should remain open and available for peaceful worshippers and tourists of all faiths. People of every faith should be permitted to pray on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, in a manner that is fully respectful to their religion, taking into account the times of each religion’s prayers and holidays, as well as other religious factors.

This dubious statement clearly raises additional concerns about the future of al-Aqsa as a mosque. As a city of significance to the three religions, it in turn implies that the mosque should also serve as a synagogue for Jews and church for Christians, on their respective holy days. The mention of “every faith” appears to include Christians but mainstream Christians have never aspired to this. They have been lumped into the equation to mask the clear intention of turning the mosque into a Jewish place of worship.

In the sections of the DoC where the significance of the al-Aqsa Mosque in relation to Islam, Judaism, and Christianity is discussed, other noteworthy comments regarding the al-Aqsa Mosque are prominent. According to this section, there are very sharp statements regarding its significance for Judaism

such as its history dating back to the time of Abraham for the Jews, and how this land evolved into a political centre during the time of King David, with the Jews having at least three thousand years of history. The document also references King Solomon and Moses in the Jewish narrative and the placement of the Ten Commandments in the 'temple'. It mentions that although Jews pray at the Western Wall, part of the 'Second Temple', the al-Aqsa Mosque or 'Temple Mount' is their holiest site (White House, 2020, p.15). This strongly implies their claim over the site and implicitly suggesting the need to construct a 'Jewish Temple' there. While no emphasis is placed on the site's significance to Christians, the Muslim significance is distinctly undermined.

The intriguing aspect of how these claims are articulated in the DoC is the detailed explanation elaborating on the Jews' presence in the Holy Land and supporting their stance towards al-Aqsa Mosque while degrading others' beliefs. 'Mount Moriah', which is claimed in the biblical narrative to be where the Dome of the Rock, is situated and believed to be the site where Abraham intended to sacrifice his son Isaac, is a prime example of the deliberate use of language in the DoC to advance a specific narrative. In this case, the Jewish and Christian mythology and claims over al-Aqsa and its Dome of the Rock are evident, asserting that it was formerly Mount Moriah and is based on an entirely fictitious dispute. The document then makes another claim that it became the political centre of the Jewish people at the time of King David, and the building of an alleged "First Temple on Mount Moriah" and that the "Second Temple was built atop the same mountain" until they were destroyed. This becomes more apparent in another statement that lays the groundwork for this attempt regarding the whole site of al-Aqsa and its Western Wall as remnants of the Second Temple; "Although Jews pray today at the Western Wall, which was a retaining wall of the Second Temple, the Temple Mount itself is the holiest site in Judaism" (White House, 2020, p.16). Thus, the claim over the Buraq Wall is the departing point for subsequent material claims over the entire site of the mosque.

It is clear that an attempt is being made to endorse Jewish rights in the area by using claims in the document that have no ground; on the contrary they are opposed by archaeological evidence. This includes Biblical and Israeli archaeologists, many of whom question such arguments. Aren Maeir of Bar-Ilan University states: "if the scholars asked a hundred scholars (about the Jewish Temple), you will get a hundred and one opinions" (Maeir as cited in al-Ratrout, 2012). This is reflected in the various theories and locations of the 'temple' in available literature. Ernest Martin, a Biblical scholar even argues that based on the scripture, the site of al-Aqsa was never a Jewish temple, rather a Roman fortress (Martin, 2000). As noted earlier such statements within the DoC do not have valid evidence to go beyond just being claims of mythology along with the lack of archaeological finds and historical evidence. It is well established that the site has no remains of a 'Jewish Temple' as even established by Israeli archaeologists and it was a desolate area during the Roman period; Tuvia Sagiv concludes that the

ancient archaeological remains of al-Aqsa's foundation should be dated to the Pagan Roman Emperor Hadrian, in the second century CE, and not earlier to the time of Herod (Sagiv as cited in al-Ratrout, 2012, 84).

In addition, the Western Buraq Wall of al-Aqsa Mosque was not even holy to Jews or a place where they worshipped until the late Ottoman period. The wall became *Joha's False Nail* during the British occupation in order to lay further claims over the mosque (al-Jubeih, 2003). The clear distortion evident in the DoC is in line with the modern Zionist narrative that made the Western Wall a national and religious symbol (Cohen-Hattab & Bar, 2018; Ricca, 2010), this came following Trump's visit to the wall as the first US sitting president to do so. Christian Zionists, on the other hand, taking the Bible literally, see the religious scripture as their historical source, thus confirming both the first and second 'temples'. Therefore, without any requirement for solid proof, the DoC lends credence to the idea that the site of al-Aqsa was the temple and its western wall is a relic of the second 'Jewish Temple', which in turn brings us to the Christian Zionist perspective and the historical backing they offered the Jews in accordance with the Christian and Jewish Zionism alliance. To put it another way, the objective of the DoC, as a product of the pro-Israeli Trump administration, is not to bring peace and prosperity to the Holy Land as is claimed, but rather to lay the groundwork for the fulfilment of evangelical and Jewish predictions. Furthermore, the DoC makes a claim that there "are nearly 700 separate references to Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible", an argument Zionists propagate. However, when looking at the Torah, "Jerusalem is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah, the first five most sacred books of the Hebrew Bible" (Armstrong, 1997, 1), not even once. This section of the DoC not only emphasises Jerusalem's significance to the Jews but narrows it down to primarily the site of al-Aqsa Mosque.

The following paragraph on the Christian significance, although no importance is paid to the site of al-Aqsa Mosque, the wording also undermines Islam and Muslims. There are clear inferences that Christians "longed to recover the holy city" from the day Muslims took it in 637, and achieved such desire with the Crusades! Not only that, but during Muslim rule, the medieval period, pilgrims would face "dangers and challenges" and only during the late Ottoman period were they "granted legal rights to their holy sites". While under 'Israel' there is a "thriving Christian population" (White House, 2020, p.15). These references clearly undermine the Islamic framework and practices, under which Christians and Jews lived side by side, for the first time in history, in peace under Islam's inclusive vision (Armstrong, 1997).

While analysing the following passage, associated with Islam, it is clear that any claims made regarding the matter's significance to Muslims are not fully in line with the material presented in Islamic sources and are, on the contrary, twisted. Accordingly, the value of al-Masjid Al-Aqsa to Muslims is confined to a single building within al-Aqsa Mosque enclave and merely to the period of the last Prophet Muhammad, and specifically to the occurrence of *Isra and Miraj* and the

claimed subsequent *Qiblah*. However, to reduce the significance of al-Masjid Al-Aqsa to Muslims to a singular event alone while ignoring its predecessors is a distortion of the historical and theological reality. It also utilises orientalist and Zionist arguments that undermine the importance of al-Aqsa to Muslims, by claiming that the Umayyads made “*Jerusalem as an alternative place of pilgrimage when Mecca [sic] was controlled by a rival caliphate*”. Thus, arguing that some Muslim rulers attempted to give emphasis to a religious importance of Jerusalem and such the victory of Salah al-Din “*led to a revival of Islamic interest in Jerusalem*” that is implied to have been non-existent at some stage. It even goes further in undermining its importance to Muslims today as “*the third holiest site in Islam*”, while establishing it as the “*holiest site in Judaism*”. Thus, the DoC depicts a scenario in which the significance of the al-Aqsa Mosque and, by extension, the holy city is undermined for Muslims and implies that the existence of the al-Aqsa Mosque, as a Muslim site of worship, hinders the construction of the Jewish temple. Ultimately, it is obvious that these statements are unqualified to doubt the importance for Muslims.

Once it is established that the site of al-Aqsa Mosque, in the religious and historical sense, is holiest to Jews, with little or no significance to Christians, and questionable holiness to Muslims, the proposed future is then based on such a framework. As for the sovereignty in the future of al-Aqsa Mosque, it is clear in the DoC that the state of ‘Israel’ will have jurisdiction over the site. It qualifies this with what was implied earlier, and with a further distortion of facts and history; “*Unlike many previous powers that had ruled Jerusalem, and had destroyed the holy sites of other faiths, the State of Israel is to be commended for safeguarding the religious sites of all and maintaining a religious status quo*”. Israel’s violation of human rights, disregard of international law and international humanitarian law, and imposing upon Palestine an apartheid reality as reported to the UN’s Human Rights Council (2022), is conversely commended in the DoC and thus encouraged for taking on this aggressive role. The policies that Israel has implemented in the Holy Land since the foundation of the Zionist state are commended and praised, and this occupation should continue disregarding international law. The document goes on to allege that previous rulers before the Zionist occupation have “*destroyed the holy sites of other faiths*”, when seen through the lens of historical records, it is clear that this is nothing more than an exaggerated claim without historical context. Taking into account the time prior to the twentieth century, inclusivity reigned in the region for centuries under Muslim rule, since the seventh century, with the exception of the Crusades, and thus indicate that this notion utterly distorts historical realities. According to historical records, the city had a cultural renaissance not only during the Islamic Ottoman era, but throughout the lengthy periods under Islam and places of worship were protected from the time Caliph Umar issued his Assurance of Safety (El-Awaisi, 2007; Abu Munshar, 2012), and the existence of churches is testimony to this. Historical sources demonstrate that the era of the Crusades, the largest genocide

seen by the Holy Land, is now being replayed eight centuries later at the hands of the Zionist enterprise, despite the image depicted in the wording of the DoC; falsifying history and creating a new twisted narrative. However, such historical references are lacking in the text of the Deal, which causes casting doubt on the veracity of the material and making an unbiased political approach difficult.

The text of the Deal intentionally leaves out historical atrocities since the onset of the occupation. It neglects to mention how Israel demolished the historic Maghariba neighbourhood soon after seizing the entire city in 1967 as part of its Judaisation project, which began with Israel's declaration of its presence in the region (Abu Shammalah, 2019). From the outset, 'Israel' embarked on a campaign of terror and violence, which has led to the demolition of all mosques, houses, shops and other waqf structures the neighbourhood's (such as Madrasah, Zawayah and Sufi lodges), that have had stood there for centuries. Israeli military troops have been responsible for a wave of terrorism that has included the displacement of the residents of the Maghariba neighbourhood, located next to the Western Buraq Wall of the al-Aqsa Mosque, and its destruction (Abu Shammalah, 2019). The Deal claims that Israel has established security in the region and maintains political stability in Jerusalem, where clashes have continued for over half a century and massacres have been committed within its holy sites (such as the 1990 al-Aqsa and the 1994 Ibrahim Mosque massacres). The increasing desecration of Muslim holy sites is clear evidence of the distortion of history to suit the Zionist narrative.

Statements in the DoC imply that the US administration believes all of Jerusalem's holy sites should be governed in the same manner as they are currently. If this is the case, then the al-Aqsa Mosque is entirely subject to whatever administrative authority Israel appoints and whatever fate it chooses. With no provision for Muslims to have a say in the American decision and Israeli sovereignty over the al-Aqsa Mosque, the text of the Deal while claiming that the *status quo* should be maintained, actually makes it abundantly clear that the status of what it terms the 'Temple Mount/ Haram al-Sharif' would be entirely altered. Kushner, in his memoir, emphasises that the issue of al-Aqsa Mosque was central to the 'deal'. Predictably, its formation was one of the main objectives of the DoC as, in Kushner's own words, it was what was lacking in earlier 'peace' initiatives; the "*most contentious issue -the status of East Jerusalem and its crown jewel, the Temple Mount-*" (Kushner, 2022, 109). He adds that in meetings with some Arab leaders, this issue continually arose in discussions. In his meeting with the late Sultan Qaboos of Oman on 23 February 2019,<sup>4</sup> he told him, "*the most crucial element of Israeli-Arab peace was access to the al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount*". Kushner adds that the Sultan expressed his disappointment because "*for years the Arab media had spread a false narrative that Israel wanted to destroy the mosque*" (Kushner, 2022, 214). The Sultan further said that he felt bad for the Palestinians as they "*carry with them the burden of the Muslim world*". This was a turning point for Kushner to focus on al-Aqsa Mosque in the 'deal'. He

states that as he flew to Bahrain the next morning, this issue was playing over in his mind, particularly concerning who appointed inept Abbas and his ‘band’ to “represent the entire Arab world on the issue of the al-Aqsa Mosque”. Having a ‘eureka moment’, that besides the territorial conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the main “broader conflict between Israel and all Arabs about access to the al-Aqsa Mosque”, he concluded after two years of exploring this conflict, to “narrow our focus to the issue of access to the al-Aqsa Mosque” as that would make progress possible (Kushner, 2022, 217-218). Before landing in Bahrain, he asked his team to make changes to the ‘deal’, so that the issue of al-Aqsa Mosque was removed from being a subject of negotiation with the Palestinians to being the centrepiece of the normalisation agreements between Muslim countries and ‘Israel’, paving the way for the ‘Abraham Accords’ (Kushner, 2022, 219).<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Kushner shifted this from being a subject to be negotiated to settling it in the way he, and naturally Israel, saw fit. He emphasises his point in various places in his memoirs. His and Israel’s stance and narrative are clearly articulated; “after being denied access to the Temple Mount for decades, Israel would never agree to give up control of East Jerusalem” (Kushner, 2022, 110). Adopting Israel’s position, the fact that the future administration of al-Masjid al-Aqsa would remain entirely under Israeli control indicates that this mission of demolition and Judaisation will continue. Consequently, the fact that this document defends Israel’s sovereignty over the al-Aqsa Mosque and supports this decision casts significant doubt on whether the al-Aqsa Mosque will continue to exist as a mosque. Furthermore, it introduces the idea of opening the site to Jewish prayer. This was advanced by the team while the DoC was being drafted. Jason Greenblatt (2022) in his recently published memoirs, claims that he was the driving force behind this; “I also recommended that people of every faith, including Jews who were presently excluded, should be permitted to pray on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, in a manner fully respectful to their religion, taking into account the times of each religion’s prayers and holidays, as well as other religious factors”. The same wording was included in the DoC, albeit diluted to encompass other religions. Thus, the survival of al-Aqsa Mosque is threatened by the major privileges accorded to ‘Israel’ in the language of the DoC for the purpose of implementing the principles of Christian Zionism and its future aspirations.

Therefore, the Trump administration’s DoC makes it clear that ‘Israel’ would have full control of the Holy City, while the Palestinians would be confined to a few neighbourhoods on the city’s eastern outskirts, beyond the apartheid 8-m-high wall. While an undivided Jerusalem becomes the sovereign capital of the Zionist state, the document absurdly suggests that the Palestinians could choose one of the villages, such as Abu Dis, and “could be named Al Quds”! This insulting proposal, while upholding a Jewish Jerusalem, paradoxically expects Palestinians to search for a plot of land and simply call it al-Quds, negating their connection with the holy city, while amplifying the Jewish connection. It may be argued that the content of the DoC is predicated on a hypothetical situation designed to yield



results favourable to 'Israel' and that this situation disregards the vast majority of any relevant context. The Palestinians would have to accept this unilateral deal in order to avoid the consequences that would befall them if they chose to oppose it. All things considered, the US plan to 'resolve' the conflict only aggravates the conflict further, violates international law regarding Jerusalem's status and ignites a new wave of controversy on an issue very sensitive to billions of Muslims around the world, namely al-Aqsa Mosque.

### THE FUTURE OF AL-AQSA AS PROJECTED BY THE DEAL & ITS IMPLICATIONS

As is justified in the DoC, 'Israel' has not hesitated to publicly state that it asserts sovereignty over the al-Aqsa Mosque. Consequently, the interferences in the *status quo* of the Masjid are not limited to justifications in the DoC, as Israel had already been establishing a *de facto* dominance over al-Aqsa Mosque. However, there are two key points within the language of the DoC that should be emphasised, as they pose serious threats to the future existence of al-Aqsa Mosque. In association with the DoC, the first key point directly indicates that the site of the al-Aqsa Mosque is to become a shared space for prayers and tourists of all faiths, a desire strongly promoted by certain radical Jewish and Christian Zionists. This is blatantly asserted within the DoC:

Jerusalem's holy sites should remain open and available for peaceful worshippers and tourists of all faiths. People of every faith should be permitted to pray on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif [i.e. al-Aqsa], in a manner that is fully respectful to their religion, taking into account the times of each religion's prayers and holidays, as well as other religious factors (White House, 2020, p.16).

If implemented, it would be impossible to ensure that al-Aqsa Mosque enclave, will continue to serve solely as a mosque in the future. Moreover, if this particular site of worship for Muslims becomes accessible for other faiths' worship as indicated in the language of the DoC, there will be no future for al-Aqsa Mosque as an exclusively Muslim place of worship. In reality, this would serve as an open invitation allowing Jewish settlers, who have been attempting to perform prayers on the site for years, to finally enter al-Aqsa Mosque freely. Even if Muslims today defend the mosque from the incursions of intruders, this statement in the DoC undermines the fundamental integrity of al-Aqsa Mosque and grants the luxury of dedicating a new space for other rituals, paving the path for the construction of structures, and eventually the envisaged Jewish temple on this site.

This first critical aspect in the DoC regarding the future of al-Aqsa Mosque leads naturally into a second issue, which is the guarantee that people of all faiths would be permitted to perform their religious prayers, taking into account their respective religious holidays. Therefore, the second major issue is that the DoC dictates that all religions should be permitted to pray fully on what it terms the 'Temple Mount', taking into consideration the times of prayers and festivals of each religion, among other religious factors. The choice of the term 'Temple Mount' over 'al-Aqsa Mosque' in the DoC lends legitimacy to Jewish claims to the site,<sup>6</sup> a position already established in the document concerning the first and

second 'Temples', thus ushering for the construction of a third 'Jewish Temple', a fulfilment of prophecy important to Evangelicals.

Taking this assertion in the DoC into account, it becomes clear that its objective is to provide a valid foundation for additional major changes concerning the future of al-Aqsa Mosque. This blatantly alters the status quo of al-Aqsa Mosque and divides the mosque both temporally and spatially. It is essential to recall that since the occupation in 1967, an agreement was reached to maintain the internal administration of the entirety of al-Aqsa Mosque under Jordan's Islamic Waqf. However, though 'Israel' regarded its occupation as 'liberation' and hoisted its flag atop the Dome of the Rock, it was favourable for both sides at the time to retain the internal administration of the al-Aqsa Mosque (al-Haram al-Sharif) under Jordanian Awqaf control. The site was exclusively dedicated to Muslim worship, while non-Muslims were only permitted to enter as visitors or tourists (Zalberg, 2020). Furthermore, Jewish Law (Halakhah), as proclaimed by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, prohibits Jews from accessing the mosque's compound as it is deemed too holy to tread upon.<sup>7</sup> However, certain radical Jewish groups have been vigorously lobbying to overturn this position and defy this halakhic prohibition by entering the site and more recently praying within it.

Nonetheless, the *status quo* has been altered on multiple occasions, some planned and others as reaction to certain events (al-Jubeh, 2010). The first change was the actual occupation in 1967 and its immediate consequences; including the seizure of al-Aqsa's Buraq Wall, destruction of the adjacent Maghariba Quarters, Israel's control over all the gates of the mosque and the confiscation of the key to the Maghariba Gate<sup>8</sup> as well as the confiscation of al-Madrassa al-Tankiziyya.<sup>9</sup> In addition, a permanent Israeli military police station was established inside the mosque, north of the Dome of the Rock, and Israeli border police were later positioned at all the gates of the mosque. This was followed by declaring the site of al-Aqsa Mosque as 'public open spaces', and initiating archaeological excavations in the vicinity and underneath the mosque from 1968.<sup>10</sup> The *status quo* continued to be altered; the tunnel under the western wall of the mosque was completed and officially opened in 1996.<sup>11</sup> Israel established within synagogues and places for Jewish worship within the tunnel, directly beneath the mosque's western wall. Another significant change was associated with Ariel Sharon's storming of into the Mosque in 2000 with thousands of soldiers, resulting in the killing of dozens of Muslims inside the mosque. This incident resulted in further major changes to the *status quo*, through which Israel ended Jordan's control over the entry of non-Muslims into the mosque, as well as ending the Awqaf's right to renovate the mosque.<sup>12</sup> Israel clearly claimed that the area of the mosque was public spaces under its jurisdiction and permitted Israelis and tourists, escorted by Israeli police, access from 2003; furthermore, no renovation could be undertaken without its approval. Israel's restriction of Palestinian Muslims from the mosque and their forcible removal to make way for Jewish visitors represented another change to the *status quo*. This was followed by the

sealing off part of the mosque to Muslim access and the closure of al-Aqsa for two weeks in 2017 (El-Awaisi and Yavuz, 2020, 224; al-Jubeih, 2010, Emek Shaveh, 2017). More recently, a new reality has been enforced, legitimising Jewish prayer within the mosque area as a direct result of the DoC. In summary, these actions, which aggressively undermine the sanctity of the mosque, stand in stark contrast to the security and peace purportedly promised by the DoC for Jerusalem. The DoC which claims to uphold the *status quo*, is effectively ending it once and for all, as it proposes three main changes in practice; it would reverse the centuries-old arrangement by giving control of the site to Israel, removing Jordan's custodial administrative role, and allowing non-Muslims to worship there (El-Awaisi and Yavuz, 2020: 224).

The primary change proposed for the al-Aqsa Mosque is to allow non-Muslim prayers inside the Mosque's area, which not only alters the *status quo* but terminates it completely. It suggests that during non-Muslim religious holidays, the al-Aqsa Mosque should be accessible only to non-Muslims. This is something that Jewish temple groups have been advocating in recent years and has even been discussed in the Israeli Knesset to enforce a model similar to that of the Ibrahim Mosque in Hebron, where Jews have exclusive access during their religious festivals, including the participation of high-ranking state officials. Within al-Aqsa Mosque, this has not yet been implemented, but attempts to do so are evident, posing a serious threat to the continued existence of al-Masjid al-Aqsa as a mosque. Earlier measures allowed occupation authorities to limit Muslim access to the al-Aqsa Mosque during the hours of the morning (7:30 to 11:30) and early afternoon to make way for Jewish settlers and tourists. More recently and following the announcement of the Deal, Jewish groups have raised the bar further. Although previously they just required access, now prayers are conducted under the protection of Israeli occupation forces. The fact that the DoC asserts that "*Jerusalem's holy sites should remain open and available for peaceful worshippers and tourists of all faiths*", and that they should be allowed to pray in the mosque taking into consideration "*the times of each religion's prayers and holidays, as well as other religious factors*" has enabled these Jewish groups to begin implementing this on the ground with the support of the Zionist establishment. Given these wordings, it is uncertain how situations would be handled when two or more religions celebrate their holidays on the same days, but priority to Jews is evident.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, taking into consideration the rituals, festivals, and prayers of each religion "*in a manner that is fully respectful to their religion*", suggests a definite division of the site and its allocation to 'other religions' besides Islam. Since the DoC was announced Israel has begun allowing Jews to enter the mosque during the holy month of Ramadan, and particularly the last ten days, which was previously not allowed. This has escalated in the last few years since the DoC and has led to an outright attack on the mosque.

Ostensibly, according to Jewish law, as noted earlier, Jews are prohibited from entering the entire site of al-Aqsa Mosque, let alone worshipping there.

Fanatical Jewish groups, with the support of Christian Zionists, are evidently pushing for a change in religious rulings and seeking ways to circumvent them. Temple groups have reduced the hallowed ground that they are not supposed to enter to just the platform of the Dome of the Rock, and with the backing of some reformist Rabbis, they have issued a revised ruling. There has even been an attempt to remove the sign from the Chief Rabbinate at the Maghariba Gate, which forbids entry to the site. Moreover, there are ongoing campaigns to encourage Jews to enter the mosque site, and prizes and incentives are being offered to those who smuggle in offerings and other religious items, such as the *shofar* (ram's horn) (Israel National News, 2022). On the other hand, this restriction is no longer being strictly enforced, and Jews are not bound by this ruling. The text of the DoC instead of adopting the view of the Chief Rabbinate and maintaining peace, takes an extreme stance and encourages Jews to pray inside the mosque. This clearly demonstrates that the plan projected by the DoC does not reflect mainstream Jewish or Christian beliefs but rather the extreme views of Jewish groups, such as the 'Temple Mount' Organisations, and the apocalyptic beliefs of Christian Zionists.

The DoC not only advances the temporal division but also a spatial one, as these groups have seized this opportunity and started to congregate in large numbers on the eastern side of the mosque, near the al-Rahma Gate. During their intrusions and congregation within this part of the mosque, Muslims are not permitted to approach that area, and if they insist on being there, even outside of these hours, they are either arrested or escorted away. However, Jewish groups have continued to escalate their demands asking for more concessions regarding their prayers within the mosque, initially requesting to bring in prayer shawls, religious books, and religious objects. On 22 May 2022, an Israeli Jerusalem Magistrates Court ruled that Jewish prayer and prostration are permitted, as these are rights recognised for all religions and do not contradict the Law of Protection of Holy Places. Following international outcry regarding the change in the *status quo*, the government secretariat issued a statement on the court decision, asserting that “*there is no change, on the status quo of the Temple Mount*” and this pertained to a court case involving three Jews who had conducted Jewish prayers inside al-Aqsa. Though it was claimed that the Appellate Court had revoked the decision, the reality on the ground suggests otherwise. The Supreme Court of Israel issued a verdict allowing Jews to blow the *shofar* and conduct other religious rituals at the eastern wall of al-Aqsa Mosque on 19 September 2022. Jewish groups succeeded in bringing religious accoutrements for worship, such as the *shofar*, into the mosque in September 2022 on multiple occasions. Additionally, they managed to conduct a Rabbinic summit inside al-Aqsa Mosque twice, in April and October 2022, under the protection of the Israeli police, during which Rabbi Yehuda Shlush stated, “*we were in large numbers, we conducted prayer, Mussaf and Hosanna, in congregation with priestly benediction, out aloud and without interruption*” (Gottlieb, 2022).

According to these Temple groups, this means that al-Aqsa is now *de facto* a temple, as, according to the Talmud and the Sanhedrin literature, such a congregation of the court of the Rabbis can only occur inside the 'Temple'.

Until now, Muslims were able to stay in al-Aqsa Mosque and chant *takbir* (God is Great) to emphasise the Islamic identity of the Mosque before the DoC. However, presently Muslims are forcefully evicted from the Mosque during the incursions of Jewish settlers, even during the month of Ramadan in the last three years. The text of the DoC states, consistent with Israel's policy, that “*peaceful worshippers*” are allowed to worship freely. Therefore, with this DoC, the Israeli government, believing that Muslims standing in opposition to intruders are not ‘peaceful worshippers’, is granted the authority to forcibly restrict Muslims' access and prayer to accommodate Jewish settlers (El-Awaisi and Yavuz, 2020: 229). Consequently, the debate regarding the future of al-Aqsa Mosque has intensified due to the proposal to end the Mosque's *status quo* by making it “*open and available for peaceful worshippers and tourists of all faiths*”. In reality, it is already unfeasible to respect the rights of Muslims if their mosque is open to adherents of other religions. Furthermore, this could potentially trigger an immediate religious conflict over al-Aqsa Mosque, which Christian Zionists eagerly anticipate. The deliberate choice of terms such as “*peaceful worship*” and “*in a manner that is completely respectful their religious beliefs and practices*” are emphasised to keep the al-Aqsa Mosque accessible to all people (White House, 2020, p.16), but this puts Muslims in a defensive position to protect their mosque, as was observed in Ramadan 2021, 2022 and 2023. They would subsequently be labelled as ‘violent’ worshippers and aggressors while defending their holy site from intruders. While tens of thousands of Muslims were in al-Aqsa Mosque during the month of Ramadan, armed occupation forces would evict them to make way for a handful of Jewish extremists. This pleases both the Temple groups and evangelical fanatics awaiting the apocalypse.

Throughout the entire 181-page document of the DoC the al-Aqsa Mosque site is neither recognised nor treated as a Mosque or a Masjid; instead, it is regarded as an esplanade or, as Israel prefers to call it, ‘public open spaces’. There is not a single line defending the indisputable rights of Muslims who have been dwelling and worshipping on this land for centuries, while it is biasedly defending the rights of Jews, who have failed to provide any historical or archaeological evidence to support the site was ever a synagogue or temple. Thus, alarm bells are ringing for these biased verdicts, and it paves the way for the Israeli authority to determine which side should be respected and who is engaging in peaceful worship. In this context, the Muslims who are banned from praying in al-Aqsa Mosque, especially the *murabits* (the steadfast guardians), are not considered ‘peaceful worshippers’ by Israeli forces and settlers. Israel has exercised, and now has, even more, unchecked power to keep Muslims, who are not deemed ‘peaceful’, by Israel's definition, out of the mosque site at any time.

With the current right-wing government and Itamar Ben Gvir serving as Minister of National Security, one of his first actions was to provocatively storm al-Aqsa Mosque on 3 January 2023 eliciting international condemnation for his intrusion. The Temple groups have realigned their strategy with the increasing support of the government and police. They have escalated their demands, and on the day Ben Gvir assumed office (1 January 2023), they submitted to the Israeli police commissioner a list of demands for numerous changes to their access to al-Aqsa Mosque and requested an audience with the minister. These demands were submitted through Aviad Fisoli, the attorney for the new Sanhedrin council, a key rabbinical institution of Temple settler groups supported by the Temple Institute and even evangelical groups. Their demands include, among other things, granting full freedom of worship to Jews to perform prayers and religious rituals inside the mosque, extending opening hours to include access on Friday, Saturday, and evenings, as well as unrestricted access to the mosque throughout Jewish holidays and not limiting access during Muslim holidays. They also demand the opening of all gates through which Jews can enter, besides the Maghariba Gate, ending police escorting Jews during incursions and allowing Jews to roam as they please, declaring the 'equal right' of all religions to Al-Aqsa, lifting the ban on bringing plant and animal offerings as well as sacred religious accoutrements, and allocating a site for a permanent synagogue inside the mosque (Jundi, 2023; Shragai, 2023).

In this regard, besides the temporal division, the DoC lays the groundwork for spatial division, similar to the division of the Ibrahim Mosque in Hebron, wherein the eastern part of al-Aqsa Mosque could be reserved exclusively for Jews. The Israeli authorities have been pushing for a ban on Muslims visiting Bab al-Rahma, which was opened by Muslim worshippers by force in September 2019 after it had been shut for over a decade. As the number of Jewish intruders has increased, and as some have started performing full prostrations as part of prayer procedures in that area, Israeli forces have detained and expelled an increasing number of local Muslims in an apparent attempt to cordon off the area. Moreover, an Israeli court determined the closure of the Bab al-Rahma building in July 2020 (El-Awaisi and Yavuz, 2020: 230). Numerous Israeli lawmakers have openly suggested the division of al-Aqsa Mosque in the past. More recently, Amit Halevi, an MK for the ruling Likud party, has introduced a draft bill proposing the division of Al-Aqsa Mosque, leaving Muslims with only 30% of the mosque, while also redefining al-Aqsa Mosque as a single building, in line with the DoC (Anadolu Agency, 2013; Yerushalmi, 2023). These developments have led to calls for a separate administration to be established to handle Jewish worship, as well as limitations of the Islamic Awaqf. All of these measures seem to align with the provisions outlined in the DoC, which states that "*People of every faith should be permitted to pray on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif*" and grants full Israeli control over al-Aqsa Mosque area (White House, 2020, p.16). Thus, the DoC sets

the preliminary steps necessary for the construction of a Jewish temple, consistent with the eschatological prophecies of evangelicals.<sup>14</sup>

### THE ENVISAGED JEWISH TEMPLE AND ARMAGEDDON

As projected by the DoC, the transformation of al-Aqsa Mosque into a multi-religious site open to non-Muslims will result in the site no longer being exclusively a mosque for Muslims in the foreseeable future. This will provide Zionists with the foundation for constructing their long-awaited 'Jewish Temple', to be followed by the Battle of Armageddon. Initially, it is worth noting that Christian Zionism has been a major factor in both Trump's announcement of the DoC and Israel's current position in Jerusalem (Sağlam, 2023). The importance of the Holy Land and the site of al-Aqsa Mosque in terms of Christian Zionism has been discussed previously; accordingly, considering the significance of the site of al-Aqsa Mosque within the Holy Land for evangelicals, the 45<sup>th</sup> US president Trump issued the DoC not only in accordance with political interests, but also with religious concerns, serving Christian Zionism. The DoC is a serious step towards the fulfilment of prophecies that Christian Zionism expects to occur in the imminent future. Since the rise of premillennial dispensationalism in the early nineteenth century, the belief in the imminent rebuilding of a 'Jewish Temple' has gradually grown in popularity, and now 'the Temple Mount' is at the centre of the controversy regarding the Jewish claim to exclusive sovereignty over the Old City of Jerusalem (Sizer, 2006: 174). Today, many Christian Zionists, namely evangelicals, actively support the establishment of the 'Jewish Temple' due to their belief in its imminent rebuilding and the reinstatement of animal sacrifices in a millennial temple. Thomas Ice, Randall Price, Grant Jeffrey, Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, Dave Hunt, and Grace Halsell (who estimates that 10% of Americans back this movement) are just a few of the modern Christian Zionists whose works discuss the reconstruction of the 'Jewish Temple'; their combined book sales exceed \$100 million, and their works can be found in more than fifty languages (Halsell as cited in Sizer, 2006: 171).

In the eyes of Christian Zionists, the establishment of 'Israel' in Palestine is a fulfilment of a crucial prophecy that has been latent for ages, thus reviving faith in the Second Coming of Christ. Accordingly, many Christians and Jewish Zionists believe that to fulfil biblical prophecy and hasten the arrival of the Messiah, the Muslim al-Aqsa Mosque, with its Dome of the Rock, must be demolished, the temple erected, priests consecrated, and sacrifices reinstated. Christian Zionists are raising money to build this 'temple', in alliance with the 'Temple Institute' and the Israeli establishment, and are also sponsoring excavations in the Old City and in Silwan, which they call the City of David. Recently, evangelical Christian farmers in Texas even donated five red heifers, needed for the building of the temple.<sup>15</sup> From the perspective of futuristic literal hermeneutics, the construction of the 'temple' is not an end in itself but a significant step towards the fulfilment of prophecies immediately before Christ's Second Coming. The ultimate aim is to defeat the evil ones, namely Muslims, in the grand scheme of things. According to

their theology, building the ‘temple’ will pave the way for the return of Jesus and the Battle of Armageddon in the final phase. All of these fit their theology regarding al-Aqsa Mosque, which they consider to be the site of the ‘Jewish Temple’, and which lies at the heart of the prophecies to be fulfilled. Since the occupation of al-Aqsa Mosque in 1967, evangelical voices have revitalised the reawakening of the prophecies starting with the building of a ‘Jewish Temple’ on the site of al-Aqsa Mosque, as they see the destruction of al-Aqsa Mosque as the starting point leading to the aspirations of Evangelism (Durbin, 2020).

Additionally, the capture of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the defeat of five Arab states were interpreted as a manifestation of God’s intervention in human affairs and a sign that the apocalypse was imminent (Armstutz, 2016: 123-124). When the Israeli forces took control of the eastern side of the city including the site of al-Aqsa Mosque, Herbert W. Armstrong, an American evangelist and founder of the Worldwide Church of God, re-shared a prophecy in the editorial of his magazine indicating that the Temple would be built within four and a half years.<sup>16</sup> This incited Dennis Michael Rohan, an Australian Christian Zionist, to set fire to al-Aqsa Mosque in 1969 to hasten the fulfilment of this prophecy (Amal, 2021).<sup>17</sup> Israel sought to prevent Muslims from extinguishing the fire by cutting off water supplies and not allowing fire engines to reach the site. While the occupation authorities were complicit in various ways, they distanced themselves, as did Armstrong and his church, from Rohan and his actions (Gerringer, 1975). Evangelicals advocated the idea of forcing ‘God’s Hand’ by destroying the mosque to achieve their prophecies. During the ongoing process, the situation has evolved to a stage where Christian Zionists have been providing financial support to biblical archaeology. Herbert W. Armstrong himself participated in digs alongside Israeli archaeologist Benjamin Mazar in a 50/50 joint venture with his institution (Nagtegaal, 2022). Christian Zionists preach their beliefs using religious justifications, such as the need to financially and politically back the ‘state of Israel’, as manifested in the ongoing, unconditional US support and as envisaged in Trump’s Deal of the Century.

Biblical prophecy, according to Christian Zionists, predicts a time of tribulation, the secret rapture of the saints, and the rebuilding of the ‘Jewish Temple’ on the site of al-Aqsa Mosque, all of which will lead to the war of Armageddon, in which many Jews will be killed or massacred. After this, Jesus will return and rule from Jerusalem for a thousand years (Sizer, 2006: 184). Thus, the construction of the ‘Temple’ is crucial in the chronology of predictions, alongside the rapture, the tribulation, Armageddon, the Second Coming, and the Day of Judgment. Hal Lindsey, regarded as the ‘Father of the Modern-Day Bible Prophecy Movement’, states clearly that:

There is one major problem barring the construction of a third Temple. That obstacle is the second holiest place of the Muslim faith, the Dome of the Rock. This is believed to be built squarely in the middle of the old temple site. Obstacle or no obstacle, it is certain that the Temple will be rebuilt. Prophecy demands it...



the most important sign of Jesus Christ's soon coming is before us... It is like the key piece of a jigsaw puzzle being found (Sizer, 2006).<sup>18</sup>

Accordingly, evangelicals envision a 'temple' extending over the current area of al-Aqsa Mosque and the reopening of the sealed Gate of Rahma, Golden Gate, through which they believe Jesus Christ will enter.<sup>19</sup> The Gate of Rahma is thus a focal point of conflict in Islamic Jerusalem due to Muslim ownership of a site that Jews and Christian Zionists believe should be accessible to them to clear the path for the arrival of the respective Messiah. In light of the possibility of a spatial division occurring at al-Aqsa Mosque, as suggested by the DoC, the location of the Gate of Rahma may be one of the reasons why the seizure of the eastern part of the mosque will be a priority for Jewish and Christian Zionists in this context. Therefore, in terms of the Evangelical vision and in alignment with their plans for the fulfilment of the prophecies, one of the most significant hurdles delaying the construction of the 'Jewish Temple' is the existence of al-Aqsa Mosque, despite numerous plans and attempts to demolish it over the past century.

The alliance between Christian evangelicals and Jews is in reality is a temporary one and is predestined to end once the Jews have fulfilled their role. Lindsey argues for the inevitability of a war over al-Aqsa site; he states that prophecy demands *"that the Jews rebuild the Temple for the third time upon its original site. At that point, Judaism and Islam will be placed on an inevitable course of war over the site, a war that will start Armageddon... any move toward that direction is a crucial clue to what hour it is on God's prophetic timetable"* (Sizer, 2006). Additionally, David Brickner, the International Director of Jews for Jesus, argues that the rebuilding of the 'Temple' will be directly linked with the deaths of most Israelis, based on his literal interpretation of the Bible; *"a full two-thirds of the population of Israel will perish in the ensuing conflict.. The hope of the Jewish people in seeing the glorious Temple rebuilt will, in fact, lead to their greatest calamity and suffering"* (Sizer, 2006). Christian Zionist enthusiasm for building a 'Jewish Temple' over the site of al-Aqsa Mosque is part of a broader projection of the future they envisage, where Jews only play a role in its fulfilment and will eventually be wiped out.

According to dispensationalists, this will be followed by two stages leading to Christ's inevitable return; firstly, 'the rapture of the saints' through removal of Christians from the earth to meet Christ in the air, and the second phase, the rise of the Antichrist with evil prevailing and unbelievers, including the Jews now restored to 'Israel', will suffer for seven years during the tribulation (Sizer, 2006: 192). The coming of Christ will annihilate Satan's rule over the world, Christians will be raptured safely to heaven just before Armageddon begins, whereas Jews will face an imminent holocaust and Israel will be the 'Fuse of Armageddon' (Lindsey as cited in Sizer, 2006: 192). In fact, as seen from the DoC, after the privileges granted to 'Israel' in accordance with this alliance, dispensationalists engage in anti-Jewish (anti-Semitic) rhetoric when it comes to the prophecy of the Battle of Armageddon. William Blackstone (d.1935), an American evangelist and

Christian Zionist, is explicit about the suffering of the Jewish people during the Tribulation in his book, *Jesus is Coming*, and asserts:

Surely Israel shall be restored; but there is an awful time of trouble awaiting her. Israel's sins are mountain high. The guilt of innocent blood is on the Israelite's – the precious blood of Jesus Christ... It is probable that 'the times of the Gentiles' are nearing their end, and that the nations are soon to plunge into the mighty whirl of events connected with Israel's godless gathering (Blackstone, 1989: 173, 244).

By this projection, it is clear that although Christian Zionists appear to be the main supporters of Jews in realising their aspirations, their primary goal is merely to fulfil their religious responsibilities towards their own prophecies. Furthermore, Christian Zionists believe that Jews deserve this catastrophic end because they are responsible for innocent blood including that of Jesus Christ. So, as it is embodied by the statements of Blackstone, while the Christian Zionist idea evaluates 'Zionism' as a sign for the apocalyptic prophecies, it is not welcomed or associated with; it merely serves as a stepping stone for Evangelical aspirations. Modern dispensationalists share a similar view, predicting that the Jewish people will be among those most negatively affected by the events leading up to the 'Battle of Armageddon' and the Tribulation in 'Israel'. Another Christian Zionist, Charles Ryrie (d. 2016), claims that this is the time of Israel's greatest bloodbath, while John Walvoord (d. 2002) predicts a holocaust in which at least 750 million people will perish, and Tim LaHaye (d. 2016) warns that the trouble that is coming to Jacob, as foretold in Jeremiah 30:7, will be far worse than the Spanish Inquisition or the Holocaust of Adolf Hitler (Sizer, 2006: 194). Therefore, it would be appropriate to say that the Christian Zionists believe that they will definitely be saved by Christ and that they will witness these great massacres from the heavens. It is claimed that only a small number of Jews who convert to Christianity during the Tribulation will survive to see Christ return and be saved, but the truth is that two-thirds of the Jewish people will be slaughtered in a catastrophe, akin to the Holocaust, before Christ can save a small group of them (Sizer, 2006: 203). Despite the belief that Jews will become pawns in the salvation of Christians and will perish, Christian Zionism essentially does not consider Jews valuable and considers them only a commandment of God and a necessity for the fulfilment of their prophecies; it is Jews again that will have an important place, following Armageddon, in God's judgement. Christian Zionists have keen insight on this matter, and Brickner's warning that those who resist Christ, the Antichrist, and Israel will be judged horribly and sent into the abyss serves as a good example of their ideas (Brickner as cited in Sizer, 2006: 201).

As a result, the 'state of Israel' is sacralised in a way that makes it clear why Christian Zionists insist on giving Israel such privileges in US policy, as reflected in the DoC, which embodies the favour shown to 'Israel' from the past to the present. This is because they have an unshakeable belief in how people and nations approach Israel's territorial or religious claims, and whether they assisted or resisted Jewish immigration to Palestine will determine their eternal destiny.

Accordingly, Christian Zionism shows that Jews are given as much importance as believing in Jesus.<sup>20</sup> The Holy Land, in particular and the geography of the 'Middle East' in general, is the gateway to the New World for evangelicals. The beliefs and prophecies attributed to the city of Jerusalem, which is the place where Jesus Christ will come on the way to the Battle of Armageddon, and where he will protect the Kingdom of God along with those who believe in him, have also manifested in a way in the DoC in terms of its objectives as a product of Christian-Jewish Zionist alliance. In this respect Evangelicalism, which also drives imperialism, has formed the basis of the policies of Trump's administration, which marked this period with many privileges granted to 'Israel', one of which the DoC has set as milestone of the American-Israeli alliance. According to its beliefs and prophecies, God entrusted the globe to the Israelites, but He promised an eternal reward to those who helped to build His reign on earth. Thus, the Christian Zionists, who have the most important share in the initiatives for the future of al-Aqsa Mosque, pushed to officially and legally hand over the sovereignty of both al-Aqsa Mosque and Jerusalem to the Jews, and the DoC is one of the most concrete and up-to-date representations of this approach.

As Jews have an important role in preparing an ideal environment for Christian Zionists regarding their beliefs on shared fate with Jews, especially in terms of expectations regarding the eschaton, Jesus' return, and the re-establishment of the kingdom of heaven (Kurtođlu, 2016: 64), it may be concluded that most of the US policies during Trump's administration to legitimise and to support Israeli existence by emphasising the ancestral and religious connections of Jews lay the groundwork for the 'Divine plan' and pave the way for the salvation of Christian Zionists. The fact that there is no emphasis on the eternal rights of any other nation or religion in the Holy Land other than 'Israel' and the Jews in Trump's policies and specifically in the text of the DoC also provides a basis for this conclusion. In consequence of the covenantal tradition, evangelicals assign important roles to Jews (Mead, 2008). Jerusalem must belong to the Jews, and in particular, the 'Jewish temple' should be built as soon as possible, in order to achieve salvation in the Great War, namely the Battle of Armageddon (Albayrak, 2019).

## CONCLUSION

The Western attitude towards the establishment of the Zionist state in Palestine has been kindled with religious euphoria from its outset. Christian Zionists have heralded Jewish Zionism by calling for Jews to be taken to Palestine, the establishment of a Jewish state and the building of a 'Jewish Temple', to hasten the Second Coming of Christ. The US's unequivocal support has been partly driven by this. Although American presidents has sided with 'Israel', and many vowed to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, this was only realised by Trump. His 'Deal of the Century' endeavoured to enforce a new reality for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, legitimising further annexation into the Occupied Territories and ending the status quo over Jerusalem and al-Aqsa Mosque. Despite being a flagrant

violation of international law, and in spite of Palestinian objections and international condemnation, Trump accomplished his pledges. The authorship of the text of the Deal was written with a clear bias that fulfils what 'Israel' and evangelicals aspire to in the short and medium terms. In the official pronouncement of the deal at the White House on 28th January 2020, both Trump and Netanyahu used rhetoric that appealed to the large evangelical leadership attending the event. The same was seen at the inauguration of the US Embassy in Jerusalem on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2018, where most of the key speakers were preachers and pastors from evangelical circles who emphasised the coming of the Messiah in their speeches. With Trump voted out of office, he boasted about how “No President has done more for Israel than I have”, while also expressing his discontent with Jewish Americans for not being supportive enough of his policies towards 'Israel' whilst in office. He openly disclosed, “Somewhat surprisingly, however, our wonderful Evangelicals are far more appreciative of this than the people of the Jewish faith, especially those living in the US” (Doğru, 2022). Both events and these recent statements clearly reveal the real driving force behind Trump’s policy in trying to please both Christian and Jewish Zionists. This is also evident in the pro-Israel team that drafted the DoC and Israel’s involvement in making changes to it before its publication.

Within this context it is not surprising that the deal is not just biased but presents the basis for the aspirations of both Jewish and Christian Zionists. Within the text of the DoC, the importance of the site of al-Aqsa Mosque is discussed with a comparative approach, starting with promoting the Jewish narrative while undermining the Muslim one. Even facts about the historical and religious connections of Muslims to Jerusalem are twisted in line with their spurious arguments. Therefore, it seems unlikely that the DoC, defined by the White House as a vision for 'peace and prosperity', would realise what it insinuates for the Holy Land, where many conflicts have taken root over the past century. The drafting of the DoC in such a way that it appeals to the realisation and aspirations of evangelical Christians suggests an eventual transformation of turning the site of al-Aqsa Mosque into a multi-religious tourist destination, with the looming outcome of obliterating the mosque from the site and giving 'Israel' the prospect to build their claimed 'Jewish Temple'. Consequently, it is evident that evangelicals continue to work to influence American politics in line with their views and literal interpretations of the Bible, as they have the backing of such a sizeable constituency and financial clout. This was clearly reflected in the appointments of Trump’s administration inner circle.

It is also concluded that Christian Zionists have interest-oriented relations with 'Israel' due to their partisan support for Israel’s apartheid regime, their obsessive Islamophobic views translated into hatred of Muslims worldwide as well as Palestinians in the Holy Land, and their eager anticipation of Armageddon. Accordingly, evangelicals attribute significant value to Jewish involvement in two key events important to their future vision: the building of the 'Jewish Temple'

over the site of al-Aqsa Mosque, and the start of a great war in the 'Middle East'. In this respect, the Christian Zionist perspective is also highly anti-Semitic in its beliefs, as the privileges granted to 'Israel' in the DoC ultimately end with the belief that Jews will perish in an inevitable war, with a catastrophic outcome greater than the Holocaust. While the majority of Jews will perish in the War of Armageddon, a small remainder will convert to Christianity; Muslims, who are viewed as adversaries, will be on the side of evil as 'friends of Satan' and will be vanquished and annihilated upon the return of Jesus to Earth. Therefore, whether intentionally or otherwise, based on the 'privileges' granted in the DoC, it can be seen that this legitimises the oppression of the Palestinians in the name of God, as well as the inevitable mass killing of Jews.

As evangelicals view Jews as pawns in their plots, they currently support Jewish interests and agendas, notably Jewish Zionism, wherever they have influence. As a result of their close ties to influential Jewish lobbies in the United States, they provide political and financial support for Israel's 'Middle East' policy. Hence, evangelicals view Islam and Muslims as the most obvious security threat and consider them the greatest obstacle to the fulfilment of evangelical prophecies. In other words, it is concluded that with their multi-billion-dollar budgets, propagandist preachers, and lobbying activities encouraging Western states to combat Muslims, whom Israel perceives as enemies, Christian Zionists constitute one of the most serious challenges facing the Holy Land through their encouragement to cleanse Jerusalem of Muslims and providing substantial financial and moral support for this purpose. However, when the tide turns, the outcome will not be a favourable for the Jews. In this context, the eschatological beliefs of Christian Zionists have had the power to influence the foreign policy of the United States. Theologically, Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of 'Israel', the inclusion of the Golan region within the borders of Israel, as well as statements and decisions in these respects, are directly influenced by Christian Zionism. Moreover, it is apt to say that the current administration in the US, led by Joe Biden, a steadfast supporter of 'Israel' for a long time, is maintaining the situation as it is with regard to 'Israel' and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This includes upholding some Trump-era decisions, like recognising Israeli sovereignty over the Golan. President Joe Biden, a self-described Zionist, is frequently quoted as saying that "if there was no Israel, the United States would have to establish one". The current US stance is still more akin to what it was under Trump than to attitudes under Barack Obama, according to rights groups who claim the Democratic president has so far failed to fulfil his modest pledges to the Palestinians. In a sense, in the post-Trump period under Biden's administration, the US has treated Jerusalem as Israel's capital while using imprecise language to indicate its position on Eastern Jerusalem.

In summary, it would not be an exaggeration to state that we are faced with a high-level Machiavellian movement that will not end until Jesus Christ returns, and which is willing to risk the annihilation of a substantial portion of humankind,

including Jews, through possible nuclear wars in order to achieve its ultimate aims. In this respect, the DoC, which undermines the importance of Jerusalem and especially al-Aqsa Mosque for Muslims, aims to grant certain dominance to the Israeli government in the region in accordance with the Jewish-Christian Zionist alliance. This is being continued by the American government today in conjunction with a right-wing Israeli government, which is willing to push things to the limit over al-Aqsa Mosque. This has been clearly demonstrated in recent Ramadans and is likely to be further tested in the coming months. This, in turn, indicates that the validity of this alliance remains in terms of its objectives, not only for Jerusalem including the site of al-Aqsa Mosque but also for the region at large.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Today the wall known as al-Buraq Wall, commemorates Prophet Muhammad's miraculous nocturnal journey and is located on the western side of the al-Aqsa Mosque. As the Islamic narrative goes, before Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven at the conclusion of his Night Journey (*al-Isra*) from Makkah to al-Aqsa Mosque, the Prophet tied *al-Buraq* here. This remarkable occurrence is a clear reference to the role of al-Aqsa Mosque as a meeting place for humanity and God (Nor, 2006). This miraculous event, which doubles its importance of this region by Muslims, is also an indication of an undeniable connection between Makkah and Islamic Jerusalem, established by God, and this is also corroborated by the direction of the walls al-Aqsa Mosque towards the Ka'bah in Makkah (Al-Ratrout, 2013; El-Awaisi, 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> According to the Oslo conventions, the West Bank region belonging to the Palestinian State, whose independence will be registered over time, was divided into three areas: areas A, B and C. Area A was left to the full control of Palestinians, while area B was left to the Palestinian authority and Israeli security control, and area C, which corresponds to about 60% of the West Bank area, was left to Israeli control in its entirety. Originally, it was planned that these territories, which were formed in the 1993 Oslo Agreement, would be completely left under Palestinian control as a result of mutual fulfilment of obligations under the agreement, and a Palestinian state based on the West Bank and Gaza, which corresponds to about 22% of historical Palestine, would be created. It should be noted that the areas, mainly form the C zone in the Oslo Accords and occupied by Israel mainly after the June 1967 war, are important strategic areas for ensuring both the water needs and the safe food supply of Palestine (Yetim, 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> Kushner is rather clear on this in his memoirs, he states: "I included Brian in most of my meetings with Arab leaders not only because he was an astute policy adviser, but also because his presence reminded Arab nations that we were aligned on a key priority for them, and we expected them to engage constructively on our other priorities" (Kushner 2022, 222).
- <sup>4</sup> His team were all American Jewish Zionist, Avi Berkowitz, Jason Greenblatt, and Brian Hook.
- <sup>5</sup> "After two years of building trust in the region, I was encouraged that Arab leaders seemed ready to move forward with a new paradigm for the Middle East. If Israel's prime minister endorsed the plan following the elections in April, the Arabs and Israelis would be closer than ever on several key issues, including the path to a Palestinian state and **access to the al-Aqsa Mosque. This would shake up the status quo and put in motion our newly refined strategy to encourage the Palestinians to come to the table, while we pursued a parallel track of normalization between Israel and the Arab nations**" (Kushner, 2022, 224).
- <sup>6</sup> The way the term al-Aqsa Mosque was used reduces it to a singular building within the mosque's compound, which constitutes only a fraction (about 3%) of the mosque's area.
- <sup>7</sup> This was also the position of earlier Jewish religious authorities such as Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, the chief rabbi of the Orthodox community of Jerusalem during the Buraq revolt. He issued a statement published in the Palestine Bulletin on 29 November 1929 which stated: "The Jewish People do not, under any consideration, desire to lay hand on that which is not theirs and much less to touch any of the rights of the rest of the inhabitants to the places they have been holding and towards which they have been cherishing respect and holiness. There is, particularly, no foundation whatsoever to the rumour that the Jews wish to acquire the "Har Habaith" (Mosque of Omar site [i.e. al-Aqsa Mosque]). On the contrary, since, by reason of our sins, we were exiled from our land, our Temple was destroyed and we are without the means of purification set out by our Torah, it is forbidden to any Jewish person to put his foot on the site of the Har Habaith (Mosque of Omar site), until the arrival of the righteous Messiah, who, by the spirit of the Lord, will righteously reign for the welfare of entire humanity and who will give us back the means of purification prescribed for in our Torah" (Sonnenfeld, 1929, 3).
- <sup>8</sup> Jordan's Awqaf allowed non-Muslim tourists access to the site after buying a ticket, through the Maghariba Gate until the year 2000, there were exceptions to this, for more see al-Jubeh (2010).
- <sup>9</sup> What was confiscated from al-Aqsa on its western side, was immediately turned into Jewish spaces, both of which are Islamic Waqf property.
- <sup>10</sup> Excavation under the mosque that started in 1968 reached in 1981 Sabil Qaytbay close to the Dome of the Rock, and was threatening the foundations of the mosque.
- <sup>11</sup> The opening of the tunnel in 1996, caused an uprising amongst Palestinians, tens of whom were killed.
- <sup>12</sup> As the Awqaf had done in 1996 and 1997 in reopening the Marwani Musalla and Aqsa al-Qadim.

- <sup>13</sup> For example, on the Eid al-Adha (9<sup>th</sup> August, 2019), one of the special holidays for Muslims, fanatical Jews had requested permission from the police to have access to the al-Aqsa Mosque as it coincided with their Tisha B'Av mourning and fasting day, which corresponds to the first day of the eve and Eid al-Adha. Then, more than 250 fanatical Jews stormed the al-Aqsa Mosque under occupation police protection. On the other hand, a joint statement from the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, the Palestinian Supreme Fatwa Council, and the Islamic Awqaf, Affairs and Holy Sites Council, called on the Palestinian people "to stand guard at al-Aqsa Mosque against possible raids by fanatical Jews". In the statement, it was emphasised that all other mosques in Jerusalem will be closed in order to perform Eid prayers only at al-Aqsa Mosque, and all the plans that Israel was trying to implement through incursion organised by fanatical Jews were disclosed (Firat, 2019).
- <sup>14</sup> While the majority of Jews believe that the temple will only be built through divine intervention and will ascend from the heavens.
- <sup>15</sup> According to Jewish tradition for a Jew to become ritually pure, the ashes of a heifer red in colour and unblemished are the two requirements for sacrifice according to Numbers 19 (Jones, 2022).
- <sup>16</sup> On 1 May 1967, Armstrong gave a speech in England in which he stated "There will be a Jewish Temple built in Jerusalem, with animal sacrifices once again being offered, probably within about four-and-one-half years. It is going to take some time to build such a Temple... So once again before the second coming of Christ, a vile leader will stop the daily sacrifices being offered in the Temple (yet to be built) in Jerusalem, and will profane the Holy Place with an idol... So there will be a Temple built on the spot of the old Temple in Jerusalem. The Jews will again be offering the daily sacrifices... "So putting all these prophecies together, it is plain the Israelis must soon flood over the 'no-man's land' of the divided city of Jerusalem, and take at least the territory where the ancient Temple stood, and then start to build a Temple." He reiterated this in his magazine after the occupation of Jerusalem in 1967 in which he wrote: "But be sure time is shorter than you supposed! Momentous prophecies are due for fulfillment, very rapidly, from now on! ... I will just say, now, that from those prophecies, it is possible that the taking away of the daily sacrifice in the Temple - the placing of the "abomination" there also - could take place early in 1972. This is indicated by Revelation 12: 14 (another three-and-one half-year period), by Rev. 3:10; and other facts of history and prophecy connected with Matthew 24: 14 - as well as other prophecies in Daniel.". (Armstrong, 1967, 1-5).
- <sup>17</sup> According to Michael Rohan's later confessions, "after reading that article, he felt that he was sent by God and that he acted according to divine commands in line with the Book of Remembrance, so he tried to destroy al-Aqsa Mosque so that the Jews could rebuild the Temple and thus speed up the coming of the Messiah the Savior who will rule the world for 1,000 years." (Amal, 2021).
- <sup>18</sup> Although Lindsey altered their views on the site of the temple, claiming it can be built alongside the Dome of the Rock, however, most orthodox Jews, remain convinced before the Temple can be rebuilt the Dome of the Rock has to be removed (Sizer, 2006).
- <sup>19</sup> Al-Rahma Gate or the Golden Gate is one of the two sealed gates located on the eastern walls of al-Aqsa Mosque and it is believed that from this gate Jesus will enter and according to a Jewish tradition, the Messiah will enter through this gate. Christians associate it with Emperor Heraclius who is said when taking the city back from the Persians entered from this gate with the Holy Cross following the path Jesus followed before he was crucified. However, archaeologists have preferred the opinion that the gate was constructed during the reign of the Umayyads. The gate was closed in the Abbasid or Fatimid period and during the crusade it use to be opened twice; on Palm Sunday and the Feast of the Cross. The gate was ultimately sealed shut with stones in the Ottoman period (Jallad, 2017). In 614, the Persians conquered Jerusalem and the Holy Cross, on which Christians believe Jesus was crucified, captured and taken to Persia. Fifteen years later, Emperor Heraclius led the Byzantine army to victory over the Persians, recapturing the cross. Heraclius, as depicted in innumerable Christian icons, returned the cross to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. According to Christian tradition, this gate was built in line with the Holy Sepulchre by the Emperor Heraclius during the Byzantine era in the course of the returning of the stolen Holy Cross. It is actually disputed whether this gate was built by Heraclius, before the Umayyad era (Hasson, 2019).
- <sup>20</sup> This was the initial premise of British institutions established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the idea of converting Jews to Christianity and taking them to Palestine, such as the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1799 and the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews or the London Jews Society (LJS) in 1809. For more El-Awaisi & Yiğit (2020).