

Islamic Jerusalem A New Concept and Definitions

Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi

Al-Maktoum Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies

As an essential part of introducing Islamic Jerusalem, it is important to be clear on what we mean by this new terminology or at least we need to establish a working definition for it. To help the reader appreciate how difficult it was to arrive at a definition, a number of questions need to be raised. Is Islamic Jerusalem the same as Jerusalem as a city? What sort of Jerusalem are we talking about? Is it simply the area of Al-Aqsa Mosque? (This is only 1/5 of the Old Walled City.) is it the Old Walled city of Jerusalem, East Jerusalem, West Jerusalem, Greater Jerusalem, the whole of Palestine or part of Palestine? All these questions address the question from a contemporary context. However, in order to produce a definition it is important to link this with a historical context.

In addition to introducing new definitions of Islamic Jerusalem and Islamic Jerusalem Studies, the aim of this chapter is to discuss the background of the new field of inquiry of Islamic Jerusalem Studies.

Background¹

The establishment of the new field of inquiry of Islamic Jerusalem was a journey of nearly a decade, 1994-2003, which adopted the principal of gradual developments and travelled

through several stations. It also passed a number of stages on the road to its establishment through an integrated programme which included a number of new academic initiatives.

As part of his vision for the new field, the founder paid particular attention to establishing the concept of Islamic Jerusalem Studies through building its foundations. From the initial stages he was keen to provide practical steps to deliver the essential contributions of knowledge in the new field to the world of learning, and to encourage young researchers to specialise in this field. These have been delivered mainly through organising an annual international academic conference on Islamic Jerusalem Studies (seven to date), the Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies, and the securing of a good number of postgraduate research studentships in Islamic Jerusalem Studies. These elements were very significant steps towards creating the new frame of reference for the study of Islamic Jerusalem. Indeed, both the annual conference and the Journal have successfully “highlighted the gap in the available” literature on Islamic Jerusalem studies, provided the “necessary knowledge” to develop the field, and become an international discussion forum for scholars who are interested in the field².

In addition, other serious practical steps were needed to institutionalise the development, integration and promotion of the field. This was initiated through developing the first new unit entitled “Islamic Jerusalem”, which he taught at undergraduate level at the University of Stirling. This unit has been developed into a taught master programme at Al-Maktoum Institute. Indeed, to pioneer the field, Al-Maktoum Institute

embodied the founder's vision by inaugurating the first and unique taught master programme in Islamic Jerusalem Studies worldwide. Following the establishment of Al-Maktoum Institute, was the creation of its first academic post, the first chair in Islamic Jerusalem Studies. The Centre of Islamic Jerusalem Studies was founded to focus all its efforts, and to play a key role in developing the new field. This was a natural progressive development aimed at structuring the research and teaching of Islamic Jerusalem Studies.

Shaikh Hamdan Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum's passion and commitment ensured the development of the new field. When the field was in its initial and crucial stage of development, Shaikh Hamdan played an essential part by providing scholarships for young scholars to pursue Islamic Jerusalem studies at postgraduate level. His second major involvement was to promote the development of the new field by establishing Al-Maktoum Institute. Aisha al-Ahlas argued that the "main reason behind the success" of establishing the new field of inquiry of Islamic Jerusalem Studies was related to the "uniquely close relationship between the two elements, knowledge and power"³. This formal model of relationship between ruler and scholar is absent in the Arab and Muslim countries. Indeed, as stated in the *Dundee Declaration for the Future Development of the Study of Islam and Muslims* on 18 March 2004, one of "the crises in the contemporary Muslim world is the absence of cooperation between knowledge and power".

Definitions

In the first few years of establishing the new field, a number of Arab scholars were very concerned about this new terminology, especially the word “Islamic”. Their main worry was that the use of this word could open up hostility and non-acceptance by some Western scholars. At that time, the author’s main counter-argument was that, without the term Islamic, the whole terminology would lose its niche, meaning and definition. In addition, if it were to be only Jerusalem without the term Islamic, which Jerusalem would we be talking about? In addition, there were already many research and teaching programmes in Jerusalem Studies which meant that our contribution to knowledge would be very limited. However, Islamic Jerusalem opened up a new area of specialisation in Jerusalem Studies with a new frame of reference. Probably the term Islamic could be the right term to shock, cover new ground, and promote serious dialogue and initiate debates that will shed light on new lines of explanation.

After the initial research on Umar’s Assurance of Safety to the people of Aelia, the author started from 2000 to develop all his new findings. This helped in 2004 to define both Islamic Jerusalem and Islamic Jerusalem Studies. Indeed, Umar’s Assurance was the jewel of the first Muslim conquest of Aelia, and the beacon for developing Islamic Jerusalem’s unique and creative vision and nature.

I Islamicjerusalem

Aisha al-Ahlab argued that the fifth international academic conference on Islamic Jerusalem Studies held on 21 April 2003 was “a turning point” in the history of the new field of inquiry of Islamic Jerusalem Studies⁴. Although he was the one who in 1994 invented this new terminology of Islamic Jerusalem, the author was very confused when he was trying, especially in the last five years (2000 – 2005), to come to an understanding of what he meant by Islamic Jerusalem.

On 21 April 2003 in the fifth international academic conference on Islamic Jerusalem “Islamic Jerusalem: Prophetic Temples and al-Aqsa Mosque Demystifying Realities and Exploring Identities”, he presented the keynote speech on “Exploring the identity of Islamic Jerusalem”, when he admitted this confusion publicly and said that “it took me nearly three years to come to the working definition which I would like to present to you today”. He added that “we need to start with a working definition. So, what do we mean by Islamic Jerusalem? ...”.

Although he did not present at that time, his final definition of Islamicjerusalem it contained the key elements of Islamic Jerusalem, “There are three elements of this working definition. Its geographical location (land), its people (i.e.: who lives or used to live there) and its vision to control or to rule that land and its people. It is not possible to separate these three elements as they are interlinked. In addition, they are linked with their historical context”. (For the author, if geography is the

theatre, history is the play.) For the first time, he argued that Islamic Jerusalem is not a mere city or another urban settlement, but a region which includes several cities, towns and villages. So, one can see from this definition that Islamic Jerusalem is to be described as a region with three key interlinked elements. Identifying the centre of the *Barakah* led him to develop a new significant innovative theory, “the *Barakah* Circle Theory of Islamic Jerusalem”. It is based on new interpretations of the core Muslim sources and history. He also made the same point when he presented his public lecture at the Academy of Islamic Studies at the University of Malaya on 24 September 2004. However, what is presented here is the revised definition which takes into consideration the discussions he has had since then, and the new definition of Islamic Jerusalem Studies.

Islamic Jerusalem is a new terminology for a new concept, which may be translated into the Arabic language as *Bayt al-Maqdis*. It can be fairly eventually characterised and defined as a unique region laden with a rich historical background, religious significances, cultural attachments, competing political and religious claims, international interests and various aspects that affect the rest of the world in both historical and contemporary contexts. It has a central frame of reference and a vital nature with three principal intertwined elements: its geographical location (land and boundaries), its people (population), and its unique and creative inclusive vision, to administrate that land and its people, as a model for multiculturalism⁵.

The term *Bayt al-Maqdis* has been used in the past in both core and early Muslim narratives and sources to refer to Aelia region.⁶ It may be claimed that Prophet Muhammad was the first to use the term *Bayt al-Maqdis* to refer to the Aelia region. Indeed he used both terms, Aelia and *Bayt al-Maqdis*, in many of his traditions. However, one can argue that the Arabs before the advent of Islam may also have used the same term to refer to the same region. Although the Prophet used *Bayt al-Maqdis*, the author cannot be certain who was the first to use it⁷.

The word for word translation of the Arabic term *Bayt al-Maqdis* could be the Holy House. This might be understood from a theological point of view, but it would definitely be difficult to understand from historical and geographical contexts. In addition, the use of the term *Bayt al-Maqdis* does not represent the definition which has been presented in this section. This is especially true after it became very obvious that Islamicjerusalem is a new concept which carries historical, geographical, religious, cultural, political backgrounds. In addition, it is also not only al-Aqsa Mosque nor the Walled City of Jerusalem, as some out-dated arguments might suggest. Indeed, it is not a city or another urban settlement, but a region which includes several villages, towns, and cities which have an inclusive multicultural vision.

However, the terminology Islamicjerusalem was a new concept which appeared and was used in its comprehensive sense for the first time originally in the English language by this author, as has been documented, characterised and defined in this chapter. It should be noted that Islamicjerusalem is one

word and not two separate words, Islamic and Jerusalem. It should be made clear also that Islamicjerusalem is different from Muslim Jerusalem as in Jewish Jerusalem and Christian Jerusalem. The historical period when the Muslims ruled Islamicjerusalem for several centuries should be called Muslim Jerusalem and not Islamicjerusalem. Islamicjerusalem is a new concept but Muslim Jerusalem refers to the periods when Muslims ruled Islamicjerusalem. To illustrate this point, Umar Ibn al-Khattab's conquest of the region is the first Muslim conquest of Islamicjerusalem. Indeed, this should also apply to the later Muslim period up to 1917 and to any Muslim rule of Islamicjerusalem in the future. In addition, contemporary Muslim Jerusalem is shaped in part by dialogue with the concept of Islamicjerusalem, the classical and modern history of Muslims, and in part by response to external interests and influences in the region. Accordingly, contemporary Muslims seek to relate their heritage in Muslim Jerusalem from the concept of Islamicjerusalem and Muslim past to the radical situation of today.

It is worth mentioning that, since its launch in the winter of 1997, the Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies has also carried the Arabic term *Al-Quds al-Islamiyyah* or Islamic Quds. However, the author's new findings on Umar's Assurance of Safety to the people of Aelia led to a change in the use of that Arabic term. The change of the Arabic title of the Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies from *Al-Quds al-Islamiyyah* to Bayt al-Maqdis occurred in the summer 2000 issue. This was the same issue of the

Journal which published the author's article on Umar's Assurance in both the English and Arabic languages.

The last part of the definition has been partly borrowed from the political science theory of the three elements of any state, but replaces the concept of sovereignty with the vision of inclusivity and plurality of Islamicjerusalem. Indeed, this unique creative vision of Islamicjerusalem is more important than the issue of sovereignty in the case of Islamicjerusalem. It could be argued that the final product is normally the issue of sovereignty. However, the agenda for Islamicjerusalem should not be the desire to achieve colonial goals of ruling lands and people which could be based either on economic ambitions or on racist nationalist and theological claims or any other interests and claims. If there is no vision or a vision of exclusivity in Islamicjerusalem, the sovereignty will naturally lead internally to oppression, divisions in society and its communities; and externally to the involvement of external powers to try to resolve these internal troubles and problems, which will lead to instability and barriers to the steady progress and prosperity of the region. Indeed, the unique aspect of Islamicjerusalem is highlighted through its vision, which presents a model for peaceful co-existence, and a way for people from different religious and cultural backgrounds to live together in an environment of multiculturalism and religious and cultural engagement, diversity and tolerance.

This understanding of Islamicjerusalem as a Model for Multiculturalism was presented by the author, for the first time, in his public lecture on "Islamicjerusalem as a Model for

Multiculturalism” at the Academy of Islamic Studies at the University of Malaya on 24 September 2004. It was based on the findings of his research on Umar’s Assurance in 2000. However, what is presented in this book is the revised presentation which takes into consideration the discussions he has had since then, especially in his revised version of Umar’s Assurance in this book, and the new definitions of Islamicjerusalem and Islamicjerusalem Studies.

II Islamicjerusalem Studies

The sixth international academic conference on Islamic Jerusalem Studies organised on 31 May 2004 celebrated the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the new field of inquiry of Islamic Jerusalem Studies. This was another significant event in the history of the new field. Indeed, in his keynote speech, the founder presented for the first time his definition of Islamic Jerusalem Studies. However, what is present here is the revised definition which took into consideration the discussions he had since and the new definition of Islamicjerusalem.

Islamicjerusalem Studies can be fairly eventually characterised and defined as a new branch of human knowledge based on interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. It aims to investigate all matters related to the Islamicjerusalem region, explore and examine its various aspects, and to provide a critical analytic understanding of the new frame of reference, in order to identify the nature of Islamicjerusalem and to understand the uniqueness of this region and its effects on the rest of the world in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Indeed, Islamicjerusalem Studies is a field of inquiry which covers several disciplines, such as the study of Islam and Muslims, history and archaeology, art and architecture, geography and geology, environment and politics, and other related disciplines. Accordingly, it has interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches which include historical and theological, theoretical and conceptual, empirical and cultural approaches. However, the aim of this new field is to escape the trap of reacting to others by creating debates which will lead to more constructive dialogue between scholars in several disciplines.

The new field will not only provide an understanding but will examine the new frame of reference within which Muslims approach Islamicjerusalem. Several questions will be the key to addressing this point: What are the reasons for Muslims having close links to and concern with Islamicjerusalem? What is the significance of Islamicjerusalem to Islam and to Muslims? Does Islamicjerusalem have any special status compared with any other region? In-depth discussion of the various aspects and dimensions of Islamicjerusalem will indeed open up new horizons for those interested in understanding its nature and the reasons for its distinctness from other regions.

This new field could be argued as consolidating the Qur'anic, Hadiths and Muslim historical disciplines by shedding light on new lines of explanation. Numerous verses revealed about Islamicjerusalem in the Qur'an, and about the frequency with which the Prophet spoke about it⁸, leads one to argue that the new field has revealed greater insights into several

disciplines such as the interpretation of the Qur'an and the Hadiths. In addition, it has clarified several contradicting historical events and resolved a number of problematic historical issues.

Finally, one could argue that a definition should be short, precise and to the point; yet these definitions of Islamicjerusalem are very long. However, what has been provided for the first time is a scholarly presentation of what “could be fairly eventually characterised and defined” of Islamicjerusalem and its field. So it is not only the definition of Islamicjerusalem and its field but also the characteristics of these definitions. In addition, these definitions which appear for the first time in this format try to shock, confuse, and throw doubts on some of what has been taken for granted in the past by a variety of scholars representing various schools of thought, trends, and approaches. It also aims to raise questions and provide researchers and scholars in the field with the key aspects of Islamicjerusalem.

Although these definitions are the author's most important contributions to the field, they should be considered as working definitions to set the scene for the field's future development. This could at a later stage lead to the development of the field into “precisely concisely” definitions. One can argue that these “fairly eventually” definitions are needed at this stage of the development of the field. However, these by no means claim to be theological or divinity *Ilahiat* definitions which cannot be changed or developed, as some Muslim traditionalist theologians would claim. They are, as in the case of

Islamicjerusalem Studies, characterised and defined as, a new “branch of human knowledge”: Indeed, there are human explanations and interpretations of new concepts and terminology which are subject to change and development based on the latest scholarly research in the field.

Latest Research on Islamicjerusalem Studies

Al-Maktoum Institute has developed unique teaching programmes based on current and progressive research which take into consideration the needs and preferences of our local, national and international students, so that they can appreciate and understand the various schools of thought within a specific line of study. This has produced mass waves of postgraduate students with the first master’s degree in Islamicjerusalem Studies⁹, students who hopefully now have a thorough grounding in the new field.

In addition, the Institute has trained qualified students and created a team of young scholars in a variety of disciplines in Islamicjerusalem Studies and conducting high-quality research either at taught master or PhD levels. For example, the following list contains some of the latest research on Islamicjerusalem Studies:

1. Othman Ismael al-Tel wrote his PhD thesis (2002) on *The first Islamic conquest of Aelia (Islamic Jerusalem): A critical analytical study of the early Islamic historical narrations and sources.*

2. Haithem Fathi Al-Ratrout wrote his PhD thesis (2002) on *the Architectural development of Al-Aqsa Mosque in Islamic Jerusalem in the early Islamic period: Sacred architecture in the shape of the "Holy"*.
3. Maher Younes Abu- Munshar wrote his PhD thesis (2003) on *A Historical Study of Muslim Treatment of Christians in Islamic Jerusalem at the Time of Umar Ibn al-Khattab and Salah al-Din with Special Reference to Islamic Values of Justice*.
4. Mohammad Roslan Mohammad Nor, is writing his PhD thesis on *The Significance of Islamic Jerusalem in Islam: Quranic and Hadith Perspectives*.
5. Aminurraasyid Yatiban wrote his Master's dissertation (2003) on *The Islamic Concept of Sovereignty: Islamic Jerusalem during the First Islamic Conquest as a Case Study*". He is now writing his PhD thesis on *Muslim Concept of Sovereignty: An Analytical Study of Islamic Jerusalem in the Early Muslim Period (622 – 1258 CE)*.
6. Khalid Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi wrote his Master's dissertation (2003) on *Geographical Boundaries of Islamic Jerusalem*. He is now writing his PhD thesis on *Islamic Jerusalem – An Analytical Study of its Boundaries*.
7. Raja Hisyamudin B. Raja Sulong wrote his Master's dissertation (2003) on *The Development of Islamic Jerusalem under the Mamluks Sultanate with Special reference to the Urbanization and Constructional Activities in the Walled City*. He is now writing his PhD thesis on *The Cultural and Educational Developments of Islamic*

Jerusalem; a Comparative Study between the Ayyubids Period and the Mamluks Period.

8. Ra'ed Jabaren, is writing his PhD thesis on *Islamic Jerusalem: Juristically perspective.*
9. Fatimatuzzahra' Abd Rahman wrote her Master's dissertation (2004) on *Political, Social and Religious Changes in Islamic Jerusalem from the First Islamic Conquest until the end of Umayyad period (637 to 750CE): An Analytical Study.* She is now writing her PhD thesis on *The Muslim Concept of Change: An Analytical Study of the Political, Social and Economic Changes in Islamic Jerusalem from the First Muslim Conquest till the End of the Fatimid Period (637-1099 CE).*

In short, in the initial efforts, with determination and clear vision the new field of inquiry of Islamic Jerusalem studies was founded, together with interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. Indeed, the new field established a new frame of reference on Islamic Jerusalem. Through the establishment of the Academy, the founder planned that research and scholarship take place in building the foundation stones of his vision for the field. In addition, through taking practical steps, he institutionalised the development, integration and promotion of the new field within academia, especially within the British higher education establishments.

- 1 This background of the new field of inquiry of Islamic Jerusalem Studies was based on Aisha al-Ahlas (2004), *Islamic Research Academy: 1994-2004, background, activities and achievements, with special reference to the new field of inquiry of Islamic Jerusalem Studies (ISRA, Scotland)*.
- 2 Ibid, p. 35.
- 3 Ibid, p. 80.
- 4 Ibid, p. 32.
- 5 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, terminology means a “set of terms relating to a subject”; the term (s) means “a word or phrase used to describe a thing or to express an idea”; concept means “an abstract idea”; abstract means “having to do with ideas or qualities rather than physical or concrete things”; nature means “the typical qualities or character of a person, animal, or thing”; and vital means “absolutely necessary”. The author is very grateful to Sarah Hassan for collecting these definitions from the Oxford English Dictionary.
- 6 Othman Ismael Al-Tel (2003), *The first Islamic conquest of Aelia (Islamic Jerusalem): A critical analytical study of the early Islamic historical narrations and sources* (Al-Maktoum Institute Academic Press, Scotland), p. 291.
- 7 The use of this terminology *Bayt al-Maqdis* needs further research.
- 8 Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi (1998), “The significance of Jerusalem in Islam: an Islamic reference”, *Journal of Islamic Jerusalem Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2 (Summer 1998), p. 49.
- 9 The total number to date is fourteen. Among them, five have registered for their PhD degree in Islamic Jerusalem Studies. During this academic year, 2004/2005, eight more postgraduate students have begun the taught master in Islamic Jerusalem Studies.