

UNDER THE DOME.

Crowning Jerusalem's sacred mount, the Dome of the Rock is a place of both prayer and protest. Extensive restoration and archaeological research are uncovering fresh clues to the shrine's origins.

THE DOME OF THE ROCK—AN ARCHITECTURAL MASTERPIECE AND ISLAM'S THIRD HOLIEST SITE—IS REVEALING ITS SECRETS TO SCHOLARS GRANTED UNPRECEDENTED ACCESS.

BY ANDREW LAWLER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ZIYAH GAFIĆ

At the heart of the Dome of the Rock is a limestone outcrop revered by Muslims as the place from which Muhammad ascended on his mystical journey into heaven. One of the world's largest collections of Islamic mosaics covers some 13,000 square feet of the shrine's interior.



'ANY VIEWER'S TONGUE WILL GROW SHORTER TRYING TO DESCRIBE IT,'

marveled the inveterate traveler Ibn Battuta while visiting Jerusalem in 1326. "This is one of the most fantastic of all buildings, of the most perfect in architecture and strangest in shape."

For more than 13 centuries, the Dome of the Rock has been the jewel in the crown of Jerusalem's sacred acropolis, a sprawling area known to Jews and Christians as the Temple Mount and to Muslims as the Haram al Sharif—the Noble Sanctuary. As Islam's oldest building, the dome ranks with the neighboring Church of the Holy Sepulchre in spiritual importance and the Taj Mahal in grace. Simple geometry dressed in sumptuous materials gives this iconic structure a timeless appeal.

One chilly winter morning, the shrine slowly fills with women in long coats and hijabs. They sit on the plush red-and-gold carpet, alone in contemplation or in small groups to study the Quran. While men flock to the much larger Al Aqsa Mosque a hundred yards to the south, this tranquil space is mostly the domain of Muslim women and children.

Sireen Karim, a middle-age kindergarten teacher dressed in black, gestures at the mass of stone that dominates the center of the building.

"This is where Muhammad, peace be upon him, ascended to heaven to meet all the prophets, and where he came back with the message to pray five times a day," she says. "It also healed his sadness. And this is where we come to cure our grief and ease a troubled state of mind."

The sacred slab is the color of moon rock, its coarse and pitted surface contrasting sharply with the splendor

A mother and her daughters pray in the Well of Souls, a grotto beneath the venerated stone. Here, according to some, the spirits of the dead await the final judgment.



surrounding it. Two concentric rings of marble and porphyry columns and piers encircle it, supporting a dome laced with fantastically intricate shapes. The walls carry flowing Arabic inscriptions, as well as one of the world's largest collections of medieval mosaics. From below, these tiny glass-cubed pixels resolve into lush palms, ripe grapes, and a fortune in diadems and necklaces. An occasional pigeon flies through one of the four open doors, whirring in circles within the round expanse.

A narrow set of worn marble steps leads beneath the rock to a rough-hewn grotto called the Well of Souls. A Muslim tradition asserts the waters of paradise flow under the cave, while some Christians and Jews have long imagined

that the space conceals a secret passage filled with valuable artifacts.

In 1911 European treasure hunters bribed their way inside and hacked away at the cave floor in vain hope of finding the famed Ark of the Covenant. Their desecration sparked weeks of angry rioting. Seventy years later, senior Israeli rabbis bored a hole at the base of the Western Wall and tunneled their way east to try to locate the sacred object. The illicit search yielded nothing but a brief scuffle between rabbinical students and Muslim guards and fears of a regional conflict.

The Dome of the Rock has miraculously survived looters, earthquakes, religious strife, bloody invasions, and more prosaic threats



Only Muslims may worship in the dome and the surrounding 36-acre Al Aqsa compound—a rule dating back centuries meant to maintain Jerusalem’s fragile peace. But a growing number of Jews demand the right to pray on the plaza, threatening to upend the tradition.

like pigeon droppings clogging its drainpipes, sending rainwater trickling into the walls. Its striking image adorns coffee mugs, tea towels, and screensavers, and framed pictures of its dome hang in mosques, living rooms, and public buildings around the world.

“Almost two billion people are connected to this place,” says Sheikh Omar Kiswani, director of the 36-acre religious complex, as we stand on the sunlit stone platform that supports the dome like the setting of a jewel. “When the Prophet Muhammad descended from heaven, by God’s wish, all the prophets gathered here to pray,” says the bearded cleric, sweeping his arms to take in the paths, gardens, courtyards, and buildings that are considered a single vast mosque. “That’s why praying here is equal to 500 prayers elsewhere.”

Today the Dome of the Rock also stands at the center of one of the world’s thorniest geopolitical disputes, and its golden vault is a frequent backdrop to violent confrontations between Palestinian worshippers and Israeli police.

“Any church or synagogue in the Holy Land is a place of peace,” says Kiswani, sighing. “Only here is it a war zone.”

Muslims extol the shrine as Islam’s most important site after Mecca and Medina, while Palestinians honor it as the cherished symbol of their nation. For many religious Jews, however, the structure is an abomination fated to be destroyed to make way for a new Jewish temple. Some evangelical Christians also insist it must be replaced by a new temple to set in motion the return of Jesus Christ. Such a volatile mix of beliefs sends shudders through politicians across the region, who fear any attempt to raze it would result in a catastrophic war.

Yet while the Taj Mahal and the Holy Sepulchre have clear origins as tombs for famous people, the reason for the dome’s construction is a source of contention and uncertainty.

“We have to strip away the politics imposed

on the building, like peeling an onion, to understand why and how it was built,” says Beatrice St. Laurent, an American art historian who studied the site for 30 years with her Palestinian colleague, Isam Awwad, who passed away in 2018. Their results provide an intriguing new take on the mysterious old shrine and the visionary Muslim leader who might have built it.

SIX CENTURIES AFTER the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and its Jewish Temple complex, the acropolis lay in ruins. For Byzantine Christians, this desolation was proof that their faith had triumphed over Judaism. A Muslim army took control of Christianity’s holiest city without a fight just a few years after Muhammad’s death in Medina in A.D. 632. When the new rulers sought to establish their own place of worship in Jerusalem, the choice was obvious.

One tale has it that Muhammad’s father-in-law, Umar, personally cleared away filth and debris to expose the sacred outcrop. It would be several decades before a building rose over that chunk of revered bedrock. According to early sources, the architects were two Jerusalem residents: a Muslim theologian named Raja ibn Haywa, and a Christian named Yazid ibn Salam.

They didn’t have to look far for inspiration. The fourth-century Holy Sepulchre, with its massive rotunda over what Christians believe is the tomb of Jesus, lay within sight. And eight-sided churches—a shape with roots in ancient Rome—stood at Caesarea on the nearby Mediterranean coast and along the Sea of Galilee.

In 1992 construction workers expanding the highway from Jerusalem to Bethlehem encountered the ruins of another octagonal building. Rina Avner of the Israel Antiquities Authority led the subsequent excavation in an olive grove next to a gas station. *(Continued on page 54)*

**‘WE HAVE TO STRIP AWAY THE POLITICS
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—BEATRICE ST. LAURENT, ART HISTORIAN



The Cotton Merchants’ Gate, one of seven providing access from Jerusalem’s Old City into the Al Aqsa compound, dates to the 14th century. Israeli security tightly controls every entry point, leading at times to protests and violent confrontations.

A Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives, a ridge opposite Jerusalem's Old City, offers a sweeping view of the gleaming golden dome. Some Jewish extremists see the Islamic shrine as a blasphemous monument that should be demolished to make way for a restored temple.

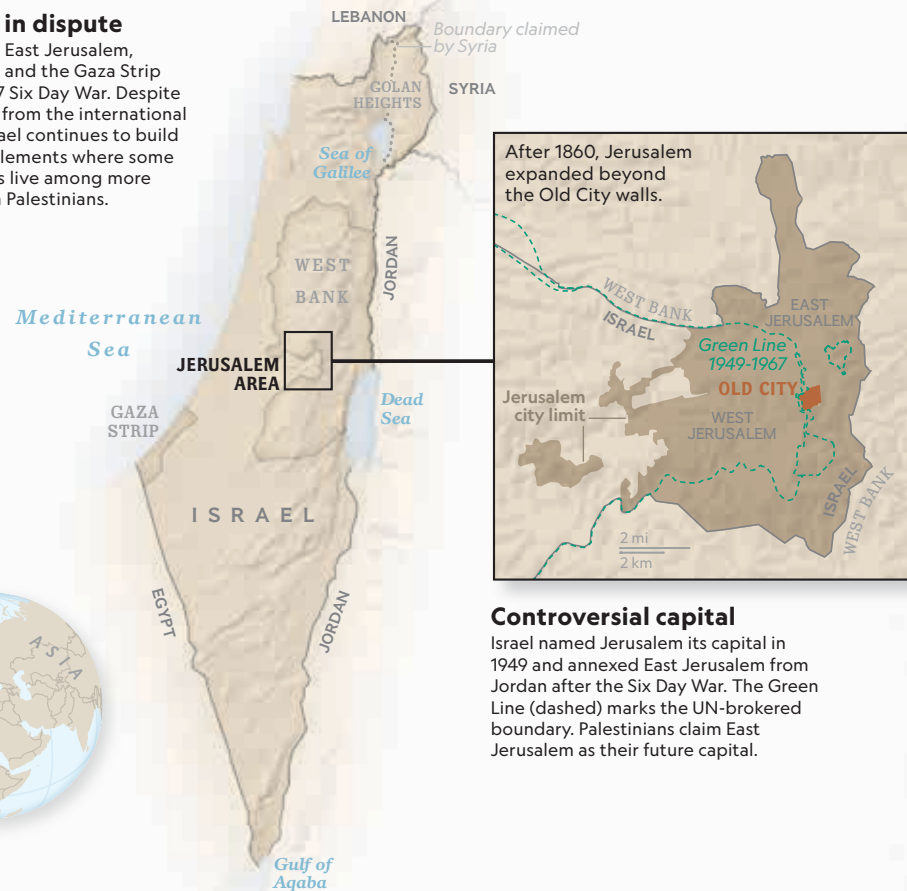


SHAPED BY FAITH

Jerusalem's Old City is layered with history, beliefs, and divisions. It's the site of two now vanished temples that for centuries were the central place of Jewish worship. It's where Jesus of Nazareth is believed to have been resurrected after his Crucifixion. Here too is the stone Muslims revere as the spot where the Prophet Muhammad began his nighttime journey to heaven. These events consecrated the city to three great religions, leading to eras of both peace and bloodshed.

Territories in dispute

Israel captured East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip during the 1967 Six Day War. Despite condemnation from the international community, Israel continues to build West Bank settlements where some 450,000 Israelis live among more than 2.5 million Palestinians.



Controversial capital

Israel named Jerusalem its capital in 1949 and annexed East Jerusalem from Jordan after the Six Day War. The Green Line (dashed) marks the UN-brokered boundary. Palestinians claim East Jerusalem as their future capital.

OLD CITY TODAY

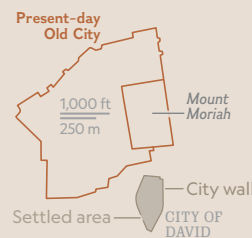
The 224-acre area is home to more than 30,000 people, some two-thirds residing in the Muslim Quarter. Over a hundred synagogues, churches, and mosques are interspersed among houses, shops, archaeological sites, and government buildings.



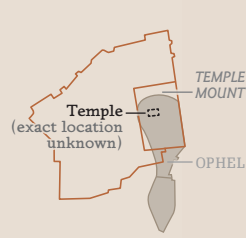
IMPRINT OF THREE MILLENNIA

Continuously settled since the Bronze Age, Jerusalem has been shaped by successive rulers and empires. According to the Bible, Israelite kings captured the city and built a temple on the site Muslims now call Haram al Sharif.

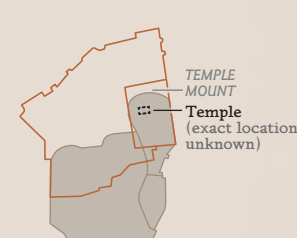
circa 1000-930 B.C.
The Israelites capture the small walled settlement from the Jebusites.



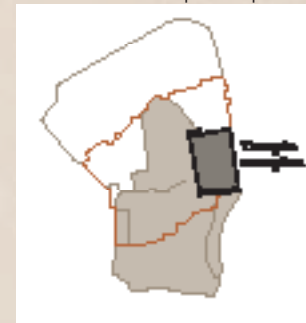
circa 930-720
The capital city expands to include the high ground of Mount Moriah.



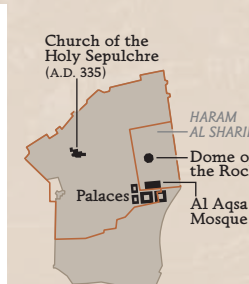
720-586
Jerusalem remains the capital of Judah as the northern kingdom of Israel falls.



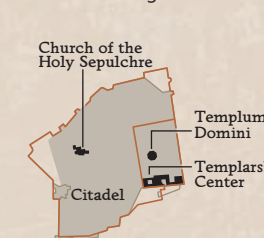
19-4 B.C.
King Herod the Great, appointed by Rome, renovates the Temple complex.



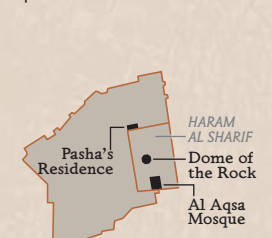
A.D. 638-1099
Muslim leader Umar captures the city; the Dome of the Rock is built.



1099-1187
Christian Crusaders seize Jerusalem and repurpose sacred buildings.



1516-1917
Ottoman Turks gain control of the city. The Old City's present walls date to this era.

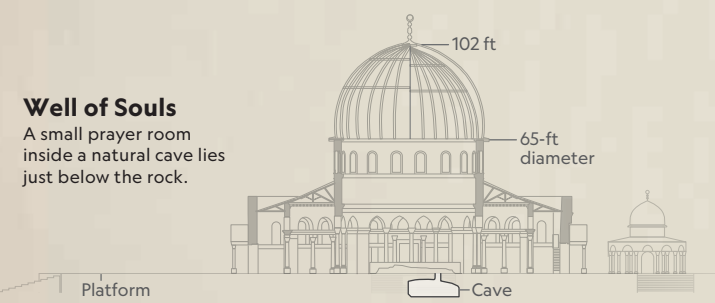
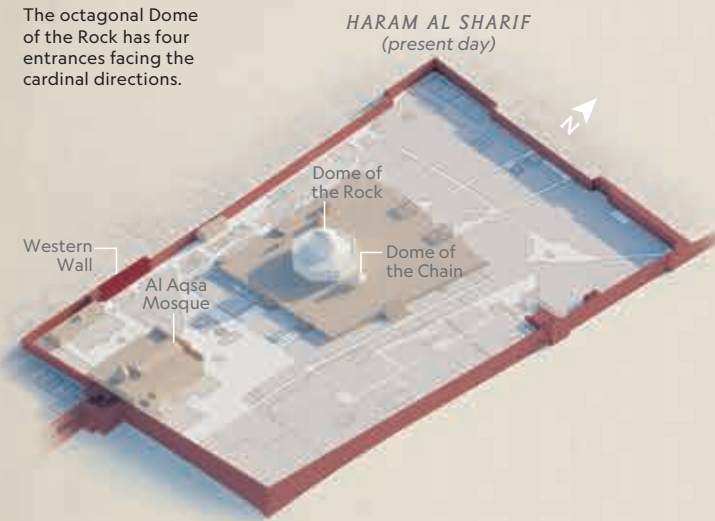


MATTHEW W. CHWASTYK AND PATRICIA HEALY, NGM STAFF. SOURCES: SURVEY OF ISRAEL; THE CARTA JERUSALEM ATLAS, CARTA JERUSALEM; PLANET LABS, INC.; ERIC H. CLINE, GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

A SITE FOR THE CENTURIES

The Dome of the Rock—built during the Muslim Umayyad dynasty and gracing Jerusalem's skyline—has been renovated and restored over 13 centuries. Its core elements, however, have been preserved throughout the ages. New details of its many architectural changes are coming to light as experts delve into historical records, archival photographs, and remnants of its original facade.

The octagonal Dome of the Rock has four entrances facing the cardinal directions.



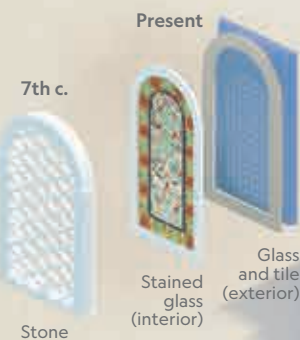
Pieces of the past

Many interior mosaics have survived. Seventh-century exterior mosaic fragments were discovered in the 1960s, offering clues to previous designs.



Views over time

Early windows were marble lattice. During the '60s renovations, experts used Ottoman-era techniques to restore stained-glass windows.



Recycled elements

Spolia, or objects reused from other buildings, can be found in the multihued stone columns and some of the veined marble slabs adorning lower walls.

Roof refresh

The original roofing material was replaced with durable lead, lasting more than 900 years. In 1993 golden panels replaced the leaky aluminum roof built in the '60s.

DOMES MATERIAL



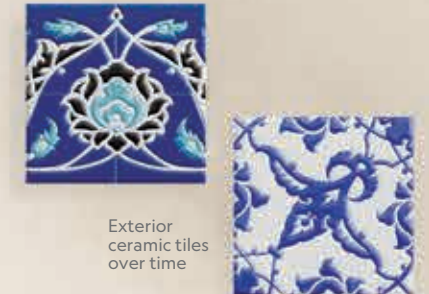
7TH CENTURY

PRESENT



Changing patterns

The shrine's exterior was once covered with mosaics. Since the 1500s, it's been clad with tiles bearing inscriptions and geometric and botanical motifs.

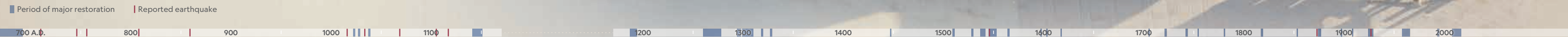


Structural support

Under the elaborate facade are coarse stone-block walls extending to bedrock below. The walls have changed little since their original construction.

Dome of the Chain

This tiled, 11-sided pavilion has spoliated columns and geometric flooring. It has undergone multiple renovations alongside its larger contemporary.



- 660-691** Debris on the sacred hill is cleared; the Umayyads build the Dome of the Rock around a rocky outcrop.
- 1022-1038** Earthquakes damage the dome; the Muslim Fatimid dynasty adds a lead roof and repairs mosaics.
- 1141-1150** European Christian Crusaders pave over the rock and erect an altar encircled by a metal barrier.
- 1187-1193** Muslim leader Saladin removes the altar and refurbishes the dome's colorful interior.
- 1260-1510** The Mamluks, ruling from Egypt, restore the roof, mosaics, and intricately patterned floors.
- 1545-1566** Ottoman Suleyman the Magnificent transforms the exterior with tile and stained-glass windows.
- 1720-1721** A lead roof, wooden beams, and windows are replaced as part of restorations.
- 1874-1876** Maintenance of the exterior requires stripping the facade to bare stone.
- 1958-1965** The dome, 45,000 tiles, and all windows are replaced.
- 1993-2016** Work includes a new dome and the conservation of millions of mosaic pieces.

PORTIONS OF THE "7TH CENTURY" ILLUSTRATIONS WHERE NO REFERENCE FROM THE PERIOD EXISTS ARE AN ARTISTIC RECONSTRUCTION.

MONICA SERRANO AND PATRICIA HEALY, NGM STAFF. SOURCES: CAPITALIZING JERUSALEM: MUAWIYA'S URBAN VISION 638-680, BY BEATRICE ST. LAURENT AND ISAM AWWAD (FORTHCOMING); BEATRICE ST. LAURENT, BRIDGEWATER STATE UNIVERSITY; HEBA MOSTAFA, UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

The Dome of the Rock is a place for pilgrimage and prayer for those of the Muslim faith.



13,000

SQ FT, DOME

45,000

CERAMIC TILES

1,380

24-KARAT-GOLD-PLATED ROOF PANELS

12,800

SQ FT OF INTERIOR MOSAICS

MUSLIM RULERS BROUGHT ARTISANS FROM DISTANT PLACES TO JERUSALEM. THE RESULT WAS A REMARKABLE SYNTHESIS OF TRADITIONS FROM THE FAR ENDS OF THE ISLAMIC EMPIRE.

Women enter the stairwell leading below the sacred rock to the Well of Souls. Marble panels, rich gilding, and glass mosaics likely made by Persian craftsmen embellish the shrine's interior. Arabic inscriptions proclaim the primacy of Allah and spurn the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.



She determined it was the long-lost Church of the Kathisma, or the Seat of Mary. Built in A.D. 456, the church's inner and outer rings surround a sofa-size rock said to be where Mary, pregnant with Jesus, rested on her way to Bethlehem. Avner believes the church, which became a popular pilgrimage site for early Muslims, served as a model for the Dome of the Rock three miles to the north. "This was a time when Christian holy places could still be shared," she says, "and their lore and beliefs carried over into Islam."

YET THE DOME OF THE ROCK is not simply a grander copy of a Christian sanctuary. Instead of the austere facade of most Byzantine churches, the shrine's original exterior was sheathed in glass mosaics that blazed in the Jerusalem sun. The building's four doors that open to the cardinal points also have no obvious precedent in the region.

Domed palaces with four entrances and churches with exterior mosaics did exist more than a thousand miles to the south in the wealthy kingdom of Saba in southwest Arabia, according to St. Laurent, a Harvard-trained art historian, and Awwad, the longtime chief architect and conservator of the Noble Sanctuary. They also point out that the intricate mosaics show influence from the Sasanian Empire to the east in what is today Iraq and Iran.

The crowns that form a motif recall royal headgear captured from the Sasanian monarch by Islamic forces. These influences suggest that Muslim rulers brought artisans from distant places to Jerusalem. The builders also gathered stones and columns from Jerusalem's Jewish, Roman, and Byzantine ruins to incorporate into the structure. The result was a remarkable synthesis of traditions from the far ends of the fast-expanding Islamic empire.

Once completed, the dome became for a time the scene of elaborate rituals. Early chroniclers record attendants dressed in costly robes, anointing the rock with a golden oil made of saffron, musk, and ambergris. Others spread incense into the air with censers, the smoke spreading into the city as a sweet-smelling call to prayer and drawing pilgrims and shopkeepers to circle the stone, a practice that may have its roots in pre-Islamic Arabian traditions.

But why did Muslim leaders pour so much time, effort, and money into this richly ornamented shrine? For today's believers such as Karim and Kiswani, it celebrates the Prophet's mystical journey into the skies. There is, however, no mention of that association in the few texts that are contemporary with the dome's construction.

Some argue that the new Umayyad dynasty, established in 661, sought to bolster Jerusalem's prestige at the expense of Mecca, the power center of its political foes. The Dome of the Rock, according to this thinking, was designed to rival the Kaaba, a sanctuary centered on a sacred stone that Muslim pilgrims circle. Others insist that the dome asserted Islam's presence in what was then an overwhelmingly Christian city; they note its cupola is almost identical in size to the Holy Sepulchre's largest dome.

What is certain is that the building pays homage to the piece of bedrock at its heart. Along with the story of Muhammad's mystical ascension, there are claims it marks the spot where Adam was created, where Abraham nearly sacrificed his son Isaac, and where the dead will be judged at the end of time. Some say it is the site of the holiest part of the vanished Jewish sanctuaries. The Quran mentions Solomon, and the Umayyad rulers may have chosen to honor a stone many associated with that famously wise king. When Crusaders from Europe conquered Jerusalem after a ferocious fight in 1099, they mistook the dome for Solomon's temple and made it a church.

UNTIL RECENTLY, the primary evidence for pinpointing the dome's date of construction and its principal patron was an inscription on one of the building's arcades. The mosaic lettering records the year 691 and probably the name of Umayyad caliph Abd al Malik, who reigned then, though his name was replaced by a later ruler eager to take credit. Abd al Malik has therefore long been presumed to be the building's founder, with the date marking either the start or end of construction.

But a golden opportunity—quite literally—to gather fresh clues came in the early 1990s when the dome was in desperate need of repairs following a botched renovation by an Egyptian team

in the 1960s. Though Israel controls security on the acropolis, the king of Jordan remains custodian of the holy site. King Hussein sold his London home to raise \$8.2 million to purchase 176 pounds of 24-karat gold plating to gild the exterior dome. Workers also removed modern aluminum and concrete repairs and replaced them with traditional materials, including mahogany beams and lead sheets.

Awwad managed the '90s restoration and allowed St. Laurent to document the process. Seizing this rare chance, the two scholars probed the building from foundation to finial, crawling among the rafters, scrutinizing more than a thousand old photographs, and locating discarded materials from earlier renovations.

One of their most intriguing finds is that the famous inscription was placed over earlier mosaics. Based on this and other evidence, St. Laurent and Awwad argue that the building's first benefactor was Abd al Malik's predecessor, the controversial founder of the Umayyad dynasty named Muawiya. A merchant's son who became one of Muhammad's scribes, Muawiya was a "brilliant and wily opportunist," according to one Islamic historian. He became governor of Syria, a region that included Jerusalem, as strife broke out among contending leaders of the nascent empire. The traumatic conflict split the Muslim community between what came to be known as Sunnis and Shiites.

After his rival was assassinated in 661, Muawiya embarked on a monumental building program, including repairing the walls and gates of the Noble Sanctuary. St. Laurent and Awwad contend that the Dome of the Rock was part of that massive project, and it was designed as a seat of royal power as well as for religious purposes. "It looks just like the crowns in its mosaics," St. Laurent notes of the building's distinct geometric shape and bejeweled exterior.

Their most controversial claim is that the shrine was open not only to Muslims but also

to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians during what St. Laurent calls "a period of inclusivity." As commander of the faithful, Muawiya asserted his role as leader of all the monotheistic faiths. That the city's new Islamic rulers allowed Jews to return and permitted Christian worship is well attested in contemporary documents, supporting the idea of a fleeting era of something more than simple religious tolerance. Seen this way, says St. Laurent, the dome was the diadem in "Muawiya's vision of unity."

SUCH HARMONY IS ELUSIVE in the modern Holy City. In 1984, encouraged by an extremist mentor, Yehuda Etzion gathered 660 pounds of stolen dynamite and a handful of other ultranationalist Jews. Their goal was to blow up the dome.

"It was necessary," Etzion explains calmly when I visit his home inside a well-guarded West Bank settlement. "This was the only way to build the third temple." Many Jews believe the dome stands on the site of the two previous temples. An informant tipped off police before the group could act, and Etzion spent five years in prison for conspiracy to commit a crime.

Other attacks were more successful. In 1982 an Israeli army recruit from Baltimore went on a shooting rampage in the shrine, killing two and seriously wounding several others. The Jerusalem waqf, the Islamic foundation that oversees the acropolis, claims there have been dozens of attempts by Jewish extremists to damage or destroy the building.

Etzion now insists that the dome's demolition should come only with the agreement of the waqf, a highly dubious scenario. But his vision has moved from fringe to mainstream. Jewish religious and political leaders who in the past avoided any talk of removing the shrine now

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TOP LEFT

Many parts of the ancient shrine have been replaced in modern times. The exterior tiles date to the 1960s; the gilded dome, to the '90s. The gold plating was at first so blinding in Jerusalem's intense sun it had to be dulled.



TOP RIGHT

Sheikh Omar Kiswani, the director of the Al Aqsa complex, marries a couple (wearing white) in a ceremony inside the Dome of the Rock. "Any church or synagogue in the Holy Land is a place of peace," he says. "Only here is it a war zone."



BOTTOM LEFT

A father and son take a moment's rest amid the dome's ornate splendor. Conservators struggle to maintain the aging building, where fixing a leaking roof or laying new carpet can quickly escalate into a political drama.



BOTTOM RIGHT

Palestinians take part in a protest on steps leading up to the dome, which has emerged as a potent symbol of the Palestinian cause for independence, on par with Jewish attachment to the nearby Western Wall.





Jewish men peer down at a section of the Western Wall, a remnant of the Jewish Temple complex razed by Roman forces in A.D. 70. Beyond rises the dome that many Jews and Christians believe was built on the site of the ancient Jewish Temple.

openly speak about constructing a third Jewish temple. In the meantime, a growing number of religious Jews demand the right to pray on the platform long reserved only for Muslim worship—an Israeli policy designed to prevent friction between adherents of the two faiths.

In recent years these Jews have tested the limits of that restriction, roaming the grounds in groups protected by Israeli police. A new right-wing Israeli government includes several ministers eager to allow Jewish prayer on the acropolis, heightening tensions.

In April of this year police stormed the Al Aqsa Mosque twice during Ramadan, smashing doors and windows, firing rubber bullets, and injuring 12 people. Police claimed they quelled

rioters armed with fireworks who had barricaded themselves in the building, but their actions were denounced by Arab nations and Muslims around the world.

Far less media coverage attends another, quieter, crisis. In 2016 Hussein's son and successor, King Abdullah II, launched a multimillion-dollar project to address major problems plaguing the Dome of the Rock's interior, including buckling mosaics, flaking plaster, and rotting wood. Much of the damage came from the leaky 1960s roof or seeped into the walls when the 48 original waterspouts clogged with pigeon dung.

Progress has been slow. Jordanian and Al Aqsa officials blame Israeli police, who control anyone and anything entering the gates.

"They interfere with everything we do!" exclaims Bassam al Hallaq, head of the site's restoration department, as we stand beside the low wooden rail surrounding the rock. "Every day I have a problem." He jabs his finger at an area where the brown paint has worn off. "I want to paint this exactly the same color, but I can't get permission."

When Al Hallaq attempted to replace a fallen tile in 2019, he was handcuffed and held at a police station for more than six hours. Israeli police declined to comment on his allegations, but given hardening relations between Jerusalem's Jews and Muslims, the difficulties of repairing and maintaining the ancient structure are likely to worsen.

AS SUNLIGHT SPILLS OVER the Mount of Olives shortly after dawn, Hanady Halawani meets me outside one of the acropolis gates. Small and thin, Halawani is part of a movement to make the dome a center for teaching the Quran to Palestinian women. "We started with 50 students and seven teachers," she says. "Now we have 17 teachers and 650 students—and that is only the women's project!" For Halawani, religious learning and political activism are intertwined. "Al Aqsa is a place of worship, and our presence there protects it from the occupiers."

Israeli officials, suspicious of her organizing efforts, have repeatedly banned her from entering the sacred site, which is why we meet outside the compound. Halawani claims to have been arrested 67 times and says she has done 13 stints in prison, including three in solitary confinement. As we speak, she glances nervously at the armed Israeli police officers who pass by.

In recent decades the dome has emerged as a potent "national as well as a religious symbol" for Palestinians, explains Palestinian philosopher Sari Nusseibeh. In his book-strewn office north of the Old City, he says the dome retains its power as a place "where heaven and earth are tied together." But he worries that the mixture of politics and faith on both sides is growing ever more volatile. "People are getting more religious," he says. Meanwhile, political extremists also are on the rise. "It is a scary future to think about."

When I return to the compound, two dozen religious Jews shepherded by armed Israeli police are circling the perimeter, some bowing and touching their foreheads in signs of prayer. I remove my shoes and enter the dome, encountering Fatah Kayem and his two sons, Ibrahim and Muhammad, as they stroll through the peaceful space.

"It is sacred because this is where the Prophet came," the 51-year-old accountant tells me. "And we also say it is at the heart of the capital of the Palestinian state. We come here to pray that God removes all injustices."

As he speaks, two pigeons flutter furiously in the cavernous space, looking for a way out. Below, the rock stands as mute witness to a tumultuous past as well as an uncertain future. □

Writer **Andrew Lawler** is the author of *Under Jerusalem: The Buried History of the World's Most Contested City*. Photojournalist **Ziyah Gafic** focuses on Muslim communities around the world.

Facing south toward Mecca, Muslim worshippers perform Friday prayers outside the Dome of the Rock. A source of both inspiration and contention, few places on Earth are freighted with so much meaning for so many.

