

## **AL-AQSA MOSQUE**

Before Islam, there were definitely holy and blessed places on **Mount Moriah** in Jerusalem; including a Byzantine church destroyed by Persians in year 614 AD - at place where **Al-Aqsa** stands now.

The *Salat* [prayer or *Nimaz*] was made mandatory for Muslims when Prophet Muhammad pbuh came back from **Mir'aj**; see the holy **Qur'an 17:1**. Al-Aqsa, literally means 'the farthest' - '**farthest from Makkah**', an indication to Jerusalem - though the Holy Qur'an does not mention the city by name.

**A common misconception:** most Muslims consider the **Golden Dome** of Jerusalem as **Al-Aqsa Mosque**; these are two different buildings. Golden Dome is a shrine whose significance is derived from the Foundation Stone [holy ROCK], which lies at its heart. As opposed to the Dome of Rock's Byzantine style, Aqsa Mosque is the feature of early Islamic architecture. It is about 100 yards away from the **Golden Dome** and is one of the **oldest & holiest** in the world. During Nabi Muhammad pbuh's lifetime - the term used for Aqsa as mosque didn't mean a physical structure but **location**.

Before the Muslims' take over, Jerusalem was held by the Byzantine Empire, and Emperor Justinian had a 6<sup>th</sup> century Christian church here dedicated to the holy Mary, which was burnt down by the Persians. When **Caliph Umar RA**, in 638 AD, visited the Temple Mount in the company of Archbishop Sophronius - he said prayer on the Foundation ROCK, the site from where Nabi Muhammad pbuh ascended to heaven.

Then Caliph Umar established a small mosque there for Muslims - most probably over the remains of that demolished church. That structure was later expanded by the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik and finished by his son al-Walid I in [705 or] 715 AD. The

building was repeatedly destroyed by earthquakes and rebuilt, until the reconstruction in 1033 AD by the Fatimid caliph 'Ali az-Zahir and that version of the structure is what can be seen in the present day.

Since then the Muslims are in control of Jerusalem city. The period of Muslim worship on the Temple Mount was only interrupted by the Crusaders, who held Jerusalem during 1099-1187 AD and plundered the **Golden Dome** and **Al-Aqsa Mosque** (*far less generous than Muslim Caliph Umar, who had spared the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and remains of other religions when he took over Jerusalem*).

The place of Caliph Umar's first mosque is still available to see by tourists; which is a room near the niche of the present Aqsa mosque - called **Masjid e Umar**.

The Haram comprises nearly **one-sixth** of the walled Old City and can accommodate thousands of worshippers on festival prayers like Eid. **Al-Aqsa** itself is 35,000 sq ft in size and including its outer precincts it can accommodate up to 50,000 worshipers. The mosque itself, divided by columns into seven aisles, allows room for about 5000 Muslims to bow down their heads before Allah on the carpeted floor.

It has four minarets and a beautiful, tile-covered facade with 14 Romanesque arches. The Mosque's main ablution fountain, known as **El-Kas** [the cup], which is used by worshipers, is located between **Al-Aqsa** and the **Golden Dome**. It originally dates back to 709 AD [before completion of Al-Aqsa] AND re-erected by *Sultan Qaitbay* in 1455 AD.

**AL-AQSA Mosque** is on the southern end of the Golden Dome, which non-Muslim visitors can access from the Western Wall plaza through **Moroccan [Maghrabi] Gate**. Muslim visitors can enter from any side - but after showing their passports to the Security Guards proving they are Muslim tourists. Tourists must dress

modestly, and women should cover their hair, arms and legs. Shoes are not allowed inside the mosque but are left outside on shelves on entrances.

Archaeologists believe that when the Crusaders captured Jerusalem in 1099 AD, they concluded that the mosque was the true site for Solomon's First Temple – **and NOT the [Golden] Dome of the Rock** as claimed by Jewish literature.

Across the centuries, **Al-Aqsa Mosque** has been extensively restored and renovated; most recently during 1938-43, when columns of white *Carrara* marble, supplied by Mussolini, were installed and a new ceiling was built at the expense of King Farouk of Egypt. In 1967, it was little damaged by gunfire and in 1969 fire damage was deliberately done which destroyed some of the priceless 12<sup>th</sup> century interior detail. Despite this, the 7-aisled interior is impressive and is home to a striking and carved *mihrab*.

The early Muslim caliphs of Jerusalem used to reside in Al-Aqsa compound, but Crusaders converted it to the **Order of the Temple** in 1149 AD; they used the mosque first as their **Royal Palace**, then as the headquarters of the new Knights Templar AND finally made it church. One of the mosque's many rooms still has the medieval rose window it had when it was Crusader rulers' high residence.

After Makkah and Madina, the Jerusalem city is the third most revered holy site in Islam. The magnificent **Golden Dome** and the nearby **Al-Aqsa** are the principal remaining shrines on the Temple Mount. The structure has undergone many repairs and decorative additions through the centuries, but its basic design remained substantially unchanged and it stands as the greatest achievements of Islamic architecture related with the ancient time zone.

The AL-AQSA witnessed a turbulent 20th century. On **20<sup>th</sup> July 1951**, while on visit to Al-Aqsa Mosque, King Abdullah of Jordan was

shot dead here by a Palestinian while attending Friday prayers in the company of his grandson, Prince Hussein. The Palestinian gunman fired three fatal bullets into the King's head and chest; Prince Hussein was hit too but a medal that had been pinned to Hussein's chest deflected the bullet and saved his life. The assassin named Mustafa Ashu, 21 then, was shot dead by the king's bodyguards at the spot.

Inside AL-AQSA, once there was a **Mimber of Nur Ad Din Zinki** [1146-74 AD]. Even prior to the liberation of Jerusalem from the Crusaders, Zinki had got this pulpit built in Aleppo in 1168 AD, with the intention of installing it here when AQSA be freed. Zinki; however, passed away before his dream could be realised. It was at the hands of Saladin Ayyubi that the pulpit made its way to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The pulpit was made from cedar wood, decorated with ivory and sea shells. A crown, an emblem of the Tankaziyah state, also features but was probably added later.

The original *mimbar* was burnt to ashes in a terrorist attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque on **21<sup>st</sup> August 1969** by a mental-case Australian Christian named Rohan. A new *mimbar* was then made in Jordan; its shape, size & decoration made identical to the old one and was installed in the mosque in 2007.

Behind the *mimbar* or pulpit is a rock, originally from the Dome of the Ascension, which bears the left footprint of holy **Jesus** it is believed. Near the *mihrab* is a small mosque, known as the **Mosque of Umar** [RA]. Under the mosque is a large hall. It leads to one of the original entrance passages to the Temple Mount during the period of the Second Temple. In the courtyard on the extreme south-west is a large building, formerly known as the **Mosque of the Moors**, which now contains the **Islamic Museum**.

There are 15 green coloured gates leading to the **Masjid al Aqsa** of which 10 are open and five

are closed; most gates are located on the western boundary wall. The keys to all the gates, with the exception of the Moroccan gate are held by the Islamic Waqf. However, they can only open or close gates with the consultation of the Israeli police on duty, which control access to the site.

The steps that lead up to the central plaza, where the **Golden Dome** sits, are spanned by handsome arched columns dating from the *Mameluke* period. Some sects of Muslims call these the '**Scales**' as they believe that the scales used to weigh the souls of human beings will be hung here on the Judgement Day. See a letter, a tribute, a gratitude on media pages from an American tourist [[thesacredplaces.com](http://thesacredplaces.com) is referred]:

*"I loved it! It was a life goal for me to visit **Al-Aqsa Mosque**; it was full of peace, harmony and lovely people – they all were very kind and helpful. To try and explain this place in words is difficult but here goes. Built on rock that includes **bait ul maqdis**, the first qibla of Muslims, as well as various different monuments of many prophets. Every tourist, Muslim or not, should go and see the 3rd holiest site in Islam.*

*You have to keep your passport with you safe at all times to prove to the guards at the masjid doors that you are a tourist. There is plenty of walking and not much can be done my wheel chair."*

### **EL-KA'AS:**

It is Al-Aqsa Mosque's main ablution fountain, known as **el-Ka'as [the Cup]**, and is located in north in between the mosque and the Golden Dome in the Haram compound. It is used by worshipers to perform *wudu*, a ritual washing of the hands, arms, feet, and face before saying prayers. It was first built in 709 AD by the Umayyads, re-built by the Ayoubi Sultan Al-Adel Abu Bakr in 1193 AD but in 1327–28 Governor

Tankiz expanded it to house more worshipers. Lastly, in year 1455, Sultan Ashraf Qaitbey brought it in better shape which the tourists see now a days.

Water in it was originally supplied from Solomon's Pools near Bethlehem but now it gets water from pipes connected to Jerusalem City's main water supply.

### **AQSA-in Arab Israel Conflict:**

The site has been the most contested piece of the Holy Land since Israel occupied East Jerusalem, including the Old City, in 1967. However, the conflict dates even further back - before the creation of Israel.

In May 1947, the UN drew up a partition plan to separate historical Palestine, then under British control, into two states: one for Jews, and one for Palestinians. In that plan to be implemented within a year, the Jewish state was given 55% of the land, and 45% was for the Palestinians.

The Jerusalem belonged to the international community then under the UN control. It was granted this special status for its importance to the three Abrahamic religions. In May 1948, Israel declared statehood. The Palestinians alleged that Israel had captured some 78% of the land without any mandate, while the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza were taken over by Egyptian and Jordanian governments and thus 1<sup>st</sup> Arab-Israel War broke out.

After the 2nd Arab-Israeli war in June 1967, Israel occupied the Old City and al-Aqsa compound – later extending to the East Jerusalem as a whole. In 1980, Israeli parliament passed a law that declared Jerusalem the '*complete and united capital*' of Israel. Israel also built 12 fortified Jewish-only settlements in East Jerusalem, housing some 200K Israelis. Since 1967, the Islamic Waqf has control over matters inside the Aqsa Plaza, while Israel controls external security and other anti-social activities.

Palestine also alleged that Jewish Temple movements, such as the *Temple Mount Faithful* and *the Temple Institute*, have gone violent while aiming at rebuilding the Third Jewish Temple in the Haram compound – and that such groups are being indirectly funded by the Israeli government. In 1990, the Jews declared to lay a cornerstone for the 3rd Temple in Haram compound, leading to riots and massacre in which 20 Palestinians were killed. In 2000, Israeli politician Ariel Sharon entered the holy site accompanied by 100s Israeli police, clashes broke out, in which more than 3,000 Palestinians and some 1,000 Israelis were killed.

Palestine also alleged that in 2015 again, 100s of Jewish youth tried entered the Aqsa mosque complex to commemorate a Jewish holiday. A year later, protests also erupted after when the Jewish settlers teased Muslims during the holy month of Ramadan, in breach of tradition.

It is also on record that Aqsa Mosque was shut down for the first time since 1969, after a deadly gun battle between Palestinians and Israeli forces. This **attack of 14<sup>th</sup> July 2017**, two Israeli police officers died and also three Arabs – so the mosque was subsequently closed for two days. Then thousands of Palestinians came out to pray in the streets outside of Lion's Gate. To suppress the demonstration, Israel used force and four more Arabs were shot dead. Then the Christians had also joined Muslims voicing against injustices and oppression that Palestinians face in Jerusalem.

Al-Aqsa is a small area, but symbolically it is a large part of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. **AL-JAZIRA of 6<sup>th</sup> December 2017** held:

*"With more restrictions placed on Palestinian access to the compound and ongoing calls by Israeli religious groups to allow Jews to pray at the site, many Palestinians fear a possible division of the compound."*