

Erdoğan again has his eyes set on Jerusalem

The Turkish president believes that Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem is a historic accident, and everything he does is geared towards amending it.

(March 1, 2021 / JNS) Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's decision to change the name of the Directorate of Religious Affairs to the "Directorate of Jerusalem and Umrah Affairs" isn't about semantics but substance. Erdoğan views himself as a successor to the line of Ottoman sultans. He wants to restore the empire of old and sees himself as responsible for Jerusalem from the Islamic perspective.

In his own eyes, Erdoğan is the successor to Salah al-Din and Suleiman the Magnificent. Hence, Erdoğan has adhered to the dream of a Muslim caliphate with Jerusalem as its capital. Consequently, he has reintroduced Ottoman language studies in Turkish schools and receives visiting leaders and dignitaries with an honor guard wearing old Ottoman caliphate uniforms.

From Erdoğan's point of view, Jerusalem is "under occupation," is of utmost importance after Mecca and Medina, and should be part of the "Umrah" (the "regular" Muslim pilgrimage throughout the year, unlike the Hajj). True to this worldview, as early as 2017 the Turkish president called for "conquering" the city through a mass infusion of Muslim tourists to Israel. "We must visit Al-Aqsa much more," he said at the time. He noted disappointedly that during the previous year, only 26,000 Turkish tourists had visited Jerusalem, the highest number of any Muslim country but far lower than the hundreds of thousands of Americans, Russians, and French who visited the city and the Al-Aqsa mosque.

Erdoğan believes that Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem is a historic accident. All his moves relating to Jerusalem, including the aforementioned name change, are geared towards amending it. In his vision, he sees himself as the modern Salah al-Din and the future liberator of Jerusalem. The Muslim tourists—who in some cases are "unemployed" Turks whose visit to Israel is funded by the Turkish authorities—are Erdoğan's soldiers in the fight for Jerusalem.

In a viral video posted to social media by pro-Turkish elements two years ago, an

anxious Palestinian man is seen asking urgently for Muslims to defend al-Aqsa. The video quickly shifts to images of ships, planes, and vehicles draped in the Turkish and Palestinian flags, and their destination is singular: al-Aqsa. The video then shows a mass of people charging the gates of the compound, pushing back Israel Defense Forces soldiers, and filling every square inch of the site. “Al-Aqsa is liberated,” the words finally appear.

The *murabitun* and *murabitat* (groups of Muslim “guards”), who routinely harassed and prevented Jews from visiting the Temple Mount, were ultimately outlawed. They were the vanguard of Erdoğan’s grand vision and the head of the Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, Sheikh Raed Salah, his ally in the Holy Land. Now—by registering Turkish pilgrims within the framework of the Umrah—Erdoğan wants to continue his “war of liberation” on behalf of Al-Aqsa, which has been “captured, contaminated and defiled” by the Jews and Israel.

In 2015, Erdoğan sent Mehmet Gormez, the head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, to Jerusalem, to organize the “Laylat al-Qadr” (“Night of Decree”) prayer on the Temple Mount, essentially incorporating Jerusalem as a “pilgrimage” station even then. Now he has made it official. Were it up to him, he’d probably lead the next Laylat al-Qadr prayer himself.

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