

The rise of Raed Salah, Israel's Islamist leader who wants Jerusalem at the heart of a caliphate

The recently rearrested preacher has built a career 'defending' Al-Aqsa against Israel's purported planned takeover, building vast support among Arab Israelis.

In 2001, Sheikh Raed Salah did something almost unheard of in the Arab world: He voluntarily relinquished power.

Since 1989, he had served as mayor of Israel's second-largest Arab city, Umm al-Fahm. He and his organization — the now-outlawed Northern Branch of the Islamic Movement — had transformed the city from a communist powerhouse into the center of Islamist life in Israel.

But, he said, it was time for him to step away from politics and concentrate his energies on one particular goal — the defense of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem from an ostensible Israeli state plan to destroy it.

On Tuesday morning, Salah was taken into custody by police on suspicion of incitement. Jewish Israeli politicians from the left and right celebrated the move, while Arab Israelis opposed it. If he is imprisoned, it will be his fourth stint in Israeli jail, his third for incitement charges.

In 2015, his movement was outlawed over what Israel said was "a mendacious campaign of incitement under the heading 'Al-Aqsa is in danger.'"

Yet, since 2015, Salah has been gaining in popularity among Arab Israelis, according to one expert — and the more the security services are seen as persecuting him, the more he is perceived as a martyr sacrificing his freedom for Muslims' most potent national-religious symbol between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

And outlawed or not, his movement continues to run nearly all of its activities in broad daylight, just under different names, the expert said.

That the Al-Aqsa Mosque, located on the Temple Mount, needs defending at all is denied by Israel. Rather than planning to destroy or take control of the mosque, Jerusalem says it is vigorously defending the status quo at the site, which bars anyone not Muslim from praying there — including Jews, though it is their holiest place in the world. In 1967, Israel conquered the mount, only to immediately cede it back to Jordanian religious control in order to avoid a larger conflagration with the Muslim world.

Yet in recent years, the idea that Al-Aqsa needs defending has been the stated reason for numerous terror attacks against Israelis, and it brought tens of thousands of Palestinians into the streets in July in order to protest metal detectors and cameras placed at entrances to the Temple Mount. For most Israelis, the new security measures were a logical response to a shooting attack by three Arab Israelis on July 14, in which the gunmen used weapons they had smuggled into the sacred compound to kill two policemen on duty just outside.

The idea that “Al-Aqsa is in danger” is not new — it dates back to the 1920s, and continues to be propagated by all the major Palestinian political players including Hamas and Fatah. But experts interviewed by The Times of Israel said Salah has done more to spread and ostensibly legitimize the idea than any other person in history.

Salah’s writings and speeches have spread to Muslim houses of study and prayer across the world, including in non-Muslim countries like Australia and Thailand. He is known worldwide as “Sheikh Al-Aqsa.”

Outside the realm of politics, he has managed to foster the image of a humble public servant. He is seen as a pure-hearted and generous person with clean hands, unspoiled by politics, according to experts. Those who know him describe him as a man of considerable charisma, a natural-born leader. At protests, he can be seen standing quietly with folded arms, silently observing the events. But in front of the pulpit, he transforms into a fiery speaker.

“I remember that he always had something special about him. A quiet leadership quality. He wasn’t someone that took leadership, but rather leadership came to him,” said Sa’id Abu Sharka, a cousin of Salah’s, in a 2012 documentary about the preacher.

Hashem Abd al-Rahman, a former mayor of Umm al-Fahm who is close to Salah,

said of the preacher in the same documentary, “If you sit with him for an hour or two, he doesn’t speak if there is no reason.”

Salah dresses in common preacher’s garb, and in the winter, always wears the same worn-out grey coat.

Despite the fact that he is seen as one of the greatest threats to Israel’s security, and is the leader of an outlawed Islamist movement, he lives off a meager government pension in a small home in Umm al-Fahm.

A brief history of Salah and his movement

Salah was born in 1958 in the town. His father was an Israeli police officer, and his two brothers also followed in their father’s footsteps. Salah, a father to eight children, took a different path.

From 1977 to 1980 he studied Islamic law at Hebron University. Though his native Umm al-Fahm was a strong communist stronghold — like much of Arab-Israeli society at the time — he would soon join the nascent Islamic Movement, a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot akin to Hamas.

After an initial period of violence, the Islamic Movement embraced a nonviolent activist approach throughout the 1980s, filling the institutional void left by the state with schools, health clinics, mosques and charities. By 1989, Salah was one of five mayoral candidates from the movement to win elections.

The rise of Hamas in the late 1980s and the Oslo Peace Accords of the 1990s led to a split in the Islamic Movement.

Salah, according to Israel, has close relations with Hamas. Indeed, in 2003 he was imprisoned for two years on charges of funneling millions of dollars to the Gaza-based terror group. He was also charged for being in contact with Nabil Mahzomah, an Arab Israeli accused of being an Iranian agent, who was living in Lebanon at the time.

Salah opposed the peace talks that would eventually lead to the creation of the Palestinian Authority, while the Islamic Movement’s founder, Sheikh Abdullah Nimr Darwish, remained committed to a political process until his death earlier this year.

The official split had occurred in 1996, when the Islamic Movement ran in

national elections, a move Salah deemed irreconcilable with Islamic law because it meant participating in the secular rule of law, according to a Brookings Institute report.

Salah's movement split off and became known as the Northern Islamic Movement. And almost immediately he began harnessing the incendiary power of the Al-Aqsa Mosque to rally support for his movement.

The making of the 'Al-Aqsa is in danger' mantra

Salah's Northern Islamic Movement held its first signature "Al-Aqsa is in danger" rally in 1996.

It was attended by thousands in Umm al-Fahm. Only a year later, deadly riots would break out when the Palestinians accused Israel of trying to destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound (Temple Mount) after a second exit was opened from the Western Wall Tunnels into the Old City's Christian Quarter. Twenty-five soldiers and almost 100 Palestinians were killed. Immediately after the riots subsided, Salah hosted his second "Al-Aqsa is in danger" rally.

Salah would continue to hold these rallies year after year, organized around the idea that Israel intended to destroy Islam's third holiest site, at times drawing up to 70,000 attendees, until his movement was outlawed in 2015.

With the issue of Al-Aqsa, Salah found "a vacuum and moved in. It was an issue no other Islamic group was dealing with," said Professor Yitzhak Reiter, an expert on political conflict at sacred spaces, especially the Temple Mount, and the Israeli Islamist movement.

Dr. Nohad 'Ali, a sociologist at the Western Galilee College, head of the "Arab-Jewish-State" project at the Technion's Samuel Neaman institute and a specialist on the Islamist movement in Israel, said Salah's success stems from the fact that he managed to turn Al-Aqsa into "both a national and religious symbol."

From 1996 to 1998, Salah and his movement played a leading role in establishing two new mosques on the Temple Mount: one in the underground space known as Solomon's Stables, in the southeastern corner of the mount, and the other in the space under the Al-Aqsa Mosque (or "ancient Al-Aqsa").

Salah mobilized the Arab Israeli community for the construction projects.

Volunteers carried out the construction with materials that were donated, and the money for the project was raised through donations.

“Everyone identified these mosques with Salah. He became a hero,” said Reiter, who is a professor of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Ashkelon Academic College and a researcher at the Jerusalem institute for policy and research.

Salah was seen as preventing the establishment of a Jewish synagogue in those large empty spaces, which now host thousands of Muslims worshipers weekly.

Salah at one point also tried to bring water from the holy Well of Zamzam in Mecca — thought by some to have special healing powers — to the cisterns of Al-Aqsa. This would have enhanced Al-Aqsa’s importance as a pilgrimage site, and Salah’s own status within the Muslim world.

At the time he was building these mosques on the Temple Mount, Salah had his own office in the compound.

Waqf officials told Reiter that they were powerless to stop Salah’s construction plans.

In his speeches, Salah has professed his long-term hope that one day Jerusalem, with Al-Aqsa at its center, can be the heart of a future Islamic caliphate.

The Jewish state, just like the Persians, the Romans, the Crusaders and the British, will be “vomited out” from the land, Salah has said.

The underground outlaws work in daylight

In 2015, Israel’s internal Shin Bet security agency recommended against outlawing the Northern Islamic movement. The Shin Bet was afraid that rather than the Islamist group, rather than being defanged, would simply move underground and become harder to track. And that is precisely what happened.

“The majority of the movement’s activities continue to function,” stressed ‘Ali. “It’s still felt in the Arab streets daily,” he added.

For every institution of the Islamic Movement that was banned, said ‘Ali, it has an alternative institution that continues to carry out the same functions. So for example, the monthly bulletin of the Islamic movement was closed, so another

was opened in a different name. 'Ali said the state knew full well this would occur, and a "quiet agreement" exists between the police and the movement.

In every Arab town you still find weekly da'wa, or proselytism, sessions, 'Ali said.

The movement sends dozens of buses to Al-Aqsa weekly, and the outlawed Mourabitoun and Mourabitat groups — Muslim men and women that Israel said were paid by Salah's movement to initiate provocations at the Temple Mount — continue to visit the holy site daily.

The only difference in the outlawed group now, according to 'Ali, is that it operates a little more "modestly," eschewing grandiose events.

Salah continues to give speeches in mosques and public events in the Arab/Muslim sectors. Earlier in August he visited a mourning tent of an Arab Israeli killed in Jaffa.

After the shooting attack on the Temple Mount, Salah immediately took to the pulpit to blame Israel for deaths of the gunmen, whom he called "martyrs" and wished an afterlife in paradise.

'Ali, who interviewed Salah regularly for his dissertation, argued, however, that Salah is well-known among Arab Israelis an opponent of violence.

"I know for sure that he is against the use of weapons. He knows it is against the interests of the northern Islamic Movement," said 'Ali, adding that the gunmen harmed Salah's movement rather than represented it.

While 'Ali could not recall any anti-violence statements made by Salah, he noted that the preacher signs onto the anti-violence declarations of the High Follow-Up Committee, an umbrella group for Arab-Israeli leadership.

But powerful Israeli ministers were quick to blame the July Temple Mount attack on Salah. Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, who outlawed the movement, Intelligence and Transportation minister Yisrael Katz and Housing and Construction Minister Yoav Galant immediately called for his arrest.

The July 14 attack on the Temple Mount compound "was exactly what the Shin Bet feared," said Reiter.

The shooters came from Salah's hometown and professed to carry out the attack in order to defend Al-Aqsa.

Muhammad Hamad Abdel Latif Jabarin, 19, the youngest of the three killers, had a number of posts on his Facebook page that showed he was interested in "freeing" the Al-Aqsa Mosque from Israeli control.

One of Jabarin's posts from July 2016 shows a picture of Salah next to the Temple Mount. The post reads: "Every year and the Al-Aqsa Mosque is closer to freedom."

How to contain Salah has been a conundrum facing Israeli security services since the early 2000s.

Reiter said that in 2003 he was consulted by the Shin Bet about Salah's movement. At that time, he said it was the Shin Bet that wanted to outlaw the Northern Islamic Movement, but the police opposed such a move.

'Ali said his most up-to-date and as-yet unpublished research shows Salah has only become more popular since his movement was outlawed.

Half of Arab-Israelis identify with the Islamic Movement, as well as one-third of Christians, 'Ali said, noting the Islamic Movement provides services to the entire Arab community, including help in restoring churches.

Reiter believes the Shin Bet is currently operating similarly to the way the FBI did with the infamous Chicago crime boss Al Capone, "slowly gathering evidence in every field they can."

Salah 'intentionally' conflates peripheral opinions with government policy

At the beginning of the Second Intifada, in October 2000, 12 Arab Israelis, one Palestinian and one Israeli Jew were killed during clashes between Israeli police and Arab protesters.

To probe these events, the Israeli government appointed a commission, the Or Commission, led by Supreme Court Justice Theodor Or.

The commission, which also included former Nazareth District Court judge Hashem Khatib, pointed to Israel's institutional discrimination against Arab citizens as a long-term cause for the violence.

However, for the immediate cause of the violence, the commission pointed a finger at Salah and his movement.

“In the Islamic Movement’s activity [with regard to the mount], more than in other areas, its strategy emerged clearly: escalating conflict, activism in the field, and agitating the public. The movement gave Al-Aqsa priority as a sensitive focal point for unifying the Muslims in Israel, and as a bridge to the Palestinian society in the territories and to the Islamic world as a whole,” the commission wrote.

The commission noted that Salah and his followers may have had genuine cause for concern, with various rabbis and politicians broaching plans to build a synagogue on the holy site, and “extremist groups” engaging in symbolic acts of fulfilling the vision of rebuilding the Jewish Temple.

But it argued that “Raed Salah went much further, since he acted to stir up the Arab public against a supposed intention of the Israeli government to replace the Al-Aqsa mosques with a Jewish Temple – an intention that had no connection whatsoever to reality.”

Nadav Shragai, Israeli journalist and author of a booklet entitled, “The ‘Al-Aqsa Is in Danger’ Libel: The History of a Lie,” made a similar argument in an interview with The Times of Israel.

“This libel [‘Al-Aqsa is in danger’] is not directed at the Temple Mount Institute or Yehuda Etzion,” a group and an activist advocating for Jewish sovereignty over the holy site.

“It’s directly aimed at the Israeli state itself, against the state that has done all it can over the years to protect the Al-Aqsa Mosque, even though it meant harming the right of Jews on the site,” he said.

‘Sincere fear’

Nashat Aqtash, a media professor at Bir Zeit University in Ramallah, believes Al-Aqsa is in danger.

“Many officials in the government, the settlers, all the Jewish terrorist groups are every day saying it’s about time to destroy the Al-Aqsa Mosque and build the Temple,” he told The Times of Israel recently.

Aqtash reflects the majority Palestinian opinion. In one 2016 poll, over half of

Palestinians said they believed Israel plans on destroying Al-Aqsa Mosque and replacing it with a Jewish Temple, while just nine percent said they believed Israel intends to keep the status quo.

Sari Nusseibeh, a Palestinian professor of philosophy and former president of the Al-Quds University in Jerusalem, in an email response to The Times of Israel, said it wasn't hard to explain why a majority of Palestinians think this way.

He attributed the belief to "constant and growing noises and practices pointing to the desire to rebuild the Temple."

He provided one example from Arabic social media. In a popular clip, young ultra-Orthodox students, in response to questions from a teacher, say in unison that a third Temple will be built and Al-Aqsa Mosque will be destroyed.

Nusseibeh said he believes all the conflict over the Temple Mount could be settled once "there is a peace agreement and each side could assuage their fears of the other."

Reiter argued transparency could help Israel alleviate the fears of Muslims.

"We have to create a system to work on the process of getting accurate information and transparency to change these wrong beliefs in the Arab world," he said.

Reiter criticized right-wing Israeli politicians who in recent years have made public statements and actions that play into the hands of Salah's campaign.

"Agriculture Minister Uri Ariel conducted the priestly blessing on the Temple Mount and broadcast it to the public. What should Muslims think when seeing a cabinet member doing such things?" he asked.

"The current situation is really complicated. It doesn't work in our favor. We have to be wiser in future actions," he said.

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