# Rhetoric, Force and Authority: Ariel Sharon's Visit to the Haram al-Sharif and the Al-Aqsa Intifada

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From my experience in Jerusalem and before that in Tel Aviv, I think that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is about control—Israeli control over Palestinians in so many different spheres, political, economic, borders, security, et cetera, and of continued Palestinian fighting against that control.
>    —Edward Abington, former U.S. consul-general in Jerusalem, po-
>    litical consultant to the Palestinian National Authority (Gazit
>    and Abington 2001, 63)

If you look at the history of the conflict in the past 20 years, to the extent that there has been a major breakthrough, especially on the Palestinian-Israeli front, it has been a breakthrough in the evolution of the conflict from an ethnic one that seemed to have no solution...into a nationalist one.... That kind of framing of the conflict as a nationalist conflict, not ethnic, not religious, created room for compromise and provided the basis of the negotiations that have been ongoing for the past seven or eight years.... What we have seen in the past few months, especially since the collapse of the Camp David negotiations, is the beginning of the transformation of that conflict from a nationalist conflict into an ethno-religious conflict.

The issue of Jerusalem and the way it was framed in negotiations has begun the transformation of the conflict into a religious one. There's no question that in the Middle East, the issue of Jerusalem is bigger than the issue of Palestine. We have seen the widening of the conflict from a Palestinian-Israeli conflict to an Arab-Israeli conflict and even to a Muslim-Jewish conflict. It's an issue that plays into the

hands of opposition movements in the region, most of which are Islamist. And it even plays on the differences within Israel itself, among Arab and Jewish citizens.
—Dr. Shibley Telhami, Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland (Lang, Telhami and Ross 2001, 5)

When heading north along the narrow stone corridor of Al-Wad street in the Old City of Jerusalem, pedestrians pass under an apartment building that spans the thoroughfare. The owner of the apartment, former Israeli General, now Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, has been at the centre of a storm of controversy and violence within Israel and Palestine in recent months. Hanging from a window on an upper floor of the building is a large Israeli flag that drapes twenty or thirty feet down the wall. It is an eye-catching display—the blue Star of David on a white background stands out in sharp contrast to the aged brown and grey rock of the buildings overhanging the road. The apartment is located very near the area where the Jewish, Christian, Armenian, and Muslim quarters of the Old City converge. The road leads from the Temple Mount area in the south through the Muslim Quarter of the Old City to Damascus Gate in the north—a route frequented by merchants, their customers, and anyone going to pray at either the Muslim Haram al-Sharif, or the Jewish Western Wall. To the average pilgrim or tourist visiting Jerusalem, the flag is a simple reminder that one is in Israel. But to those living in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City, the apartment building, and its owner, is a thorn in the flesh (personal visit, June-July 2000).

Ariel Sharon purchased his apartment in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City in 1987, in the midst of the first Palestinian *intifadah,* a period of riots and demonstrations against Israeli control of Palestine (Armstrong 1997, 416). Now Prime Minister of Israel, Sharon still maintains his apartment, with its prominently displayed flag, as a symbolic gesture of the right and determination of Israelis to maintain an authoritative presence in the Muslim areas of the Old City. The apartment building is heavily guarded by Israeli soldiers and has been the focal point of several skirmishes between Palestinians and Israelis during the fourteen years that Sharon has owned it.

A central issue in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is the issue of who should control the city of Jerusalem and, more importantly, certain sections of the Old City that have been important sites of worship to Muslims, Jews and Christians for centuries. The deep divides in the conflict stem in large part from the issues of authority and administrative control over areas of Jerusalem that have an integral part to play in the formation of identity for Jews and Muslims. In this article, I offer an analysis of the social and political dynamics underlying the violence that followed Sharon's 28 September 2000 visit to the Haram al-Sharif, giving particular attention to the use of religious rhetoric and force in constituting authority and mobilizing Jewish and Palestinian groups.

## Framework of Analysis: Lincoln's Theories of Social Formation

Two works by University of Chicago historian of religion Bruce Lincoln provide the theoretical grindstone for this article's analysis of conflict and the formation of group identities. *Discourse and the Construction of Society* and *Authority: Construction and Corrosion* each take a central theme in the rhetorical practices shaping society and examine the dynamics by which social groups are moulded. Stated differently, Lincoln examines how particular agents within social life employ techniques and strategies to create, maintain or contest systems of social relations. *Discourse and the Construction of Society* examines the use of discourse (forms of knowledge) and discourse's physical counterpart, force, in fashioning social life. In *Authority: Construction and Corrosion,* Lincoln looks at the techniques behind creating and maintaining authority within social groups.

Lincoln's work on the dynamics of social construction provides an eclectic set of concepts and processes that can be used in exploring the means by which Jewish and Palestinian groups are formed, maintained and perpetuated across time. Before delving into the data that will be used in looking at conflicts within Israeli society, an understanding of society—the most basic concept underlying Lincoln's work—is necessary. Lincoln's approach to social analysis is post-structuralist in that he rejects analyses of society that focus exclusively on institutions.

While discussions of political institutions, kinship patterns, economic practices, or other such approaches to studying society do yield useful results, Lincoln calls for a reconsideration of the most rudimentary elements of society.

Lincoln derives his definition of society from the Latin verb *socio*, "to join or unite together, to associate," and defines society as "basically a grouping of people who feel bound together as a collectivity and, in corollary fashion, feel themselves separate from others who fall outside their group.... Society in its essence consists not of impersonal structures, but of human beings who feel or come to feel more affinity for, than estrangement from, one another." Within scholarly discourse, social borders are often considered to consist of such things as "language, topography, diet, patterns of economic and marital exchange, habituated behaviors (customs), normative preferences [such as] values in the moral sphere, aesthetics or taste in others." Lincoln argues, however, that specific emotions are the primary base from which social groups develop. Specific sentiments of "affinity and estrangement" are the most basic elements of any social group. Thus, the borders of society are never simple and clear, but consist of a negotiation among perceptions of similarity and dissimilarity. Where the perception of similarity is predominant, feelings of "likeness, common belonging, mutual attachment, and solidarity" bind the individuals within a social group together. On the other hand, where the perception of dissimilarity is prevalent, feelings of "distance, separation, otherness and alienation" prevail (Lincoln 1989, 9-10, 173).

Particular, identifiable social groups are not monolithic entities. Even collections of like-minded individuals sharing strong ties of commonality still contain within themselves aspects of tensions that can govern relations between dissimilar groups. A social group is a synthesis of discrete parts; associations based on similarity/dissimilarity of any number of characteristics operate within a group, so that groups cohere on a level of association that can be somewhat ambivalent at a multitude of particular points. Thus, groups are at times shaped through more complex processes of fusion and fission, whereby smaller groups may come together to form a larger group, or a larger group may split off to form a smaller entity. Whereas one society may be

broadly characterized by its opposition to an external Other, multiple internal divisions may also exist within the group. Therefore, society is not a monolithic whole—as earlier sociologists once portrayed it—but a dynamically interactive system of segmented subgroups. As Lincoln puts it, "members of a total social field can recombine at different levels of integration to form aggregates of varying size" which "nest comfortably one within another, like Russian dolls or Chinese boxes" (Lincoln 1989, 19).

With the emergence of the modern nation state, one level of identity is that of the nation, an entity that can at times be problematic. According to Lincoln, the condition in which "contending groups...are superficially integrated within a weak state is an important feature in some of the most bitter conflicts of the contemporary world." Times of revolution and civil war reveal "the potential fluidity of all social formations" and can demonstrate "certain ways in which stability may be maintained in the midst of flux." Because revolution and war entail great disruptions within the smooth operations of social systems, both can offer an important glimpse into the internal struggles, cleavages, oppositions and inequities within and between social groups in the larger entity of a particular state (Lincoln 1989, 18, 178).

In conflict among groups with radically differing narrative substructures, looking at the role of myth in political discourse and the processes of creating groups and establishing authority allows us to pull back the veil to a certain degree in order to glimpse some of the inner workings of social conflict. Myth—defined as broad, authoritative, widely acknowledged narratives and understandings that, by their invocation of the past and application to the present, can motivate large scale actions on the level of social groups—is instrumental in forging a concept of social identity, and in advancing the political claims to inherent historical rights which both groups claim in relation to the land (Lincoln 1989, 24). On both sides, invocation of the narratives of the past is a key element in the struggle to legitimize opposing regimes.

Authority however, can be more difficult to establish, as it involves consent or acknowledgement of one particular claim among those competing for the allegiance of social groups. The attempt to establish authority by means of appeals to myth, operate on the discourse side

of social construction. The appeal to myth is a rhetorical attempt at mobilizing and using deeply embedded emotions, value orientations and sentiments of group identity, for certain ends. Elements of religious discourse may at times be a discrete tool taken up and used by members of social groups (the human agents in the greater whole of society) as they contest and enforce their designs for social life. As Lincoln states:

> In the hands of elites and of those professionals who serve them (either in mediated fashion or directly) discourse of all forms...may be strategically employed to mystify the inevitable inequities of any social order and to win the consent of those over whom power is exercised, thereby obviating the need for the direct coercive use of force and transforming simple power into "legitimate" authority (Lincoln 1989, 4-5).

By advancing convincing constructions and definitions of symbolic elements, social spaces and external realities, groups attempt to create the illusion of authoritative power. But discourse does not always play into the hands of the dominant: "discourse can also serve members of subordinate classes...in their attempts to demystify, delegitimate, and deconstruct the established norms, institutions, and discourses that play a role in constructing their subordination" (Lincoln 1989, 4-5). Thus, discourse (myth) can also be used as a tool of rupture for debunking the claims of one group over another and these contending constructions can create the alternate image of justified resistance to particular forms of power. Religious rhetoric is particularly important due to the strong emotional base to which it often appeals as part of the art of persuasion.

### Prelude to Violence—Fissures in Israeli Society

This line of thinking can be very useful in describing and conceptualizing the relationships among groups within the geographical entity of Israel/Palestine. Indeed, to even give a name to the land itself or the socio-political divisions among groups therein is an act that provokes a reaction from inhabitants. To refer to the country as "Israel" clearly

demarcates the land as in possession of a state run by Israelis, most of them Jews, many from foreign lands, who make strong claims to the right to permanently inhabit the land now under their control. The name "Israel" also contains associations with the ancestral groups that occupied areas of Palestine in the first and second millennia B.C.E. By contrast, to refer to the land and country as Palestine is to make an altogether different claim regarding the land and the rights to ownership thereof. The name "Palestinian" refers to those inhabitants of the land who contest the legitimacy of the Israeli government and their competing claims to the land. Since the formation of an Israeli state in 1948, and the subsequent wars to establish the Israeli presence in the land, Palestinians have worked through popular, governmental and covert means to subvert and prevent the establishment of Israeli government, its political rights and territorial claims while advancing their own. "Palestine" brings with it the echoes of Philistines, the "original" inhabitants and bitter rivals of the Israelites. In discussing the Holy City, to invoke a name—Jerusalem or Al-Quds—is to evoke conflicts and loyalties that are foundational to Jewish or Palestinian identities.

To begin looking at the relations between groups in Palestine, it is easiest to move from the level of the most obvious differences to more particular differences: "language, topography, diet, patterns of economic and marital exchange, habituated behaviors (customs), normative preferences [such as] values in the moral sphere, aesthetics or taste in others" (Lincoln 1989, 9). Here we can speak in terms of Arabic vs. Hebrew, analyze the territorial claims of each group, compare economies and cultural practices, and study the relationship between Islam and Judaism to no end. Another element to consider is the differential access to power between groups as a cause for extreme strain among them. High rates of unemployment, restrictions on freedom of movement and access to natural resources are three points around which Palestinian irritation and discord with the Israeli state arise. While this may give us some guidance for establishing what particular markers constitute the boundaries of Israeli or Palestinian society, this would invariably simplify a much more complex situation. Even within those groups that consider themselves part of *Israeli* society, there exist mul-

tiple lines of difference—affinity and estrangement. A look at the Is-
raeli parliament, the Knesset, may help illustrate these differences.

Two primary parties in the Knesset preside over others, the rightist
Likud Party and leftist Labor Party. Ehud Barak's Labor Party, elected
by a narrow margin in 1996, had issued statements calling for a "secu-
lar revolution" in the political life of Israel. The most controversial
political stances that Barak adopted were his positions on the Haram
al-Sharif and Jerusalem, to be discussed momentarily. A letter from
Ariel Sharon, leader of the Likud Party, to the Israeli public during the
political campaign of 1996, demonstrates the general stance of the Li-
kud Party: He rejected international efforts for peace by rejecting the
Oslo accords; he argued for the right of Israeli security forces to oper-
ate in all Palestinian areas; and he demanded that all Palestinian Au-
thority offices in Jerusalem be closed. Sharon's opposition to both
Prime Minister Barak and PA leader Yasir Arafat took a particularly
personal edge during Barak's term in office. Sharon referred to Barak
as a "weak man" and said of Yasir Arafat: "I don't know anyone who
has so much civilian Jewish blood on his hands since Hitler" (*New York
Times*, 25 May 1996).

A further divide of primary importance exists within the Knesset.
Israeli-Arabs, citizens of Israel of Arab descent, constitute "18 percent
of the population of just over six million" (*New York Times*, 26 January
2001). But the status of Israeli-Arab citizens within the state of Israel
has been an issue of much debate. While many Arab MK's (Knesset
Members) argue that they are marginalized and treated as second-class
citizens, many Jewish Israelis are suspicious of their fellow Arab citi-
zens and their allegiance to the state. As a result, Arab-Israelis are
prohibited from participation in the Israeli army on the grounds that
military service may require them to fight against relatives within Pal-
estinian forces. However, this allowance for Arab-Israelis is considered
a mark of disloyalty by many Jewish Israelis, and they look upon their
Arab compatriots as "in but not of" Israeli society—and therefore a
potential internal threat to the state. Until recently, however, this
suspicion had not proved to be grounded. In all the riots, upheavals,
and disturbances that have characterized the history of the Israeli
state, Arabs had not taken any action against the state since their in-

corporation into the body of the Israeli public in 1967 (*World Press Review*, December 2000, 14-15).

Under current arrangements, East Jerusalem, including the Old City and the Haram al-Sharif are under Israeli control, having been brought under Israeli civil law following the Israeli capture of the city in 1967. East Jerusalem and the Haram al-Sharif were officially annexed by Israel in 1980, though these actions were denied legitimacy by the United Nations. The Haram al-Sharif, administered by a Jordanian religious trust, the *Waqf*, is nominally under Palestinian control. Palestinians make up a small cadre of unarmed security personnel within the compound itself, while Israeli police who restrict the number of Palestinians having access to the area controls the entrances to the Haram. But Jerusalem as a whole is important not only due to religious considerations. Jerusalem is the area of greatest inter-dispersion of Arab and Jewish populations—inhabited by 450,000 Jews and 190,000 Arabs. Currently, more than a third of the Jewish population lives in areas of East Jerusalem to which Palestinians lay claim (Ben-Meir 2001, 86).

Three basic bargaining positions have been the poles around which negotiations and political opinion historically cluster: full Israeli sovereignty over all of Jerusalem and the holy sites, shared sovereignty involving various options of mixed control over holy sites and East Jerusalem, or the internationalization of the city under the administration of the United Nations, a position asserted in the 1948 UN General Assembly Resolution 181. This later option would grant sovereignty over holy sites to neither Israeli nor Palestinian governments, but would place the administration of sites under Jewish, Christian and Muslim leaders (BBC News On-Line, 28 September 2000).

The 1993 Oslo accords stipulated concessions by Israeli and Palestinian authorities and created a process for defining and implementing, a peace agreement that gravely disappointed Palestinians. Yasir Arafat agreed to recognize the legitimacy of the state of Israel, make land concessions in exchange for partial Israeli withdrawal from areas of the West Bank and Gaza and implemented a five-year transitional period during which negotiations toward final status issues could begin. Palestinians, however, were deeply frustrated over loss of lands defined as

Palestinian by the U.N. in 1948, and the failure of officials to address concerns regarding the status of Jerusalem, the right of refugees to return and the postponed prospect of statehood. In the years following, declining incomes, skyrocketing unemployment rates (40 percent by January 2001) and the greater apparent success of militant Islamist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah as contrasted with charges of corruption and nepotism within Arafat's secular Fatah movement deepened Palestinian frustration and anger (Hedges 2001, 133-136).

In the Camp David negotiations held during the summer of 2000 in the United States, Barak opened new matters of discussion that had not yet been broached in official negotiations, "slaughtering three sacred cows: borders, settlements and Jerusalem." The parties discussed the creation of a demilitarized Palestinian state, the normalization of relations with Israel, land exchanges, the possibilities of a shared Jerusalem and the incorporation into Israel of Jewish neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem, and the right of return of refugees. While significant differences remained to be addressed, the consensus among journalists and analysts is that the negotiations broke down over one issue: Israeli sovereignty over the Haram al-Sharif. According to Arafat, the Israeli delegation offered Palestinians custodianship of the Haram and the right to fly the Palestinian flag, while keeping the area under Israeli sovereignty. The offer was refused (Gazit and Abington 2001, 62-70).

Prior to his 28 September speech, Sharon began to issue increasingly vocal calls for the dissolution of the Barak-led government. In a letter to the *Jerusalem Post* on 18 August, Sharon charged Barak of transgressing all bonds of trust with the Israeli people. "Barak is deepening animosity and internal hatred and thus, endangering us all," he wrote, "Democracy is in a state of turmoil. There is a prime minister without a government, without a majority in the Knesset, and without a majority among the public; a prime minister who violated the pledges that got him elected."

In addition to the allegations that Barak was in violation of the basic ideals of democracy, Sharon argued that Barak was threatening national security and the most important elements of Jewish public life: Israeli holy sites. Sharon charged Barak with a systematic attempt to remove Jewish presence from holy sites, such as the Old City, the

Temple Mount, and the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, which he termed the "national and historical assets of the Jewish people." As a result, Sharon argued that

> we must take all necessary steps for early elections with a government based on broad national consensus that will work to bring real and secure peace, peace with Jerusalem, peace that will safeguard the vital national interests of Israel and protect the historical rights of the Jewish people in its one and only homeland, Israel, and in its undivided capital, Jerusalem.

## Myth and Violence: Discourse and Force in Cultural Conflict

On the morning of Thursday, 28 September 2000, one day before the beginning of *Rosh HaShana,* the Jewish new year, Ariel Sharon visited al-Haram al-Sharif compound with three other MK's from the Likud party and over 1,000 Israeli soldiers as his security entourage. After a tour of the grounds and a brief speech, he and his guards left the compound. Violent outbreaks between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians began on 28 September. On Friday, 29 September, following afternoon prayers at Al-Aqsa mosque, Palestinians began throwing stones at worshippers celebrating *Rosh HaShanah* at the Western Wall, and burned an effigy of Ariel Sharon within the confines of the Haram. Israeli troops entered the compound and the following clashes resulted in the death of five Palestinians and one Israeli. Two hundred Palestinians and 30 Israeli soldiers were wounded. Ten more Palestinians were killed in clashes with Israeli soldiers in the West Bank and Gaza that day. At Netzarim Junction in Gaza, twelve-year-old Muhammad al-Durrah was killed during a fight between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian policemen. Al-Durrah was instantly glorified as a martyr among Palestinians and became the standard case in point of Israeli brutality within the Arab world. On 30 October twelve Palestinians died in clashes, and two days later Israelis began deploying helicopter gunships and tanks into the West Bank and Gaza (Chronology 2001a, 112-119). By early November, according to estimates by the Union of Palestinian Medical Relief Committees, 170 people had been killed and 6,000 wounded (Said 2001, 27). By March of 2001, 350 Palestinians

and 60 Israelis had died, while 12,000 Palestinians and 200 Israelis had been wounded (Lang, Telhami and Ross 2001, 1). Much else remains unanswered: Why did Sharon visit the Temple Mount? Why was there a violent reaction to this among Palestinians? Was the violence religiously motivated? Concepts from Lincoln's theoretical work on myth and social construction present tools for analysis.

First of all, Lincoln problematizes simplistic definitions of religion. The inevitable masking that takes place when one refers to intrinsically religious phenomena is exchanged for a view of religion in which cultural and social practices of an empirically verifiable nature constitute the workings of religion. Religion is no special entity of its own, but is tied in with political life, economics, social interaction and other tangible, observable aspects of humanity. Religion is therefore analyzable. As a cultural phenomenon, religion is considered in terms of political formations, social processes, and contingent historical occurrences. It can be discussed and studied in terms of "this-worldly" disciplines and the scholar of religion need not resort to discussions of ethereal beings, metaphysics and theology. Lincoln removes talk about religion from the sacred sphere and places it within the sphere of "profane" or mundane analysis, so that religion can be broken down into discrete operating principles and social constructs. This approach allows for a renewed understanding of situations such as the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

On the PBS's Online NewsHour for 2 October 2000, Margaret Warner interviewed Khalil Jahshan of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee and David Makovsky, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, former editor of the *Jerusalem Post* and current diplomatic correspondent for *Ha'aretz* newspaper. During the course of the discussion, and with Lincoln's work in mind, a statement by Makovsky prompted me to ask a series of problematic questions. When asked to give his prognosis for the Middle East peace process, Makovsky stated, "If they don't reach a solution on issues like Jerusalem and the holy sites, then I fear a political conflict of the last 50 years is going to spill over into an uncontrollable religious war." How will this war be specifically religious? What social issues are marked or masked by that catchall phrase?

Since identity and socio-political formations are constructed in reference to the realms of ideals, narratives and history, such conflicts effectively take on mythical qualities. Labelling these conflicts as intrinsically religious distances them from concrete analysis in many ways. Instead of leading to inquiries into the psychological, political and sociological roots of conflicts, or an inquiry into the nature and formation of radical groups (including how they legitimize their activities, gain support and how they use myth and rhetoric), grouping these sorts of conflicts under the heading "religious war" distances them from analytical scrutiny. It paints the protagonists and antagonists as wholly other in contrast with secular and rationalist categories and not motivated by concrete historical concerns.

By looking at specific statements by Ariel Sharon made after the eruption of violence, we can discern the manner in which myth can be mobilized to generate unity and agreement among what are in fact disparate social entities, and the way in which myth can serve to buttress claims to authority. On 20 October 2000, Sharon directed his first speech after the beginning of clashes between Israelis and Palestinians to a group of 4,000 evangelical Christians associated with the pro-Israel group, International Christian Embassy. His speech, given at a Christian commemoration of the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, touched upon the manner in which Sharon attempted to ground the authority and motivation for his actions in the Bible—the key narrative for both Christians and Jews. "The land of Israel is holy to Jews, Christians and Muslims, but it was promised by God only to the Jews," he stated, adding that Jerusalem would remain, "the undivided capital of Israel forever.... You can hold the Bible in your hand, you don't need any guide or explanation" (*Christian Century*, 8 November 2000, 1144).

The power of myths lies in the ways they are deeply engrained in the emotional and cognitive substrate of individuals and social groups. The mobilizing, persuasive power of religious rhetoric derives from this strong force of emotion:

> In this sense the authority of myth is somewhat akin to that of charters, models, templates, and blueprints but one can go beyond this formulation and recognize that it is also (and perhaps more important) akin to that of revolutionary slogans and ancestral invocations,

> in that through the recitation of myth one may effectively mobilize a
> social grouping (Lincoln 1989, 24-25).

In another statement regarding his interpretation of the right of Jews over the Haram al-Sharif and the legitimacy of his visit there, Sharon stated, "The Temple Mount is the holiest place for the Jewish people— the remains of the temple are there. It is not only my right but my duty to go there" (*Newsweek*, 16 October 2000, 39).

In the positions that Sharon takes against Palestinians, the element of national identity as defined by the mythic past play a large part, and since the narratives of the Jewish past are attached to specific geographical locales, these sites are extremely important for advancing historical claims to the land. The same sites are important in religious celebrations and commemoration. It is the confluence of these three factors—mythic past, historical importance, and religious symbolism— that make myth, history and religion such powerful rhetorical tools in the hands of politicians on both sides of the conflict. Both Yasir Arafat and Ariel Sharon make repeated claims that Jerusalem will serve as the "eternal, undivided" capital of their respective peoples. In this way, the mythic past that shapes social identity, sites of historical importance, political claims and future projections are strongly interwoven.

Sharon has further made the preservation of Jerusalem and other sites of religious significance an important platform in his campaign against Ehud Barak. In his 16 August letter to the *Jerusalem Post*, Sharon charged that Barak betrayed democracy by stating his willingness to allow Muslim control of such sites as the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron, and the Temple Mount. According to Sharon, the holy sites are the "national and historical assets of the Jewish people" and any compromise on their status is a threat to legitimate government itself. Sharon charges that Barak's concessions regarding holy sites represent a systematic attempt to remove the Jewish presence from the holy sites and therefore threaten the historical markers that affirm both Jewish national identity and claims to have historical privilege to the specific areas of land in Palestine. These acts of concession are indicators of an attack on democracy, a foundation stone to the state and another key element of Israeli national identity in addition to his-

torical and cultural assets. For Sharon, transcendent religious and political values are under siege by Barak's actions.

In a letter to U.S. Secretary of State Madelaine Albright, Sharon further elaborated his view of the authoritative claims that Jews have the right to advance regarding the Haram al-Sharif and the land in general. On 2 October, Sharon wrote:

> I believe we can reach peace, but it must be durable and real peace based first and foremost on complete negation of violence. Furthermore, it requires Arab Palestinian recognition and acceptance of the historical inherent rights that Jews have on their land in their undivided Capital Jerusalem and particularly sovereign rights and free access to our most sacred site on the Temple Mount. This right is granted and has only been safeguarded to every Israeli citizen as well as visitors, regardless of race, creed or religion since Israel united the city in 1967.

Sharon intertwines religious sacredness with the political rights established by Israel in 1967. Due to the importance of the site for the historical development of Judaism, it is closely tied in to their cultural, political, and historical identity. In order to firmly establish and maintain that identity, free, secure access to the Temple Mount must be provided for Jews. The various buildings and structures in the 35 acres that make up the Temple Mount—or the Haram al-Sharif, depending on the political claim one is making—constitute a physical claim to history, a marker affirming the reality of the mythic past and a symbol to be used in constructing national identity. For Sharon, any sharing of sovereignty over Jerusalem or the Temple Mount creates a challenge to the claim of historical, inherent rights of Jews, rights that are superior to those of Palestinians due to the fact that the Temple Mount is the most sacred place for Jews. Only with the unification of Jerusalem in 1967, have the rights of people of all races, creeds or religious persuasions been guaranteed.

In the sphere of political action and debate lines of estrangement between Palestinians and Israelis form around issues of land, sovereignty, right to govern and administrate the land, and most importantly, history. It is history that is employed to buttress all other claims to political rights, and, for Sharon at least, history is the pri-

mary marker of national and political identity for Israelis. Israeli identity is not grounded in shared language or customs, but in the transcendent value of particular sites that serve as physical reminders of a mythical unified past.

Another statement reveals Sharon's use of the past to establish the legitimacy of the present and cast a vision for the future. In remarks made to a 13 November forum held by the *New York Post*, Sharon said:

> United, I believe, we can win the battle for peace. But it must be a different peace, one with full recognition of the rights of the Jews in their one and only land: peace with security for generations and peace with a united Jerusalem as the eternal, undivided capital of the Jewish people in the state Israel forever. You know, as Jews we have been praying or 2,000 years, "next year in Jerusalem." Thank God, we are in Jerusalem. Every year, every day, every night in Jerusalem. Forever in Jerusalem.

Sharon is not afraid to ground immediate calls for political action in a transcendent rhetoric that blends a mythical, eternal future with the ardent desire and vision of nationalism. Under Sharon's hands, religion is a pretext for political sovereignty, a tool for reaffirming and legitimizing that sovereignty, and a means of consolidating Israeli national identity. Sharon appeals to religion to strengthen the state against threats from the outside. He shores up internal support for himself by clearly defining the lines that constitute loyalty to the people and the transcendent nature of Israel, and implicitly contrasts his view with stances which evidence betrayal and distance from the sentiments of the people.

Though Sharon argued that his visit was motivated by the approaching holiday of *Rosh HaShanah*, other commentators have attributed his visit to less pious motives. Several factors within the political life of Israel converged at the same time as Sharon's visit, and raise troubling questions about Sharon's motives. On the night before Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount, he called for early internal party elections within the Likud party. On the following day, Sharon's greatest rival for the leadership of the Likud party, Benjamin Netanyahu, was cleared of charges of fraud by an Israeli court. In addition, an interview with Ehud Barak, detailing his new proposals re-

garding the peace settlement with Palestinians, was scheduled to be released on the same day. The interview contained Barak's statements on joint sovereignty over Jerusalem, the recognition of a Palestinian state, and the establishment of international authority over the Temple Mount. In the larger arena of global politics, negotiations regarding a peace settlement between Arabs and Israelis were at a crucial juncture at Camp David in the U.S and the world at large was watching the entire situation with keen interest. So Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount constituted an advance to centre stage within the contests of power in his own political party, within Israeli politics in general, between Arabs and Israelis, and even in the debates raging on the global political stage. In terms of receiving attention, Sharon was at the right place, at the right time, employing actors and gestures designed to dramatically accentuate his desire to be heard.

But are Sharon's ideas taken as authoritative among the general population of Jerusalem? Obviously not among Palestinians. The constitution of authority is important in understanding the political dynamics involved in this conflict between peoples. Authority is not a transcendent substance, a property owned and commanded by civil or military figures. Instead, authority is an effect—something dynamic, contestable, and constructed. Authority is a result of a conjunction of things:

> I take the effect to be the result of the conjuncture of the right speaker, the right speech and delivery, the right staging and props, the right time and place, and an audience whose historically and culturally conditioned expectations establish the parameters of what is judged "right" in all these instances. When these crucial givens of the discursive situation combine in such a way as to produce attitudes of trust, respect, docility, acceptance, even reverence, in the audience, or—viewing things from the opposite perspective—when the preexistent values, orientations, and expectations of an audience predispose it to respond to a given speech, speaker, and setting with these reverent and submissive attitudes, "authority" is the result (Lincoln 1994, 10).

Sharon's march on the Haram al-Sharif is an excellent example of mustering of a wide variety of modes of discourse—a political speech,

highly symbolic social stages, the rhetoric of legitimate power and in-
herent rights, and the use of force—in a bid for legitimate power. It is
an attempt to bring together "the right speaker, the right speech and
delivery, the right staging and props, the right time and place" in an
appeal for acknowledgement as the rightful guardian of legitimate gov-
ernment and power. Given the political circumstances of the time,
however, it is probably safe to conclude that Sharon was not bidding
for Palestinian recognition, but for the allegiance of Jewish parties dur-
ing a time of flux and uncertainty in government.

This incident is also an example of how authority can very easily
break down due to differences between the speaker attempting to con-
struct authority for himself and the audience to whom he appeals. If
authority involves first of all the conjunction of the right speaker with
the right audience, then in this case, the effect of authority is torn
apart by the radical distrust, hatred and disdain held by Palestinians
toward Ariel Sharon. Though Sharon has stated that his remarks on
the Haram al-Sharif were meant to offer a conciliatory tone toward
Palestinians, the other symbolic elements in his tour of the site worked
against him in this matter. If Sharon gave a speech about the possibil-
ity of peace between Arabs and Israelis, this was overshadowed by his
refusal to acknowledge warnings issued by the *Waqf* (the Muslim reli-
gious trust in charge of administering and protecting the Haram al-
Sharif) that his visit could result in violence. The presence of 1,000
Israeli security troops definitely conveys a statement of superior right
in territorial matters due to superior physical power.

His visit could well have been a bid to topple any potential opposi-
tion to his position as the number one candidate for leadership of the
Likud party. Within the political dynamics of the peace process that
was taking place at the time, Sharon's actions set forth a clear position
regarding his stance on the most volatile issues of the negotiating proc-
ess—the status of Jerusalem and of the administrative authority of the
Temple Mount. Sharon demonstrated that no form of negotiation that
challenged Jewish claims to political rights on the Haram al-Sharif
would be acknowledged. Whether this was an action to undermine the
peace process or simply to clearly articulate a position is uncertain.
Many have accused Sharon of deliberately inciting violence.

The Palestinian audience, however, was in no way conditioned to passively, respectfully, or submissively accept his statements. Instead, the situation gave way to a spectacle of violence. While force is often the monopoly of dominant groups, it can also be a primarily means of resistance among those whose interests are regularly overlooked and whose access to other channels of expression are routinely blocked. Force, articulated in rebellion, uprisings, and resistances, can serve as a powerful tool in deconstructing or attempting to destroy a particular social configuration. To date, this situation of challenge and riposte, strike and counter-strike epitomizes the status of Israeli-Palestinian politics.

Herein lies the crucial paradox of authority surrounding the Haram al-Sharif. According to Sharon, only Israeli sovereignty will guarantee free access to all. Palestinians, however, challenge the right of Israel to exercise sovereignty over the Haram. Such a disagreement over sovereignty results in Israeli *power* and *control* over the Haram, but does not result in *authority*. Unless Israeli sovereignty is acknowledged among Palestinians, it remains sovereignty only in word, not in fact, and the claims and counterclaims to authority resound in political speeches and violent acts. On 4 January 2001, in an ironically well-timed coincidence, Israel's Chief Rabbinate Council ruled that it was absolutely prohibited by Jewish law to grant sovereignty or ownership of the Temple Mount to foreigners—thus excluding the possibility of Palestinian sovereignty or internationalization—on the same day that the Mufti of Jerusalem, Shaykh Ikrama Sabri declared in an interview that Islamic law prohibits non-Muslim sovereignty over the Noble Sanctuary (Chronology 2001b, 303). As long as Israeli or Palestinian sovereignty is physically contested, it is not fully established; it is instead a constant vying for authority, never the attainment of it. True Israeli or Palestinian sovereignty will only come with acknowledgement of Israeli rights by Palestinians or vice versa. The rhetoric of authority, rights, sacredness, and sovereignty is a failed rhetoric in fact. Instead, authority is always on the verge of breaking down. It is constantly renewed through the rhetoric of the sacred, inherent historical rights of one group over another, and the exercise of coercive force.

The use of religious rhetoric is, of course, not confined to the Israeli political establishment, as the violent discourse of the glories of martyrdom well shows.  This radical Islamist rhetoric has impacts far beyond the confines of the West Bank and Gaza, as the apocalyptic vision of Palestinian Sheik Abed el-Fatah illustrates.

> This uprising will not be limited to Palestine but will spread to the entire Arab world.  It will unite all the Muslims behind our struggle.  All the Jews who came here from other countries, from all over the world, must now go back.  Those that are from Palestine can stay, as long as they are peaceful (Hedges 2001, 132).

## Conclusions

No doubt the deep frustrations and hatreds between Arabs and Israelis are deeply rooted in historical conflicts, in social and economic discrepancies, many of which fuel conflicts under the guise of religion.  The situation is not just a conflict of myth, but the element of myth plays an important part in dramatizing the conflicts, mobilizing social groups, and bringing the conflicts to the forefront of national and international attention.  Myth serves to disguise the social and political processes at work within the conflicts, and create a sense of conflict over ultimate ideals.

The conflicts that engulf the whole land of Israel encompass all the basics of life (water, land, housing, food supplies, rights of burial, voting rights, rights of religious expression) and are very deeply intertwined with ideas of the sacredness of the land and its ties to a mythic past and future.  The religious elements also serve to simultaneously conceal and reveal competing economic interests, territorial claims, and racial hatreds.  In reverse of the biblical story of childhood conflict between Isaac and Ishmael, Isaac is now consistently heckling Ishmael, to which Ishmael responds violently.  Ultimately, what is reified as the will of God, favouring whichever group claims that blessing, is instead the will to power.  That will to power is easily observed as Jewish or Islamist religious parties vie for control with secular parties both within the Israeli Knesset and amongst the Palestinian people.  And it is horrendously visible as Palestinian youth proclaim the will of Allah mani-

fest in violence, make their suicidal gestures of self-sacrifice and Israeli forces respond with superior firepower and brutal repression.

## Postscript (May 2002)

Events since the original completion of this study in the spring of 2001 require an acknowledgement as this is being revised for publication. As I write this, I look back on the Israeli rejection of the peace proposals of the Saudi Crown Prince, the invasions of Jenin, Bethlehem, and Ramallah by Israeli forces, massive protests—at times numbering a million strong—across the Arab world against the actions taken by Israel, and an unbelievable campaign of suicide bombings within Israel. Looking at the conflict in terms of religious rhetoric may only suffice for explaining some of the violence, but an understanding of the raw emotion that makes for the cleavages in the Middle East is indispensable, especially should the scenario which the framing of the conflict devolves from that of competing nationalism to that of bitter and vicious rivalries between ethnic-religious groups.

The role of religious rhetoric in framing conflicts has become more pressing for Americans following 11 September 2001. Understanding the motivating ideologies of militant Islamic fundamentalism has become a national priority. But as scholars of religion, politics, or society, it is imperative for us to remain keenly aware of the role and consequences of American religious rhetoric, as epitomized in that now pervasive slogan, "God Bless America," in framing global conflicts and shaping national identity, consciousness and action.

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