

Anwar Sadat's Visit to Jerusalem, 1955

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In Anwar Sadat's English-language autobiography *In Search of Identity* (1978), there is an insert of photographs, including one depicting the young Sadat wearing a suit and standing with a group of notables against the backdrop of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The caption of the photograph explains that it was taken during his visit to Jerusalem in 1955, as secretary-general of the Islamic Congress.¹



Anwar Sadat with Jordanian hosts at the Dome of the Rock, December 1955.

What was Sadat doing on that visit? The question is left unanswered in the autobiography, where Sadat simply notes that his famous 1977 visit was his second to the city.² The 1955 visit is similarly omitted in the biographical literature on Sadat. Analysis of the visit, aside from satisfying curiosity about the episode itself, sheds light on the situation of divided Jerusalem prior to 1967, and the status of Jerusalem in Islam.

A day in Jerusalem

The December 1955 visit was part of a longer itinerary, which brought Anwar Sadat to Syria, Lebanon,

Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. The declared purpose of this excursion was to mobilize support for the idea of holding an Islamic conference, of governments and peoples, under the auspices of the Islamic Congress, a Cairo-based organization which answered to Sadat himself. On December 11, after stops in Lebanon and Syria, Sadat arrived in the Jordanian capital of Amman. There he explained to journalists that the sole purpose of his visit was to advance the cause of the Islamic Congress, and in particular to discuss a possible time and site for a conference of Islamic states. There he met with Shaykh 'Abdullah Ghusha, president of Jordan's religious board, to discuss the visit to Jerusalem scheduled for the next day.³

The following day, December 12, Sadat arrived in Jerusalem by motorcade, where he was received by the governor of Jerusalem and local notables, including Shaykh Ghusha; Sa'd al-Din al-'Alami, mufti of Jerusalem; and Shaykh Muhammad al-Amin al-Shinqiti, the chief qadi (religious court judge) of Jordan. Sadat prayed in the Aqsa Mosque and also in the Dome of the Rock, heard explanations about both sites, and received some published materials about them. He also pronounced the *fatiha* over the tomb of King (formerly Sharif) Hussein Ibn Ali.⁴

Subsequently, Sadat issued a statement, announcing that Egypt pledged 75,000 Egyptian pounds for renovations of the Aqsa Mosque, and another 75,000 to establish a permanent office for maintenance of the mosque and shrine. Egyptian engineers were already on their way to oversee the work of renovation. Sadat also promised that the Islamic Congress would assist Islamic education in the city by providing textbooks, teachers, and expansion of schools.⁵

But his most ambitious plan was the establishment of an Islamic cultural center, with Egyptian funding, which would be larger and grander than the cultural centers established by the Western powers. The cultural center would be a meeting place for Muslims from around the world, and would even draw students from as far away as Pakistan and Indonesia. The Islamic Congress had already budgeted 250,000 Egyptian pounds for the establishment of the center, Sadat announced. He anticipated the construction would begin within a year, and would be completed within three years.⁶

As for the location of the building, Sadat had already set his sights on an appropriate tract. Standing above the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Dome of the Rock, he asked who owned the promontory. He was told that it belonged to the *waqf*, the authority for Islamic religious endowments. Sadat expresses his desire that the Islamic cultural center be built there. The holy city, he said, had to reflect the greatness of the Arabs and Islam, and so it had to expand. But he added that the precise site of the center would be determined in consultation with the Jordanian authorities and the Egyptian consulate in Jerusalem.⁷ He then proceeded to visit Hebron, and returned to Amman.

Only in Amman did Sadat make a political statement. This was a moment of heightened tensions between Israel on the one hand, and Syria and Egypt on the other. Sadat announced that there was an appropriate response to Israeli provocations: force and the strengthening of Arab armies. The armies of Syria and Egypt would respond in a coordinated fashion to any Zionist provocation, and he also called for the military recruitment of Palestinian refugees to the struggle.⁸

Defeating the Baghdad Pact

The visit may be interpreted on a number of levels. First, it occupies a place in the history of the organization—the Islamic Congress—in whose service Anwar Sadat came to Jerusalem. More broadly, the Islamic Congress may be located in the context of the Egyptian struggle against the Baghdad Pact.

The Islamic Congress was the product of a tripartite initiative, of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. In August 1954, a meeting took place in Mecca, during the pilgrimage season, among Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser, King Sa'ud, and Pakistani Governor-General Ghulam Muhammad. The three leaders came to an agreement to establish the Islamic Congress, out of different and even contradictory expectations. Egypt hoped to create a neutral Afro-Asian block, using Islam as a unifier. Pakistan, in contrast, sought to use Islam, and the Islamic Congress, as the foundation of an anti-

Soviet Muslim alliance supported by the Western powers. Saudi Arabia at that time was aligned with Egypt, and saw the Islamic Congress as a counter-balance to a possible Iraqi-led union of the Fertile Crescent. King Sa'ud was accorded the symbolic title of president of the Congress, and Anwar Sadat, at the time minister of state in the Egyptian government and editor of the daily newspaper *Al-Jumhuriyya*, was appointed the secretary-general of the organization.⁹ The Islamic Congress established its headquarters in Cairo, in the opulent royal Palais Toussoun in the fashionable Zamalik neighborhood. (Sadat's first renovation was to turn Prince Said Toussoun's well-appointed bar into a prayer room.)¹⁰

The Islamic Congress almost immediately split in February 1955, when Pakistan joined the Baghdad Pact and Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru visited Cairo. Egypt strongly opposed the Baghdad Pact, and conducted a vigorous campaign to prevent the accession of other Arab countries. Anwar Sadat's visit to Jordan in December 1955 took place at the height of the crisis surrounding the question of Jordan's possible accession to the Pact. Sadat was immediately preceded in Amman by a British emissary, Sir Gerald Templer, chief of the Imperial General Staff, who tried to persuade King Hussein to join the Pact. Sadat's visit (like that of Egyptian chief of staff 'Abd al-Hakim 'Amr to the Jordanian capital earlier that same month) had the intent of thwarting British plans, in particular by mobilizing Palestinian opinion against the Pact. An Israeli press report went so far as to describe the Islamic Congress as "a fictitious file," behind which Sadat pursued Egypt's effort to counter the pro-Western alliance.¹¹

How did Sadat operate in Amman? The first secretary of the British embassy there suspected that Sadat personally bribed the Palestinian ministers in the government to threaten resignation over the Baghdad Pact, describing Sadat as "one of the direct causes of the breakdown of the negotiations with the Jordan government."¹² On December 14, just after Sadat's departure, serious riots broke out on both banks of the Jordan, putting the regime in peril. The American ambassador to Jordan had no doubt about the causes of the unrest: "During the internal crisis and riots of December 14-21, 1955, the strength of Egyptian influence was manifest. Very revealing also is public acceptance and even approbation of subversive character of Egyptian activity."¹³ On his return to Egypt, Sadat claimed he had succeeded in uncovering a vast British conspiracy to recruit the Arabs to the Baghdad Pact.¹⁴ In his memoirs, he wrote: "It is no exaggeration to say that I played an important part in the frustration of the Baghdad Pact."¹⁵ Indeed he did.

It was oddly ironic that Sadat used his position as Secretary General of the Islamic Congress to block an effort to organize an Arab front against Soviet expansion. In his book *The Game of Nations*, CIA agent Miles Copeland revealed that the Americans had a clandestine link to the Islamic Congress:

The Islamic Congress was founded in 1954 with Anwar Sadat as its head, Hassan Touhami becoming his deputy a year or so later. It sent Koranic literature to Africa, and held conferences on such subjects as Islamic law, Islamic art and Islamic archaeology. Religious attachés were sent to various Egyptian missions abroad and assigned the task of watching for opportunities use common religious interests to achieve at least tactical "union" against one or another of the Great Powers on some specific issue. The American Government at first gave limited encouragement to the program, on the theory that the Egyptians could help persuade some of the countries of Africa (northern Nigeria, for example) that progress wasn't inconsistent with the teachings of Islam. The encouragement was discontinued in the early 1960s when it became apparent that the religious attachés were less concerned with progress than with developing ties that would be helpful in "the struggle against our common enemy, imperialism."¹⁶

The meaning of the words "encouragement" and "support" in the lexicon of Copeland was usually

financial rather than moral. Hassan Touhami, one of Nasser's most trusted aids, was also Copeland's own link to Nasser. Copeland's hint receives some validation from a report of the French ambassador to Egypt, dating from 1954, which relates rumors to the effect that "American circles" viewed the establishment of the Islamic Congress favorably, seeing it as something useful for its own future political plans.¹⁷ Just how the Americans rationalized this support is an unknown.



Sadat at the Aqsa Mosque during the same visit.

Against the Brotherhood

Sadat's visit to Jerusalem also occurred on another plane: that of the struggle between the Free Officers regime in Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood preceded Sadat to Jerusalem. In December 1953, an international Islamic conference had been held in Jerusalem, bringing together Muslim Brotherhood activists from Egypt and Syria, as well as from like-minded movements throughout the Muslim world. In this manner, the Muslim Brotherhood sought to place itself at the forefront of the continuing struggle against the state of Israel, and to transform Jerusalem into a hub for the Muslim Brotherhood everywhere. The 1953 conference evoked an earlier Islamic conference, held in 1931 in Jerusalem, and organized by the then-leader of the Palestinian national movement, Hajj Amin al-Husayni. It even had the same name: the General Islamic Congress. (The organizers had hoped that Hajj Amin himself would head of the conference—at the time, he was residing in Damascus—but the Jordanian authorities prevented his entry.)¹⁸

Participants in the 1953 conference included Sayyid Qutb, the chief ideologue of the Muslim Brotherhood; Mustafa al-Siba'i, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria; 'Allal al-Fasi, head of the Moroccan Istiqlal party; and Navab Safavi, head of the Iranian Feda'iyān-e Islam. The conference passed resolutions condemning the existence of Israel and rejecting proposals for the internationalization of Jerusalem.¹⁹ Navab Safavi paid an emotional visit to the Palestinian refugee

camp of Deheisha, and Sayyid Qutb visited Qibya, site of a large-scale retaliatory raid by Israeli commandos in October 1953 that resulted in the deaths of scores of civilians. “I returned from Qibya,” he said, “and I doubt whether we are men. I hope this doubt will not last.”²⁰ (Both Safavi and Qutb would eventually be executed for their political activities, by the regimes in Iran and Egypt, respectively.)

The Jordanians, in permitting such a conference, faced a dilemma similar to that confronted the British authorities in Jerusalem twenty-two years earlier. The Jordanians feared that the conference would turn into an anti-imperialist, anti-British, anti-French, and anti-Soviet demonstration—and a diplomatic embarrassment. At the same time, they wished to allow the Muslim Brotherhood to show solidarity with Jordan against the Zionist enemy. The authorities therefore set limits to the scope of the conference. Its resolutions were to relate only to the struggle against Israel. The participants held an informal gathering *after* the conference, in Amman, where they vented their opposition to various forms of imperialist oppression (British, French, and Soviet).²¹ Following the conference, a secretariat was established in Jerusalem, which was supposed to organize future conferences. Sa’id Ramadan, a leading Egyptian Muslim Brother, was elected secretary general of the conference, and Kamil al-Sharif, another Egyptian Muslim Brother, was named his deputy.

During the course of 1954, the relationship between the Nasser regime and the Muslim Brotherhood deteriorated rapidly, especially after a failed assassination attempt against Nasser on October 26. As the crackdown evolved, Egypt also tried to create difficulties for the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, and especially in Jerusalem. Cairo pressured Amman to close the secretariat of the Islamic Congress, and when Sa’id Ramadan entered Jordan in April 1954, Jordanian intelligence detained and interrogated him. Ramadan threatened to transfer the secretariat to another country.²² He later moved to Syria, where he felt more secure. In September 1954, he and Sharif were stripped of their Egyptian citizenship, and Sharif was expelled from Jordan in November 1954.²³ In the summer of 1955, authorities shut down the office of the conference, in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Despite this, a number of mediation efforts were undertaken, especially by Syrian ulama, in order to resuscitate the Jerusalem conference. Against this background, it is possible to detect a second hidden mission in Sadat’s visit, and especially in his proposal to establish an Islamic cultural center on the Mount of Olives. The center, under Egyptian supervision, would assure that Jerusalem would not be turned again into stronghold of the Muslim Brotherhood in future—a firm base from which the Brotherhood could operate against the Egyptian regime. The center would also have established Egypt as champion of the struggle to preserve the Islamic character of the city against Zionists enemy.

Sadat several times had to clarify the position of the Islamic Congress vis-à-vis the parallel organization of the Muslim Brotherhood. Earlier, in 1954, he had been asked whether the Muslim Brotherhood would be welcomed in the Islamic Congress. He replied that the goals of the Congress and the Brotherhood differed. The Islamic Congress rejected “fanaticism,” whereas the Brotherhood stood for stagnation and against the development and renaissance of Islam.²⁴

On his 1955 trip, he slightly moderated his tone. In Damascus, prior to his arrival in Jordan, he said he saw no obstacle to unifying efforts with those who had held their conference in Jerusalem, provided that they first distance themselves from politics, since only harm came to Muslims by inserting religion in political affairs.²⁵ In Jordan, in response to a question, Sadat said that his organization wished success to “those who organized their last conference in Jerusalem”—that is, the Muslim Brothers—and that there was a need for “tens” of such conferences.²⁶ In this manner, Sadat avoided direct public criticism of the efforts of the Muslim Brothers, who had enjoyed the cooperation of the religious establishment in Jerusalem. But the timing of Sadat’s visit—shortly after the closure of the conference office in Jerusalem and the expulsion of its organizers—indicated that Sadat did not expect to operate alongside the Muslim Brothers in Jerusalem, but in their place.

Not that the Islamic Congress really intended to convene a conference in Jerusalem. A collection of

documents from the papers of 'Awni Abd al-Hadi, who served as Jordanian ambassador to Egypt in the early 1950s, quotes correspondence from the ambassador indicating that the Jordanian Foreign Ministry pressured him to promote the idea of holding an Islamic conference in Jerusalem. ('Abd al-Hadi was unenthusiastic about the idea, hence the need to pressure him.) The ministry believed that such a conference, of Islamic states in Jerusalem, would strengthen Jordan's international position and would constitute Islamic validation of Jordan's annexation of the city and the West Bank to the kingdom of Jordan.²⁷

But Nasser poured cold water on the idea. In a conversation with 'Abd al-Hadi, Nasser warned of the downsides of holding an *Islamic* conference in Jerusalem. There was a danger that the Christian world would react negatively to such a conference, viewing it as an attempt to enforce the supremacy of Islam over the holy places. He also doubted that the Arabs would receive any meaningful support from non-Arab Muslims, who so far had extended no material or moral assistance to their Arab brethren.²⁸ It seems likely that Nasser also did not wish to rule out other options for solving the Jerusalem question, which might have involved internationalization of the city.

So it was no surprise that Anwar Sadat, during his visit, evaded the question of whether the Islamic conference might be held in Jerusalem itself. Such a decision, he stated, rested with the higher council of the Islamic Congress. As a gesture to his hosts, he said that he personally preferred Jerusalem, but also made it clear that this preference was his alone.²⁹ In fact, there was never a serious plan to convene an actual conference in Jerusalem (or anywhere else). Egypt's aim, through the Islamic Congress, was to *prevent* future Islamic conferences in Jerusalem—specifically, those organized by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Aftermath: Success and Failure

Upon the conclusion of his visit to Jerusalem, Sadat continued on his way to Saudi Arabia, the Gulf, and Iraq. He left Jordan in a state of turmoil, having successfully done his part to block its path to the Baghdad Pact.

But the Islamic Congress spent itself in the process. Nasser later presented the Islamic Congress itself as a casualty of the Baghdad Pact, in a speech in 1966: "When the Baghdad Pact was formed early in 1955 it became impossible for the Islamic Congress to be convened as a political conference not linked with imperialism... After the creation of the Baghdad Pact and the joining of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Iraq, it became difficult for the Islamic Congress to meet on a political basis. We therefore pursued the idea on a popular level."³⁰ By 1956, Saudi Arabia had also dropped out, leaving the Islamic Congress as a purely Egyptian propaganda tool, devoted to spreading Egyptian influence in Africa, India, and Southeast Asia. Sadat himself moved on in 1961, to be replaced by Kamal al-Din Husayn, a Free Officer known for his Islamic leanings. By that time, the Islamic Congress had disappeared from public view.

Likewise, nothing ever came of the plan to establish an Islamic cultural center on the Mount of Olives. Egyptian-Jordanian relations began to deteriorate, and in the course of 1956, Nasser sought to undermine the very foundations of the Hashemite Kingdom. The Jordanians, a few years later, permitted the construction of the Inter-continental Hotel (today, the Seven Arches) precisely where Sadat had envisioned the site of the Islamic cultural center.

The Jordanians also allowed the Muslim Brothers to return and reestablish themselves in Jerusalem. Signs of reconciliation were evident already in 1956. The Jordanians did not permit the Muslim Brothers to convene their conference in Jerusalem that year, so it was held in Damascus. But the participants received permission to visit Jerusalem after their conference, and the conference bureau reopened in Jerusalem.³¹ The Muslim Brothers subsequently held three more conferences in Jerusalem between 1960 and 1962. Among the participants were some of the most notable figures in the pantheon of radical Islam. In addition to those who participated in 1953, mentioned earlier, additional participants included Abu al-A'la Maududi, leader of the Jama'at-e Islami of Pakistan;

Ayatollah Mohammad Taleqani of Iran; Fathi Yakan from Lebanon; and many others. As the hostility between Nasser and King Hussein grew, so did the criticism of the Egyptian regime unleashed at these conferences. They served not only the purposes of the Muslim Brothers, but also those of King Hussein, against his enemies both at home and abroad.

In 1962, the Muslim Brotherhood convened its last conference in Jerusalem. Many members had moved on to Saudi Arabia, and there they took to convening in the holy cities, and especially during the pilgrimage season. Saudi Arabia had become a more secure base from which to conduct their campaign against the Nasser regime. The office of the conference nevertheless continued to operate in Jerusalem. After 1967, it relocated to Amman, where it became an appendage of the Jordanian Ministry of Religious Endowments.

In summation, during the Jordanian period, the uneasy alliance between the Hashemite monarchy and the Muslim Brotherhood succeeded but little in advancing the cause of Jerusalem on the Islamic level. The divisions in the Arab and Islamic worlds, over the Baghdad Pact and the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, prevented the creation of an organized framework for strengthening the position of the city, raising funds for its Islamic sites, and convening gatherings in solidarity with the struggle for an Islamic Jerusalem. Such frameworks were established only after 1967, and especially after an act of arson damaged the Al-Aqsa mosque in 1969.

It was the fire that finally brought about the creation of an Islamic organization of states, from which there emerged the Jerusalem Committee in Morocco, the Jerusalem Fund, and a wide range of activities on behalf of Jerusalem in the Islamic world. The Organization of the Islamic Conference, according to its constitution (article 21), is committed to moving its seat from Jedda to Jerusalem upon the "liberation" of the city. Whether it will seek to do so in the way that Sadat proposed in 1955, or in the way he paved in 1977, remains to be seen.



Anwar Sadat prays in the Aqsa Mosque on his second visit to Jerusalem, November 1977.

Notes

1. Anwar el-Sadat, *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), insert between pp. 216-17.
2. "I left early in the morning, Sunday, for al-Aqsa Mosque to perform the Bairam prayers. I was in Arab Jerusalem for the second time in twenty-two years. (The first time was when I was Minister of State and secretary-general of the Islamic Congress.)" El-Sadat, *In Search*, p. 310.
3. *Filastin, al-Difa'*, December 12, 1955.
4. *Filastin*, December 13, 1955.
5. *Filastin*, December 13, 1955.
6. *Al-Difa'*, December 13, 1955; *Al-Ahram*, December 13, 1955.
7. *Filastin*, December 13, 1955; *Al-Ahram*, December 13, 1955.
8. *Al-Difa'*, December 14, 1955.
9. Sadat press conference, *Al-Ahram*, September 17, 1954; "Congrès islamique annuel," *Cahiers de l'Orient contemporain* (Paris), no. 30 (2d semestre, 1954), pp. 146-47; "Le Congrès Islamique," *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Études Orientales du Caire* (Cairo), vol. 3 (1956), pp. 471-78; Mahmud Brelvi, "The Islamic Congress (*Al-Mo'tamar al-Islami*), Cairo: A Brief Survey of its Work," *The Islamic Review* (Woking, England), vol. 44, no. 10 (October 1955), p. 13, <http://www.wokingmuslim.org/work/islamic-review/1955/oct55.pdf>.
10. *Al-Ahram*, August 25, 1953.
11. *Davar*, December 12, 1955.
12. Heath Mason, first secretary, dispatch of December 31, 1955, FO371/121476.
13. Lester D. Mallory, U.S. ambassador to Jordan, dispatch of January 5, 1956, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955-1957, Volume XIII, Near East: Jordan-Yemen* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1988), p. 13; <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v13/d11>.
14. *Al-Jumhuriyya*, December 24-27, 1955.
15. El-Sadat, *In Search*, p. 136.
16. Miles Copeland, *The Game of Nations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969), pp. 185-86
17. Maurice Couve de Murville, French ambassador to Egypt, dispatch of September 22, 1954, archive of the French Embassy in Cairo, carton 70, 12/, "Congrès Islamique," now at the Centre des archives diplomatiques in Nantes, France.
18. *Al-Ahram*, December 10, 1953.
19. *Al-Ahram*, December 10, 1953.
20. *Ha-Po'el Ha-Tza'ir*, December 22, 1953.
21. *Filastin*, December 12, 1953.
22. French consul in Jerusalem, despatch no. 340 of April 12, 1954, archive of the French Embassy in Cairo, carton 70, 12/5C, "Frères musulmans," now at the Centre des archives diplomatiques in Nantes, France.
23. French consul in Jerusalem, despatch no. 1045 of November 29, 1954, archive of the French

Embassy in Cairo, carton 70, 12/5C, "Frères musulmans," now at the Centre des archives diplomatiques in Nantes, France.

24. *Al-Ahram*, September 17, 1954.

25. *Al-Ahram*, December 12, 1955.

26. *Al-Difa'*, December 13, 1955.

27. 'Awni 'Abd al-Hadi, despatch of May 19, 1954, quoted by Khayriya Qasimiya, '*Awni 'Abd al-Hadi: Awraq Khassa* (Beirut: PLO Research Center, 1974), p. 199.

28. Ibid.

29. *Al-Difa'*, December 12, 1955.

30. *Address by President Gamal Abdel Nasser at the great popular rally held by the Arab Socialist Union in celebration of the anniversary of Unity Day, Cairo, February 22, 1966* (Cairo: National Publication House, 1966), pp. 37-38; *Al-Ahram*, February 23, 1966.

31. *Filastin*, July 2, 1956.