

**Religiosity as Materiality of Resistance and Emergent Identity:  
The Lababidi mosque in Acre**

**Introduction**

In the summer of 2005, the Municipality of Acre (an ethnically mixed city in northern Israel) along with the Old Acre Development Company Ltd carried out a renovation project of the Lababidi mosque, a family endowment dating to the 1930's. It would seem that even the mere likelihood of a future renovation of the mosque sufficed to instigate a heated debate among city's inhabitants, organizations, and officials. The gist of it was an ongoing controversy within the Jewish majority of Acre regarding the Arab minority's right to reconstruct their historical mosque, and the fear that Arab citizens will take over the city center through pushing of Jewish citizens out. These kinds of unchecked and highly emotional responses regarding the mosque serve as a clear indication to the importance of religious voices within contemporary cities in the postsecular. Despite the heated public debate voiced by members of the Jewish majority no dramatic changes took place, not in the mosque and certainly not in the surrounding neighborhoods for nearly seven years. After a quiescent period of seven years, the al-Jazzar Islamic Endowment committee of Acre (hereafter Endowment Authorities) launched a restoration project which ultimately reinstated the compound according to its original function; an Islamic house of prayer. Since, March 2012, and against the backdrop of the growing unrest and militant declaration of various Jewish member and organizations within the Jewish community, regular prayers are conducted in the mosque five times a day and throughout the week.

The Lababidi mosque in Acre will serve us in this lecture to contribute and challenge two bodies of knowledge:

- a. The debate over the post secular in general and the post secular city in particular (Beaumont and Baker , 2011; Beaumont and Cloak, 2012).
- b. The literature on the contested nature of sacred places (Chidester and Linenthal, 1995; Smith, 1978; Van der Leeuw, 1933; Eade and Sallnow, 1991; Kong, 2001).

These understandings and theoretical awareness serves us as in our current project in which the discussion of the Lababidi is part off: Enchanted Places on the Margins. In this project we adopt a neo-Gramscian and a neo-Weberian approach to the study of the sacred and engage in a comparative analysis of newly emerging sacred sites among Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities in Israel. These sacred sites serve as tools or platforms for social resistance, local political struggles, and cultural innovation, thereby posing a challenge to the dominant landscape. The basic premise of our project is that assaying these sacred venues while they are still in the “process of becoming” promises to shed light on the way in which specific meanings and practices are articulated, contested, and negotiated by various religious groups that find themselves pitted against the establishment. Furthermore, these defining moments are critical to understanding how belief systems are imprinted into pilgrimage routes and other holy landscapes. While working in our various sites we deploy different contemporary cultural and structural theses on hegemony and relations between elites and non-ascendant groups within ethno-religious spaces. In this specific case study we are concerned with trying to understand how does religious reconstructions and the tensions they evolve effect urban life and landscapes?

In order to set the current case in context and specifically the issue of resistance we would embark on one of our previous works. While working on the production of meaning to the Haram al-Sharif the revered Islamic site in the region one of our interlocutors, a professor of sociology which hails back from a Christian family formulated his understanding about Islamic sites in Israel in the following manner:

The holy Islamic places are more important to me than the Christian ones...the mosque in Jaffa or in Acre, and the mosque in a ruined village are all signs for the continuation of Palestine... I would pay good money for a mosque to be built atop Mount Carmel because it challenges the political Jewish identity of the State of Israel.

- This is surely but one of the ways these places may be understood and promoted but it is pertinent in the case at hand as it might shed more light on the reactions among the Jewish majority community regarding the emerging of a new Muslim site. In this short presentation of the renovation project of the Lababidi mosque we argue that:
- The city in the postsecular is growingly succumbing to a plethora of religious voices.

- These voices are becoming highly influential forces in recalibrating, reforming and formulating the modern secularist city planning and increasingly shaping the urban landscape as well as physical and social dynamics of the city.
- The analysis of the Lababidi mosque reconstruction process suggests that in postsecular Acre religion is re-inscribed onto the urban landscape, language and conduct both as an instrument of (mis)communication and as an instrument of knowledge - indeed a Bourdiean symbolic medium which is becoming a field of negotiation and contestations among different players at different urban scales. This last point relates to the fact that the growing presence of religious claims in the urban sphere serves mostly to growing miscommunications and animosity as our observations point out.

From a methodological perspective we adopt, engage and combine various methods:

Ethnography of the reconstruction and renovation project of the mosque

Interviews with citizens of Acre.

Visits and survey of the mosque

Literary survey – press, internet sites and forums

In order to set the mosque renovation in context of the postsecular I will briefly outline the urban development of Acre since 1948 to the present as part of the State of Israel.

The historical city of Acre was confined to its walls until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Following a modernization plan in 1909 a new suburb grew north of the Old City. During the British Mandate (1917-1948) this suburb quickly developed consisting mostly of lucrative townhouses of affluent families. In this suburb a new mosque was endowed in 1930 and due to the fact that it served a relatively rich community or upper echelons member it was built without the iconic Islamic landmark in the shape of a minaret to avoid the sounds of the muezzin five times a day as some of our interlocutors suggested. The establishments of the Jewish state in 1948 have had a dramatic effect on development of the city, on the Arab urban community and circuitously on the Lababidi mosque. The Jewish state brought along a new understanding and dimensions of urban planning. Part of this was the advancement of a Jewish hegemonic position on spaces and lands (Kimmerling 1983; Low-Yone and Kallus, 2001). After the conquest of the city of Acre by IDF forces on May 18, 1948, the city won the somewhat dubious title of a 'mixed city'. In the context of modern Israeli this usually refers to cities where Jews and Arabs live together along

ethnonational fault lines which have both social and spatial manifestations in the city. In most cases this alleged 'co-existence' is involuntary and largely entails mistrust, dispossession of the subordinate group by the hegemonic one and often enough violent outbursts between the two groups. As of the 1960s the Old City was assigned for Arab population while the newly planned and constructed modern neighborhoods were earmarked for Jewish population (Rubin, 1974). The modern parts of the city, even though initially inhabited by Jewish citizens, shortly succumbed to local demography, needs and simple economic logic of supply and demand. As times passed the new neighborhoods became more and more heterogenic.

### **Lababidi histories and memoirs**

The mosque served its community for a short 18 years and following the creation of the state of Israel as a Jewish state and the urban turmoil of Acre was closed to any activities until 2012. In 2005 a short renovation was initiated by the Ministry of Tourism which was followed with a heated debate among the Jewish and Arab citizens of Acre. The real change took place after a new committee of endowment was elected headed by Salim Najami who in addition to his role as a top executive in an Israeli bank serves in the city council. One of his first goals was to reinstate the mosque. Najami was adamant to renovate the mosque and was even more unyielding after receiving some calls and visits at the worksite by officials from the Ministry of Interior Affairs, the Ministry of Law and local police officers. They were all concerned by what they referred to as crossing a red line and breaking the urban delicate status quo. But Najami was undeterred:

Every backstreet in Acre has a synagogue and if you add to this the new compound of the Yeshiva and what is it that we ask for; simply to pray! ... what is wrong with an old man living outside the Old City enjoying a closer place in which he can pray? (Interview, 26.12.2012)

Not being a religious man himself Najami was also unimpressed by various statements and appeals of Islamic clergies in Acre that tried to persuade him to make large statements through the renovation of the compound. The renovation was kept simple and functional and thus had a calming effect on the already agitated Jewish community.

On March 11, 2012 the mosque was inaugurated and a first prayer was preformed, the fist since 1948. Since then, five prayers are conducted in the mosque every day, seven days a week. In order to keep a quite life the mosque keeps few rules as Nagmi tells:

The phrase "Allahu Akbar" will be said only inside the mosque. We will not say "Allahu Akbar" outside the mosque. Perhaps this

will happened when the state will be more democratic (Mynet, 22.12.11).

### **Religious Multivocality: a cacophony of religious voices in the post secular city**

In Acre as in other cities in the postsecular there exists multivocality of religious voices and following a plethora of material activities. The Jewish religious institutions are mushrooming in Acre. To-date the most conspicuous religious compound in this part of the city is the Ruach Tzfonit (Northren Spirit) Yeshivat Hesder of Akko. This FBO was established in Acre in 2003 with the crystal clear goal of "strengthening the Jewish and Zionist character of the city" (taken from the yeshiva website: <http://yakko.co.il/eng/>). In 2007 the ground was broken for a new spacious compound which was inaugurated in the eastern-Jewish side of the city in a glamorous and well attended public event on June 30, 2011 (<http://www.akkonet.co.il/forums/viewtopic.php?f=8&t=66>).

In a circular to his students Rabbi Yossi Stern express his understanding of the city in theological terms:

“The city of Akko, the ancient capital of the Galilee and one of the holiest cities in Israel, represents thousands of years of Jewish history. For generations, Akko served as the port of entry to the Holy Land. The Talmud relates that the Sages would kiss the stones of Akko when arriving to this vital seaport.

The Yeshiva is but one of many newly founded religious organizations that operate and influence the emerging new landscape in the city. This multi dimension and highly fractured picture is also to be found among the Muslim minority.

### **The Muslim Voice:**

In addition to the al-Jazzar Endowment Authority a few other (albeit smaller) Islamic FBOs operate in the city. Fakhri a social activist in Acre laments this surge in FBOs and hold them responsible for the disunity and political ineffectiveness of the Arab minority in town:

...[do] we need to open a school, an HMO, an activity center, a fire station, but a mosque? What is the use? For us to have more disagreements? no less than four camps in addition to the *Salafis* (an extremist non partisan group)... surely, there is no need for another mosque as long as there are more basic needs to be met in the city. This is an exploitation of the religious feelings of the people. (Interview, January 27, 2013)

He adds an intriguing dimension to the alleged success of the Lababidi project and actually suggests that this move may ultimately leads to the annihilation of the historic central mosque in the Old City by diminishing its former roles and glory and turning it into a museum. This he suspects will serve the authorities' plan to keep the Arab Muslim community at bay and fractured.

### **By way of summation**

As we draw towards the end of this short presentation we would like to reiterate our initial question regarding the ways these new phenomena defined here under the idea of the postsecular city influence and shape the city. We would like to point out few of the ideas we are currently looking at in Acre and in the other sites of our project.

**Religious multivocality** - This religious multivocality in Acre indicates that the city experiences a resurgence of religious activities and a growing influence on its urban landscape. Differently from the modern project of the city, that assumed a secularization of spaces and the rationalization of the various parts of the city public spheres, we show that religion claims are becoming center stage in the postsecular city. The demands of urban groups to be more apparent in the city and to reify their own symbols and ideology in the urban landscape are growingly framed and based along religion affiliations and belongings.

**Urban transformation of space** - following we argue that these are clear indication to the urban transformation of space and everyday life in Acre and the growing importance of religion on landscape and city planning. We point out to the increasing role of religion as a planning device in the postsecular. Nowadays, in order to plan and take seriously citizenry claims, the city and its agents, must understand and be able to interpret religious claims, sentiments and practices.

**Contradicting claims over the city** - moreover, this interpretation must take into account the contradicting demands and claims that can pose a threat of conflicts and even violence. This kind of reading and planning

will challenge the idea of mixed city and the harmonic model of the modern city. Differently from the modern city, that supported a mixed city in which citizens share a secular public sphere and maintain religious/ethnic enclaves that support the status quo and therefore order, the new city, what scholars call the post- modern city is nowadays a product of multivocied religious claims. In this new reality, the city is multivoiced and dis-harmonic, and the various religious movements may be found in constant conflict and turbulence. This new reality is aptly demonstrated in the cacophony of voices and internal city rivalries that arose while the renovation project was set in motion.

**Contested nature of the sacred and resistance** - the growing importance of religious claims in the postsecular city reintroduced the contested nature of the sacred in a rather intriguing way. The Lababidi mosque surely supports the idea that subordinate groups use the sacred as part of their empowerment and counter-hegemonic processes. However, this materiality of resistance can also play into the hands of hegemonic forces by allowing new understandings circulate in the urban landscape regarding previous bastions of the minority cultural heritage.

**Reframing the sacred in the postsecular** - If we are to agree that in the postsecular city religious multivocality reflect a new understanding of the nature and planning of the city than it follows those former constructions might also change. This was only hinted above in one of the remarks made by a secular activist in Acre who went as far as to blame the new endowment committee as playing into the hands of the authorities and promoting the new mosque at the expense of the community previous and yet most meaningful religious site. He warns that it might end with the topocide of a sacred site.

**The growing role of FBOs** – in the postsecular city it would seem that part of the framing of urban and cultural demands in religious terms leads to the growing role of Faith Based Organizations in the urban life. As cities are becoming more and more heterogenic in this age of rapid globalization the claims of those organizations on the city would end up in conflicts and contestations over meaning and function of the sacred. In this context disorder would emerge as one of the main characteristic of the post secular city.