

Erdogan: 'Jerusalem Has Been Our City For Thousands of Years'

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Erdogan addressed the opening of the Turkish Parliament on October 1 with a ringing declaration that “Jerusalem Has Been Our City For Thousands of Years.” The “our” in “our city” seemed to refer now to the Turks, and now to the “Palestinian people.” The story is [here](#).

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Thursday implied that Jerusalem belongs to Turkey, referring to the Ottoman Empire’s control over the city for much of the modern era.

In this city that we had to leave in tears during the First World War, it is still possible to come across traces of the Ottoman resistance. So Jerusalem is our city, a city from us,” he told Turkish lawmakers during a major policy speech in Ankara. “Our first qibla [direction of prayer in Islam] al-Aqsa and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem are the

symbolic mosques of our faith. In addition, this city is home to the holy places of Christianity and Judaism.”

The Turks were the colonial masters of Jerusalem for 400 years, from 1516 to 1917, ruling over Muslim Arabs, Jews, and Christians too. If those 400 years of rule means that “Jerusalem is our [Turkish] city,” then what should we say about Istanbul, which as Constantinople was for more than a thousand years the richest and most important city in Christendom? Jerusalem has been lived in continuously by Jews for the last 3500 years; the archaeological evidence of that Jewish presence in the city has been found at thousands of sites – ancient synagogues, homes, tombstones, wine-presses, oil lamps, pottery – much of it with Hebrew inscriptions, with more such evidence being uncovered by archaeologists every year. Does President Erdogan expect the Western world to overlook all that? When Jerusalem was the first qibla, for just a few years before 624 A.D., when Muhammad replaced it with Mecca, Jews had already been living in Jerusalem for more than 2000 years.

The Ottoman Empire ruled over Jerusalem from 1516 to 1917. Modern Turkey, its successor state, has long stressed its enduring connection to the holy city, regularly condemning Israel’s alleged efforts to “judaize” it and the US administration’s December 2017 recognition of it as Israel’s capital. Jerusalem has been the capital of Israel since the country’s founding, and the Jewish people have thousands of years of history in the city, backed up by extensive archaeological finds.

During a lengthy speech at the opening of the Turkish parliament’s new legislative session, Erdogan spent several minutes lamenting the fate of Jerusalem and the Palestinians’ plight.

“Another crisis that our country and our nation carefully

follow is the oppression of Israel against the Palestinians and the indifferent practices that disregard the privacy [sic] of Jerusalem," he said toward the end of his address.

"The issue of Jerusalem is not an ordinary geopolitical problem for us. First of all, the current physical appearance of the Old City, which is the heart of Jerusalem, was built by Suleiman the Magnificent, with its walls, bazaar, and many buildings. Our ancestors showed their respect for centuries by keeping this city in high esteem."

It was not Suleiman the Magnificent, but the Jews of Jerusalem who built much of the Old City, including the Jewish Quarter with its 37 synagogues, all but two of which were dynamited by the Jordanians between 1949 and 1967. It was not Suleiman the Magnificent who built the First or Second Temples, including the Western Wall that is all that remains of the latter, but the Jews. It was not Suleiman the Magnificent, nor any Turkish ruler, who established the venerable Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives that is 3,000 years old, and contains 150,000 Jewish graves. Suleiman did build the current walls of the Old City, and many of its gates, from 1535 to 1542, but what is within those walls was built by Jews – cisterns, aqueducts, mikvahs – as well as by Turks. Christians, too, built important sites, such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 335 A.D., the Tomb of the Virgin Mary, the Cenacle, and many other buildings of note in Jerusalem. These have made little impression on Erdogan. After discussing the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aqsa Mosque and other Muslim sites, Erdogan says, in his sole reference to a non-Muslim presence in Jerusalem, that " In addition, this city is home to the holy places of Christianity and Judaism."

The Palestinian people have been living in Jerusalem "for thousands of years," but they were occupied and had their rights violated, the Turkish leader went on.

If the “Palestinian people” have been living in Jerusalem “for thousands of years,” where is there a single scrap of archeological evidence of their presence? Any sign of a distinctively “Palestinian” home or house of worship, or pottery shards, or coins, or mosaics, or glassware, or oil lamps, or scraps of writing? And what was the language of those “Palestinians” for those thousands of years before the Arabs, and their language, arrived? What was the religion of those “Palestinians” who have in Erdogan’s fantastical tale been living in Jerusalem for “thousands of years”? It couldn’t have been Islam, which only began in Mecca with Muhammad being visited by the angel Gabriel in about 610 A.D., and then preaching this new faith starting in 613 A.D. We need Erdogan to tell us what religion they had before the mid-7th century, what language they spoke, and why there is no physical evidence of their existence, though there are thousands of Jewish sites and artifacts that attest to the presence of the Jewish people, the Jewish religion, the Hebrew language, in Jerusalem.

And when were the “Palestinian people” in Jerusalem “occupied”? Has it only been since the modern state of Israel took possession of the Old City after the Six-Day War? Weren’t the “Palestinian people” in Jerusalem also “occupied” by the Turks, from 1516 to 1917? Or don’t the Turks count as “occupiers,” because they are fellow Muslims? A great many Arabs, still resenting how the Ottoman Turks mistreated their ancestors for centuries, would beg to differ.

Some of us might want to bring up another embarrassing fact about those “Palestinians.” Why are the “Palestinian people” nowhere mentioned by any of the Muslim chroniclers and travelers? Why do we find no mention of them in the extensive state records of the Ottoman rulers and administrators of the Empire, who held Jerusalem from 1516 to 1917?

And let’s bring the story of the “Palestinian people” up to date. Why do none of the Arab – or Turkish – rulers,

diplomats, writers, and journalists ever mention the “Palestinian people” until after the Six-Day War, when it became important for the Arabs, having failed militarily, to wage a propaganda campaign against Israel that would force the Jewish state to be squeezed back within the 1949 armistice lines? With the help of Soviet advisors, the Arabs began a campaign that focused on this newly invented “Palestinian people.” Only thus could the Arab gang-up on Israel be presented to the world as a conflict “between two tiny peoples, each struggling for its homeland.”

At this point it is *de rigueur* to quote Zuheir Mohsen, the “Palestinian” leader of the terror group As Saiqa, and I won’t break with tradition. In an interview he gave to the Dutch newspaper Trouw in 1970, Mohsen declared what should be an obvious truth: *“The Palestinian people does not exist. The creation of a Palestinian state is only a means for continuing our struggle against the state of Israel for our Arab unity. In reality today there is no difference between Jordanians, Palestinians, Syrians and Lebanese. Only for political and tactical reasons do we speak today about the existence of a Palestinian people, since Arab national interests demand that we posit the existence of a distinct ‘Palestinian people’ to oppose Zionism.”*

Tayyip, the favor of your reply is requested.

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