



Conflict over sacred space: The case of Nazareth

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ABSTRACT

Nazareth is the ethnic-national center for Israel's Arab minority, and the epicenter of Christian sacred sites. For two decades Nazareth's Christian and Muslim Arabs have been divided over the proposed building of a new Mosque on the large public Plaza adjoining the Church of the Annunciation. The analysis of this disputed urban place addresses: (a) spatial, temporal, cultural and political dimensions of the dispute 'stories' as told by the stakeholders, and (b) vocabulary, expressed by frames, which constitutes spatial transgression at the micro-level in Nazareth.

The case provides insights into what such sites may tell us about regime-minority relations, inter-group tensions and minority conflicts, local politics, and perceptions of landscape dominance. A framing typology – including Issues, Values and Process frames – of conflicts over sacred sites is applied in the analysis. Frames are a way of categorizing the unique understanding of each stakeholder as to what constitutes the agenda, the relevance and importance of various issues to the dispute, and the risks involved.

Two types of disputes emerge from the empirical data – geopolitical and national, and intra-religious ethnic. The micro-scale analysis provides the ingredients needed to understand ways in which religion and politics intertwine in the Plaza. The Process frames proved most salient in terms of identification of spatial transgression. Whereas Value frames are immutable, insights point to possible changes to Process and Issue framing which might enable more astute management of future conflict flare-ups.

Religion itself and enlargement of religious sites have a long-established history of disputes worldwide. This paper contributes to the study of geography of locational disputes and the concept of spatial transgression – group resistance to what one group perceives as an unwelcome invasion by another in its territory – with empirical emphasis on religious politics in Israel.

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Introduction

Religion and the expansion of religious sites have a wide-reaching global history of generating disputes, and have been studied extensively by historians, scholars of religion and social scientists including geographers. While geographers have emphasized religious–political conflict over territory between States or within States, studies at the micro-level focus predominantly on conflicts over cultural landscape change (e.g. Harvey, 1979; Knott, 2009; Kong, 2010; Peach & Gale, 2003; Shinde, 2012). This study extends the predominant geographic emphasis on territory to include examination of the political bases and geographical settings for such disputes. It investigates the conflict over religious spaces as it relates to power struggles among stakeholders from the local to the international levels, focusing on two different religious communities in Nazareth, Israel – Christian and Muslim,

using concepts of spatial transgression, – group resistance to what one group perceives as an unwelcome invasion by another in its territory.

The focus is on the dispute in Nazareth between Christian and Muslim Arabs over construction of a Mosque on the Plaza adjoining the Church of the Annunciation. In this context, the research addresses the boundaries of sacred spaces. Would the public Plaza be experienced as a part of the Church's public space as perceived by the Christians and intended to meet the needs of mass pilgrimage? Or, as the supporters of the proposed Mosque perceived, also a place for Muslim prayer assemblies? To what degree and by whom do perceptions of sacredness extend to the adjacent Plaza? The research questions are twofold (a) what are the spatial, temporal, cultural and political dimensions of the dispute 'stories' as told by the stakeholders, and (b) what is the vocabulary, expressed by frames (the cognitive lenses through which each stakeholder views the world), which constitutes spatial transgression at the micro-level in Nazareth?

The article proceeds with Section 'An introduction to geography of locational conflict over religious space and spatial transgression'

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as an introduction to the geography of locational conflict over religious space and spatial transgression. Nazareth within the Israeli context is presented in Section ‘The Nazareth dispute in the Israeli context’, followed by a presentation of the case in dispute in Section ‘The disputed mosque – a profile of nuances of spatial transgression’. Section ‘Research design and methodology – framing and frames’ explains the research design and framing methodology and the findings are presented and analyzed in Section ‘Frame findings and analysis’. Section ‘Conclusions’ offers conclusions.

An introduction to geography of locational conflict over religious space and spatial transgression

Conflicts over sacred places involve complex layers of social, cultural, political, economic and psychological forces. Lily Kong (2001) articulates the necessity for multi-scale analyses on religion by calling for: “global, national, regional, local and, indeed, that of the body” (p. 226). Almost a decade later, she identifies four major global shifts and ways in which they intersect with religion as key areas where future research should be directed – one of them being *rapid urbanization and social inequity* (Kong, 2010).

This helps place our empirical research in the following ways. The Nazareth case focuses on the interactions among politics, community and religion from a local perspective – influenced by national and global interests within the urban context of religiously mixed cities. Distinguishing between the religious and the community contexts are unfolding issues at the heart of the dispute. Arab communities in Israel are undergoing a process of rapid urbanization. Arab Israelis are a minority within the State of Israel, politically and economically. High birth rates (3% per year), geographically-constricted jurisdictions and lack of out-migration from the Arab towns and villages cause Arab municipalities to rapidly urbanize (Khamaisi, 2011; Ozacky-Lazar & Ghanem, 2003; Tarabeih, Khamaisi, & Shmueli, 2012; Yiftachel, 2000). The population growth within these localities, the expansion of their built up areas, and their socio-economic and geo-political transformation are part of the context within which the dispute over the Plaza adjacent to the Church of the Annunciation is taking place.

Sacred spaces

Sacred spaces have both physical and symbolic dimensions. They are geographically marked, associated with places to which one or more religious community attributes extraordinary religious significance or considers as a subject of divine consecration (Brace, Bailey, & Harvey, 2006). As early as 1933, Van der Leeuw (1938 English translation) identified four categories of politics in the production of sacred space: (a) position as a conquest of space; (b) property with sacredness maintained through claims and counterclaims to its ownership; (c) exclusion, whereby maintaining boundaries preserves sacred place; and (d) politics of exile, often taking the form of a longing for the sacred. Many modern scholars focus on one or more aspects of Van der Leeuw’s typology as he was one of the pioneer historians and philosophers of religion (e.g. Chidester and Linenthal (1995) outlined four strategies in the production and reproduction of sacred space; Gold (2003) explored the tension between humanistic and social scientific approaches; Murphy (2010) dealt with the politics of religion as a whole).

Sacred spaces have attracted considerable attention in the literature on identity formation and minority groups (Chidester & Linenthal, 1995; Eade & Sallnow, 1991; Friedland & Hecht, 2000; Kong, 1993, 2005; Napolitano, 2009). Tuan’s (1980) classic differentiation between space and place (development of a special relationship/meaning transforms space to place) serves as a basis for scholars who demonstrate how sacred venues serve as a nexus

for identity formation, collective memory, self-empowerment, resistance and exclusion. Many studies concentrate on evidence that shrines are the result of a process in which minorities negotiate competing claims of and needs for sanctity by dint of a rich tapestry of innovative devotional symbols and practices (e.g. Holloway, 2006; Tweed, 1997).

There have been a series of studies on disputes surrounding the location of mosques in the UK which link the geography of religion to the geography of the built environment. Location, or expansion, of minority-religious groups’ places of worship is often associated with negotiation and competition relating to politics of identity and geographies of exclusion (Bashir & Flint, 2008; Gale & Naylor, 2002; Naylor & Ryan, 2002).

Khamaisi (2012) adds a temporal facet to the spatial dimension and claims that one of the roles of sacred places in cities (together with fulfilling important identity functions) is as landmarks of space and time, and that cities undergo dynamic changes (demographic, political, socio-culture and economic), while sites may continue to belong to one religious group. He posits that this dynamic character of cities as a whole vis-à-vis the static character of sacred places lays the grounds for possible conflict if not managed in a manner that induces tolerance. In the case of Nazareth, the historic Christian sacred space is threatened by growth of the Muslim population in a city that has flipped from a Christian to Muslim majority, and its religious claim to the same site.

Hassner (2003) identifies *centrality* and *exclusivity* as measures for evaluating the sensitivity of sacred spaces, particularly places perceived as sacred by more than one group. In his 2013 review article he posits that due to the *indivisibility* of sacred sites, these disputes are unresolvable and preclude the sustainability of compromise solutions. The three strategies which he reviews are partition, scheduling and exclusion – about which he goes on to say that “Rather than mitigate the conflict, they create incentives for competition over more space and more time as a means for establishing relative legitimacy” (Hassner, 2013, p. 330).

Spatial transgression

Our definition of spatial transgression has been developed from a number of sources (Collins-Kreiner et al., 2013). ‘Difference’ has been regarded as an intrinsically social occurrence. For a powerful group to retain control over space or place, Cresswell (1996) argues that it must distinguish ‘us’ from ‘them’, accentuating how the prevailing group differs from others who upset the status quo. Confronted with an unwelcome new group, the controlling group delineates boundaries to prevent outsiders from penetrating what they consider as their space (Sibley, 1995).

Emmett (2009) described how the siting of churches and mosques during different time periods and in diverse geographic locations has demonstrated both conflict and adaptation between Christians and Muslims. He develops a classification of ten indicators ranging from intolerance to tolerance – and categorizes examples accordingly from destruction to shared sacred spaces.

In this research, spatial transgression incorporates these ideas and further defines it at the outset as a challenge to an often very fragile spatial status quo – or to the politics which go into its production and maintenance – whether in conflict over replacement of one religious facility for another, sharing of space on that site or shifting the use of a facility from religious to non-religious functions (Collins-Kreiner et al., 2013). It complements and adds to concepts of sacred space reviewed above. The case of Nazareth illustrates the nuances of spatial transgression processes at the micro-level. Geographical notions such as scale, core areas, place identity, attachment and image, boundaries and demographic power shifts help explain the concept of spatial transgression as they emerge from the frames.

The Nazareth dispute in the Israeli context

Conflict over sacred places in Israel can be seen as two, not mutually exclusive, types:

- (1) Geopolitical and national, as found in Jerusalem and elsewhere where places are sacred to Christians, Muslims and Jews, with each religious-ethnic group having its own claims, myths, and narratives. This type of conflict is clear, strong, and intertwined with the national conflict, especially in the West Bank and Arab East Jerusalem.
- (2) The second conflict is intra-religious-ethnic, in which certain groups use stories, history, and figures to secure control. Such conflicts may be among groups such as Haredi (the conservative form of ultra-orthodox Judaism) opposed to non-Haredi and secular Jews, conflicts between the various Hasidic courts and the Lithuanian (mitnagid) traditions, between Jews of Oriental and European origins (Hasson, 1996) or between Muslim and Christian Arabs in Ramallah, Bethlehem or Nazareth (Rabinowitz, 2001).

The dispute to be analyzed here takes place in Nazareth and encompasses characteristics of both conflict types. On the national level, some of the Arab population of Nazareth identifies with the Palestinian struggle. On the local level there are disputes between Christians and Muslims over local government and control.

The Nazareth situation

Nazareth is Israel's largest Arab city with approximately 74,000 residents (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012), 73% Muslim, 27% Christian. The City serves as the ethnic-national center for Israel's 1.6 million Arab minority and, as one of the most important places for Christianity, is the global epicenter of Christian sacred sites.

The City's demography has changed over time. Until the mid-1800s, Nazareth's 5500 residents were mostly Christian Arabs. By 1912, 74% of the population was Christian. Since the mid-1900s, the proportion of Christians declined to 30% currently (Fig. 1). Nevertheless, Christians still hold key positions in many public institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and the municipality. The

municipal elections in March 2014 resulted in the election of the Muslim contender.

Nazareth is home to numerous Christian sacred sites, the most important being the Church of the Annunciation. Construction of the Church was completed in 1968, over an earlier Byzantine-era site and then Crusader-era churches. In the 1990s, the Pope announced his intention to visit Nazareth during the Millennium year which spurred plans for both the City and the Plaza adjacent to the Church of the Annunciation. The City also houses sixteen mosques, the largest and oldest built in the early nineteenth century.

'The Disputed Mosque' – a profile of nuances of spatial transgression

The core of the City of Nazareth is a dominant religious edifice – the Church of the Annunciation and more recently the public Plaza that adjoins it. Over the past few decades, as the City's Muslim population has become a strong majority and taken up residence in neighborhoods near the Core, the Christian monopoly of the City's core space is being challenged by the Muslim community (see Fig. 2).

During the 1960s, when the majority of Nazareth residents were still Christian, the Church of the Annunciation, the largest church in Israel, was constructed without opposition by local Muslims.

In the 1990s, as the Millennium visit of the Pope approached, a government plan was prepared to convert the area in front of the Church into a large town Plaza in order to accommodate the many pilgrims expected, as well as provide new infrastructure. In implementing the plan, the City destroyed an abandoned Muslim school on the existing Plaza that included a Muslim prayer site (Cohen-Hattab & Shoval, 2007).

This site included an ancient tomb that was identified by Muslims as the grave of Shihab a-Din, the nephew of Salah a-Din Al Ayoubi who freed Jerusalem from the Crusaders. According to Muslim tradition, Shihab a-Din was wounded in the battle of the Horns of Hittin against the Crusaders in 1187, and was brought to Nazareth and buried there after succumbing to his wounds (Fig. 3).

The *Nazareth 2000* plan, initiated in 1995 by the Israeli Ministry of Tourism, was developed by national planning ministries in

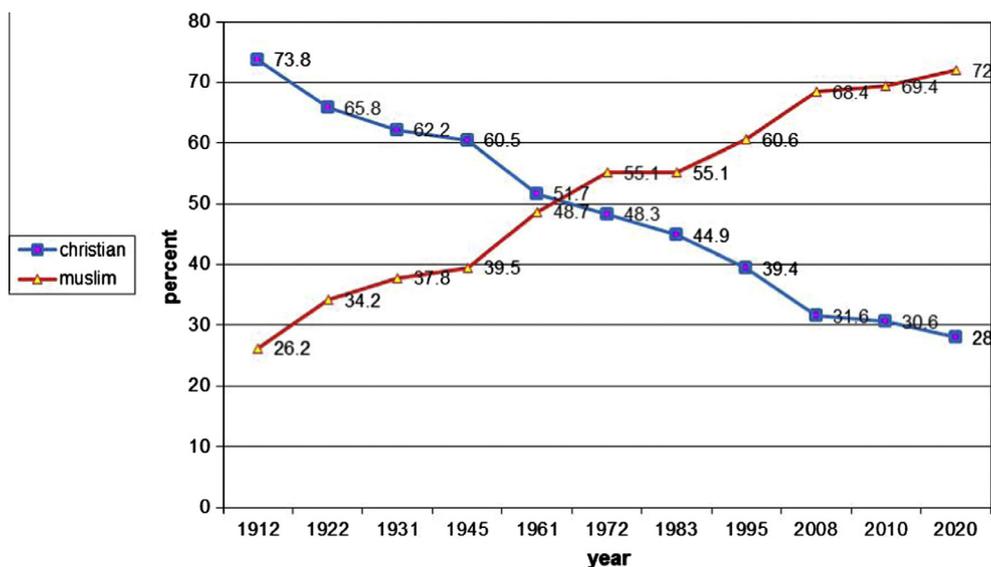


Fig. 1. Changes in percentage of Muslim and Christian residents in Nazareth between 1912 and 2010, and the 2020 Projections (Khamaisi, 2012).

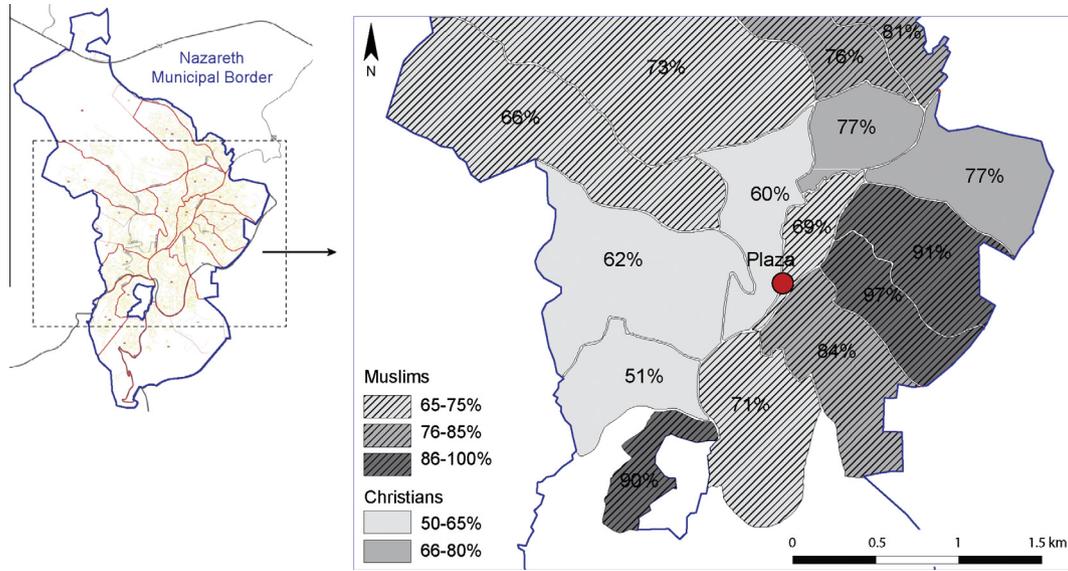


Fig. 2. Spatial distribution of Nazareth's population by sub-group (Muslim and Christian) by statistical area (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

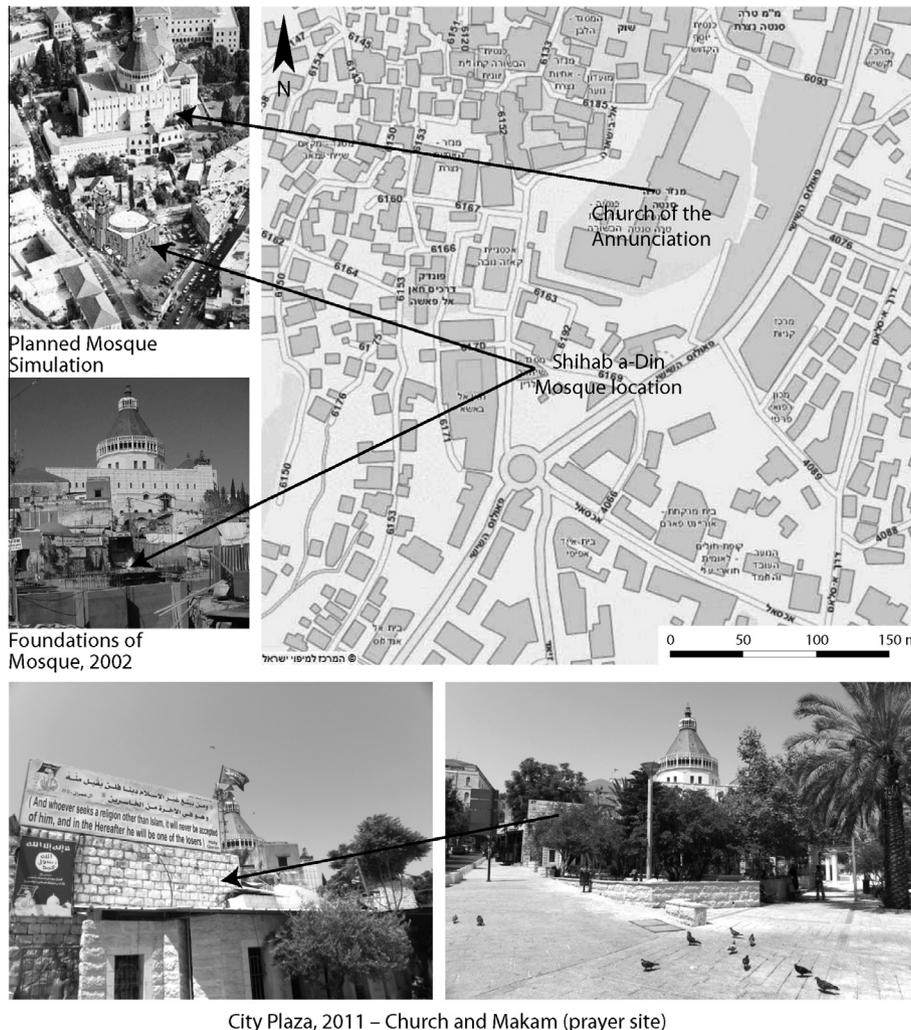


Fig. 3. Map of the area the planned mosque was designed by Architect Ammar Khammash.

Jerusalem and aimed principally at attracting Christian pilgrims. Its goal was to strengthen Nazareth's Christian identity. There was no input from either the Nazareth municipality or involvement of the local population in planning and/or implementation (Cohen-Hattab & Shoval, 2007; Rabinowitz, 2001). A major element of the plan was construction of the new public Plaza facing the Church in time to host the great number of pilgrims anticipated as part of the Papal Millennium celebrations. In actuality, the Millennium events occurred on a very limited scale due to the outbreak of the Second Intifada in Israel (2000–2005), which was compounded by the Mosque-Church conflict in Nazareth.

There had been considerable resistance to *Nazareth 2000* among the City's Muslim population even before it was officially presented (Urieli et al., 2003). In opposing the plan for Plaza, the religious considerations of Nazareth's Muslim residents outweighed their desire for potential economic benefits. This was in contrast to the attitudes of the City's Christian residents who were highly invested in the events surrounding the Pope's visit for religious, cultural and economic reasons (Cohen-Hattab & Shoval, 2007).

Christians perceived the Plaza as a part of the Church's public space intended to meet the needs of mass pilgrimage, while the supporters of the Mosque, proposed to be built on the site of the ancient tomb, perceived it also as a place for Muslim prayer assemblies. Thus the *Nazareth 2000* plan brought to the forefront the question of boundaries of sacred spaces.

Preceding the local elections in 1998, local Muslim leaders joined forces in an effort to accrue political benefits and initiated a master plan for a mosque to be constructed over the existing Shihab a-Din tomb. In April 1999 violence erupted between residents in the Muslim protest tent (which they had erected in the Plaza) and several Christian youths who were passing by. Plans for the construction of a Mosque on the site went from 450 square meters to 700 square meters. After an international architectural competition, the Islamic local Waqf (an Islamic institution which endows and protects Muslim properties used for charitable or religious purposes) committee began to build the Mosque before the planning procedures had been completed or building permits issued (Khamaisi, 2012). In protest, the City's Christian institutions closed their gates (Rabinowitz, 2001).

Following attempts by outside parties (such as Yasser Arafat, the late Chairman of the Palestinian Authority and Vatican officials) to intercede in the dispute, in 2001 the newly-elected Israeli Government demolished the Mosque foundations, and required the Plaza to be built according to the *Nazareth 2000* plans. This was executed smoothly and uneventfully, and in 2005 the Plaza was completed. On Fridays Muslims hold prayers in the Plaza, close to the small Shihab a-Din tomb which is now being renovated (Khamaisi, 2012).

Research design and methodology – framing and frames

Urban theorist and activist Jane Jacobs advised that the understanding of politics of identity and place requires studies to “be worked through the local, rendered in detail” (Jacobs, 1996, p. 6). The analysis of the Nazareth case was conducted using a framing typology for sacred site conflict developed by the authors (Collins-Kreiner et al., 2013).

We designed the research to answer the following questions: Do emerging frames reflect spatial transgression as part of the politics of the construction of sacred space in Nazareth? Do the frames indicate obstacles to, or preclusion of a sustainable solution? Can the frames indicate possible future mitigation strategies? In addressing the first two questions the focus of the analysis is on

interpretive insights; the third is future supposition, but if pursued, strategic analytical insights would come into play.

Framing

Framing was introduced as a tool for geographical analysis in 2008 (Shmueli, 2008). In the context of conflict, framing analysis can shed light on parties' own interests and motives and on those they attribute to others. Each party or *stakeholder* has a unique understanding of what constitutes the agenda, the relevance and importance of various issues to the dispute, and the risks involved. Frames are cognitive shortcuts which help people understand complexity. They limit people's field of vision to what is seen as appropriate and possible, relevant or not (Kaufman & Smith, 1999). Frame analysis helps explain both interpretive (social and psychological dynamics) and strategic (rational choice as motivating factors) behaviors, and “bridge the strategic-interpretive-divide, allowing both...to stand on relatively equal footing” (Desrosiers, 2011, p. 2).

Frame analysis of the Nazareth case

Nineteen interviews regarding the Church of the Annunciation, the Plaza and the planned Mosque in Nazareth were carried out between 2009 and 2012. The interviewees belonged to three stakeholder categories: Muslim residents and/or municipal officials; Christian residents and/or municipal officials; and regional/national-level professionals and decision-makers. Added to the dataset were archival items comprised of protocols from municipal, district committees and ministerial forums, and articles from local (Arabic) and national archives – a total of 510 coded statements which provided the empirical basis for frame identification in the Nazareth case.

Interviewees were selected using a snowball approach, starting with individuals quoted in the many planning meeting protocols (local, district and national) about the dispute and those appearing in media articles in the local and national press, continuing with a snowball identification approach.

Interviews¹ lasted between one-and-a-half to three hours. Transcriptions and their analysis were sent to the interviewees for approval/revision and were kept anonymous, attributed only to the large stakeholder groups. In Nazareth, the understanding of and ability to elicit stakeholders' frames is instrumental in any effort to understand difficult issues relevant to spatial transgressions.

Each statement or archival entry was coded as an individual frame. These frames are general (characterizing own or opponents'

¹ Interview questions focused on the conflict from the viewpoint of stakeholders in each category, including:

- The historical chain of events leading to the dispute.
- Key issues.
- Basic interests.
- Proposed solutions.
- Stakeholder amenability to compromise, or non-compromise.
- Important issues for future discussion.
- Perceptions of and reactions to the decision-making process.
- Barriers to negotiation, mediation and consensus decision-making approaches.

group) or specific (related to the Plaza dispute). The frames were then aggregated into *Frame Families* relating to various recurring characteristics (physical, socio-cultural, religious, political, economic, relational and procedural). These *families* were further grouped into three categories, or **Super Frames** relating to conflict **Issues**, **Values** and the **Processes** addressing them. **Table 1** displays the frame typology and the frequency with which frames, *frame families* and **super frames** occurred in interviews and documents analyzed.

Frame findings and analysis

Analysis of the findings will be presented according to the three **super frame** categories. The discussion will focus on frames which occurred with the greatest frequency within the *frame families*. Geographical and urban concepts such as *core areas*, *scale*, *place identity*, *attachment and image*, *demographic changes and boundaries* emerged from the various frames and are noted in *italics* as sub-headings throughout this section.

Issues super frame

The **Issues** super frame comprised 16% of the coded statements. Two *frame families* comprise the **Issues super frame**: *Physical characteristics of the elements proposed for the site* and *Physical planning issues*. The Nazareth conflict revolved around the Plaza, site of both the existing Church of the Annunciation and the planned Mosque.

Scale

One of the most prominent characteristics of the Church is its large size, corresponding to the centrality of Nazareth in the Christian religion. Initial plans for the Mosque called for a modest structure with a high minaret; later, a larger building was proposed.

Interviews revealed several stories, most of which drew a connection between the physical image and location of the building (Church or planned Mosque) and the message that it conveyed, whether it signified control over the space or served a practical function.

Place identity

Some interviewees emphasized the unshakeable identity of the City of Nazareth with the Church, as in “*Nazareth was the city in the middle of which stood the Church of the Annunciation*” – a city identified with Christianity, with the Church constituting an integral part of the urban fabric. Most of the negative reactions to the proposed Mosque were based on its location. Interviewees saw the Mosque as “*invading*” a highly charged area identified with Christianity – not as an invasion of empty space.

“the purpose of building the Mosque was to overshadow or belittle the Church of the Annunciation – these were the wishes of the Islamic movement” (Regional/national level professional/decision-maker)

“It’s not just a Mosque, but one whose minaret rises above the Church of the Annunciation, because it’s a matter of competition between religions.” (Christian resident/municipal official)

The physical characteristics (10%) of the site included: its size and height, its visibility, and its design, shape and aesthetic. *Physical planning issues* (6%) included: issues of access and exclusion – the attribution of public space to one religious group; planning problems, such as negligence of the site prior to planning of the Plaza; and location – the centrality of the site, as issues (**Table 1**). Cautiously, this suggests that issues concerning the more geographical (spatial) material aspects of the Plaza were not as strongly framed as part of the conflict or of the spatial transgression. They are however, strongly tied to the **Values** frames as reflected below.

Table 1

Super Frames, *Frame Families* and Frames and the frequency (%) with which they appear in the dataset (general typology – Collins-Kreiner et al. (2013)).

Super frames	Frame families	%	Frames – perception that there is a problem: compatibility/incompatibility of the site according to
Issues 16%	Physical characteristics of site	10	(3) Size, height (4) Visibility (conspicuousness) (3) Design, shape, aesthetics
	Physical planning issues	6	(1) Access, exclusion (1) Planning problems, nuisances, hazards(e.g. environmental safety) (4) Location as an issue
Values 31%	Community, social, cultural significance	6	(4) Sphere of influence (of the religious site), scale of conflict (1) A different identity that is perceived positively (center of tolerance) (1) A different identity that is perceived negatively (foreign entity)
	Political, ideological, significance	9	(3) Source of power or control (2) Source of strong emotional conflict (4) Political conflict in guise of religious
	Religious significance	14	(10) A religious site, a religious symbol, myth-based (4) Gives religion a presence
	Economic, tourist, aesthetic significance	2	(1) Attracts religious pilgrims (1) Attracts tourists (0) Increases real estate values
Process 53%	Administrative characteristics of process	28	(11) Ownership and control over the land (17) Decision-making process
	Characterization of the parties involved	15	(6) Stereotypes of the parties (5) Who are the parties to the conflict? (4) Inequality among stakeholders in decision-making processes
	Nature of the relationships among the parties	10	(8) Use of power; hostility; violence (2) Trust or distrust

Values super frame

The **Values** super frame comprised 31% of the coded statements. The **Values** frames embraced the religious identity of the City and the site: the identity which the proposed Mosque was likely to impose, the nature of the conflict over construction, the values it would express and the rightfulness of the site's religious nature and its traditions.

Place identity, attachment and image

When interviewees referred to *Political, Ideological Significance* of the Plaza, they tended to convey a dual message: about the ownership of the land, and about identity of the place, which involved diverse political and religious meanings symbolized by the site. They referred extensively to the issue of ownership (Source of power or control) of the Plaza, where most of the controversy was over Waqf versus State ownership. The Muslim Waqf claim was that historically the place had a Muslim identity and therefore there was no reason not to construct a Mosque there, while the Christians and the Israeli government's claim that the *maqam* was located on State land (formerly public Ottoman land) presumably made the place 'neutral', but, in essence, identified it as non-Muslim. Ownership is an administrative and legal issue to be resolved with the help of documents testifying to the legal owners. However, each side cast heavy doubt on the authenticity and interpretation of the documents presented by the other party. Moreover, the Muslims rejected the Israeli law as the relevant law to consider. In their view, the law was used as a tool by the Israeli government to confiscate Arab lands.

Throughout the interviews two distinct identities of the *maqam* in Nazareth were presented: as a 'truly' religious place (*Religious significance*, 14%) and as a political place (*Political, ideological significance*, 9%). The religious identity of the space was derived from several different themes: the roots of the religious identity by virtue of its being the property of the Muslim Waqf, the tomb of Shihab a-Din and the need to accommodate the many worshippers from the Muslim side, the centrality of Nazareth to the Christian religion, and the threat that the Mosque would overshadow the Church from the Christian side. The political identity of the place was derived from other themes: the sovereignty and control in the City of Nazareth, Jewish–Arab relations in Israel, and the conflict as a means to gain political capital.

Arguments included that Shihab a-Din was based on

"myth, tradition and beliefs and not on hard evidence. . .and Shihab a-Din was buried in Damascus, not Nazareth." (Christian resident/municipal official)

According to some interviewees, the struggle was political, with religion serving only as an excuse for the political conflict. Their discourse reflects two contradictory worldviews: values relating to the rule of law and to freedom of religion and worship. Christian interviewees and representatives of the national/regional professional government expressed the importance of law. They felt that in addition to the importance of religious freedom, it was important to assure order and the safety of the residents of Nazareth. On the other hand, many Muslim interviewees chose to emphasize that freedom of religion and worship are held sacred in Islam and are sovereign. They argued that historically, it was Muslims who had granted religious freedom to Christians, while the Christians (and the Jews), in turn, created obstacles regarding all attempts to construct Muslim places of worship.

Frames comprising the *Community, Social, Cultural frame family* (6% of coded statements) express the competing identities at play in Nazareth in general and in terms of the conflict specifically, as well as their competing scales within these identities. The site is

the center for strong religious emotions on both sides. The Shihab a-Din theme strengthens the place-specific narrative. Regardless of whether or not this is a politically-driven or religious tale, within this *frame family* its showing is strong. Van der Leeuw's politics of 'position' and 'exile' are sharply reflected.

Process super frame

Process frames were by far the most salient of the super frames (53% of the coded statements in the dataset). These frames refer to processes revolving around construction of the site. They include features that reveal the perception of the proposed Mosque as lawful, appropriate and just, or as wrong and presenting a threat to one of the stakeholder groups involved. The dominant concerns regarding the process of both Muslim and Christian interviewees were of a decision-making process rife with aggressiveness and misuse of power, stakeholder identities, each party's characterizations of the other, and feelings of inequality.

The Muslim interviewees' discourse around the decision-making process revealed the following lines of argument:

- National decision-making was skewed in favor of the interests of the Christian population and against those of the Muslim populace.
- Interviewees, who blamed the government for the crisis, argued that the various governments of Israel tried to delay construction of the Mosque by transferring the responsibility from one government agency to the next.

Challenge to Christian Dominated Core

The Muslim interviewees' main claim regarding the application of power and aggression during the process was that the State exerted power against the Muslims by destroying the foundations of the proposed Mosque. The Christian interviewees' claims around the power aspect were:

- The Muslims were the aggressors in the conflict against the State and the municipality, exerting power when taking control of the building site of the Mosque and during the illegal construction.
- The Muslims used the issue of the Mosque to carry out violence against Christian residents of the city, both senior Christian officials and passersby.

One of the most complex aspects of the 'disputed Mosque' affair was the variation in the way the different parties perceived the conflict. The interviewees had different depictions of the dispute's nature and of the parties involved:

- No conflict at all.
- A religious conflict – between Muslims and Christians. The Muslims tried to undermine the centrality of Nazareth to the Christian world, thereby enhancing the Muslim identity of the City.
- A political conflict – between Muslims and the Authorities – both the (Christian and communist) municipality and the national (Jewish) government with which it identifies. The conflict was between the Muslims and the State, not between Muslims and Christians.

Demography-driven power shifts

Underlying these views are stakeholders' characterization frames of inequality, distrust and stereotyping. These characterizations reveal a great deal not only about the conflict over the specific site, but about the broader perspective of future relations

between the different population groups. They may shed light on the ability or inability to reach a future resolution regarding some of the issues that constitute the core problem. Interviewees articulated inequality concerns on two levels – within Nazareth and nationally:

- Within Nazareth, Muslims claimed that the Christian minority held undue power in the City. They also claimed that the number of Christian religious and social service institutions was much greater than those of the Muslims, despite Muslims' greater needs based on their larger numbers.

"In Nazareth, although the decisive majority is Muslim, there are 12 mosques covering an overall area together of 4000 m². The overall area of Nazareth is 4 dunam; it is inhabited by 76,000 people, 70% of them Muslims and the rest Christians. . . The Muslim residents see themselves discriminated against not only by the Zionist government but also the Christian institutions which were built on Muslim institutional and religious sites." (Muslim resident/municipal official)

- Nationally, the inequality between the Jewish and Arab sectors is seen as driven by decision patterns of the Israeli government, including greater allocation of resources among cities with a Jewish majority compared with those with either Arab Christian or Muslim majorities.

Boundaries of the Plaza as sacred space

The socio-political background is a complex picture of minority–majority relations. In this context, stakeholder groups held different perceptions of the identity of the Plaza in terms of its control. Some saw it as a Muslim place that the Christians had 'occupied'; others saw it as a Christian place that the Muslims were trying to take over. In this context, the primary element that differentiates the narratives, or stories told by the various stakeholders about the history of the site, is the starting point of the story which changes the overall narrative and addresses the ownership of the site – *identity and place attachment* – differently. The essence of the narratives appears in [Table 2](#).

The shared **Process** frames highlight questions of spatial transgression, particularly in sub-frames such as land use, land ownership, decision-making processes, stereotypes and questions of who are the parties to the dispute. Not surprisingly, van der Leeuw's 'property' and 'exclusivity through maintaining boundaries' politics types are inherent in these frames. Frames regarding ownership of the land and the fluctuating and politically-laden decision-making process are greatly emphasized (*Administrative characteristics* 28% of coded statements). Those dealing with the nature of the relationship among parties and how they characterize one another are deeply rooted (*Characterization* 15%). Understanding the *Nature of the relationships among the parties* (10%) is critical before any

change in that relationship can occur. Inequality and power frames are at the core of the conflict for all stakeholders.

In Nazareth, the site's physical characteristics – **Issues** super frame – are laden with values, playing a role in determining perceptions of spatial transgression. However, it is within the **Process** super frame and, to a lesser extent, within the **Values** super frame that the perceptions of spatial transgression are formed and solidified. Even more evident and perhaps surprising is the saliency of the **Process** frames.

Conclusions

The disputed urban space which is the focus of this study is a public Plaza which is reluctantly shared or divided by Muslim and Christian residents of Nazareth. The research addressed:

- (1) The spatial, temporal, cultural and political dimensions of dispute stories as told by stakeholders which may explain and clarify the process of spatial transgression in Nazareth.
- (2) The vocabularies expressed by frames which constitute spatial transgression at the micro-level in Nazareth.

In response to the first question, the spatial, temporal, cultural and political dimensions of the dispute focus on different majority–minority relations: a Christian minority in a Muslim city, an Arab minority in a Jewish State and a Jewish State sensitive to the interests of the Western Christian world.

The conflict is both political and ethnic-religious in nature, embedded in a rapidly urbanizing city where issues of social inequity are examined by stakeholders on both micro-level within Nazareth and macro-level within Israel. In a political environment perceived as undergoing a process of demographic change, the proposal to construct a Muslim religious site in the Plaza is seen as a threat and potential violation of the status quo and the ways to maintain it.

Political power is closely intertwined with religious supremacy and control – sometimes driven by religion and at other times the driver. In the eyes of many of the Nazareth stakeholders interviewed, politics is exploiting religious differences. Political power struggles envelop the conflicting identities of place – the international sense of Nazareth as Christian coupled with local Christian efforts to retain control of the core, and the local Muslim majority seeking to escape their peripheral status and imbue the City with Muslim meaning and tradition. Thus the dispute is both geopolitical on the national and international scales and religious-ethnic on the local and national levels. Hassner's theory on indivisibility of sacred site and Van der Leeuw's four types of politics are reaffirmed in our study. The analysis points to the importance of the temporal dimension ([Khamaisi, 2012](#)) – roles of time and tradition, patterns of activity and inactivity and the impact of zigzag and fluctuations of national interventional decision-making. While at the outset we expected that spatial transgression assumes activity, the findings demonstrate how patterns of inactivity also contribute to transgression.

Currently, by government decree, no mosque has been constructed on the Plaza. However, today the Plaza is no longer solely an extension of the Church. The Plaza is shared with Muslim's praying on the site of the *maqam* on Friday mornings and this accommodation is tolerated on both sides. The Plaza has become a central place for Muslims even though it lacks a Mosque.

The second research question addressed the vocabulary or frames which express spatial transgression. The framing typology is comprised of three super frames: **Issues**, **Values** and **Process** reflecting different identities of place, complex political power networks and majority–minority relations working within a

Table 2
Narratives.

Time period	Starting point of narrative
First Century	Nazareth as the birth place of Christianity
Twelfth Century	Burial of Shihab-a din in Nazareth
1960s	Muslim awakening in Nazareth as a result of demographic changes
1964	Pope Paul VI visits the Holy Land
1990s	Israeli Government approval of a Mosque in the Plaza
1990s	Proposed Papal visit – retraction of Government approval for building of the Mosque on the Plaza

demographically shifting city. The **Issues** super frame which relates to physical characteristics of the site and planning issues were identified in only 16% of the coded statements – the least important among the super frames. Physical issues are attached to social, value related and functional images. In another location the physical scale and characteristics of the proposed Mosque might be perceived as suitable.

The **Values** super frame was identified in 31% of the coded statements. These are important for insight into the underlying context but these frames are usually unchangeable in contrast to the **Process** and **Issues** frames which are often amenable to modification and change.

The **Process** super frame was identified in over half (53%) of the coded statements. The finding that it is in the **Process** frames where most of the spatial transgression is identified holds potential for effective intervention and reframing. The salience of **Process** frames indicates that sensitive and good practice dispute management may allow stakeholders to “find ways to step around the big shapes of friend and enemy” (Spencer, 2012, p. 731).

At this time the conflict in Nazareth over the Plaza is in a hiatus but this is unlikely to last owing to the increasing demographic imbalance between the Muslim majority and the Christian minority and the very recent change in local government. Hassner's insights as to the inherent instability of like-situations are resounding. At the outset, the parties viewed change in the status of the Plaza as a zero-sum game. The current status quo points to a gradual change in this perception. Involving all the parties in negotiations which may lead to a reframing of these perceptions and utilizing particularly the insights gleaned from the **Process** frames may be valuable in such an endeavor.

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