

# THE SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF JERUSALEM—THE ISLAMIC VISION\*

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Seyyed Hossein Nasr

THE SUBJECT OF JERUSALEM is an extremely significant one for both spiritual and obviously mundane reasons. For men and women of faith, especially those who belong to the world of Abrahamic monotheism, it is of both immediate and ultimate concern. It is of immediate importance because peace between Judaism, Christianity and Islam today depends so much on the present and future state of this city. And it is of ultimate concern because for the children of Abraham Jerusalem is not just another city nor even another holy city but a city that is related intimately with the ultimate end of humanity and eschatological realities of global significance which will affect the whole of the human species. It is therefore necessary that we should try to present the Islamic perspective on this holy city in candour beyond diplomatic niceties, concentrating upon the spiritual vision of Jerusalem to which, we presume, the Spanish title of the conference *Jerusalém Mística* refers.

Before turning to this celestial and mystical Jerusalem, it is necessary to say a few words about the earthly Jerusalem as a sacred land and city. Jerusalem is not a united city as often claimed but in practical terms a city with marked divisions as far as followers of the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions are concerned. There is an Islamic as well as a Jewish and a Christian Jerusalem. One might say that it is united only in the mind of God and can be united on earth only by our accepting the union of parts, a transcendent unity which is beyond and yet unites the distinct segments of the city while respecting and preserving those divisions

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\* Text of lecture given in Caracas, Venezuela in 1996, in a conference on *Jerusalém Mística*.

based upon revealed visions of the three monotheistic religions which have a concrete presence in the city. No single vision can obliterate the other visions of the city in the name of imposing its own unity. The unity of Jerusalem is either a unity encompassing the multiplicity of the religions involved in Jerusalem or a dangerous dream which cannot but lead to the most divisive nightmare.

Jerusalem is the heart of the holy land, a term in fact used in the Qur'ān and not explicitly in the Bible. Here in Jerusalem God has spoken more than once, each "time" addressing a new religious universe which He chose to bring into being. It is the site of the Temple built by the Prophet David, where Christ ended his earthly life and where the Prophet of Islam ascended to Heaven. In the same way that God has the freedom to speak, to reveal more than once, each recipient of the Divine Message has not only the freedom to accept that Message, but also the duty to carry out the obligations which such acceptance implies. Having accepted the series of revelations revealed to the prophets of Israel, Jews have had the obligation to remain bound to Jerusalem throughout their history even through two thousand years of exile in the diaspora during which the cry "Next year in Jerusalem" was repeated even when it seemed most unlikely. Likewise, by virtue of accepting Christianity, Christians are duty bound to have a special attachment to Jerusalem as did their forefathers who even fought bloody wars known as the Crusades for over a century with the declared intention of regaining control of the holy city, who oriented their churches in Europe in its direction and who have made pilgrimage to the holy city during the past two millennia.

This attachment to Jerusalem is no less real for Muslims than for Jews and Christians for reasons which we shall state shortly. Not all the Palestinians nor all the Arabs nor even all the over one billion and two hundred Muslims now living in the world could give Jerusalem away for no matter what amount of wealth, power, land or any other worldly compensation. The attachment of Muslims to Jerusalem is permanent and will last as long as human history itself. Moreover, present day exertion of worldly power will not affect that relationship one iota any more than did the two thousand years exile of the Jews from the holy city altered their attachment to Jerusalem. In fact pious and traditional Jews who are so deeply attached to Jerusalem should understand better than anyone else the depth of attachment of Muslims to the same city.

It is now necessary to explain why Muslims are so firmly attached to Jerusalem and what the spiritual significance of this city is which makes this attachment religious and spiritual and not only temporal and material. There are three main reasons which themselves result in a fourth one: The first is that Jerusalem was chosen by God as the first direction of prayer or *qiblah* for Muslims. When the injunction to perform the five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*) was given by God to the Prophet of Islam as a

duty to be performed in the most fundamental rite of Islam. It was not until the Prophet of Islam came to change the direction of prayer five times a day to the direction of the "qiblah" and share the direction directed with Me.

There is in fact a spiritual significance which possesses the city of Makkah. Although it is not until a beautiful revelation from God reveals the true spiritual significance and the importance of the earth for the earth. In the Muslim mind which is the fact Jerusalem is the city which is the spiritual center of the whole Abrahamic religion. It also marks the beginning of the renaissance hence the reassessment of the dividing of the world and their reunification.

The second reason is that this site that the Prophet of Islam Presence. The Qur'an speaks of the night from the Prophet of Islam Worship [Jerusalem] show him of O. -Pickthall translation (*Hadīth*) and tradition elucidate the significance of the daily prayer in its esoteric dimension. The adage according to the spiritual ascent of Jerusalem is the Prophet of Islam his miraculous journey proceeded horizontally means that this city has dimensions of existence.

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duty to be performed by the member of the community and as the most fundamental rite of the religion, the direction chosen for the prayers was Jerusalem. It was not until the second year of the *hijrah* that the Prophet was ordered by God to change the direction of the prayers to Makkah toward which Muslims turn five times a day to this day. Therefore Jerusalem is called *al-qiblat al-ūlā*, "the first *qiblah*" and shares this supreme honour of being the point to which the prayers are directed with Makkah to which it is inwardly related.

There is in fact a famous mosque outside Madinah named the *Qiblatayn* mosque which possesses two *qiblahs*, one in the direction of Jerusalem and the other Makkah. Although the old *Qiblatayn* Mosque was torn down some fifteen years ago, a beautiful new mosque built by 'Abd al-Wāhid al-Wakīl has replaced it which reveals the transition from Jerusalem to Makkah as did the earlier mosque. The significance and honour of being the first *qiblah*, hence the central point of the earth for the earliest Islamic community, has continued to be identified by the Muslim mind with Jerusalem and will never be forgotten. In a mysterious way in fact Jerusalem is present in the daily canonical prayers as Muslims turn to Makkah which is the supreme centre of the specifically Islamic community as Jerusalem is of the whole Abrahamic family. Lest one forget, it is necessary to recall that Islam also marks the return of the cycle of monotheistic religions to its Abrahamic origin; hence the reassertion of the role of Jerusalem as the supreme centre of that world, the dividing of this centre, esoterically speaking, into Jerusalem and Makkah, and their reunification at the end of time.'

The second reason for the significance of Jerusalem for Muslims is that it was from this site that the Prophet made his nocturnal journey (*al-mi'rāj*) to the Divine Presence. The Qur'an itself states, "Glorified be He who carried His servant by night from the Inviolable Place of Worship [Makkah] to the Far Distant Place of Worship [Jerusalem] the neighbourhood whereof We have blessed, that We might show him of Our tokens! Lo! He, only He, is the Hearer, the Seer."(XVII;1 -Pickthall translation). Furthermore, there are numerous sayings of the Prophet (*Hadīth*) and traditional commentaries which clarify the meaning of this verse and elucidate the significance of the *mi'rāj* which is associated with the inner meaning of the daily prayers and is the prototype of spiritual realisation in Islam especially in its esoteric dimension associated with Sufism. There is in fact a famous Arabic adage according to which the daily canonical prayers (*ṣalāt*) are the nocturnal or spiritual ascent of (*mi'rāj*) of the true believer (*mu'min*). This second significance of Jerusalem is therefore again related to Makkah since in the case of the Prophet his miraculous journey, divinely ordained, began in Makkah from which he proceeded horizontally to Jerusalem and from there vertically to Heaven which means that this city lies at the intersection between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of existence corresponding metaphysically speaking to the intersection

between the two dimensions of the cross for the Christians. Furthermore, the spiritual association between *ṣalāt* performed in the direction of Makkah and inner *mi'rāj* or ascend of the soul, which prayers make possible for those spiritually qualified, and Jerusalem again preserve throughout the devout Muslim's life the inner and inviolable link between Jerusalem and Makkah.

The third reason for the significance of Jerusalem for Muslims is related to Islamic eschatological teachings. Few people in the West are aware that according to traditional Islamic sources, especially the collections of Ḥadīth or sayings of the Prophet, this historical cycle will come to its end with the return of Christ and not the Prophet. Muslims therefore share with Christians belief in the doctrine of the Second Coming of Christ and even many events preceding it such the appearance of the anti-Christ called in Arabic *al-Dajjāl*. Moreover, these eschatological events and especially the Second Coming are associated by Muslims, as they are for Christians, with Jerusalem. For Muslims it is there that Christ will descend, where the trumpet will sound, where the dead will be raised to life and where judgement will take place. That is why over the centuries so many Muslims wanted to be buried in Jerusalem.

The Islamic traditional sources also identify the end of the world with the destruction of Jerusalem. One might ask what the term "destruction" means in this context. Is it the destruction of the traditional character of the city and the desecration of holy sites and ambience with the creation of the most worldly and profane architecture? Is it building a hotel on top of the very mount, that is the Mount of Olives, where Christians and Muslims expect Christ to descend? Is it the destruction of the city as a whole through war between Jews and Muslims? Is it civil war within its boundaries between followers of the Abrahamic religions? From the Islamic point of view one can only say God knows best (*Allāhu a'lam*). Whatever the meaning, however, this belief by Muslims in the relation between the destiny of Jerusalem and of the world itself, adds to the eschatological significance of Jerusalem which no worldly accord or discord between present day actors upon the scene of Jerusalem can change. When a Christian or Jew in the West asks why it is that Jerusalem is so important to Muslims, the eschatological factor should never be overlooked for it points to meta-historical realities which therefore transcend time and are embedded permanently in the mind and soul of Muslims.

The three religious realities associated with Jerusalem in the Muslim mind namely, its being the first direction of prayer (*al-qiblat al-ūlā*), the site of the Prophet's nocturnal ascent (*al-mi'rāj*) and the site of eschatological events bringing the history of present day humanity to an end have resulted in a fourth very important religious significance of Jerusalem for Muslims, that is its being a major centre of pilgrimage. In Arabic Jerusalem is called *al-Quds*, "the holy city" or *Bayt*

*al-muqaddas*, "the sacred sanctuary". The sacred city is in "free" it so that C pretexts for the centuries when Jews and Christi

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*al-muqaddas*, "the sacred house" and Muslims have always looked upon it as the sacred sanctuary to which they should make pilgrimage. This significance of the sacred city is in fact shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike and the need to "free" it so that Christian pilgrims could have easy access to it was one of the main pretexts for the Crusades whereas in fact during the last thirteen of fourteen centuries when Jerusalem was in Muslim hands pilgrimage was always possible for Jews and Christians and their holy sites were protected in the city.

In any case as far as Islam is concerned, pilgrimage is a major part of the rites of the religion and plays a more central role today than it does for many sectors of the Christian world although of course pilgrimage has not at all disappeared from Christianity, especially in its Orthodox and Catholic forms. The main pilgrimage which is obligatory in Islam, if all the conditions established by the Divine Law (*al-Sharī'ah*) are met, is of course the *hajj* or annual pilgrimage to Makkah which must take place during a particular period of the Islamic lunar calendar. To this day, however, nearly all the two million pilgrims who perform the *hajj* also make pilgrimage to Medina, where the Prophet is buried. For the past fourteen centuries and until the 1967 war which caused Jerusalem to cease to be controlled by Islamic authorities, most of those making the *hajj* would also make pilgrimage to Jerusalem, as the third holy city to be visited (the time that the city was held by Crusaders being an exception). Those who came from northern lands such as Turkey, Caucasia and Syria would have their caravans and later cars and buses stop in Jerusalem either on the way to Makkah and Medina or upon returning from the Hijaz. Those who came from lands in east and west or south of Arabia, such as Persia, Egypt, Yemen, India, Somalia, the east coast of Africa, etc. would make a separate journey north to Jerusalem with the specific goal of completing their annual pilgrimage to the third of the three holiest cities of Islam. Over the centuries in fact many books were written on how to make pilgrimage (*ziyārah*) to Jerusalem and its holy sites as there were works on pilgrimage to Makkah and Medina. Many in fact also made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem separately during different periods of the year. One can hardly overestimate the impact upon the Muslim mind and soul of the impossibility of completing pilgrimage to all the three holy cities as a result of present day conditions which make pilgrimage to Jerusalem well highly impossible for most Muslim pilgrims, although there are still a few, especially from the West, who are able to fulfil their deep urge to visit Jerusalem as an Islamic holy site.

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HAVING DESCRIBED THE RELIGIOUS significance of Jerusalem for Muslims, at least as far as the most important factors are concerned, it is now possible to turn to the "mystical" significance of Jerusalem which we presume to mean its spiritual,

esoteric and metaphysical significance and meaning. Let us begin with the *qiblah* or direction of prayers whose profound significance in relation to both Jerusalem and Makkah must be understood before anything else. For a Muslim, wherever he may live on earth, there is an invisible line connecting him or her to Makkah, where all these lines meet in a single point. This is easier to conceive on a flat surface which is in fact how the earth appears to our immediate experience with all that such an immediacy symbolises. On a flat map these would be a large number of lines like a vector field in physics all converging upon the single point that is Makkah. The same of course holds for the earth as a sphere, of which Muslim astronomers and geographers were fully aware. It is, however, somewhat more difficult for non-specialists to envisage the spherical situation as the flat one. In any case space for Muslims is polarised with all points on earth being connected to Makkah which is the supreme centre of the Islamic world and where for that world the vertical axis, the *axis mundi*, connecting Heaven and earth, touches the earthly plane. The *qiblah* is therefore the pole and centre of the Islamic cosmos and its link to higher states of being.

As already mentioned, Jerusalem, where the three Abrahamic faiths meet, is the pole of the Abrahamic world as a whole. When Islam was first revealed its reassertion of pure Abrahamic monotheism was confirmed by Jerusalem being chosen by God as the *qiblah*. Then as a direct command from God, the *qiblah* was changed to Makkah which was also associated with Abraham who built the *Ka'bah* at the centre of the city, the *Ka'bah* being for Islam the actual point where the heavenly axis touches the earth. In contrast to Jerusalem which had been at the centre of historical events of the eastern Mediterranean world, Makkah remained a forgotten sanctuary the primordial sanctuary even antedating Jerusalem, destined to enter into the light of history only with the revelation of Islam. Makkah's being chosen as the *qiblah* marked the assertion of Islam as a distinct new religion of the Abrahamic family with its own distinct center while the fact that Makkah was the second *qiblah* and not the first, this honour being reserved for Jerusalem, shows the inalienable link between Islam and primordial monotheism associated with Abraham. It is said in some traditions that by the order of God Makkah as *qiblah* became separated from Jerusalem with which it was united at the beginning and "travelled" south to the most primordial of all temples and that at the end of time the two *qiblahs* would become united again as Islam, being the last monotheistic religion, would become united with the whole Abrahamic heritage. In the Islamic perspective the inner reality of Jerusalem and Makkah as the first and second *qiblahs* are united and nothing on the temporal plane can sever this union.<sup>2</sup> Jerusalem is the pole and center of Judaism, Christianity and Islam as heirs to Abrahamic monotheism and Makkah the particular pole and center of the Islamic world which, being a reassertion of pure Abrahamic monotheism, returns to the

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primordial center that can never become severed from that center where all the children of Abraham meet. One cannot bow in daily prayers towards Makkah without being aware of that city of Abraham north of Makkah which God chose as the Muslims' first *qiblah*. The two realities are fused together on the highest plane and in the same way that Muslims have preserved to this day something of the ambience of the world of Abraham and the Semitic patriarchs, more so than have Western Christians and Jews, Muslims remain attached in an ultimate sense to Jerusalem where the three families of Abrahamic monotheism meet.

Let us turn to the second religious significance of Jerusalem for Muslims namely the Nocturnal Ascent or *al-mi'rāj*. To understand the significance of this event in relation to the city, it is enough to look at the panorama of Jerusalem even today dominated as it is by the Dome of the Rock or *Masjid al-Ṣakhrah*, built originally by 'Umar, and in its present form by the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik, to which the Abbasids and the Mamluks made additions, the most recent repair and renovation of the mosque have been carried out by King Ḥusayn of Jordan only in the past few years. One of the oldest and grandest mosques of Islam, the Dome of the Rock reveals also in the clearest fashion the cosmology of the traditional Islamic universe. Its dome, like that of the sacred architecture of other traditions, symbolising Heaven, while its octagonal base symbolises the Divine Throne (*al-'arsh*) which according to Islamic tradition is carried by eight angels, the Throne to which the Prophet ascended during his *mi'rāj* from a rock (*ṣakhrah*) which is at the center of the mosque and after which the mosque is named. The monumental presence of this great Islamic architectural masterpiece at the center of the Jerusalem skyline, embodying the principles of Islamic cosmology, is the clearest indication of the relation between this city and the Islamic universe as well as the supreme spiritual experience of the Prophet known as the Nocturnal Ascent or *al-mi'rāj* to which so much Islamic literature and art has been devoted.

Countless works have been written about the *mi'rāj* and it is not possible here to delve into all its mysteries. But a few words have to be said about it to bring out the profound significance of Jerusalem from a spiritual and mystical point of view in the Islamic vision of the world. The whole miraculous journey of the Prophet took place while he was in Makkah from which he was taken by the archangel Gabriel first horizontally to Jerusalem and then vertically from Jerusalem to the Divine Proximity, to a station so close to God that the archangel could not accompany him for the last step of the journey lest he would be "burned" which means a state transcending even the archangelic level. During the journey through the heavens, symbolised by the various planetary spheres but not reducible to them, the Prophet encountered the various prophets including Moses and Christ and received the supreme knowledge of Divine Unity at the highest stage of the journey. Moreover, the journey was carried out physically as well as spiritually like the ascent of Christ

from Mt. Tabor. It was also during the *mi'rāj* that the Prophet experienced the inner mysteries of worship instituted in the daily prayers (*ṣalāt*) which constitute the heart of Islamic worship.

The *mi'rāj* is first of all the prototype of all spiritual realisation in Islam. That is why so many Sufis, some of whom were to influence indirectly the structure of the *Divine Comedy* of Dante, wrote about the *mi'rāj* as model for spiritual realisation. As already mentioned, the daily prayers are in fact called the *mi'rāj* of those who are real believers except that *mi'rāj* for men and women of spiritual quality can only be spiritual while that of the Prophet was both corporeal (*jismānī*) and spiritual (*rūḥānī*). Consequently the spiritual life in Islam is subtly intertwined with the spiritual significance of Jerusalem as the locus of the beginning of the vertical phase of the prototypic spiritual journey of the Prophet to the Divine Abode.

The *mi'rāj* also links Jerusalem in other ways to Makkah. First of all the journey itself links the two cities esoterically as well as factually for the earthly part of it was from Makkah to Jerusalem. Both cities are, therefore, central to this supreme experience of the life of the Prophet which all Muslims accept as part of their sacred history that has not been reduced to harmless tales and stories as so many people interpret Jewish and Christian sacred history in the West today. Secondly, since the Prophet experienced the inner meaning of the central ritual of Islam, namely the daily prayers, during the *mi'rāj*, these prayers preserve a hidden link to Jerusalem above and beyond the role of Jerusalem as the first *qiblah* to which Muslims turned during these prayers before Makkah was chosen as the *qiblah*.

The universality of the Islamic perspective as far as revelation is concerned, as expressed explicitly in the Qur'ān, makes of the Abrahamic prophets important figures in the Islamic firmament itself. Muslims must have the deepest reverence for Abraham, Moses, Christ and other prophets preceding the Prophet of Islam no matter what others, even some of the rebellious members of Judaism and Christianity, might say about them.

Now, this universal perspective is also concretely associated with the encounters of the Prophet during the *mi'rāj* with the spiritual reality of these earlier prophets in the other world. And it is this celestial harmony between the prophets of the Abrahamic family, described in the Qur'ān and realised by the Prophet concretely during the *mi'rāj* that has caused Muslims through most of their history, with a few tragic exceptions, to give refuge to Jews and Christians living amidst them. For Muslims 'Umar's order to respect Christian sites in Jerusalem served as a model and for centuries under Muslim rule the religious rights of Christians and Jews and their houses of worship and holy places were protected and respected. Jerusalem remains in the Muslim mind the most important locus for the children of Abraham to live

in harmony and ordained as the *mi'rāj* whose very location is the heart of the sacred history.

We live in a period of crisis. But no matter how long it lasts, one cannot deny the need for peace and security. In any case, however, in reference to the Muslims in Bosnia, Jerusalem is a symbol of that harmony, even if Jerusalem is not a permanent rather than a temporary and have the final

Meanwhile, no matter how long it lasts, the hearts of Muslims are in contact with the eschatological event. Jerusalem is not able to make a journey often to the sacred history. In any case, it would send oil to Jerusalem, lives in the proximity of her. Jerusalem, lives in contact with the doctrines and ascend to the spirit of humanity within the Islamic universe.

"Allāh, may He be merciful to the people of Eden, My hall had mercy upon you with him."



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in harmony and as far as they are concerned this harmony is part of what God ordained as the destiny of the city as confirmed by the profound meaning of the *mi'rāj* whose vertical part originated and terminated in that city from the rock whose very location links this central episode of Islamic sacred history to the loci of the sacred history of Judaism and Christianity.

We live in a period in which the writing of revisionist history has become common. But no matter how one seeks to distort history for ideological and political ends, one cannot deny that for centuries Jews and Christians lived amidst Muslims in peace and security even if they did not enjoy all the rights of the Muslim majority. In any case, however, Islamic history was not witness to any 1492s or 1992s (this is in reference to the expulsion of Muslims and Jews from Spain and the massacre of Muslims in Bosnia). In Muslim eyes Jerusalem in its spiritual reality remains the symbol of that harmony between the three faiths which have issued from Abraham even if Jerusalem on earth is now undergoing such a divisive and confrontational period in its history. And it is that celestial reality of Jerusalem that, being permanent rather than transient, will finally manifest itself on the earthly plane and have the final word.

Meanwhile, no matter what happens temporally Jerusalem will continue to live in the hearts of Muslims as their first *qiblah*, the site of the *mi'rāj* and the arena for eschatological events which concern all believers. Also, although most Muslims are not able to make the pilgrimage to this holy city today, their thoughts continue to journey often to this precinct chosen by God as the site of so many episodes of sacred history. In days of old those who could not make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem would send oil to be burned in the lamps of her mosques. Today it is the prayers of Muslims everywhere which are sent to join the prayers of those who still live in the proximity of her holy sites. Meanwhile, Jerusalem, that mystical and spiritual Jerusalem, lives in the minds and hearts of all Muslims, near and far, and they are in contact with its celestial reality whenever they penetrate more deeply into the doctrines and practices of their faith, whenever they turn to the *qiblah* or ascend to the spiritual world or meditate upon the end and glorious resurrection of humanity with all of which, Jerusalem is inextricably linked within the Islamic universe.

“Allāh, may He be praised and exalted, said of Jerusalem: You are My Garden of Eden, My hallowed and chosen land. Whoever lives here does so because I had mercy upon him, and whoever leaves this place does so because I am angry with him.”<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 According to a ḥadīth transmitted by Ka'b ibn Aḥbar, "Resurrection of the dead will not take place until one of the two temples [Makkah and Jerusalem] journey to the other, since Allāh's abode and seat of judgement are there.
- 2 According to a ḥadīth transmitted by 'Ā'ishah, "The Prophet said," Makkah the city Allāh exalted or sanctified, created and surrounded by angels a thousand years before creating anything else on earth. Then he jointed it with Medina and united Medina to Jerusalem, and earth and only a thousand years later created the [rest of the] world in a single act.
- 3 Ḥadīth transmitted by Ka'b al-Aḥbar.

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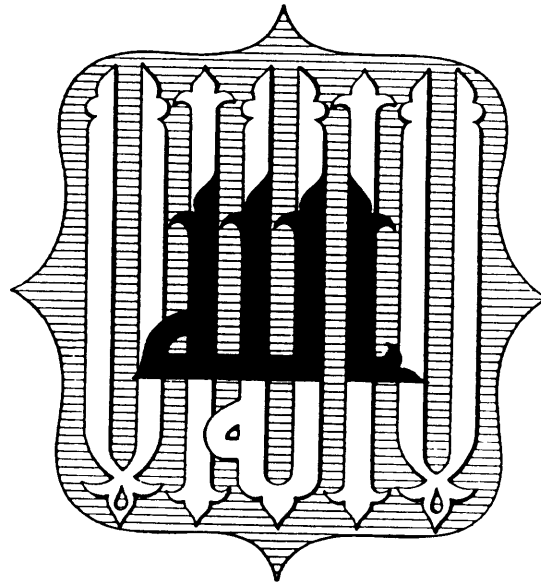
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\* Deputy Director-General

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