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Counterinsurgency and the Problem of Sacred Space

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On April 2, 2002, a clash between the Israeli military and Palestinian gunmen that began like so many other violent encounters in the West Bank took a decidedly odd turn when the gunmen, 39 in all, sought refuge in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, revered by Christians as the birthplace of Jesus.¹ There they remained, relatively safe from harm, for the next six weeks. Although the gunmen were Muslim, the Christian clergy inside the church offered them sanctuary from the Israeli soldiers outside as well as food and shelter. The Israeli military, under international scrutiny for besieging such an important sacred site, refrained from attacking the building or apprehending the gunmen. Instead they attempted, with some success, to snipe at the gunmen through open windows, taking particular care not to damage the structure itself. Despite the danger, the priests refused to leave when given the opportunity to do so yet also insisted that they were not hostages. The gunmen, on the other hand, accepted various strictures on movement and behavior dictated by their hosts, even when these encumbered their survival during the siege. This unusual state of affairs ended with the safe conducting of the surviving gunmen out of Bethlehem.

How can we explain the seemingly strange behavior by various parties to this incident? The answer, in large part, has to do with the sacred character of the building in which the gunmen sought refuge. Asked later about the unusual standoff, the mayor

of Bethlehem explained: "It is an unusual situation that required exceptional decisions. The Church of the Nativity demands this exception. If it were not for the church, we would not have agreed to this."² Yet attributing the idiosyncrasies of this particular incident to the religious importance of its setting seems to raise more questions than it can resolve: Why should Israeli soldiers and Palestinian gunmen care about the sanctity of a Christian holy place? What makes a place sacred in the first place? What sort of restrictions does this religious status place on insurgents and on counterinsurgency forces? Do these strictures apply to all sacred places equally or are some sites more important than others? Underlying these queries are two fundamental policy riddles that echo throughout this volume: Why are insurgencies drawn to sacred sites? What can counterinsurgency forces do in such cases?

This chapter offers some answers to these questions by focusing on the three actors involved in any counterinsurgency effort at a sacred site: believers to whom the site is sacred, insurgents, and counterinsurgency forces. I begin with a functionalist definition of sacred space that focuses on the services such space performs for believers. I show that sacred sites are places for communicating with the divine, receiving divine gifts, and gaining insight into greater religious meanings.

In the second part of the chapter I show that the ability of sacred sites to perform one or more of these functions determines their importance to members of a religious movement. The relative significance of a sacred site is a useful predictor for public responses to counterinsurgency operations at such a site. At its essence, the function of sacred places in counterinsurgency operations is to enhance audience costs. Audience costs are the penalties imposed on an action by spectators.³ Audiences can penalize decision makers for failure to secure beneficial outcomes, for neglecting to abide by prior promises, or for committing actions from which the decision makers had promised to refrain. During counterinsurgency operations at sacred places, sites *deepen* audience costs by adding a religious dimension to a conflict that an audience might otherwise judge on its political, ethnic, or moral merits. These sites *widen* audience costs by drawing the attention of a national, regional, or even global community of believers to an event that might otherwise attract local observers only.

In the third part of this chapter I focus on insurgents and examine the multiple advantages that the functions of sacred space and

the rules that govern that space offer to insurgents. Sacred sites offer a convenient place of refuge and a logistical hub because of their location at the heart of population centers, their layout, and the presence of unarmed worshippers that can be used as decoys or hostages. These sites offer access to potential recruits, temporary reprieve from security forces that are often reluctant to enter sacred sites, as well as basic needs such as food, water, and shelter.

More important, insurgents can rely on the local population's sensitivities toward the sacred site to level the playing field with counterinsurgency forces, particularly when insurgents share a religious affiliation with the community worshipping at the site. When this happens, the community tends to interpret rules and restrictions to the advantage of the insurgents inside the shrine and the disadvantage of the counterinsurgency forces on the outside.

In the fourth part of this chapter I turn to the challenges facing counterinsurgency forces at sacred sites, in particular the adverse consequences of destroying sacred sites and the costs of desecrating these sites. Failure to meet these challenges will further alienate the local population, potentially increasing local support for the insurgents. Managing counterinsurgency operations that involve sacred sites thus requires not merely a knowledge of the specific site, its design, and the rules that regulate access and behavior within it, but also a familiarity with the relevant audiences observing the operation.

By taking the religious dimensions of these disputes seriously, decision makers can access "religious intelligence": religious experts and community leaders who can provide information about the relevant parameters of a given site and can attempt to negotiate these parameters so as to facilitate military operations. To conclude this chapter, I highlight some of these arguments with a brief examination of the siege at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in April 2002.

What Is Sacred Space?

Sacred sites are prevalent, varied, and complex enough a phenomenon to allow for multiple definitions, approaches, and theories. Because I am interested in the effects of counterinsurgency operations on those observers who revere the relevant sacred site, this chapter espouses a functionalist approach that defines sacred space from the point of view of the worshipper.⁴ For the believer, geography is not uniform in its religious significance. Sites that facilitate access to the divine are more important than those that do not. At

these locations, the gods break through to the human realm and become accessible. Sacred places are bridges, connecting the mundane and the divine, turning these sites into religious centers for adherents of the faith.

As far as worshippers are concerned, sacred places fulfill three types of needs. First, they are places in which worshippers can communicate with the divine by means of prayer and ritual. Second, sacred places contain a permanent divine presence. Worshippers thus approach such places with the expectation of receiving blessings, healing, forgiveness, spiritual merit, or salvation. Finally, in their layout and design, sacred places provide meaning to the faithful. They evoke passages from history, social structures, or religious precepts and, ultimately they hint at the underlying order of the cosmos through architecture, decoration, and rituals.

The ability to communicate with the divine, to receive gifts, and to gain insight into greater meanings turns all sacred spaces, irrespective of size or importance, into religious centers for believers. This is true of primary sacred sites, such as Mecca, Amritsar, and the Temple Mount, which form historical, spiritual, and cosmological centers for Muslims, Sikhs, and Jews respectively. Believers often associate such places with the act of creation, the end of days, or the timeless authority of God over man. The same holds, on a smaller scale, for minor sites such as local mosques, shrines, temples, churches, or synagogues. By facilitating group ritual and communication with the divine, these sites also act as two-way channels between the present world and a world removed. They are world axes that connect heaven and earth but also function as spiritual pivots around which the believers' world revolves.⁵

Pilgrims who journey to sacred places thus travel toward the center, seeking in the sacred space a microcosm of the universe and of the specific religion it represents. Consider three of the cities that loom large in this volume: Mecca in Saudi Arabia, Amritsar in India, and Najaf in Iraq. These sites attract pilgrims who wish to come into closer contact with their god by accessing sites of religious history and geography. In all these cases the pilgrims' journey to the sacred site is also a journey to the center of the universe, where they can expect to see a representation of their spiritual world and to conduct exchanges with the divine. It is toward such centers that synagogues, mosques, shrines, temples, and churches are oriented and that prayer is directed.

Muslims worldwide pray toward the Black Stone, a meteor embedded in the *Ka'ba*, the large cuboid structure in the center of

the Grand mosque in Mecca.⁶ This stone is said to mark the very first place of prayer, erected by Adam and later rebuilt by Abraham. It is here that an angel saved the lives of Hagar and her son Ishmael, patriarch of all Arab peoples. It is here that the Prophet Muhammad founded the Islamic movement, and it is from here that he embarked on his miraculous night flight to Jerusalem, from whence he ascended to heaven. The pilgrimage to Mecca, the *hajj*, is a sacred duty for all Muslims. Once the devout complete their pilgrimage and arrive in Mecca, their directed prayer is translated into circumambulation of the stone, followed by a series of group rituals designed to symbolically reenact key events in Islamic cosmology.

The Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar (colloquially known as “the Golden Temple”) was founded by Guru Arjun, the fifth leader of the Sikh movement. The Temple complex, known as the Court of the Lord, is made up of several ornate structures arranged around a large, rectangular reflecting pool, the Pool of Nectar. These structures include the *Akhal Takht*, the Throne of the Ever-Living God, several guest houses, fruit gardens, pavilions, and a 130-foot domed tower. The centerpiece of the complex is the Golden Temple itself, the *Harimandir*, the most sacred shrine in the Sikh religion. Here the representation of sacred space as center takes the form not of a stone but of a sacred text, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The book, a collection of poems, prayers and hymns composed by the first ten gurus of Sikhism, contains the tenets of the faith. The tenth and last leader of the faithful bestowed the title “guru” onto the text itself, at which point it became the eternal guide for all Sikhs. The *Guru Granth Sahib* is placed in the heart of the Harimandir Sahib, verses from it are sung continuously from dawn to sunset, to the accompaniment of flutes, drums, and strings. Pilgrims can cross the causeway to circumambulate the text or hear its verses while encircling the pool.

Like Mecca, Najaf is a Muslim sacred site. Yet whereas Mecca can claim the position of the very center of the religious universe for all Muslims, Najaf and its twin city of Karbala are of religious significance for Shi’a Muslims only. It is in Najaf that the Imam Ali, cousin and son-in law of the Prophet Muhammad, is buried. His shrine, in the center of the city, adorned by a magnificent gilded dome, is the destination for Shi’ite pilgrims from across the globe. They revere Ali as a martyr, last of the righteous successors of the Prophet and first of the *imams*, the spiritual leaders of the Shi’a faith. Many who visit the shrine do so toward the end of their lives with the intention of being interred in the large cemetery nearby,

thus ensuring themselves a resurrection with Ali on the Day of Judgment.

Estimating the Importance of a Sacred Site

Despite their attachment to Najaf, Shi'a Muslims rank Mecca, Medina—where the Prophet Muhammad is buried—and Jerusalem as more significant sacred sites than Najaf. And yet Shi'a Muslims pay reverence to their local mosques as well. This phenomenon raises the problem of ranking sacred sites by significance. How do believers prioritize sacred sites? An answer to this question holds the key to determining how believers might respond to military operations at their sacred sites. How might Thai decision makers have estimated, *ex ante*, the public response to the military incursion of the Krue Se mosque in Pattani (analyzed here by Liow in chapter 7)? How might the Indian government have predicted the response by Kashmiri Muslims to the counterinsurgency operation at the Charar-e-Sharief shrine, given its experience with counterinsurgency at the Hazratbal Mosque (both examined by Ganguly in chapter 3)?

The religious significance of a sacred site depends on its relative ability to fulfill the three crucial functions listed earlier: communication, divine gifts, and insight. The stronger a group's belief that a site provides communication with the divine, a sense of divine presence and meaning, the more important the site is for believers. At the most central of sacred sites, the believer can hope for the clearest and most unmediated exchange with the gods.

Sites of primary importance are constructed on sacred ground on which some divine revelation or a founding moment of a religious movement has taken place. Mecca is the most revered site for Muslims because Allah manifested himself there to the patriarchs and to Muhammad and because He decreed that this be the focus of all Muslim prayers. Christians revere the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem as the site of several incidents related to the birth of Jesus Christ. They attach similarly primary importance to the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth and the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, purported to be the site of the crucifixion and resurrection.

Sacred sites of secondary importance are located on consecrated ground, that is, at locations chosen not by the gods but by religious actors. Their importance is elevated by the presence of a relic or some divine gift that bestows healing, miracles, and intercessions

to the faithful. Muslims in Kashmir revere the Hazratbal Mosque in Srinagar because it contains a precious relic, a hair of the Prophet Mohammad. The *Moe-e-Muqqadas* (sacred hair) draws pilgrims from across Kashmir to the seventeenth-century shrine, hoping that proximity to this relic will provide a more immediate experience of God and a more effective answer to prayers. Shi'a Muslims revere the twin shrines of Abbas and Hussein in Karbala, not far from Najaf, because they contain the tombs of these two leaders of the early Shi'a movement, sons of Ali and martyrs for the faith.

Most sacred places, however, neither are located on sites of religious-historical importance nor do they contain relics. These places of tertiary importance account for the vast majority of sacred sites. The town or village mosque, church, synagogue, gurdwara, and the like are designed for routine use by a community that cannot access a primary or secondary shrine. Many of these tertiary sites emulate the primary shrine in layout and orientation. For example, just as the synagogue recalls the design and functions of the Temple in Jerusalem, so are Sikh Gurdwaras worldwide modeled after the Harimandir Sahib in Amritsar, similarly mosques face Mecca and derive their layout from the first mosque in Medina. The link between the tertiary site and the relevant primary site is constantly underscored in prayers, rituals, and invocations.

Because there are no relics to desecrate or sacred soil to defile at these tertiary sites, the rules designed to protect the sacred there can be relaxed. Nonetheless, these sites can come to acquire increasing significance over time, as the religious community celebrates its sacred rituals there, introduces sacred artifacts, and begins accepting the place as a suitable substitute for the primary sacred site. This process grants even tertiary sites, such as the Krue Se mosque in Thailand or the Lal Masjid in Pakistan, a significance that is sensitive to desecration.

Most religions, then, offer a hierarchy of sacred sites (see table 1.1). This ranking affects the depth and width of public responses to attacks and thus has two implications for counterinsurgency operations. First, the more significant a shrine, the stronger the public response to damage or desecration. At the same time, more important shrines will elicit such responses from a broader spectrum of observers, reaching, in the case of primary sites, to members of the religious community worldwide. Thus the audience to a counterinsurgency operation at an important sacred site can expand to include co-religionists in far reaches of the globe that have little else in common with the militants in terms of ethnic, national, or political aspirations.

Table 1.1 A Ranking of Sacred Sites by Significance

	<i>Christianity</i>	<i>Islam</i>	<i>Sikhism</i>
Primary	Church of the Nativity (and others, e.g., Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Church of the Annunciation)	Mecca Medina Jerusalem	Harimandir Sahib
Secondary	Cathedral with relic Miracle site (Lourdes, Fatima, etc.)	<i>Summi</i> Mosque with relic (e.g., Hazratbal , Damascus, Cairo)	<i>Sufi</i> Saint's shrine (e.g., Charar-e-Sharief)
Tertiary	Local church	local mosque (e.g., Krue Se, Lal Masjid)	Local mosque Local <i>gurdwara</i>

Note: Sites listed are provided as examples only; sites highlighted in this volume appear in bold print.

Although the ranking of sacred places within a given religion is often quite clear and explicit, caution is required when one is prioritizing sacred sites in order to assess public responses to counterinsurgency operations. The typology suggested here cannot provide more than a rough heuristic. For one thing, different religious movements have radically diverging conceptions of sacred space, its importance, and its vulnerability to desecration. Comparisons of ranking across religious groups or even subgroups are thus of limited utility. Second, ranking within any one religious movement is often more continuous than dichotomous, with multiple intermediary stages blurring the boundaries between categories.

Finally, a community's local-patriotic, emotional, or political attachment to a shrine can elevate the value of even the most insignificant of sacred places. Believers might express a strong bond with a minor site for a host of reasons: because it is associated with a beloved local saint, because the community relates its own identity and history to that of the site, or because the institutions surrounding the site provide crucial economic, political, or social services to the community. Indeed, local political events, such as discriminatory policies toward a community and its sacred site or—at the extreme—government-sanctioned violation of the site during counterinsurgency operations, can all increase the significance of a sacred place, thus complicating the calculation significantly.⁷

Insurgency and the Utility of Sacred Space

Why are insurgents drawn to sacred places? The answer has to do with both the physical features of sacred sites and the rules imposed on these sites by the community of believers. The location, the layout, and the presence of unarmed worshippers at these sites offer insurgents an opportunity for leveling the playing field with the counterinsurgency forces outside the shrine. More important, the rules governing access to the shrine and the behavior within it tend to play to the insurgents' advantage. All these factors can be derived from the three functions that sacred space performs for believers: communicating with the divine, receiving divine gifts, and gaining insight into greater religious meanings.

Because sacred places provide these critical functions, they symbolize the very essence of the religious movement, both to its members and to members of other faiths. They represent the religious movement at its most splendid, displaying the power and wealth of the religious community even to those barred from access. Many

of the great religious shrines around the world, such as the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the Harimandir in Amritsar, or the mosques in Najaf and Karbala, have in popular perception become synonymous with the religions they represent. Believers are drawn to sacred places not only because of the religious functions these sites perform but also because these places assume particular social roles. Shrines that occupy a prominent place in a society's religious landscape are likely to assume a central position in its social, cultural, and even economic and political sphere as well. Sacred places have doubled as courts, schools, marketplaces, and royal residences.

As a consequence, insurgents who occupy a sacred place can expect to find cover among the crowds attending the site. This cover can be exploited for obtaining hostages, as occurred in the Meccan insurgency in 1979 (examined by Ménoret in chapter 5) and in the Bethlehem siege (discussed in this chapter). In these cases, worshippers who happened to be at the sacred site when the crises erupted became unwitting human shields for the insurgents. Alternatively, insurgents can use the constant flow of worshippers, religious rituals, and tacit or explicit consent from the shrine managers as a cover for establishing a permanent base for their operations. Such was the case during the Shi'a insurgency based in Najaf and Karbala (examined by Patel in chapter 6). In some cases insurgents are able to capitalize on both options: Sunni insurgents based their activities in the Lal Masjid but also exploited the presence of worshippers to their own advantage during the ensuing siege (examined by Pardesi in chapter 4). By locating his headquarters in the Harimandir, the leader of the Sikh insurgency, Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, was able to use the flux of Sikh pilgrims as a cover for his fortification of the temple. The presence of hundreds of worshippers at the shrine during Operation Blue Star (examined by Fair in chapter 2) also complicated matters significantly for the Indian government. The location of many of these shrines in city centers, often surrounded by labyrinthine bazaars, makes for quick and convenient ingress and egress at times of need, sheltered by a dense urban environment that further hampers counterinsurgency operations.

The design of sacred sites provides further advantages to insurgents. The layout of a shrine employs architecture to represent the rules governing behavior and access. The structure channels and constrains movement around the sacred site by means of barriers, gateways and passageways. It also creates the necessary spaces and facilities for performing rituals such as group worship, ablution, baptism, confession, or sacrifice. The more familiar the insurgents

are with the shrine, the easier it will be for them to gain advantage over their opponents by sheltering in hidden rooms, passageways, and subterranean vaults. Insurgents have also used minarets (during the Lal Masjid and Mecca sieges, for example) or tall structures such as guest houses and water towers (during Operation Blue Star) to snipe at counterinsurgency forces.

Older shrines, particularly those designed to house and protect a religious elite or to harbor the faithful during attacks by outsiders, tend to resemble veritable fortresses. They are often characterized by tall and thick walls, narrow windows and doors, and a self-sufficient design that may include gardens, wells, and stores of provisions. The broader the scope of social functions that the shrine performs, the better the odds that insurgents will find food and water at the site, supplies that will prove useful for surviving a prolonged siege.

More troubling yet, from the counterinsurgents' point of view, is the tendency of religious communities to locate the most valuable element of their sacred sites in the center of their shrine. The *Ka'ba* at the center of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the Golden Temple in the middle of the Harimandir, the tombs of saints or imams in the heart of mosques, all these encumber counterinsurgency operations that seek to expel insurgents from a shrine without damaging the most sensitive aspect of that shrine. In most cases it is impossible to conduct offensive operations inside the shrine without severely damaging these crucial sites in its center.

The strongest factor that favors insurgents seeking refuge at a sacred site, however, is unrelated to the physical appearance of the site. This factor is the set of religious rules governing access to the site and behavior in it. Because these sites constitute ruptures in the ordinary realm, worshippers have to abide by specific rules designed to protect the divine presence from desecration, to protect humans from overstepping dangerous limits as they approach the divine, and to distinguish the sacred space from the surrounding secular area. Transgressing these rules is tantamount to sacrilege. One of a religious group's most important tasks is therefore to enforce these limits on access and conduct.

These strictures advantage insurgents, provided they share a religious affiliation with the community that guards the sacred site. Some of the rules governing a sacred site explicitly discriminate between members of the faith and outsiders. As members of the faith, the insurgents will enjoy a freedom of movement and access that may be unattainable to their adversaries. Other directives, such as those banning weapons or prohibiting the use of force

within a sacred place, might apply equally to members of the faith and outsiders. Worshippers are nevertheless likely to show lenience in applying these rules to members of their own religious community, particularly if insurgents can persuade worshippers that they are acting in defense of the faith and in defense of the sacred site.

Finally, positioned inside the shrine, insurgents are less likely to cause offense by inflicting damage on the structure during fighting than would the troops opposing them. As long as insurgents are shooting out and counterinsurgency forces are shooting in, much of the responsibility for damage to the shrine will be placed squarely on the latter's shoulders. Insurgents have even willfully desecrated sites in preparation for and also in the course of fighting, perhaps in the expectation that the counterinsurgency forces would be blamed for the destruction. As Fair makes clear in her study of Operation Blue Star and as Ganguly suggests in his analysis of the Charar-e-Sharief crisis, this insurgent strategy often succeeds in directing observer wrath toward the counterinsurgents. Even though insurgents are usually complicit in any damage or desecration that occurs at a sacred site by virtue of having drawn the fighting there, counterinsurgency forces must take care to manage media depiction and public perceptions of the conflict lest they find themselves bearing the brunt of believers' anger.

Counterinsurgency and the Challenge of Sacred Space

Counterinsurgency forces conducting operations at a sacred site thus face a twin challenge that mirrors the advantages enjoyed by insurgents. First, they must overcome the obstacles posed by the physical features of the site without antagonizing the population that holds the site dear. This first challenge is beyond the scope of this chapter and is addressed in detail by other contributors to this volume. The second challenge requires a familiarity with the idiosyncrasies of a given sacred place. In particular, counterinsurgency forces need to be both clear about the audience that will be scrutinizing violations of the sanctity of the sacred site and aware of acts that might constitute violations thereof. Three possible violations merit particular attention: infringements on rules regulating access and behavior, damage to the structure of a sacred site, and transgressions of the right of sanctuary.

When confronting insurgencies at sacred sites, counterinsurgency forces must contend with enhanced audience costs. In drawing combat to a sacred place, insurgents *deepen* the normal public relations costs associated with counterinsurgency operations by

adding a religious dimension to the conflict. Although counterinsurgency operations at temples, mosques, or churches involve some of the same difficulties as operations at other public sites, such as schools or hospitals, they are likely to evoke a more visceral reaction in a religious audience concerned with desecration. At the same time, combat at these sites *widens* the observing audience by appealing to members of the relevant religious community across a particular nation, region, or even the globe. The Pakistani and Thai government, for example, broadened the potential audience of their respective counterinsurgency operations to include all Muslims in their country, across Asia, and even worldwide when they chose to confront insurgents in the Lal Masjid and the Krue Se mosque.

The likelihood of a vehement response from a broad audience is proportionate to the significance of a shrine, as was discussed earlier. Primary shrines are esteemed by the global religious community. The sieges in Mecca, Amritsar, and Bethlehem thus unleashed angry responses from Muslim, Sikh, and Christian communities far beyond the location of the actual operations. Transgressions committed at secondary shrines will enrage a somewhat narrower audience: the two sieges in Kashmir affected Muslims in South Asia primarily, just as operations in Najaf and Karbala disturbed Shi'a communities in the Gulf region primarily. Muslims outside these particular communities would have limited knowledge of the sites involved or the significance of their desecration. Attacks on tertiary sites might draw the attention of a still narrower community, though their impact should still exceed in both intensity and scope that of a counterinsurgency operation at a "secular" site.

To minimize these costs, decision makers must familiarize themselves with the precise implications of their future actions in the religious realm. Desecration, meaning the transgression of the boundary between the sacred and the profane, is more than just an offense to the sensibilities of those who revere a sacred site. It is understood by these practitioners as a tangible assault on the status of the site that, if successful, can strip a site of its sanctity. As a consequence, believers will go to extremes to prevent the desecration of their holy places or to avenge such transgressions. Leaders concerned with the desecration of a sacred site must therefore obtain answers to three questions. First, what are the restrictions that the local religious community places on entry into this site? Second, how will this community respond to destruction of some or all of the shrine? Third, to what extent does this community envision the insurgents as protected by the right of sanctuary?

The first of these questions has to do with rules delimiting who may approach the sacred site and how such admission is to be performed. These rules are designed to uphold the distinction between profane and sacred space. They include gestures of approach that occur at the threshold of a sacred site, such as ablution or the removal of shoes before entering a mosque, the removal of headdress upon entering a church, or the covering of one's head upon entering a gurdwara or synagogue. Additional codes may prohibit a range of activities within the sanctuary or forbid all but a narrow range of behaviors. The use of force and shedding of blood are strictly prohibited within a mosque, for example. Upon entering the Grand Mosque in Mecca or the Harimandir in Amritsar, worshippers are expected to perform circumambulations of the central shrine (the *Ka'ba* and the Golden Temple, respectively) before engaging in a series of prescribed rituals. Yet while the carrying of weapons, for example, is strictly prohibited in Mecca, no such prohibition exists in Amritsar, since all baptized Sikhs are expected to carry a *kirpan*, a short ceremonial dagger, at all times.

These two sacred places also exemplify extreme positions regarding restrictions on entry. Members of all faiths are welcome at the Harimandir; its four gates facing the cardinal directions represent accessibility to all. Churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues display varying degrees of openness to outsiders, though most communities require that visitors seek their permission before entering their sacred space. Access to the Grand Mosque in Mecca, on the other hand, is prohibited to non-Muslims, who cannot even come within a 20-mile radius of the city.

Given these restrictions, it is incumbent upon decision makers to assess the right of access for counterinsurgency forces in each case, to learn the appropriate gestures of approach, and then, most challenging of all, to determine the costs and benefits of abiding by these rules. One cannot expect counterinsurgency forces to remove their shoes during hot pursuit into a mosque but one might expect them to do so before conducting a routine search in a mosque. In either case, the effect of their failure to do so at a local mosque would be negligible compared with the repercussions of doing so at a more significant mosque. The more important the site, the greater the likelihood that a transgression will be viewed as an unforgivable act of desecration. Once inside the sacred site, military or police personnel can trigger indignation in an endless variety of ways, such as acting or talking inappropriately, handling items considered sac-

rosanct, consuming prohibited food or drink, spitting, smoking, or even posing irreverently for the media.

The second question decision makers must answer before engaging insurgents at a sacred site concerns the consequences of damaging the sacred structure. Unlike the sacred place, which is perceived as divinely ordained, the sacred structure is usually understood as man-made: consecrated by human hand, it can also be repaired or rebuilt. How a religious community will respond to damage caused to that structure during combat thus depends on how it views the relationship between the underlying site and the structure that towers above it. The more significant the site below, the more likely that the structure above has absorbed its sanctity, incorporated the religious functions that the underlying site provides, and merged with the site to become one sacred space. For believers, then, damage caused to a local church, for example, is qualitatively different from damage caused to a cathedral or a primary shrine, such as the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Religious movements have established clear rules that dictate the conditions under which a sacred structure is considered salvageable, requires reconsecration, or needs to be demolished and totally rebuilt.

Complicating matters further, the offense taken by believers in response to damage to their shrine depends not only on the rules pertaining to a particular scenario, but also on the subjective interpretation of these rules by observers. This interpretation may depend on the extent of the damage, the significance of the part of the structure that was damaged, the imputed intentionality of the act, or the number of casualties caused by the attack. For example, the most visible elements on a sacred site's exterior, such as domes, bell towers, or minarets, often play a relatively minor role in the rituals performed in its interior. Yet, insignificant as their formal function might be, believers are likely to take grave offense at damage to the outward appearance of their shrine. This reaction is particularly likely if, as in both Sunni and Shi'a mosques in Iraq, these domes and minarets have become symbols not only of the shrines they adorn but of the very community that worships there.

Timing is another significant parameter that can affect how a community responds to an incursion that destroys or desecrates a shrine. Such assaults will be viewed with greater hostility if they coincide with significant dates in the religious calendar. Attacks on mosques on a Friday (the Muslim Sabbath), during Ramadan (the holy month), or on the memorial day of a saint entombed in a

mosque suggest callous opportunism and convey disrespect toward the community and its values. Operation Blue Star, unfortunately timed to take place during the fifth day of the lunar month—an auspicious time for Sikh pilgrimages—and on a date marking the martyrdom of the constructor of the Harimandir, who had been executed under religious persecution, represents the epitome of this type of insensitivity.⁸

A third obstacle facing counterinsurgency forces contemplating an attack on insurgents in a sacred place is the right of sanctuary. This right rests on the belief, common in some religious movements, that the persecuted are immune from seizure inside a sacred place.⁹ The right of sanctuary has undergone varying degrees of development across religious traditions, with some movements denying the right altogether while others differ on the justification for the right and the conditions under which it is extended.

In biblical Judaism, for example, the right of sanctuary rested on the assumption that particular sites, enumerated in the scriptures, were protected by divine sanction.¹⁰ The practice of sanctuary achieved its fullest development in Roman and Christian law, which derived the right from the inherent inviolability of all sacred sites. In medieval Christianity, this right detailed the crimes for which a felon might obtain sanctuary, the locations at which sanctuary was available, the duration and conditions of the felon's tenure at the sacred site, and mechanisms for escorting him out of the sacred place to beyond the reach of the persecuting authorities. The right of sanctuary continues to be practiced and respected with astonishing frequency, such as by illegal immigrants seeking refuge in churches to avoid deportation.¹¹ The right of sanctuary as understood in Sunni Islam applies not to protection from criminal prosecution or arrest, as it does in Christianity, but to an absolute prohibition on violence inside a mosque, as spelled out in the Qur'an.¹² The Shi'a practice, on the other hand, developed in a manner reminiscent of the Christian and Jewish practice; Shi'a mosques can provide criminals with a temporary sanctuary from arrest (*bast*), particularly if the mosque contains the tomb of a saint (*wali*) who can extend a divine protection over the refugee.¹³ All of these traditions, with their varying interpretation of the right of sanctuary, must grapple with the difficult question of whether this right should be extended to armed insurgents.

The preceding discussion does not exhaust the universe of rules, norms, and expectations attached to the conduct of counterinsurgency operations at sacred sites. The conclusion from this brief sur-

vey is simple: Decision makers must take the religious dimension of operations at sacred sites seriously and acquaint themselves with the religio-legal minutiae that determine how a religious community will respond to an attack involving a sacred site. Given variations within as well as across religious movements, with changes often depending on the idiosyncrasies of a particular site or the local preferences of a particular community, there remains only one reliable means of accessing the "religious intelligence" required for the successful completion of such an operation: decision makers must consult with religious experts who can provide information about the implications of using force at a sacred site. If no such experts are available, the decision makers will have to acquire this intelligence from the community itself, such as by conferring with community leaders or the religious elites.

Religious leaders are likely to hesitate to cooperate with secular authorities that are planning an attack on their sacred site. At the same time, these leaders should be willing to provide information that can help minimize damage to its most important elements, keep believers out of harm's way, and reduce the risk of sacrilege and desecration. Religious elites can provide key facts about the targeted site, its meaning to worshippers, existing restrictions on access and behavior, and crucial information about sensitive times and dates. They may be able to predict, explain, and even influence public perceptions of operations in sacred space. Finally, if they have gained the trust of both insurgents and counterinsurgents, they may be willing to act as go-betweens during a standoff.

Because insurgents are aware that their legitimacy can be undermined by religious authorities, they are likely to threaten these authorities into compliance. Faced with intimidation, death threats, or even the murder of an outspoken associate, religious leaders have often chosen to overlook militant excesses and the desecration of sacred sites. Properly manipulated, religious actors may even choose to direct the responsibility for the desecration onto the counterinsurgents. To avoid this danger, counterinsurgency forces would do well to conceive of religious authorities as assets that need to be protected before they can be expected to cooperate.

The Bethlehem Siege, April 2002

The Israeli siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem offers an intriguing example for counterinsurgency operations involving sacred space, because the site was sacred to a religious group that

was distinct from the ethnic majority represented by both the Israeli government and the Palestinian insurgents. The gunmen were thus unable to capitalize on many of the advantages usually offered by sacred places during insurgencies. Nonetheless, this case exhibits many of the arguments, challenges, and possible solutions proposed in the preceding pages.

The site itself displays many of the characteristics of a sacred space. For nearly two millennia, Christians have revered this site as the location of various key events related to the founding of their religion. A grotto under the sanctuary marks the site at which Mary and Joseph spent the night; a silver star set into the floor of the grotto (engraved *Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est*) marks the precise location of Christ's birth. Nearby, worshippers show where Mary first set her child down in his crib and, elsewhere, where an angel warned Joseph to flee to Egypt. The adjacent Chapel of Saint Jerome is said to be the location at which that Church Father translated the bible into Latin. Near the church is the Shepherd's Field, the tomb of the matriarch Rachel, and a second grotto, known as "the Milk Grotto," where Mary is said to have nursed her son.¹⁴

Believers come to this church and to the adjacent sites in order to witness the evidence for these events and envision them more vividly. It is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in the Holy Land and one of the most important holy places in Christendom. Pilgrims, many of whom frequent the church every year, come here in the expectation that their prayers will be more efficacious than at their home churches. At the yearly Christmas Mass, the birth of Christ is ritually commemorated and reenacted. Nursing mothers or barren women in hope of children visit the Milk Grotto nearby, marvel at its miraculously chalk-white walls, and pray for intercession by the Virgin.

The design of the church matches its function as a primary pilgrimage target. The church above the grotto is a simple Byzantine basilica, with stairs leading down into the grotto at its center. Adjacent to the basilica is a gothic church as well as Franciscan, Greek, and Armenian convents, yielding a single compound 130,000 square feet in area, surrounded by tall walls.¹⁵ The exterior is fortress-like, with thick Byzantine walls further bolstered by buttresses. The only access into the basilica is through the "Door of Humility," so called because its diminutive height forces visitors to bow upon entering. Over the centuries, this layout proved ideal for protecting the small Christian enclave of monks and pilgrims from attacks by Persian and Muslim forces.¹⁶ This sturdy design also proved instru-

mental for the survival of 39 insurgents during a month-long siege in 2002.

In March 2002 Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) troops entered Bethlehem as part of "Operation Defensive Shield," a large-scale military effort to capture Palestinian militants throughout the West Bank. Several units of armed Palestinians, cornered in Bethlehem, sought refuge at sacred sites in the city: one group escaped to an Assyrian church, another to the Roman Catholic convent of Santa Maria.¹⁷ The third and largest group, composed of members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, among them a dozen men on Israel's "most wanted" list, found refuge in the Church of the Nativity.

The clergy inside the basilica complied fully with the insurgents' demand for asylum. Brother Parthenius, the priest who interacted most frequently with the insurgents inside the church, later claimed that he had "felt obligated by his Christian vows to offer the gunmen sanctuary now that they had entered the church."¹⁸ Michel Sabbagh, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, explained: "The basilica, a church, is a place of refuge for everybody, even fighters, as long as they lay down their arms...in such a case, we have an obligation to give refuge to Palestinians and Israelis alike...once inside, any human being—whether Palestinian or Israeli, armed or not—who asks for protection will receive sanctuary. A basilica cannot give up people to be killed or made prisoners."¹⁹ The Palestinian governor of Bethlehem, trapped with the insurgents inside the church, thanked the Greek Orthodox archbishop of Bethlehem for "providing the church as a haven for the persecuted."²⁰

Israeli decision makers realized early on that the public relations costs of a hot pursuit into one of Christianity's primary sacred sites would be prohibitive. Then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, keenly aware that Christian audiences worldwide were observing the crisis, promised that Israeli forces would not "defile" the church.²¹ Despite pressure from hawks in the military to launch an assault on the church, the Israeli colonel in command ordered a siege, realizing the risk in turning "a symbol of peace for all the Christian world into a place of blood."²² The presence of some 150 unarmed civilians in the church, who had happened to be in and near the church when the conflict began, placed additional limits on the military's freedom of action.

The military isolated the church from the surrounding houses and cut off water, food, and electricity supplies. Although the church had been stacked with provisions at the outset of the crisis, intended for consumption by the monks, all inside were reduced to squalor

and starvation by the time the siege ended.²³ The IDF also broadcast loud sounds at the church and deployed stun grenades, expecting this psychological warfare to increase pressure on the gunmen.²⁴ Israeli snipers used cameras mounted on several cranes and one blimp as well as remote-control-operated rifles to pinpoint and kill seven insurgents in the church and wound seven others without harming the hostages or the structure. The exchange of fire between the besiegers and the besieged caused extensive damage to various structures in the church compound, but it did not harm the church itself.²⁵

The fact that the insurgents were Muslim complicated matters further, because it led to the imposition of various restrictions by the priests, constraints that would not have been imposed had the insurgents been members of the Christian community. The priests prohibited them from interring their dead on church grounds, prevented them from leaving the church structure and entering the adjacent monasteries, restricted their movement within the church, and prohibited other activities, such as smoking and consuming alcohol.²⁶ By preventing the insurgents from entering the sacred grotto, the priests inadvertently increased their exposure to sniper fire aimed at the ground floor of the basilica. The priests even attempted, albeit in vain, to convince the insurgents to disarm.²⁷

The sacred setting for this siege influenced not only the choices made by both parties but also the outcome of the conflict. The standoff ended, after forty days, in a compromise very much patterned after the practices used for concluding a traditional sanctuary episode. Under the supervision of a neutral party, the security staff of the American embassy, the insurgents surrendered their weapons, left the church, were taken by American diplomatic vehicles to an airport, and boarded a British military airplane to Cyprus, from where they were later dispersed throughout Europe.²⁸ This solution was reached after intense contacts between the Israeli government, the Vatican, and the Greek Orthodox Church, as well as the United States and the European Union. Remarkably, and in spite of the local Christian population's natural sympathy for the gunmen's cause, the restraint exhibited by the Israeli military as well as government contacts with religious elites in Israel and abroad ensured that much of the ill will associated with the incident was aimed at the Palestinian leadership. When the gunmen finally surrendered, members of the Arab Christian community castigated their armed presence in the church and their cynical use of this sacred site for publicity purposes.²⁹

Conclusion

Resolving the standoff at the Church of the Nativity required significant sacrifices from all parties involved. The Israeli government wished to try the insurgents for acts of violence against Israeli citizens yet saw them escape to safety. The insurgents were forced to suffer the harsh fate of exile. Once the doors of the basilica were reopened, the Christian community returned to find their sacred site in a sorry state: filthy, bullet-pocked, and partially charred.

Yet, as the case studies in the chapters to come demonstrate, all sides to this conflict could have fared a great deal worse. The Bethlehem standoff sets a high standard for counterinsurgency operations at sacred places due to a series of exceptional circumstances that do not usually hold in conflicts of this sort. Because the sacred site was associated with a party neutral to the Israeli–Palestinian dispute, both rivals respected the site, restrained their use of force, and were able to rely on various Christian actors to broker an agreement. The priests inside the church chose to extend to the insurgents the protections that were due to refuge seekers, but they did not collude with them, lest they surrender the sacred site to the insurgents' whims or discredit themselves in the eyes of the Israelis.

The more common ending to sieges on sacred sites is an all-out attack on the site by counterinsurgency forces, either because the government identifies with the religious community that worships at the site or because it associates the insurgents with that community. In the first case, decision makers may feel unimpeded in using force or they may even feel compelled to use force to evict the insurgents from the sacred site. In the second case, perhaps realizing the difficulty in sustaining a prolonged siege and the futility of the limited use of force, decision makers often opt for the one course of action that maximizes their control over the situation. Either scenario is likely to end with the routing of the insurgents, troop losses, "collateral" civilian casualties, damage to the shrine, and significant political repercussions for the government that ordered the assault.

Managing counterinsurgency operations at sacred sites thus requires striking a delicate balance between political and religious interests as well as a fortunate confluence of variables that is beyond the immediate control of the decision maker. By taking the religious dimensions of these operations seriously and by consulting

with religious experts and, if need be, with local religious elites, decision makers can stack the deck in their favor. Doing so may improve the odds of a desirable outcome, but it cannot ensure success. Ultimately, there is a limit to the extent to which violence in sacred space can be managed.

Notes

1. Joshua Hammer, *A Season in Bethlehem: Unholy War in a Sacred Place* (New York: Free Press, 2003).

2. Joel Greenberg, "Palestinians Prepare Exit from Church," *New York Times*, May 9, 2002, p. A22.

3. The term "audience costs" gained prominence through James Fearon's discussion of democratic audiences and their impact on dispute escalation by democratic regimes. James D. Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (Sept. 1994), 577–92. I use the term more broadly here to denote the costs imposed by any audience on counterinsurgency forces operating in sacred space.

4. Though this is the most dominant approach in the study of sacred space among sociologists of religion, drawing on work by Mircea Eliade, it is by no means superior to alternative approaches that problematize the social construction of sacred space or focus on religious elites and their use of sacred space to consolidate their power. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York: New American Library, 1958). See also Joel P. Brereton, "Sacred Space," in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*.12 (New York: Macmillan, 1987); A. Morinis, ed., *Sacred Journeys: The Anthropology of Pilgrimage* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992).

5. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, p. 375.

6. Here and throughout the chapter I have relied on a variety of public sources for empirical information about these sacred places. They include Norbert C. Brockman, *Encyclopedia of Sacred Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); James Harpur, *The Atlas of Sacred Places* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994); Colin Wilson, *The Atlas of Holy Places and Sacred Sites* (Toronto: Penguin Studio, 1996); Susan Hitchcock, *Geography of Religion: Where God Lives, Where Pilgrims Walk* (Washington: National Geographic Society, 2004); and Martin Gray's *Places of Peace and Power* website at <http://www.sacredsites.com/>.

7. Chidester and Linenthal elaborate this argument in the context of legal disputes over the ownership of sacred space. See David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, eds., *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

8. Mark Tully and Satish Jacob, *Amritsar: Mrs. Gandhi's Last Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), p. 146.

9. See, for example, Christian Traulsen, *Das Sakrale Asyl in der Alten Welt: Zur Schutzfunktion des Heiligen von Koenig Salomo bis zum Codex Theodosianus* (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004); and G. Cyprian Alston, "Sanctuary," *Catholic Encyclopedia* 13 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1912). I examine this issue in depth in "At the Horns of the Altar: Counterinsurgency and the Religious Roots of the Sanctuary Practice," *Civil Wars* 10, no.1 (March 2008), 22–39.

10. This practice is mentioned in Exodus 21:12–15, Numbers 35:13–15, Deuteronomy 4:41–43, Deuteronomy 19: 4–7, and Joshua 20:7.

11. See, for example, Randy K. Lippert, *Sanctuary, Sovereignty, Sacrifice: Canadian Sanctuary Incidents, Power and Law* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005); "Hundreds Have Taken Refuge," *The Gazette* (Montreal), August 2, 2003, A4; Jason Bennetto, "Judge Rules Deportation of Afghan Family Illegal," *The Independent* (London), September 12, 2002, p. 8.

12. These passages are Sura 2:125 and Surah 2:192.

13. Gordon B. Newby, "Bast," in *A Concise Encyclopedia of Islam* (Oxford, U.K.: OneWorld, 2002), p. 42.

14. Edward Arbez, "Bethlehem," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 2 (New York: Robert Appleton, 1907); James Harpur, *The Atlas of Sacred Places*; Colin Wilson, *The Atlas of Holy Places and Sacred Sites*.

15. "A Church and a Site Revered by 3 Faiths," *New York Times*, April 4, 2002, p. 11, citing *Agence France-Presse*; Arbez, "Bethlehem."

16. Steven Erlanger, "Under Siege, Fiercely Longing for Peace," *New York Times*, May 8, 2002, p. 15.

17. Anton La Guardia, "Bloody Siege of Bethlehem: Surrounded by Israeli Troops and Tanks, Palestinian Gunmen Seek Refuge in the Church of the Nativity," *Daily Telegraph* (London), April 4, 2002, p.1.

18. Hammer, *A Season in Bethlehem*, p.194.

19. "A Church and a Site Revered by 3 Faiths," *New York Times*, April 4, 2002, p. A11, citing *Agence France-Presse*; Alan Philips, "Survivor's Tale of the Siege of Bethlehem," *Daily Telegraph* (London), April 20, 2002, p. 15.

20. Hammer, *A Season in Bethlehem*, p. 197.

21. David Rhode, "Church of Nativity Damaged and a Monastery Is Scorched," *New York Times*, April 9, 2002, p. A11; Philips, "Survivor's Tale of the Siege of Bethlehem; Hammer, *A Season in Bethlehem*, p. 205.

22. Philips, "Survivor's Tale of the Siege of Bethlehem," p. 15, citing Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah.

23. Justin Huggler, "Middle East: Freed Youths Tell of Hunger and Death in Church of the Nativity," *Independent* (London), April 27, 2002, p. 14; Paul Adams, "I Got Out for the Sake of My Family': Tired and Weak, Nine Young Palestinians Allowed to Leave Church of the Nativity," *Globe and Mail* (Canada), April 26, 2002, p. A1.

24. Philips, "Survivor's Tale of the Siege of Bethlehem."

25. Joel Greenberg, "Israeli Snipers Play Cat to Palestinians' Mouse at Church of Nativity," *New York Times*, April 24, 2002, p. 10.

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26. Alan Cowell and Joel Greenberg, "In Church of Nativity, the Refuse of a Siege," *New York Times*, May 11, 2002, p. A1; Hammer, *A Season in Bethlehem*, pp. 209 and 212.

27. Hammer, *A Season in Bethlehem*, p. 195.

28. Joel Greenberg, "Palestinians Prepare Exit from Church," *New York Times*, May 9, 2002, p. A22; Hammer, *A Season in Bethlehem*, pp. 251–60.

29. Hammer, *A Season in Bethlehem*, pp. 249–50.