As is well known, control over the Temple Mount/Haram al Sharif (hereafter Temple Mount/Haram) in Jerusalem has been bitterly contested between Moslems and Jews since the site was captured by Israel during the June 1967 Six-Day War. Yet conflict over the site between Jews and Moslems was evident as far back as 1920. Christians and Moslems fought over the site during the Crusades. Even the building of the Dome of the Rock and the Al-Aksa Mosque which sit atop the Temple Mount/Haram was not devoid of conflict, this time among Moslems themselves. This essay, while concentrating on the political conflict between Moslems and Jews over the Temple Mount/Haram, will place the conflict into a larger historical perspective.

The essay will be divided into four parts. First, I will discuss the concept of political legitimacy, and the role of religion in helping a country’s leader to achieve it. I will employ a case study involving the conflict over the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, also in Jerusalem, during the Crimean War to demonstrate how Czar Nicholas I of Russia and Emperor Napoleon III of France sought to use religious issues, and specifically control over the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, to buttress their domestic political positions. Their behavior bears a close resemblance to that of the Mufti, Hajj Amin el-Husseini, in the 1920–1938 period and Yasser Arafat from 1967 until his death in 2004. Next I will analyze the conflict over the Temple Mount/Haram during the period when the British controlled Jerusalem (1917–1948), to show how the Mufti used the issue of the Temple Mount/Haram to gain political legitimacy as leader of the Palestinian Arab community, even seeking to get world Moslem support for his position. Third, I will demonstrate how Yasser Arafat, following in the footsteps of the Mufti, also sought to use the issue of the Temple Mount/Haram to enhance his political legitimacy, and how his actions inexorably led to the Al-Aksa Intifadah. Finally, I will discuss how other Middle East
actors, including Kings Abdullah I, Hussein and Abdullah II of Jordan and Israeli Arab leaders have sought to use the issue of the Temple Mount/Haram to gain political legitimacy.

Religion and Political Legitimacy

Skipping over the Political Science jargon, the term “Political Legitimacy” basically means that the people who are ruled by a leader feel that he (or she) is justly in power, that the leader has a moral right to rule.¹ Legitimacy may come from the fact of a leader being a former military hero, such as President Dwight David Eisenhower of the United States, the American hero of World War II. Other forms of legitimacy are based on a leader’s being seen as supporting the religious beliefs of his countrymen, and this is the area on which my essay will concentrate. Frequently, when a political leader’s legitimacy is weak, he may turn to religion to bolster it. This was the case, for example, of General Zia al-Haq of Pakistan whose actions led to the rise of the Taliban.² It was also the case of both Czar Nicholas I of Russia and Emperor Napoleon III of France whose confrontation over the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem was one of the causes of the Crimean War.³

In 1853, both Nicholas I and Napoleon III had serious legitimacy problems. Napoleon III, originally elected President of France in 1848, consolidated his power in a coup d’état in 1852, thereby undermining French democracy. His political legitimacy was shaky at best. He sought to cultivate France’s powerful Catholic Church to gain support and legitimization in light of contestation of his rule. Similarly, Nicholas I had come to power in the face of a popular insurrection supporting his brother Constantine, and his rule had been plagued by increasing numbers of peasant revolts. Under the circumstances Nicholas became increasingly dependent on the Russian Orthodox Church for both support and political legitimization. With both leaders striv-

¹ For a brief introduction to the concept of Political Legitimacy see Mark Kesselman et al., Introduction to Comparative Politics (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000) p. 7.
³ For a study of how domestic politics affected the Crimean War, see René Albrecht-Carrié, A Diplomatic History of Europe Since the Congress of Vienna (New York: Harper and Row, 1958) pp. 84–94.