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Jerusalem: Points of Friction – And Beyond

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The Future of Jerusalem: Israeli Perceptions

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Among the many Hebrew names of Jerusalem is the renowned *ir shalem*, city of peace. Unfortunately, Jerusalem has for generations experienced deep religious, political and national conflicts. In particular, it has been a focus of the Palestinian-Zionist, Arab-Israeli and Muslim-Jewish disputes.

It is, therefore, hard to imagine that the current peace process between Israeli Jews on the one hand, and, on the other hand, Palestinians, other Arabs and Muslims, could be completed in a meaningful and durable way, without an acceptable solution to the Jerusalem issue. Such a solution will by no means be easy to achieve, given the deep emotional religious, cultural, historical, and national attachments of Jews and Arabs—Muslims and Christians—to Jerusalem.

Many or most Jews in Israel and abroad consider Jerusalem (*Yerushalayim*) as their symbol; the heart of their national, religious and cultural ethos; the historical and eternal capital of their old-new state. In addition to the numerous times it is mentioned in the Bible, Jewish Jerusalem has for ages been the topic of countless poems, novels and works of art produced by Jews (and Christians) all over the world.

A Historical Note

Jerusalem became the center of the Jewish people some 3,000 years ago (the anniversary was recently celebrated), and with the exception of some long intervals, Jews resided there throughout the centuries. Jewish exiles and their descendants continued to pray three times a day for their return to the city. On festivals Jews blessed each other with "Next Year in Jerusalem."

During various periods of its history, notably the Ottoman period, Jews came back (or "ascended") to Jerusalem, and since the mid-nineteenth century they have outnumbered both its Muslim and Christian inhabitants. Subsequently, Jerusalem became the symbol and the headquarters of the modern Jewish national movement, the Zionist movement (Zion being one of Jerusalem's major names). In 1949, the year following the establishment of Israel, (West) Jerusalem was proclaimed as its capital, but it was not recognized by the majority of the world nations. Following the 1967 war, East Jerusalem—including the Old City—was captured and formally annexed to Israel. In spite of strong international condemnation, the *unified city* was proclaimed an "integral" part of Israel's capital. As the number of Jewish inhabitants greatly increased, several new Jewish suburbs were built around Jerusalem, mostly on confiscated Arab lands—partly crown land and partly private land.

The policy of the Israeli governments since 1967—both Labor and Likud—backed by most Israeli Jews, has been to maintain a unified Jerusalem; to Judaize or Israelize it, demographically and politically; to integrate its Arab population; and to insulate it from the Palestinian-populated West Bank.

Prior to the Oslo agreement with the PLO in 1993 and the Washington Declaration with Jordan in 1994, no Israeli government had agreed to put Jerusalem on the negotiating table. But, at the same time, Israel allowed free access to Christian and Muslim holy sites, while the *Haram al-Sharif* (the Temple Mount) was granted an autonomous status *de facto* under the management of the Jordanian controlled Council of *Awqaf* (religious endowments) and Islamic Affairs. In the Oslo agreement Israel has for the first time undertaken discussing the Jerusalem issue, in the negotiations with the PLO on the final status issues (along with borders, security, Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlements). In the Washington Declaration Israel made a commitment to grant "high priority" during the future negotiations on the final status of Jerusalem to Jordan's "historic role" at the Muslim holy sites there.

Scenarios

It can be assumed that during the negotiations on the final status of Jerusalem, the Israeli government—be it Labor- or Likud-led—will suggest a religious solution to the Jerusalem problem by offering Jordan, Egypt and Morocco, as well as other Arab and Islamic nations (provided they establish diplomatic relations with Israel), the guardianship of the Islamic holy sites in unified Jerusalem. In an attempt to defuse or mitigate the Arab and Islamic opposition to its control over all of Jerusalem, Israel may even offer a *de jure* special status to the Muslim holy shrines, or perhaps even an extraterritorial status, similar to that of the Vatican in Rome.

In the same vein, an Israeli government (more likely a Labor one) will probably suggest a kind of Palestinian autonomy or self-administration in East Jerusalem in municipal, cultural, social and economic affairs, but not in political matters.

Such an Israeli position was already been indicated in Labor party leader Shimon Peres' letter of October 1993 to Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Johan Jorgen Holst, stating that "all Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem, including the economic, social, educational and cultural and the holy Christian and Muslim places, are performing an essential task for the Palestinian population." Similarly, the former mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, had in 1977 suggested a network of boroughs for Jerusalem.¹ Modeled on the municipalities of London, this would enable the Palestinians in East Jerusalem to conduct their own affairs in many aspects of life.

Although such a solution may also involve functional sovereignty² or permit a certain political status to evolve for the Palestinians in Jerusalem, the Israeli official position has not changed: United Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty will remain Israel's "eternal and exclusive capital." This position which is supported by most Israeli Jews, derives not only from the national-religious uniqueness of Jerusalem to the Jewish people, and from the demographic and political predominance of Israeli Jews in the city. Many Israelis argue that, despite its holiness to Islam (and Christianity), Jerusalem always held a secondary status in these religions, after Mecca and Medina (or Rome and Constantinople). Similarly, Israelis argue that Jerusalem was never a capital of an Arab empire or state, not even of the Kingdom of Jordan during its control of the city (1948–1967), nor was it a capital of a Palestinian state—in fact, never has one existed.

Unfortunately many Israeli Jews are unaware, or do not acknowledge, that (East) Jerusalem has for decades been the political and spiritual center of the Palestinian national movement as well as the geographical and economic link between the northern and southern parts of the West Bank and between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. A variety of Palestinian national, cultural, social and religious institutions have functioned during long periods of time in Jerusalem, while its Palestinian inhabitants now number some 160,000 people—almost one-third of the total population. (And then there is the emotional and religious attachment to Jerusalem of more than 200 million Arabs and more than a billion Muslims). A solution to the Jerusalem problem that does not provide significant satisfaction to the national-political aspirations of the Palestinians will not be viable, even if their religious and municipal needs are fulfilled and several Arab and Islamic nations are content with a religious solution for Jerusalem.

In quest of a durable settlement to the Jerusalem issue, we can identify potential points of agreement between most Israelis and most Palestinians regarding the future of this city. Notably, there is widespread agreement that it should remain undivided. There is also a near-consensus that free access to the holy sites of all three religions should be continued. And many Jerusalemites—mostly Palestinians—support the creation of two municipalities or several boroughs, Israeli and Palestinian, within a Greater Jerusalem metropolitan system or under an umbrella city council.

By contrast, however, the issues of sovereignty and the status of the Old City still remain the major bones of contention between Israelis and Palestinians and therefore need to be tackled in creative, imaginative ways and in a gradual form. Ideally, Jerusalem ought to be the undivided capital of the two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, and be designated as a sanctuary of peace. This would mean a joint sovereignty of both states or a "condominium" of Israel and Palestine, administered by an umbrella council and local district councils, with an Israeli parliament and ministries in the western sector and Palestinian ones in the eastern sector.

Another useful solution would be a "scattered sovereignty" in the undivided city: Israeli law applied in every Israeli majority district and Palestinian law applied in every Palestinian majority district, as if those districts were parts of Israel or Palestine. Other options for the future status of Jerusalem are shared sovereignty, functional sovereignty or divided sovereignty—with the Old City having a special status—administered by both the Israeli and the Palestinian governments or by representatives of the three religions.

Yet it is highly doubtful whether most Israeli Jews will be ready to accept any of these designs, because of the emotional, psychological or theological motives that underlie them. Perhaps more acceptable to not a few Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs would be the establishment of a Palestinian sovereign capital, *al-Quds*, in the eastern sections of Jerusalem, around Abu Dis and Azariyya, to be linked to the Palestinian municipality, or municipal sections, of the city. Most of the lands of these neighborhoods are formally in the West Bank and were never annexed to the Jerusalem municipality. The other sections of Jerusalem, mostly Jewish, would be under Israel's sovereignty and continue to be its capital, *Yerushalayim*. The *Haram al-Sharif* would have a special status as an Islamic site under the guardianship of Arab and Islamic states, including Palestine and Jordan. The Old City would be administered by the Jerusalem umbrella municipal council, composed of Israelis and Palestinians and assisted by an interfaith committee of Jewish, Christian and Muslim religious sages.

Such a design for the future of Jerusalem might have been pursued gradually and with sensitivity at the final stage of the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo peace process, had Mr. Peres and a liberal-left coalition won the Israeli national elections. However, since the victory of Benjamin Netanyahu and the ultra-nationalist-religious Jewish forces who had made united Jewish Jerusalem their motto in the election campaign, the chances of a pragmatic solution for Jerusalem are rather slim. It is possible that Mr. Netanyahu will suggest a limited religious "solution" in Jerusalem, such as giving Jordan a major role in administering the Muslim shrines at *al-Haram al-Sharif*. But the new Israeli government will by no means offer any political solution to the Palestinians in Jerusalem, and perhaps not even municipal autonomy. One of the major arguments for such an omission is that "a territorial

solution in Jerusalem would likely tear the fabric of Israeli society and raise serious questions about the legitimacy of Israel as a Jewish state."³

It is obvious that such a policy is likely to provoke deep resentment and widespread opposition and perhaps even ignite violence among Palestinians. It is also highly doubtful that Jordan will be willing to become a partner to Israel's "religious solution" for Jerusalem, which excludes other Arab and Islamic nations. Consequently, Israeli failure to resolve the Jerusalem issue could not only bring about the resumption of the Palestinian *intifada*, but possibly also impair Israel's peace with Egypt and Jordan, prevent an Israeli-Syrian agreement, reverse Israel's newly established ties with other Arab and Muslim nations, and damage its position in the international community.

References

1. Teddy Kollek, *Foreign Affairs* (July 1977).
2. See Ruth Lapidot, "Sovereignty in Transition," *Journal of International Affairs* 45:2 (Winter 1992).
3. Dore Gold, *Jerusalem* (Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center, Tel Aviv University, 1995), 45.