

JERUSALEM: FROM CONFLICT TO COMPROMISE?

An Abstract by Moshe Ma'oz

The Old City of Jerusalem, about one square kilometer in size, is the only site in the universe that has always been sacred to all three Abrahamic faiths and civilizations. But rather than becoming the city of peace (*Ir Shalem*, one of its Hebrew names), it has for ages endured bitter conflicts among Jews, Christians and Muslims, who have refused to share it or tolerate one another's affinity to it, but have claimed exclusivity or priority in it.

The Jewish Narrative

Thus, according to a major Jewish belief, Jerusalem has been for more than 3,000 years the only unique center of Judaism and the Jewish people, whereas Christianity and Islam, which appeared later in history, have their own centers: Rome and Constantinople, Mecca and Medina, respectively. In addition, Jews would say that Jerusalem is not mentioned at all in the Quran, and was never the capital of a Muslim state. It served as the capital of the Christian Crusaders for only short periods (88 years during the 12th century and 15 years during the 13th century). By contrast, although the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed twice (in 586 BC and 70 AD) and Jews were exiled, they have never disengaged from Jerusalem or forgotten it. Jews continued to reside in Jerusalem for centuries, albeit in small numbers and, along with their brethren in the Diaspora, they pray toward Jerusalem three times a day. Jews would make pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year, chant in their prayers "Next year in Jerusalem" and would occasionally vow "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right arm wither." Indeed, Jews from the Diaspora have immigrated (or made *aliyya* – ascended) to Jerusalem throughout the centuries,

notably during the Ottoman-Muslim period (1516-1917). In the year 1800 they numbered some 2,000 people (out of a population of 9,000) in Jerusalem, reaching 45,000 (out of 70,000) in 1914, thus outnumbering both Muslim and Christian communities. As it happened, many of those Jews were European citizens, not Ottoman subjects, who were motivated by Jewish religious feelings. But since the 1880s, several waves of Jewish immigrants arrived in Palestine who were mostly secular and driven by a new nationalist-political ideology — Zionism.

Although the name of this nationalist movement is derived from “Zion” (another term for Jerusalem), most Zionist immigrants would not settle in Jerusalem owing to its parochial religious character. But during the 1990s, under the British Mandate, the Zionist institutions moved from Jaffa to Jerusalem. The reasons for that move were highlighting the centrality of Jerusalem in Jewish nationalist and political aspirations and possibly combating the newly emerged Palestinian-Arab nationalist movement which made Jerusalem its political and religious center. By then, Jerusalem had expanded immensely beyond the Old City, increasing its Jewish majority population and becoming a major focus for a fierce conflict (sometimes violent) between the Jewish-Zionist and Palestinian-Arab nationalist movements. Both parties would also involve their religious sites in their struggle for Jerusalem.

In November 1947 the U.N. tried to resolve this conflict through its partition resolution (No. 181) namely: dividing Palestine into two states — an Arab and a Jewish — while placing Jerusalem under an international regime. The Palestinian Arab leadership (as well as other Arab and Muslim nations) rejected that resolution, whereas the Jewish-Zionist “Yishuv” (community) accepted it. Following their victory in the 1948 war, the newly emerged Jewish state — Israel — made West Jerusalem (80% of the city) its official capital (1949). The Hashemite Kingdom of

Jordan, which had assumed control over the Old City and East Jerusalem, would not make it even its second capital (after Amman).

Israel occupied East Jerusalem (including the Old City) during the June 1967 war, annexed it, and proclaimed (in 1980) the “unified” city as an integral part of Israel and its eternal capital. It also adopted extensive steps to “Judaize” Jerusalem, including the Old City: *inter alia* evicting Palestinian Arabs from the Jewish quarter and settling Jews there. By now some 3,000 people live in this quarter, mostly American Orthodox Jews, out of a total population of 33,000 in the Old City, mostly Muslims. The total number of inhabitants in “Greater Jerusalem,” including new Jewish neighborhoods, is about 700,000; two thirds are Jews and one third Arabs.

Yet the main site of conflict between Jews and Muslims (and to some degree also Christians) is the Old City and its holy places, notably the Temple Mount /Al Haram Al-Sharif. According to a 2005 survey, 51% of Israeli Jews favor Israeli control over the Temple Mount (but 36% are for joint control). By contrast, most Palestinian Arabs (90%) and Muslims at large request Muslim control, while Christians at large have developed diverse attitudes toward the question of Jerusalem.

Christian and Muslim Attitudes

Significantly, unlike Judaism and Islam, Christianity was born in Jerusalem, through events related to the life and death of Jesus. The destruction of the Jewish Temple was regarded as a victory of Christianity over Judaism, coupled with the strong Christian objection to the earthly Jewish city in favor of the heavenly New Jerusalem. Under the first Christian empire, Byzantium (326-614, 624-638 AD), Jerusalem became an important Christian religious center, while Jews were not permitted to reside there. Similarly, during the Crusader period (1099-1187, 1229-1244 AD)

Jerusalem also became a Christian political capital and Jews were again not allowed to live there. Broadly speaking, the Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christian churches — although vying for control over the holy shrines in Jerusalem — have rejected the Jewish claim to Jerusalem. Many Christians, particularly Catholics, have advocated an international regime in the Old City and the holy shrines. By contrast, many Christian Protestants have acknowledged the strong Jewish affiliation to Jerusalem, while many evangelists in the U.S. have enthusiastically supported the Jewish claim.

In comparison, most Muslims in the world (1.3 billion population in 57 states) have intensely rejected the Jewish claim to and control of the Temple Mount/ Al-Haram Al-Sherif and the Old City. According to a major Islamic tradition, Patriarch Abraham/Ibrahim and Prophet Muhammad formed a link between Jerusalem and Mecca. Abraham, the first monotheist and first Muslim (*Awwal al-Muslimin*) built, with his son Ishmael/Ismail, the Ka'ba in Mecca and subsequently the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Prophet Muhammad initially requested his followers, including Jews, to pray in the direction (*qibla*) of Jerusalem (*Aula al-qibla ayn*) and subsequently toward Mecca. The Prophet also made his nightly journey (*Isra'*) from the Holy Mosque in Mecca to Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, on his winged horse (*Burak*); and from Al-Aqsa he ascended to Heaven.

According to these Islamic traditions no Jewish Temple was ever built in Jerusalem; Jewish sovereignty over Jerusalem lasted only about 400 years; Jews in Jerusalem had been preceded by the Jebusites, who were Arabs; and Muslim domination of Jerusalem continued from the 7th century AD, with short intervals, to the early 20th century. To be sure, these Jerusalem-centered traditions have been widely propagated by Palestinian and Jordanian leaders, all over the Muslim world, particularly since the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967. Yet, other Islamic

traditions have placed Jerusalem third in its holiness after Mecca and Medina, while some Muslim thinkers have acknowledged the Jewish link to Jerusalem as well as the Jewish Temple. But these thinkers would allege that Judaism (and Christianity) had been a first phase in the Abrahamic monotheistic message, that has been included in, and continued by Islam.

These diverse Islamic traditions notwithstanding, it may be assumed that many pragmatic Muslims would agree to a compromise solution for their conflict with Israel and the Jewish people over Jerusalem and the Holy Land. Such a solution would include the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside Israel, with East Jerusalem as its capital. The Old City and the Temple Mount would be shared by, or divided between Israel and Palestine. Israel would retain control over the Jewish quarter and the Western Wall (and possibly also the Armenian quarter), whereas the Palestinian state would dominate Al-Haram Al-Sharif's mosques as well as the Muslim and Christian quarters. A joint Jewish-Christian-Muslim organ would supervise the new configuration of the Old City and the holy shrines.

Undoubtedly, there will develop fierce opposition to such or a similar compromise, by both Muslim and Jewish religious and nationalist zealots. But it is the vested common interest of Israel, the Palestinians and the Arab and Muslim nations to prevent a devastating Muslim-Jewish religious war. It is therefore an historic common challenge of moderate Jewish and Muslim leaders, as well as of the U.S. and the international community, to implement a compromise settlement for the deep-seated conflict over Jerusalem.