



ESSAY

THE CENTRALITY OF JERUSALEM TO AN END OF CONFLICT AGREEMENT

RASHID KHALIDI

MORE THAN ANY OTHER ISSUE of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Jerusalem has deep resonance for all the parties. Certainly, there will be no end to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, no Arab-Israeli reconciliation, and no normalization of the situation of Israel in the region without a lasting solution for Jerusalem. For a solution to be seen by all parties as satisfying, it must accomplish three things: it must allow Palestinians and Israelis to share the city equitably; it must allow Jerusalem to be the capital of both Palestine and Israel; and it must allow people of all faiths to have free and unimpeded access to Jerusalem.

During the Clinton administration, however, a line of argument prevailed that Jerusalem is really important to only one religious tradition, the Jewish one; and that it is really important to only one people, the Israelis. This intolerant and ignorant thesis is essentially aimed at keeping treatment of the Jerusalem issue in U.S. policy where it has been for the past eight years—hostage to the assumption that the only important question regarding Jerusalem is what Israel will accept.

Indeed, this assumption has extended to all issues of the conflict. For the last eight years, the ceiling of the negotiations brokered by the United States has been what American policymakers—often mistakenly—claimed to be the outer limits of what Israel would accept. Thus, they argued that Israel would never negotiate with the PLO, would never accept the idea of a Palestinian state, would never withdraw from Lebanon, would never accept a complete withdrawal from the Golan Heights, and would never accept Palestinian sovereignty over parts of East Jerusalem. Over time, of course, the past three Israeli governments—those of Yitzhak Rabin, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Ehud Barak—came to accept the possibility, and in some cases the reality, of all of these options that American “experts” claimed were unthinkable for Israel. The converse of the American policy assumption that all that matters is what Israel will accept is the policy’s total disregard for what the Arab parties could accept.

RASHID KHALIDI is president of the American Committee on Jerusalem and director of the Center for International Studies at the University of Chicago. This essay is based on an address given to the National Association of Arab Americans–American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee symposium at the National Press Club in Washington on 9 February 2001.

JERUSALEM AS CAPITAL OF TWO STATES

Peace in the Middle East does not have to be made—as some appear to believe—between Israel's Likud and Labor parties. It has to be made between Palestinians and Israelis, and between Arabs and Israelis, and it must take into account the concerns of Muslims, Christians, and Jews everywhere. Indeed, where Jerusalem is involved, the need to consider the concerns of a broad range of constituencies is more urgent than with any other issue in the Arab-Israeli conflict, because of Jerusalem's profound resonance for so many people.

For confirmation of how important Jerusalem is to peace in the Middle East, one has only to look at events since September 2000. The new Palestinian intifada, named for the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, exploded following Ariel Sharon's provocative visit to affirm Israeli sovereignty over the third holiest site in Islam and the killing of seven unarmed Palestinian protestors the following day. Sharon's first act after winning the 6 February 2001 election for prime minister was to visit the Western Wall plaza and proclaim Israeli sovereignty over occupied Arab East Jerusalem. We have seen since the Camp David negotiations of July 2000 how central Jerusalem can be to conflict in the Middle East. But it is also essential to ask how it can be central to ending the conflict.

One issue insufficiently stressed by those laying the groundwork for an agreement is the absolute centrality of a mutually satisfying resolution on Jerusalem to achieving an end considered extremely important by Israel's supporters: this is acceptance of Israel in the Middle East and normalization of its relations with its neighbors. The desire for this objective is great among many in Israel (although the Israeli prime minister-elect and some of his supporters do not appear to share it). It was also apparent in Prime Minister Barak's quest in negotiations as of July 2000 for an agreement on a final end to the conflict with the Palestinians.

In view of this desire, it would be advantageous to all concerned for the Palestinians and the other Arab parties, and also the United States, to put forward proposals whereby Israel would obtain recognition of Jerusalem as its capital in exchange for Israeli recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, with all that acceptance entails. What Israelis perceive as a major concession on their part (and Arabs perceive as no more than implementation of UN Security Council resolutions and international law) can thus be shown to be something of great benefit both to Israelis and to the Palestinians and other Arabs.

The converse must be mentioned. If Israel does not recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, with all that entails, Jerusalem will never be recognized as the capital of Israel in the Arab world, the Muslim world, and in many, perhaps most, other parts of the world, which have withheld such recognition for the past fifty-two years.

It should be emphasized, however, that this is not self-evident. It therefore is necessary for the Palestinians, the Arab parties, and U.S. policymakers and diplomats to stress the positive aspect of this trade-off, which is that the only way to achieve universal recognition and acceptance of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, and of Israeli sovereignty over part of the city, is for Israel to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine and to recognize Palestinian sovereignty over occupied Arab East Jerusalem.

MUTUAL ACCESS, SECURITY, AND SOVEREIGNTY

What are the most important elements regarding Jerusalem in a potential end of conflict agreement? First is unimpeded access to Jerusalem for Palestinians, for Muslims and Christians from other Arab countries, and for Muslims from other countries. This can only mean access under Palestinian control. Second is a satisfactory and mutually acceptable regime for control over and security in the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish holy places in Jerusalem. This will require significant changes in the status quo. And third is Palestinian sovereignty over Arab East Jerusalem (the largest Arab city in the West Bank), as a single unit, with contiguity of the city's Arab neighborhoods and open road connections with adjacent Palestinian regions of the West Bank to the north, south, and east.

Each of these three points must be seen not as Palestinian desiderata (which they are), but as prerequisites for the acceptance of Israel as a normal part of the Middle East region. Do Israelis seriously assume that other Arabs and Muslims will accept that all details of the life of Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, from control over open space, to sewage, to freedom of movement, should be permanently governed solely by the requirements of the comfort and security of Israeli residents of the city? Do they seriously assume that Arabs and Muslims will accept permanently a situation where Palestinians, as well as Muslim or Christian pilgrims from the Arab countries, should have to submit to the humiliations of Israeli security controls before being allowed to worship in Jerusalem? How would they feel if Jews were to be subjected to similar humiliations before they were allowed to worship there?

Only if one begins from the invidious premise that Jerusalem is important primarily to Israelis, and is more precious to Jews than to adherents of any other faith, can such assumptions be justified. It is up to the Palestinians, the Arabs, and to American policymakers and diplomats to show Israelis and their influential supporters in the United States that it is as advantageous to Israel as to other parties to accept free, unimpeded access for Palestinians and other Arabs and Muslims to Jerusalem, a satisfactory security and control regime for all of Jerusalem's holy places, and Palestinian sovereignty over Arab East Jerusalem. Until now, however, Palestinians largely have failed to articulate a vision embodying this reality either in the United States or in Israel. Doing so is an essential part of laying the groundwork for a just and lasting solution to the conflict.

A starting point for such a vision can be the three points mentioned above. We can look at each of these points in more detail. For example, the question of access to Jerusalem involves three important considerations. The first relates to Jerusalem as the center of life for the West Bank and Gaza Strip, given its importance as a center of education; of professional, medical, and consular services; and of wholesale and retail trade, all of which require free and unimpeded access to the city for the 3 million Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, access that has been denied to them since the start of the peace process in 1991.

The second involves Jerusalem's centrality as a communications node for the entire West Bank, as the sole linkage point for the road network running along the north-south ridge line between the Nablus and Ramallah areas to the north and the Hebron and Bethlehem areas to the south. This necessitates unimpeded road access for Palestinians to and through the city, which they have not had for a decade. And finally, it is a destination for Christian and Muslim worshippers and pilgrims from throughout Palestine. Those of the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been denied this opportunity since Israel imposed on them the "closure" of Jerusalem in 1991.

All of these considerations require that Arab East Jerusalem function as a single unit with contiguity between its various Arab neighborhoods and that there be unimpeded road connections to the rest of the West Bank. This could be done in the context of the entirety of Jerusalem remaining a single open city, with a single joint municipality protecting the interests of both populations living there.

With regard to the second point, security, the sad events since the end of September 2000 and, beyond that, the bloodshed of the past decade at holy places in Jerusalem, Hebron, Nablus, and Jericho—where the great majority of the victims have been Palestinian—have shown that the way in which both sides have exercised control over sites considered sacred by the other has been far from satisfactory. Certainly the current status quo at the holy places in Jerusalem is intolerable for the Palestinians, who have seen worshippers killed at the country's most sacred Muslim site three times in ten years: in October 1990, September 1996, and September 2000, when seventeen, three, and seven Palestinians, respectively, were killed by the gunfire of Israeli security forces in and around the Haram al-Sharif.

The establishment of a mutually acceptable regime for control over and security in the Muslim, Christian, and Jewish holy places will thus require an uninhibited and imaginative exploration of all the options. It will require as well a major de-escalation of the rhetoric on both sides. But such a de-escalation is unlikely as long as the new Israeli government under Ariel Sharon remains in office. Hopefully, the 65 percent majority of the Israeli electorate who did not vote for Sharon on 6 February 2001 will eventually express itself, and perhaps a de-escalation of rhetoric and serious consideration of this matter will be possible.

The bottom line as far as a satisfactory regime for holy places in Jerusalem is concerned involves one of two options. The first is some sort of Palestinian control over all Muslim and Christian holy places, sacred sites, and places of religious significance in both East and West Jerusalem, with matching Israeli control over similar Jewish sites on both sides of the city. These would include both the Jewish Mount of Olives Cemetery in East Jerusalem and the badly neglected historic Muslim Mamilla Cemetery in West Jerusalem. Arrangements for the security of worshippers that do not infringe on the security of local residents also would have to be worked out.

The second option is the establishment of a neutral and mutually acceptable international, or possibly interfaith, authority over all sacred sites in both East and West Jerusalem, and perhaps beyond them in the rest of Palestine/Israel. This could be either a temporary or permanent arrangement and would have to be coupled with mutually acceptable security arrangements—possibly with an international component—both for worshippers and other citizens.

Palestinian sovereignty over Jerusalem, as a unit, with contiguity of its Arab neighborhoods and with connections to its hinterland in the West Bank to the north, south, and east is essential, in part because of the serious flaws in the Jerusalem proposals that were tabled during the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations that went on from the Camp David summit in July 2000 until a week before the Israeli elections in February 2001. These proposals have been declared “off the table” after the Barak government’s electoral defeat and after the end of the Clinton administration, which had served as their midwife. They will remain off the table until the new government headed by Sharon has run its hopefully brief course, since Sharon has pledged to reject any serious negotiations regarding Jerusalem. But as we have seen in the past, once a proposal has been placed on the table, it has a way of remaining there, even with the passage of time and with modifications to reflect changed conditions. Presumably, this will be the case with the Barak-Clinton proposals on Jerusalem as well.

JERUSALEM AS KEY TO PERMANENT PEACE

What were the merits of these proposals, and what was wrong with them? Their primary merit was that for the first time Israel accepted that it cannot maintain control over at least some of the Arab-populated areas of occupied East Jerusalem. However, in spite of this merit, these proposals gave primacy to the security, circulation, and other needs of the Israeli population of occupied Arab East Jerusalem. The majority Palestinians were obliged to accommodate themselves to this population illegally settled by its government in occupied territory, on confiscated Arab land, in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, Security Council resolutions, and international law.

The result, which can be seen from maps that project the implications on the ground of the Barak-Clinton proposals, is a series of small Palestinian-

controlled islands in a sea of Israeli-controlled Jerusalem stretching without interruption from the far west of the city to the Ma'ale Adumim settlement in the east.* According to these proposals, Palestinian East Jerusalem would have neither the contiguity of its neighborhoods nor connections to its hinterland in the West Bank. Most of the land in the Jerusalem area would have been annexed to Israel and reserved for the use of the city's Jewish residents.

Today we are far from a substantive discussion of any of these matters, as Ariel Sharon's bellicose and expansionist declarations during his postelection visit to the Western Wall and the explosion the same day of a car bomb in West Jerusalem both underlined. This is not to suggest that this is merely a storm before the calm. On the contrary, we are likely to face an ugly period in the near future during which fatuous injunctions from certain analysts (like Robert Satloff of the pro-Israeli Washington Institute for Near East Policy) to the Bush administration that it focus on crisis management and concentrate on more "serious" matters than Arab-Israeli peace-making (such as Iraq) may be followed. Sadly, there will undoubtedly be plenty of crisis in Palestine/Israel for the new administration to manage.

The new Bush administration is understandably reluctant to become involved in the morass of Middle East peacemaking in which the grandiose aspirations of its predecessor sank. The Sharon government will refuse to move forward on these issues, preferring instead to prolong occupation, settlement, and direct and indirect Israeli control over the three million Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza Strip under the transparent rubric of "further interim arrangements" bound to be unacceptable to the Palestinians.

Nonetheless, amid the confusion and the violence and deceptive spin-management of the eight months since the failed Camp David summit, there have been rays of sanity. Jerusalem (along with the issues of territory, settlements, and security) is one of the issues where the outlines of a solution could be glimpsed, even if a final agreement could not be reached before the clock ran out in February 2001. And few would question today that Jerusalem is absolutely central to any agreement to end this conflict. There is no alternative but to end it, because the more than 400 Palestinian and Israeli deaths of the last months (in a seven-to-one ratio) merely hint at how unmanageable this conflict can become if it is not ended.

* See maps in this issue's Settlement Monitor—*Ed.*