

Film Documentary Review

Lord Ashdown's 'The Battle for the Holy Land: Jerusalem' – the View of a Soldier, Diplomat, Politician and Spy

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In 2007, Lord Ashdown compiled an investigative documentary for Channel 4, *'The Battle for the Holy Land: Jerusalem'* exploring and analysing the historical, religious and political claims to the sacred city and possibilities for Jerusalem's future status. This two hour, six-part documentary, shot over a period of four months in Jerusalem uniquely captures, the intractable issues, yet also the real life stories of pain, suffering and social division. Ashdown, a former Royal marine (Persian Gulf and Far East), British politician (leader of the Liberal Democratic Party, 1988-1999) and International diplomat (European Security Conference) is well placed to offer pragmatic and strategic insight into Jerusalem's enduring conflict. Drawing on his military experience of sectarian violence on the streets of Belfast and his political post of High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina (2002-2006) overseeing a fragile post-war reconstruction, he presents both valuable comparative analysis and feasible 'on the ground' interventions for Jerusalem's divided city. In *The Battle for the Holy Land*, Ashdown admirably tries to engage with and disaggregate Palestinian and Israeli claims and counterclaims, in an attempt to find practical steps that will help facilitate a process of peace-building. The result is a balanced, yet hard-hitting account, which provides human faces to a globalised conflict; probing the underlying sources of conflict rather than too often reported consequences.

Part one of the documentary begins by framing the conflict around Israel's occupation/reunification of East Jerusalem in 1967 and the symbolic capture of the Jewish Western Wall alongside the fateful destruction of the Arab Mughrabi Quarter. The second part examines the historic massacres committed by both Jews and Palestinians at Deir Yassin and Gush Etzion in 1948, and the subsequent legacy of antipathy and mistrust. Part three explores the Israeli governments' systematic attempt to sustain a Jewish majority in Jerusalem through Palestinian house demolitions, unequal provision of public services and physical exclusion due to the construction of the separation wall. The fourth section explores the tensions within the Arab Christian community, particularly concerning the Greek Orthodox sale of land and pilgrim access to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Part five focuses exclusively on the disputes, violence and controversy concerning the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif compound. The final section analyses the recurring tensions, which

Ashdown summarises as ‘the dialogue of the deaf’, ‘exclusive visions without inclusive answers’ and ‘racism masquerading as bureaucracy’, before setting out a comprehensive strategy for Jerusalem’s future. This includes putting Jerusalem first in any broader agreement; the acceptance of a ‘shared history and a shared city’; status quo arrangements that cover all the holy places; a charter of rights for all of Jerusalem’s citizens and ‘an end to the wall and the terror that created it.’

The power of this investigative piece does not merely lie with its clear yet rather vague conclusions, but in the fascinating extensive interviews and illuminating snapshots of everyday Jerusalem experiences. Ashdown doesn’t shy away from awkward questions but seems to relish challenging both sides of the conflict – whether it be probing Israeli officials over tunnels under the Haram; Greek Orthodox Patriarchs over land sales and corruption; Al-Waqf staff concerning their inability to dialogue with Israelis; Israeli settlers and Islamist leaders on their exclusive visions of Jerusalem; and Palestinian and Israeli politicians and activists on their inability to recognise alternate historical perspectives. These rigorous discussions are balanced with sensitive and emotive personal stories of Palestinians who have lost homes, Israeli parents who have lost children in suicide attacks; and those suffering due to house demolition orders, road blocks and expropriation of land. The result is a complex and dynamic account of Jerusalem’s multifaceted friction points.

Despite the documentary’s breadth of analysis, wide ranging interviews and coverage of the major themes, it seems to have overlooked completely the issue of Palestinian sovereignty and statehood. Ashdown’s valuable principles clearly are envisioned within a shared and open city (under Israeli control) but they fail to address the controversies over municipal borders, land ownership, Israeli settlements and security. Also while Ashdown makes compelling arguments concerning the establishment of a unified religious body to regulate and manage access of Jerusalem’s Holy Sites (copying the Status quo arrangements of the ‘Church of the Holy Sepulchre’) he provides little detail or discussion as to how this could practically work. Similarly the charter for equal rights for Jews and Palestinians, tends to ignore the wider implications of citizenship and legal jurisdiction; would this be enforceable in Israeli courts or under a system of joint sovereignty?

These unresolved questions, do not detract from an insightful and timely investigation, of a city which remains a ‘pressure cooker’ for volatile religious imaginings, nationalist aspirations and real urban struggles. Ashdown’s conclusions if anything emphasize the need for greater regional co-ordination and international pressure and diplomacy to facilitate an agreement on Jerusalem as part of a wider Arab-Israeli peace initiative.