



# Doves over Jerusalem? An interview with Menachem Klein

Graham Usher

*Menachem Klein is a Research Fellow at the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies. In his recent book **Doves over Jerusalem**, Klein gives the first detailed account of the "final status" agreement on Jerusalem envisaged by Israel's Justice Minister, Yossi Beilin, and Palestinian chief negotiator, Mahmoud Abbass (Abu Mazen), in the unofficial "understandings" they reached in Stockholm in October 1995.*

In an interview with Graham Usher for the *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, Klein summarizes the issues raised in his book, looks at recent Israeli policy and practice in Jerusalem, and assesses the current status of the Beilin-Abu Mazen understandings.

***What are the main themes of your book?***

The book addresses two main issues. First, it summarizes the unofficial history of Israeli-Arab negotiations over Jerusalem. Second, it looks at the present facts and realities in the city and argues that any future resolution of the status of Jerusalem must accommodate these realities.

The book also submits a new definition of Jerusalem. For me, Jerusalem must be defined as a frontier city rather than simply a polarized or "multicultural" one. It is a frontier city because it is the site where two nations confront each other. This is how Israel and the Palestinians always viewed it and why Jerusalem remains the symbolic core of the conflict between them.

Negotiations about Jerusalem began in the Camp David talks between Sadat and the Israelis and so already have a long history. The formal position that emerged with Camp David was that the issue of Jerusalem must be deferred until the very end of the peace negotiations. It was thought that Jerusalem was so politically and emotionally loaded an issue that to address it immediately would block all other channels of the peace process. Once these channels were completed—so the argument went—the two sides would be politically ready for a compromise on Jerusalem. The resolution of Jerusalem, in other words, becomes the seal of the agreements on all the other issues in the conflict.

Formally, the Oslo accords adopted this model of deferral. In the 1993 Declaration of Principles both sides agreed to postpone the issue of Jerusalem until the final status negotiations. But it became apparent very

soon that the issue couldn't be postponed. Even in August 1993—when Oslo was still a "secret channel" between the Israeli government and the PLO—the question came up of the status of the existing Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem. Both sides agreed that the newly established Palestinian Authority should not operate in East Jerusalem. But what about those Palestinian institutions already functioning there?

The answer was given in the "secret letter" of September 1993 from Israel's then Foreign Minister, Shimon Peres, to Norwegian Foreign Minister, Jorgen Holst. The letter commits Israel not only to ensure that the Palestinian institutions in East Jerusalem will stay open, but even to "encourage their development." Peres' letter was significant in one other respect too. It marked the first time an Israeli government—any Israeli government—had used the term "East Jerusalem" to designate a political reality rather than merely a religious reality.

Then came the interim agreement of September 1995, when Israel agreed that Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem could participate as voters and candidates in the elections for a Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC). This was a very important breakthrough. When Israel annexed East Jerusalem in 1967, it offered a choice of residency or citizenship to the Palestinian inhabitants. After 32 years of direct Israeli rule, around 2,000 Palestinians have taken Israeli citizenship. Which is another way of saying that a third of those living within Jerusalem municipal borders have rejected Israeli sovereignty despite the extra political rights it would give them. Thus in

agreeing that East Jerusalem's Palestinians can vote in the PLC elections, Israel is accepting that these Palestinians are part of the Palestinian political system, that their political and national rights find expression outside Israel. Not only that—these rights were actually exercised on 20 January 1996 when East Jerusalem's Palestinians voted and participated in the PLC elections.

These facts show not only that a deal is possible on Jerusalem, but that no Israeli-Palestinian agreement is going to be possible without a deal on Jerusalem. The entire peace process is predicated on it.

***You said that any agreement on Jerusalem must accommodate its present realities.***

***Could you explain what you mean?***

Take the issue of Jerusalem being an "open city." It was Sadat who raised this first as a slogan: that Jerusalem should be an "open city" with freedom of movement for the two peoples within it. But what does this mean in the context of a two-state solution? What about Israelis who want to travel to Ramallah, to within the borders of the Palestinian state? The very call for an open city raises the question of Jerusalem's borders. And it is clear to me that Jerusalem's existing municipal borders—and so the present "separation line" between Israel and the occupied territories—cannot be the "final status" borders. The present municipal borders do not fit the existing realities of Jerusalem. They cut many Palestinian areas in half. What were Palestinian villages in 1967 are now suburbs. And nearly half of the city's

Jewish population now lives in East Jerusalem. So Jerusalem's borders will have to be redrawn in any final status settlement.

On the other hand, there can be no return to the pre-1967 reality of a divided city. Aside from the Israeli Jews who now live in East Jerusalem, Palestinians from the West Bank depend economically on work in West Jerusalem. And whatever discrimination they face there, the average Palestinian income in West Jerusalem is higher than in the West Bank and much higher than in Gaza. So Palestinians will also want Jerusalem to be an open city in any final status arrangement

***But the present policy of the Israeli government is that Jerusalem is a closed city, at least for most Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza ...?***

But this policy cannot endure. Even today, the closure policy is flexible. During the last weeks of Ramadan it effectively ends. The point is to agree on special arrangements to enable Palestinian free access, perhaps via a territorial corridor from the West Bank to the Old City. But whatever the restrictions in place today, Israel will be obliged in any final status agreement to provide free access to Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza to the holy places in East Jerusalem. This obligation concerns not only the Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza, but also Jordan—a point that is underscored in the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty.

***What do you expect Ehud Barak's stance to be on Jerusalem?***

I don't think Barak has a clear policy on Jerusalem. But—whatever the slogans of his election campaign—he cannot by-pass Jerusalem, no more than could Likud. Likud's strategy was to ignore Jerusalem and pre-empt its final status through a stock of unilateral acts—i.e. confiscating the IDs of East Jerusalem Palestinians, demolishing "illegal" houses in East Jerusalem and trying to expand the borders of "Greater Jerusalem." I look at all these acts in the book and conclude that they failed totally.

The aim of Likud and Olmert was the same as every Israeli government since 1967 and was explicitly stated in 1974—to keep the "demographic balance" in Jerusalem at around 75 percent Jewish and 25 percent Arab. But this policy too has failed. Today the demographic balance is at least 70 percent Jewish and 30 percent Arab and—according to the latest survey done by our Institute—more likely 68 percent Jewish and 32 percent Arab. The consensus of all experts on Jerusalem is that Jewish population ratio in the city will stay below 70 percent. This is a major worry for any Israeli government—for there is a basic political assumption, held by both Labor and Likud, that the lower the Jewish demographic presence in Jerusalem the weaker is Israel's claim for absolute sovereignty over it.

This is what drove Likud's policy on Jerusalem. It is not clear whether similar considerations will drive Barak's. But it is clear such policies won't work. In the last three years, scores of Palestinian houses

have been destroyed in East Jerusalem, but their numbers pale into insignificance compared to the number of unauthorized houses that have been built. Orient House estimates that some 4,000 IDs of East Jerusalem Palestinians were confiscated during the Likud period; Israeli NGOs say the number is 3,500. But both Orient House and the Israeli NGOs say that at least 10,000 and probably more Palestinians have returned to East Jerusalem in the last three years for fear of losing their Jerusalem residency status. At the same time, the international cost of the policies of ID confiscations and house demolitions to Israel's reputation has been enormous, especially when you consider that it failed in its primary aim of forcing Palestinians to leave Jerusalem.

Even Olmert has realized this. The policies of ID confiscation and house demolitions are not so organized now. They are virtually over, especially with the new Israeli government in place.

I expect the same fate to befall Netanyahu's plans to unilaterally expand the city's borders to create a de facto "Greater Jerusalem" umbrella municipality. The aim again was to achieve a 75-25 percent demographic balance, but this time by expanding the borders to include Jewish areas to the west of Jerusalem as well as expansions to the north, east, and south. But the international community—including the US—protested the plan, as did Israel's Interior Ministry, which was alarmed at the prospect of losing some of its powers to the municipality. The plan is now effectively frozen.

***What about the plan to expand Ma'ale Adumim, which some Israeli commentators say Barak quietly supports?***

The plan is not new. The original idea was to expand Jerusalem's borders eastwards to incorporate Ma'ale Adumim. [Former Israel Defense Minister Moshe] Arens' plan aims to expand Ma'ale Adumim westwards to connect it with Jerusalem, the so-called E1 "tourist" plan. But whether you expand east or west, you still have the fact of the number of Palestinian villages and Palestinian private properties that lie in between. I think it would be very difficult for Israel in the present political situation to confiscate these properties. But if it doesn't confiscate them, there will be large Palestinian "islands" in the heart of the E1 plan.

I simply don't believe such unilateralism is any longer feasible. As the final status approaches, Israel has to recognize the political and demographic fact of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, in the same way as the Palestinians will have to recognize the facts of Talpote and the 25,000 Jews who live in Ma'ale Adumim. The period of evading the issue is over.

***Do you think the Beilin-Abu Mazen understandings will be operative in the new Israeli government?***

I don't think the understandings are any longer "actual," if that's what you mean. Peres rejected the understandings, Barak hasn't referred to them, and Abu Mazen denied their existence! So a resurrection of the Beilin-Abu Mazen understandings is currently a non-starter. But while the remedies they proposed may no longer be

actual, the rationale behind them will be. The understandings retain their relevance because they contain the ingredients that must be used in any resolution of the final status of Jerusalem, even if that outcome is different from the one envisaged by Beilin and Abu Mazen.

For example, the understandings assume changes in the current borders of Jerusalem. They also assume different conceptions of sovereignty and tacitly accept that the notion of exclusive sovereignty is not the only one. New concepts of sovereignty will have to be developed to tackle the issue of Jerusalem because there will be powers of national expression and authority even in those Arab neighborhoods that, according to the understandings, will fall under Israeli sovereignty. This will be the stuff of the final status negotiations. Let me just say that the understandings are more balanced to the Palestinians than the accounts of them given in the Israeli press. Everyone is aware that the status of Jerusalem is not going to be resolved simply by giving the Palestinians a capital in Abu Dis.

***One of the criticisms of the Beilin-Abu Mazen understandings is that while they offer a demographic solution to Israel the "problem" of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, they do not offer the Palestinians a geographic solution to problems of mobility, zoning, and urban development in East Jerusalem. Do the understandings touch on any of these issues?***

There is the idea of an umbrella borough system in the understandings, although the head of the umbrella municipality will always be an Israeli—if only because of the Jewish majority electorate in Jerusalem. But, yes, your criticism is fair and issues of Palestinian housing and urban development must be addressed in any final agreement on Jerusalem. And this will be tough because discrimination is built into the Israeli system. I don't see any Israeli government granting control over the "green areas" in East Jerusalem to the Palestinians, for instance. But issues like this may force Israel to change its priorities. In the end—if progress is to be achieved—Israel and Israelis will have to liberate themselves from the notion that Palestinians are a demographic threat. All the acts of discrimination—be it in zoning rights, house demolitions, or ID confiscations—flow from this perception.

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Graham Usher is Occupied Territories' correspondent for *Middle East International* and author of *Dispatches from Palestine: The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process* (London: Pluto Press, 1999).

صدر حديثاً

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ومؤسسة الدراسات الفلسطينية

**ديرياسين**

الجمعة ١٩٤٨/٤/٩

وليد الخالدي

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ومن مؤسسة الدراسات المقدسية  
القدس

صدر حديثاً عن مؤسسة الدراسات  
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