

Jerusalem and the Holy Sites: A Call for Peace at a Time of Crisis

Nurit Hirschfeld
January 13, 2015



Executive Summary

Conference on "Jerusalem and the Holy Sites: A Call for Peace at a Time of Crisis"
Jerusalem, January 11-13, 2015

A. Jerusalem and the Holy Sites – Political, Regional and International Aspects

1. Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Introduction

The conflict over the holy sites in Jerusalem is regarded as part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Prof. Eliezer Glaubach, the president of UPF's Jerusalem Forum for Peace and Security, opened the discussion, giving an overview of the efforts that have been made over the years to achieve a comprehensive peace agreement. Since 2002 the Quartet, an international entity composed of the United Nations, the United States, the European Union and Russia, has been involved in mediating between the Israelis and the Palestinians in an effort to resolve their conflict. However, the negotiations collapsed in 2006 when Hamas won the Palestinian elections, and a division was created in the Palestinian authority between Hamas (in the Gaza Strip) and Fatah (in Judea and Samaria). Prof. Glaubach pointed to the lack of internal unity on both the Palestinian and the Israeli sides as the major impediment to a desirable future solution.

Status Quo

Mr. Ran Segev from the Ministry of Strategic Affairs in Israel referred to the status quo in Jerusalem as a desirable state of affairs for Israel, and one that can be maintained only through a political solution. By status quo he means freedom of worship on the Temple Mount, as in other parts in Jerusalem, as well as Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem. Mr. Segev noted that already in 1979 – in the peace contract with Egypt – the late Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin gave formal recognition to the special status of Jerusalem. Mr. Begin declared that within the framework of a general solution there should be an agreeable arrangement in Jerusalem. He did not declare "Jerusalem belongs to the Israeli state, and we will not negotiate about Jerusalem"; thus, Mr. Begin expressed the Israeli understanding of the need to compromise in Jerusalem.

History

Moreover, Mr. Segev claimed that the Israeli state wishes for peace with its neighbor and is even willing to compromise on issues in Jerusalem, in spite of being attacked in 1947, in 1967 and in 1973. Mr. Segev mentioned that for 19 years (1948-1967) Israeli access to the Western Wall was blocked, whereas since Israel became the sovereign of Jerusalem, Muslim access to El-Aqsa Mosque has been guaranteed. Mr.

Segev concluded by pointing out the lack of trust between the Palestinians and the Israelis. During the years of the second Intifada, the citizens of West Jerusalem suffered from terror attacks, which resulted in their losing trust in the Palestinians' desire for peace. This violation of trust needs to be restored.



2. The Temple Mount - Current Status, Limitations and Difficulties

Prof. Glaubach noted that raising the issue of the status of the holy sites in Jerusalem during negotiations for peace in the Middle East is like throwing a bomb into the room. The issue is highly sensitive and could even set the whole region on fire.

Mr. Segev argued that the goal should be to maintain the status quo, according to which everyone is free to visit the holy sites: both Muslims and Jews. This is indeed officially the status quo, but in reality this agreement is not being kept, and Jews are deprived of their right to go to the Temple Mount and pray there. Mr. Segev believes that it is possible to achieve this “status quo” and that the two sides should work in creative ways to search for a solution. One suggestion, for example, might be to ask the Arab League or indeed another Arab country, to take responsibility for the Temple Mount.

Mr. Pinchas Inbari, a journalist and senior Middle East analyst, spoke of the lack of unity in the Arab world in respect to Jerusalem. For the Muslim Brotherhood, Jerusalem is the center, whereas Saudi Arabia, following the Salafi tradition, does not even recognize the holy sites in Jerusalem. So for the state of Israel to develop a formal position regarding Jerusalem, it is of great importance to know what the demands of the Arab world are.

Moreover, as was noted by Sheik Ali Birani, president of the Jerusalem Interfaith Forum, there is a disagreement between the Palestinians and the Jordanians regarding sovereignty over the Temple Mount. According to the peace contracts between Israel and Jordan, the sovereignty is in the hands of the Jordanian Waqf, but later on the Palestinians expressed their disagreement with this.

3. The Middle East Arena and International Support

Introduction

Mr. Daniel Sherman, a lecturer on Middle East affairs and politics, noted that there is clearly a transitional process in the Middle East. It is clear that something is coming to an end, and yet it is not clear what the next phase will look like. It is a historical opportunity to build something new, one that we should take very seriously, with a responsible attitude. This should involve analyzing various angles and asking questions regarding the role that individuals, societies and religion should play in shaping this new phase.

Israel and Iran

Dr. Werner Fasslabend, former defense minister and president of the parliament in Austria, sees the great potential of the region to prosper and flourish. The key in his opinion lies with the super powers in the

Middle East. He sees two of them in the region: Israel and Iran. The solution should include those two super powers and it would bring the Middle East to growth and prosperity.



Israel and Palestine

Dr. Robert de Wijk from The Hague Center for Strategic Studies in the Netherlands argued that the ability of Israel to be involved on the international level is limited due to the Palestinian issue. Once this conflict is resolved Israel will have the ability to contribute to the development of the region.

Mr. Mohammad Shawahin, chairman of the Justice and Peace Cultural Forum in Jordan, shared his opinion according to which the Jordanian army can be a part of the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in places where Israelis and Palestinians find it difficult to trust the security forces of the other side.

Mr. Inbari believes there would be a good chance of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict if Israel were to enter into discussions with the Arab League. The Americans should be invited at the end of the process in order to give their stamp of approval. The Europeans should not be involved, in his opinion, since otherwise it may complicate the process of finding a solution.

The Balkan Model

Dr. de Wijk suggested that the solution in the Middle East should be similar to the one in the Balkans: states according to ethnic groups. Mr. Inbari sees the crisis in Syria as an opportunity for the region to reach a solution such as in the Balkans. The crisis in Syria is the result of a conflict between tribes and ethnic groups such as Alawites and Kurds fighting each other. If the solution were to give those ethnic groups recognition and territories, then also a way could be opened for the recognition of a Jewish entity in the form of the State of Israel.

Supporting this view was also Mr. Yaki Dayan, a former consul general of Israel in Los Angeles. He said that the Middle East has a strong tribal element and quoted the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, who once said that Egypt is the only state in the Arab world since the others are tribes.

Egypt and Jordan

In the view of Mr. Inbari, international support from the US and Europe should be given to Egypt and Jordan, since they are the two islands of stability in the region, and this stability should be supported and strengthened.

4. Terror and Radical Islam

Mr. Dayan pointed out the need to take into account the role of radical Islam when attempting to promote peace in the Middle East. Mr. Segev argued that peace is achievable, and it is our responsibility to strive

for it. Nevertheless, any attempt to bring peace to the Middle East should take into account the powers of terror and radical Islam such as ISIS and include ways to eradicate their power. Dr. de Wijk and Mr. Segev agreed that, with determination and proper cooperation of armies and states, ISIS can be blocked. Mr. Segev emphasized that ground troops should be involved and do the work in the battlefield. So far he doesn't see anyone taking this kind of responsibility, but he is hoping to see one.



B. The Temple Mount and Jerusalem – Spiritual, Religious and Moral Aspects

1. Interfaith and Religions in Jerusalem – the Source for Solution

Dr. Ines Murzaku, chair and professor of the department of Catholic Studies in Seton Hall University in the US, explained that since Jerusalem is perceived as the cause of the conflict, it also holds the key to solving the conflict. Jerusalem is the perfect place to create dialogue among religions, and due to its deep spiritual qualities it can become the city of peace, as envisioned by prophets and spiritual figures throughout history.

Rabbi Yaakov Luft, a lecturer of Jewish philosophy, contested the common claim that religion is the source of violence and conflict and thus has no place in the search for a peaceful solution in Jerusalem. He argued that an examination of the alternatives to religion, such as nationalism, fascism or communism, reveals that they were more deadly, causing the loss of millions of lives. Human behavior can be either good or bad, and when religion is used badly the results are bad. Since the character of the conflict in Jerusalem is religious, one cannot find a solution to the conflict by removing religion from the discussions. Rabbi Luft suggested selecting in each religion the good values of peace and friendship, thus promoting a positive and a peaceful movement in society, forging a path for peace in Jerusalem.

Rabbi Joseph Abittan, director of the Monotheistic Religions Council for the South of France, argued that the conflict in Jerusalem is a political conflict, not a religious one. He claimed that Jerusalem became important to Islam only when Jerusalem became politically important. In religious terms Mecca is the main and important city to Islam, parallel to the religious significance of Jerusalem in Judaism.

2. Spiritual, Moral and Religious Leadership: Nurturing Values of Care for the Other as Well as Proper Moral Norms

The Need for Constructive Vision

Mr. Dayan said that with the collapse of the former Soviet Union the Arab, world lost the secular alternatives of nationalism and communism. A vacuum was created, which was filled by radical Islam, which, in Mr. Dayan's view, appears to be the only coherent ideology that can remain competitive in front of the western world, now that the other ideologies have faded away.

The need for clear moral values was also raised by Prof. Glaubach. He noted that the region is suffering from the lack of a leader with a strong and clear vision, such as King Hussein, Anwar Sadat, Yitzhak Rabin and Menachem Begin, all of whom were willing to make painful sacrifices in their quest for peace.



The Need for Spirituality in Religion

Imam Faisal Abdul Rauf, founder and chair of the Cordoba Institute in New York, argued that, although the conflict might seem to stem from religious roots, this is only so because so many religious people today act with no soul. Religions need an infusion of spirituality.

Worshipping God Instead of Worshipping Religion

Imam Rauf described the situation of religions today as idolatry of religion: "We have lost the way of worshipping God. Instead of God, we are worshipping Islam, Judaism, Christianity, or nationalism." The will of God is unity among people, not separation or rivalry. The goal of religion is to know God and to look at human beings through God's eyes. God's eyes are eyes of care and love. The religious law in all religions is based on loving God "with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our might." If we don't start at this point of loving God and loving human beings with God's eyes, we will not be able to solve the problem.

Holiness and Holy Sites

Imam Rauf defined the attachment of religious people to holy places as religious materialism, which doesn't leave room for a solution. But from the loving and caring perspective of God the problems can be solved. In Imam Rauf's understanding human beings are the ones who make a place holy. There is no holy place without human beings. Thus, in order to solve the problem of the holy sites, one needs to solve the problems in people's hearts.

Rabbi Edgar Nof, chair of Bridges of Hope in Haifa, also identified the problems of the holy places as coming from the human heart. There are beautiful and magnificent places for each religion, in Jerusalem and in other places. And yet, each one feels that what he has is not enough. The materialistic world is educating people to gain more and more; no wonder such an attitude breeds extremists who want to take over more and more territories and places. The root is in the human heart. That is where we need to search for the solution.

Working Towards Peace – A Long-Term Religious Obligation

Rabbi Edgar talked about the moral religious obligation to work for peace. He noted that the Holy Bible starts with the creation of Adam and Eve, and thus all human beings and the whole world were created by God. Murder and killing have heavy consequences on the human soul for future generations. Putting an end to killing and striving for peace are a long-term mission. The fruits might not be seen in a day, and yet it is our responsibility to invest our efforts, as is stated in a Jewish source: "The responsibility to bring

the work to completion is not yours, and yet you are not free to desist from it" (Mishnah, Avot 2, 16). Rabbi Edgar put an emphasis on making efforts for peace, as a moral and religious obligation.

Interfaith Understanding as an Important Tool for Peace

Sheik Samich Natur, the editor in chief of Al-Amama, a Druze magazine in Israel, described the Druze religion as a religion of peace, using force only rarely, in self-defense. Sheik Natur acknowledged the violent aspects in each religion as well as the peaceful ones. He said that through interfaith activities religions can find their common positive values, and thus work together in harmony to achieve peace in society.



C. Jerusalem and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict – Soft-Power Solutions

Mr. Dani Sherman suggested a profoundly realistic approach to the conflict: not to search for an ultimate solution that would solve the conflict at once but rather to create an ongoing process that involves solving local problems. Below are several initiatives and suggestions in this light:

The Reality of Religious Tolerance

One of the ways to promote cooperation and tolerance is to encourage and support positive existing models and initiatives. A major example of such models is the one brought up by Sheikh Dr. Omar Kayal, a national inspector from the Department of Religious Communities in the Ministry of the Interior in Israel. Dr. Kayal described the activities of his office: they arrange yearly conferences and gatherings of religious leaders from all corners of the country and are also called to mediate disputes at times of conflict between sects or religious communities.

Dr. Kayal also spoke about freedom of worship, which is protected by law in the state of Israel; under his supervision are prayer houses as well as cemeteries spanning the entire religious mosaic of Israel: Sunni Muslims, Sufi Muslims, Druze, Greek Catholic Christians, evangelical Christians, Baha'i, Circassians and more. As a representative of the state, he is responsible to ensure their welfare and solve problems when needed.

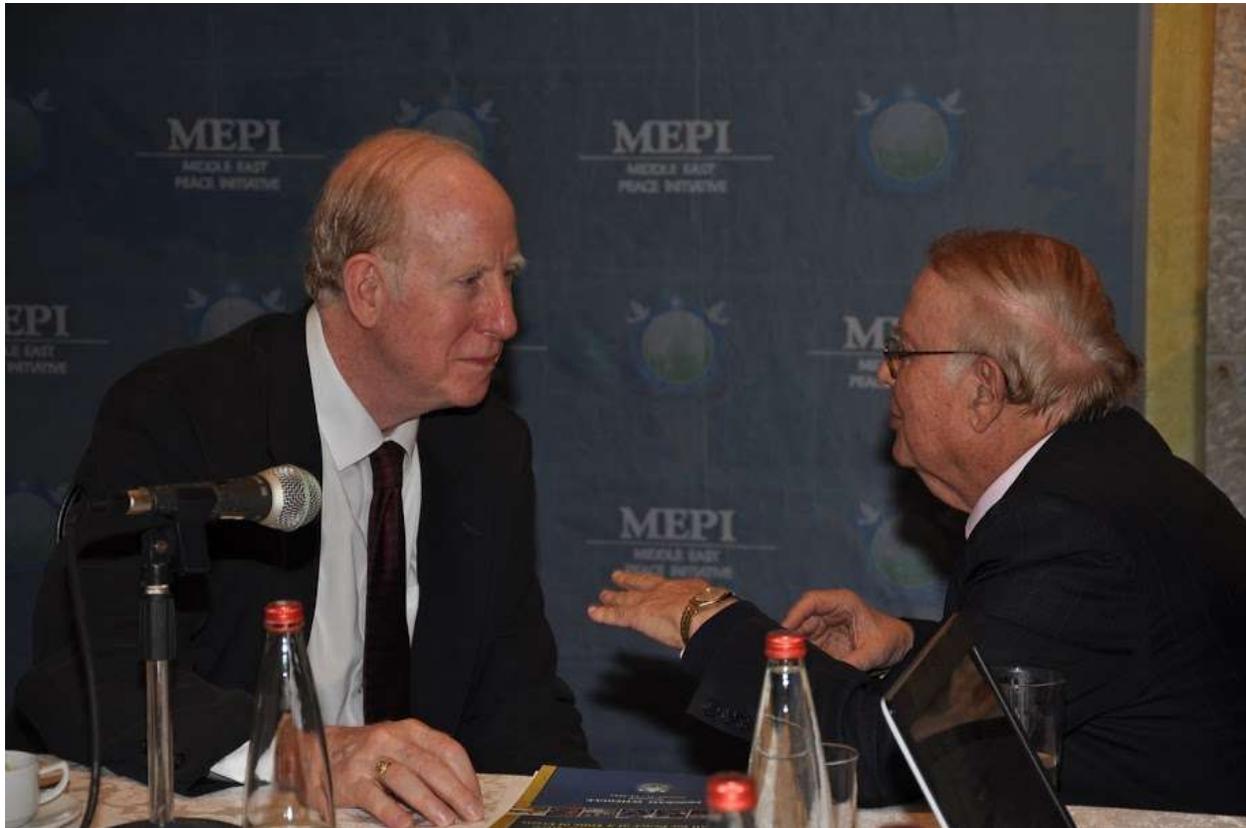
Dr. Avraham Haim, president of the Council of the Sephardic Community of Jerusalem, gave the example of Jewish religious freedom under Ottoman Muslim rule. Dr. Haim presented a historical review of the four Sephardic synagogues in the Old City of Jerusalem, showing historical papers and laws from the Ottoman regime protecting the synagogues and ensuring the right of Jewish people to pray there.

Economy

Mr. Dayan argued that the conflict can be managed by a long-term strategic plan of nurturing the Palestinian economy, solving water problems and the like. Supporting this, Mr. Inbari added that before talking about holy sites, the standard of living in East Jerusalem must be elevated. Once this is being

taken care of, it will be easier to talk about the holy places. In general, Mr. Inbari claimed that financial stability and economic opportunities must be provided for the young Arab population. Otherwise, it will be difficult to bring the conflict to an end.

Mr. Inbari brought up a different aspect of the economy: large amounts of money are donated to the Palestinian people, and yet this money usually doesn't reach its destination, the needs of the Palestinian people; instead, it ends up in the pockets of corrupt leaders. In light of this, Mr. Inbari's recommendation to the west is to define clear criteria for the donations given to the Palestinians. Such criteria should prevent the money from ending up in corrupt hands.



Education

Mr. Segev believes that education is a field that one needs to invest in, in order to dispel ignorance as well as support moderate religious voices. Dr. Eldad Pardo, a lecturer and research fellow in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is directing a research project on educational materials used in Arab countries. He sees a strong correlation between the content of the educational materials being studied in schools and the political moves in the states. In his research he finds strong racism and anti-Semitism in the educational school materials in the Arab countries. He believes that through teaching (in schools) the basic principles of all the religions the solution to the conflict in Jerusalem can be found.

Tourism

Mrs. Naomi Tsur, chair of Jerusalem Green Fund and former deputy mayor of Jerusalem, discussed interfaith tourism in her Green Pilgrimage initiative. Tourism, big cities and holy sites are a combination that can have a far-reaching impact. The need to protect the environment and the love of tourism (and visiting holy places) are common to all people around the globe. Through her green fund Mrs. Tsur wishes to promote a peaceful environment and peaceful cities. Everyone wants to have tourists in their city, and everyone wants their city to be a green one. Tourism involves crossing borders. If ways can be found to bring tourists from Bethlehem to Jerusalem or from Jordan to Israel, it will be an important act and a significant step.

D. Beyond the Conflict in Jerusalem

Prof. Qais Saidi, a representative of the Mandeans, a persecuted religious minority, described the difficult situation that his people have experienced due to the lack of religious tolerance in Iraq, their original homeland (before escaping as refugees to Europe). Prof. Qais served as a vivid reminder to all the participants of the importance of keeping equal moral standards among all people and all religions. Fighting to eliminate violence against peoples and religions, as well as promoting values of peace and the sanctity of human life, will not only solve the conflict in Jerusalem but can also ease the wounds of other bleeding areas and nations around the globe.