

Miles apart over the same city

by Mahdi Abdul Hadi

There are varying conceptions in reading, understanding and presenting the question of Jerusalem by the concerned parties. These have led to a number of crises in negotiating Jerusalem.

The first crisis is the differing views over what Jerusalem we are talking about. The logical and reasonable approach is to talk about Jerusalem according to the partition plan of United Nations Security Council Resolution 181 of 1947. UNSCR 181 provides for the city to be a *corpus separatum* under international trusteeship and a center for two states, an open city or joint capital embracing a variety of identities and citizenships, Israeli, Palestinian as well as international.

With the Oslo accords of 1993, however, the terms of reference changed to the two-state-solution based on UNSCR 242 of 1967, which foresaw a division of the city along the pre-June 1967 armistice line. As the leading Palestinian negotiator, now and in Oslo, Ahmed Qurei, has put it: «Palestinians agreed to give up West Jerusalem in Oslo and they cannot afford to share East Jerusalem.»

The second crisis is the contradiction in aspirations for the city's future. Negotiators have been discussing Jerusalem not on any agreed formula but on a combination of what their personal understandings of history, faith and legend are. In recent interviews, President Mahmoud Abbas says he wants East Jerusalem as it was before 1967. But Qurei and many others, realizing that time for the two-state solution has nearly passed, are beginning to advocate a bi-national state with one Jerusalem—East and West—as the capital for the two people. Outside the realm of negotiations but an important player nevertheless, Hamas politburo chief Khaled Meshaal says that for him, Jerusalem means land, geography, history and religious heritage and is not just the name of a piece of land in the West Bank. Meshaal said he would never share it with Israel.

On the Israeli side, Shimon Peres insists on Jerusalem as Israel's eternal capital, not to be divided or shared except through minor arrangements regarding holy sites. Kadima's Shaul Mofaz and the Shas party have accused Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Livni of partitioning Jerusalem when they discussed the possibility of giving up some Palestinian neighborhoods. On the outside, Likud's Binyamin Netanyahu has stated repeatedly that Israel will never give up an inch of Jerusalem and the Knesset recently passed two laws to this end.

The third crisis is that of the third party. The US has never been a credible mediator. A most glaring example is Washington's very own 2003 roadmap that calls for «clear phases, timelines, target dates and benchmarks». Yet the US accepted Ariel Sharon's 14 reservations and then went along with his unilateralism. Thus, while Israel could rely on its partners in the US, Palestinians have been left out of the game. (Even when Arab countries have tried to step into the breach, their efforts, notably the 2002 Arab peace initiative, were simply ignored. This is in spite of the fact that it offers Israel comprehensive peace with the entire Arab world in return for abiding by international law.)

The US will continue to be a biased player. The statements by the current presidential candidates on the issue of Jerusalem in particular promise little in the way of a fair resolution. The fourth crisis is one of leadership. There was always a question mark over how far Olmert could lead Israeli negotiations while facing allegations of corruption and stepping down as head of Kadima. At the same time, Mahmoud Abbas has been negotiating against a backdrop of not only a divided Palestinian society but a divided Fateh movement, and he remains haunted by his «end of term», due in January 2009.

Without resolution or clarity to the abovementioned crises, future negotiations will stand little chance of success. Suggestions to bring in Arab countries—including Jordan, which, with the 1994 Washington Declaration and against the wishes of the Palestinian side, became the custodian of the Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem—will not resolve any of the problems and can be considered mere time-wasting tactics.

Besides, there remains a lack of a culture of recognition and appeasement. The rhetoric of both sides is devoid of conciliatory messages and does not spark hope of any new promising approach to talks. Under these circumstances, one must doubt that future talks can be conducted with the depth and seriousness needed to reach a workable agreement satisfactory to all parties.—
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