

# ICWA LETTERS

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## Jerusalem: Course and Destiny

JERUSALEM, Israel

October 1995

By Hisham H. Ahmed

In the overall context of Palestinian-Israeli relations, the question of Jerusalem stands out as one of the most complicated ones. The following is a translation of an Op-Ed piece I published in the Arabic-language local newspaper, *Al Quds*, on October 28, 1995:

Contention over Jerusalem has been and remains aflame within the overall Palestinian-Israeli struggle.

Discussion of Jerusalem at this stage of Israeli-Palestinian interaction, will, without any doubt, raise any number of queries and ideas, as both parties consider Jerusalem an integral part of their legal, political, economic, religious and social entity.

Jerusalem represents, in both parties' opinion, the heart, whose dismemberment or even marring shall be life-threatening. In reality, despite some similarity in the Israeli and Palestinian views toward Jerusalem, there are substantial differences between them concerning their constituents; means, methods and objectives. The considerable Palestinian presence in East Jerusalem, whether demographic, national or institutional, would not have been dislodged over the past three decades had it not been for the consecration of Israeli convictions that Jerusalem is the only and eternal capital of Israel. The Palestinian people and their sole legitimate representative, the PLO, have concentrated their efforts over the years using various methods in a number of international and Arab forums, to consolidate the fact that East Jerusalem is essentially Arab and an integral part of the Palestinian land occupied in 1967. It was not by mere coincidence that the UN repeatedly declared a position congruent to that of the Palestinians' through numerous resolutions. In addition, the Arab states and the Islamic Conference have rendered it unequivocal that the eastern part of this city, deeply rooted in the history and culture of humanity, is Palestinian and should remain such.

Even the United States, despite its firm strategic ties and numerous homogeneous interests it shares with Israel, has shown one indication after another of its conviction that East Jerusalem should necessarily be the center of the Palestinians' political and national presence. At the very least, one can say that almost every American presidential candidate used to promise during his electoral campaign that he would move the American Embassy from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem, once he was elected as president.

However, such promises soon lost momentum as the obstacles facing such a step were too great for the president to overcome.

Palestinian objection to the implementation of such a promise was an issue that could not be underestimated. Moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem clashed or at least did not comply with the official US stand toward the Palestinian question in general and Jerusalem in particular.

In addition, Arab and Islamic objections were taken into consideration and those nominated for the US presidency realized the difficulty or impossibility of carrying out their promise. However, they were principally concerned with attracting the largest number of Jewish votes in the US. This dilemma, resulting from making promises and having to face obstacles when coming to their implementation, became more acute instead of disappearing.

This phenomenon has occurred repeatedly during most presidential elections since 1967. Presidential competition was obviously focused on the Palestinian-Israeli issue,

and the candidate who could present the more attractive promises was the most likely to gain Jewish votes and thus have better chances for victory.

## Jerusalem Now

The position that Jerusalem occupies at the moment in Palestinian-Israeli relations has changed. On the one hand, discussions over Jerusalem's destiny have been postponed until the final stages of negotiation. However, postponing such a central issue until the final stages, does not diminish its importance from the Palestinian point of view. The dominant feeling is that the sensitivity of the question of Jerusalem should encourage dealing with it in a more detailed and diagnostic manner. This Palestinian attitude has not constituted an obstacle in the path of Israeli intentions, either economically, religiously, demographically or politically. Israel, due to the inequality between it and the Palestinians, feels that it is the party that can manipulate affairs more efficiently to its own advantage.

This can be most evidently seen in the case of Jerusalem and the realities that concern it. Greater Jerusalem, from the Israeli perspective, is increasing in size daily as a result of increased land confiscation. The Palestinians who reside in Jerusalem are still losing property as a result.

The relevant issue, however, is that the percentage of land owned by Palestinians in Jerusalem has started to contract and that owned by Israelis has, of course, increased. In addition, one should note the results of the results of the Israeli census in Jerusalem and its suburbs. It will certainly have demographic effects in Israel's favor, as the legal position of those carrying a Jerusalem ID and living outside the city remains undefined.

This change, both demographically and economically in favor of the Israelis, no doubt has political and psychological repercussions that cannot be overlooked. Lack of land, as a result of its confiscation, has reduced the possibilities of construction for housing or industrial purposes on the Palestinian side. The scarcity of houses in Jerusalem, as is well-known, has inevitably led to an incredible raising of rents, which many Palestinians cannot meet.

Therefore it has become almost impossible either to reside or invest in Jerusalem. As a result Palestinians have had to pay a high price for not being able to meet the requirements of residence, work or investment in Jerusalem. This has led to a coercive and not necessarily optional attempt to search for an alternative place of residence.

The struggle for survival has therefore left its imprint on the demographic shape of Jerusalem. All the above comes in addition to the numerous steps the Israelis have taken, so that the severity of the situation will intensify. When there is land for Palestinians to build on, and if they are able to acquire a building license from the Israeli Municipality, it is considered a privilege because it occurs so rarely. The expenses incurred when obtaining a license — if it is approved — render its implemen-

tation difficult to achieve.

Many houses have been demolished for lack of a license. This has aggravated and complicated the situation even further. The families who live in houses without a building license live in a state of continuous instability, and therefore continuous insecurity, period. This feeling of insecurity, at least psychologically, has led to inevitable results for those with or without licenses.

Negligence of the city's upkeep and cleanliness, and some deterioration in a number of patterns of social behavior are not coincidental or without cause. They are all an inescapable result of intrinsic and external insecurity.

What has complicated the issue even further for the Palestinians is the fact that the Israelis have set up checkpoints between the parts of a single urban body and have strangled communication between Jerusalem and the rest of the occupied Palestinian lands. The Israelis claim that placing barriers between the West Bank and Jerusalem came as a result of Israeli security concerns. According to this pretense, the checkpoints prevent undesirable elements from entering Jerusalem and Israel proper.

Actually, the security excuse for placing the checkpoints between Jerusalem and the West Bank is the least important. The real objective is political in general and socio-economic and psychological in particular. It is well known, even to Israeli decision-makers, that a Palestinian who is determined to threaten Israeli security will most probably use a safer route, even if it is more difficult.

Checkpoints could decrease such Palestinians' speed in reaching their targets in Israel, but they cannot prevent them. On the contrary, the existence of such checkpoints causes them to sharpen their skills in planning and executing their operations. It is no coincidence that there was an increase in military operations in Israel by certain Palestinians after checkpoints were placed between Jerusalem and the rest of the occupied areas. It is just as true that the whole Palestinian situation has deteriorated, both politically and economically. It is also a fact that the attempt to isolate Palestinians from Jerusalem has produced a reaction, an insistence on achieving their objectives. The security dimension then neither convinces the Israelis nor the Palestinians.

So, what is purpose of the checkpoints? A large number of Palestinians who reach Jerusalem do not go through the checkpoints at all. Reaching Jerusalem by the infamous Wadi-alnar route, despite legal ramifications, is well-known to Israeli military authorities. This leads us to presume that they have other than security aims in mind.

Those who travel by this route jeopardize their source of livelihood, if arrested, since they cannot then escape either detention or a fine. They are under a continuous legal threat, going to or returning from work.

These adventurers who seek to earn their daily bread have also to pay a psychological toll. Travel by this route

is nerve-racking and puts too much pressure upon the physique as well. The severe turns and curves of this rough route and the probable danger the travelers face on it all leave their distinct imprint: it produces lined faces and deep sighs of pain, as well as certain attitudes that distinguish those who are obliged to take this route regularly.

In addition, Jerusalem to these people will eventually represent something merely abstract, which instigates a feeling of terror and insecurity. Therefore the connection between the conscience of a Palestinian going to Jerusalem incognito and the meanings of the entities of this city enrooted within his conscience are negatively affected, especially if one measures an individual's behavior over a period of time.

Placing checkpoints between Jerusalem and the rest of the occupied Palestinian territories aims, among other things, at bringing about a psychological schism between the various sectors of Palestinian Society on the one hand, and between the people and what they consider to be the pulsating heart of the nation on the other.

In addition to creating a state of psychological trauma and physical fatigue, traveling to Jerusalem by a route other than the usual makes daily breadwinning for such travelers an extremely difficult task. At the same time, the inability of West Bankers and Gazans to reach Jerusalem directly threatens the city's economy:

The interchange of commercial relations between Jerusalem and other areas has decreased more than that between these outside areas themselves. It is especially difficult to go about buying or selling in Jerusalem. This disturbance in exchange relations renders Jerusalemites' ability to interact economically with the West Bank more difficult than previously, even though they can travel more easily than others.

### **Palestinians and permits to Jerusalem**

As for those Palestinians who can get permits to travel to and from Jerusalem, they are subject to limited movement. They pass checkpoints at least twice a day; they pass by the Israeli soldiers there morning and evening. This imbues their psyche with the effects of the incommensurate friction between them and those who own the attributes of power. Their fate fluctuates between the ability to go to Jerusalem legally and their ability to obtain permits from the Israeli authorities. This oscillation between doubt and certitude, along with the feeling of total humiliation that enshrouds those who attempt to obtain a permit from the Israelis, also has a direct effect on the nature of the economic, social and psychological connection with Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is difficult and therefore undesirable to reach as a result of the physical and psychological complications one has to face in getting there. Jerusalem is a focal point that has been targeted for isolation and monopolization. Jerusalem, the meeting point of Islam and Christianity, has made its plight even more difficult in light of the situation described above.

Those who in the past went to Jerusalem's holy places for spiritual or religious purposes are not able to do so today. If they are able to reach these holy places, it is despite the extreme difficulty of obtaining a permit or the threat that overshadows being in this place of worship "illegally." So, from this point of view, the focal point has been severed from all other parts.

### **The Political Factor**

All these social, economic, psychological and religious difficulties that pertain to Jerusalem emerge from its political situation. The repeated attempts by Ehud Olmert, the Mayor of Jerusalem, to close the main "arteries" of the Palestinian part of the city, that is its institutions, in addition to his manipulation of the festivities arranged on the occasion of "Jerusalem's 3000th anniversary," serve the Israeli political aim to monopolize the city, to isolate and define its course in order to restrain its destiny before negotiations concerning its situation start. His repeated statements, which stress that the city should remain unified and the eternal capital of Israel leave no doubt that all he has done aims at defining a certain course for the city at determining its fate.

Olmert's repeated expressions and his steps emerge from certain motives; they have a great effect on designing results.

The U.S. Senate's backing of Bob Dole's initiative to move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem at this time cannot be underestimated.

For the American president to exercise his veto concerning this resolution has more or less closed the circle from the political point of view around Jerusalem. Issuing such a resolution at a time when the UN was celebrating its 50th anniversary, without any comment from the Arab or Islamic world, except what was declared by president Arafat, increases barriers set around Jerusalem.

Olmert's statements were corroborated by more decisive ones by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on several occasions. The most recent was what he said in New York while attending the United Nations 50th anniversary celebration.

Such expressions, declarations and resolutions are considered most injurious blows to the peace process. One could misinterpret this American Senate resolution as an undeclared acceptance of the division of Jerusalem between Palestinians and Israelis. However, the wording of the resolution leaves no doubt that the course of the city and its destiny are extremely important.

Holding on to a demographic and institutional presence in Jerusalem is now the leading priority for the Palestinians in order to have an effect on the course and destiny of the city. This will inevitably face colossal obstacles, unless it is accompanied by a serious consideration of all factors pertaining to Jerusalem socially, psychologically, religiously, economically and politically, by Palestinians locally, regionally and internationally. □

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