

300 Rabbis in U.S. Group Say Jerusalem Is Shareable

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By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

A group of American rabbis, concerned that the Israel-Palestinian peace talks might collapse over the tangled issue of Jerusalem, called yesterday for the two sides to share the city.

"The question is whether Jerusalem should be under the exclusive sovereignty of one nation," read a statement signed by more than 300 rabbis, calling itself the Jewish Peace Lobby. "The question is whether the pursuit of both justice and peace requires that, in some form, Jerusalem be shared with the Palestinian people. We believe that it does."

The petition was organized by Jerome Segal, a research scholar at the Center of International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland, who founded the Peace Lobby a decade ago to push Israel toward negotiating with the Palestine Liberation Organization. Now that the peace negotiations are edging toward the final, knotty differences, Mr. Segal says outside groups must force debate on the most sensitive issues.

"We know there has been no serious debate inside Israel about any general compromise on Jerusalem," Mr. Segal said in a telephone interview. "Jerusalem is still kind of viewed as the third rail of Israeli politics, with the right claiming that the left will redivide Jerusalem and the left saying that is a lie."

The statement was issued yesterday in part because the Palestinian leader, Yasir Arafat, is to meet with President Clinton in Washington today for talks about the peace negotiations.

The issue's sensitivity is evident in the number of rabbis who declined to sign. Some 1,200 were initially approached; of the more than 800 who backed off, many said they could not envision a practical way of sharing the city.

Mr. Segal and the rabbis who signed say the subject is so emotional that nobody has ever analyzed the actual geography involved in detaching western Jerusalem from the eastern portion, where all 180,000 Palestinians live.

A survey devised by Mr. Segal with researchers from both sides found that neither Israelis or Palestinians viewed the borders of the city as sacrosanct when it was broken down neighborhood by neighborhood.

"When you ask people what parts of the city are important," he said, "only the Mount of Olives and the Old City are really important to both peoples."

The old city constitutes only 1 percent of the area of modern Jerusalem, the rabbis pointed out in their statement yesterday. The area within its walls is important to Jews, Muslims and Christians because it contains the remnants of the last Jewish temple and the third holiest mosque in Islam, which Muslims once faced in prayer. It also includes a church on the site where Christ is believed to have been crucified.

The rabbis said in their statement that sovereignty in this area could come through creative negotiations that would not have to apply to other lands.

They also suggested that the borders of Jerusalem - which have been expanded again and again practically since the day Israel captured the city in 1967 and reunited its eastern and western parts - might be reduced to create a more Jewish city. By giving up control over the sprawling, mostly undeveloped Arab areas the rabbis say, Israel would remove from Israeli Jerusalem most Palestinians, who would most likely become citizens in a future

Palestinian state, anyway.

Rabbis who signed the statement said that they felt it was a moral question and that peace was the most important goal of the Jewish people.

"The notion that Jerusalem belongs to the Jews and only the Jews, if that precludes peace, is wrong," said Rabbi Burton Visotzky, a professor of rabbinic literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan. "I think in the end we will have to live with our neighbors and there is no way around it, and that includes Jerusalem."

The impracticality of sharing the city deterred many from signing the statement. Others opposed the idea of Americans' interfering in the negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians over a city that each side views as its capital.

The position of most Jewish groups in the United States on the issue of Jerusalem hews closely to the official position of present and past Israeli governments, which is that it is their indivisible capital.

Mr. Arafat and the Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak, have committed to Feb. 13 as a deadline to develop a framework for negotiating outstanding differences, including Jerusalem. But those efforts have bogged down; a spokesman for Israel said no change should be expected on the issue of Jerusalem.