

On the Temple Mount, God is the Key. Sovereignty over Jerusalem Religious Sites Belong to God.

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Israel is prepared to formalize the status quo on the Temple Mount, where day-to-day administration is in Muslim hands. The problem is that from an Israeli perspective, the status quo includes Israeli sovereignty and Palestinian administration. While Palestinians have never accepted Israel's claim to sovereignty, this issue has remained dormant. But in the context of a Palestinian state, any international treaty covering administrative control will inevitably engage the sovereignty issue.

Who has underlying sovereignty over the plateau itself? To whom does it belong? If this question is always answered in a traditional way - either Israel is sovereign, or Palestine is - then there will be no solution.

An alternative approach is needed, one that formally disposes of the sovereignty issue, making it possible for administrative matters to be purely administrative - important, but not of vital symbolic meaning. A possible solution lies in a suggestion made several years ago by the late King Hussein - that the two sides should stop arguing over sovereignty and agree instead that ultimate sovereignty belongs to God.

What makes this approach so interesting is that it resonates powerfully among Palestinians of all political and religious orientations. When Palestinians were asked what they thought of this approach to the holy sites in Jerusalem, 64 percent indicated their support. Among those who identify with Islamic fundamentalist parties, the figure soared to 77 percent, and among the very religious it was 88 percent.

What these numbers suggest is that in this simple phrasing - sovereignty over Jerusalem's religious sites belongs to God - there is the making of a stable framework, a symbolism to last generations.

The fact that there is an approach to the Temple Mount-Haram al Sharif that has wide support, even among those most resistant to any agreement in other areas, should be translated into political support among Jewish Israelis. Research has shown that the single greatest determining factor in any willingness of Jews to accept a compromise on Jerusalem, is whether a peace agreement will bring genuine and lasting peace. "Sovereignty belongs to God" holds that promise. It is a phrase that will resonate with Muslims throughout the Islamic world, especially in Iran.

Cynics may say, "fine, sovereignty belongs to God - but whose God?" This is exactly the point. Judaism, Islam and Christianity all affirm there is only one God. The Torah presents God as the sovereign of both the children of Isaac and those of Ishmael. In Genesis, God makes a covenant with Hagar that from Ishmael will also come a great nation.

The point is, there is great potential within the religious traditions for reconciliation between both these peoples. A settlement of the Jerusalem question that underlines this ancient belief in a common God - in common ancestors - has a power it would be foolish for negotiators to ignore.