

If It's God's Land, Let There Be Compromise

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Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, now conferring at the Wye Plantation in Maryland, may not, in the next few days, engage the central issues of the conflict--Palestinian statehood, borders, settlements, limitations on Palestinian sovereignty, refugees and, of course, Jerusalem. But sometime very soon they must and will address these questions.

Above all, it is Jerusalem that is viewed as the impossible issue, the one element of contention about which no compromise seems possible. It is believed that on this one issue the two peoples are so far apart that any political leadership which even sought to compromise would be swept aside. Within Israel, Jerusalem is viewed as the third rail of Israeli politics. Even the left-wing Meretz Party has declined to propose sharing sovereignty with the Palestinians. And some 94 percent of Palestinians say that even if it were the only way that a Palestinian state could come into being, they would not accept Israel's claim that it alone is sovereign over all of Jerusalem. Were the PLO to abandon Jerusalem, Palestinians would abandon the PLO.

If the prospect for resolving the Jerusalem question is so bleak, then we might indeed wonder whether it is worth all the effort being made to attain a peace agreement. The Islamic world is not going to forget about Jerusalem. If all issues other than Jerusalem are resolved, the stage will be set for a Jerusalem-centered, Jewish-Moslem conflict far more horrific than what we have seen thus far.

Fortunately, much of the common wisdom about the non-negotiability of Jerusalem is mistaken or overstated. Two extensive, recently concluded studies of Palestinian and Israeli Jewish perspectives on Jerusalem (I was one of the researchers), funded by the Ford Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation and the U.S. Institute of Peace, are reshaping our understanding of the limits of negotiability.

The first step toward finding a solution to the Jerusalem question is to go beyond talking about "Jerusalem" per se, as if there were a single coherent, commonly understood entity to which the term refers. Instead, it is necessary to disaggregate the city, to inquire about the radically different parts of the hybrid that falls within its municipal boundaries. Herein lie the possibilities of compromise.

Most people think of Jerusalem as consisting of eastern and western halves, divided between 1949 and 1967 and unified during the Six Day War. What is less well understood is that in 1967, after the city was re-unified, Israel redrew the municipal boundaries, incorporating into East Jerusalem a section of the West Bank 10 times the size of what up until then had been the eastern part of the city. This post-1967 addition to Jerusalem is not a continuous urban environment. It contains Arabvillage areas, considerable undeveloped land, a Palestinian refugee camp and newly constructed Israeli residential compounds (called neighborhoods by Israelis and settlements by Palestinians). In all, municipal Jerusalem consists of more than 100 square

Our studies confirmed the intense attachment that almost all Israelis and Palestinians have to Jerusalem. But when we set out to uncover the nature of this special attachment, several striking conclusions emerged:

- * Most Israelis and Palestinians give far more importance to some parts of the city than to others.
- * Within both national communities there is great consensus as to which sections of the city are most important and which are least important "as part of Jerusalem."
- * In the main, Israelis and Palestinians don't have the same priorities.

With the exception of areas inside the Old City, most Israeli Jews say that Jerusalem's Palestinian neighborhoods are not important to them "as part of Jerusalem." An analogous pattern is found among Palestinians--a radical distinction is made between Jewish and Palestinian neighborhoods, with most Palestinians finding Jewish neighborhoods in Jerusalem of distinctly lesser importance. The areas of great importance to both peoples encompass less than 2 percent of the city, the Old City and the

This underlying differentiation suggests that it may be possible to resolve the Jerusalem issue by establishing two cities, Yerushalayim and Al Quds (the Hebrew and Arabic names for Jerusalem). Each would be the sovereign capital of its own state. The Old City, the core of Jerusalem for both peoples, would be a point of overlap, included in both cities.

For Israelis this would mean once again redefining the boundaries of Jerusalem, this time to exclude from Yerushalayim various Arab residential areas outside the Old City. There are those who say this is unthinkable, that the boundaries of the city, even if established somewhat arbitrarily, take on a sacred character--that for Jews, Jerusalem's holiness pervades the city from one edge to another. But no such conclusion was borne out by actually studying Israeli attitudes. Without raising the issue of Palestinian sovereignty, just to test the thesis that Jerusalem's boundaries were sacrosanct, Israeli Jews were asked: "In order to ensure a Jewish majority, do you support or object to redefining the city limits so that Arab settlements and villages which are now within the borders of Jerusalem (such as Shuafat, Um Tuba, Sur Baher) will be outside the city?" Some 59 percent indicated their approval; of the 41 percent that objected, only 7 percent objected strongly. Thus, it is clear that most Israeli Jews view the boundaries of the city as a policy instrument. If modification of Yerushalayim's boundaries promotes what is most important to them, they are open to making the city smaller.

What might happen with respect to the Old City, in particular the Temple Mount, an area of substantial importance to some 95 percent of Israelis and Palestinians? There are several options. One is that both sides would ritualistically affirm their sovereignty over the Old City, but would then work out an administrative agreement for handling day-to-day affairs. Given that since 1967 there has been a de facto agreement giving the Palestinians administrative control of the Temple Mount, this is not impossible. A second possibility would be to make use of a rare but not entirely unknown concept of "joint sovereignty" in which both states would agree that sovereignty over the Old City was held not by either state alone but by the two states together. Again, a day-to-day administrative agreement would be necessary.

Most intriguing, however, is a suggestion voiced some years ago by Jordan's King Hussein: that when it comes to the Temple Mount, both sides should stop arguing about sovereignty and agree that "sovereignty belongs to God." When Israelis and Palestinians were asked about this option, their responses were encouraging. Some 35 percent of Israeli Jews supported the notion, and the figure rose to 44 percent among the most religious. Not bad for a novel idea, one not presently advanced by any Israeli leader. And among Palestinians the response was overwhelmingly positive: Some 64 percent of Palestinians supported the idea. The number rose to 77 percent among those who identified with fundamentalist groups.

There are some experts who have scoffed at such verbal gymnastics, pointing out that there is no precedent for such a resolution and that the phrase "sovereignty belongs to God" has no clear meaning. In this, however, they are indeed being shortsighted. One only needs to remember that, between 1975 and 1988, U.S. officials were forbidden to make contact with the PLO unless that organization recognized Israel's "right to exist," though no one knew what it was for a state to have a "right to exist." The concept had no precedent in international law, and it was never made clear whether this meant a "right to have come into existence" or a "right to remain in existence"--a rather important distinction. None of this, however, prevented the formulation from playing an important role in blocking potential negotiations. Thus, it is quite possible that King Hussein's formulation is the key to peace.

Finally, the studies of Israeli and Palestinian attitudes brought out a dimension largely overlooked in the political discourse. Both studies strongly pointed to the centrality of moral judgments in disposing people toward compromise. Among Israelis, some 39 percent agreed that Palestinians have some legitimate rights in regard to Jerusalem. These people, almost half of whom identified with right-wing parties, were considerably more open to compromise than those who did not recognize any Palestinian rights; this held true even for those who were doubtful about the prospects for lasting peace. Among Palestinians, only 20 percent recognized any Jewish rights concerning Jerusalem, but here, too, this group was distinctly more open to compromise.

These depressingly low numbers have an important upside. Among both Israelis and Palestinians, strikingly little effort has ever been made to deepen people's appreciation of the moral complexity of the conflict. The importance of moral judgment, and the relatively low current level of moral recognition, suggests untapped potential for those seeking to build genuine peace. The Jerusalem studies suggest that what is needed is not some impossible shared narrative of the conflict, but only more widespread acknowledgment among Israelis and Palestinians that both sides have some legitimate rights.

Resolving the Jerusalem question will not be easy. Indeed, Jerusalem remains the most difficult of the final status issues. However, if there is courageous leadership that speaks out, even in part, for the moral legitimacy of the other's point of view, peace really is possible.