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**MIDDLE EAST: THE FAULTLINE**

**Jerusalem: myth and  
reality**

Contents

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Middle East in freefall

Palestinian hopes in  
tallers

Jerusalem: city of  
conflict \*

**Jerusalem: myth  
and reality \***

'We are still the  
enemy' \*

Deheishen days

Media omissions,  
army lies

Children in the line of  
fire

A chronology of  
confrontation and  
negotiation

Ever since the Six Day war one image and one voice have remained implanted in the Israelis' collective memory: the photo of the paratroopers at the foot of the Western Wall, their faces ecstatic, and the voice of their commander General Motta Gur, declaring "the Temple Mount is ours".

On 7 June 1967 the Israeli army had just conquered the whole of Jerusalem's Old City, including the Hara al-Sharif, the precinct on which the Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock are sited, which Jews refer to as the Temple Mount. Leaving the precinct, Moshe Dayan, then minister of defence, said on the radio: "This morning the Israeli armed forces have liberated Jerusalem, the divided capital of Israel. We have returned to the most holy of our holy places and we will never lose them again" (1)

This was the start of the myth of the indivisibility of Jerusalem, as "the reunited and eternal capital of the state

[Little Boy](#)[A necessary evil ? \\*](#)[Ill-gotten gains \\*](#)[Index on corruption \\*](#)[How to play the aid game](#)[Double challenge confronts Belgrade \\*](#)[Dead end for Balkans 'Marshall Plan' \\*](#)[Venezuela waits for superstar's magic to work \\*](#)['Little people' rally to their hero \\*](#)[Old guard fights back](#)[Venezuela : the dates](#)[Kenya's battle for biodiversity](#)

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of Israel". This dogma has been so firmly implanted that it is hard to imagine that up until 1967 the authorities - of the state and pre-state Zionist movement - had never seriously tried to annex East Jerusalem. Jewish sovereignty over the Temple Mount had never been thought of in temporal terms.

From a religious point of view, the most sacred place on earth was the Temple which, according to the Bible, King Solomon built on Mount Moriah, where Abraham sacrificed a ram in place of his son Isaac. In the Temple was the Holy of Holies which only the high priest could enter. Its destruction by the Romans in 70 AD did not make the place any less sacred, according to a tradition going back at least as far as Maimonides, the 12th century Jewish philosopher. "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Sion" chanted the first exiles after the fall of the first temple in 587 BC. So as not to forget this loss, in every Jewish marriage the bride and groom break a glass and say out loud: "If I forget thee, o Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning".

Over the past four centuries the Western Wall or Kotel (also known as the Wailing Wall) acquired growing religious significance. The faithful came there to lament the fall of the Temple, of which it is the last vestige. They pray for the arrival of the Messiah, which will mark the end of exile. Then, and only then, will the Temple be rebuilt. As the Talmud tells us, the rebuilding of the Temple and its altar does not fall to men.

The Waqf, custodian of the Muslim holy places, more or less tolerated these prayers at the Wall but did not permit Jewish worship on the Aqsa precinct itself: built on the site of the Temple six centuries after its ruin, the Haram al-Sharif (Noble Sanctuary) is the third holiest place in Islam, after Mecca and Medina. However, religious Jews did not themselves ask to worship there, fearing it would be sacrilege to tread on the holy site of the Temple without having first been purified.

Pious Jews went to the holy land, driven by persecution, in the hope of the imminent arrival of the Messiah or, for the poor, of material aid (sent by the diaspora to Jerusalem's religious institutions). But no-one came to build a state or turn Jerusalem into a capital.

Zionism, appearing at the end of the 19th century, was not about waiting for the Messiah, it was about regrouping Jewish exiles in a new homeland. This was anathema to the Orthodox, who watched helplessly as the forces of nationalism recovered their religious symbols. Paradoxically, the new movement had an ambivalent attitude towards the city from which it had taken its name.

For the first Zionists, the gap between heavenly and earthly Jerusalem provoked that same disappointment which so many visitors to the holy land have recounted. Gustave Flaubert wrote in his travel diary on 11 August 1850 that the curse of God seemed to hover over the city, a city holy to three religions, which was dying of

boredom, stagnation and abandon. And the father of modern Hebrew. Eliezer Ben Yehuda, spoke of the shock of contact with "the city of David, destroyed and deserted, debased to its fundamentals" (2).

### 'Zionism without Zion'

Theodor Herzl, founding father of political Zionism, sought the protection of the foreign powers for his proposed Jewish National Home and so was careful not to alienate them by making premature or exaggerated claims on Jerusalem. In his book *The Jewish State* (1896), he promised the Christians a form of extra-territoriality over the holy places. At a meeting with the papal nuncio to Vienna, Monseigneur Agliardi, on 18 May 1896, he even envisaged extra-territoriality for the whole of Jerusalem, with the capital of the future Jewish state sited to the north of the holy city. He even gave the same assurances to the Turks (3) - though, it is true, tactical promises cost nothing. Another major figure, Chaim Weizmann, leader of the Zionist movement from the end of the first world war, could not bear Jerusalem: according to Israeli historian Tom Segev (4), he felt it was the reverse of the Zionist dream and symbolised an obsolete Judaism.

David Ben Gurion, head of the Jewish Agency (the executive branch of the Zionist movement) and Israel's first prime minister - whom Ehud Barak takes as his model - was acutely aware of the pitfalls of the sacred. He may have hoped one day to make the whole of Jerusalem the capital of a Jewish state, but first he wanted to create that state - a far more crucial aim than historic and religious claims on the holy city. Up against the Zionist right, which in the late 1920s was organising committees for the defence of the Wall, Ben Gurion pleaded for the politics of the possible. In 1937 he accepted the Peel Commission plan which proposed partitioning Palestine into two states - one Jewish, on a small part of the land, and the other Arab, with Jerusalem remaining under British rule. Accused of promoting "Zionism without Zion", he replied that it was necessary to seize the chance of forming an independent Jewish state in Palestine, even if it meant enlarging it at a future date. "I have always made a distinction between Eretz Israel [the Land of Israel, which meant the whole of Palestine] and a state in Eretz Israel," he wrote at the time. "I know the value of the prayers and hymns about Zion, but repeating them three times a day, 365 times a year, for 1,800 years, hasn't given us an inch of land nor has it advanced us one single step towards redemption."

Some Zionists were against a municipal division of Jerusalem. As a result, the municipality remained in Palestinian hands. Ben Gurion wrote: "Our situation in Jerusalem would be much better today if we had understood that we should have divided Jerusalem and created an autonomous Jewish municipality. Unfortunately, a sterile, stupid, pretentious patriotism dictated otherwise. As a result, the city is certainly unified, but under the authority of the Nashashibis and the Khalidis [two leading Palestinian families], and all

because some Jerusalem politician wanted us to rule over the Temple Mount and the Mosque of Omar."

Like Herzl before him, Ben Gurion was interested first and foremost in new Jerusalem, in the western part of the city. That quarter, he thought, should become a Jewish town, separate from the Old City, which was destined to become a "spiritual and religious museum for all the religions" (5). In 1938, in conformity with these views, the Jewish Agency produced an extremely detailed plan proposing that the eastern part of Jerusalem, including all of the Old City, remain under British control, and the western part become the capital of the Jewish state.

On 29 November 1947 the United Nations General Assembly adopted a partition plan that took its inspiration from this proposal. Resolution 181 provided for independent Jewish and Arab states and a "special international regime" for Jerusalem and the holy places. Ben Gurion had the wisdom to agree, but the Zionist right, a minority, did not. The Palestinians rejected the partition plan and the war that followed ended in the disaster that they call the *nakba*. No Palestinian state came into being and, worse, the Jewish side emerged from the war with a third more land than had been allocated to its state, from which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were expelled.

In Jerusalem, however, the Israeli victory was not complete. The Jordanian army won the Jewish quarter of the Old City, and its 2,000 inhabitants had to seek refuge in the western part in May 1948. Their defence had been surrounded and, short of manpower and weapons, they had no means of holding on without outside help. Either they had to be evacuated or given reinforcements. But the Zionist leadership did neither: it did not want to give up the Jewish quarter because of its symbolic significance, but nor did it want to allocate forces that would be more useful elsewhere.

Ignoring the UN resolutions on internationalising Jerusalem, Ben Gurion solemnly declared to parliament on 13 December 1949 that Israel "has, and will have, one single capital, eternal Jerusalem". Though he did not say so explicitly, he meant West Jerusalem. Earlier, the leader of the nationalist right, Menahem Begin, proposed writing it in black and white that Israel's capital included the Old City and the holy places. The prime minister asked him sarcastically if he envisaged armed conquest of the Old City and, that not being the case, concluded that the declaration made no sense (6).

Until June 1967 Israeli leaders did not talk about reunification, that is to say the conquest of the eastern part of the city, then under Jordanian rule. Only the right, which remained in opposition until the formation of a national unity government before the war, ritually talked of the "liberation of Jerusalem". The Israelis seemed to have forgotten the eastern part of the city.

On 5 June 1967 the prime minister, Levi Eshkol, was

worried. The political consequences of occupying the Old City needed to be carefully weighed, he told the cabinet that evening. The next morning the minister of defence, Moshe Dayan, was also hesitating about whether to order the troops in to take the Old City. The temptation proved irresistible.

The rest is history: a large part of the Jewish population was overcome by a mystical nationalist fever and celebrated a seemingly miraculous victory and the "reunion of the people of Israel with Bretz Israel". The way was opened for the rise of an extreme religious right. On 10 June Israeli bulldozers laid waste the Arab quarter and opened up a large area in front of the Western Wall, forcing more than 100 Arab families to leave their home at three hours' notice. On 27 June the Knesset extended Israeli legislation to the eastern part of the city, which amounted to annexation.

The new municipal borders stretched eastward, absorbing a maximum of land and a minimum of Palestinians. But the authorities were careful not to incense the Muslims of the entire world by touching the Haram al-Sharif. When Dayan took the Old City, he made the soldiers take down an Israeli flag they had hoisted over the Aqsa precinct. On 17 June 1967 he confirmed the Waqf's control of the Haram, and on 20 August the government forbade Jews to pray there, to stop any such ideas on the part of the army chief rabbi, Shlomo Goren (7).

Goren, mad as he might be, was not the only person to see in the conquest of the Temple Mount the germ of final redemption - causing the philosopher Yeshayahu Leibovitz to protest about the heathen cult of the Wall. The writer André Néher described the mood: "That morning of Shavuot [which fell that year on 7 June], all Jews felt that a new stage had been reached in fulfilment of the messianic promise". For him, the slogan "Jerusalem is not negotiable" was an act of faith - at the very least "a common platform for all the Israeli political parties without exception" (8).

Meantime it has become clear that Jerusalem is quite negotiable, and has indeed been negotiated under the 1993 Oslo accords. Hopes earlier this year of reaching some sort of consensus on the issue have been dashed. It was a question of too little, too late, to prevent the violence that led to the deaths of dozens of Palestinians in the holy city.

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\* *Journalist* and author of "Histoire de la droite israélienne", Complexe, Brussels, 1991

1. See Israel's Foreign Relations. Selected documents, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Jerusalem, 1976.
2. Eliezer Ben Yehouda, le rêve traversé, "Midrash" series, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 1998.
3. Theodor Herzl, The Jewish State, Constable, London, 1988. Prior to the British Mandate, Palestine was part of the Ottoman Empire.

4. This did not stop Weizmann from renewing attempts to acquire the Wall. See Tom Segev, *One Palestine, Complete*, Little Brown, 2000.
5. Letter to the central committee of Mapai, 1 July 1937. David Ben Gurion, *Zihronot* (Memoirs), Am Oved, Tel Aviv, 1976.
6. Parliamentary debate, 9 November 1949.
7. Rabbi Goren was convinced he knew the position of the "holy of holies" and could thus enter the precinct without trampling on this most sacred of places.
8. André Néher, "Jérusalem Irremplacable" and "Les grandes retrouvailles" in *Dans les portes Jérusalem*, Albin Michel, Paris, 1972.

**Translated by Wendy Kristianasen**

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