



Written by on August 26, 2009

Jerusalem Key Factor in Palestine Peace

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu began a four-day European tour in London on August 25, meeting with Britain's Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. The two leaders reportedly discussed Jewish settlements (including those in East Jerusalem) and Iran's nuclear program.



ABC News reported that following his talks with Brown, Netanyahu made apparent that he is not willing to compromise on the status of Jerusalem — the eastern portion of which is claimed by both Israel and Palestinians. "Jerusalem is the sovereign capital of Israel," he said. "We accept no limitations on our sovereignty. To put a fine point on this Jerusalem is not a settlement."

The Obama administration has been exerting pressure on Israel to halt the spread of Jewish settlements on the West Bank, which is viewed by Palestinians as the site of their future sovereign state.

Netanyahu told reporters that during talks with U.S. diplomats he would seek a compromise that would allow Israel to continue constructing settlements in the West Bank as peace talks with the Palestinians resumed.

According to Xinhua, the official Chinese news service, Netanyahu started talks with U.S. Middle East envoy George Mitchell on the second day of his trip, and before that meeting Netanyahu said Israel was making progress toward reopening talks with the Palestinians and hoped to be able to do so shortly. "We are making headway. My government has taken steps both in words and deeds to move forward," said Netanyahu.

However, observed Xinhua, Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said in Ramallah on August 25 that a de facto Palestinian state would be created in two years "without waiting for the results of the peace negotiations with Israel."

A *New York Times* report about Fayyad's newly unveiled plan noted that it presented the Palestinian government's goals and operational instructions for ministries and official bodies. Fayyad said the plan was meant to hasten the end of the Israeli occupation of disputed West Bank territory and pave the way to independent statehood, which he said "can and must happen within the next two years."

Fayyad's plan calls for establishing a democratic Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, with East Jerusalem as its capital. It also appeals to Palestinians whose loyalties are divided between the rival Fatah and Hamas factions to unite in building a Palestinian state.

The report quoted the U.S. consul general in Jerusalem, Jacob Walles, who expressed approval for the plan, observing that under the premiership of Fayyad there has been "a lot of progress in the West Bank" in economic, security, and other spheres.

Against the backdrop of conflicting interests between Israelis and Palestinians, the Middle East-based



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Al Jazeera.net published a thought-provoking article by University of California professor and author Irvine Mark Levine on August 26 entitled "[Jerusalem's myriad divisions](#)." Professor LeVine begins his analysis by establishing the importance of the ancient holy city of Jerusalem in the overall peace process:

There are at least four major obstacles to achieving a lasting peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians: settlements, refugees, economic independence, and, of course, Jerusalem.

Each component presents its own difficulties, but Jerusalem remains even more stubborn than the rest because it holds an ideological power on Israeli and Palestinian identities.

A large part of the article's value to someone wanting to understand the dynamics of the ongoing dispute is LeVine's concise summary of the history of Jerusalem and surrounding lands, going back to the Roman conquest of the city in 63 B.C. As LeVine relates, the era of serious conflict in Jerusalem began when Jordan relinquished control of East Jerusalem to Israel following the latter's victorious occupation of the entire city during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and the subsequent annexation of East Jerusalem and its environs in 1980.

LeVine's conclusion expresses a somewhat pessimistic (though not hopeless) expectation for a successful resolution of competing Israeli and Palestinian designs on Jerusalem and the West Bank:

The problem is that the ever-increasing Israeli control over East Jerusalem — most recently epitomized by the much-criticized Israeli announcement that it intends to build in the Palestinian neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, near the Old City — leaves increasingly little land remaining in Palestinian hands.

Even if such an agreement could be reached before East Jerusalem is permanently separated from the West Bank, the core religious issue of who has sovereignty over the Temple Mount will prove extremely difficult to overcome, as long as both link religious and nationalist identities together.

Unless both sides are convinced to think more broadly about Jerusalem as an open city with various zones and levels of sovereignty - some of it shared — there is little chance that a workable agreement can be found on the Jerusalem question.

The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, particularly with regard to control of Jerusalem, is almost universally expressed as a dispute between Jewish and Muslim interests, as in LeVine's observation: "the core religious issue of who has sovereignty over the Temple Mount will prove extremely difficult to overcome."

Almost always lost in such discussions is the undisputable historic fact that Jerusalem is regarded as a holy city by *three* major faiths: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Even more ignored is that fact that not all Arabs (including Palestinians) are Muslims. There was at one time a substantial minority of Christian Arabs in Palestine, though their numbers have diminished over the years as a result of suffering caused by their being perennially caught in the middle of the conflict. About 75,500 Palestinian Christians still live in the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with about 122,000 Palestinian Christians living in Israel.

Historically, Christians have at least as valid a claim over Jerusalem as any other faith. This is so not only because of the establishment of the early Christian church there in the first century, but also because of possession of the land by Christian Rome from the time of Constantine through the first Muslim conquest in 638, subsequent reoccupation of the area during various Crusades, and finally,



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reoccupation of Palestine by predominantly Christian Britain under the mandate period from 1922 until the establishment of Israel in 1948.

The presence of the Christian church in Jerusalem has a long history. As just one example, St. Cyril was ordained as bishop of Jerusalem about the year 335.

And yet, today, when discussion are held about who has legitimate control of which areas of Jerusalem and adjacent parts of the West Bank, the parties invited to the table almost exclusively represent Israeli Jews and Palestinian Muslims.



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