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**The Future of Jerusalem: Between Public Opinion and Policy**

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The Palestinian arena in general and questions on Jerusalem in particular currently confront Israel with acute complex challenges that have serious ramifications for the future. This week began with the celebration of Jerusalem Day on Sunday, May 13, followed by the move of the US embassy to Jerusalem, Israel's capital city. In tandem, the ongoing campaign along the Israel-Gaza Strip border – “The March of Return” – which has been underway for several weeks, has escalated. Critical dates are May 14, which saw a spike in violence and a sharp rise in Palestinian casualties with dozens killed; Nakba Day, i.e., May 15; and May 18, the first Friday of the month of Ramadan. The two challenges – Jerusalem and Palestinians' right of return to the territory of the State of Israel – are core issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that currently represent seemingly impassable obstacles to a political settlement. Focusing on Jerusalem, this essay analyzes Jewish public opinion to the issue, with emphasis on questions of the city's unity and the status of the Temple Mount.

**A United Jerusalem?**

Statements by Israeli public officials and the discourse in the traditional and social media about President's Trump recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and his decision to move the US embassy there are notable for the absence of longstanding clichés such as “a united Jerusalem forever and ever” and “the greater city.” Instead, the discourse is focused on “Jerusalem as Israel's capital.” The question still open is what constitutes the Israeli capital: its western area only; or also its Historic Basin, including the Old City, the Temple Mount, and the Mount of Olives; or perhaps also all of its eastern section? President Trump has stated that Jerusalem's borders will be determined in negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, and no one in Israel has questioned this publicly.

An analysis of public opinion on this question may help the attempt to assess the range of flexibility an Israeli government will have when in the future it examines options for the borders of Israeli sovereignty in the city. The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) National Security Index is a systematic longitudinal survey that since 1984 has tracked trends in Israeli public opinion on issues of national security. According to the index, over the years most of the public has viewed a united Jerusalem as an important principle and opposed any municipal division. In 1994-1998, some 80 percent of respondents felt that Jerusalem must be united and opposed any division of the city, even

as part of an permanent status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians and even if the agreement depended solely on a division of the city. However, in 1998-2000, opposition to dividing the city dropped to 65-70 percent of the Jewish population, and stayed in that range until 2014. In the summer of 2014, the security situation in Jerusalem worsened in what Palestinians called “the war for Jerusalem,” and was accompanied by a further decline of those opposing the transfer of Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem to the Palestinians and reached about 60 percent.

Indeed, the multiple violent events (“the knives intifada”) of 2015-2016, with Jerusalem at the center, affected public opinion. It seems that the violence undermined the longstanding assumption that it is possible to maintain the city’s status quo. The cement barriers installed in East Jerusalem, albeit for a short time, were a concrete divider between Jewish and Arab neighborhoods at a time of right wing government control. The National Security Index indicated that since then, the public’s willingness to sever the Arab neighborhoods from the city has grown. In late 2017, in answer to the question “Should Israel, as part of a settlement that would end the conflict with the Palestinians, transfer the rule of the Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem to the Palestinians, or should it continue to control them, even at the cost of a settlement that would end the conflict?” 51 percent of respondents said they would prefer to transfer the rule of East Jerusalem’s Arab neighborhoods to Palestinian control; only 49 percent said they would prefer to retain them.

Moreover, most of the public expressed an interest in change in East Jerusalem. Only 25 percent of respondents supported maintaining the status quo, whereas 75 percent preferred some type of change: about 20 percent favored more physical separation between East and West Jerusalem; about 27 percent favored transferring control of the Arab neighborhoods to the Palestinian Authority (excluding the Old City); some 28 percent favored the establishment of a separate mmunicipal authority from the Jerusalem Municipality for the Arab neighborhoods, though under Israeli sovereignty. The latter figure refers to a relatively new idea and is therefore particularly interesting, because three INSS surveys conducted over the last three years indicate a moderate increase in support for the idea (from 23 to 28 percent).

### **The Temple Mount**

As evident from past events, the Temple Mount is a most volatile point of friction capable of rapidly setting the city on fire and generating large scale escalation. It seems that the public is aware of the religious, national, and security sensitivity of the site: surveys show that most of the public (65 percent) feels that Israel should not allow any or only limited Jewish ascent to the site. By contrast, 35 percent of the public favors allowing Jews to visit and pray freely on the Temple Mount. The surveys also indicate

that at times of security tensions, public support for Jewish freedom to visit – in particular visits by public officials – to the Temple Mount drops dramatically, compared to times of relative peace.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Jerusalem is a particularly complex issue because of its religious significance to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the demand of each side to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that the city be its capital, and the inextricable links between the lives of its Jewish and Arab inhabitants. Even after the move of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, which could encourage the move of other embassies, most of the international community will continue to view East Jerusalem as occupied territory and, as long as there is no resolution between Israel and the Palestinians, will refrain from recognizing (West) Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

The waves of terror in Jerusalem in recent years have disproved two false assumptions that have long guided Israeli governments. The first is that it is possible to maintain the status quo in the city, including on the Temple Mount. The violence that erupted over the Temple Mount issue in recent years demonstrates that the status quo is not acceptable to all the "playing" elements on the Temple Mount i.e., Israel, the Palestinians, the Jordanian kingdom, the Muslim inhabitants of East Jerusalem, and the Northern Branch of the Israeli Islamic Movement, all of which operate on the basis of different and sometimes opposing rationales. The site has become a locus of Jewish protest (because of the limited access) and of rioting by Palestinians and Muslims because of false allegations that Israel is about to change its status.

The second false assumption is that Jerusalem is a united city and that it is enough that politicians declare it to be so to construct a desired reality. This line of thinking is at odds with the reality in the east of the city, especially the neighborhoods and villages where for 51 years, neglect has reigned supreme in every aspect and few Israeli Jews ever enter. Even now, Israeli control there is limited, especially in the areas on the outer side of the security barrier. Indeed, a clear majority of Israelis agree that today, in practice, Jerusalem is divided into a Jewish city and an Arab city.

On May 13, in honor of Jerusalem Day, the Israeli government approved a 2 billion NIS five-year plan for East Jerusalem aimed at education, employment, and infrastructures. However, even if the plan is implemented in full, the process is lengthy, and it is doubtful if it will effectively resolve the tensions inherent in the fundamental issues: (1) the volatility of the status of the Temple Mount and what occurs at the site; (2) the difficult living conditions in East Jerusalem resulting from decades of neglect; (3) Israel's de facto limited sovereignty in the east part of the city and the ongoing security challenge a

peaceful routine; (4) the relative proportion of Palestinians in the population (currently about 38 percent) that is expected to grow, and with it also the number of requests for full citizenship; and the right of the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem to vote in the elections for mayor and the municipal council of Jerusalem; and (5) the dependence of East Jerusalem inhabitants on West Jerusalem for employment and the mingling of the populations in the city. These fundamental problems are liable to erode the status of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the city's stability.

A string of urgent actions is needed to confront these issues, first and foremost improvements to municipal services, infrastructures, and quality of life in East Jerusalem, as well as incentives to involve the Arab population in the Jerusalem municipal authority. It is necessary to encourage the emergence of local leadership in the Arab neighborhoods and villages and appoint local leaders to public positions. It is important to adapt conditions on the ground to the trend that has emerged in recent years of shifts in the Jewish public's attitudes to the practical components of an arrangement on Jerusalem. Most of the public feels that the current reality is highly problematic and difficult to sustain forever. Therefore, at present there is growing openness to new and creative ideas. The steps proposed to improve living conditions support a range of future options for East Jerusalem – in both regulated and independent frameworks.