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“If I Forget Thee O Jerusalem”

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“If I forget thee O Jerusalem” might seem to some to reflect the interest of the Arab-Palestinian public in the city more than the interest of the Jewish public. There are significant gaps between the various communities living in the city, leading to a great deal of friction and tension. The recent escalation and the clashes on the Temple Mount, in Sheikh Jarrah, and at the Damascus Gate between the police and hundreds of young Arabs are evidence of Jerusalem’s potential for volatility and its position at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although the Israeli government’s five year plan to improve the infrastructure and economic situation in East Jerusalem is a positive trend that should continue, maintaining stability demands a high degree of sensitivity to the needs of the respective communities, an effort to reduce the points of friction, increased involvement of East Jerusalemites in civil administration, and the creation of conditions for the development of local Arab leadership.

Jerusalem is a story of sensitivities, a meeting between nationalist sentiments, religions, communities, and cultures, a central issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and a barrier to a political settlement, with each side seeing it as the capital of its own state. Marked by large socioeconomic gaps, Jerusalem is home to Israel’s two weakest economic sectors – the Arabs and the haredim (ultra-Orthodox) – and is now the country’s poorest large city. The Arabs of the East Jerusalem neighborhoods are at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, and the Covid-19 pandemic has increased their economic distress.

Is Jerusalem indeed “above our chief joy”? What does Jerusalem mean for the Jewish and Arab publics? These questions have become more salient in the face of recent events and growing tensions that have spilled over into violence, and the tense encounter between the city’s Jewish and Arab residents.

Potential Conflagration

Recent violent events have restored the issue of Jerusalem to the public agenda, and highlighted its position at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The clashes began with the closure of the plaza at the entrance to the Damascus Gate and the ban on young Arabs gathering there during the nights of Ramadan, together with the harassment of

haredi Jews by young Arabs documented on TikTok. The plaza at the Gate, “East Jerusalem’s city square,” is an important element in the leisure culture of this part of the city, an almost autonomous Palestinian space that lies on the main access route to al-Aqsa (the Temple Mount compound). It has therefore become the focus of friction between young Arabs, the Israel Police, and Jews entering the Old City. The tension has been heightened by the confrontational activity of extreme right wing Jewish elements, such as the anti-assimilation Lehava organization, and the purchase and takeover by Jews of residential apartments in East Jerusalem.

By last week’s end, the focus of events had moved to the Temple Mount, where the potential for escalation is greater than at Damascus Gate and Sheikh Jarrah. Clashes erupted on the Temple Mount when the Police tried to reduce the number of worshippers for Laylat al-Qadr, when Muslims believe that the Gates of Heaven open, and for Jerusalem Day. Passions rose when police forces broke into the al-Aqsa compound in order to eject the protestors who were hiding there.

The trend toward escalation was also encouraged by the postponement of elections to the Palestinian Authority Legislative Council, following an allegation by PA Chairman Mahmoud Abbas that Israel was preventing voting in Jerusalem. Subsequently, the head of the Hamas political wing, Ismail Haniyeh, invoked the Jerusalem issue: he called the city “the nation’s compass” and praised the Palestinian people for their “resistance” in Jerusalem and at al-Aqsa Mosque. The Hamas leaders promised the organization would defend Jerusalem, as it did by sending rockets from the Gaza Strip. Haniyeh added that the Palestinians had brought Jerusalem back to center stage, and swore that on the 28th day of Ramadan (this year coinciding with Jerusalem Day in the Jewish calendar), Hamas would not abandon the Arab residents of Jerusalem. Thus, over the past week Hamas has made every effort to inflame the area, recruiting Mohammed Deif, the head of its military wing, who threatened “a final warning of Palestinian resistance regarding the Temple Mount.”

Special Status for East Jerusalemites

In the sixth decade of the city’s unification, the rift between the Palestinian public in Jerusalem and the Palestinian Authority has intensified due to the security barrier and the elimination of the PA’s authority in the city. Over the years, Israel has prevented the emergence of local Arab leadership in the East Jerusalem neighborhoods, thus widening the rift in Arab society, where the younger generation set the tone, and leading to the development of a hybrid political identity. On the one hand, the people enjoy the benefits of residence in Israel, and particularly the aspects of freedom of movement and work, and on the other hand they seek to achieve a special place in the promotion of Palestinian national aspirations. This leadership and identity vacuum has encouraged the younger

residents to define their own agenda. They draw strength from Jerusalem’s special status in the Islamic-Palestinian context and have positioned themselves as the representatives of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims, who struggle against Israeli control of the holy sites of Islam, and in particular as the guardians of al-Aqsa. They have demonstrated increasing readiness to use violence against the Israel Police, as shown by the case of the magnetometers at the entrance to the Temple Mount nearly four years ago.

The political positions of East Jerusalemites have changed in recent years. Past polls indicated that the majority would like to integrate with the Jewish portion of Jerusalem (West Jerusalem), but today the findings are quite different. Surveys of Palestinians in East Jerusalem by David Pollock of the Washington Institute revealed some important insights: (1) Since 2017, the national aspirations of East Jerusalemites have surpassed their personal needs, and they put less stress on the benefits of living in Israel. (2) Until 2015 there was a rise in the desire of East Jerusalem residents to have Israeli citizenship (from 35 percent in 2010 to over 50 percent in 2015), but subsequently there was a significant decline in this inclination, together with a greater preference for Palestinian citizenship – 70 percent in 2020. This change is apparently due to the differences between parts of the city; the absence of Israeli investment in East Jerusalem in spite of the five year plan – Government Resolution 3790 of May 2018, to invest about NIS 2 billion to improve the infrastructure and economy of the eastern city – whose results are barely felt at the individual level in the Arab neighborhoods; the consequences of the barriers between neighborhoods during the “intifada of knives”; and the creeping change in the status quo and more severe security measures on the Temple Mount. The study also shows that East Jerusalemites have become more pessimistic about the possibility of realizing the two-state solution, feel more alienated from Israel, and have hardened their attitudes regarding a resolution of the conflict.

The Jewish Public and Jerusalem

One of the verses most deeply enshrined in Jewish heritage is [“If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning...if I do not set Jerusalem above my chief joy”](#) (Psalms 137: 5-6). The psalm describes the Babylonian exiles longing for their beloved city after the destruction of the First Temple. The verse has accompanied the Jewish people throughout the years of exile until today, and is a commandment of sorts to every Jew to preserve the place of Jerusalem in his/her heart.

In spite of Jerusalem’s central place in Jewish consciousness, and in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, it actually arouses interest in some of the Jewish public mainly at times of crisis. A good portion of the general Israeli public sees Jerusalem as a city of tourism and ceremonies in normal times that occasionally jumps to the top of the agenda following a terror attack or display of hatred, raising the question of its future. Unlike in

the past, Jerusalem appeared little on the political agenda in the recent rounds of elections, and there was far less use of slogans such as “Greater Jerusalem, the eternal and united capital of Israel.”

While Jerusalem is no longer at the heart of the Israeli discourse, when the public is asked about solutions to the Jerusalem issue, interesting findings emerge, as reflected in a recent National Security Index survey conducted by the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS). For many years most of the public saw Jerusalem as a single, united city and objected to its partition, even in the framework of a full peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians. But in recent years cracks have appeared in the perception of a united Jerusalem, the public is divided over this question, and there is a trend toward change in the public’s attitude to the practical components of an arrangement in Jerusalem.

When the public is asked about the correct solution to the “Jerusalem question,” only a fifth to a third of respondents (19-33 percent) consistently replied that the current situation should continue. Most respondents preferred the formulation of a new solution: 25-30 percent support retaining the status quo, but with more physical separation between the western and eastern parts of the city. A quarter support transferring the Arab neighborhoods (excluding the Old City) to Palestinian Authority control; and 22-28 percent support setting up a separate local authority for the Arab neighborhoods under Israeli sovereignty. This finding is particularly interesting, because the idea has not been widely discussed and was not at the top of the agenda, but it apparently reflects recognition of the developing reality of Jerusalem as a divided city, where Jews rarely visit Arab neighborhoods. Hence there is a potential openness to new ideas.

In fact, thinking about separation – in one form or another – between the Jewish and Arab areas of Jerusalem is linked to the finding that most of the Israeli public supports separation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, and a reduction in friction between Jews and Palestinians. The INSS survey also shows that violent episodes persuade the public that the underlying assumption about the possibility of maintaining the status quo is no longer valid.

The research likewise revealed interesting findings about the Temple Mount, which is a volatile focus of friction and could lead to major escalation. The public is aware of the site’s religious and security sensitivity: the majority, about 65 percent, believe that Israel should not allow the free entry of Jews to the area, or allow only limited entry. In parallel, about a third support allowing Jews free entry to the Temple Mount to pray. Here too, in periods of heightened tension, public support for entry to the Temple Mount, and particularly by public figures, declines significantly.

Conclusion

In recent years Israel has adopted the approach that if problems are not highlighted and discussed, they can be swept aside and hidden under a thin veil of “status quo,” which could continue forever. This also applies to Jerusalem. But the question is, until when? A common perception is that if the socioeconomic situation of Arab residents improves, stability will be maintained, and Jerusalem’s complex existence will continue. The Israeli government’s five year plan was formulated on the basis of this approach. This investment, currently in full swing, is a positive trend – for both scenarios: unity and separation, and indeed, “a happy neighbor is better than an unhappy neighbor.” But without a vision for the future, a five-year plan appears as a drop in the ocean after years of neglect. For example, there is a shortage of some 4,000 classrooms in East Jerusalem schools.

Fires in Jerusalem are easy to ignite and hard to extinguish, because the national-religious aspect overcomes other aspects, and in both camps there are people driven by a strong desire to light fires. In a sense, it is surprising that the gaps, friction, and tensions in Jerusalem have not led to fiercer and more frequent outbreaks of violence. One explanation is that Jerusalem consists of three types of neighborhood where the fabric of life is almost entirely separate: the areas inhabited by secular and traditional Jews, the haredi areas, and the Arab areas in the eastern section. Therefore, the main loci of potential violence are the Temple Mount and its environs, and the Silwan and Sheikh Jarrah areas, where Jewish organizations are working to encroach on Arab homes and property.

Although East Jerusalem residents have a special identity, they are highly dependent on the western section for employment and higher education. Maintaining their status as residents rather than citizens with full rights allows both sides to live with the illusion that this is a temporary situation between future unity and division, and to avoid dealing with the demographic significance of the situation, where East Jerusalem accounts for 40 percent of the population. After all, they could democratically determine who will be elected mayor of the city.

Therefore it is imperative to examine the idea of a separate municipal authority for the neighborhoods of metropolitan East Jerusalem and to encourage the Arab residents to be self-governing, while allowing free movement of workers between the parts of the city. It is in Israel’s interests to encourage the growth of local Arab leadership, which can be a partner in planning and implementing programs to improve the situation, as well as a partner for resolving problems and preventing escalation through dialogue. The answer to tension does not only lie in the use of force and greater police presence.