

# ON JERUSALEM

Lecture given by Afif Safieh at a seminar organised by the Arab Research Center in 1994.

First of all, I would like to address my colleague on this panel, Mr. Michael Safier. Contrary to his anticipation, and maybe contrary to my habit, I will not be passionate and emotional but quietly factual. I fully agree with Professor Ibrahim Abu Lughod. The destiny of Jerusalem is surely totally tied to the fate and destiny of Palestine. The battle that took place in Palestine, all throughout the 20th century, aiming at reducing the majority into a demographic minority and propelling the minority into a demographic majority, that battle was also waged in and around Jerusalem but in an even more acute manner.

The municipality of Jerusalem was first established in the 19th century, during the Ottoman rule in Palestine, in 1863. The Municipal Council was then composed of five members: three Moslems, one Christian and one Jew. At the end of the 19th century, there was a small Jewish Community in Palestine of around 20,000 inhabitants and they were an integral part of the Palestinian social tissue. They were overwhelmingly anti-Zionist or non-Zionists. They thought that the penetration of Zionism in Palestine would complicate and poison inter-confessional relations and they also thought that Zionism would fail. History has proven them right on one point and wrong on the other. But by 1920-1921, coming from Russia but also mainly from Poland, massive arrivals of new Zionist immigrants numerically drowned this indigenous Jewish Community which became since then a shrinking minority within the growing Jewish Community.

In 1917, at the end of Ottoman domination in Palestine, the Jerusalem Municipal Council was composed of ten members: 6 Moslems, 2 Christians and 2 Jews. The British authorities nominated in 1918 a new council of 6 members: 2 Moslems, 2 Christians and 2 Jews. Until 1927, Arabic was the exclusive language for the deliberations of the Council's meetings.

In 1927 municipal elections were held to elect a Council of 12 members: 5 Moslems, 4 Jews and 3 Christians. The elections organised in 1934 brought again a Council of 12 members but its changed composition again reflected the alteration that had occurred in the demographic equilibrium of the city: 4 Moslems, 2 Christians and 6 Jews. <sup>(1)</sup>

As a result of the 1948 war, Jerusalem city came out divided in two, with the Western side under Israeli control and the East side, including the Old City, under Jordanian rule. But contrary to widespread impression or perception, in 1948 West Jerusalem was not Jewish. The massacre of Deir Yassin – which is in the outskirts of West Jerusalem where 254 villagers were slaughtered and the blowing up of the Semiramise Hotel in West Jerusalem triggered the ethnic cleansing of West Jerusalem and of coastal Palestine. Menahem Begin, in the first edition of his memoirs in 1952 titled “The Revolt”, boasts that Zionist forces after Deir Yassin “advanced like a knife in butter” with the Arab civilian population fleeing in panic. He was advised by more sophisticated and polished friends to remove that passage from other editions of his book. 64,000 Palestinians were driven out of West Jerusalem and the four villages in its immediate vicinity which were

later annexed to its municipality boundaries namely Lifta, Deir Yassin, Ein Karem and El Malha.

There were several Palestinian residential neighbourhoods in West Jerusalem where middle-class Palestinians, civil servants, lawyers, engineers and doctors lived and worked. To name just a few: Katamon, upper and lower Baqa'a – before 1948 my family lived in upper Baqa'a Talbieh, Mamillah, Shama'a, Musrara, Abu Tor etc. Palestinians left with only the key to their houses and one of the sad jokes among Palestinians is that their country was taken . . . furnished. The late professor Henry Cattán has analysed in great depth the "legalised theft" that followed where all these real estate properties were declared "absentee property".

In today's value, all these properties would amount to billions of dollars, since Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings would be the Mayfair and the Park Lane of any global monopoly game.

Property ownership in West Jerusalem was (and is) as follows: 40% of West Jerusalem was privately Palestinian owned, 26% was Jewish owned and the rest belonged to the Moslem Awqaf (Moslem Trust), to the different Christian Churches and to the Government of Palestine.

Let me just give a few examples as to what happened after the dispersion and dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Hilton and the Sonesta Hotels are now built on the property of Lifta village (since then annexed to the municipal boundaries of West Jerusalem). So are the Knesset, the Prime Minister's office, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Interior. The Israeli Knesset is built on the property of the Khalaf family from Lifta now residing in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah which was annexed after the 1967 war which makes the Khalaf family very "present absentees". But no one ever thought of compensating them.

I share Michael Safier's hope that in a not too distant future there will be on one hill of Jerusalem the Israeli Knesset and on another hill the Palestinian Parliament. They will have two features in common. Both would have been democratically elected and both would have been built . . . on Palestinian land.

The houses in the centre of Deir Yassin – the second of the villages vacated by Palestinians and annexed by the West Jerusalem Municipality – are used today as an Israeli sanatorium for the mentally ill run by the Ministry of Health.

The Israeli Hadassa hospital is built on Ein Karem lands; so is Yad Vashem the memorial for the Jewish victims of Nazism.

The stadium of West Jerusalem is built on the El Malha village and so is the recently opened Jerusalem Mall.

The Israeli Independence Park is on a Moslem cemetery in the Mamilla neighbourhood where also a superb building, owned by the Moslem Awqaf, and which housed in the 1930's the first Palestinian theatre, has been transformed into the Israeli Ministry of Trade and Industry.

I could continue endlessly . . .

On the eve of the 1967 war, the West Jerusalem Municipality was composed of 37,000 dunums. The war ended, one of the first decisions of the Israeli Government was to dismiss the Arab Municipal Council of East Jerusalem headed by Mr. Rouhi Al Khatib who was then deported to Amman and to annex East Jerusalem and much of its surroundings, up north to Ramallah and down south to Bethlehem. East Jerusalem was

thus expanded three times beyond its previous dimensions and saw an additional 72,000 dunums annexed to a “Unified Jerusalem”. 24,000 dunums of those 72,000 have since then been confiscated and a belt of Israeli settlements – fortresses that Mr Ibrahim Mattar calls “the new walls” of Jerusalem – has been erected on those expropriated lands suffocating East Jerusalem and disarticulating the West Bank.

The choreography of the expanded and annexed East Jerusalem is both intriguing and interesting. The lands of several villages were annexed but not the villages themselves so that the demographic balance does not tilt to the Palestinians’ advantage.

That was the case of four villages to the East of East Jerusalem: Hizma, Anata, Bethani and Abu Dis. That was also the case of the villages of Beit Ikhsa and Beit Hanina to the west of East Jerusalem. To the north, Jerusalem airport was annexed but not its immediate neighbourhoods of Dahiet Al Barid, El Ram and the refugee camp of Kalandia.

Had those neighbourhoods and villages been annexed, a minimum of an additional 80,000 Palestinian inhabitants would have been added to Jerusalem.

Figures announced in August 1993 show that Jerusalem – East and West – has a global number of 564, 300 inhabitants. West Jerusalem inhabitants number 260,900 and East Jerusalem 303,400 with Jewish settlers already outnumbering the indigenous Moslem and Christian inhabitants by 152,800 to 150,600.

It is highly disturbing that the international media insists on speaking of 120,000 settlers in the Occupied Territories. This shows a great degree of indulgence towards the Israeli position which tends not to include the settlers in and around East Jerusalem. The demographic balance today in the West Bank is 1,200,000 Palestinians and 280,000 Israeli settlers (over 152,800 in expanded East Jerusalem plus 120,000 in the rest of the West Bank). In the Gaza strip, the presence of 4,000 settlers has already ruined the euphoric “Oslo Spirit” generated in August – September 1993.

### **Some concluding remarks:**

(1) This intense and now accelerating settlement activity was conducted by successive Israeli Government: left, right and centre since 1967. A great number of UN resolutions – at both levels in the General Assembly and in the Security Council – were adopted trying to deter and to dissuade Israel from this course of action in defiance of International Law and Conventions governing the behaviour of an occupying authority. All those resolutions unambiguously condemned Israel’s annexation of East Jerusalem, considered it “null and void” and declared the settlements “illegal”.

Because of this mercifully unequivocal legal position but also for pragmatic considerations, the settlers have to be withdrawn for the final status agreement to work. Settlers do not represent the most adorable segment of Israeli society and are not at all equipped to be the bridge for future harmonious relations between the two communities. Leaving them behind is the best recipe for failure. Any solution to be acceptable and durable has to remedy, at least partially, historical injustices inflicted. I personally believe that the settlements should be left as part of the compensation that the Israeli State owes Palestinian society, even though the architecture is of a very questionable taste. But here too, we are expected to show tolerance.

(2) Since the Palestinian side has had to reluctantly accept that the status of Jerusalem be decided in the second phase of negotiations to start “no later than the beginning of

the third year” of Palestinian self-government and since the Israelis are unscrupulously multiplying *faits accomplis* that are justifiably perceived as prejudicing the outcome of negotiations, I believe that the Palestinians need to take the audacious initiative – a unilateral step – of establishing a Shadow Palestinian Municipal Council. This initiative can go parallel to the peace process and will be a collective act of non-violent defiance against a *status quo* – an established disorder – that we totally reject and that the world disapproves of.

(3) We are all aware of the shortcomings and the risks entailed in the “Oslo Accords” but we should capitalise on the windows of opportunity that the agreements have to offer. Today many Palestinians are planning to visit the occupied homeland after decades of diasporization. Many are contemplating a possible return and are exploring available options and possible avenues. That trend has to be encouraged. The addition of individual cases will transform it into a collective phenomenon. In this respect I have to pay tribute to Professor Abu Lughod who abandoned a brilliant academic career in the most prestigious American universities to come back and teach in the West Bank at Bir Zeit University. His highly appreciated decision has created a role model that will be emulated in the near future.

(4) Jerusalem is so unique that it deserves the “Two Embassies” solution. Peter Mansfield keeps reminding me that I do not need to have the word “unique” preceded by “so”. But I like the unnecessary emphasis. In future, Jerusalem can remain undivided. I deliberately avoid the word “united” because it was perverted by the Israeli annexationists. It will be two cities, two capitals for two separate and sovereign political entities with freedom of access to everybody everywhere and each religious shrine will be run and managed by the relevant religious community. Embassies will be opened in East Jerusalem accredited to the Palestinian State and Embassies will be transferred from Tel Aviv to West Jerusalem accredited to the Israeli State. After 1967, the American Consulate in Jerusalem tried to initiate a one-reception event for both East and West on the occasion of their Independence Day on the 4th of July. A Two States solution, a Two Embassies solution also mean a Two Cocktails solution. The more receptions there are, the merrier it will be.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The study recently published by PASSIA (Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs) in Jerusalem. “The Municipality of Arab Jerusalem” by Oussama Halabi (in Arabic) traces the history and the composition of the Jerusalem Municipal Council.

<sup>2</sup>I have relied on data contained in Mr Ibrahim Mattar’s very informative paper: “To whom does Jerusalem belong?” which is an update of his article: “From Palestinian to Israeli: Jerusalem 1948-1982 published in the journal of Palestine Studies/Summer 1983 no.48.

<sup>3</sup>Dr. Mahdi Abdel Hadi, director of PASSIA, has lobbied for more than two years for this idea.

### In answer to several questions by the audience

**Safieh:** I will single out one of the four points that Michael Dumper offered as factors for greater optimism, namely, the lure of Tel Aviv for West Jerusalem liberals. On the contrary, I find this phenomenon as a source for greater worry because we are left with right wing and ultra orthodox residents who are much more fanatical and less accommodationist. With settlement building around occupied East Jerusalem continuing

with even greater acceleration, we have to note that the more recent the Jewish immigrant the more radical he/she is. During my visit to Jerusalem I was harassed twice by settlers. One happened to be a recent immigrant from Latvia, the other from Brooklyn, New York. The most brutal coercers of the Palestinians today are the Falashas in the Israeli army.

The point raised by Leila Fanous concerns Palestinian return. I have just come back from a visit to Jerusalem after more than a quarter of a century. Of the 36 pupils of my promotion-class of 1966 in the College des Freres, only three are still in Jerusalem and the 33 others are scattered literally in the four corners of the world. The age category of the 30-50 year olds is almost non-existent in Jerusalem. It is as if society has simply skipped one generation. Most were in my case abroad to pursue university studies in 1967 when East Jerusalem was occupied, annexed and a demographic census conducted. We became legally non-existent. In 1968, I applied for family reunification but I was offered instead a tourist visa, for one month, non-extendable, on condition that I show my return ticket before I am allowed in Jerusalem. Involved in student politics – and then was the golden era of student politics – even a new tourist visa became impossible.

I personally believe that our struggle will grow increasingly non-military but will remain equally as challenging if not more challenging and demanding. Up to now we have paid the price of the peace process: Israel has rehabilitated itself internationally, it has renewed diplomatic relations with almost all countries, and funds and investments are pouring in. The peace process and the new ambience created allow us now to start visiting our homeland. Visiting as a first step. It can become an unstoppable bulldozer. Some say, I won't go back unless and until the situation has changed. My answer is that the situation won't change unless and until we start going back. There is going to be a battle for Jerusalem. It is of a demographic nature, and of an institutional nature. We should practice our beliefs. We believe in the indivisible nature of the Palestinian people and, from now on, we should achieve enhanced Palestinian – Palestinian – Palestinian co-operation in all fields, meaning the Palestinians of the diaspora, the emerging Palestinian entity, and Israeli Palestinians. For example a Palestinian publisher in London can have the books he publishes printed in Jerusalem. It has economic rationality – much cheaper – but also political and strategic significance; that of energising the Palestinian economy. The struggle in Palestine has been: “whose demography on whose geography?” and we should spare no effort in creating job opportunities for all those still there and, even further, to integrate returning Palestinians. Palestinian refugees now living in the periphery of Amman, Damascus, Beirut and Sidon should not be expected to come back and live in the periphery of Nablus and Hebron. Only a dynamic economy can integrate large numbers of returnees as full partners and participants in the new society and new political entity. I am personally very unhappy and unsatisfied with our political under-development. I believe we neither have the establishment or institutions we deserve nor do we have the opposition we need. Working at improving both is a very worthy task. For better strategic planning we need better of both.

Michael Safier used a word I frequently resort to in my parallel discourse: Cosmopolitan. Yet I am not sure we give the same meaning to that concept. The Palestinian people is an Arab people whose culture is Arab and Islamic. They include a small but dynamic Christian minority. At the crossroads of three continents it has been historically an outward orientated society. Having Holy Places for the three monotheistic

religions has put it in daily contact with the outside world and the world daily comes to Jerusalem. For a variety of reasons, Palestinian society today is one of the best equipped to reconcile harmoniously authenticity and modernity, specificity and universality. Jerusalem has been, and should be the centre of gravity of cultural cross-fertilisation and of the dialogue of civilisations. It is there that we can move beyond confrontation towards authentic reconciliation. Yet I do not believe that Zionism and settlement building have enriched the cosmopolitan tissue and texture of society in Jerusalem. Being exclusivist and expulsionist it has rather impoverished Jerusalem.

*Religion:* I am totally foreign to any attempt to give this conflict religious connotations. I have always been exasperated by the use, misuse and abuse of religion in political struggles.

The intrusion of religion in political debates has always exacerbated tensions. Anyway God is usually innocent of the behaviours/misbehaviour of those who pretend to be guided or inspired by him/her.

Uri Davis addressed the issue of settlement and settlers. There are four categories of settlers: the security settlers, the ideological settlers, the ecological settlers and the economic settlers. The security settlers were put in place just after the 1967 war in what was designated as strategic locations. Military experts now consider them to be more a security liability rather than a strategic asset. The economic settlers are the ones who were enticed and attracted by economic incentives, cheaper housing, credit facilities etc. The ecological settlers are mainly yuppies, young professionals who were seeking unpolluted areas out of West Jerusalem or Tel Aviv and an “apartment with a view” on the Dead Sea or the Judean Desert. The ideological settlers, the most aggressive of the four categories are the religious-motivated settlers who believe that the Palestinians are the contemporary “Amaleks” of the Bible that God wishes to see expelled or exterminated.

I personally believe that leaving the settlers is a recipe for failure and disaster. They have settled in Occupied Territories in total defiance of the International Community and of International Law. Their continued presence is not only wrong legally and ethically but also pragmatically. They have declared openly that they are organising in an underground para-military organisation. They will have one of two types of behaviours, if not both, like the OAS and the French *pieds-noirs* of Algeria. They will either go into Palestinian neighbourhoods to provoke tension and friction feeding the spiral of violence or hope to be beaten so as to project of themselves the image of an endangered species reinventing the Israeli army back if and when it had withdrawn. The Israeli society and leadership have to face the fact that the settlers do not represent the most adorable segment of Israeli society and they are hardly the best equipped to be the bridge for future harmonious relations. After the emergence of the Palestinian entity, individual Israelis can apply, through normal institutional channels, for residing in Palestinian territory. Yet I do not think that anyone who wants to pray in a shrine of religious significance has to settle beside it. My family, we go to Rome and to the Vatican and then we move along, without expressing any claim, though we believe we are the descendants of the early Christians, those who were sent to the circus to amuse the mob and feed the lions. I mention that because some invoke suffering as a valid argument for territorial claims.

Gayth Armanazi raised the issue of how to move from A to B. It is “the question” still begging for an answer. Having taken part in a variety of diplomatic encounters or

academic seminars. I have realised that diplomacy is not an exercise in intellectual seduction. It is a confrontation of wills within the framework of a certain *rapport de force* where every advantage is taken of any disequilibrium of power. I believe if the local belligerent parties are left to themselves – as is the case now – they will never achieve an acceptable compromise. I have supported the Oslo agreement “*faute de mieux*”, as the least unattractive of a set of very unattractive alternatives.

Mr. Chairman, I belong to a minority school of thought that advocates “an elegantly imposed solution – if need be inelegantly – from the outside that is mutually unacceptable”. Bearing in mind the pathology of conflict and the psychology of the belligerents, I believe that “mutually unacceptable” carries more potential than the concept of mutual acceptability. Since both societies tend to believe that Mandatory Palestine is totally theirs, the Two-State solution should be the solution aimed at hoping that both States will opt in the future for vertical expansion rather than horizontal expansions one at the detriment of the other. This will not be a just peace but it will be just acceptable. Anyway the Palestinians have resigned themselves to aim at possible justice rather than absolute justice.

I personally am in favour of an interventionist United Nations body. I believe that in our contemporary international system – and I prefer international system to world order because the concept of order has moral connotations that the system totally lacks – UN supremacy is the only possible substitute to American hegemony. During the last three decades international pressure was exerted on the Arab side to reduce their demands. We had to discover that there were three layers in political expectations: the desirable, the possible and the acceptable. We had to discover that not everything desirable was possible, not everything possible was acceptable. As a consequence we had to reconcile our national rights with the international will.

The same pressures have now to be exercised on the Israeli side. I am revolted by the self-inflicted impotence of the major external actors when dealing with the Middle East. Palestinian decision-making has to take place in the most uncomfortable political environment. We have to constantly bear in mind: (1) Arab impotence, (2) the decline, then the demise of the Soviet Union, (3) the abdication of Europe for a geo-strategic role, (4) the paralysis of the UN, (5) the total alignment of the US on every capricious Israeli preference, priority or policy. External pressure will be most helpful to the most advanced or enlightened Israeli politicians who are now hostages to a public opinion that they have once helped to fanatise. Anyway, peace in the Middle East is too important to be left to the Israelis alone to decide upon. But, for the moment, given the givens, they believe that they can set the ceiling of the possible and of the permissible. That they can dictate the pace of progress of the peace process: extremely slowly.