

## Document Jerusalem and the Peace Process

### OPENING ADDRESS

The 1999 International Academic Conference on Islamic Jerusalem  
"Muslim-Christian Relations in Jerusalem"  
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I would first of all like to thank the conference organisers from the Islamic Research Academy for inviting me here today and I would like to convey my best wishes to all those involved in organising today's meeting. I would also like to congratulate the Academy on the very important work that they have undertaken to promote a better understanding through academic research, of the role of Jerusalem in the Islamic faith and of how the historic significance of Jerusalem has such bearing on the lives of Muslim everywhere. For much of this century the City of Jerusalem has been synonymous with conflict and violently conflicting claims of ownership. It is only through the sort of discussion organised here today on Christian - Muslim relations in Jerusalem, that we will be able to break through the illusion that Jerusalem can ever exist under the exclusive ownership of one faith or nation. Even less that a political formula for Jerusalem based on the absolute rights of one nation at the expense of another will ever be a viable basis for peace.

I will leave the detailed discussion of today's central theme to the many experts gathered here, but I hope to be able to contribute to the debate by saying something about our concerns and hopes for the resolution of the status of Jerusalem and our expectations of the new Labour-led government in Israel. I hope that you find the Labour Party concerns with regard to Jerusalem reflect your own concerns and that we recognise that an equitable and just resolution to the issue to Jerusalem is a critical part of the wider Middle East peace.

We meet today in the wake of a new agreement between Israel and the PNA on how to move forward with the peace process and also in the wake of two car bombs in Israel presumably the work of a group ideologically opposed to the peace negotiations. Experience tells us that progress in diplomatic negotiations very often brings with it an increased risk of violent opposition. As strongly as we support the effort to bring a lasting and just peace to the Middle East, we deplore the violent attempts to derail it. Events like the car bombs in Tiberius and Haifa on Sunday add to the sense of urgency with which we view the need for a political solution to the Middle East conflict.

The agreement reached in Egypt over the weekend is a welcome restart to the peace process which has been at an effective standstill for the last 3 years. There are many parts of the agreement that bode well for the future; the handing over of more land to the PNA, the long-awaited release of prisoners, the opening of safe passages between Gaza and the West Bank and the construction of Gaza seaport. It seems that both sides have committed themselves to a more concrete set of aims and deadlines, which will help to bolster the much needed confidence of the Israelis and Palestinians in the process. This progress is certainly welcome.

It has always seemed sensible that the issue of the status of Jerusalem should have been designated as a final status issue, subject to negotiations on the final peace settlement. The reasoning of those who drew up the Oslo Agreement was that the interim period of the peace process was to be seen as an

opportunity to build the confidence of both Palestinians and Israelis in order to make agreement on the most sensitive issues a possibility. This incremental mechanism built into the agreement won the support of the international community and seemed to offer the best chance of success. It can never have been envisaged, however, that Israel would adopt an interpretation of the Oslo agreement which allowed it to carry on colonising Jerusalem in the intervening years as if no agreement had been signed. These policies were most vigorously pursued by the Likud government of 1996-99 with PM Netanyahu's ideological and very public opposition to the Oslo Process. However, we can't ignore the fact that ID confiscation, house demolitions and aggressive settlement activity have also always been a feature of Labour Government in Jerusalem.

This has resulted in a situation where physical and demographic changes in Jerusalem moved on apace, while the democratic peace process had ground to a halt. Of the many expectations we have of the new Israeli Government, one of the most pressing must be swift and decisive action to halt those policies that are perceived by the Palestinian population as running counter to the commitments made under Oslo and which have always been condemned as serious violations of International Humanitarian Law. Foremost among these, is the relentless settlement activity in and around East Jerusalem.

I would like to repeat for the record, the Labour Party and British Government's position on the status of Jerusalem. Britain along with the majority of the International community has never recognised the sovereignty of Israel in East Jerusalem; neither after 1967 war when Israel occupied the whole of the city, or in 1980 when Israel formally annexed East Jerusalem. Britain along with the International Community and the United Nations believes that the status of Jerusalem is still to be determined; a view reflected in the Oslo Agreement; and believes that until that time, Jerusalem remain unaltered and that its international status should be protected in the interests of all inhabitants. Through the years of conflict and dramatic political

change before and after the onset of the peace process, the need to uphold this position becomes ever more clear. The simple fact that five years on from the first signing of the Oslo Agreement, the Palestinian feel themselves to be rapidly losing their rights and status in Jerusalem.

Many statistics and anecdotal examples bear out this picture. Despite the negotiations and forward movement in the peace process, Israel continues without halting, to consolidate its hold on East Jerusalem and its environs. The ultimate goal is to alter the demographic balance permanently in its favour. In recent report on settlement activity in the OTs compiled by the Israeli Peace Movement "Peace Now" it was reported that 42 new settlements have been established since last year's signing of the Wye River Memorandum. In addition, it seems that 14 of these have been set up since Ehud Barak became PM. While we continue to view all settlements activity to the provisions of the Fourth Geneva Convention, the pattern and nature of recent settlement activity in the OTs and particularly in Jerusalem, demonstrate why it continues to poison the atmosphere and why it represents such a threat to the prospects for a durable settlement.

In a recent legal opinion by the Judge Advocate General in Israel, it was stated that of the 42 settlement 'outposts' set up in recent months, only 12 would be defensible before the High Court. In practise this means that settlers have moved quickly onto sites that were sometimes over 2 kilometre away from the main settlement block and have hastily applied for, and received retroactive legal approval for their actions. They responded literally to the call by Ariel Sharon for Israelis to settle the hill-tops and take as much land as possible. And it seems to date that their actions have paid off. It is these activities that must be dealt with swiftly and decisively by the new Israeli government. In an article by Uri Avnery over the weekend, he made the point that the way one goes about making peace is as important as the peace settlement itself. It will be compromising to the new government's ability to negotiate peace, if he does not

acknowledge the feelings of anger and resentment in the Palestinian Community engendered by these actions. It was heartening to read that at the end of July PM Barak sent soldiers to dismantle 5 mobile homes of settlers who were illegally trying to expand a trailer camp near the settlement of Shvut Rachel. The accompanying statement from the PM's office said "the government will vigorously oppose any unilateral and illegal steps". This step is to be welcomed and must be the first of many such decisive acts to remediate the flagrant injustices caused by politically motivated settlement activity.

As I mentioned earlier, settlement activity in East Jerusalem and expansion in the suburb settlement is a cause of serious concern to Palestinians as it clearly threatens to dictate the outcome of final status negotiation on the status of Jerusalem. Last year's decision by Israel to bring the planning control of the suburb of Maale Adumin under the authority of the Jerusalem Municipality set alarm bells ringing and provoked serious criticism from the International Community. It is feared, not unsurprisingly, that this move is a forerunner to the extension of the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem to cover the whole of Maale Adumim and thereby alter the demographic balance of the city permanently. Palestinian land continues to be confiscated to accommodate the massive E1 project designed to link Maale Adumim to Jerusalem, which if it goes ahead will cut the map of the West Bank into two.

In another recent development it appears that Israel has made plans to build an 'Erez Style' checkpoint on the road from Bethlehem into Jerusalem. The Erez checkpoint in Gaza is notorious for the aggressive and discriminatory security checks required of all Palestinians. This new checkpoint is allegedly to have one road for Israeli and tourists and another to accommodate Palestinians traffic. Apart from the humiliation and inevitable confrontation encouraged by this segregation, it is yet another signal that Israel continues to refuse to acknowledge Palestinian national rights in Jerusalem and that the state is taking steps to permanently exclude Palestinians from the City. Apart

from the sinister undertones of this type of segregation, a concrete checkpoint has an air of finality about it. The population of Bethlehem are looking to the peace negotiations to reinstate their freedom of movement and right to travel freely to and from Jerusalem; building a permanent checkpoint to keep most Palestinians out is not inspiring confidence.

We have had many cases brought to us in recent years of Palestinians residents of Jerusalem threatened with loss of their ID cards as a result of increasingly restrictive criteria for eligibility to remain 'residents' in Jerusalem. In late July, Dr Musa Budeiri a senior faculty member at Al-Quds University and resident of Jerusalem had his ID card withdrawn. My colleagues Geoff Hoon the minister then responsible, took up the issue personally with the Israeli Government on a trip to the area. The British Government is extremely concerned about the policy of ID withdrawal and has raised the issue many times with the Israeli Government. We consider it to be an illegal and unjust attack on the rights of Arab residents of Jerusalem and will continue to raise it with the Israeli Government. To date, as far as we are aware, the case of Dr Budeiri remains unresolved and we look forward to the full restoration of his right to residency in his home city.

In this regard, there have been encouraging signals from Interior Minister Sharansky who, despite his opposition to the new Wye Agreement, has made statements suggesting that Israel might review the policy of ID withdrawals and who has also pledged to ensure decent treatment for the Arab inhabitants of East Jerusalem. We would hope that this new approach will be based on the protection and respect for the rights of the residents of East Jerusalem as stipulated in International Law.

The fact remains that policies continues apace in Jerusalem that reflect the determination with which all Israeli governments have pursued the consolidation of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem. PM Barak, like all his predecessors, has stated that the Jerusalem is non-negotiable, a so-called 'red line' and that Jerusalem will remain the eternal and united capital of

Israel. The actions on the ground every day seems to underline that determination and refusal to compromise and leave Palestinians not unreasonably sceptical about Israeli intentions towards final status negotiation. Last year, the State of Israel celebrated the 50th anniversary of its creation - at the same time, Palestinians commemorated the 50th year of 'Nakba' the tragedy of loss and dispossession. It seems that in keeping with the attempts to resolve other historic conflicts, a central part of the formula must be recognition and acknowledgement of past injustice and present rights. It is this element that is singularly still missing from the rhetoric of peace and the issue of Jerusalem is one of the most potent examples. No matter how strongly Israel claims Jerusalem and attempts to manipulate its demography, Jerusalem remains central in the hearts and minds of Muslims, Jews and Christians everywhere. Jerusalem has been the home of Palestinians Arabs for centuries and those rights must be reflected in the final peace settlement.