

**Document**  
**The Position of the Labour Party**  
**Towards the Question of Jerusalem**

**OPENING ADDRESS**

**The 1997 International Academic Conference on Islamic Jerusalem**  
**Organised by the Islamic Research Academy (IRAP)**  
**at S.O.A.S., University of London**  
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I would like to thank the Islamic Research Academy for inviting me to speak at their inaugural annual international academic conference on Islamic Jerusalem. I would like to take the opportunity to wish my good friend Dr Abd al-Fattah El-Awaisi and his colleagues all the best with this academic project and their work to promote dialogue and a better understanding of Islam and the Muslim world.

Since 1969 the Labour Middle East Council has been campaigning for the achievement of the national rights of the Palestinian people. In that context, we have long understood the cultural, historical and religious significance of the City of Jerusalem to the Palestinian people and the wider Arab and Muslim worlds, but have felt that there are too many in the West who have not. I will not attempt a historical analysis of that significance in the present company, but will instead approach the issue from a perspective of a political party and organisation that is working in support of the Middle East Peace Process. I am also conscious of the fact that British Labour Government

will assume the Presidency of the EU in January next year (1998) at a time of great historical poignancy to the Palestinian people, fifty years after the end of the British Mandate in Palestine and the foundation of the State of Israel.

**The position of the Labour Party towards the question of Jerusalem has always been governed by the Party's belief in the rule of law as set down in United Nations resolutions. In line with this approach, the Labour Party refers to the special international status envisaged for the City of Jerusalem set down in the Partition Plan - General Assembly Resolution 181 - of November 29th 1947. The Labour Party's official position on Jerusalem is of the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force" and a prohibition on any changes made to the status of the city pending a final settlement.**

While there are very few people now who would advocate any type of "UN administration" in Jerusalem as originally envisaged in 1947, still fewer people accept that the issue of sovereignty, i.e., Israeli claims to the whole city, has been resolved. **The Labour Party certainly does not accept this claim.**

**The Labour Middle East Council has always argued that the "holding" position provided by International law which unequivocally precludes colonisation and annexation by any of the parties to the conflict, is the only point from which it will be possible to begin the negotiations on final status. It is a position that ought to have been upheld and underwritten by the International Community. The guarantee of this status by the Co-signatories to the IV Geneva Convention, should have been the ultimate protection of the rights of both Palestinians and Israelis in the City of Jerusalem. The reality, however, is that the International Community has chosen, whether by omission, negligence or sheer discrimination, to allow the rights and claims of the Israeli State in Jerusalem to take precedence**

**over those of the Palestinian people and the rest of the Arab world.**

**Within the Labour Middle East Council and the Labour Party generally, we utterly condemn the cynical policy of settlement and colonisation in East Jerusalem that has been accelerating since the signing of the Peace Accords in Washington in 1993 and which has resulted in a Jewish settler population in East Jerusalem which outnumbers the indigenous Arab population. We deplore the removal of ID cards, on whatever pretext, from growing numbers of Arab residents in East Jerusalem, denying families their homes and birthright, and making many thousands more fearful for their future. We deplore the myriad of policies employed by the Israeli government to reduce the number of Palestinians residing in Jerusalem including restrictions on family reunification in the city - we have first-hand knowledge of this when PLO representative in the UK Afif Safieh was denied the right to return to the city of his birth. We deplore the restrictions placed on Palestinian housing construction, lack of housing stock for Arab residents and minimal investment in the infrastructure of Arab parts of East Jerusalem. All these policies are a determined effort to change the demographic balance in the city and thus strengthen Israeli claims to sovereignty over the whole city.**

As a Parliamentarian, I also have serious concerns about the residents of East Jerusalem who were permitted to stand in the elections for the Palestinian Legislative Council - a sensible and forward looking decision by Israel - but who now have so many restrictions placed on their movement and work that they are often prevented from carrying out their democratic duties and serving their constituents.

When I first visited Jerusalem in 1980 it was broadly speaking, open to the Palestinians residents of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and it was the place through which Palestinians would travel in order to reach other parts of Palestinian

Territories, north and south. It was clearly the heart of the Palestinian territories containing many of the commercial, cultural and religious institutions that sustained and informed the Palestinian national identity. **When I travelled to the Occupied Territories in May this year (1997), however, I visited a city that has been totally cut off from the rest of the Occupied Territories as Israel attempts to implement its own vision of the future, with Jerusalem as its "eternal and unified capital". The temporary roadblocks and checkpoints which were set up in response to security threats to the Israeli inhabitants of Jerusalem, have become symbols of a long-term vision of Jerusalem under the exclusive sovereignty of Israel and based on the denial of Palestinian national rights.**

As a foreign visitor, I was able to visit Jerusalem, but Palestinians from nearby Bethlehem, a 15 minute bus ride to the south, who might once have lived and worked in the city and who might have family in the city, are prohibited from entering. **This is a situation which is neither comfortable nor optimistic.**

**To any neutral outside observer, it is obvious that the attempt by Israel to consolidate its control over the whole of the city and in the process to deny and to extinguish by force, Palestinian claims and rights in Jerusalem, will serve only to prolong the conflict that we are trying to resolve.**

As Chair of the Labour Middle East Council I welcomed the signing of the Oslo Accords in what was a genuine effort by then Israeli government and the PLO to begin the long process of diplomatic peace negotiations. Along with others, I also accepted the notion that the peace settlement should be incremental and carried out in stages, and that the most difficult and complicated issues including the final status of the City of Jerusalem should be left for final status negotiations when enough trust and confidence had been generated to allow for accommodation and compromise. **We did not expect, however, that Israeli governments both Labour and Likud, would**

**decide to use the interim period to consolidate their illegal hold over what is still regarded by the rest of the world as the Occupied Territory of East Jerusalem.**

**The result of this strategy as demonstrated by the crisis provoked over the settlement at Jabal Abu Ghunaim, is an ongoing erosion of confidence in the peace process and the belief in the possibility of a just and durable settlement. It is too much to expect that Palestinians who not so long ago enjoyed relatively free access to the City, to their places of worship and work, to the main medical and cultural institutions and to the commercial centre of the country and who are now faced with what seems to be a permanent state of exclusion, will continue to look to the peace negotiations for a just and honourable outcome.**

**In order to best serve the interests of peace and the future of the Middle East Peace Process, the International Community must look to its role of guaranteeing the status of Jerusalem as it stands in international law and take a firm stand against Israeli annexationist policies in East Jerusalem. In this regard, it falls on the European Union, particularly Britain, and member states of the UN to challenge the US policy of recent years of decoupling final status issues such as Jerusalem, from their positions in international law. The further that the issue of Jerusalem is allowed to drift away from its reference point in international law and the consensus of the international community, and the longer its fate is left to be determined by the unequal balance of power in the region, the more distant is a settlement.**

**Like many others who are actively involved in the search for peace in the Middle East, I see the issue of Jerusalem as a macrocosm of the wider conflict. The accommodation and compromises that in the end will have to be achieved in determining the final status of Jerusalem, will have to be based on a respect and acknowledgement of the national rights and identity of all peoples in the region.**

**It will not be achieved by attempting to rewrite history and expecting one nation to deny its past and forgo its future in deference to another. Jerusalem represents the past, present and future of the Palestinian people and I am glad that the 1997 International Academic Conference on Islamic Jerusalem today will help us understand its significance in the Islamic world, and the necessity of finding a solution that reflects and honours not only Israeli Jewish national aspirations, but also the long-denied national aspirations of the Palestinian people.**

