



INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE QUESTION OF JERUSALEM

Preserving the cultural and religious character of Jerusalem

27-28 June 2019

Geneva, Palais des Nations

CHAIR SUMMARY

The **International Conference on “Preserving the cultural and religious character of Jerusalem”** was convened in Geneva on 27 and 28 June 2019, under the auspices of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People (CEIRPP), in collaboration with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Ahead of the Conference, on 26 June, the Committee held bilateral meetings with the President of the Human Rights Council and Permanent Representative of Senegal to the United Nations in Geneva, Ambassador Coly Seck; the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ms. Michelle Bachelet; and the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Mr. Peter Maurer.

The Conference brought together Palestinian, Israeli and international experts, representatives of the diplomatic community and civil society to address the issue of Israel’s policies and measures aimed at changing the cultural and religious character of Jerusalem, which have significant political, legal and socio-economic ramifications, including the threat of derailing prospects for a peaceful solution to the Question of Palestine. Participants sought to discuss viable strategies to stem efforts to alter the demography and character of the City; and ensure that all its Palestinian inhabitants enjoy their inalienable rights.

At the opening, **Mr. Philippe Baudin-Auliac**, Chief of Political Affairs and Partnership Section in the office of the Director-General, delivered a statement on behalf of Mr. Michael Møller, Director-General of the United Nations Office in Geneva, representing Secretary-General António Guterres. He recalled that the Question of Palestine has lost none of its urgency and that any idea falling short of the parameters set out in relevant United Nations resolutions will stand no chance of success. The statement quoted the Secretary-General, who reiterated that there was “no plan B” to the two-State solution. Accordingly, Jerusalem was a key final status issue and without a solution of its status, no Israeli-Palestinian agreement was possible. Both parties were called to implement their bilateral agreements and avoid taking unilateral action that undermined the two-State solution. Measures aimed at changing East Jerusalem’s demographic composition, character and status were a violation of international law and of UN resolutions. Moreover, the statement called for an “immediate halt to the Israeli authorities’ destruction of

Palestinian-owned property in East Jerusalem;” and on Israeli authorities to refrain from passing legislation that redraws the municipal boundaries of East Jerusalem.

In his opening statement the **Chair of the Committee, Ambassador Cheikh Niang (Senegal)**, said that “the international community’s pledges to the Palestinian people [...] must be respected,” in reference to the two-State solution based on the 1967 borders, East Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Palestine and negotiated outcomes for all final status issues. He warned against the expansion of settlements throughout the occupied Palestinian territory, slowly “eating away” the land of the State of Palestine; and against formal annexation, in contravention with Security Council resolution 2334 (2016). He called on all Member States to comply with Security Council resolution 476 (1980) and to refrain from establishing diplomatic mission in Jerusalem. He warned that the legislation redrawing the municipal boundaries of East Jerusalem risked excluding an estimated 120,000 Palestinians from the City and absorbing some 140,000 Jewish settlers into it. Most importantly, the status quo of the holy sites in Jerusalem must be respected, and their preservation was the international community’s shared responsibility. The Chair welcomed recent statements made in that regards by world leaders including the King of Morocco, the King of Jordan and His Holiness Pope Francis.

The representative of the State of Palestine, **Minister of Social Affairs and senior member of the Palestine Liberation Organization Executive Committee Ahmad Majdalani** stated, in reference to the so-called economic workshop held in Bahrain on 26 June, that Palestinians did not need an economic solution that would perpetuate occupation but their right to self-determination. He claimed that the cause of Palestinians was not “for sale” and that the workshop had been a “resounding failure” due to the absence of a legitimate Palestinian representation. The political track should be the foundation of a solution while the economic track would be its support. The State of Palestine believed, in his view, that security needs should be addressed for both sides. Moreover, the security needs of an occupying party should not be equated with those of the occupied one. Minister Majdalani also spoke about applying international law without double standards. The State of Palestine believed that protection of the peace process and stability of the region required “speedy measures”, including and foremost the recognition of the State of Palestine, on the premise of saving the two-State solution. The collapse of the latter would bear grave consequences for the entire region.

Assistant Secretary-General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, Samir Bakr, delivered a message from the Secretary General of the organization reaffirming that all measures by any party aimed at forcibly altering the legal, historical, cultural and political status of occupied Jerusalem, including attempts to relocate diplomatic missions were “blatant violations of international law.” The OIC believed that Israeli violations against Christians and Muslim holy places in East Jerusalem were deliberate attempts to undermine the international community’s efforts to engender inter-religious and inter-cultural tolerance, peaceful cohabitation and coexistence among diverse civilizations. The OIC warned that such violations would engulf a solvable political conflict into a global religious one with unpredictable repercussions on peace and security in an already volatile region. He referred to the collective punishment imposed by Israel through the holding of tax revenues and the exacerbation of the financial and economic crisis endured by the Palestinian people. He underlined that addressing

the dire economic situation of Palestinians should not overshadow the core political issue, which remains the Israeli occupation and its ramifications.

The representative of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Programme Executive for the Middle East Carla Khijoyan spoke of the organization's commitment to the cause of Jerusalem. She underlined how the global Christian fellowship shared a profound concern for the people living in Jerusalem, particularly the indigenous Jerusalemite Christians whose future in their own City was impaired by the prevailing occupation, creeping annexation and unfulfilled promises of the international community. The World Council of Churches' position was that Jerusalem could not be the exclusive possession of one faith or people over and against another. Jerusalem had to be the city of three religions and two peoples for it to be the city of peace. These two peoples were the guardians of its sanctity and had the responsibility to organize their lives in the City and welcome all pilgrims from all over the world. No country could define unilaterally the status of Jerusalem and the solution should come about through dialogue and negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli authorities.

During the first panel, themed "*The legal status of Jerusalem under international law and in the context of a final peace settlement*", speakers described Israeli practices in East Jerusalem aimed at weakening the Palestinian presence in the City. An Israeli lawyer discussed the dichotomy between the taxes imposed by the municipality of Jerusalem on Palestinian residents and the quality of services they receive in return. Tax collection was presented as part of a most effective "bureaucracy occupation". The system of residency permits and impediments on freedom of movements were a means to separate East Jerusalem from the rest of the occupied territory, she added. Speaking on Israeli infrastructure projects and on expropriations and demolitions of Palestinian-owned lands and structures, a Palestinian lawyer explained the evolving Israeli jurisprudence and how the High Court of Justice increasingly ruled in favour of expropriations. The Israeli Court based its rulings on laws dating back to the pre-1967 era such as the Absentee's Property Law (1950) and Law on Planning and Construction (1965).

The second panel, on "*Challenges to safeguarding the cultural heritage of Jerusalem*", both Israeli and Palestinian experts in the preservation of holy sites in Jerusalem explained how Israel was consolidating its control over the City and its surroundings and described Israel's determination to alter Jerusalem's character through the destruction of old buildings and the construction of railroads and cable cars projects. Most importantly, since 1997 Israel systematically denied access to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), mandated to inspect the conservation of Jerusalem. In addition, Israel continued to ignore the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. Despite the complex and challenging situation, Palestinian residents continued to preserve the cultural history of their City with the restoration of more than 4,000 architectural structures. Also, they continued to represent more than 40 per cent of the Old City's population after 50 years of Israeli occupation. The important housing crisis in the Old City meant that 80 per cent of Palestinian inhabitants, who used to be part of the middle class, are living presently under the poverty line – they refused to relocate as a means of resistance against Israel's attempts to alter the identity of the City. A Jordanian representative spoke about the main restoration phases of Islamic cultural sites as part of the Hashemite custodianship responsibilities.

The third panel on “*Jerusalem: Holy to the three monotheistic religions*” discussed how lack of freedom of worship and freedom of movement violated the basic rights of most Palestinians. Archaeological excavations affected the Christian and Muslim quarters, changing the character of the City. One speaker presented an understanding of Zionism which required Jews in the holy land to respect the rights of all religions and accommodate the sovereignty of the Palestinian people. Another speaker explained the difficulty of a pro-Israel lobby in the United States that had elevated Israel to a domestic issue, while the question of Palestine was considered part of the foreign affairs agenda. During the discussion a majority of those present agreed that the paradigm of “My place is my place and yours is yours, and we should not be praying at each other’s places” as the underlying principle for the different religions to coexist peacefully in Jerusalem.

During the final panel on “*Ways forward to preserve the character of the Sacred City*”, a Palestinian representative detailed the actions taken by the State of Palestine before international organisations and organs, including the United Nations General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. One speaker explained how Palestinians were trying to maintain and restore the city, while another suggested organising a round table with Palestinian, Israeli and international experts to articulate principles for the protection and preservation of Jerusalem’s historic and sacred sites. During the ensuing discussion, it was advocated that the preservation of the legal status of Jerusalem should be through supporting initiatives that called for an end of occupation, ensuring accountability for the breaking of international law and by entrenching the status of Jerusalem in international law but not through religious narratives.

In the closing session the **Chair of the Committee, Ambassador Cheikh Niang (Senegal)** thanked the Palestinian, Israeli and international experts for having outlined, during the two-day event, the challenges in preserving the cultural and religious heritage of Jerusalem and for having put forward suggestions for the preservation, as an important step to secure the two-State solution. The Chair said the Conference was the sixth consecutive on Jerusalem organized by the Committee, in collaboration with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and highlighted its opportune timing. **Ambassador Riyad Mansour (Palestine)** spoke of the strategic partnership with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and the World Council of Churches for this event and encourage more partners to rally to the cause of Jerusalem. Ambassador Mansour recalled the message sent by the Committee during last year’s Conference in Rabat, and according to which, unilateral decisions to move embassies to Jerusalem were considered null and void. This year’s Conference served to send a message on the Bahrain economic workshop held the day before, and which sought to push forward “a dead initiative” of economic ideas.

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****Note: This Summary attempts to provide an overall picture of the deliberations of the Conference. A detailed report, including specific questions that were addressed during the interactive discussions, will be published by the Division for Palestinian Rights in due course.*