



## **INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE QUESTION OF JERUSALEM**

“Preserving the Cultural and Religious Character of Jerusalem”  
Geneva, 27-28 June 2019

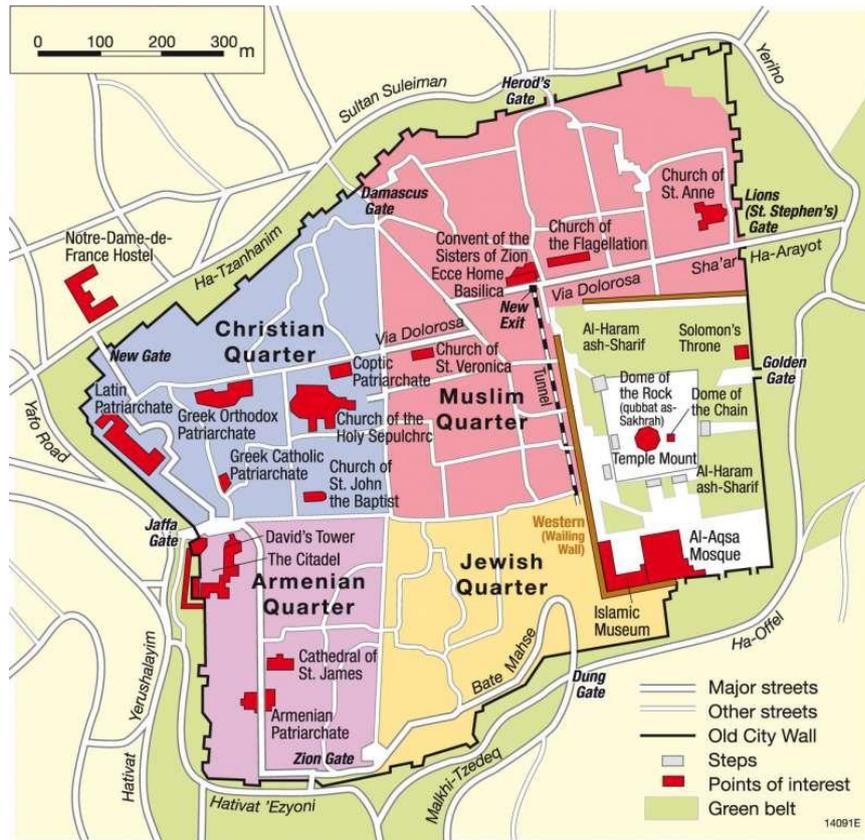
How can we relate identity and space? How can a place influence the construction of the religious and cultural identities of people? Jerusalem, that city of love, city of peace, city of hope—that small city embraces the history and core of three monotheistic religions. It is a city whose pain is deeply rooted in its glory, in its identity, in its historic, cultural, and religious heritage.

Jerusalem is a city of many contrasts. It is a historic and symbolic city, revered by Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Yet its citizens segregate ethno-nationally, culturally, and socially into different identity groups. The city of Jerusalem is not only a spiritual centre associated with age-old dreams for peace and justice. It is also, unfortunately, a city with tensions and conflicts, a symbol of national, cultural, economic, and ecological struggles. This challenging situation becomes more complex when geopolitical and international political powers become involved in the conflict.

### **Jerusalem: One city, multiple identities**

A network of interrelations exists between the formation of identities and concepts of sacred place in Jerusalem. The link between religious constructions of identity and the idea of the Holy Land has been frequently studied and explored, and it shows that the Holy Land is a concept developed in each context and intertwined with the negotiation of religious and cultural identity. More than a theoretical framework, this link is contextualized within the diverse religious communities in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Their self-understandings of their religious and cultural identities, and their concepts of the holiness of the land, exhibit a reciprocal relationship. Their constructions of identity and the space where they live inform each other.

Walking through the streets of the old city, one can see, read, and understand the multiple facets of



Jerusalem on every face, through every smile. From Arabic to Hebrew to Armenian: words and symbols slip from one language to the other and carry you away through diverse cultures with an enchanted sense of crossing the borders of time and space.

Jerusalem is made of not only stones but of faith and spirit. Each street, each path, each breath whispers a thousand and one stories of miracles, sacrifices, saints, events, and emotions.

The gates of Jerusalem must remain open to the world beyond politics, conflicts, and divisions. Its soul

cannot be locked in a definition, in legislation, or in a text. The spirit of Jerusalem will inhabit each and every human who offers love and reverence to her.

### Jerusalem: Religion, culture, and architecture

The unique architecture of Jerusalem evokes its biblical history. Jerusalem has an exceptional artistic and architectural heritage. For the Jews, it is above all the Wailing Wall, that unique vestige of the western wall of the great Temple built by Herod the Great, which anchors the city's religious value. Archaeological excavations have also uncovered several Jewish necropolises and the tomb of the family of Herod.

For Christians, Jerusalem includes such places as the Mount of Olives; the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built above the basilica of the fourth century, itself erected above the site of the traditional tomb of Christ; the tomb of the Prophets or the tomb of the Virgin Mary. These sites make Jerusalem a holy place for Christians.

For Muslims, Jerusalem means especially the Dome of the Rock, also called Omar Mosque, built on Mount Moriah, the supposed place of the ascent of Prophet Muhammad to the sky, and the Al-Aqsa Mosque, one of the most sacred shrines of Islam.

No one religion alone, nor any one ethnic or cultural group, can claim the city as solely its own.

### Jerusalem in World Council of Churches perspective

The global Christian fellowship shares with you – as with many others around the world – a profound and abiding love of and concern for Jerusalem and for the peoples living there. Our prayer is always for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6), a peace that can only be true and lasting if it is founded on justice.

We include in our membership churches with indigenous Jerusalem Christian communities whose future in their own city is terribly and imminently imperilled by the prevailing circumstances. Further, the Palestinian people live under occupation and with the negative effects of illegal settlements. They also live with the unfulfilled intentions of the international community to support a viable and just solution for Jerusalem and for all the people living in the Holy Land.

The future of Jerusalem must be a shared one. It cannot be the exclusive possession of one faith over against the others, or of one people over against the others. Jerusalem is, and must continue to be, a city of three religions and two peoples.

The Heads of Churches in Jerusalem have repeatedly and strongly affirmed this, stating in 1994:

The experience of history teaches us that in order for Jerusalem to be a city of peace, no longer lusted after from the outside and thus a bone of contention between warring sides, it cannot belong exclusively to one people or to only one religion...

In 2006, Jerusalem's Christian leadership went further:

Jerusalem, holy city, heritage of humanity, city of two peoples and three religions, has a unique character that distinguishes her from all other cities of the world ... two people are the guardians of her sanctity and carry a double responsibility: to organize their lives in the city and to welcome all the "pilgrims" who come from around the world.

In 1974 the World Council of Churches affirmed strongly that Jerusalem should be "a city open to the adherents of all three religions, where they can meet and live together," and later it went further, stating in 1998 that "Jerusalem must be a shared city in terms of sovereignty and citizenship."

The 1948 UN plan for Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum* (separated body) under international law was never realized in practice, and any plan for the city to be formally internationalized now seems unlikely. However, no country can define unilaterally what is international law on this issue. Neither can any external country dictate what the solution should be. It has to happen through negotiations between the Palestinian and Israeli authorities.

At its central committee meeting in Trondheim, Norway, in 2016, the WCC reassessed its decades-long engagement for a just peace in the Holy Land, including Jerusalem, and reiterated its strong commitment to dialogue and a negotiated settlement as key to genuine peace in the whole region. The central committee, it said:

*Calls on* Israeli and Palestinian leaders to actively and immediately pursue the implementation of a just, viable and sustainable solution to the conflict, by providing a political horizon for an end to occupation and for a just and sustainable peace for both Palestinians and Israelis.

*Urges* all members of the international community – in particular the Quartet (United Nations, European Union, USA and Russian Federation) – to resume active, determined and consistent efforts to help build such a political horizon for peace with justice between Israelis and Palestinians.

*Calls on* WCC member churches, specialized ministries and ecumenical partners to be louder voices and more active agents in countering despair and rebuilding hope, in particular through supporting and sustaining the presence and witness of local Christians and member churches in Israel and Palestine,

## **Conclusion**

The unique status of Jerusalem, its unique identity and history, must be reflected in a concrete international pact that ensures that it remains a city for two peoples and three religions. The status of Jerusalem must be part of the wider peace agreement that includes:

- a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine with borders along the Green Line
- an end to all forms of violence
- respect for human rights and UN resolutions
- an end to the illegal Israeli settlements
- the right of return of refugees and
- an end to the occupation.

Jerusalem, symbol of the spiritual core of three religions, must become a city of peaceful coexistence, open to the world, embracing humanity and elevating human dignity, as an example of the love of God for all.

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