

# Séance plénière (III) de la Conférence internationale sur la question de Jérusalem - "Préservation du caractère culturel et religieux de Jérusalem" (en anglais)

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Organisée par le Comité pour l'exercice des droits inaliénables du peuple palestinien (CEIRPP) en collaboration avec l'Organisation pour la coopération islamique

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## PLENARY III: JERUSALEM: HOLY TO THE THREE MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS

BERNARD SABELLA, Former member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, sociologist and Executive Secretary of the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees (MECC), speaking about challenges in the free access to holy sites in Jerusalem, stressed that the problem was not only preventing free access to faithful Muslims or Christians. The issue was much broader and had geopolitical considerations. Historically, after the occupation in 1967, the Israeli government had designated the Old City as "antiquities zone", a step that had included Al-Haram al-Sharif and the Western Wall, prohibiting Muslims and Christians from doing any renovations on their holy sites within the Old City without the approval of Israeli authorities. In 1997, the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People did a study on the Status of Jerusalem, identifying the challenges, including freedom of worship. Open Bethlehem, a Palestinian organization, advocated for Bethlehem to be connected to Jerusalem.

Another problem was related to archaeological excavations, which were carried out not only under the City, but they were also affecting the structural safety in the Christian and Muslim quarters. Israel was changing the character of the City. Mr. Sabella then urged States to take note of the cable car project that would change the character of Jerusalem and exemplified the "Disney-fication" of Jerusalem. The international community should insist that this project not be carried out. Similarly, the recent ruling of the Israeli High Court that the sale of Greek Orthodox Church properties at Jaffa Gate to an extremist Israeli settler organisation was also changing the character of the City for the worse.

MUSTAFA ABU SWAY, Professor of Islamic Studies at Al-Quds University and Member of the Islamic Waqf Council in Jerusalem, highlighted how, theologically, Al-Aqsa Mosque was a holy destination, including through numerous Quranic references. It was key to understand that the term stood for the whole area of the sacred enclosure spreading over 144 dunum, not just one singular building. During prayers, Muslims creating a human carpet at Al Aqsa Mosque showed the continuum of spiritual connection. Lack of freedom of worship and freedom of movement violated basic rights of most of Palestinians, for most of the year. For example, when during Easter the Israel authorities would announce how many permits they had provided to Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank to visit and pray at Jerusalem's churches, this only highlighted that Palestinians outside Jerusalem were restricted in their freedom of worship by being denied permits for the rest of the year.

The Hashemite royal family, in protecting the Arab and Islamic cultural heritage in the City, including through the Fund for the Restoration of Al-Aqsa, were in fact preserving the cultural heritage of humankind. Unfortunately, Israel continued to violate the agreed-upon *status quo*. For example, two weeks before the Conference, a Palestinian engineer working on reconstruction of Al-Aqsa Mosque had been detained for trying to restore one tile in Al-Aqsa Mosque – one of the many illegal movements of the occupying power. Another example, the Museum of Tolerance in Jerusalem was built on a historic Islamic cemetery. No mention of Al-Aqsa Mosque could be made without historical reference to Jordan, as four major renovations had been done by Jordanian kings. This appreciation of Palestinians towards Hashemite Custodianship in Jerusalem was embodied in the Agreement signed in 2013 between Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, represented by Mahmoud Abbas.

LEAH SHAKDIEL, Representative of Oz V'Shalom and Rabbis for Human Rights, speaking about a Jewish perspective on the holy sites in Jerusalem, said that it was possible for an Orthodox Jew to accommodate not only peace, but also sovereignty of the Palestinian people and a political agreement. Jewish connection

to the site of its former Temple in the City had never stopped: proof of attachment could be seen in everyday blessings and prayers. But in reality, only Jewish extremists would like to see the Dome of Rock destroyed and replaced by a Jewish temple. The problem was that the majority of Jews in Israel did not have the political courage to send that extremist minority to the margins of society. Thus, its mentality had an impact on the right-wing government and its policies. Yet, the Israeli authorities did not even bother to come to this Conference and present their view.

Ms. Shakdiel presented an understanding of the Zionist project, which implied that return of Jews to the holy land meant they had to respect rights of all religions. For example, to her the Dome of the Rock was the most beautiful building in the world, and like her most Jews did not see a problem with its existence on the site of the former Jewish temple. Of course, it would be wrong to think only in terms of ideology and religion, without looking at reality and people's lives, including expulsion of people from their homes, destroying buildings and using the law to give power to one religion over another. It was possible to move away from a chauvinistic sense that if one prayed in one place, then it would become exclusive and oppressive of other religions. This was acknowledged in the Old Testament where it was stated that God was infinite and encompassed the universe. The Jewish idea of a focal point for worship [in a temple] was symbolic of a universal idea.

DAVID WILDMAN, Executive Secretary for Human Rights and Racial Justice, General Board of Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church, speaking about the role of Christian lobbies in the United States and abroad in preserving the status quo of the holy sites, said that international Christians had to remove the speck from their own eye. The Israel lobby in the United States had made Israel a domestic issue in the United States. This issue was about votes and campaign donations, while Palestine was still seen as a foreign policy issue. Now, the churches in the United States were beginning to gradually see the bigger picture. When the United States decided to unilaterally move the Embassy to Jerusalem, many churches condemned that movement as detrimental to peace. United Methodists were concerned that this move would incite and escalate violence of settlers who felt they now had even more impunity.

The legacy of the United States' churches in relation to indigenous grievances was still horrendous. There was a similar tension within the churches today in the United States that blindly supported Israel in its occupation policy. Thousands of pilgrims from the United States still went to Jerusalem and only some engaged with Palestinian Christians and Muslims, realizing that free access was not provided to Palestinians. Thus, now churches were beginning to catch up to their ethical considerations and started engaging with Airbnb, Expedia, Booking and TripAdvisor, which had all been criticized by Amnesty International in its recent report. Christian Zionism, a theology of some Christians, was a racist and false theology. The real battle was not in conferences but on streets for open access of Jerusalem to allow free practice of worship. In closing, he called upon the Committee and Member States to work on a database on international companies involved in tourism in the occupied Palestinian territory, so that their duplicity could be exposed when it came to Jerusalem.

#### DISCUSSION:

In the ensuing discussion, the role of civil society and churches in attempting to alter things was acknowledged. One gave as a hypothetical example, if tomorrow a map of the Old City of Jerusalem was drawn up where the Church of the Holy Sepulchre would be called the Temple of Jupiter, how would Christians feel? Concerning the access to Jerusalem and preservation of its heritage, some argued that there was talk about sites and buildings, but a lack of talk about human beings, both Palestinians and Christians within Jerusalem.

In answering, Mr. Sabella reference the Bible verse "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth." He said that Palestinians were meek, so hope was expressed they would inherit the land. Jerusalem was the eternal capital of humanity. Defining the holy places was very important and both Islam and Judaism defined the same places as holy, which is where the problem was. Then it came to determine how holy a place was for Islam and how holy for Judaism, in essence becoming a question of power and imposing will over history, tradition and heritage. Many Muslims came to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and showed respect to the place. Unfortunately, more extreme Jewish counterparts would come with an idea to take over a place, not to respect it. As religious narratives on all sides were upsetting, a political solution was needed. This political solution should include the *status quo* and right to free access to worship.

Mr. Abu Sway used the historical moment when Caliph Umar, invited by Christian clerics to pray at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, refused to do so because he was worried about setting a precedent and that future generations of Muslims would then claim the site as theirs. This paradigm of "My place is my place and yours is yours, and we should not be praying at each other places" was underlying a to live together in Jerusalem. Holiness should not be confused with geopolitics. For example, holiness did not stop at the border with Lebanon, which was a political delineation. After all, there was no commandment "Thou shall have a nation state." There was now a dangerous wedding between nationalism and religion.

Ms. Shakdiel reminded that we were living in dangerous times filled with anti-democratic sentiment. Instead of constitutions, the global market had become important, the G-8 and money that was oppressing countries from the south. In this terrible era, it was up to those who were intent on having a democratic impulse and civil society to work and we should not give up. What had happened to the Zionist movement was horrible; it moved from being an oppressed minority to an irresponsible type of sovereignty. Sovereignty had to be responsible; it meant one would be judged by the way one treated a smaller group that had less power. The State of Israel was behaving as an irresponsible State. Jerusalem Day, when Jews celebrate the "liberation of Jerusalem" in 1967, became a day when religious people celebrate. Even in an era where Trump was supporting Prime Minister Netanyahu, one would still have to reach a point of speaking about two capitals in one city. This would have to be done by those who were resistant to current anti-democratic era.

Mr. Wildman said that what needed to happen was to alter behaviour. There was now an identity-based discrimination towards Palestinians. This was the problem of Christian Zionism, which saw Palestinians as an obstacle to its triumph. This was fitting well with racist views about indigenous people in the United States. In the United States context, it was too easy to personify political issues. The problem was not Prime Minister Netanyahu or President Trump, it was when people joined groups like Christians United for Israel and movements demonizing others. The main concern was the violation of human rights that was so well documented. The question was what actions the Committee could take, despite all problems within the United Nations.