I, Me, Mine:

A Historical Perspective on International Recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's Capital

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Introduction

I returned to Jerusalem when I was thirteen years old. Since moving to Canada five years earlier, my relationship with the city - its history, its buildings, its sights and sounds - had remained a central component of my self-identity. Now, I was back home. The day following my bar-mitzvah (the reason for my visit), my uncle took me for a tour through Jerusalem's past and present. Although I don't remember much, there was one moment that has stuck with me to this day. Perched off a small lookout in Gan HaPa'amon, not far from the Montefiore Windmill, my uncle gestured toward the Old City walls and told me that someday, hopefully soon, half of this place would have to be given to the Palestinians in exchange for peace. He then turned to me and asked whether I would be willing to consider the trade. "Never," I answered. The thought of Jerusalem - my home, my birthright - being ripped in half and gifted to another people was unimaginable, and it haunted me for weeks afterwards. Up until that point in life, my relationship with the conflict had been purely black and white. I was convinced that Israel had always been on the righteous path, that its leaders, military, and citizens could do no wrong, and I knew virtually nothing about the Palestinian plight - nor did I particularly care. But the reality that I was forced to confront that day in Jerusalem allowed me to begin formulating a more nuanced understanding of the conflict, its complex background and present circumstances, as well as the sacrifices that peace demands.

At thirteen, I probably would have been thrilled by the United States' President Donald Trump's decision to officially recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and relocate his country's embassy from Tel-Aviv. Today, however, I see no cause for celebration. I continue to love Jerusalem and believe that it always has been, and always will be, Israel's rightful capital. But

Jerusalem belongs to the Palestinians too, and no truly effective resolution to the conflict will be possible unless both sides accept these facts. Simply put, recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2018 contributes nothing to the prospect of regional peace. Rather, it further complicates a regional situation that is more sensitive today than ever: rewarding an Israeli government that has made little effort to demonstrate its desire for a two-state solution, fueling Palestinians' claims of American bias, and halting a peace process that has already slowed down to a crawl for the indefinite future.

My disagreement with this decision and my fear of its repercussions do not stem from political opinion. They are instead rooted in an understanding of the complex history surrounding Jerusalem's role within the overall quest for peace. This essay will argue that although international recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital may appear groundbreaking to some , it largely mirrors previous efforts by both Israelis and Palestinians to establish exclusive ownership of the city by exploiting its powerful religious, historical, and emotional significance. This argument will be made by focusing on two critical episodes in the city's relatively recent past: the Palestine Riots of 1929 and Israel's de facto annexation of Jerusalem in 1967. Both will showcase not only how Jerusalem serves as a microcosm for broader beliefs and anxieties regarding the conflict, but that it has repeatedly been sought as a means towards the end.

The Palestine Riots of 1929

By the end of 1917, Palestine's future was at its greatest point of uncertainty in centuries. In December of that year, General Allenby's march into Jerusalem marked the conclusion of Britain's conquest and the transfer of power back into Christian hands for the first time in seven

hundred years. One month earlier, the Balfour Declaration had given Zionists newfound hope that they had evolved into a mature, forceful movement whose presence in the country was not merely fleeting. At this time, a number of questions arose. What were Britain's interests in the region and how would it go about pursuing them? How truly committed was the British regime to establishing a Jewish homeland? What would this mean for its relationship with the Palestinian majority?

The British Mandate's first decade proved to be a relatively quiet one, and while Jerusalem's Jewish and Muslim residents shared a long history of religious tensions, they never culminated in any significant outburst of violence. Under Ottoman rule, for example, Jews were permitted to reside within the city, but prohibited from accessing the Temple Mount (Cohen 64). What, then, led to the explosive outburst of violence that shook the country in late August of 1929? This answer can be traced to three general trends that came into conflict throughout the 1920s: Britain's declining commitment to Zionism; the Zionist Movement's growing sense of urgency and its pursuit of an increasingly political mission; and the Palestinians' efforts to protect their majority as well as to maintain a political and religious status-quo that was favorable to them (Shapira 74). More importantly, however, the growing spread of a national consciousness among members of both communities made way for the uniquely explosive dynamics in place by 1929 (Cohen 65). The divide between the two had previously been based purely on religious grounds, but another, more combustible element now came into play.

The lead-up to the Palestine Riots began on September 24, 1928, during the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. When British authorities removed a prohibited divider meant to separate male and female worshippers at the Western Wall, debate was sparked regarding the

longstanding issue of Jewish prayer rights at the site (Cohen 70). The controversy prompted the publication of a British government policy paper in December of that year, which deferred to the status-quo, upholding Muslim ownership of the Temple Mount vicinity while maintaining that Jews remain constrained to prayer rights (Cohen 70). However, the initial debate had by that point evolved into something that brought out more deeply-rooted anxieties - both religious and political - between Jews and Muslims, and British attempts at mediation did little to extinguish the flame that had already consumed the country's different hearts and minds.

On August 23, 1929 Palestinian crowds in Jerusalem unleashed a massive wave of violence on the city's Jewish residents (Cohen 72). The following day, bloodshed began to spread across the country. Jewish communities, including those in Hebron, Safed, Motza, and Kibbutz Beit Alpha, were devastated by massacre. British authorities, meanwhile, failed to contain the violence due to their generally indifferent attitude to the developments taking place, characterized by their dismissal of Jewish warnings and the large-scale reduction of police numbers throughout the preceding years (Shapira 79) When the carnage finally abated by August 30, one hundred and thirty three Jews had been killed. This compared with eighty seven Palestinian deaths, mostly at the hands of British police (Gilbert 60). This was to be the bloodiest moment in the history of Jewish-Muslim relations in Palestine until the Arab Revolt of 1936-1939.

Since the dust settled nearly ninety years ago, this episode has claimed an important spot in popular narratives of the conflict as both Israelis and Palestinians continue to place blame on the other. According to Hillel Cohen, a number of prominent Palestinian writers, including Ghalem Samrin and A.W. Kayyali, have tended to pass the riots off as a response to the Jewish

protests which called for the retaking of the Western Wall (65-66). Similarly, David Hirst has

argued that it was "the Zionists, exasperated by the Arabs' opposition and the support their case

had received from the mandatory authorities, made the Wall the scene of a crude and

chauvinistic show of force." (9). Was the Palestinian fear of such a Jewish takeover of the Wall

legitimate? In a sense, Palestinian concerns were logically rooted in broader anxieties regarding

the Zionist community's true intentions and the rapidly transforming landscape of their

homeland. Colin Schindler elaborates on the Palestinians' collective fear of dispossession at this

time: "The defeat of the Turks, the British conquest of Palestine, and the Balfour Declaration all

heightened the nationalist sentiments of both Jews and Arabs. Although the Balfour Declaration

had promised a national home rather than a state, there were real Arab fears about being

excluded and dispossessed." (Schindler 28).

While it is true that both Jews and Palestinians routinely provoked one another, the

general historical consensus holds that Jerusalem's Muslim authorities, led by Mufti al-Hajj

Amin al-Husseini, were primarily responsible for the escalation into violence. Although Philip

Mattar has been apprehensive about al-Husseini's role, the breakdown he provides of the Mufti's

activity at the time largely supports the prevailing argument that he sought to transform a

relatively unremarkable dispute into a heavily politicized matter for the Arab world in general

and Palestine's Muslims in particular. According to Mattar, the Mufti held the belief that the

Jewish people had "unlimited greedy aspirations" and that they plotted "to take possession of the

Mosque of al-Aqsa gradually… by starting with the Western Wall." (Mattar 39-40). Cohen, too,

argues that the Mufti was responsible for disseminating the simplistic view that "Zionism was a

melding of religion and nationality" and that gaining control of the Wall was therefore a critical

goal for the movement (Cohen 86). Whether or not the Mufti directly encouraged the crowds to wreak havoc remains difficult to prove, with material pointing both toward and against this conclusion, and this essay will not exaggerate his role by playing up available evidence. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Mufti took advantage of existing tensions in order to rally as many Palestinians as possible around his belief that any Jewish presence in Jerusalem, no matter how undisruptive, should never be tolerated.

Israel's De Facto Annexation of Jerusalem in 1967

In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, the nation was swept by the tides of military victory as its territory expanded threefold to include the West Bank, Golan Heights, and Sinai Peninsula. Contrasting the victory were the many fresh challenges facing the country, chief among them what to with the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and Syrian Arabs who had come under its rule. The most far-reaching product of the war, however, centred around Jerusalem. For the first time in nearly two millennia, the city was in Jewish hands. The conquest of Jerusalem was a powerful moment for Jews worldwide, the emotional shockwave it sent perhaps even rivalling the creation of the State of Israel twenty years earlier. Finally, Israel had the power to "alter the geopolitical status of Jerusalem" (Efrat 11), and the Israeli government would certainly waste no time doing just that.

The war was almost immediately followed by the Israeli government's deliberate effort to permanently strengthen Jerusalem's Jewish character by reshaping the city's geographical landscape and population makeup. Most scholars agree that the government sought this objective by following a two-step formula. First, bringing East Jerusalem under Israeli administrative

control through legal means. Second, reshaping Jerusalem's demographic balance and establishing facts on the ground. The plan was to unify Jerusalem without officially annexing its eastern neighborhoods and drawing international condemnation.

By the time the short war concluded, Israel's cabinet had unanimously reached a consensus regarding the need for Jerusalem's de facto annexation, adopting "an unequivocal position, and with no differences of opinion a consensus developed in the nation regarding the need to unify Jerusalem and turn it into a large city populated by Jews." (Efrat 11). Although a number of cabinet members disagreed about the manner in which this process should be conducted, the least dramatic path was ultimately selected: making use of existing legal frameworks to clandestinely integrate Jerusalem's two halves (Segev 485). In place of drafting a new law that would officially unify the city, the government simply modified existing administrative and municipal laws. The amendments made to the Law and Administration Ordinance (Amendment No. 11) 1967 and Municipal Corporations Ordinance (Amendment) Law 1967 effectively granted the Minister of Interior the power to enlarge any municipality without outside approval. On June 28, the Minister used his new authority to extend Jerusalem's bounds so that they would include the recently acquired eastern neighbourhoods (Yishai 45). This measure not only united Jerusalem, but also brought the Old City and its environs under Israeli, and therefore Jewish, authority.

However, Jerusalem could not be made Jewish by simply bringing the city under Israel's administrative control. Most important was the task of restoring Jerusalem to its former glory (Segev 487). This would be accomplished both by increasing Jerusalem's Jewish population and by strengthening the city's Jewish character through the establishment of facts on the ground.

The new occupation introduced a new challenge: what would the Palestinians' presence and role within the city look like in the future? Because Israel had technically integrated rather than annexed East Jerusalem under international law, the government was able to provide its Palestinian majority the status of permanent residents without being obligated to grant them citizenship. This move not only prevented them from voting in national elections, but also threatened the stability of their collective foothold, since permanent residency could be revoked far more easily than citizenship (Rempel 525). Furthermore, both the government and private citizens began laying the groundwork for the erection of new neighbourhoods and settlements that would make room for a growing number of Jewish residents and extend the city's bounds beyond the pre-1967 border (Segev 485). The modern suburbs of East Talpiot, Pisgat Ze'ev, the French Hill, and Gilo were all originally part of this calculated effort to modify Jerusalem's demographic balance.

The Israeli government further believed that a more favorable reality required the swift creation of facts on the ground (Rempel 522). The most questionable manner in which this materialized was the destruction of Jerusalem's Mughrabi Quarter, a centuries-old Muslim community which sat directly facing the Western Wall. On June 11, 1967, just one day after the war's end, military authorities expelled the quarter's residents with only several minutes' notice before the bulldozers began rolling through their homes (Hirst 10). The Western Wall Plaza, a place where today's Jews gather together in worship and joy, sits at the former site of these homes. The destruction of the Mughrabi Quarter merely signalled the beginning of a year-and-a-half-long process of re-Judaizing the Jewish Quarter: some eighty Palestinian families were cleared out, either by means of compensated eviction or by assuming ownership of

houses that had been left abandoned at the end of the war, in order to make room for Jewish

residents (Segev 488). Officially, Jerusalem was only officially annexed in 1980 after the

Knesset passed the Jerusalem Law. However, this was a largely symbolic move to formalize a

process that began more than a decade earlier (Yishai 45). There is much truth to Israeli

intellectual Yeshayahu Leibowitz' infamous remark that the Western Wall, and by extension all

of Jerusalem, had been co-opted into a symbol of conquest (Segev 433). The State of Israel

finally managed to gain ownership of a united Zion, but did so while knowingly bringing about

the subjugation and dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who knew it as their

only home.

Conclusion

The two episodes discussed in this essay may appear entirely unrelated to the United

States' official recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. But history may be our most useful

tool in determining whether or not this decision will help advance the prospect of peace. In 2018,

Israelis and Palestinians generally continue to seek exclusive ownership of Jerusalem while

discounting the validity of the other's claims and the authenticity of their attachments to the city.

Recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital before both sides have reached a shared solution to the

conflict serves as an explicit assertion of Jewish ownership of the city. Mufti al-Husseini sought

to accomplish the same goal for his people in 1929, when he convinced Palestinians across the

land that Jewish access to the Western Wall represented a matter of life and death for their

national aspirations. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, the Israeli government strove to do this

too when it began to reshape Jerusalem's demographic balance. Both sides have refused to

acknowledge that Jerusalem equally belongs to Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. Therein lies the problem that this essay has identified. By now, the United States has already opened its embassy to Israel in Jerusalem and it is too late to ask that this decision be reversed. Other countries are poised to follow suit. Yet, what appears to be a mere embassy move embodies the repetition of a historical cycle that will only continue to stoke the flames of hatred on both sides. All that I can hope for is that our leaders - Israeli, Palestinian, American - pay a little more attention to the history next time. Maybe if previous generations did so, thirteen year old me may not have thought that coexisting in Jerusalem is so bad after all.

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