

# Whither Christian Jerusalem? The city is holy to three religions, not just two

by Chibli Mallat

The long Camp David negotiations between the president of the Palestinian Authority and the prime minister of Israel fell apart, by all accounts, over the issue of Jerusalem. Disagreement centered on the impossibility to bridge the gap between the conflicting sovereignty claims of the two leaders. It was assumed, throughout, that Ehud Barak was speaking for Israeli sovereignty over the city, while Yasser Arafat wanted the recognition of full (or quasi-full) Palestinian sovereignty over the Eastern Arab side of the city.

But the question is: was Barak defending Israeli or Jewish sovereignty, and was Arafat standing for Palestinian or Muslim interests? In other words, are we witnessing in the conflict over sovereignty a simple national clash for Jerusalem as capital of the state of Israel as against the capital of the (state of) Palestine? Or should the complexity be extended much further afield to Jerusalem as the Holy City for the three great historical monotheistic religions? On this qualification depends the future of Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

Despite the tireless rhetoric over the sacredness of Jerusalem for the three religions, the little which has surfaced from the two-week pow-wow sounds dominantly sectarian: Barak, no doubt, was talking about the eternal capital of the Jews, and his "one Israel," we have learned over the past two years, is an exclusively "one Jewish Israel." In a sense, the equation of Israel

with Jewishness, at the expense of the equality of all its citizens, a fifth of whom are not Jews, is hardly surprising. After all, Israel is by definition a Jewish state. The case of Arafat is more troublesome. The so far muted alliance of convenience between Christians and Muslims, an alliance largely driven by the Judaization of Jerusalem – incidentally a problem for less fanatical Jews themselves – fails to secure Christian rights. It should no longer be acceptable for Christians, inside or outside the Holy Land, to be represented vicariously.

## Disregard at Camp David for international status stems from the lack of formal representation

Christian interests in Jerusalem have been marginal in Camp David. This was confirmed by Madeleine Albright in Rome on Aug. 1: "At Camp David certainly, the issue of internationalization was not the solution to it," she said, despite the well established position in international law over Jerusalem. This disregard at Camp David for the international status of the city results from the absence of formal Christian representation. Insofar as Jewish and Muslim representation dominated the negotiating table, and the American broker was hardly a Christian broker, one understands better the exercise in damage limitation which was carried out in the Vatican, after the fact, by the US Secretary of State.

For better or for worse, then, including the risk of tying a further knot to an already intractable file, Jerusalem must be reclaimed as the Holy City for Christians also. The recurring rhetorical reference to its sanctity and importance for all three religions must now give way to a dual breakthrough: a diplomatic position forcing Christian repre-

sentation on the negotiating table, on equal footing with the other two religious representatives, and a legal position that does not relegate Christians to a mere rank of pilgrims and tourists under the sufferance of Jewish or Muslim sovereignties.

Let us probe further these two avenues. Neither representation nor legal status is a simple proposal. While it will come as shocking, at first, for Christians to take some distance from Arafat as a "Muslim" representative, the logic of 'city holiness' is simply too powerful for such figleaves to endure any longer.

The Muslim president of the Palestinian Authority cannot speak authoritatively in the name of the Christians of the world. While such an approach risks a grave split within Palestinian society along sec-

tarian lines, a direct representation of Christian interests is needed because of the currently dominant sectarian logic. Arafat himself should allow it to happen by shrugging off the self-bestowed mantle of Christian representation. Who can bear such a mantle is a difficult question, but Camp David has forced the issue of Christian Jerusalem on the world in a way which needs to be henceforth addressed in more attentive terms. This is pressing in view of the dramatic decline of Christian residents of the city: in 1893, Christians represented 13 percent of the people of the Holy Land, in 2000, they are barely 2 percent. In Jerusalem proper, 30,000 Christians lived in 1944. They were still some 27,000 in 1967, when Israel occupied the city. According to some accounts, they are now fewer than 7,000.

As for the contours of the "final" legal status, here also a revolution of sorts is needed, because Muslim (ie Palestinian) and Jewish (ie Israeli) sovereignties exclude, by their very nature, Christian rights. In other words, the legal status of Jerusalem must also accommodate the right to Christian sovereignty over the city. True, Christians are far less numerous than Muslims and Jews, but this is as much a fact of the ruthless policy of Judaization over the century, as it is because of their improper representation at the negotiating table. This

will not be possible until a more serious re-examination of "internationalization" as a legal solution, along the lines of the UN-adopted Statute of the City of Jerusalem. That statute, approved by the UN Trusteeship

Council in 1950, consecrates in law the "corpus separatum" of Jerusalem, and its "Special International Regime."

A political seachange is needed for an approach to Jerusalem which would conform to international law, and to the importance of the city for all three world religions. Diplomatically, a full, comprehensive, representation is needed at the negotiating table. In law, a determined share of sovereignty is required to acknowledge the Holy City's special international regime. Without those two conditions, there is no future for Christian Jerusalem.

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## We can't have Christians relegated to tourists under the sufferance of Jewish and Muslim sovereignties