



Between Many Jerusalems

Reviewed by Issam Nassar

The Politics of Sacred Space: The Old City of Jerusalem in the Middle East Conflict, by Michael Dumper; Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002. 185 pages.

Although the conflict over Palestine is multifaceted, the question of Jerusalem is by far more complex and unique in ways that often are not taken into account by those who hold a vision for the political future of this city. The fact that Jerusalem is a holy city for three religions makes it unique and symbolic, and at the same time blurs the reality that it is also a living metropolis. For those who reside in it, Jerusalem is a city with a material life contested and inhabited by two national groups that each claim it as their capital. Because it is a holy city for three different and distinct religions, there have been a number of historical imaginations of the city ingrained in the minds of the followers of those religions. It is through these independent and separate imaginings that the concept of the holy has been assigned various

meanings. In a sense, there are several Jerusalems coexisting next to each other and on top of each other, with each community seeing only its own and in the process ignoring the others' imaginings - if not the others' very existence.

Between these Jerusalems and within each one of them there exist many conflicts, contradictions and competitions over issues related simultaneously to both the spiritual and the material. Contestations over who owns a historical and a religious site are an integral part of life in Jerusalem, while conflicts over the politics of nationalism are often tainted by elements of religious imaginings. The Old City of Jerusalem, despite its being a small portion of modern day Jerusalem, is now at the center of all such contestations.

Aware of the all the difficulties inherent to the discussion above, Michael Dumper in his *The Politics of Sacred Space: The Old City of Jerusalem in the Middle East Conflict* examines the roles of the three religious communities within the Old City, as well as the changes in demography that were brought about by Israel's occupation and policy of annexation of the city. While the Jewish population of the Old City has grown significantly, as has Jewish control over city affairs, both Muslim and Christian roles in Jerusalem have declined ever since Israel occupied east Jerusalem in 1967.

Dumper illustrates how events such as the destruction of the Magharibi quarter of the Old City by Israel and the expansion of the Jewish quarter contributed to the decline of Muslim position in the city. Israeli direct control of certain holy sites that were until 1967 under Muslim control, and the continuation of archaeological digs under and around *al-haram* represent attempts to change the character of the city as an Arab

and Islamic city. Still, the Muslim community of the Old City has found ways to resist Israel's policies, mainly through activities under the Muslim *waqf* authorities.

In a similar manner, Dumper shows that the Christians of Jerusalem have also seen their role in the city's affairs significantly weakened. The size of the community in fact has dramatically declined since the War of 1948 from close to one fifth of the city's total population to a mere three percent. Since 1967, Israel's policies often have been aimed at preventing Muslim-Christian cooperation in the city, as well as deepening the conflicts that already exist between the various weakened Christian denominations. The fact that the properties of the Christian Churches were subject to active Jewish acquisition by various means (confiscation, lease and purchase) only made matters worse.

Dumper concludes that the long years of Israel's occupation, with all the changes that such control brought about, make the return to the status quo that existed before 1967 rather hard. At the same time, he argues - perhaps with some exaggeration - that Israel's plans for unifying and Judaizing the city have also largely failed. The Muslim community in the city shows signs of revival and self-assertion and the Christian Church leadership has become more adamant about its disaffection with the Israeli vision for Jerusalem.

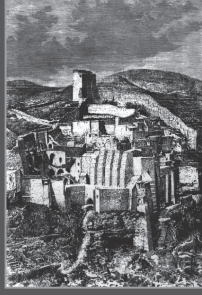
On the issue of the Old City and the peace process, Dumper offers insights into a complex situation that can to some degree explain the failure of the Camp David negotiations of 2000. By subjecting the issue of holy places to legal scrutiny, the author explains how the various laws and legislations that are in existence have managed, on one hand, to maintain the status quo in the city and on the other, to change it beyond

recognition. Of particular concern are the Israeli laws that annexed east Jerusalem to Israel and dissolved its independent administrative status, particularly the Israeli Law of Administrative Ordinance. Not only do these laws come into conflict with the many other regulations that previously existed regarding the status of the city (such as the Ottoman *firman of Status Quo* of 1856 and Article 14 of the Mandate Charter of 1922) but they also violate commitments made to the Palestinians during the peace process. The Israeli laws that made it possible for settlers to move into the Old City were on many occasions responsible for redefining and sometimes fuelling

the conflict over the city.

This is an unusual book in its theme and scope, but not an unfamiliar one. It is about sacred imagination, its legislation and negotiation over both what the city represents, as well as the political negotiations in the ongoing Middle East conflict. Dumper has managed to write a comprehensive and a coherent narrative that combines themes usually addressed in separation from each other. This well documented historical/political study is a must-read for students of Jerusalem's history and scholars and politicians on all sides.

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