

The Role of Sacred Sites in Handling the Israel-Palestinian Conflict

Shorena SIGUA*

Maia KAPANADZE**

Abstract

The presented article deals with the issue which is defined as the key role of holy sites and their importance in handling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The conflict between Israel and Palestine has been a hot spot on the world map for several decades and still maintains front page news of the main political events, which is still important due to its wide scale and lack of prospects and ways to resolve this conflict.

In scientific circles, a number of monographs and scientific articles have been devoted to a still unresolved dispute between these two peoples and there is still a great deal of interest among scientists regarding this issue, to which a number of opinions on possible ways to end up the conflict have been expressed. Many leading organizations and institutions of the world have intervened in resolving this issue, but, for some reason or more, the attempt to end it up peacefully still seems a distant prospect and is still very obscure.

Numerous studies related to this problem suggest one of the ways to resolve this conflict through existence of a common sacred religious place between these two nations and their common patriarch.

The purpose of this article is to highlight the role of common sacraments and common ancestor in the managing this conflict, and it also emphasizes the fact that, previously, one of the main causes of this conflict was the common religious sanctity existing there, which might be considered one of the main key factors to resolve this issue and put the final peaceful end to this long-standing dispute.

Keywords: Conflict, dispute, issue, peaceful, religious, resolve

*Ph.D. Student, Faculty of Social Sciences, Program of Political Sciences, Caucasus International University, Tbilisi, Georgia.
E-mail: sh.sigua@gmail.com

**Assoc. Prof., Georgian-Iranian Relations Scientific-Analytical Center, Caucasus International University, Tbilisi, Georgia.
E-mail: maia-maiko@mail.ru

Introduction

The state, its governing, policy and religion, these are qualitatively and completely different kinds of concepts; there is a very close, invisible and harmonious fusion among them that make peaceful coexistence and absolute guarantee of clerical, theological or political society. Though, even a small disagreement and dissonance between them is just enough to stir up political crisis and chaos.

Over the centuries, the existence of religion and common religious sanctities among people themselves could have somehow played a role of a peacemaker, and even its prerogative was to settle and end long wars up. However, the conflict and war caused by the craving to seize common religious sanctities is still remembered by mankind.

Research methods: Qualitative and in-depth interview, Content-Analysis Method.

Results: We found out some main reasons that might have caused the conflicts and while at the same time could be the key of resolving the issue. As we consider this theme should be relevant for persons who are interested in history and politics of Eastern world and Conflict resolution.

Discussion: We dare to say that the key to end up Israel-Palestine conflict might lay in religious issue and their common sacred things.

Religion and holy places, from the very beginning, had a very deep mystical influence in both the secular and the theological states. Along with sacred rules and rituals, it played a politically dominant role in the creation and formation of a particular state. Its role is incredibly large and multifaceted.

Sacred places play a particularly important role in the political or social life of the Middle East. In many cases, politics uses these sacred places as its own weapon, which naturally has somehow great impacts on the political or geographical space and landscape in its own way.

The most obvious case is Israel-Palestine conflict; one of the reasons might be considered the common religious sanctities. Therefore, the presented circumstance makes it obvious in which way the factors of common religious relics have got influence on the handling the conflict.

Small Historical Review

In the era of patriarchs, before the Jews conquered Jerusalem, Shiloh, Beth-el, Shechem (the Arabs call the latter Nablus, which

is the Arabic name for the Greek city of Neapolis, or the new city), had a cult meaning for them. When the Jewish state ceased to exist, Jerusalem still retained its symbolic role.

Orthodox Jews do believe that the third temple is to be erected by the Messiah (Messiah, the Savior revealed by God), but there are those who are willing to build the third temple themselves on the spot where they believe the previous two stood. This means to annihilating an Islamic shrine standing on the same site - a rock dome.

However, a few sound-minded Israeli politicians are well aware that even an attempt to make such step would create an international problem (Bloomington, 1991, pp. 174-183).

The second part of Jewish temple is considered to be the only surviving pillar of its foundation - Ha-Kotel Hamaravi («Western Wall», better known as the «Wailing Wall»), which the Jews consider to be the main shrine of their faith.

Orthodox Judaism forbids a Jew to ascend on Har-Ha Bait because they may accidentally step on it and defile the place where the Holy of Holies locate. However, the temple has not existed for two millennia any more, and the exact location of the Holy of Holies is unknown.

Since 1947, by a UN decision, Jerusalem was declared an independent administrative unit subject only to the UN. During the Arab-Israeli war of 1948-1949, Jerusalem was divided into two parts: its eastern part was handed over to Jordan, and its western part to Israel.

1950 The Israeli government, against the UN decision, declared Jerusalem the capital of Israel and then annexed the eastern part. Because of this, there is still fighting between Israel and Palestine.

The formation of the sacredness of the place is not always the same. A comparison of the approaches of the world's two religions to the holiness of Jerusalem gives us such a picture:

Because Jerusalem was originally a holy city (the strategic importance of the city always used to lag behind of its religious significance), it was constantly «liberated» on religious grounds. The «liberation action» was carried out by a secular government, which was followed by great bloodshed.

Sacred Places and Their Role

Jerusalem is a holy and sacred city for both Jews and Muslims. The importance and origin of this holy city is just the cause of the

endless disagreement between the Jews and the Palestinians up to date. The desire to own this sacred place led to an unresolved dispute the Jews and Palestinian Arabs.

For the Jews, coming back to the "Promised Land" was born at the very heart of their religion, for fulfilling to which they have been striving for centuries, and this religious issue is politically motivated as well. The unifying link for Jews scattered all over the world is their religion and their desire to return to a holy place dedicated to God's chosen ones. As for the Palestinian Arabs, they settled in the area for which they did not wage war on anyone for its conquest.

Added to this is the fact that as soon as Islam became a monotheistic religion, the confessors of which are the Palestinian Arabs, Jerusalem became the third holy city for the Muslims (after Mecca and Medina). But the only problem is not only this one – the Jews and the Arabs are peoples of Semitic descent who have in common the patriarch Abraham the same as – Ibrahim. Hence, they have common religious sanctities as well, which may play both a positive and a negative role in handling the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It depends on how involved external forces can directly or indirectly effect on this conflict. (**Note** – we are focusing only on the Palestinian Arabs. In fact, Jerusalem is a holy city for all Muslims. The common patriarch Abraham is the patriarch of the Arabs and not just the Palestinian Arabs).

After the restoration of the state of Israel, both Jews and Palestinians claim the right of the capital of Jerusalem equally. The reason for this is the common Holy places in Jerusalem between Jews (Jews) and Muslims (in this case, we emphasize the Palestinian Arabs). Aforementioned this is one of the reasons for the constant disagreement between them, which is why this dispute remains unresolved to this day (Anderson, 2001, pp. 104-114).

Jerusalem - the capital of world religions - is one of the main cornerstones of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Both of them consider it to be the capital of their own.

It is the holy and sacred places that are the main cause of the unresolved disagreement and bloody conflict between the Palestinians and the Jews, which deepens the wound of the conflict more and more and leaves no room for healing up.

Holy to the Jews is the whole Israel, which according to the Torah was promised by their God. Particularly sacred to them is the Temple Mount (Har Ha-Bait), where they do not / cannot ascend, and its western wall (Kotel Ha-Maarawi), where they pray for. This place is also sacred to Muslims.

The tomb of the patriarchs in the city of Hebron (the tombs of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob in the cave of Machpela) is a place of equal sanctity for Jews and Muslims, as the common patriarch Abraham the same as Ibrahim is buried there in the 7th century the Al-Haram Al-Khalil Mosque was built.

The third holy city for Muslims is Jerusalem - the same Al-Quds - where [the hill] is the Al-Aqsa Mosque ("Holy Reserve") on Al-Haram esh-Sharif, which the Jews call exactly the same place as Har Habayit and Al-Qubbat al-Sakhra (Dome of the Rock) (Ellis, Marc, pp. 70-77).

If "two or more religions claim to have a holy place, peaceful coexistence is possible until other religions recognize the special right of one religion in that holy place and accustom themselves to the idea that they have the means and the right to pray there. However, attempts to change this exclusive right have provoked strong protests and sometimes even bloody controversy. "(Boaz Evron, 1995. p.100-115) – This case is well-reflected in Israel-Palestinian conflict, where along with other issues, is compounded by having common religious sanctities, which complicates the things more and gives the involved external forces a good opportunity to resolve this conflict solely for their own interests.

According to Muslim belief, Muhammad miraculously traveled from Mecca to Medina, from Medina to Jerusalem, from where he ascended to heaven (this ascent is called Miraj) through al-Buraq. Through this journey of Muhammad, Islam linked itself to the special sanctity of the Jews in Jerusalem, which was already firmly established and rooted in Judaism. The main reason for this was the clear emphasis on the fact that Jews and Arabs have one patriarch that is they have a common Abrahamic origin. **Note:** Muhammad, being an Arab, would certainly care about the fact that for the Muslims, after Mecca and Medina, the holy city was also Jerusalem.

The geographical coincidence of the sacred place for the two religions, of course, creates an ideological controversy (Gachechiladze, 2019, pp.235-237). The coincidence of these sacred places can be not only a complication, but it might also be a link between still unresolved dispute and could contribute to the handling the conflict.

However, the conflict is provoked not only by wild striving to master these common sanctities but it might be incited both by internal and external forces as well.

A clear proof of this is the fact that the former US President, Donald Trump, on December 6, 2017, recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

“Jerusalem is one of the world’s most fiercely contested swaths of real estate, with each side disputing the other’s claims. Palestinians view East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian State and most of the world considers it occupied territory. Jerusalem’s Old City has the third-holiest mosque in Islam and the holiest site in Judaism, making the city’s status a sensitive issue for Muslims and Jews alike. Jerusalem is also sacred ground to Christians” (Mark Landler, Dec. 6, 2017).

The declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel brought the conflict between Israel and Palestine into another phase and brought the situation to a standstill, from which it was very difficult to get out.

Managing the bloody conflict that keeps one of the hottest spots on the modern world map for more than a decade, might have been caused by the factor of having the common religious shrines, places, and the common patriarch Abraham.

Conclusion

The Palestinians and the Jews claim on the same holy places, which equally strengthens the ways of reconciliation between them and while at the same time contributes to the aggravation of the conflict.

Though, without interference and ceasing of the outer forces in the process of resolving this long-standing dispute, the Palestinians and the Jews might themselves be able to clearly outline and set out, in the light of common sanctuaries and holy places, the prospects for a peaceful end to this long-lasting conflict.

Their common Semitic, Abrahamic origins might be considered as good mechanism for healing this conflict. This considered, there may occur the positive outcome, as the means through which these two nations are confronted with might easily turn into the ways of resolving actually outlining the way-out of the conflict.

It is not in the interests and plans of external actors to resolve this issue for many reasons; quite on the contrary, the religious context is used as an artificially aggravating negative factor, which further increases and prolongs the duration of this “everlasting” conflict.

References

- Anderson, E. W. (2001). *The Middle East: Geography and Geopolitics*. London and New-York: Routledge.
- Aruri, N. (ed). (1989). *Occupation, Israel over Palestine*. A set of essays examining the Israeli occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. AAUG Press.
- Boaz, E. (1995). *Jewish State or Israeli Nation?* Indiana University Press.
- David Ben-Gurion and the American Alignment for a Jewish State*. (1991). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, and Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University.
- Ellis, M. (1989). *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: The Uprising and the Future*. A plea for restoration of the tradition of justice in Judaism to be applied to Palestine and Palestinians. Orbis Books.
- Gachechiladze, R. (2019). *Middle East*. Georgian edition, Sulakauri Publishing, Tbilisi.
- Gonen, R. (2000). *Biblical Holly Places*. Contested holiness: Jewish, Muslim, and Christian perspectives on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, Jerusalem, 2017.
- Lander, M. (2017). Trump Recognizes Jerusalem as Israel’s Capital and Orders U.S. Embassy to Move. Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/world/middleeast/trump-jerusalem-israel-capital.html>
- Stewart, J. (2009). *British Policy in the Middle East 1966-74*, Paperback.