

# WHAT IS THE LAND OF ISRAEL?

By Baruch Cohon

Among the debates flourishing in today's media, from print to internet and back, Israel/Palestine ranks high. History, religion and politics intersect in the Middle East generally and on the banks of the Jordan in particular.

Extremists on the Jewish side proclaim that what is called Greater Israel is the eternal inheritance of the Jews. That concept would expand the boundaries of modern Israel considerably, to the dimensions of Solomon's kingdom, including territory now governed by Syria, more or less governed by Iraq and Egypt, and an integral part of the kingdom of Jordan.

Arab extremists would settle for nothing less than liquidating the Jewish state and replacing it with one more Arab dictatorship. Presumably such a state would be called Palestine since that is the name Arafat chose for his fictitious nation, the name that Arab propagandists then sold to the world.

Between these extremes, official and unofficial negotiators and debaters operate.

History supports the Jewish position to this extent: Jews established a national home on that land some 3,000 years ago and developed a strong culture there for 1,000 years. Then, despite being overrun and exiled by Babylonians and Romans, some Jews continued for the past 2,000 years to live in Jerusalem and some other parts of the territory that Imperial Rome called Judea, Ottoman Turkey called the Sanjaq of Jerusalem, and England called the Protectorate of Palestine. Jewish tradition never called it anything but *eretz yisrael* – the Land of Israel.

What does that land consist of?

When the World War I allies defeated Turkey and the British took over that area, the Balfour Declaration promised a Jewish homeland in the territory of *eretz yisrael*, but laid out no boundaries. A League of Nations resolution in 1922 was more specific. Neither of these documents ever got implemented, however. Then came World War II and the Holocaust. And by the time 1947 rolled around the much-discussed Partition Plan made it plain. Its borders were irregular but definite, assigning territory to the Jews and territory to the Arabs. This plan gave the bulk of England's

protectorate to what was then called Transjordan – now the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. By that time there was a sizeable active Jewish population between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, made up of Zionist halutzim, refugees from genocide, and the remnants of longterm residents. That population, led by Chaim Weitzman and David Ben-Gurion, accepted the partition. The Arabs rejected it. The British proceeded to pull out. The Jews proclaimed the independence of the State of Israel. Arab residents of the new state took orders from their supposed allies in surrounding countries and many of them picked up and left, on the theory that those “allies” would soon drive the Jews into the sea and they could return in triumph. That, of course, did not happen. The struggling pioneers of Israel beat off seven Arab armies and survived. Ever since then, those “allies” steadfastly refused to admit the Arab refugees to their countries, leaving them instead in squalid refugee camps to be supported by the United Nations, to generate international sympathy and to breed local suicide bombers.

So much for history. The result of it all gives us a growing number of people who are best described as victims – not victims of “Israeli occupation” as their propagandists claim, but victims of their fellow Arabs’ corrupt governments.

Religion figures strongly in this picture, both legitimately and distortedly. Legitimately, Muslims have very little connection to the territory centered in Jerusalem. Although they maintain mosques on the Temple Mount and claim it is holy to their faith, the fact is that Mohammed never set foot in Jerusalem. The Koran never mentions the place. Muslims pray facing Mecca, not Jerusalem. Only Jews face Jerusalem in prayer. The Haj is a sacred pilgrimage pious Muslims try to undertake at least once in their lives – not to Jerusalem but to Mecca. Mecca is their holy city. There, as in the rest of Arabia, no religion but Islam is allowed. Go find a church or synagogue in Riyadh. Muslim religious law is called Shari’a, and the goal of radical Islamists is to impose its rule on all the human race, by persuasion or by force. Furthermore, radical Islam reportedly holds that any land once ruled by Muslims remains Muslim land forever and must be recovered as a religious duty. That includes a broad swath of planet Earth from Spain and Portugal on the west to the Philippines in the east, from the Balkans and Chechnya in the north to central Africa in the south. Mosques in Dubai, and in Iran and Sudan and throughout the Middle East, and their outposts in places like England and Germany and China, preach death to

the infidels. Since Islam prohibits birth control, a huge number of younger sons with no means of support floods into non-Muslim countries to get recruited in these mosques, sent to Pakistan, and trained to commit terrorist attacks. Additionally, Islamist organizations like Al Qaeda – claiming religious sanction – support their terrorist activity with the drug trade.

Thus does a monotheistic religion get distorted to authorize international crime.

Now let's look at another religion. Ancient Israel was a theocratic society. Although the king was a national head of state, he was responsible to priests and prophets who were relied on to supply Divinely inspired guidance. Torah law applied to all Jewish residents, and traditionally included 613 mitzvos or commandments. Still does. Those strictures are not now and never were enforceable on non-Jews. Resident non-Jews were held responsible for the Seven Commandments of Noah – Noah being the common ancestor of the entire human race. The Seven Noachide laws included: 1) courts of justice, 2) prohibition of blasphemy, 3) of idolatry, 4) of incest, 5) of murder (literally bloodshed: "whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed"), 6) of robbery, and 7) of eating meat cut from a living animal. That's all. Ancient Israel accepted those who lived in its territory and worshipped their own way, as long as they followed those basic standards of human conduct. In that spirit, modern Israel guarantees freedom of religion to all who live in its territory. Jewish religious law is called Halacha, and Orthodox Judaism would urge all Jews to observe it. But Judaism is not a proselytizing religion, and certainly not a convert-or-die religion. Those who join the Jewish fold by choice are welcome, but those who do not are not the targets of either persuasion or force. Non-Jewish houses of worship in Israel are not merely permitted, they are protected.

Thus does another monotheistic religion – the first such in fact – get applied to build a democratic society.

The religious reality of the Land of Israel is inextricably linked to the political reality. What makes that condition inevitable is the fact that being Jewish is both a religious and an ethnic identity. You can be a citizen of Israel and be an Arab. Further, you can be a Christian, a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Jew

or a Hindu and still be a citizen of Israel. But you can't be both a Jew and a Muslim. You can't be both a Jew and a Christian.

And you can't be both a Jew and an Arab unless you are an Arab converted to Judaism. If you are so converted, you risk your life at the hands of Islamist radicals.

Religious/political links have strange effects on the policies of organizations both in Israel and elsewhere. Christian churches that value the land as the cradle of Christianity are far from unanimous when it comes to their policies. Left-leaning churches divest from investments in Israel, in "politically correct" deference to Arab complaints about "occupation." Conservative churches, however, support Israel in particular and the Jewish people in general with some real fervor. Jewish organizations too, continuing the uncomfortable tradition of "two Jews, three opinions," range from total doves to total hawks. Those multiple opinions also get represented in the Knesset, Israel's parliament.

Reflections of this complex picture crop up in American politics, most prominently in an election year. Numerically the Jewish vote is a small fraction of the total -- perhaps as little as 1%. But candidates compete for it vigorously. In states with large Jewish populations like Florida, that vote can mean the difference between victory and defeat. So effective campaigning requires candidates to tell Jewish audiences what they want to hear, and by and large they want to hear a positive attitude toward Israel. Israel is our ally. Israel must survive. We seek peace between Israel and its neighbors. Etc., etc. These are public statements. Messages to Muslims and to Arab-American groups can be less than public. Sometimes more can be learned from what those groups say and do regarding a candidate, than what the candidate says and does about them. In the current campaign, for example, Democrat Obama drew an ovation from Jews in an AIPAC audience for a speech advocating retaining Jerusalem as the permanent undivided capital of Israel. Then a day later he reversed himself in an interview, declaring Jerusalem must be a subject of "final negotiations." What happened in between? Hamas, the group that runs Gaza and is defined by our State Department as a terrorist organization, yelled in protest. And Hamas is the group that previously endorsed Obama's candidacy!

The United Nations reflects the Land of Israel controversy in its own convoluted way. Created with UN approval in 1948, Israel has drawn a large majority of negative UN resolutions ever since. Of course Israel has just one vote there. The Arab/Muslim bloc has many. The much publicized Durban conference on human rights was manipulated into an anti-Israel rally by Muslim countries represented there. Of all the world's refugees, only the Arab refugees are subsidized by a special UN commission. Up to now, the UN's one nation one vote structure protects countries like Arabia which practices human slavery, and Sudan which conducts campaigns of genocide, but censures the State of Israel for its "targeted killings" in protection of its own citizens. Of late, the Egyptian who heads the UN's atomic energy team, Mr. El Baradei, finally concluded that Islamofascist Iran could produce an atomic weapon within six months. One wonders what kind of protest could cause him to reverse himself.

Mainstream media in the United States, and even more in other countries, tends to swallow and repeat anti-Israel propaganda, whether it is faked pictures of an Arab boy supposedly shot by Israeli soldiers or the twisted reports of Al Jazeera and of Hizbullah's media mouthpiece condemning Israel for defending itself against terrorist attacks.

In all these areas, the conflict surrounding the Land of Israel spills over into the world at large. Islamists cite Israeli "occupation" as justification for their violence. That's what they tell the world. But to their own people they define Israel as the "little Satan." America is the "big Satan." Both must be destroyed.

Therefore, in the days ahead we could well expect to see mounting pressure on the Western World to abandon Israel, on the theory that doing so will satisfy the Muslim World. It won't. Abandoning Israel would only encourage the Islamofascist war against the West.

The Land of Israel – homeland, battleground, sacred shrine, secular laboratory, tourist magnet or terrorist target – looms important in our world. Eric Hoffer the longshoreman-philosopher once wrote: "As it goes for Israel, so will it go for all of us."