International Conference on Question of Jerusalem Concludes with Experts Sharing Models for Coexistence between Palestinians, Israelis

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Meetings Coverage

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JAKARTA, 15 December — As the two-day International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem concluded this morning, experts in a plenary session on historical and contemporary models of coexistence provided a glimpse of the city’s past and present while offering suggestions for the future.

Menachem Klein, a university professor and author based in Ramat Gan, provided a look at Jerusalem before the 1948 war had divided the city. There was a patently incorrect concept about how Jerusalem had been separated into exclusive ethnic quarters prior to the war. In fact, inhabitants spoke many languages, and Arabs and Jews had lived side by side in what was then a cosmopolitan city.

During the pre-war years, inhabitants had lived respectfully and peacefully in the city, with no “mental boundary” separating Muslim and the Jewish areas and where barriers of language and culture posed few impediments, he said. Residents who ventured into the “physical sphere” of the “other” had said they felt quite at home there. While one could not return to the past, he said, one must learn from the inclusive social nature of the city’s history. Indeed, the shared past needed to be studied to build a shared future.

Azyumardi Azra, Rector of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University in Jakarta, said that Indonesia’s shared history of peaceful religious coexistence had included a guarantee for the protection of life and property and had recognized the basic principles of human rights long before the United Nations adopted the Declaration of Human Rights.

Moving forward, he said, there was a need to mainstream religious moderates so that those groups could play a bigger role on the road to peace. Dialogues needed to be intensified, first on an intra-Muslim and intra-Jewish basis and then between religious groups. Religious leaders must also strengthen dialogue to develop mutual respect and understanding to create peace in the city. The aim of religious dialogue spanned a range of issues, including early warning systems to avoid conflict. Indonesia’s model for peaceful coexistence demonstrated successful results in that regard. Intellectuals and non-governmental organizations must also be involved to put pressure on advancing the peace process.

Wendy Pullan, Head of the Department of Architecture at Cambridge University, said that the current situation showed that fractured Jerusalem was “too badly damaged at this point”. The international community must go beyond immediate strategies and begin thinking about long-term plans for the future. Ethnic cleansing was a current reality and there needed to be protection for Palestinians now.

Given the situation on the ground, the city could not simply be re-divided again, she said. Divided cities simply failed to flourish, she emphasized, adding that while borders and frontiers might be tempting in times of heavy conflict, they had diminishing returns over time. Public space was inherently risky, but it was a notion that must be considered as essential to the city and therefore nurtured. The current violence in Jerusalem and Israel’s intransigence had meant that there was little hope for creating such common space. But, a shared city could be envisioned, she said, expressing concerns that under current conditions, dividing Jerusalem could put Palestinians living there at a disadvantage.

After an interactive discussion with the experts, closing remarks were made by Hasan Kleib, Director-General for Multilateral Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia; Riyad Mansour, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the United Nations; and Desra Percaya (Indonesia), Vice-Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People.

The Conference was jointly organized by the Committee and the Organization for Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and hosted by the Government of Indonesia.

On 16 December, the Committee will hold a United Nations Civil Society Forum, titled “Civil society action in support of justice in Palestine, ending the occupation”.

Plenary II

The following experts made presentations on historical and contemporary models of coexistence: Menachem Klein, university professor and author of several books, including Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Hebron, Ramat Gan; Azyumardi Azra, Rector of Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Jakarta; and Wendy Pullan, Head of the Department of Architecture at Cambridge University, Cambridge.

Mr. KLEIN, focusing on pre-1948 Jerusalem, provided a vivid description of daily life in the city. A patently incorrect concept about how Jerusalem had been divided into exclusive ethnic quarters prior to the war did not reflect a reality that inhabitants usually spoke several languages and that Arabs and Jews lived side by side in what was then a cosmopolitan city.

Instead, inhabitants had lived respectfully and peacefully whereby no “mental boundary” had separated Muslim and Jewish areas and barriers of language and culture had posed few impediments; residents who had ventured into the “physical sphere” of the “other” had said they felt quite at home there. Providing examples of coexistence, he said Jews and Arabs lived in the same neighbourhoods.

Citing an example stemming from archival interviews with residents, he said there was a sense of a shared space. Religious holidays were celebrated in the open with members of other faiths taking part. Likewise, festivals and local holy places were shared by all the local people — Jews, Arabs, Christians and Muslims alike. Even after the 1919 and 1920 nationalist riots had left the Jewish community with mixed feelings, regular life had resumed, with Arabs and Jews apologizing to each other over the violence that had occurred.

When the Israeli Government had reassigned vacant homes of Palestinian refugees to Jewish people, the new tenants had spoken of carefully guarding, in a room sealed with wax, the owners’ belongings, he said, referring to the Jerusalem Municipal Archive’s interviews in the 1960s with city inhabitants after the war. Many of those who had been interviewed had signed Israeli Government waivers requiring them to vacate the premises within a month at the original owner’s demand.

Mr. AZRA, recalling visits to Jerusalem, said there was a need to mainstream the moderates so they could play a bigger role on the road to peace. Dialogues now needed to be intensified, he said, first on an intra-Muslim and intra-Jewish basis and then between different groups. Religious leaders must also strengthen dialogue to develop mutual respect and understanding to create peace in the city. Intellectuals and non-governmental organizations must also be involved to put pressure on Governments to move the peace process forward.

Indonesia had a history of peaceful coexistence with Judaism and other religions over the last century, he said. With regards to the situation in Palestine and Israel, he said that while Israeli trade relations had been discussed in 1999, the Indonesian Government had decided in 2005 that formal ties between his country and Israel would be possible only after peace had been reached. Indonesia was also planning to open a consulate in Palestine and had been active in encouraging dialogues between Muslim, Jewish, Palestinian and Israeli groups.

Indonesia was a showcase of pluralism and multiculturalism, including religious harmony, he said. While the country was predominantly Muslim, Indonesia was not an Islamic State, nor was Islam the official religion. Instead, the country recognized many religions and all major holidays were celebrated, including Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist. National principles fostered inclusiveness and tolerance. In that regard, the aim of religious dialogue incorporated a range of issues, including early warning systems to avoid conflict. The Indonesian model for such dialogue had resulted in many examples of social harmony.

Ms. PULLAN, giving a presentation on examples of post-conflict urban spaces and existing communities, provided a range of examples about what a new Jerusalem could look like. Showing a map of Jerusalem, she said the patchwork of settlements, built primarily with a view to ensuring a continuity of Jewish space, was a fragmented snapshot that reflected a situation that could not simply see the city re-divided again without violent upheavals.

Divided cities simply did not flourish, she said, citing Belfast, Beirut and Nicosia. Temporarily erected barriers were usually an act of despair in times of extreme conflict that typically created long-term problems and, as in Jerusalem, more extreme conflicts. Instead, the creation of public spaces should be studied. Neutral space where both sides could meet was risky, but necessary in building a viable city for all residents. Using Nicosia as an example, she said that after the city was split in 1974, the United Nations had brokered talks with the two mayors, shaping a long-term strategic plan based on the notion of reunification. While the plan had not been perfect and Nicosia remained divided, the city had developed strategies for infrastructure and common spaces.

In Jerusalem, the Israeli-built light rail system was a large public project that provided a service to residents of that highly divided city. In other circumstances, the system would be used across the spectrum, but as a piece of transportation infrastructure, it was seen in a political light with many Palestinians staying away from it.

The current violence and Israel’s intransigence meant little hope for creating common public spaces, she said. Timing was critical, given the current situation in Jerusalem. Ethnic cleansing was a reality and there needed to be protection for Palestinians now. It was also necessary that the international community must go beyond immediate strategies and begin thinking about the future. “The city is too badly damaged at this point,” she said, adding that the international community needed to engage with Jerusalem with that in mind.

Discussion

TOVA NORLEN, a visiting fellow at the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, D.C., led the discussion, summarizing her personal history with Jerusalem before asking the experts a series of questions. As a high school student, she said she had lived in a house in the former “no man’s land” between East and West Jerusalem, and had to decide which direction to walk and even what to wear when heading to different parts of the city.

She recalled that, as with other ethnic conflicts, for instance in Beirut, Bosnia and Kosovo, violence had driven apart identities. The construction of conflicting identities was so much easier than their deconstruction. “While we know how these hardened identities were created, it is important to note that we cannot just remove the barriers and reverse the events in order to go back to a harmonious Jerusalem.”

Asking Mr. Klein about the issue of the deconstruction of hardened polarized identities, she noted that there were now generations of religious Israelis who might become “just as militant as their jihadi counterparts”. She also asked whether creative solutions could be worked into a two-State solution where both sides could agree that they were living on land that was also sacred to others.

She asked Ms. Pullan how the separation that had caused physical and psychological barriers could be reversed. She also recalled the practice of settlers in Jerusalem avoiding street traffic by travelling from roof to roof to get to yeshivas in the Muslim quarter. She then asked about the flourishing of divided cities from the perspective of solutions for Jerusalem, in particular when addressing the needs of a Palestinian State that included the possibility of at least a nominal division of the city in order for the Palestinian part to become the capital of an independent Palestinian State.

During the discussion, Jordan’s representative said dialogue was very important in that it provided shared perspectives. But, the problem at hand had passed beyond the stage of dialogue. The focus should now be on putting pressure not on Palestinians but on the right-wing Israeli Government to abide by international law and implement United Nations resolutions.

A representative of the Global Peace Foundation of Malaysia asked about a solution for the current situation. A representative of the Ramallah-based Al-Haq — Law in the Service of Man asked Mr. Klein for his views on refugee Arabs being denied the right of return to their homes. A representative of civil society from Indonesia asked how Jerusalem could maintain the title of “city of peace”.

Ms. PULLAN said the issue went beyond settlers on the rooftops. Settlers were, in fact, building tunnels under the city that were being used for tourism, prayer and archaeological excavations. Such tunnels had “sandwiched” Palestinians, with hostile settlers on the rooftops and underneath. That worrying concern could not simply be removed in an easy way. Every city had conflict and, to the extent that conflict could be channeled in positive ways, public space was key to the proper functioning of a city and a notion that had to be nurtured.

In her research of a dozen divided cities, none had flourished, she said. That trend tended to create problems for all residents. The current situation in Jerusalem was both a political and religious conflict. One possible scenario would be to establish an open city for all residents with political capitals removed to Tel Aviv and Ramallah.

Mr. AZRA said the origins of the current conflict were political. Over time, however, it had become difficult to distinguish between political and religious conflicts. Some Indonesian groups, in their support for Palestine, had used religious doctrine. Indonesia, instead, supported the creation of a Palestinian State. Egypt, Jordan and Turkey had diplomatic relations with Israel. But, when Indonesia suggested opening trade relations with Israel, the notion was rejected based on religious grounds. Indonesia supported Palestine and at the same time encouraged dialogue among the Palestinian groups.

Mr. KLEIN said that, while it was impossible to return to the past, the past should not be forgotten. Both Jews and Arabs were Palestinians and the Palestinian identity had been developed jointly since the late nineteenth century. The shared past needed to be studied to build a shared future. The perspective needed to change to clearly see the other side’s attachment to the land and that Palestine belonged to all of its citizens, as Jerusalem belonged to all citizens and communities.

Regarding refugees, he said, Israel practised double standards, with Jewish people allowed to return when Palestinians could not get back their properties. Israel exercised the right of return to Jews only, a policy that needed to change. The legal system, which was currently separated for East Jerusalem and the West Bank, should also be changed. The challenge for scholars and professionals was to discuss how the two sides should share, not divide, Jerusalem without killing the city.

The Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine, noting comments that the city could not be divided, said that some of those sentiments could not stand the test of reality. During the recent youth uprising in Jerusalem, the façade and pretention that the city was eternally united had not survived the span of two weeks. The city center was now “a ghost town”. There were also calls for establishing vigilante groups and Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu had restricted Palestinians of East Jerusalem from entering and leaving their communities. Providing other examples of reality, he said intellectuals could debate issues but should remember the situation on the ground.

There was now the notion of attachment of both sides to the land, he said. As a Palestinian, he said Palestine was his homeland. Political thinking was now embracing an acceptance of two States. Israel was, however, trying to impose on Palestinians that they did not belong to the land, which it said was the Jewish homeland.

Mr. KLEIN said the question was not about learning from the past, which should encompass inclusive principles. Jaffa and Haifa were Palestinian and “we tend to ignore and to deny the Palestinians the attachment” to those areas. Inclusive principles were the main lessons to be learned from history.

Ms. PULLAN said it was clear that Jerusalem was not a united city, a notion that was an Israeli myth. It was not divided, but in fact, fragmented, a result of long-term Israeli planning. She expressed concerns about a divided city due to the current reality, with Israel’s position of power and influence. In that regard, she said she would be afraid that the city would be divided in an unequal way that would be detrimental to the Palestinians.

Ms. NORLEN said the concern should be more about how East Jerusalem could flourish once an agreement was reached for a Palestinian State. There was dual attachment to the land and discussions on that issue should address the fact that many were denying that notion.

Closing Remarks

HASAN KLEIB, Director-General for Multilateral Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia said the International Conference had provided a valuable forum to exchange views on scenarios for a viable Jerusalem. Its protection, as a holy city of three religions, was important and must entail the assurance of accessibility and freedom of movement. However, there were great challenges ahead to securing a peaceful and viable Jerusalem.

Israeli policies and practices had breached international laws and violated United Nations resolutions, including those adopted by the Security Council. While condemning those practices, he said that condemnation was no longer enough. Persistent illegal policies and practices needed to be persistently confronted. Concerted efforts were needed towards the collective Palestinian dream to establish a viable State and to achieve peace and security in the region by removing all obstacles to those goals.

The focus on Palestine should not wither, he said. The International Conference had contributed to putting Palestine back on the global radar. The plight of the Palestinian people had gone on for too long as had Israel’s flouting of international laws. As a Committee established 40 years ago, it must now play a stronger role to clear all hurdles towards the creation of a viable Palestinian State, with East Jerusalem as its capital.

RIYAD MANSOUR, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine, thanked all organizers and participants for convening the second International Conference on the Question of Jerusalem. He pointed out that the gathering was being held in a country that was the third largest democracy and had the world’s largest Muslim population. He also expressed hope that the third such conference in Africa would further advance the question of Jerusalem.

He said that Jerusalem was the heart of the State of Palestine and that what needed to be addressed was the end of the occupation. The issue of Haram Al-Sharif was more than a holy site. It was the centre of what it meant to be Palestinian. Ending the occupation would save the two-State solution.

Speakers had addressed a range of issues, he said. But, discussing Jerusalem must be addressed within the concept of occupation. Palestinians accepted the notion of Jerusalem having spiritual ties with the three major religions. As Palestinians, anyone could have a spiritual connection, but it was not possible to translate that into a real State connection.

The reality entailed advancing the question of providing international protection for the Palestinian people, he said. The Geneva Convention outlined the relations between the occupier and the occupied. When the occupying Power abandoned its responsibility to protect the occupied and became in fact the aggressors against them, then it became the international community’s responsibility to provide protection, he said, anticipating further discussions in the Security Council on that issue.

There was a large presence of United Nations agencies on the ground who could also be involved in discussions on the protection of civilians, he continued. In addition, the General Assembly had a responsibility of providing protection. The international community must deal with the issue and provide the protection the Palestinian people needed.

The conferences were not convened to reiterate existing principles and positions, he said, but to move in the direction of practical steps. Some steps were being taken at the United Nations, but what was needed was action from groups such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). While the State of Palestine was pursuing efforts to go after criminals in the International Criminal Court, it was high time for the OIC to pursue legal options to hold Israel responsible, including through domestic courts and the International Court of Justice, as well as in national courts, as was the case in South Africa, which was holding Israeli officials responsible for violence against Palestinians. The Security Council had already weighed in, stating that the occupation of Jerusalem was null and void. After 50 years, gears needed to be shifted and practical measures were needed to insist that Israel yielded to the collective will of the international community.

DESRA PERCAYA, Vice-Chairman of the Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People, provided a summary of the Conference’s proceedings. Speakers had discussed the situation in recent months, including how Palestinians were dispossessed from their homes and quarters and how they were being made a minority in their own city. Also discussed were issues surrounding how Israeli authorities were neglecting Arab neighbourhoods, schools and streets and that the State of Palestine had been prevented from any political activity in Jerusalem, contrary to the agreements of the 1990s.

Experts had weighed in on a range of issues, highlighting that the division between Arab and Jewish inhabitants was relatively recent and not so long ago people of all faiths had lived peacefully in the city, not merely next to each other, but with each other, he said. Experts had also shared models of how such true coexistence could be achieved in the future.

As seen throughout the Conference, Jerusalem was one of the most difficult of the so-called “final status issues”, involving political, demographic, economic and religious concerns, he said. It was that last aspect, the city’s religious importance to the world’s three major religions, that most resonated with people around the globe when they thought of Palestine. “But, let us be clear,” he emphasized. “This conflict is not about religion. It is about the dispossession of a people from their rights and their land.”

He underlined the importance of being aware of that fact and to reject attempts to persuade people to interpret the conflict through a religious framework. That would only serve the interests of those who wished to portray the Palestinian cause as an extremist cause so they could justify a strong security and militaristic approach that appealed to the fears of international public opinion and thus perpetuated the occupation. Turning the struggle for Palestinian rights into a religious conflict would also contribute to efforts being made by fanatics who wished to corrupt and misguide Muslim youth worldwide. Such a situation would most likely push further away any possibility of achieving Palestinian rights.

The international community must take concerted action to persuade Israel to cease provocations and violations, particularly on the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound. All efforts must be made to provide the Palestinian people with a positive perspective that showed that they would not be abandoned by the nations of the world because of other conflicts and concerns. The message needed to be clear, he said. “We will not cease our efforts until the Israeli occupation has ended, until the Palestinian people have achieved their inalienable rights in a free and sovereign State of Palestine, with East Jerusalem as its capital.”