

COMMON GROUND



an inventory and commentary
of the Judeo—Islamic conflict

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Common Ground

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Introduction

The Judeo-Islamic conflict has engulfed an entire generation of Jews and Arabs in a cycle of violence, as the Jewish state struggles with a league of mostly Arab nations that are defending the cause of Islam in historical Palestine.

While the earlier stages of the Judeo-Islamic conflict were terrorized by complete Muslim refusal to accept the existence of any Jewish state in the Middle East, the current generation of leading politicians in Muslim countries has shown willingness to end the conflict and restore law and order in the Middle East. The landmark document of this new era is the peace initiative of the Arab League, in which Arab countries promise to end all hostilities if Israel respects the Green Line borders of the Jewish state.

(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beirut_Summit)

Israel has dismissed this peace proposal, mostly because during the past 40 years it has invested huge amounts of money into illegal Jewish settlements outside of the pre-1967 borders of the country (in the hope that when the international community notices the huge value of these Jewish investments, it will inspire international sympathy for the Jewish plans to annex those Arab territories, as a spoil of war). Ariel Sharon summarized this belief and political strategy in the words: "Everything that we take now will stay ours [because the international community will be impressed by the high economical value of our investments]... everything that we don't grab will go to them [Palestinians]."

(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_Sharon)

The successful psychological outcome of this 40-year-old policy is that today the majority of honest and law-abiding Israeli citizens view the illegal Jewish settlements on Arab lands as self-evident and legal property of Jews, unable to even imagine that any crime would have taken place. Also many western democracies, such as the United States, are more impressed by the enormous economical value of Jewish investments than the uncomfortable fact that they are illegal according to international law (which does not authorize unilateral annexation of territories conquered in war), and the governments who authorized the investments were consciously breaking the law, knowing what they were doing and why.

The Israeli side of the conflict wants to portray itself as a democracy that respects law and order, labelling Palestinian Arabs as lawless terrorists. Israel has shown very little respect to the laws of land ownership, however, and lands legally belonging to Arabs (beyond the pre-1967 borders) are generally treated as Jewish property.

In retaliation for the Israeli confiscations of Arab lands, Palestinians have resorted to violent struggle, and this in turn has incurred violent vengeance by the Israeli army.

Israel has recently been increasingly successful in convincing to the western world that the original and only source of problems in the Middle East is Islamic extremism and Arab violence against innocent and peaceful Jews. It must be noted, however, that it is typical behaviour for

humans everywhere in the world to resort to violence when something is taken by force from an entire ethnic group. Any ethnic group with any religion would probably behave violently in the circumstances that Palestinian Arabs are in, as they witness the Israeli annexation and settlement of Arab lands in front of their eyes. Islamic extremism is a consequence of hostilities, not their original cause.

The present-day version of Judeo-Islamic conflict includes a Jewish state arranging democratic elections, where the politicians promise to continue denying the basic human right of land ownership from Palestinians, and Jewish citizens give their votes in great numbers. Likewise also Palestinians arrange democratic elections, where the politicians promise to continue violating the human rights of Jews, and the Arab citizens give their votes in great numbers.

Whoever invented democracy, forgot to invent how to prevent illegal proposals from being accepted as alternatives in the elections. The western world has recognized that something illegal is taking place – on the Palestinian side – and the Hamas government has been placed in complete political boycott. But the truth is that the mainstream populations on both sides fail to appreciate many of the basic human rights of the opposite party in the Judeo-Islamic conflict.

In this booklet we attempt to find a way out of this mutual cycle of lawlessness, calling for a return to uncompromising respect of the international law in all issues. The majority of Arab politicians outside of Palestine have already found their way out of the darkest age of lawlessness (with a few glaring exceptions). It is only a matter of time when the leaders of the Arab League will convert also Palestinian politicians to the path of peace and justice. But will the western world be able to convert Israeli politicians, or will Israeli politicians be able to convert the western world to permanently cancel the right of Palestinians to their legal private lands?

1. Security arrangements

1.1 Military forces

The stable and internationally recognized military powers in the region of historical Palestine are Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. To maintain the fragile military stability of the region, the number of military powers should not be increased in the area (excluding the peacekeeping troops of the United Nations).

Palestinians wishing to participate in military training and service, should have the right and opportunity to do so outside of historical Palestine, for example in the military forces of Egypt or Jordan. (Several prosperous independent countries, such as Switzerland and Iceland, have a very low military profile or no defense forces at all.)

All military activities in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Golan Heights and southern Lebanon should be considered illegal (for any other military power than the peacekeeping troops of United Nations), after a peace agreement has been sign-

ed between Israel and its Arab neighbours, and the final status of all relevant issues has been defined. All further incitement to violent struggle should be considered illegal, and all military organizations in historical Palestine and its neighbouring countries should be considered illegal – only excluding the national defense forces of Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, and the peacekeeping troops of the United Nations.

1.2 Fortifying of border zones

The internationally recognized border zones between independent states can be fortified, as is customary in many parts of the world, often including a security fence or a solid wall. Such constructions should be subject to the same requirements of esthetic quality as any other buildings, especially in locations close to major urban centers. (The classical and highly attractive style of walls built before the 20th century should be the norm in densely populated areas.)

1.3 Transportation of passengers and freight

When a peace agreement has been signed, undelayed and uninspected transportation of passengers and freight should be guaranteed for Palestinians between all parts of the West Bank, 24 hours a day and on every day of the year.

Passengers who are not carrying much luggage, should be guaranteed undelayed and uninspected transportation between Gaza and Hebron, at least 16 hours a day and on every day of the year. (In the beginning, while permanent solutions are being planned and constructed, which preferably will be based on an underground tunnel, the transportation can be arranged in buses travelling in convoys escorted by Israeli defense forces.)

Transportation of freight and heavy luggage between Gaza and Hebron should be guaranteed at least 8 hours a day and five days a week (excluding Friday, Saturday, and the national holidays of Israel or Arab countries), until a permanent solution is constructed for transportation of passengers and freight 24 hours a day and on every day of the year.

Passengers who are not carrying much luggage, should have the right to travel between Palestinian territories and the rest of the world without being delayed or inspected by Israeli authorities.

Transportation of freight and heavy luggage between Palestinian territories and the rest of the world should be arranged at least 8 hours a day and five days a week, inspected by security personnel authorized by the United Nations (to ensure that the agreements concerning demilitarization are being observed).

2. Historical justice to Arabs and Jews

During the violent struggle between Jews and Arabs in the early 20th century, approximately 700,000 Arabs left their homes in Palestine, and were registered as refugees by the

United Nations. Today this Palestinian refugee population has grown to more than four million people.

During the same era, an equal number of Jews emigrated from the increasingly hostile Arab countries, for various reasons. It is sometimes unclear whether these people were actual refugees or simply emigrants, but it is undeniable that since the 1940's at least 250,000 (and more probably 350,000) Jews have left Arab countries as refugees persecuted by official policies of the state.

(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewish_exodus_from_Arab_lands)

Some 130,000 Jewish refugees left Algeria in 1962, when the government ruled that Jews no longer have any protection of law. At least 65,000 Jewish refugees left Egypt between 1948 and 1967, experiencing arbitrary confiscations of property and illegal deportations from the country. At least 30,000 Jewish refugees left Libya between 1945 and 1969, due to widespread violence and arbitrary confiscations of property. At least 25,000 Jews have left Syria as refugees since 1944, due to various Nazi-style laws. (A former aide of Adolf Eichmann used to serve the Syrian government as an advisor.)

(www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsources/anti-semitism/syrianjews.html)

Of the more than half a million Jews who emigrated from other Arab countries during this era, it can certainly be assumed that at least 100,000 deserve to be called refugees in the full meaning of the word. Thus the Judeo-Islamic conflict has produced 700,000 Arab refugees and at least 350,000 Jewish refugees. (No attempt is made here to summarize the injustice suffered by Christians or other minorities during the same era, but the rights of Christians will be properly represented in the proposed peace agreements.)

Israel absorbed as many Jewish refugees as were willing to immigrate to Israel, giving them the full legal status of a citizen, and the rest emigrated to western countries, where they were soon given the full legal status of a citizen.

If and when a state of Palestine will be founded, it should be evident (according to international law) that all Palestinian refugees have the legal right to return to the state of Palestine, equally as Israel absorbed the numerous Jewish refugees and immigrants, and still continues to do so. Any objections by Israel should be dismissed as a violation of human rights and as historical injustice.

According to a study performed by a commission of the United Nations in 1964, Palestinian refugees are the legal owners of 5,194 km² of private lands on the Israeli side of the Green Line border. The security concerns cited by Israel can be accepted as a legal excuse for not allowing the return of Palestinian refugees into the same security zone where Jews are living, but no legal excuse exists for cancelling their ownership of these private lands. The only legally acceptable alternative for not allowing Arab refugees to return to lands that are their private property, is to annex Israeli lands of equal size and value to the territories governed by Arabs themselves. By refusing or delaying the implementation of one of these options, Israel breaks the human rights of Arabs. Israel can freely choose the lesser evil of these two, but other legal options hardly do exist.

(www.prc.org.uk/data/asp/d7/727.aspx)

Israel's side of the Green Line comprises 20,700 km² of land (and some water), which is 77% of the entire historical Palestine. When the lands legally belonging to Palestinian refugees are subtracted from this figure (assuming that the lesser evil for Israel is to release the lands of Palestinian refugees to the Palestinian Authority), the legal territories of Israel would be 15,506 km² (58% of historical Palestine), and the Palestinian Authority would control the remaining 11,347 km². (The UN partition plan in 1947 recommended 57% of the land for Jews and 43% for Arabs. The Golan Heights are not included in any of these figures.)

(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geography_of_Israel)

When we remember that one fifth of Israel's population are Arabs, who control their private lands and can take benefit of the Israeli public lands (without having much power in governmental land politics), in reality the control and benefit of land would be quite fairly 50% – 50% between Jews and Arabs. These arrangements would evidently be the most just peace solution that anyone can imagine, and this is also one of the only legal solutions that are realistically available. (Israeli politicians continue to propose “peace” solutions that hardly even mention the human rights of Palestinians, but the law-abiding citizens should foresee what the future of such a path is. We have seen enough violence sparked by the continuing violations of human rights by both sides of the conflict.)

If and when the security aspects of Israel are guaranteed by permanent demilitarization of the West Bank, Gaza and Golan Heights (in addition to Sinai which already is demilitarized), no legal excuse remains for Israel to fail to respect the land ownership of Palestinian Arabs, including the refugees.

All Jewish infrastructure and real estate beyond the Green Line, once built illegally on Arab territory, should be recognized as Jewish property temporarily on Arab lands. The government of Palestinians should have the right to legally nationalize all such investments, which means that selling the infrastructure and real estate to Arabs will be obligatory, whenever requested by the government of Palestinians, but a valid market price must be paid as compensation before ownership is transferred.

The belief and publicly proclaimed policy of several successive Israeli governments, expecting western sympathy for the high monetary value of illegal Jewish investments on Arab lands, should with these arrangements be proven false and criminal, and the authority of international law should be restored without delay.

When Arab investors would purchase Jewish properties on the Palestinian side of the Green Line, these lands should be transferred to Palestinian control and into the use of Palestinian Arab population. However, the properties should remain in Israeli control and inside the Israeli security zone until full payment has been received from investors authorized by the Palestinian government.

This gradual transfer of illegally built Jewish infrastructure into Arab ownership should proceed in a reasonable order, what comes to the geographical location of the lands, so

that the Israeli and Palestinian security zones will constantly remain defensible and unbroken.

Exceptions to this basic principle can be freely agreed between Jews and Arabs as two equal negotiating partners, if a proposal made by one party, such as exchanging land for land, is accepted by the other party. (Numerous such exceptions will be introduced and recommended further on in this text.)

What comes to economical compensation paid to the refugees, it should be understood that Israel is responsible for no more than 50% of the costs, and the Arab countries that have caused a Jewish refugee problem are responsible for another 50% of the costs (as Israel already has paid the costs of a Jewish refugee problem caused by Arab states, approximately half the size of the Palestinian refugee problem). Donations from a wider international community may be necessary to solve this issue in a satisfactory way.

3. The final status of Jerusalem

“In view of its association with three world religions, the Jerusalem area (...) should be accorded special and separate treatment from the rest of Palestine, and should be placed under effective United Nations control.” (UN resolution 194, article 8)

The area of historical Jerusalem (approximately 2 km² that was surrounded by walls until 70 AD), should be defined as Common Ground, and permanently placed under international administration (in similar fashion as the Italian capital Rome hosts a walled microstate, the Vatican City). Several reasons speak in favour of this arrangement:

- Only an internationally administered separate zone can be free of all visa requirements, allowing access to any person of any nationality, without discriminating or favouring anyone.
- After the UN resolution 181 recommended Jerusalem to be placed under international administration, the Old City has been annexed first by Transjordan and later by Israel, in both cases illegally and without international recognition.
- Having the Old City under international administration would probably be more comfortable for Israeli security officials than any other politically realistic final solution.
- Foreign visitors (and most notably Christians) typically want to visit all parts of the Old City. If the Old City were divided between two independent states, numerous security checks would waste the time of visitors and police.
- Notable religious minorities in Jerusalem prefer more conservative conduct in public places than is guaranteed by the legislation dictated by the liberal mainstream population. (Disagreements about proper clothing have occasionally sparked violence

between secular and religious citizens.) The internationally administered Vatican-style microstate would have a stricter dress code than the rest of Jerusalem (which is true also for Vatican City compared to Rome).

- Arab governments have a history of investing public funds to Islamic sites mainly, and Israel has a history of investing public funds to Jewish sites mainly. Only an international government can be expected to treat with equal respect and economical investment the holy sites and residential areas of different religions. (The deteriorating standard of living in the non-Jewish areas of the Old City, most notably in the Christian slum block of Hezekiah Pool, is a humanitarian reason to recommend international protection for the entire Old City, rather than partitioning it between two ethnicities which both have a long history of neglecting the holy sites and residential areas of religions other than their own.)



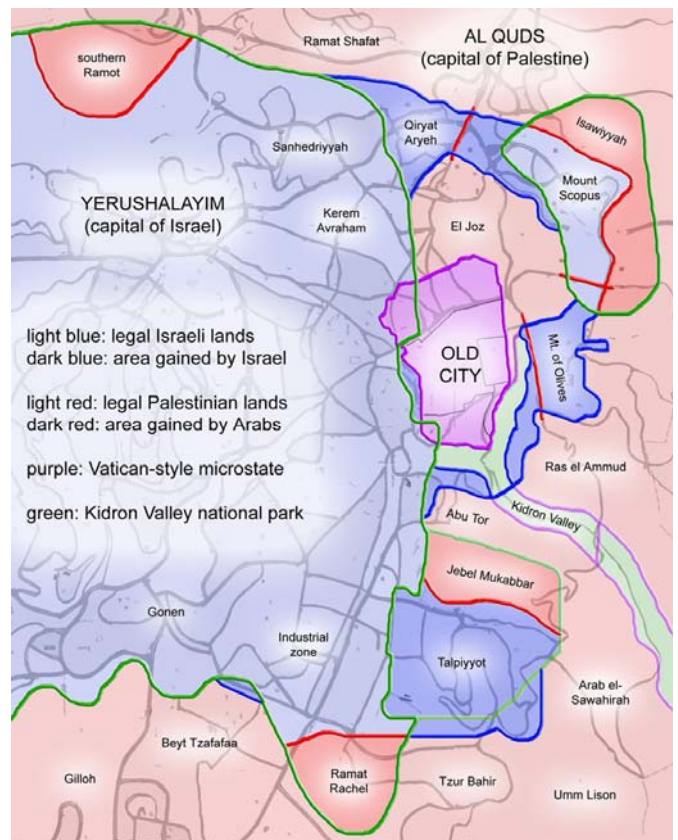
Photo: the Christian residential area of Hezekiah Pool, with an open sewer and dump of 0.3 hectares, is one of the most repulsive slums in the Middle East. A pilgrimage to the roof of Petra Hostel near Jaffa Gate (where this photo was taken) is highly recommended for anyone who wants to see the whole picture of daily life in the Old City. 40 years of Israeli rule in the Old City has not offered public funding to this historically valuable area, as its residents are not Jews. High-resolution photos of the Hezekiah Pool are available at www.co-ground.com/slum.

What comes to the rest of Jerusalem, it is true that UN resolution 181 proposed international administration for a rather extensive area, but it should be in no one's interests that the United Nations permanently controls modern residential areas of independent nations. The rest of Jerusalem should be legal national territory of Jews and Arabs, according to the Green Line borders (Arab investors having the legal right to purchase any infrastructure and real estate east of the Green Line, in a reasonable geographical order).

Special treatment should be given to the large Jewish cemetery on Mount of Olives, however. The isolated Jewish zone on Mount Scopus (in pre-1967 borders) should be re-shaped as a narrow half-circle from Sanhedriyyah to Mount Scopus, then to Mount of Olives, western Silwan, northern Abu Tor, and Giv'at Hananyah. (This half-circle is slightly larger than the Jewish Mount Scopus zone in Green Line borders. This can be compensated by increasing Arab territory elsewhere in Jerusalem, for example in Ramot, where the Green Line runs through the modern residential area.)

Three underground tunnels would be constructed for Arab traffic across this Jewish half-circle: one along Jericho Street past the Jewish cemetery, one along Sheikh Anbar Street past the top of Mount of Olives, and one from Sheikh Jarrah to Giv'at Mivtar.

It can also be arranged, if the two negotiating parties so agree, that the Jewish settlement in Eastern Talpiyyot is compensated by annexing Ramat Rachel into Arab territories. (The roads in this area are built in such a way that it is more comfortable to annex all of Ramat Rachel into Arab territories than to split Talpiyyot in two halves.)



Map: proposed final status for downtown Jerusalem (including some voluntary exchanges of land between Israel and Palestinians). High-resolution version is available at www.co-ground.com/city.

4. The final status of Temple Mount

The Temple Mount in Jerusalem, now occupied by Islamic buildings only, has a significant role as a public symbol of historical injustice and war between religions. Whenever non-Muslims visit the Old City of Jerusalem and see the Temple Mount in its present state, they are reminded of the era of enmity between the three Abrahamic religions, so bitter that these three cannot even fit on the same square of 14 hectares.

King Solomon built the First Temple in 960 BC, which was destroyed by Babylonians in 586 BC. Prophet Ezra built the Second Temple in 515 BC, which was renovated by King Herod in 20 BC, frequently visited by Jesus of Nazareth, and finally destroyed by Romans in 70 AD.

Jerusalem was conquered for Islam in 637 by Caliph Umar, who was a personal companion of Muhammad and the second Caliph of Islamic history. He built the Aqsa Mosque on the southern edge of Temple Mount, which is now considered one of the holiest shrines of Islam. But Caliph Umar wanted to have peaceful relations with Jews and Christians, and therefore he showed respect to the holy sites of Jews and Christians, and did not build anything at the highest peak of the mountain, where the Temple had once stood.

(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umar, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Aqsa_Mosque)

40 years later, during the reign of later Umayyad dynasty, Caliph el-Malik decided to build something else than the Temple in the place of the ancient Temple of King Solomon and the prophets. This was a deviation from the peaceful policies of Caliph Umar, and in later history has served as a declaration of war between the three Abrahamic religions.

Shia Muslims strongly criticize the Umayyad dynasty of this era. The Shi'ite doctrinal book Sulh al-Hasan complains that the Umayyad rulers made "various lies and baseless claims", and there is a "continuous disagreement between the Umayyad Muslims and those who were loyal to Islam".

(www.balagh.net/english/ahl_bayt/sulh_al-hasan/24.htm)
(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umayyad#Shi.27a_view)

Also Sunni Muslims are critical of this era of the Umayyad dynasty, viewing many of the Umayyad rulers as sinners that caused great disaster among the people.

(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umayyad#Sunni_view)

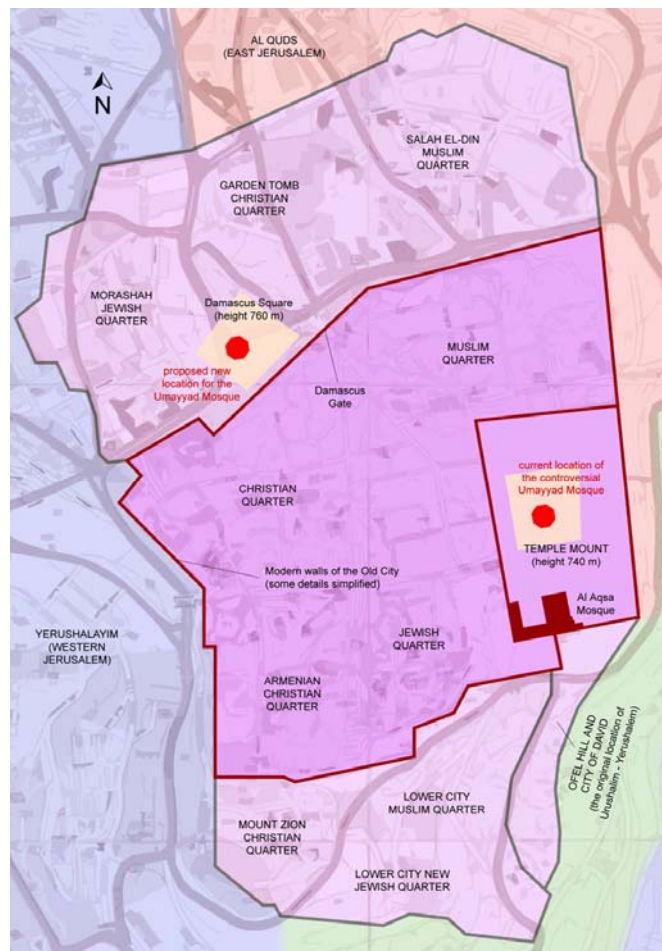
Does Islam not respect King Solomon and the ancient prophets, who built the Temple of Jerusalem? It does, to the extent that every major Arab city has a Suleiman Street. But neither Shia nor Sunni Muslims acknowledge the Umayyad dynasty of this era as Muslim authorities in the full meaning of the word.

Occupying the ancient site of the Temple of Jerusalem with something else than the Temple is the path of war between religions. It was the path of later Umayyad dynasty, but it may not be the path of true Islam. In any case it was a path avoided by Umar, the second Caliph of Islam and the first Islamic conqueror of Jerusalem.

Muslims should be able to agree that the path of peace is to respect the site of the Temple once built by Solomon, the world-famous king who is equally respected by Muslims, Jews and Christians alike (while the later Umayyad dynasty, which began occupation of the Temple site, has been very little respected even by Muslims themselves).

It should be in the common interests of the three Abrahamic religions to heal the wounds of historical injustice and proclaim an end to the era of war between religions, by relocating the controversial Umayyad mosque to another suitable place in Jerusalem, such as the spacious Damascus Square in front of the Damascus Gate (which is 20 meters higher than the Temple Mount, and there is direct visibility between the Temple Mount and Damascus Square).

The memory and history of the ancient kings and prophets (who are considered holy in Islam, Judaism and Christianity) should be respected by rebuilding the Temple of Jerusalem, in such a design that it serves the Muslim audience in a similar way as the current building on the site (having an open floor, through which can be seen the capstone of the mountain), also serving Jewish and Christian pilgrims as a memorial of how this holy site once looked like. The building should be equally available for religious services of the three Abrahamic religions, according to a daily or hourly schedule.



Map: proposed walled area of the Vatican-style microstate of Jerusalem Old City. (The current walls, shown in dark red, would be extended to the historical areas in the south and in the north.) The proposed relocation site of the Umayyad Mosque is to the west of Damascus Gate, in a beautiful and spacious area now occupied by streets and parking lots. Maps and photos are available at www.co-ground.com/microstate.

5. Common Ground

If and when two independent states will be created in historical Palestine (one for Jews and one for Arabs), several historical or religious sites and landscapes would be inaccessible for Jews, Muslims or Christians who have an emotional connection with the places.

The partition committees of the early 20th century tried to solve this problem by assigning the most important historical sites into international administration of the United Nations, which would guarantee a safer and more neutral access for visitors than if the sites are included in Israeli or Palestinian territory. The committees typically paid most of their attention to the regions that are important for Christians (Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth), and the proposed UN-controlled territories also included vast residential areas of Jews and Arabs.

A more reasonable option would be to leave all modern residential areas in the control of Jewish and Arab authorities, and make a more comprehensive (and less Christianity-centered) list of historical sites that would be difficult to access for Jews or Arabs in the case of a peace agreement and a two-state solution, also including some of the most important nature reserves in this Common Ground that would be controlled by the United Nations and equally accessible for all residents of historical Palestine.

(We are discussing the legal territories of Israel and Palestinians now, and these recommendations are subject to the approval of these two parties, and freely modifiable in negotiations between them.)

The Vatican-style microstate could host a chain of national parks and nature reserves, starting from south of the Old City of Jerusalem, along the Kidron Valley to the Dead Sea (through regions that otherwise would be inaccessible for Jews), then along the Lower Jordan River Valley to Lake Kinneret (between the military zones of Jordan and Israel, now inaccessible for all civilians), along the eastern shore of Lake Kinneret, and then through Upper Jordan Valley to Mount Hermon. (The rest of Golan Heights, excluding the nature reserves, would be returned into demilitarized Syrian control, and the nature reserves would be accessible for Syrian civilians.)

Along or near this chain of national parks and nature reserves are located several historical sites that are important for Jews, Arabs or Christians: the Herodion fortress, Mar Saba monastery, Qumran caves, ancient Jericho, ancient Beyt Shean, Belvoir fortress, ruins of Gamla, ancient Capernaum, Nimrod fortress and Tel Dan.

From Mount Hermon the narrow zone of Common Ground would continue to the west along the border between Israel and Lebanon (offering a magnificent view deep into historical Palestine from these high mountains), reaching the Mediterranean Sea near Roosh ha Niqraa, where the Vatican-style microstate would have its own port for such international visitors travelling by sea, who have no visa for Israel or Palestine.

From the port on the coast of Mediterranean Sea, several historical sites would be accessible by waterbus routes, without a land connection to the UN-controlled main zone: Acco fortress, ancient Caesarea, Old Yafo, and ancient Ashqelon.

With another seaport close to the border of Egypt, the typical journey of an Arab, Jewish or foreign visitor would continue along another nature reserve to the ruins of the ancient Nabatean cities Nitzannah, Shivtah and Avdat, then admiring the magnificent views of Ramon Crater from its eastern cliffs. From here a nature reserve would continue to the Aravah Valley border zone between Israel and Jordan, then turning north back towards Kidron Valley (through the Judean nature reserves and possibly via the ruins of ancient Arad).

The Aravah Valley nature reserve would continue also towards south, via the ancient Egyptian mines in Timnah, finally reaching the Red Sea in the New Lagoon area of Eylat. From there a short waterbus connection would take the visitor across the Eylat bay to the Coral Beach nature reserve (near the Egyptian border), from where another nature reserve would continue back to Nitzannah.

The economically important access to the Red Sea would thus be guaranteed for Palestinians through this Common Ground controlled by the United Nations. (The Peel Commission in 1937 perceived the entire Negev desert to be Arab territory, a year later the Woodhead Commission recommended the entire Negev to be Common Ground, but since the UN partition plan in 1947 the Negev has been considered mainly Jewish territory. These sometimes a bit irrational changes in policy have radically affected the total size of Jewish and Arab territories, as the Negev comprises nearly 50% of entire historical Palestine.)

(www.mideastweb.org/peelmaps.htm, www.mideastweb.org/181.htm)

With such generous areas on the Jewish side of the Green Line defined as Common Ground, a similar chain of national parks and nature reserves would be designed also across the West Bank, to guarantee safe and neutralized access for Jews and foreign tourists to historical sites in the regions of Bethlehem, Hebron and Shekhem.

All these areas legally belong to Israel or Palestinians, but it should be in the common interests of both sides to prefer having a chance to safely visit all parts of historical Palestine, rather than each party defending the unity of its own territory and being unable to access the historical sites on the other side of the border. Maps and photos of many of these areas are available at www.co-ground.com/common.

6. Settlement activities

Due to emotional connection with the history of the land, many Jews would prefer to live in the West Bank, and many Palestinians would prefer to live in Israeli regions such as Yafo, for example. Jews have been able to fulfill these dreams by building settlements in the West Bank, but Palestinians have not been able to do much more than repeat their demands for the right of return of refugees.

The aforementioned plan of internationally administered Common Ground could also include some settlement activity, to the extent that the two parties of the negotiations agree with each other. It would be possible to renovate some or all of the historical ruins as living museums, with a regulated population of Muslim, Jewish and Christian residents. The Old City of Yafo and the Nabatean cities of the Negev could be settled by Palestinian Arabs (primarily refugees from these areas), while an equal number of Jews would be able to settle historical sites in the West Bank. Some other sites, such as Caesarea, would be settled by a mixed population of Jews, Arabs and Christians.

If a more remarkable number of Jews and Arabs wish to live in such settlements outside the main territory of their nation, it would be possible to agree that the settlement activity is more extensive in some cases, including modern housing projects, with Jewish settlements located in the West Bank, and Palestinian settlements of equal size in Israeli territory. But instead of a permanent exchange of territories and security zones, such areas could be placed in the custody of a neutral third party (such as a Vatican-style microstate).

By allowing Palestinian settlements in places such as Yafo, Israel might be able to buy Palestinian acceptance for equally large Jewish settlements in some parts of the West Bank.

The rhetorics and actions of both sides of the conflict should be based on uncompromising respect of who is the legal owner of each territory. Lands that are one's own legal property can be claimed without negotiations. Lands that are the legal property of someone else can only be humbly requested, asking the price and trying to bargain a deal, knowing that as long as there is no deal, the land legally belongs to the other party.

7. Future of the Judeo–Islamic conflict

The long-term strategy of Israel seems to be simply waiting infinitely, for another thousand years if needed. They have *de facto* control of the entire historical Palestine, and a secure military position with strong international allies. If a peace treaty were signed one day, Israel expects to lose more than it gains. Acting its obligatory role in the peace process is for Israel a cheap way to buy the political approval of the western countries. Delaying the process is a cheap way to extend illegal possession of Palestinian lands, the longer the better.

Palestinian organisations continue to make exaggerated and legally unfounded claims, which no international court would ever rule in their favour, and which Israel would never accept without a war to the last man. Frustrated by the stalled peace negotiations, Arabs resort to violence. But armed struggle will not bring them any closer to their goals than it has done during the past 60 years. The only chance that Palestinians have is to distance themselves from all violence, remove from their agenda all references to the destruction of Israel, and then present their realistic and strictly legal claims to the international community.



Photos: Acco, Nimrod, Jerusalem, Roosh ha Niqraa, Timnah, Yafo.

About the author

John Joe Mittler is a Christian writer, born 1974 in Finland, and residing in Finland. Many of the facts and photos introduced in this booklet were collected during his two-week visit to the Middle East in December 2006, driving 3,000 kilometers across all parts of Israel, and studying the region of Jerusalem for one full week. Narrative of the experiences, and best of the 1,500 photos taken during the journey, are available at www.co-ground.com/travel.