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Page

20

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Jerusalem backlash one-sided

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ABDULLAH al-Tal, commander of the Jordanian assault on Jerusalem's Old City during the 1948 Israeli War of Independence was, of course, proven wrong.

After 19 years of Jordanian occupation, Israeli forces recaptured the Old City, and Jews were able to return to the historic Jewish Quarter, rebuilding their ruined homes and synagogues and once more making pilgrimages to the holy sites from which they had been barred for so long.

Israel also captured the eastern areas of greater Jerusalem, the status of which remains one of the most bitter points of contention in the ongoing quest to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The intention by the US to move its embassy in Israel to Jerusalem evoked a wave of outrage.

One can question the advisability of such a move, with even many firm supporters of Israel believing it would have been better to let sleeping dogs lie.

Even so, the extent of the backlash is surprising. After all, West Jerusalem has been Israel's capital since the state's foundation, and it is presumably there that the US embassy will be based.

Moreover, it was made very clear that the decision does not amount to the US taking any position on such final status issues as the specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem, questions that the parties involved will have to resolve.

Supporting Palestinian rights in East Jerusalem is quite in order, but not to the point when it amounts to a denial of Jewish historical and spiritual-cultural roots in the city.

Such, unfortunately, is the case with Extraordinary Professor at the University of Pretoria Garth Le Pere's intemperate and decidedly unscholarly take on the US embassy issue ("ANC commitment to the oppressed tested by Trump", December 17). Typical with hardline Israel bashers, no room is found for nuance, context or balance.

His "incontrovertible historical facts" that he believes "might help the South African government to get on the side of truth and justice" also prove, on closer examination, to be anything but. For example, it was not Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in September 2000 that sparked the ruinous four-year conflict generally known as the "Second Intifada".

As early as the first anniversary of that outbreak, Palestinian leaders (including Marwan Barghouti, bizarrely touted as the "Palestinian Mandela") were admitting quite unabashedly that the visit was deliberately exploited to ignite a conflict that had long been in preparation.

Then there is Le Pere's baffling assertion that on recapturing the area in front of the Western Wall in 1967, Israel "renamed" it as the "Jewish Quarter". This fosters the impression that a "Jewish Quarter" in the Old City is of very recent origin rather than dating back for at least a millennium, and it is difficult to accept that the writer was unaware of this.

Le Pere also signally fails to acknowledge how previous Israeli governments have on a number of occasions offered to share the sovereignty of Jerusalem as part of a final status peace deal.

In 2000, Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered dramatic concessions that would have allowed the Arab neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem to become the capital of a Palestinian state, but the proposal was rejected by Yasser Arafat.

In 2008, Israel offered to put the Old City under joint management by a special committee consisting of representatives from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Palestine, the US and Israel, but again the Palestinian leadership was not interested.

It is regrettably true that poverty levels in East Jerusalem are unacceptably high, but then comparable levels of poverty can be found within Israel's ultra-Orthodox Jewish community.

It cannot be glibly assumed that "Israeli oppression" is the reason many Palestinians are struggling.

Compared with Jordanian misrule, the position of East Jerusalem residents under Israeli administration has improved. They are entitled to National Insurance, health and municipal services, study at the Hebrew University and work in the service sector in the west part of the city.

Palestinians are taking a hard look at the corrupt and oppressive misrule of the Palestinian Authority and Hamas and opting to be part of Israeli society.

• Shapiro is an independent Middle East researcher.