

Jerusalem:

A Vision for Tomorrow

Oct 8, 2010



Brief Analysis

On October 6, 2010, Jerusalem mayor Nir Barkat addressed a special Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. As leader of a uniquely high-profile city with complex municipal and political challenges that have international repercussions, Barkat laid out an optimistic vision of Jerusalem's future, including a detailed new municipal "master plan" for population growth, economic development, and zoning issues related to the expansion of Arab and Jewish neighborhoods. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

http://www.youtube.com/user/WashingtonInstitute?feature=mhum#p/c/4620B42ABB8A04A5/0/rrM49p_JfrA of this event on Youtube.

Jerusalem is a city with some three thousand years of history. It is also the city of its present inhabitants, of which two thirds are Jewish, one third are Muslim, and approximately 2 percent are Christian, as well as an international city for 3.5 billion people of faith -- an important fact Jerusalem's leaders and inhabitants must remember when making decisions. With this sense of history in mind, Jerusalem's leaders envision a restored city in which individuals of all faiths can worship in peace, much as they did thousands of years ago. Though challenges remain for Jerusalem, its leadership is committed to achieving its vision and maintaining the unity of the city.

Challenges

Jerusalem must overcome numerous obstacles before it can fully realize the vision of its present leadership. Though businesses are growing, the city must be made more attractive for tourists, investors, and young entrepreneurs. In comparison to major international cities such as London and New York, where more than 40 million tourists visit each year, Jerusalem hosts just over 2 million visitors annually. Increased tourism means increased investment opportunities and increased revenue, both of which could stem the growing problem of emigration of young people away from Jerusalem.

Though Jerusalem is Israel's largest city -- Tel Aviv is the second largest, with 400,000 inhabitants, half the population of Jerusalem -- it is also one of the country's poorest. The city is short 200 classrooms and lacks proper investments and infrastructure such as roads and public transportation. Jerusalem also faces the problem of some 20,000 illegal structures that are at odds with current zoning laws, most of them in east Jerusalem.

Moreover, Jerusalem expects a natural population increase of 200,000 within the coming years, which will create an increased demand for housing. Arab and Jewish neighborhoods will need to expand to meet the scale of the city.

Master Plan

The master plan for the city of Jerusalem, which was drafted under former mayor Ehud Olmert, is largely accepted by Israelis as the wisest blueprint for the city's future. It is designed to ensure that municipal activities occur in a legal and professional manner rather than based on political motivations, and it accounts for both the challenges facing the city and a broader vision for its progress.

In economic terms, the plan acknowledges the importance of growth by implementing mechanisms to attract businesses, investors, entrepreneurs, and overall private sector growth. It recognizes as well that certain areas of the city may need to be reshaped in order to enhance business, commerce, and the hotel industry, to create a richer experience for those coming to Jerusalem, and to allow the city's inhabitants to benefit from such tourism.

The master plan also accounts for the continued protection of approximately three thousand historical buildings in Jerusalem. The city, through its business development arm, works to assist those businesses that are adversely affected by historical preservation policies.

In order to reach its expansion goals, Jerusalem must be allowed to build and issue permits. Otherwise, the cost of living will increase and people will either leave the city or build illegally. Thus, the master plan addresses current neighborhood layouts and expansion prospects, acknowledging the tendency of Arabs to live in predominantly Arab neighborhoods and Jews to live in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods. If someone desires a permit, he or she must request such a permit before a committee, following established procedures.

To account for illegal structures at odds with city zoning laws, Jerusalem's municipal leadership is pushing for a more efficient zoning process, which is aimed at decreasing tensions and eliminating 90 percent of the problems that arise when such illegal structures are built.

In the case of Ramat Shlomo, a district committee was responsible for approving various building and expansion phases for development of that particular area. As no building freeze exists in Jerusalem, committee officials proceeded with construction plans in Ramat Shlomo according to the expansion goals of the city's master plan and city guidelines. Though the proposed construction of 1,600 new Jewish apartments in a supposedly Arab area created a stir during U.S. vice president Joe Biden's visit, the Ramat Shlomo expansion was not in an Arab neighborhood. Furthermore, the master plan calls for expansion of both Arab and Jewish neighborhoods according to each neighborhood's needs, regardless of ethnicity or religion. Thus, the plan makes it illegal to discriminate against either Arabs or Jews. Rather, Jerusalem's policy under the master plan is to align public building projects with the needs of the majority of a given neighborhood. Jerusalem's leaders are pushing ahead to develop Ramat Shlomo in a way that will be fair for all its citizens. There is no flexibility in the master plan to allow for exemptions in certain political situations.

In order to ensure that the desires and needs of all of its residents -- Jewish, Muslim, and Christian alike -- are addressed with fairness and consistency, Jerusalem has instituted twenty-eight community councils. Furthermore, it has introduced a seven-borough system in order to improve its provision of cleaning and sanitation services.

A Unified City, in Ideology and Practice

As Jerusalem moves forward, it must maintain its unity, in both ideological and practical terms. Ideologically, Jerusalem has a history that spans three thousand years. Since it was destroyed two thousand years ago, the city has passed through the hands of multiple conquerors, none of whom has ever declared it a capital, except for the Jewish people.

With regard to religion, the city only became truly open and free for all believers following its reunification in 1967. Each faith -- Muslim, Jewish, and Christian -- manages its own religious sites. The only religious limitation involves Jewish practice on the Temple Mount. Maintaining this freedom of religion holds strategic importance for the city's future, by allowing visitors to worship here and then return home as ambassadors of peace.

Jerusalem is an international city in character, but it must remain unified in governance. The Old City, at Jerusalem's core, indeed has particular diversity. Yet the city has one public transportation system, one police system, and a unified public works system. Though creative solutions for peace often include dividing the city, such a plan could not be enacted to the benefit of residents, whether Arab or Jewish. In a practical sense, a city requires a

single management structure. No divided city in the world has enjoyed true success -- all such cities either suffer from dysfunction or eventually reunite.

When Israel took a risk by disengaging from Gaza in 2005, thinking it would do business with the Palestine Liberation Organization, it ended up facing Hamas. By dividing the city of Jerusalem, Israel would be making a similar mistake, essentially placing a Trojan horse within the city. This cannot happen. In order for Jerusalem to expand and play its role in the world, it must remain united. Put succinctly, there is only one government, one law, one Israeli city. The leaders of Jerusalem are committed to ensuring this unity of Jerusalem and developing the master plan of the city.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Allison LeBlanc. ❖

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