

## Political and Religious History of Jerusalem

Twenty miles west of the Dead Sea and thirty miles east of the Mediterranean, Jerusalem stands as a point of sovereign contest and spiritual importance for Jews, Christians and Muslims worldwide. Jews believe that the city was chosen above others to hold God's spirit, realized in the city's housing of the First and Second Temples that held the Ark of the Covenant and the Holy of Holies<sup>1</sup>. The Western Wall, the most important Jewish place of pilgrimage, is the only portion of the Temple that remains standing. Christians remember the city as the site of Jesus's Last Supper and subsequent crucifixion and participate in pilgrimages to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Mount of Olives<sup>2</sup>. Muslims hold that in 621, Muhammad stopped in the city on his Night Journey before his ascension into Heaven and it briefly became the direction of prayer for the qibla before being changed to Mecca<sup>3</sup>. The Dome of the Rock and the rest of the al-Aqsa complex remain crucial points of worship for Muslims.

Historically, the land was sought after due to its high altitude and strong infrastructure. However, with passing years these reasons have become secondary to the view that control of Jerusalem is linked to a certain religion's dominance and validity, leading to the city's conquering over 30 times<sup>4</sup>. Jerusalem has been inhabited since at least 3200 BCE, first by sun god worshipping Canaanites before King David conquered the city around 1000 BCE, bringing with him Abrahamic doctrines<sup>5</sup>. Power changed hands several times before Roman rule began in the fourth century BCE, when Jerusalem's culture was influenced by the worship of Greco-Roman deities. Muslim political control was established in 638 with the peaceful surrender of Byzantines to the Umayyad Caliphate, ushering in an era of intermingling between religious groups<sup>6</sup>. Beginning in 1099, European Crusaders took the city after intense battles, starting an era of rapid wars and subsequent changes of political control among groups like the Ayyubid dynasty, Turks, and Mamluks.

In 1516, Jerusalem fell under the Ottoman Empire, a period characterized by a millet system of government that divided the city's communities based on religious and ethnic identity. After the empire's 400-year reign collapsed at the end of World War I, the lands of Transjordan, Palestine, and Syria were divided between France and Britain, with Jerusalem falling under the authority of the British Mandate of Palestine. This act coincided with the rise of the Zionist movement, leading to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Stuck in the middle of factions with strong nationalistic and religious claims, Jerusalem was split between Israel in the west and

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Skolnik, Geoffrey Wigoder and Shmuel Himelstein, "HOLY OF HOLIES," *The New Encyclopedia of Judaism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York University Press, 2002)

<sup>2</sup> Juan E. Campo, "Jerusalem and Islam," *Encyclopedia of World Religions: Encyclopedia of Islam* (Facts On File, 2016)

<sup>3</sup> Othmar Keel, *Jerusalem and the One God: A Religious History*, (Fortress Press, 2017)

<sup>4</sup> Emanuel Gutmann, "Jerusalem," *Encyclopedia of Politics and Religion*, (CQ Press, 2006)

<sup>5</sup> Mayer Gruber, "Jerusalem in Judaism," *Encyclopedia of Judaism*, (Brill, 2005)

<sup>6</sup> John D. Hosler, *Jerusalem Falls: Seven Centuries of War and Peace*, (Yale University Press, 2022)

Jordan in the east, the dividing line lying on the Western Wall. This system remained in place until the 1967 Arab-Israeli War when Israel gained control of the entire city<sup>7</sup>.

Today, Jerusalem is claimed as both the Palestinian and the Israeli capital, but advocates from across the political spectrum have called to internationalize the city<sup>8</sup>. The UN Security Council continues to push for maintaining the Status Quo of Holy Places in the city as repeated outbreaks of deadly violence have been activated by altercations over worship in disputed sites, such as the 2022 riots at the Aqsa Mosque that injured 3 Israeli police officers and over 200 Palestinians, including women and children<sup>9</sup>. However, as the city has come to represent messianic wishes and patriotic symbols, the future of Jerusalem and its various inhabitants remains unclear.

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<sup>7</sup> Campo, "Jerusalem and Islam."

<sup>8</sup> Campo, "Jerusalem and Islam."

<sup>9</sup> "Status Quo of Jerusalem's Holy Sites Must Be Upheld, Special Middle East Coordinator Tells Security Council, as Speakers Express Alarm over Recent Violent Clashes," *The United Nations*, April 25, 2022, [press.un.org/en/2022/sc14869.doc.htm](https://press.un.org/en/2022/sc14869.doc.htm).