

**An open letter to the American President in honor of his visit to Israel and to Jerusalem
– translated from Ma'ariv website NRG (in Hebrew)**

By Professor Elinoar Barzacchi and Professor Nazmi Ju'beh

Honorable President Bush,

We would like to welcome you to our troubled region, and thank you for your efforts to advance the peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

During your visit to Israel in honor of the country's 60th birthday celebrations, you will visit Jerusalem, which will undoubtedly be presented to you as the United Capital of the State of Israel and the Jewish people. However, beyond this, Jerusalem is also key to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Annapolis Summit, which you initiated, was designed as the opening of serious political negotiations with the goal of reaching a two-state solution with Jerusalem as the capitals of both states. No one expected a peace agreement to be signed immediately following the summit; however, many people – ourselves included – allowed themselves to anticipate that the summit would at least bring a change in the atmosphere and conduct in Jerusalem, which lies at the center of the conflict between the two peoples.

We hoped to see changes on the ground which would support the negotiations over Jerusalem's future. We hoped to witness the cessation of unilateral Israeli actions designed to "Judaize" Jerusalem, and to see in their place the beginnings of agreed-upon measures supporting the notion that Jerusalem can be shared. We hoped that even if we did not reach a political settlement regarding the division of sovereignty over Jerusalem within a year, we would feel a real shift in the city; a shift toward truly being a city of two peoples, where both have the right to see the city as their capital, and both feel at home within its bounds.

Instead, the State of Israel embarked on a series of trust-eroding actions, immediately following the summit. These actions include: advancing the construction of thousands of housing units for Jews in East Jerusalem, expanding Jewish settlements in the heart of Palestinian neighborhoods in East Jerusalem, banning several Palestinian civil gatherings on the premise that they were connected to the Palestinian Authority, populating the police headquarters in the E-1 area, house demolitions, and archeological excavating without proper permits in the most sensitive areas of Jerusalem – in and around the Old City.

Thus, the interim period, which was supposed to initiate a period of trust-building in the city, has been transformed into a period of accelerated unilateral and aggressive actions designed to preclude a negotiated accord. Rather than striving for cooperation in which all can win, the Israeli government is perpetuating the city as a center of confrontation.

Your visit, Mr. President, will include many celebrations. However, you must request not only celebrations, but also actions –series of steps which will advance coexistence in the city – in order to pave the path towards a future agreement in Jerusalem.

As representatives of two stakeholder organizations in Jerusalem – Ir Amim (Israeli), and The Peace and Democracy Forum (Palestinian), which work together in the Jerusalem Policy Forum – we propose a number of immediate steps in order to build a foundation of trust that will support negotiations.

1. Allow the operation of Palestinian civil institutions in Jerusalem – to enable the healthy existence of two societies in the city. Preventing civic activity connected to the Palestinian Authority is absurd in light of the negotiations between the two governments; and troubling in view of Israel's failure to provide alternative services.
2. Cease appropriating land in East Jerusalem. Avoid planning new Israeli housing units; prevent settler organizations from gaining further control over sites inside Palestinian neighborhoods. Halt all building plans in the E-1 area.
3. Allocate municipal budgets equitably between East and West Jerusalem; and direct monies to the improvement of physical and social infrastructure in East Jerusalem. Likewise, permit Palestinians to develop their own properties and neighborhoods.
4. Allow freedom of movement to the greatest extent possible between East Jerusalem and the West Bank, which are linked through extensive economic and personal ties. Allow access for Muslim and Christian worshippers, as well as exchanges of goods and services.
5. Until final-status agreement, Israel should avoid alteration of the status of Palestinian residents of Jerusalem, their residency or their social entitlements.
6. Maintain transparency in all that is related to the Old City and adjacent areas. Actions must be coordinated with all stakeholders, to take into consideration their sensitivities, and to prevent unilateral actions that may endanger a future accord.

Mr. President, your visit can be an opportunity to make a critical shift, for the benefit of the city of Jerusalem, her residents and all those connected to the city – Christians, Muslims and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians alike. Without an agreed upon solution in Jerusalem, there will be no solution to the conflict as a whole. Please help us not to miss this historic opportunity.

Professor Elinoar Barzacchi served formerly as Jerusalem City Engineer, and is now Chair of the Board of Ir Amim, working for a stable and equitable Jerusalem with a politically agreed-upon future

Professor Nazmi Ju'beh is a Senior Lecturer of History and Archeology, Co-Director of RIWAQ – The Center for Architectural Preservation in Ramallah, and served as a

Palestinian representative to the peace talks in Washington (1992-1994).
