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## The Confederation of Abraham

By Stanley A. Weiss

In the center of Jerusalem is a series of platforms that were built over many centuries, known as the Temple Mount, on Mount Moriah. The stone peak of Mount Moriah is visible at the center of the Temple Mount.

Jews know this as “the Foundation Stone.” It is the holiest site in Judaism. According to the Talmud, it is from this rock that the world was first created; that Adam and Noah offered sacrifices to God; that Abraham displayed to God his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac; and that Solomon built the First Temple of Jerusalem. It is also upon this rock, in a chamber within the First Temple, that Jews placed the Ark of the Covenant—the chest which contained the Ten Commandments—making it the “Holy of Holies.”

It is a perfect symbol of the intertwined history of this disputed land that the Foundation Stone itself is housed within an Islamic mosque—the Dome of the Rock, which was built after the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem. Muslims believe that it was from this same rock that the prophet Mohammad first ascended to heaven, where he spoke to God, receiving instructions to take back to the faithful. After Mecca and Medina, it is Islam’s third holiest site.

Meanwhile, Christians revere the rock as the site of the Second Temple, which stood in Jerusalem from 516 B.C. until 70 A.D. It is the Temple where scripture says Jesus was brought as a child; where he and his disciples preached and chased away moneychangers. For a city that has been destroyed twice, and captured and recaptured 44 times, the fact that a rock sits at the center of Jerusalem’s shifting sands is perhaps the original historical irony.

The basic narrative is why Jews, Muslims and Christians claim this land as their historic homeland. While Jews ruled on and off here for nearly a millennia, Muslims—save for the Crusader period (1095-1291)—ruled the region from 638 until 1917, when the British claimed it after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I.

As the United Nations prepares to consider a proposal to recognize an independent Palestinian state, it is worth remembering that during the 1,100 years of Muslim rule, dozens of ethnic groups lived together without real borders. As Sari Nusseibeh, the Palestinian President of Al-Quds University in Jerusalem reminds me, “In contrast to our states-divided world, migration from one region to another did not require passports and proof of identity. The division of the past 60 years is the exception to the history, not the rule.”

We know the history: in 1917, British Foreign Secretary Lord Balfour promised to establish a homeland for Jews in Palestine. In 1947, the UN passed Resolution 181, portioning the area into a Jewish state and a Palestinian state, which the latter rejected. In 1948, the British withdrew, Israel declared independence, and war erupted. Some 800,000 Palestinians

who lost their homes in the conflict—and their 1.5 million descendants—have never been allowed to return (the so-called “right of return”).

In 1967, Egypt, receiving false reports from the Soviet Union that Israel was moving troops to the Syrian border, massed its own troops on the Israeli border. It drew a crippling counter-strike from Israel, who went on to also defeat Jordan and Syria in the so-called Six Day War. From Egypt, Israel claimed the Gaza Strip (and Sinai Peninsula, which was returned after a peace treaty was signed); from Syria, it occupied the Golan Heights; from Jordan, it annexed East Jerusalem and occupied the land on the West Bank of the Jordan River. International law does not recognize Israel’s claim to these occupied territories.

By some counts, there have been 31 separate peace plans proposed and rejected the past 60 years. Meanwhile, Israel has built security walls around Arab areas, established hundreds of checkpoints and built thousands of settlements in the West Bank.

The choices remain clear. Israel can agree to some form of a negotiated two-state solution, accepting an independent Palestinian state in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem, as was offered to the Palestinians by Israeli Prime Ministers Ehud Barak and Ehud Olmert—and rejected. It can agree to a bi-national solution, ceding to demographics that suggest there will be more Arabs than Jews in Israel by 2050—which would essentially mean giving up the Zionist dream of a Jewish, democratic state. Or, it can continue building settlements, which even some Israelis have compared to apartheid.

In this land where Abraham is revered both as a prophet of Islam, through his first-born son, Ishmael; and as father of the Israelites, through his second born child, Isaac—this is clearly a situation in need of new ideas.

One idea is the creation of a confederation between Israel and a Palestine within negotiated borders. Call it the Confederation of Abraham. Over time, Israelis and Palestinians could pass across secure borders. A demilitarized Palestine with international security guarantees could build confidence and ease reconciliation. Permanent joint bodies, modeled on South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, could litigate issues of common interest, from water rights to economic development. All told, Palestinians would get their state; and in return, the 21 Arab states in the region would agree to recognize a Jewish Israel. The Confederation would be a first step to a regional common market, which would allow the international community to focus on economics, not politics.

For now, all players in the region are stuck between a rock and a hard place.