

**Keynote Address by H.E. Dr. Mohamed El Aziz BEN ACHOUR**  
**Symposium on “Jerusalem, a City, a Culture, a Destiny”**  
**Organized by ALECSO at the Arab World Institute (IMA)**

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The uncertainties and concerns aroused about the current situation prevailing in East Jerusalem have escalated in recent days following the Netanyahu government's decision to include two sites in the West Bank on the Israeli heritage list.

The symposium we have the honour of organizing on this occasion is taking place while tension has reached a peak in the West Bank and as the peace process has long been stalled.

More than ever before, the Palestinians are feeling that the measures taken by the Israeli government, whether in the form of excavations beneath the Esplanade of the mosques or in the form of the incorporation of sites on the Israeli list, are the expression of a cultural aggression involving an identity-related feature.

Our goal is to emphasize that the actions undertaken these days by the Israeli authorities are serious measures affecting the historical, urban and architectural heritage of the Old City of Jerusalem – a heritage for humanity at large, but also for the Palestinian population and of course, for peace.

While recalling the occupation status, under international law, of the Israeli presence in East Jerusalem, ALECSO is, however, aware that it is far above its means and beyond its scope to claim that it can indicate the way forward for a just solution to the issue of the thrice holy city. Yet, it is within its competence and it is its duty to warn public opinion about the dangers facing a heritage that is, according to the unanimous opinion of specialists, a gem of the universal civilization.

Built under the protecting umbrella of the Muslim civilization since the Seventh Century, the Old City of Jerusalem is studded with monuments. Enclosed within its walls, it offered, in the first years of the twentieth century a unique aspect, highlighted by the splendour of the Dome of the Rock. Yet there was more to it than town planning, stones and decoration. There also prevailed a citizenship culture based on values that are being abused on the present-day, i.e., those of tolerance, coexistence of faiths and communities, as well as respect for the other. This culture of *Bayt al-Maqdis/Al-Quds*, that is to say, Jerusalem, under Muslim rule, had flourished since the Caliphate of U'mar and continued to do so until the last Ottomans –Aristocrats who followed in the footsteps of this time-honoured political shrewdness of Islam, so favourable for coexistence and so remote from that destructive fury, the tragic and bloody unfolding of which – starting from the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 until the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis in the twentieth century – had been witnessed in Europe.

This very culture, which scorned hatred and exclusion, has been, since 1967, bearing the brunt of the fallouts of a policy aimed at the Judaization of Jerusalem. So it is in this spirit that ALECSO supported a resolution adopted by the Arab Ministers of Culture that proclaimed Al Quds, as the capital of Arab Culture for 2009.

What worries us most is the stubbornness shown by the Israeli authorities, nurtured by the fanaticism of certain groups of settlers, in moving on to a point of no return in terms of de-Palestinization. Such a will for Judaization, which has been, since 1967, expressed by the destruction of neighbourhoods and homes, expulsions and construction of settlements at an increasingly sustained pace, as well as by the isolation of Palestinian districts and urban areas and the construction of a separation wall; that will, - may I say - manifests itself yet in another form, which has dangerous implications on the historical heritage of the city. The allegedly 'archaeological' excavations carried out under the Esplanade of the Mosques, where constructions dating from the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD are found, were assigned not to scientists but to an association dubbed Elad, whose dubious practices have had a shocking effect even in Israel.

Yet what we see today is that, beyond Jerusalem and the fierce excavations being undertaken there, it is in the West Bank that the Netanyahu government, in defiance of the Palestinian Authority, has decided to include two sites in Hebron and Bethlehem on the Israeli Heritage List which needed protection.

History, archaeology and heritage preservation are thus relegated to the rank of becoming mere tools of cultural dispossession of a people and are being used as instruments at the service of a venture seeking the erasure of identity.

Let us be clear: to inscribe a site revered by other religions at the same time as the Jewish religion on the list of heritage at risk is not objectionable. What is shocking and worrying is the underlying political ulterior motives in the backdrop of a conflict and especially of denial of the identity of the other and the other's rights to a heritage; what is shocking indeed is the insane goal of seeking to obliterate all Palestinian features from the heritage of Palestine.

Interest in heritage is of no value unless it is placed under the motto of respect for the other. If used as a means of dispossession, it becomes dangerous and unacceptable. When, by destroying houses, expelling Palestinians from their homes, isolating their districts and urban areas, building Jewish settlements, Israel recklessly endeavours, by so doing, to render impossible a viable Palestinian state then, yes, under such conditions, the interest in heritage becomes obnoxious.

It is worth to mention, in connection with this program of denial of the Palestinian identity, a decision which is quite symptomatic of the aggressive and nonsensical Israeli cultural policy in Jerusalem: while tolerance used to be a value that held obvious significance in the Arab Jerusalem and used to be practised on a daily basis, we now witness that under Israeli rule, it has been placed at a standstill and exhibited in a weird Museum of Tolerance built on the site of a Muslim cemetery.

Jerusalem, for the mishap, nowadays, of its Arab inhabitants, is replete of holiness. It is holy not only for Jews, but also for Christians and Muslims. Since 1948, this ancient city has hardly been favourable for intellectual serenity and political moderation. It has become a privileged area for the manipulation of the sacred by politics.

As a historian, I am distrustful of such instrumentalization. That devotion to a religion can be part of a national sentiment, is certainly not blameable; yet to persist, in the name of a policy or a government program, in exacerbating religious sentiments in order to deny all legitimacy to one's opponent by leaning on the sacred, that is unacceptable.

The use of religion in politics can only be justified by the intention of ensuring coexistence through tolerance and respect held for the other – the other's faith, culture and traditions.

The policy of the Israeli occupation authorities in East Jerusalem jeopardizes a historic city of paramount importance for civilization. By the same token, it affects the values conveyed by the Arab culture of the city. By dint of challenging the Palestinian identity, the last strongholds of this culture, based for centuries on tolerance, will eventually fall and the reckless Israeli heritage and memory drive will only lead to further strengthen an extremism which is already present.

Confiscating the material and intangible heritage of Jerusalem and Palestine will hinder any outcome towards achieving a just peace, that is, respectful of the Arab identity of Palestine; but if it continues and accelerates, it could throw a whole people in the grips of political radicalism and religious extremism.

I dare hope that our debate during this symposium will not be an autopsy of something irretrievably dead: the hope of a better tomorrow for Palestinian youth.