What Future for Jerusalem?

What happens when more than one people lay claim to the same city as their capital? This is the situation in the city of Jerusalem. In this activity, you will read information about Jerusalem and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Territories over the city. Then you will explore four possible futures for Jerusalem.

Jerusalem’s History

King David made Jerusalem the capital of all the tribes of Israel around 1000 BC. Some scholars suggest that David chose Jerusalem to be the capital so that all the tribes could share it. Thus, it did not belong to any one tribe. According to the Bible, David moved the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, thereby signaling its status as the capital of a united Israel.

In the centuries that followed, this region—known as Palestine—was conquered numerous times by outsiders. Under some of these foreign administrations, Jerusalem was made the capital of a surrounding province. The Muslim Arabs who conquered the city in the AD 600s also saw Jerusalem as a holy city. In the walled Old City, they constructed the Dome of the Rock at a place associated with their prophet, Muhammad. This Muslim sacred site is on what Jews call the Temple Mount (the Haram al-Sharif to Muslims). The Temple Mount is the location of the Jewish temple that was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. It is therefore sacred to Jews as well. The Old City also contains sites sacred to Christians. Jerusalem was in Christian hands for nearly 200 years during the time of the Crusades. It switched back to Muslim control again until World War I, when it was taken by British troops.

Jerusalem in the 1900s

After World War I, Great Britain was given legal authority to govern Palestine by the League of Nations. In 1924 Britain chose Jerusalem as the capital of this territory. Meanwhile, the British said they would support the plans of the Zionists. Zionists were Jews from around the world who hoped to establish a new Jewish nation-state in Palestine, their historic homeland. The Palestinians objected.

When Israel declared its independence in 1948, units of Arab armies invaded. At the end of the war the next year, Jordan held East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Israel ended up with quite a bit more territory than what had been proposed in the United Nations partition plan. At the
end of this war, Jerusalem was split into Jordanian East Jerusalem and Israeli West Jerusalem. The city was divided by walls and guarded by UN peacekeepers.

As long as the city was divided, many inhabitants were denied access to holy sites that were located across the boundary. Most of the major holy sites of all three religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, including the Old City, were on the Jordanian side. In fact, in its partition plan, the United Nations had proposed to make Jerusalem an international city.

Israeli West Jerusalem was surrounded on three sides by the Jordanian-held West Bank. In spite of this situation, Israel began moving central government functions into West Jerusalem in 1948. Israel officially declared Jerusalem its capital in 1950. However, almost all countries have refused to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Most countries continue to have their embassies in Tel Aviv–Jaffa.

REACHING AN AGREEMENT
The Israelis and Palestinians have been working toward an agreement over Jerusalem. The Palestinians would like an independent country of their own. The old UN plan supported this idea, which would include Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. The Israelis have strong objections to this. One reason for their objections is that they have allowed Jewish settlement in the West Bank, which Israel has controlled since 1967.

Both Jewish Israelis and Muslim Palestinians believe that their claims to Jerusalem are valid. Christians are also part of the picture. They want to be able to visit the many sites holy to their religion. How can these claims be resolved? One geographer, Dr. Chad Emmett, has outlined four possible futures for Jerusalem.

PLAN 1: A UNITED CAPITAL
In this plan, the status of Jerusalem would be as Israel sees it: “Jerusalem united in its entirety as the capital of Israel.” The city would remain united under Israeli rule. Palestinian residents of the city (who now make up more than one quarter of the total population) could hold some type of dual citizenship—Israeli and West Bank. A new West Bank (Palestinian) capital complex might even be located in East Jerusalem. The holy sites of each religion, clustered in and around the walled Old City, would have a special status, guaranteeing access to believers. This
future recognizes the importance of Jerusalem to the Palestinians, but leaves the city under Israeli control.

**PLAN 2: A FORMER CAPITAL**
The Israelis and Palestinians would both choose capitals other than Jerusalem. Israel could move its capital back to Tel Aviv, where it was in the earliest days of the country’s existence. If Jerusalem were not anyone’s national capital, it might be easier for the groups to compromise.

**PLAN 3: AN INTERNATIONAL CAPITAL**
This future emphasizes the idea that Jerusalem belongs not just to Israel and the Palestinians, but also to all for whom the city has spiritual meaning. Jerusalem could be separated politically from Israel and the Palestinian Territories and governed by an international group or a number of religious bodies. Another option would be to have Israel govern the Jewish parts of the city and the Palestinians govern the Arab parts. The holy places would be internationalized and governed by outsiders.

**PLAN 4: A SHARED CAPITAL**
Some ideas for sharing Jerusalem echo the situation of 1949–1967. During this time Jerusalem was divided by physical barriers into two parts. This plan is not popular. Other ideas include allowing Jerusalem to be the national capital of two countries exercising joint sovereignty (power) over it. There would be an Israeli mayor and city council for Israeli residents and a Palestinian mayor and city council for Palestinian residents. Together the councils could make decisions affecting the entire city. A joint authority could manage the holy sites. Everyone would have access to the entire city.

**YOU ARE THE GEOGRAPHER**
In small discussion groups, list the pros and cons for each of Dr. Emmett’s four possible plans. Think not only about what is desirable or undesirable about each plan, but also about what is practical or impractical. After discussion, decide which future for Jerusalem you think is the best choice and why. Share your group’s work in a class discussion or in a written summary.