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Netanyahu turns to Bible in tussle over Jerusalem

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By Dan Williams

JERUSALEM (Reuters) - Beset by questions about Jerusalem's future in talks with the Palestinians, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reached for the Bible on Wednesday to stake out the Jewish state's contested claim on the city.

Netanyahu told a parliamentary session commemorating Israel's capture of East Jerusalem from Jordan in the 1967 war that "Jerusalem" and its alternative Hebrew name "Zion" appear 850 times in the Old Testament, Judaism's core canon.

"As to how many times Jerusalem is mentioned in the holy scriptures of other faiths, I recommend you check," he said.

Citing such ancestry, Israel calls all of Jerusalem its "eternal and indivisible" capital -- a designation not recognized abroad, where many powers support Arab claims to East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

The dispute is further inflamed by the fact East Jerusalem houses al-Aqsa mosque, Islam's third-holiest shrine, on a plaza that Jews revere as the vestige of two biblical Jewish temples.

Heckled by a lawmaker from Israel's Arab minority, Netanyahu offered a lesson in comparative religion from the lectern.

"Because you asked: Jerusalem is mentioned 142 times in the New Testament, and none of the 16 various Arabic names for Jerusalem is mentioned in the Koran. But in an expanded interpretation of the Koran from the 12th century, one passage is said to refer to Jerusalem," he said.

Responding to Netanyahu's citations, Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat said: "I find it very distasteful, this use of religion to incite hatred and fear. East Jerusalem is an occupied Palestinian town, and East Jerusalem cannot continue to be occupied if there is to be peace."

MANY RULERS

Destroyed as a Jewish capital by the Romans in the 1st century AD, Jerusalem was a Christian city under their Byzantine successors before falling to Muslim Arabs in the 7th. European Crusaders regained it for a century, after which came 700 years of Muslim rule until Britain defeated the Ottoman Turks in 1917.

As Britain prepared to quit, the United Nations proposed international rule for the city in 1947 as a "corpus separatum."

That proposal was overtaken by fighting that left Israel holding West Jerusalem in 1948 and Jordanian forces in East Jerusalem. Israel then took the rest in the Six Day War of 1967.

The city, within boundaries defined by Israel but not recognized internationally, is now home to 750,000 people, two in three of them Jews and the rest mostly Muslim Palestinians.

Netanyahu did not refer in his speech to indirect peace negotiations with the Palestinians that resumed this month after 1-1/2 years of U.S. trouble-shooting. Diplomacy has been mired by mutual recrimination, including from Israel over the Palestinian refusal to formally recognize it as a Jewish state.

This has ossified into diehard hostility among Palestinians aligned with Islamist Hamas, while those more inclined toward peacemaking accuse Israel of sabotaging prospects by treating occupied land as a Jewish birthright that can be freely seized.

Netanyahu said Israel would retain control over all of Jerusalem while ensuring freedom of worship at its holy sites.

Such assertions are challenged by Palestinians given that Israel, over the last decade of fighting, has often limited their access to al-Aqsa. Christians in the adjacent West Bank complain of similar difficulties in reaching Jerusalem churches.

"There is no undercutting, nor do I intend to undercut, the connection of others to Jerusalem," Netanyahu said.

"But I do confront the attempt to undercut and warp or obfuscate the unique connection that we, the people of Israel, have to the capital of Israel."

(Editing by Elizabeth Fullerton)



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