

Trump's Jerusalem Decision: A US Policy Perspective

Written by Jonathan Sciarcon

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JONATHAN SCIARCON, JAN 15 2018

On 6 December 2017, the President of the United States, Donald Trump, upended decades of American policy by announcing that the US will both recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move its embassy there at a future date. Trump's move touched off a debate about whether the Israel-Palestine peace process is now dead or whether the American recognition of Jerusalem is just the kind of courageous move needed to shake up the status quo and bring both the Israelis and the Palestinians to the negotiating table. To begin addressing this dilemma, it is important to recall some fundamental history. On 29 November 1947, the UN General Assembly's Resolution 181 called for separate Jewish and Arab states in what was then Mandatory Palestine. According to the resolution, which the US supported, Jerusalem was to be excluded from this two-state solution and was to be an UN-administered international city. However, as a result of the subsequent 1947-48 civil war in Palestine and the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, Jerusalem could not become an international city and a Palestinian Arab state never came into existence. Instead, an Israel larger than Resolution 181 had envisioned came into existence, as Egypt occupied Gaza and the Jordanians took over the West Bank. Israel came to control West Jerusalem, while Jordan took over East Jerusalem, including the Old City and its Muslim, Jewish, and Christian holy sites.

Following the 1948 War, the US granted the newly-formed Israel full diplomatic recognition with Tel Aviv as its capital, even though Israel claimed West Jerusalem as its capital city and began installing its government infrastructure there. Nearly two decades later, during the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel managed to occupy the West Bank and East Jerusalem, immediately annexing the latter. The US refused to recognize this annexation and considered, until last month, East Jerusalem to be Israeli-occupied territory. Indeed, the US looked to UN Resolution 242, which called for a 'land for peace' settlement between the warring parties – the foregoing of territory to attain peace – as the basis for a future resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The idea of 'land for peace' underwent a transformation by the 1980s and early 1990s as Palestinians, and not Jordan, were recognized by the Arab world and the US as having the sole legitimate claim, under international law, to East Jerusalem and the West Bank. While the US continued to withhold recognition of any part of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, as a result of the progress made towards peace through the Oslo Accords, it became clear that the US would eventually recognize a part of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and another part as the Palestinian capital. The recent American recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital overturns this previous policy, as President Trump has now granted *de facto* acknowledgment to Israel's right to occupy the sections of Jerusalem captured in the 1967 War, giving it more than it could have ever hoped for from any previous US president.

Over the past month, even critics of Trump have argued that his move has the potential to re-energize the moribund peace process. Those arguing this tend to believe that the decision will show Palestinian leaders that they cannot avoid negotiations with Israel and that they have exhausted the US' patience. This is a flawed analysis, as it rests on the assumption that it is the Palestinians alone who have derailed the peace process and prevented the consummation of a settlement. Such an assumption ignores the fact that no significant process has existed since at least the late 1990s, partly due to a weak and divided Palestinian leadership, but also as a result of the US' unwillingness – under successive Democratic and Republican administrations – to pressure Israel into making key concessions. Most importantly, perhaps the lack of a peace process is also linked to structural obstacles within Israel's political system. Over the past two decades, the Israeli electorate has moved sharply to the Right, rendering it nearly impossible for a Left-leaning coalition committed to making serious concessions in order to restart the peace

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process to assemble a 61-seat majority at the Knesset, especially if such a coalition excludes Arab political parties.

In the short run, Trump's move is unlikely to make a strong impact within the region. The Middle East's key Sunni-majority Arab states – most notably, Saudi Arabia and Egypt – do not seek to alienate the US on this question out of the fear of losing vital military support and aid. Moreover, these states consider their immediate opponents, such as Iran and radical Islamist groups, as more important policy concerns than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In the long run, however, the decision may undercut any plausible claim the US can make to be an honest, or even legitimate, broker between the Israelis and the Palestinians. On the other extreme, it is also possible that several Arab states may abandon paying even lip service to the Palestinian cause. This may sound like a win for the US and Israel, both of whom have long wished for Arab states to sideline the Palestinian question. However, if a loss in support from Arab governments leads to an even more heightened sense of hopelessness among Palestinians, it may embolden extremists in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, exacerbating security worries for not just Israel and the US, but potentially also for US-aligned Jordan, which borders the West Bank and has a sizeable Palestinian populace.

Beyond the implications for the Middle East, Trump's move will have broader international ramifications with bearings on American foreign policy. Notably, it marks the abandonment of yet another policy that previous US presidents had adhered to. For American allies, especially in Europe, this will drive home the message that the US cannot be counted on and that American foreign policy continues to be driven solely by narrowly perceived domestic, or even party, needs rather than by international commitments or the concerns of allies.

US allies would, in fact, be quite correct to conclude that its decision on Jerusalem was driven purely by domestic – more accurately, Republican – priorities. While both Democratic and Republican politicians have spent the past several decades claiming that Jerusalem is the indivisible capital of Israel, until now, neither party produced a president willing to translate this claim into declared American policy. Trump's decision to do so was motivated by the need to shore up his Evangelical Christian base, as he suffers through a historically unpopular first year of presidency. Many Evangelical Christians, who constitute a crucial percentage of Republican voters, have long viewed the recognition of Israeli control of all of Jerusalem as a chief priority. For these voters, Trump has followed through on a promise on which even George W. Bush, a self-identified Evangelical Christian, reneged.

Interestingly, while Trump also likely wanted to please his small but influential Right-wing Jewish base, his decision, although it has drawn cheers from some, has not pleased the broader American Jewish community. This is largely because, on one hand, most American Jews are staunchly opposed to Trump's domestic agenda while, on the other hand, many American Jews believe that the US' unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital actually harms the chances of peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. It does not help that many American Jews have negative views of Israel's current government and that many younger American Jews have begun to distance themselves, or feel detached, from Israel.

As the research of scholars such as Michelle Mart and Melani McAlister, among others, has shown, American policy towards Israel has frequently been influenced by domestic cultural and electoral concerns. However, major policy decisions in the past were not decided solely on the basis of such concerns, let alone the concerns of the constituents of a political party. For now, Trump's move will certainly not help solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More notably, it perhaps only signals a further American retreat from multilateral engagement. It is the allies of the US in and beyond the Middle East who should take prior note.

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