



TRUMP'S JERUSALEM DECISION: A RECKLESS MOVE

By
Arhama Siddiq
Research Fellow

Edited by
Najam Rafique

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



“Today, we finally acknowledge the obvious: that Jerusalem is Israel's capital. This is nothing more or less than a recognition of reality. It is also the right thing to do,”¹
In a statement from the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House on December 6, 2017, US President Donald Trump formally recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and announced plans to relocate the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to the contested city at the West Bank.

All 86 countries that have embassies in Israel locate them within Tel Aviv. A smaller number, including the United States, control consulates in Jerusalem. These Jerusalem consulates are generally diplomatic missions to the Palestinian Authority and the city itself. On December 6, 2017, President Trump's decision upended seven decades of US foreign policy in the Middle East.

Israel describes Jerusalem as its undivided and everlasting capital. The city has a complex history, with the Jews who occupied it during biblical times later largely barred and the city was later under Muslim rule during the Ottoman Empire. During the 20th century, the city changed hands a number of times before Israel captured the eastern part of the city from Jordan following the war in 1967.

Today, West Jerusalem is largely Israeli while East Jerusalem is largely Arab; Palestinians see the city as the capital of a future Palestinian state. A number of countries used to have their embassies in the city, but gradually these embassies began to move out after Israel passed a law that declared

¹ Alex Ward, “Read the full text of Trump's speech recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital,” *Vox*, December 06, 2017.

Jerusalem the united capital in 1980. The last countries to move their embassies were Costa Rica and El Salvador in 2006.

The United States has never had its embassy in Jerusalem. However, in 1995, Congress passed a law that called for one to be established there. Every president since Bill Clinton has signed a waiver twice a year that cites national security concerns. There is a large plot of land in West Jerusalem in Israel where a new embassy could be built. This land is inside the 1967 borders, and the United States pays \$1 a year to Israel for a 99-year to lease the site. To this day, the plot has not been developed, and it remains an empty field.²

World leaders from the Vatican to Tehran have deplored the decision by President Trump, and security officials in the region are now preparing for a fresh wave of clashes between Israel and the Palestinians. Almost all of American European allies like Britain, France, Germany and Italy have declared this decision to be a blunder.³

Calling Jerusalem the “eternal capital of the State of Palestine”,⁴ President Mahmud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority has stated that the US could no longer be a go-between in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that it would throw this region into “a ring of fire”.⁵ He has also invited leaders of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) member states to assemble for an extraordinary leaders summit in Istanbul on December 13. A statement issued by Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi’s office said: “The people and the government of Pakistan have noted with grave concern the reported move by the US to shift its embassy to the occupied city of Al-Quds Al-Sharif, thereby altering the legal and historical status of the city.”⁶ The Pakistan Foreign Office also voiced its condemnation when it said, “Any such move will be against international law and the resolutions of the UN Security Council.”⁷

Hamas leader Ismail Haniya has said the US decision on recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is a “war declaration against Palestinians”⁸, and called for a new “Intifada”.⁹ The Saudi Royal Court

² “The Ownership of the U.S. Embassy Site in Jerusalem,” The Ownership of the U.S. Embassy Site in Jerusalem | *The Institute for Palestine Studies*.

³ Al Jazeera, “World leaders chastise US over Jerusalem 'escalation',” *Israel News | Al Jazeera*, December 06, 2017.

⁴ Al Jazeera, “Mahmoud Abbas lambasts Trump's decision on Jerusalem,” *Palestine News | Al Jazeera*, December 06, 2017.

⁵ Al Jazeera, “Erdogan: US Jerusalem move puts region in ring of fire,” *Palestine News | Al Jazeera*, December 07, 2017.

⁶ Sib Kaifee, “Pakistan expresses ‘grave concern’ at Jerusalem bombshell,” *Arab News*, December 07, 2017.

⁷ “Ministry of Foreign Affairs.” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Islamabad*.

⁸ Kim Hjelmgard, “ Hamas leader calls for new ‘intifada’ after Trump’s Jerusalem move amid ‘days of rage’,” *USA Today*, December 07, 2017.

⁹ Ibid.

issued a statement saying that the Kingdom followed “with deep sorrow” Trump’s decision and warned of “dangerous consequences of moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem”.¹⁰ Iranian President Hassan Rouhani blasted his US counterpart when he said that Iran “will not tolerate a violation of Islamic sanctities,”.¹¹ And that “Muslims must stand united against this major plot.”¹² Iran’s supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, speaking at an event, has said that the US move is a result of “paralysis and incompetence.”¹³ While the head of the Arab League has called President Trump’s decision as a “flagrant attack on a political solution” to the Israeli- Palestinian conflict.¹⁴ The Malaysian defense minister has even offered his country’s military for any action required.

Optimistic as always was Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu when he pointed out that more countries have suggested their readiness to recognise the city of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, a day after the United States formally announced that it does. “The president’s decision is an important step towards peace ... For there is no peace that doesn’t include Jerusalem as the capital of the state of Israel.”¹⁵

Under the 1947 UN Partition Plan to divide historical Palestine between Jewish and Arab states, Jerusalem was granted special status and was meant to be placed under international sovereignty and control. The special status was based on Jerusalem’s religious importance to the three Abrahamic religions. In 1980, Israel passed the “Jerusalem Law”, stating that “Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel”, thereby formalising its annexation of East Jerusalem. In response, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 478 in 1980, declaring the law “null and void”.¹⁶ Additionally, no country in the world recognises any part of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, with the exception of Russia, which announced its recognition of West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel earlier this year. However, the statement had no implications since it also recognised East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state.¹⁷

¹⁰ Hesham Hajali, “Saudi Arabia condemns Trump decision to recognize Jerusalem as capital of Israel,” *Reuters*, December 07, 2017.

¹¹ Afp et al., “Rouhani: Iran ‘will not tolerate’ Trump Jerusalem ‘violation’,” *The Times of Israel*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Irfan Haider, “Iran ‘Will Not Tolerate’ Trump Jerusalem ‘Violation’: Rouhani,” *Abb Takk News*.

¹⁴ “Arab League condemns US Jerusalem move,” *Israeli–Palestinian conflict News | Al Jazeera*, December 10, 2017.

¹⁵ Noa Landau, “Netanyahu welcomes Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital,” *Haaretz.com*, December 06, 2017.

¹⁶ “S/RES/478 (1980) of 20 August 1980,” *United Nations*.

¹⁷ Raphael Ahren et al., “In curious first, Russia recognizes West Jerusalem as Israel’s capital,” *The Times of Israel*, April 6, 2017.

Thousands of Palestinians have taken to the streets of Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip to protest against the US decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Demonstrations are also being held across three continents.

The decision by President Trump showcased a sharp break from the past policies that both the Democratic and Republican administrations have pursued with regard to the Middle East. Both have resisted moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem for fear that doing so could estrange Arab allies, trigger protests in the Middle East, and damage the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, among other outcomes.

The US decision is just another addition to the futility of the fifty years of UN resolutions on the matter. For the Palestinians, this means that the US is definitively taking sides in the conflict. President Trump might just have delivered the kiss of death to the two-state solution since Jerusalem is at the very heart of any peace process. While on one hand it seems to be a smart political move to appeal to his electoral base at home - Trump's vow to move the embassy was a campaign promise he made to the satisfaction of Israeli nationalists and supporters including Jewish-American billionaires who contributed millions to his campaign funds. Internationally, on the other hand, it seems to be a very volatile airhead move when taking into account the reactions from around the world.

Jerusalem has long been a tinderbox waiting to explode. Another way to look at this would be that this issue has remained on the back burner for most parties- used merely for optics but nothing more. This move might be the very thing which puts it back on the fore front again. In a hundred to one shot, it might make a Palestinian state possible, provided of course that the Muslim Ummah take this as an opportunity to stand united against this gross violation of international law.