



PERSPECTIVES

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How Moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem Can Improve Prospects for Peace

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In contrast to the recent "Stop Trump" conference in Paris, a decision by the next US administration to move the US embassy to Jerusalem might be conducive to the cause of peace. It will remove the air of delusional unreality surrounding all aspects of the Jerusalem question, and modify what the Palestinians should legitimately expect to achieve at the negotiating table. It will send a message of credibility and of stern refusal to bow to threats of violence. It would still need to be packaged carefully, above all in terms of policies the key Arab players now hope to see instituted; such as the restoration of US support for traditional allies and the willingness to back them against the Iranian and Islamist threats.

Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, and no amount of UN new-speak can change that. For this reason alone, a decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem – as was clearly mandated by Congressional legislation – is long overdue. But it might also turn out to contribute, in the long run, to the prospects of peace.

This claim stands in stark contrast to the dire warnings coming out of the Paris summit (which looks, in hindsight, like a "Stop Trump" gathering; hence the chilly British reaction). John Kerry, for example, spoke carelessly about an "explosion," upon which radical Islamists might feel obliged to deliver. As has been so often the case in the past, however, it is the very attempt to placate Palestinian and Arab demands that makes peace less likely. A hard dose of realism may well set the stage for serious negotiations.

In his rambling speech after the UNSCR 2334 vote, Kerry suggested that Jerusalem can be kept united while serving as the capital of two sovereign states (a somewhat paradoxical proposition). Soft and fuzzy phrases about the future of Jerusalem avoid a simple truth: no Israeli government in the foreseeable future will take the knife to a living city, relinquishing the rights of the Jewish people in the very place that has been the focus of their aspirations for millennia.

Some changes in the line of sovereign control are possible in outlying areas, but that is not what the Palestinians have in mind. What they want is a dramatic outcome that will confirm, retroactively, that the Jews never had a birthright in their own homeland and holy city. This would, they believe, break the moral back of the Zionist endeavor as a whole. This is precisely why it will not happen.

The language of UNSCR 2334, and the atmospherics (if not the relatively harmless results) of the Paris Conference, encourage such unrealistic expectations among the Palestinians. The sooner they are disabused of these notions the better. A proposition that hinges on the dismemberment of Jerusalem or the forcible removal of hundreds of thousands of Jews from their homes is a nonstarter. The Palestinians will need to grasp this premise if the two sides are ever to settle down to the business of negotiating a workable and implementable agreement.

The embassy issue is an opportunity to get back to basics. The promulgators of 2334, Kerry in his speech, and the European foreign ministers (with the exception of Boris Johnson) who participated in the Paris conference proceeded from the assumption that their object was to save the two-state solution. They were, in fact, doing the opposite.

As a majority of Israelis have said again and again, in surveys and through the electoral process: a Palestinian state may be possible, but not on Palestinian terms. When much of the world, including the outgoing US administration, buys into the Amr Musa and Saeb Erekat school of negotiations – which posits that Israel, the aggressor, has no right to an inch beyond the 1949 armistice lines, and a total withdrawal, removal of all Israelis living there, partition of Jerusalem, and the right of return are the "objective requirements of peace" – a dose of cold water is in order.

None of that is what UNSCR 242 requires. Nor is it what any true reading of the events of 1948 and 1967 would warrant. A symbolic act such as the establishment of a US Embassy, or at least the installation of some of its

functions, in (West!) Jerusalem should help to undo this unrealistic set of demands and expectations.

It would also send a clear signal to the Palestinians, including key members of Mahmoud Abbas's own Fatah, that their outlandish threats of violence – "we shall open the gates of hell" upon America – will not work, and will no longer be tolerated from an entity that enjoys generous US aid. To validate such threats, as Kerry did, is to succumb to the same mistake that President Clinton made in 2000, when he responded frantically to the Palestinian burst of violence. In effect, Clinton signaled to Arafat that his strategy of violence had worked, and he could now extract better terms than what he had been offered at Camp David a few months earlier. The results were sad but predictable, as they would be if Washington again bows to such coercion.

Having said all this, it would be wise for the incoming administration to build a framework or package of measures that would help Palestinian and Arab pragmatists (there is nothing to hope for from the radicals) explain why it would be better to swallow this bitter pill. After all, this is about moving the US embassy to West Jerusalem, which even the Palestinians acknowledge is part of Israel. The US could increase their material rewards, as Israel just did on the water issue. It could sustain the right of waiver over the suspension of aid, which seems likely to flow from new legislation on PA funding for terrorists and their families. It could – indeed must – give Egypt and Jordan a much firmer level of support than what they came to expect from Obama.

Above all, by forging a new and robust interaction with the key Gulf states based on a much more aggressive stance towards the Iranian regime, the incoming administration would greatly reduce the likelihood of an "explosion" in the Arab world. If done right, and in the right context, moving the US embassy to Jerusalem might bring home to the PA the sheer futility of their strategy of threats and of international gatherings and impositions.

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