



Trump's Recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's Capital – What Does It Mean?

Moderated by George N. Tzogopoulos

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Q: On December 6, 2017, US President Donald Trump made a statement recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and declaring that his administration will immediately begin the process of building an embassy in Jerusalem. What does Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital mean?

Respondents: Elliott Abrams, Daniel Pipes, Max Singer, Eytan Gilboa, Jonathan Rynhold, Hillel Frisch



Elliott Abrams, Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Washington, DC – Former Deputy Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor in the administration of President George W. Bush

Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and has been since its War of Independence ended in 1949. The refusal to acknowledge this fact is a piece of the long campaign to deny Israel's permanence and legitimacy.

President Trump's decision to abandon this offensive practice and state the obvious fact – that whatever else Jerusalem may ever become, including the capital of a new state of Palestine, and whatever its borders may be, it is and will always be the capital of Jerusalem – should be applauded. The argument that this kills any possible peace negotiations is ridiculous. Did George W. Bush's statements in 2004 that there would be no "right of return" to Israel and that Israel would keep the major settlement blocs in any final status deal kill off further negotiations? Did the refusal of American presidents to acknowledge Jerusalem as the capital under all previous presidents since 1949 lead to successful negotiations? The answers are no and no. Evading the facts and refusing to acknowledge reality will never bring peace.

Will there now be violence, for days or months? There will if Arab leaders want there to be. Like the intifada that Arafat fueled after Camp David, rioting and terrorism can always be arranged – or prevented. Those who "predicted" violence were in effect threatening Trump, and he was right to face them down and say rioters do not get to veto American foreign policy. If Palestinians want peace they will negotiate for peace – wherever the US Embassy sits.



Daniel Pipes, President of the Middle East Forum

The move of the US embassy to Jerusalem brings on a flood of thoughts. Briefly:

- This completes the UN creation of Israel on Nov. 29, 1947. It effectively recognizes pre-1967 West Jerusalem, not the whole of Jerusalem, as Israel's capital. Coincidentally, it came 70 years and 7 days after the UN vote. Also of note, it came three days shy of the centenary of British conquest of Jerusalem from the Ottomans.
- As a specialist on the Middle East, I hate to admit it, but this step results from fresh faces breaking with a stale past. The move sends exactly the right message to the Palestinians: your continued attempt to eliminate the Jewish state of Israel will cost you.
- Trump's December 2017 moving of the embassy neatly checks and refutes Obama's December 2016 abstaining from the Security Council resolution.
- Denunciations of the move came in fast and hard from the pope, the UN Secretary-General, European leaders, Ankara and Tehran, Islamists, the Left,

and Palestinians. Strikingly, however, Arab states were largely mum, for they have much higher priorities to contend with. Good for Trump for ignoring threats of the Arab street rising up; the riot veto must not be allowed to determine policy.



Max Singer, Senior Fellow, Co-Founder, and Trustee Emeritus at Hudson Institute, Washington DC and BESA Senior Fellow

President Trump's decision was a good decision from the point of view of Israel, of the US, and of the long-term effort to achieve peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Unfortunately the benefit of the decision was somewhat reduced by the lack of respect that exists for President Trump and widespread automatic opposition to anything he does, as well as doubts about his ability to ensure that his administration follows through with implementation of his new policy. But it is better to have the right decision from a president who is not respected than the wrong decision from a more widely respected president.

Trump's judgment that Arab threats of widespread violent Arab reaction to the US action were largely bluff will be demonstrated to be correct. And those in the US and elsewhere who are willing to learn from experience will begin to change their opinion about the centrality of the Israel-Palestine conflict to Middle Eastern politics, and about the wisdom of what had been standard diplomatic views about Middle Eastern politics. The decision and its results will eventually improve Trump's reputation with open-minded observers around the world.

The US decision to recognize the reality that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel will be most important if it becomes the beginning of a new US policy of pursuing peace by teaching and speaking the truth concerning the Palestinian-Israeli dispute – instead of ignoring or downplaying reality adverse to the Palestinians on the false theory that doing so advances the cause of peace. One of the main obstacles to peace has been European and American encouragement of Palestinian illusions that the Jewish, democratic state can be removed from the region with the help of democratic denial of reality.



Eytan Gilboa, Director, Center for International Communication and Senior Research Associate, the BESA Center, Bar-Ilan University

A long overdue action. A correction of an exceptional anomaly in international relations. States are entitled to determine where to locate their capitals. Jerusalem has been an odd exception. The US recognition doesn't change anything on the ground. It doesn't say anything about the future borders of the city or the final distribution of sovereignty. The Palestinian claim for Jerusalem is controversial. Jerusalem has been the capital of the Jewish people for over 3,000 years. The Palestinians never owned Jerusalem. Jordan occupied it between 1948 and 1967. There is almost a total consensus in Israel among all the Jewish parties except one that this was the right and justified move.

This is an American decision, not an Israeli one. Any action against Israel isn't justified. A Palestinian harsh or violent reaction should be answered by immediate suspension of the annual \$500,000 US aid and the expulsion of the PLO office from Washington. The Palestinians and Arabs have passed at UN organizations, such as UNESCO, ridiculous and outrageous resolutions that deny any Jewish rights and ties to Jerusalem. Trump's statement balances this campaign. The US will remain the only mediator because there isn't anybody else, and only the US can exert pressure on both sides to make concessions. Trump's recognition may even inspire the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations because it proves that Trump means what he says, and he has promised to bring about a comprehensive agreement.



Jonathan Rynhold, Director, Argov Center for the Study of Israel and the Jewish People, Bar-Ilan University

President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem is certainly just, but is it wise? On the one hand, the US may have increased its leverage over both sides. By stating that he is beginning preparations for moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, Trump has signaled to the Palestinians that it is in their interest to enter negotiations sooner rather than later because without serious negotiations their bargaining position will deteriorate.

Equally, because Trump is viewed as very pro-Israel by the Israeli public, it will be more difficult for Netanyahu to say no to any requests from the president for compromises. It was easy for Bibi to say no to Obama, since there was no domestic political price; not so with Trump. Moreover, nothing in the actual text of the president's statement precludes future compromise on the issue of Jerusalem; nor does it change the situation on the ground.

On the other hand, this leverage may be blown away by a storm of extremist violence. Despite the reasonable foundations of the announcement, the emotional resonance and religious symbolism of Jerusalem makes it a potent recruiting sergeant for violent extremism. It is impossible to predict whether the match that has been lit will catch fire this time, but there is no lack of flammable liquid in the room. If violence does kick off it will destabilize the relatively moderate Palestinian Authority vis-à-vis Hamas and weaken pro-Western Arab states who are aligned with Israel against Iran. Since Iran is the major threat to Israel, this would be very bad news in strategic terms, as the regional balance of power would shift to Iran's advantage.

Overall, then, Israel has gained a little from Trump's act, but it stands to lose a lot more if things turn nasty.



Hillel Frisch, Professor of Political Studies and Middle East Studies at Bar-Ilan University

For Israel, this is a major achievement. Jerusalem was the capital of the Jewish kingdom under King David and Solomon and since 1948, the capital of the State of the Jewish people, Israel, their descendants. It's high time that a unique country such as the US accept the uniqueness of the rebirth of the Jewish state with

Jerusalem as its capital. The US is still the only superpower in the world today – with the only army that can project power globally, the scientific powerhouse of our age, a country with political and economic links the world over.

Others will follow in its wake. Incidentally, Russia has already recognized Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel. The PA will learn to live with the declaration and continue security coordination with Israel against the common enemy Hamas, and the Arab states are more concerned by Iranian aggrandizement than Jerusalem, a minor city in the Muslim faith. Those who will express the greatest enmity to the decision are Iran and Turkey, imperial powers of the past; and their proxies, Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas. Iran and Turkey are reawakening their imperialist designs towards their Arab neighbors and both, in this spirit, covet Jerusalem.

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