



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# Trump's Jerusalem Statement Shakes Up the System

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Donald Trump's Jerusalem Declaration should be examined from a point of view that goes beyond questions of cost and gain. Prevailing interpretations are trapped in a Western perception of the nature and logic of the strategic process.**

A number of Israeli commentators have sought to reduce the significance of President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and even to warn of the danger inherent therein. Zvi Bar'el, for example, claimed that "Trump's decision and the severe defeat in the UN leaves Israel with Jerusalem in hand but with nothing in the long run." Eitan Haber warned that "the friend in the White House does not work for us" and that in time a Big Plan will be laid on the table – one whose details will be a great embarrassment to Jerusalem.

One might ask why this declaration was viewed as novel, as it was preceded in April 2017 by Moscow's recognition of West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, alongside East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. The prevailing view is that Trump's statement was intended to say to Israel: "You have now received a gift. Henceforth, do not foil the Big Deal."

### **Another perspective**

The Trump Declaration should be examined from a point of view that extends beyond the standard question of what Israel gained and what it will need to give in return. That conventional interpretation is trapped in a Western rational perception of the nature and logic of the strategic process. Western approaches – subjugated as they are to a production-line management model – expect strategic planning to mark a target as a desired end and to take planned steps to reach it.

By that standard, Trump's statement and its repercussions can indeed be construed as dangerous: as a seductive introduction to an enforced process whose end is predetermined, or as a reckless step towards the unknown.

But the key to Trump's logic is in a different strategic planning model – one very close to the Russian way of thinking.

After a year in office during which Jason Greenblatt and Jared Kushner served as his emissaries to the Middle East, President Trump apparently realized that the Israeli-Palestinian relationship has become paralyzed and deadlocked. With this understanding, he applied a Russian way of thinking that reflects his experience as a businessman. To break out of the standstill, he consciously sought to shake up the system. His object was to bring about a new occurrence in relation to which he would then calculate his next steps.

That was the purpose of the Jerusalem declaration, and it was fully achieved. It was much like throwing a stone into a puddle and watching the mud rise from the bottom.

### **Russian strategy as a dynamic process**

The Russian approach to strategic planning assumes that with the start of action, the system in which it operates varies and fluctuates to the point of reincarnation. The recognition of systemic change forces one to acknowledge that the plan one is embarking upon must be subjected to complete reexamination, not just to minor adjustments. There is, of course, a strategic goal that serves as a compass from the start, but one embarks upon a path without a final plan for each stage along the way towards that goal. One recognizes that this is a process, a sequence of dynamic systems, through which one will clarify not only the way to achieve the end goal but also the ability to achieve it.

A Western rational approach does not begin a journey until the ability to reach the goal is guaranteed. In this respect, Trump's move seems irresponsible. The Russian approach, on the other hand, starts the process in full knowledge that for the time being, there is no way to assess the likelihood that the goal will be reached.

In this rational format, Trump's move takes on a different meaning. Calculated steps into the unknown can be likened to the advance of a reconnaissance force sent into battle in a threatened area in order to draw fire and thus discover the enemy's military deployment while the rest of the force remains secured behind, waiting for the situation to become clearer.

In recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, Trump expressed reservations in the interests of maintaining a stable footing that will allow for retreat if necessary.

At the same time, he explicitly mentioned the two-state plan and emphasized that the borders of Jerusalem would be determined in negotiations. In fact, nothing new was said. It is precisely because of this that the ensuing uproar was so significant. It exposed the reality of Palestinian demands.

### **Potential benefits to Israel**

For those hoping for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement at almost any price, the Palestinian response led by Mahmoud Abbas, including a questioning of the US's ability to be a fair mediator, appears to be another obstacle – possibly an insurmountable one.

The logic of the two-state solution cannot explain what prevented Abbas from calculatingly accepting the declaration. He could have emphasized that it referred to West Jerusalem, which he also recognizes, as long as it is clear and agreed that East Jerusalem is the capital of the Palestinian state.

Rather, his response gave grist to those members of the Israeli leadership who are interested in extricating Israel from the format of the Clinton outline for a solution to the conflict, as agreed by Prime Minister Ehud Barak and adopted by Ehud Olmert, in his last, exceedingly generous proposal to Abbas in 2007-8. Netanyahu has been fighting this outline since he took office as prime minister in 2009. Instead of Abbas's insistence on continuing the negotiations from the place where he left off with Olmert, Netanyahu presented his willingness to negotiate without preconditions.

The difference between the Rabin outline as presented in his last speech in the Knesset in October 1995 and the Barak-Olmert outline is summed up in three essential elements: Rabin insisted on the integrity of a united Jerusalem in its broad scope, on the preservation of the Jordan Valley "in the broadest interpretation of this concept" as an eastern security border, and the insistence on a Palestinian entity "short of a state." Barak and Olmert gave up all three of these elements and added another condition that was never agreed upon in Rabin's concept – land swaps, or the granting of Israeli territory in return for every piece of land Israel retains in the settlement blocs.

The stone thrown by Trump into the puddle shows us what is going on at the bottom. Here lies the potential strategic significance of the Trump Declaration. By shaking up the system and creating an opportunity to reexamine Palestinian claims as a whole, the declaration might help Israel escape the trap of the Clinton-Barak outline.

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