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Trump's 'Repositioning' of Jerusalem



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An Assessment:

With the announcement of President Donald Trump on December 06, 2017, of his decision to shift the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, it seemed to many that the old sleeping giant of the Israel-Palestine conflict had been awoken. While pundits and analysts have been criticising him for the decision, calling him a "chump" (Freidman, 2017) for making such a decision that could only be made for reasons of "incompetence or madness"¹ (Bocco, 2017), there is much more to the decision than it being "nothing more or less than a recognition of reality" (Trump, 2017), as Trump put it. While his statement on the "reality" is very much correct to anyone who has been to Israel or has been keeping up with the developments in the region, with Jerusalem housing the Israeli Parliament, the Knesset, as well as the Israeli Supreme Court, and being the official residence of the Prime Minister, the President, and multiple other ministries, the formal acknowledgement of Jerusalem as the official capital of Israel (notwithstanding its functioning as the *de*

Key Points

1. United States President Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel draws criticism from the United Nations and many other countries around the world.
2. Trump's decision is based on his electoral promise catering to his vote base and financial support system.
3. The decision is a setback to the peace process, stability in the region, and Israel-Palestine relations.
4. It is imperative that the international community work together for a sustainable and durable solution to the conflict.

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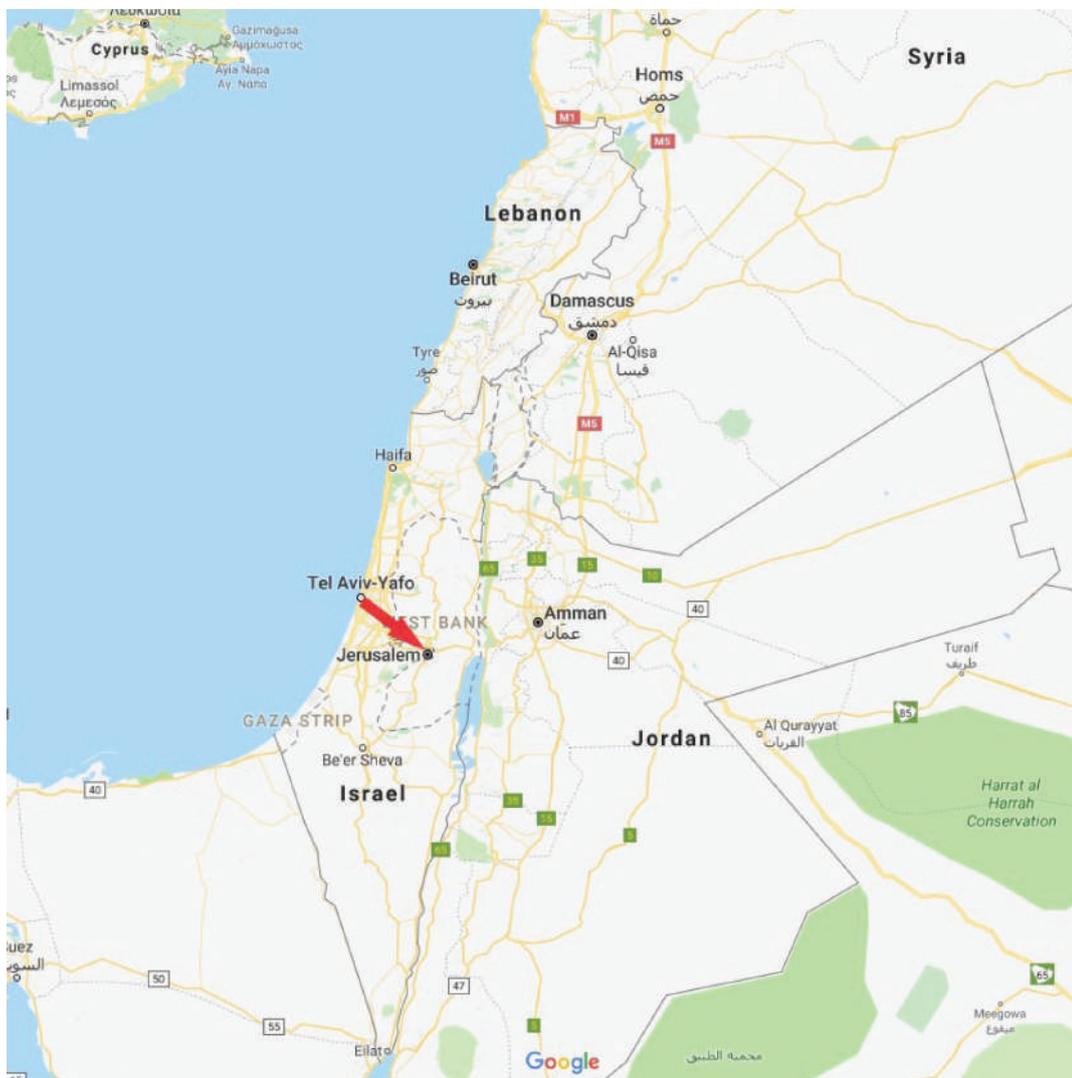
Trump's 'Repositioning' ...

facto capital) can have, and has already shown to have, serious ramifications for the relations of the countries involved.

What is most interesting to note in the developing scenario is that this decision, coming from the US government, does not affect Israel's calculus one bit, but rather affects primarily the US and its alliances, and security as connected to the region. Life in Jerusalem continues much as before². And the decision makes no veiled interest in trying to solve or affect any outcome for peace between the two countries³. For the US, making such an announcement, in fact, does not alter its alliance system in the region, with its relationship with Saudi

Arabia⁴ and the United Arab Emirates continuing much as before and at the same time, does nothing to particularly improve its relationships with the other Arab countries in the vicinity. Looking at the larger regional picture, we see that Iran continues to make changes that would allow it to become the regional hegemon⁵, Syria and Iraq are busy on their fronts in trying to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the other non-state armed groups⁶, Yemen and Libya are trying desperately, and failing, to rectify the humanitarian crisis ongoing in their home ground, and the other Arab states remain in disarray, with opinions divided on the Qatar blockade and with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) becoming almost defunct (Intelligence Online 2017).

Fig 1: The United States has Proposed to Move its Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem



At the international level, most of the countries have made statements over their worry and disappointment over the US decision, and this can be seen in the decision that was taken by the states at the United Nations General Assembly on the status of Jerusalem at the 10th Emergency Session⁷. The statement issued from the United Nations records that, “[t]hrough a resolution adopted by a recorded vote of 128 in favour to nine against (Guatemala, Honduras, Israel, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Togo, United States), with 35 abstentions, the 193-member Assembly expressed ‘deep regret’ over recent decisions concerning the status of Jerusalem and stressed that the Holy City ‘is a final status issue to be resolved through negotiations in line with relevant UN resolutions’” (United Nations, 2017).

This then begs the question: why did Trump and his Administration make such a decision? Why now? What would they gain from it?

On the surface of things, it seems that in alienating the few remaining moderate Muslim countries (such as Jordan and Palestine) in the face of the rising challenges from radical Islamic terrorist groups, while not significantly improving other relations, the United States has made a bad move (Grappo, 2017). Moreover, given the fact that Donald Trump did not hold out for any compensation in return for an acknowledgement of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, or even a mention of East and West Jerusalem as coming under different administrations, it seems as if he was simply acting on a whim, and making giveaways, as if in a Christmas spirit (Freidman,

2017; Wildman, 2017; Zalzburg and Thrall, 2017). In doing so, Trump has drastically reduced the shadow that the US casts over the politics in the Middle East, going from being a strong power whose decisions and indications could previously bring the warring parties to the table, or make any kind of deal with them, to that of simply being a disrupter, and an unpredictable one at that. With Russia now playing a more important role in the region, given its impact and influence in the ongoing Syrian civil war, and the role of the US declining, we can now expect a new matrix of power and influence in the region.

In response to the announcement, the Arab governments have been justifiably angry. It had only just been about half a decade since the countries had distanced themselves from the question of Jerusalem and that of Palestinian statehood, and reoriented themselves towards their internal politics and development. With the political turmoil resulting from the Arab Spring, to the shift in energy resources from oil to renewable energy, to the more recent shift in politics, with King Salman of Saudi Arabia purging his house of many people who supported, and were links with, the old alliances of the Kingdom, the region has been plagued with other issues. Added to this mix was the growing fatigue with dealing with the Palestine question, with no budging on the matter by either the United Nations or the other countries, the incessant feuding between Fatah and Hamas on the administration of Palestine, and a general atmosphere of wanting to move on with daily life as best as possible with the strange Israel-Palestine dynamic, and focus on the economic.

Fig 2: Responses to Trump's Announcement of Embassy Relocation



Source: Anadolu Agency, December 06, 2017, <http://aa.com.tr/en/info/infographic/8046>

This had led to a steady improvement in Israel's relationship with the various Arab countries. As Will Inboden notes, Israel's "rapprochement with Sunni Arab powers such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates is being translated into deep military, intelligence, and diplomatic cooperation, primarily directed against their shared enemies of Iran and militant jihadi groups such as the Islamic State.... In short, Israel appears to be in the midst of a diplomatic revolution in which its previous mortal enemies now stand as friends" (Inboden, 2017). However, in reaction to the news of the recognition of Jerusalem in its entirety

as the capital of Israel⁸, things have begun to shift a bit. This can be seen in the declaration by the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) of East Jerusalem being the capital of the State of Palestine (Al Jazeera, 2017).

However, simply seeing the changes in the regional power dynamics cannot tell us why Trump and his administration took this decision. After all, it seems folly to think that Trump took this decision simply because he did not want to sign another waiver for the Jerusalem Embassy Act, or that he wanted to stir up trouble for Israel, given the fact that Israel has

remained one of US's closest allies in the region. While one can assume that Trump and his administration thought that this was an opportune moment to take a decision on the matter, as most of the neighbouring countries seem not really as interested or as invested in the matter as earlier, it leaves one wondering about what could be the possible gain for the US in making such an announcement.

The rationale for making such a move becomes apparent when we look at the President's advisors on the issue. In what had been a surprising move, Trump had previously delegated the maintenance of the relationship with Israel to his son-in-law Jared Kushner, instead of assigning it to his Secretary of State or the Vice President. Kushner is an Orthodox Jew, and has had an important relationship with Israel, and has often talked with senior Israeli leaders in an attempt to get a better understanding of their concerns, and has previously donated to the state and its newer establishments. However, as Moore notes, "It remains unclear how much sway Kushner has with Trump on the matter. But the President has entrusted him with being the point man on the issue and it is likely that he had considerable input into the discussions leading up to the landmark decision" (Moore, 2017).

At the same time, it must be noted that the Jewish lobby has been one of Trump's major support bases, and had contributed significantly to his campaign. This can be seen in his March 2016 promise to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, one of the most powerful lobbies, that he would, "move the American Embassy to the eternal capital of the Jewish people, Jerusalem". The decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem, and in doing so, making it as coming under the jurisdiction of Israel, could be seen as Trump playing to base, and as "acting Presidential" (Reinl, 2017). Thus, while the move of the of US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem might be bad for the international political relations of the US with some of the other states important, I think, for Trump to make such an announcement as a symbol of his truthfulness and wholesomeness, as this move was one which was promised during his campaign

trail. It is important to note that while the national interest and international reputation of a state and its political leaders are important, *it is the perception of these in their domestic environment that is the most important for political leaders*, since that is what decides whether they will remain in power for long, or if they will get re-elected. With Trump's popularity rating coming to an all-time low for an American President, and even for him, he needed to show to his support base that they had not elected him futilely, but that he is ready to do what he says. As a businessman, we cannot simply expect him to play for the larger advantage by making some other move (such as making another embassy, or asking for talks and accords, as some analysts have suggested), when doing so would prevent him from making, and adhering to, the 'deal' that he had already made with his people.

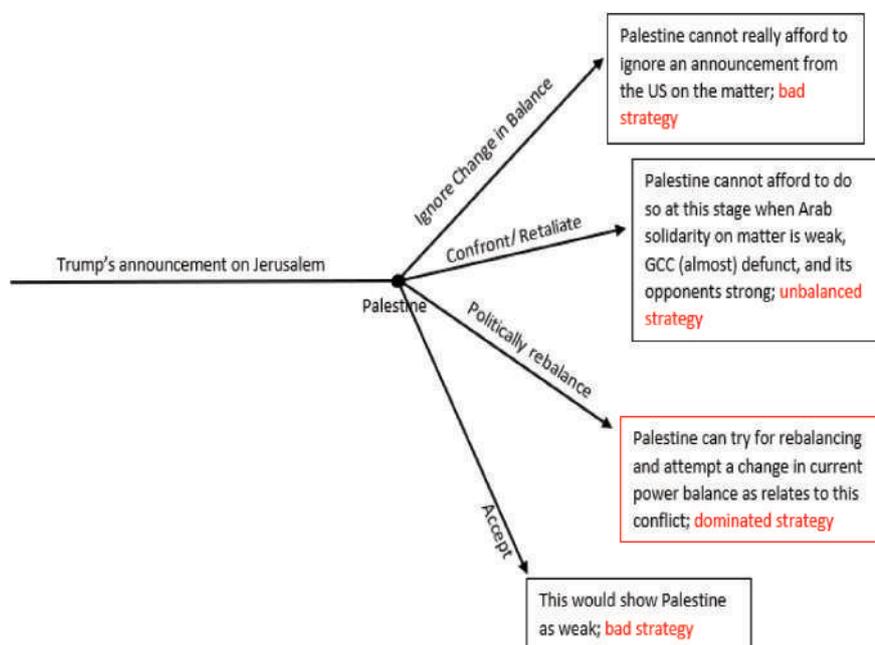
Unfortunately, politics is rarely a simple game, and in political affairs, there is almost always a larger game afoot. What this means now is not simply that the question of Jerusalem and that of Palestinian statehood is back on the table, but also that there would now be new alliances and relationships in the region. In Middle Eastern politics, where perceptions of behaviour and notions of honour are most important, Trump's nuanced wording in his announcement that "[t]his decision is not intended in any way to reflect a departure from our strong commitment to facilitate a lasting peace agreement"...and that "the United States would support a two-state solution if agreed to by both sides. In the meantime, I call on all parties to maintain the status quo at Jerusalem's holy sites, including the Temple Mount, also known as Haram al-Sharif..." is bound to get lost amidst the larger question of the acknowledgement of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. What this would mean is that the role that can now be played by the United States in the region would be diminished, and its proposals for peace, or even a place at any table that could possibly discuss matters of peace and conflict in the region, could be ignored. In criticising the US decision as a violation of international law, President Abbas stated, "We shall not accept any role for the United States in the peace

process, they have proven their full bias in favour of Israel” (Al Jazeera, 2017).

Despite such and other statements from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, and strong statements from a majority of political leaders from around the world denouncing the decision of President Trump, it is quite clear that dark days lie ahead for Palestine. With the decline in American influence in the region, and a rise in Russian influence, there might not be a consensus among the Arab states for supporting Palestine actively, as they had done before, especially given the backdrop of the multiple non-state armed groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah influencing the bargaining balance and dividing the countries on their alliances and supporters.

to, the news, as well as to the multiple air strikes on Gaza from Israel (Al Jazeera, 2017), it does not seem to be very prudent option, given that he is at this stage not sure of which political and non-state actors will support him. At the same time, while the Palestinian military is weak, and has already been under attack from Israel in the aftermath of the announcement from the United States (Al Jazeera, 2017), the Israeli military remains strong, while also having strong political relations with various countries in the region, as well as internationally, which can, at any point, support Israel militarily. Thus, despite calls from Hamas for a new *intifada* (Al Jazeera, 2017; Williams and Al-Mughrabi, 2017; Reuters, 2017), it would be prudent for President Abbas to avoid any direct confrontation with Israel and the US over the issue.

Fig 3: Possible Palestinian Reactions/Moves in Response to Embassy Move



The decision tree above shows the possible reactions that the Palestinian state can have to President Trump’s announcement of moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem. Out of the possible options of ignoring the announcement, retaliating to it, politically manoeuvring around it, and accepting it as a *fait accompli*, it seems obvious that President Abbas cannot accept the first and last options. While he can confront, or retaliate

In this scenario, the best strategy for President Abbas would be to make a political manoeuvre in an attempt to rebalance the power matrix in the region in a manner that would be more beneficial to him, and can lead to something more than simple statements of concern by other actors over the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Moreover, it may just be the most opportune moment for him to do so. Abbas

had been facing opposition from the other parties over the administration of the Palestinian territories⁹, and taking a strong position on the matter, and being able to take concrete action on it would place him in a secure position with regard to Palestinian politics. At the same time, we also have Russia now playing a major role in the region. If Abbas is able to leverage these political changes and get at least some of the other regional players on his side, such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Lebanon, etc, he might just be able to change the balance in his favour and in doing so, 'confine the crane to its nest'. If he can do that, then it is possible for him to go from being the biggest loser in the scenario to, possibly, the winner.

Regardless of the outcome of the situation, one thing that can be said with certainty is that Trump has shown the world that he focusses more on his lobbies and family politics than the role, image, and national interests of the United States¹⁰. At the same time, the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel as a 'reality' will now serve as a setback towards a resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict. It is, therefore, *now* more important than ever that the international community step up and find a solution by any configuration that can resolve and transform the conflict, and the lives of the people in the region, and help all move towards peace and development.

Notes

1. The original text in French reads:<<Je ne vois en réalité que deux explications possibles: l'incompétence ou la folie! >>
2. While life in Jerusalem hasn't been affected much, the lives of people in other parts of Israel and Palestine have come under serious threat, with indications of Israeli jets attacking the Gaza Strip (at the time of writing, there have been 10 reported strikes), resulting in the death of at least 25 Palestinians, the closing of the Israeli border at Gaza (Kerem Shalom and the Erez crossing), and an increase in the casualty rate in the West Bank and Gaza, with the Palestinian Red Crescent reporting assistance to over 1,795 people since the announcement was made by the US President (Al Jazeera, 2017).
3. In his speech, Trump mentions that he is "*not taking a position of any final status issues, including the specific boundaries of the Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem or the resolution of contested borders. Those questions are up to the parties involved*" and that "[t]he United States remains deeply committed to helping facilitate a peace agreement that is acceptable to both sides. I intend to do everything in my power to help forge such an agreement" (Trump, 2017). However, despite such an assurance (if it may be termed as such), the official acknowledgement of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, without any mention of it being a disputed territory as under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334, can (and has) caused massive diplomatic challenges to the United States and the role it can play in the region going ahead. However, as mentioned above, it is highly doubtful if it would change much in the actual day-to-day working of the US Embassy to Israel, or even in the everyday life of the people in the city of Jerusalem, despite calls to violence by Hamas and Hezbollah.
4. While King Salman noted in his speech, "The Kingdom's condemnation and strong regret over the US decision on Jerusalem, for its relinquishment of the historic rights of the Palestinian people in Jerusalem" (Al Jazeera, 2017), it seems to be, at the moment, more rhetoric than an actual actionable statement, due to the increase in trade and economic relations between the two countries. History is a testimony to the fact that countries would hardly go to war with each other over an issue when strong trade ties can be threatened. However, it also remained important for the King, as well as for the other political leaders to make a statement of condemnation in keeping with the image of Arab solidarity on the question of Jerusalem, especially given the fact that Saudi Arabia is seen as one of the major players in the region and its politics.
5. Iran is considered as making a move towards becoming a regional hegemon. Its nuclear programme, support to non-state armed groups against opposing countries, and its proxy wars in Syria, Iraq and Yemen are quoted in support of its hegemony (Newton, 2017).
6. While statements have been made by Iraqi leaders of the defeat of ISIS and complete control over all Iraqi territory as before the conflict (Media Office of the Prime Minister Dr. Haider Al-Abadi 2017), the countries are still reeling from the effects of being under ISIS control, and have much reconstruction yet to do.
7. The 10th emergency session on the issue concerning the status of Jerusalem was called for by H.E. Mr. Khaled Hussein Mohamed Alyemany, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Yemen, and H.E. Mr. Feridun H. Sinirliolu, Permanent

... of Jerusalem

Representative of Turkey, in their capacity as Chair of the Arab Group and the Chair of the Summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation, respectively (Lajčák, 2017).

This procedure, under Assembly Resolution 377 (1950), is a pathway around a Security Council veto. By it, the Assembly can call an emergency special session to consider a matter “with a view to making appropriate recommendations to members for collective measures,” if the Security Council fails to act or if there is lack of unanimity among the Council’s permanent members, China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States (United Nations, 2017).

8. It is important to note here that while President Trump did not elaborate on, or clarify, whether by ‘Jerusalem’ he meant East Jerusalem or West Jerusalem or the city in its entirety or some other variant, he based his decision on the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995, which refers to “undivided” Jerusalem, which Israel considers to be under its control. See Crisis Group Report on the matter for a more detailed legal explanation (Zalzburg and Thrall, 2017).
9. Fatah and Hamas, while currently running the administration collectively, have been having serious issues over the administration of different areas amidst allegations of corruption.
10. While the United States, in its recently released National Security Strategy, does lay out its goals and focus on the region, it seems to be quite generic, and more of a repetition of the previous National Security Strategies, though with a bit more focus on Iran. American interest in the region, as pertaining to the Israel-Palestine conflict seem to be mostly linked to its strong military and economic relationship with Israel, and can be perceived through statements such as, “Israel is not the cause of the region’s problems. States have increasingly found common interests with Israel in confronting common threats” (President Donald Trump, December 2017).

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