

Trump's Statement on Jerusalem

Commentaries by Mitvim Institute Experts

December 2017

On 6 December 2017, US President Donald Trump delivered a statement in which he recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital. His statement was warmly received in Israel, but was heavily criticized in Europe and the Middle East. This document includes commentaries by Mitvim Institute experts regarding Trump's statement on Jerusalem and its possible implications: Dr. Nimrod Goren claims that introducing a vision of peace for Jerusalem is the ultimate response to Trump's statement; Dr. Lior Lehms argues that Trump changed US policy on Jerusalem, but only partially; Rebecca Bornstein explains that while Trump's supporters applaud him, the statement puts US interests at risk; Prof. Elie Podeh analyzes why the likelihood of a breakthrough towards peace is now even more remote; and Dr. Ido Zelkowitz concludes that Trump's statement is fueling Hamas' incitement efforts.

Introducing a Vision of Peace for Jerusalem is the Ultimate Response to Trump's Statement

Dr. Nimrod Goren¹

“This is the time to say thank you for the decision that has lifted every heart in Israel, and every heart in the Jewish world”. This statement was not issued after Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, but rather by Yitzhak Rabin, in October 1995. At a festive ceremony in Washington DC, then-Prime Minister Rabin congratulated Congress for approving the bill requiring that the US Embassy in Israel be relocated to Jerusalem. But it was a bill that Rabin actually opposed, and that he viewed as a cynical attempt of right-wing actors in Israel and the US to sabotage the peace process by forcing the American president to take a one-sided stance on the sensitive issue of Jerusalem.

Rabin was not the only Israeli politician who chose to publicly pledge allegiance to the notion of a “united Jerusalem”, while understanding that a compromise in the city is required for peace. Current Israeli politicians and party leaders behave similarly, at times clearly contradicting themselves – for example, by rejecting any compromise in Jerusalem, while voicing support for the Clinton parameters (from 2000), which call for Palestinian control of Arab areas of Jerusalem.

The future of Jerusalem will not be determined by the politically-motivated statements of one American president or another. Such statements should not be underestimated, as they do impact developments on the ground and positions among the international community. But

¹ Dr. Nimrod Goren is Head of the Mitvim Institute and is a lecturer for Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

eventually, Israelis and Palestinians will make the calls and define their own political reality. In recent years, there has been a flux of international peace initiatives, and a striking absence of much-needed peace initiatives proposed and advanced by the local leaderships in Jerusalem and Ramallah.

Pro-peace Israeli politicians should not compete with the government over who is more enthusiastic about Trump's statement and who is more committed to "united Jerusalem as Israel's eternal capital". Instead, they should engage in dialogue with Palestinian and Arab neighbors, and introduce a vision of peace for the city of Jerusalem. It should be a vision based on compromise and respect, which seeks to fulfill the needs of both sides. Only this will enable the transformation of Jerusalem from a poor and conflict-ridden city into the flourishing and prosperous city it should become.

Jerusalem can become a local, regional, and international success story. In an era of peace, Jerusalem will attract flocks of tourists, businesses, and international organizations. And, yes, there will also be embassies relocating to the city, and in masses. This is the story that Israelis and Palestinians should be hearing. Voicing it is the best response to Trump's statement.

Trump Changed US Policy on Jerusalem, but Only Partially

Dr. Lior Lehrs²

Does Trump's statement reflect a historic change of US policy regarding Jerusalem?

On one hand, Trump's statement has an innovative component, as traditional American policy has not included formal recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Repeatedly, US officials have stated that the final status of Jerusalem must be determined in negotiations between the parties, that East Jerusalem is part of the territory occupied by Israel in 1967, and that it opposes the annexation of East Jerusalem by Israel and the building of Jewish neighborhoods/settlements there. President Clinton (2000) and Secretary of State Kerry (2016) spoke clearly of two capitals, or a shared capital, in Jerusalem. Trump's statement deviates from this standard.

On the other hand, Trump clarified that the US was not taking a position on final status issues, including "the specific boundaries of the Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem" that should be agreed upon by Israelis and Palestinians. Trump did not explain his definition of "Jerusalem," and did not differentiate between East and West (although the Israeli state institutions that he mentioned are all located in West Jerusalem). This reflects a transformation from a *de facto* American recognition of West Jerusalem as Israel's capital (which is reflected by ongoing visits and meetings held by American leaders in that part of the city) to a *de jure* recognition of it. Trump's statement balances his decision to sign the waiver postponing the relocation of the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. This is similar to the course of action Trump adopted towards the Iran nuclear deal. There, he tried to overshadow his decision not to formally withdraw from the deal with an aggressive speech against Iran.

² Dr. Lior Lehrs is a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute and is an Israel Institute Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Taub Center for Israel Studies at New York University.

Trump's statement is perceived by the Israeli government as an achievement, but it could backfire in several ways that will ultimately damage Israel. First, critical reactions highlight the broad international agreement that exists on Jerusalem, and show that Trump's position is an exception. Second, actors in the Arab and Muslim world can utilize Trump's statement to mobilize and radicalize public opinion, to return the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the top of the agenda, and to unify different camps and fractions at a time of division and fragmentation in the broader Middle East. Finally, the Palestinian leadership has already declared that Trump's statement rules out the possibility of continued US mediation in the peace process. A reality in which no significant international actor is accepted by both sides as a mediator is dangerous, especially when chances of violence are on the rise.

Trump's Supporters Applaud Him, but US Interests are now at Risk

Rebecca Bornstein³

President Trump's Jerusalem announcement should have been delivered as part of a broader US policy plan that includes the Palestinians and distinguishes between the status of East and West Jerusalem. Bold steps towards peace require risk, but must be based on careful policy planning. In the absence of a clear statement about final-status parameters, Trump's declaration does not advance the cause of peace. It causes the Palestinians to doubt the viability of a meaningful peace process, and undermines America's ability to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians.

Official US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital is mainly of symbolic importance. In practice, Jerusalem already functions as Israel's capital. The announcement will not change issues such as access to holy sites, municipal governance, or the broad international agreement that the status of Jerusalem should be negotiated in the framework of a two-state solution (as proven by the reactions of the UN Secretary General, France, and Germany).

Trump's political base, including evangelicals, applaud the decision, but both US and Israeli security institutions must now prepare for potentially hostile reactions. In the short term, Trump's declaration may reduce American diplomatic leverage to influence events in the Middle East, including issues outside of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as the White House's recent request that Saudi Arabia allow urgent humanitarian aid to reach Yemen. The delivery and timing of Trump's announcement is also expected to deepen the policy rift between the US and Europe, which benefits Russia, Iran, and other nations who seek to disrupt transatlantic cooperation.

According to Trump, the announcement is "a long overdue step to advance the peace process." To advance peace and ensure that the US can be seen by the Palestinians as a legitimate mediator, he should immediately follow the declaration with a plan for restarting the peace process and addressing Palestinian aspirations in East Jerusalem.

³ Rebecca Bornstein is Director of External Relations and Researcher at the Mitvim Institute, and is the editor of Mitvim's [monthly report](#) on US policies towards Israel and the Middle East.

The Likelihood of a Breakthrough towards Peace is Now Even More Remote

Prof. Elie Podeh⁴

Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel confirms Abba Eban's aphorism that "men and nations behave wisely once they have exhausted all other alternatives." Indeed, one must be puzzled by the reasoning behind this announcement, which, according to Trump, serves America's best interests.

Trump's decision harms US interests in several ways. One, in contrast to his desire to portray America as an honest broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Trump identified himself completely with one side – Israel. Although he qualified his statement by saying that this decision does not define the boundaries of Jerusalem, the content and tone of his speech was clearly one-sided. An even-handed mediator should have presented a corresponding or equivalent concession to the other party. As a result, the Palestinians will be highly suspicious of any new peace plan that the US attempts to present.

Two, the decision will unite Arabs and Muslims against the US. Trump worked very hard to reconcile with the Saudis following President Obama's foreign policy debacle, and he probably coordinated the declaration with moderate Arab leaders, but popular opposition across the Arab and Islamic worlds could influence the position of friendly Arab regimes. Jerusalem and the Palestinian issue are the lowest common denominators in the Arab world, and are still able to trigger charged public reactions.

Three, the decision opened two unnecessary fronts for the US – in the UN and the EU, where most countries oppose Israel's occupation and control of East Jerusalem.

Four, the consequent tension between the US and the moderate Arab countries, on the one hand, and between the US and Europe, on the other, serves the interests of Iran and its Middle East proxies, which can be counted on to exploit the opportunity to inflame their public opinion against the US and Israel. Turkish President Erdoğan and Russian President Putin will attempt to use the opportunity to improve their own positions and influence.

And, finally, the possibility of a violent confrontation in the Middle East or elsewhere as a result of the decision should not be underestimated.

At present, after Trump's declaration the likelihood of a breakthrough towards Israeli-Palestinian conflict resolution looks even more remote than ever. The inevitable conclusion is that Trump's decision recalls both Eban's euphemism and Barbara Tuchman's march of folly theory – that governments pursue policies contrary to their own interests.

⁴ Prof. Elie Podeh is a Board Member at the Mitvim Institute. He teaches at the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This is a shortened version of [an article](#) first published by *The Jerusalem Post*, on 10 December 2017.

Trump's Statement is Fueling Hamas' Incitement Efforts

Dr. Ido Zelkovitz⁵

The image of the US in the Arab world was shaped during the Cold War era, when the US and most Arab countries were in opposite camps, and when the Americans established their alliance with Israel. Because of this, the US was never accepted by the Arab world as an honest broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is a major difference between the manner in which the US – as a superpower – conducts its policies vis-à-vis Arab countries, and the overall negative image towards it that prevails throughout the Middle East. Arab and Palestinian leaders cannot turn a blind eye to the attitudes of their people.

Arab leaders are condemning Trump's statement on Jerusalem. This includes the leaders of countries that are strategic partners of the US in the regional struggle against Iran, such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Trump's statement also led to immediate spontaneous and organized demonstrations in the Palestinian territories. History teaches us that since the end of the first *intifada* (which erupted exactly thirty years ago), rounds of violence between Israelis and Palestinians were mostly ignited by political tensions regarding the status of Jerusalem.

Trump may have hoped that his words on American support for a two-state solution, should both sides agree to it, would enable the Palestinians to contain the response to the policy change he made regarding Jerusalem, but this did not happen. Even though some Palestinian leaders say that they are not willing to sacrifice their children because of Trump, developments on the ground tend to have their own dynamics.

The split between Fatah and Hamas increases the likelihood of another Jerusalem-related round of violence. Hamas is expected to try to ignite violence, using religious rhetoric to mobilize Palestinians. Even before Trump's statement, and in light of difficulties in the Palestinian reconciliation process, Hamas leaders criticized the Palestinian Authority for abandoning Jerusalem. Following the statement, Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh went as far as calling for a third *intifada* in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Statements by Palestinian Authority leaders following Trump's statement indicate a total loss of Palestinian trust in the US administration. This adds further obstacles on the path towards peace, and may also encourage violent acts by individuals inspired by the incitement that Hamas is spreading via satellite television channels and social media. Trump's statement might, paradoxically, benefit those Islamists who seek to transform the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a religious struggle.

⁵ Dr. Ido Zelkovitz is a Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute and is the Head of the Middle Eastern Studies Division at Yezreel Valley College.