

ANALYSIS

Trump's decision: 'Huge implications' for moving US embassy to Jerusalem

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Recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital may be symbolic, analysts say, but it will deeply affect Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims.

Moving the US embassy to Jerusalem will not end the peace process because there is no peace process, James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute said.

"I'm also not going to say that it discredits the United States because the US has been discredited with regards to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," Zogby added.

"What I am going to say is that it is a stupid and risky move because it is going to inflame passions and put people's lives at risk."

US President Donald Trump is expected to announce moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in the coming days, which would recognise the holy city as the capital of Israel.

While the decision may cement Washington's pro-Israeli bias, analysts say, its symbolism insults not only Palestinians, but also Arabs and Muslims across the world.

Jerusalem has become a symbol of a sense of historical pain and betrayal inflicted on Arab people, Zogby said.

"It's the wound that never heals, and this would simply put salt in the wound," he told Middle East Eye.

Graeme Bannerman, a former analyst at the US State Department and a scholar at the Middle East Institute, stressed that symbolism of Jerusalem matters.

Asked what the move would mean to the peace process, Bannerman said: "What peace process?"

US-sponsored negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians to find a resolution to the conflict within the framework of the two-state solution have been stagnant since 2014, while Israel has expanded illegal settlements in the West Bank.

During the 2016 US elections campaign, Trump vowed to secure the "ultimate deal" to end the conflict.

The US president, who prides himself on his negotiation skills, has tasked his son-in-law Jared Kushner with reviving peace talks between the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority.

Recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel will harm Trump's attempts to solve the conflict,

Bannerman said.

"The process really has not gotten off the ground, and this certainly won't help it get off the ground," he told MEE.

'Huge implications'

According to a poll by AAI released on Tuesday, 33 percent of Republicans favour moving the embassy to Jerusalem and 19 percent want to keep it in Tel Aviv, while 48 percent are either unsure or undecided. Overall, only 20 percent of respondents favour the embassy move.

Bannerman said recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is a domestic political gesture to fulfill a campaign promise. It has "huge implications" for America's standing in the Middle East, which holds that the final status of Jerusalem should be determined by an agreement between Israelis and Palestinians.

"It's a fundamental change in the American negotiating position," he said.

But the US will remain in a unique position to pressure both parties, especially Israel, to make compromises.

"It brings into question the objectivity of the United States as a Middle East negotiator, but to be honest the United States has not been an unbiased negotiator for the past 25 years," Bannerman said.

Declaring that Jerusalem is the capital of the eternal Jewish state is essentially dismissing Palestinian self-determination, dismissing our right to an independent state.

Hatem Abudayyeh, a co-founder of the US Palestinian Community Network, said the embassy move is not surprising, but it speaks to Trump's worldview.

"It's clear that he has a real lack of knowledge, understanding and even respect for history, for the international community, the rights of people and nations," he told MEE.

Abudayyeh said Trump's foreign policy is focused on weakening Lebanon's Hezbollah, Syria and Iran, and sees Palestinians as one of the "sectors of resistance in the Arab world".

"Declaring that Jerusalem is the capital of the eternal Jewish state is essentially dismissing Palestinian self-determination, dismissing our right to an independent state," he said.

Abudayyeh added that the move has put another nail in the coffin of the two-state solution.

He said while Trump's declaration would not change the practical status of Jerusalem, which has been under Israeli control for more than 50 years, it does make a difference by "putting facts on the ground" that strengthens the occupation.

US-Arab relations

The Trump administration has positioned itself as a firm ally of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, treating them as an integral part of a regional alliance against Iran.

But despite analyses and murmurs about an emerging Israeli-Saudi alliance, the Palestinian cause remains central to Arab and Muslim masses, including in Arab capitals close to Riyadh.

Bannerman said the embassy move would put the Saudis and Egyptians in a difficult position.

He noted, however, that Arab countries are facing serious domestic and regional struggles, making Palestine less of a “top tier” issue.

“In the end, the relationship with the United States - with all their other problems - is more important,” Bannerman told MEE.

Zogby, of AAI, said the US position on Palestine affects Washington’s ability to work directly with Arab countries.

“Trump wants to confront Iran and bring together Arabs and Israelis; that’s not going to happen ... unless they solve Palestine,” Zogby said.

He said Arab states are fighting for public opinion in the US, but they also don’t want to take steps that would compromise public opinion at home.

“Any US announcement on the status of Jerusalem prior to a final settlement would have a detrimental impact on the peace process and would heighten tensions in the region,” Saudi Ambassador to Washington Khalid bin Salman said in a statement on Monday.

“The kingdom’s policy has been - and remains - in support of the Palestinian people, and this has been communicated to the US administration.”

But beyond geopolitics sensitivity to Jerusalem cuts across the entire Muslim world. The city is home to Al-Aqsa, Islam’s second holiest site.

Jerusalem is such an emotional issue to Arabs and Muslims that moving the embassy may cause a violent backlash, Zogby said.

“It would be terrible if there were violence, but the fault is the people who provoked that violence,” he added.

According to US media reports, the State Department warned American embassies across the world to heighten security in preparation for protests if Trump announces the embassy move on Wednesday.

Jerusalem is not just a Palestinian question, Bannerman said.

“If you put it only in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, you’re not really understanding the importance of Jerusalem,” Bannerman said.

“That may be a weakness in the administration’s position; they do not appear to understand how Jerusalem resonates across the entire region and throughout the Islamic world.”

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P.S.

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<http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/analysis-huge-implications-moving-us-embassy-jerusalem-905155198>