

Donald Trump: Making common cause with Israel's ethno-state

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Eric Ruder analyzes the motives behind Donald Trump's decision to cross a foreign policy "red line" on Jerusalem—and what the ramifications could be in the Middle East.

DONALD TRUMP'S declaration that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel is simultaneously purely symbolic, dangerously provocative and highly self-serving.

How is that possible?

Symbolic: While making much fanfare regarding the decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the Trump administration also delayed the decision to move the U.S. embassy there [1], essentially turning the announcement into a symbolic statement without immediate practical consequences. According to Rex Tillerson [2], it's unlikely that the U.S. will move its embassy to Jerusalem before the end of Trump's term in office.

Provocative: Trump's pronouncement inflamed public opinion across the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world.

Though the protests were more muted than some had predicted [3], Trump's interests were served either way: If there were violent outbursts, Trump could claim this showed that his Muslim travel ban and stepped-up drone strikes across the region were "justified," and if the protests never materialized, Trump could say that the Arab world is "cowering" in the face of his aggressive and long overdue decision.

Self-serving: The announcement helps Trump promote himself as a friend of Israel and deliver on a campaign promise—one of a very few he has managed to keep—despite making the pursuit of U.S. interests in the region more difficult.

Trump pushed ahead anyway, despite being opposed by practically every U.S. ally [4] and almost the entire U.S. foreign policy and intelligence establishment. Once again, his own interests trumped every other consideration.

A QUICK review of U.S. strategy in the Middle East since the 1991 collapse of the ex-USSR left the U.S. as the world's sole predominant superpower is helpful to understand what's going on here.

In that year, the U.S. first invaded Iraq, setting the stage for more than two decades of sanctions and war that devastated what was once one of the region's most advanced economies—setting an example of what would happen for any country that defied the U.S.

While Iraq was bombed back to the Stone Age, the U.S. deepened its alliances with Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt in order to contain its main regional adversary, Iran. In 1993, the dramatic announcement of the Oslo Accords inaugurated a "peace process" that supposedly would create a

Palestinian state alongside Israel.

Needless to say, a Palestinian state never materialized, but the fiction of the “peace process” continues—mainly because Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the U.S. all have a shared interest in keeping the fiction alive.

The peace process to nowhere [5] has served Israel’s interests perfectly—giving it the time to extend its colonization of Palestinian land while outsourcing the repression of Palestinians to the PA.

With negotiations dragging on for more than two decades, and the U.S. insisting throughout that Israel’s West Bank Jewish-only settlements are illegal, Israel nevertheless expanded the number of settlements and settlers, further divided Palestinian communities, built an apartheid wall and drove a wedge among Palestinians by fomenting a split between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza.

And whenever the peace negotiations have threatened to accomplish anything, Israel has carried out a targeted assassination, home demolition or other provocation in order to spark predictable reprisals—and then hypocritically declared the futility of trying to negotiate in the absence of a Palestinian partner committed to “peace.”

For the PA, the continuation of the peace process provides a thin layer of Palestinian political elites with the trappings of power, which they are desperate to preserve, even though it’s abundantly clear that Israel has no intention of allowing the establishment of a Palestinian state.

And Israel’s punishment of Gaza—its military and economic siege that has made life a daily struggle to survive in the face of food, medical and electricity shortages—has served as a cautionary tale that any resistance strategy comes with a heavy price. So the PA continues its dead-end strategy of hoping against hope that negotiations alone will produce some meager results they can offer to the Palestinian people.

For the U.S., the peace process has enabled it to pose as the “honest broker” between the two sides—and thus make itself central to any number of negotiations around regional political and economic questions. But in reality, the U.S. has given Israel unswerving political, economic and military backing to continue its domination of the Palestinian people [6], safeguarding Israel’s colonial project and ensuring Palestinian dispossession.

MEANWHILE, THE U.S. has been playing the long game throughout the Middle East, balancing among its allies and their often-conflicting interests.

After George W. Bush’s disastrous 2003 invasion of Iraq, the U.S. was compelled to incorporate Iran into its balancing act, working with its longtime adversary to stabilize Iraq while also pursuing a carrot-and-stick regime of sanctions to get Iran to dismantle its nuclear program.

Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem only makes the network of alliances the U.S. depends on throughout the region that much more fragile.

One of the cornerstones of the peace process is the idea that all major issues—including boundaries, security, refugee rights and the status of Jerusalem—would be decided in final-status negotiations by Israel and the PA. Any unilateral decisions by either side have been considered a potentially fatal blow to the process.

While Israel and the PA regularly accuse one another of making such unilateral moves, it now turns out that the U.S. under Trump was the first to cross the line about Jerusalem.

The end result is that the PA, which was already flirting with the idea of abandoning the two-state solution [7]—in favor of calling for one state with equal rights for Jews and Palestinians—has now declared that the U.S. should have no further role in negotiations [8].

Other U.S. allies, such as Turkey and Jordan, will also be compelled to move further away [9], insofar as the U.S. decision has rendered it toxic within Middle East diplomatic circles. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is adding new strains to the U.S. relationship with Iran.

Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—who together seem determined to eradicate any trace of Barack Obama’s impact on the world—obviously consider the political fallout from the Jerusalem decision a reasonable price to pay.

But the truth is that Obama’s policy was just as pro-Israel as Trump’s—and more effective.

Obama’s Iran deal was structured so that a future U.S. president could easily ratchet up the pressure by simply declaring Iran non-compliant—exactly as Trump threatened to do before ultimately mostly continuing Obama’s policy [10].

The Democratic Party, in fact, doesn’t even pretend to offer a kinder, gentler alternative to Trump’s policy on Israel. The Democrats’ party platform, like the Republicans’, has for decades included a reference to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel [11]. Democrats in Congress have repeatedly endorsed Israel’s annexation of Jerusalem [12]—recently, Sen. Chuck Schumer actually attacked Trump’s “indecisiveness” in moving the embassy to Jerusalem [13].

But the Democrats have always understood the unspoken rule: It’s fine to call for moving the embassy to Jerusalem, but important not to actually do so.

WHICH BRINGS us to the final reason for Trump’s Jerusalem decision, and it’s the crucial one: Israel, as a state that only confers the full rights of citizenship on Jews while blatantly denying them to Palestinians, is the model ethno-state that Trump fantasizes about the U.S. becoming.

When Trump promises to Make America Great Again, that’s his aspiration.

Israel is a shining example of what the U.S. could be to the American right, from Trump through to outright fascists—an America of, by and for white nationalists.

That’s why Richard Spencer, a leading white nationalist in the alt-right movement, never tires of pointing to Israel as a model for the kind of ethno-state he favors [14].

Trump is merely following Spencer’s lead: The white supremacist in the White House is acknowledging the Zionist supremacists of Judea and Samaria.

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* <https://socialistworker.org/2017/12/15/making-common-cause-with-israels-ethno-state>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/1.828670>
- [2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/12/us/politics/tillerson-state-department-speech-jerusalem-embassy-.html>
- [3] <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/12/12/16762734/trump-jerusalem-capital-protests-palestinians-israelis>
- [4] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-israel-eu/eu-tells-netanyahu-it-rejects-trumps-jerusalem-move-idUSKBN1E50KO>
- [5] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/16/the-real-reason-the-israel-palestine-peace-process-always-fails>
- [6] <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/palestinians-should-have-long-changed-rules-game-582609215>
- [7] <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/1.813607>
- [8] <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/07/us/politics/trump-jerusalem-palestinians.html>
- [9] <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/leaders-in-the-middle-east-react-to-trump-s-jerusalem-decision-1.682167>
- [10] <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/politics/ct-trump-anger-iran-deal-20171011-story.html>
- [11] <http://progressive.org/dispatches/both-parties-pushed-trumps-reckless-action-on-jerusalem-12-6-17/>
- [12] http://fpif.org/jerusalem_endorsing_the_right_of_conquest/
- [13] <http://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/363465-schumer-advised-trump-on-declaring-jerusalem-as-israels-capital>
- [14] <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/11/why-israel-is-richard-spencers-favorite-argument>