

Jerusalem as the Capital of Israel...Why Wonder?

by [Ramy Aziz \(/experts/ramy-aziz\)](/experts/ramy-aziz)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ramy Aziz \(/experts/ramy-aziz\)](/experts/ramy-aziz)

Dr. Ramy Aziz is a researcher and analyst for the Middle East and international affairs. He is a research fellow at The Institute for the Study of Global Antisemitism and Policy (ISGAP).



Brief Analysis

December 21, 2017

On the first of December, President Donald Trump announced that the United States was recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and directed the U.S. embassy to be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In addition to fulfilling a campaign promise to his base, the move undertaken by the President legally implements a law passed by Congress in 1995 called “The Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995,” which was scheduled to be implemented no later than 1999.

The undertaking of such a move however has been avoided by a number of former U.S. presidents (Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama) on the pretext that it would have **negative consequences for the peace process and U.S. interests in the Arab and Islamic world (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-trump-would-gain-from-moving-the-u.s.-embassy-to-jerusalem>)**. This has proven to be untrue since Trump and the United States’ recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel has not inflamed the region or caused Arab and Muslim allies of the United States to cut ties with the U.S. or expel American diplomats from capitals across the Arab and Muslim world. The most significant reactions issued by these aforementioned countries consist of official statements and declarations of rejection and condemnation, although the reaction of the Arab League during its meeting more readily represents the reaction at the Foreign Minister level rather than the reaction of heads of state or kings. All in all, the meeting would be described as more formal and routine than anything else.

When diving into the grass-roots level of this scene on the streets of the Arab world, we find that there are nevertheless protests and demonstrations across several Arab and Islamic capitals such as Cairo, Amman, Beirut, Ankara, and Tehran. However, if we take a closer look at what is behind these demonstrations, we find religious currents and organizations whose political goals are always based on providing a given pretext or excuse in order to find legitimacy and gain public support. The Palestinian issue and the case of Jerusalem remains the most frequently used case by such religious and political opposition movements in the Arab and Islamic world to rally support and cover up internal concerns and the failures of their institutions.

Upon making a closer inspection of the scene in several countries, namely Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iran, we find the following:

In Egypt this issue is used by both the ruling regime on one hand and Islamic and resistance currents on the other.

Gamal Abdel Nasser often used the Jerusalem issue to stir up the masses not just in Egypt but across the Arab world by reiterating hate-filled slogans hostile towards Jews and Israel, which threatened to throw Israel into the sea and remove it from existence.

Even though such language in official speeches ceased with Anwar Sadat's signing of the peace agreement with Israel, the regime permitted currents of political Islam among the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups to adopt and use this issue, albeit with continued coordination and supervision from the regime. I remember specifically the major demonstrations that swept across Egyptian universities during the second Intifada in 2000 undertaken by students belonging to these Islamist currents and headed by the Muslim Brotherhood, the protests, the chanting of anti-Israel and Jewish slogans, and how it was supervised by officers of the SSI. However, the regime used these Islamists as a boogeyman to coerce support from both the United States and Israel, while the Islamists searched for any chance, even though it be subject to the government's conditions, to demonstrate their numerical and organizational potential.

The rules of the game have changed in Egypt however. The current regime only allowed for limited protests following last Friday's prayers at Al-Azhar Mosque, while it confronted other attempts and calls for demonstrations by **arresting protesters (<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/12/09/news/u/interior-ministry-rejects-notification-of-planned-protest-against-us-recognition-of-jerusalem-as-israels-capital/>)**. This clarifies the extent of Egypt's eagerness to preserve internal stability over its concern for the Palestinian issue and Jerusalem, and how the opportunity to protest by the opposition, which could in fact turn into protests against the regime itself, has finally died.

In the case of Lebanon, it is possible to sum up the current situation in a short sentence: the Lebanese State is being hijacked by Hezbollah – an arm of Iran which Lebanon has been incapable of handling. The Jerusalem situation is counted as a precious opportunity by Hassan Nasrallah, who certainly would not waste the chance to cover up crimes such as the killing and extermination of innocent people in Syria under the fake banner of resistance in the name of Jerusalem. Nasrallah has always justified the crimes of Hezbollah by claiming “the road to Jerusalem does not pass through Jounieh, as some say, but rather passes through Al-Qalamoun, As-Suwayda, Zabadani and Al-Hasaka.”

In Shiite Iran, which is ruled by a clerical regime, have used Jerusalem as a magical word of influence among Sunni Muslims and marketed Iran to itself as the only entity capable of reclaiming Jerusalem from the Jews. Iran has even gone as far as to give the name Jerusalem to one of the most important groups in the Revolutionary Guard led by Qasem Soleimani, who is the engineer of the sectarian wars which beguile the region and have resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of innocent souls.

Meanwhile in Erdogan-Muslim Brotherhood Turkey, Erdogan, despite the decline of his role, the shattering of his dreams to control the region through the Muslim Brotherhood, has found his ambition to emerge as the representative and the protector of Islam, Muslims, and their issues without having made any tangible contribution to the reclamation of Jerusalem in line with their claims.

This decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, regardless of its importance, was not received well or accepted by the international community. At the head of the list of those who did not welcome the idea is the European Union, which fears that such a decision would have negative effects on negotiations between the Israeli and Palestinian sides, which have already been stalled for several years. However, if we take a careful look at this decision, we find many benefits can be reaped that would favor the negotiation process between both parties. The decision disrupts the current peace process like a stone crashing into tranquil water and has once again brought the Palestinian issue to the forefront of current events after having fallen to the bottom of the list of concerns for both the Arab and international community in recent years, given the emergence of other more pressing matters.

Therefore, Palestinians must seize the current momentum that has once again brought the Palestinian issue back to the center of international attention, and move forward with direct and serious negotiations sponsored by the United States, the European Union, and the Arab League that take advantage of the existing state of rapprochement between Israel and Arab actors in the region, led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The Palestinians should also deal with other outstanding controversial issues with a real intention to reach a solution, taking into account facts on the ground and not straying from what is possible and what can be accomplished.

To take this step, the Palestinian side must unite the different Palestinian factions and obtain their mandate, given the Palestinian Authority's role as representative of all the various factions and the need to ensure that decisions reached as a result of negotiations will be subject to the approval and commitment by all the Palestinian factions.

The mishandling of the Palestinian issue by the Palestinians themselves and the permitting of a number of different countries and groups to use their issue on the basis that it represents a religious war between Muslims and Jews, has managed to not only damaged the issue but completely derail it. The inciting of hatred and resentment against the other on the basis of religion has not and will not succeed in establishing a Palestinian state and will not force hundreds of thousands of Israelis who have been living in Jerusalem even before 1967 to pack up and leave.

As for those who try to exacerbate the situation by selling lies about religious sites and Al-Aqsa Mosque, the U.S. president's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel has stressed the United States' respect for the current situation in the Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount) and Prime Minister Netanyahu has explicitly stressed in his subsequent remarks that there would be no change to the status quo of the holy sites. For decades, since the return of Jewish control over Jerusalem, hundreds of thousands, even millions, of Muslims have visited and prayed in Al-Aqsa Mosque freely without anyone stopping them.

In conclusion, Jerusalem has already, even before president Trump's recognition of it as the capital of Israel, fulfilled this role. The existence of institutions, such as the Knesset, the Prime Minister's office, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, verify that it is the capital. It is in Jerusalem where all presidents and leaders who visit Israel are received, where Sadat held his famous speeches forty years ago and not in Tel Aviv or Haifa. So why is it astonishing that the United States recognized it as the capital, when it in reality already was the capital?

Rami Aziz is an Egyptian researcher and political analyst, working on his doctorate from the University of Rome. His research focuses on the growth and development of political Islam in Europe. ❖

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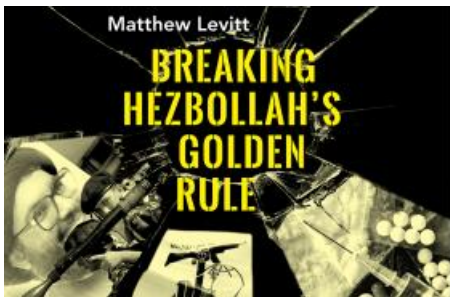
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