

Jerusalem – The Eternal City

by [Magnus Norell \(/experts/magnus-norell\)](#)

Dec 14, 2017

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/alqds-almdynt-alkhaldt\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Magnus Norell \(/experts/magnus-norell\)](#)

Magnus Norell is an adjunct scholar of The Washington Institute



Brief Analysis

December 14, 2017

Before U.S. President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in a speech on December 6, the anticipated move was roundly criticized. Both by America’s ‘traditional enemies’ such as Iran and various Islamist groups, but also by U.S. allies in the Middle East and North Africa as well as in Europe. Trump— who had informed several key-players in the Middle East of his intention beforehand—stated that that this was, “Nothing more nor less than a recognition of reality—it is also the right thing to do.” But what critics took aim at was that this move could or would trigger unrest, more violence and—according to Palestinian Authority official Saeb Erekat—mean the death of the two-state solution.

Since 1995, when the U.S. Congress decided to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem—every U.S. president, including President Trump, has signed a waiver, renewed every sixth months, postponing the move. The rationale has been that a move could upset any future peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. However, in his recent speech Trump reiterated the oft-mentioned phrase that a final and long-term solution must be left to the Israelis and Palestinians to decide themselves. He also stated that an embassy move might take several years.

So, in effect, nothing practical will change on the ground in the foreseeable future. For Israelis, Jerusalem has been their capital since December 13, 1949, and nothing in Trump’s speech hinders anyone from negotiating to have Jerusalem as a capital city for two states. Nothing in the speech negates any Palestinian claims in Jerusalem. On the contrary, [he stressed \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/while-endorsing-israeli-jerusalem-trump-doesnt-rule-out-any-of-abbass-demands/?utm_source=The+Times+of+Israel+Daily+Edition&utm_campaign=df7eda0bac-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_12_07&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_adb46cec92-df7eda0bac-54388193\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/while-endorsing-israeli-jerusalem-trump-doesnt-rule-out-any-of-abbass-demands/?utm_source=The+Times+of+Israel+Daily+Edition&utm_campaign=df7eda0bac-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2017_12_07&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_adb46cec92-df7eda0bac-54388193) the importance of maintaining the status quo with regard to the holy places.

In fact, a two-state solution with Jerusalem as a capital for both has been in every Israeli-initiated proposal since Ehud Barak up until today. For the most far-reaching proposals— Barak’s bid at Camp David in 2000, the so-called Clinton Parameters in December the same year, and Ehud Olmert’s proposal in 2008—it’s been the Palestinians who said no to those proposals.

Nonetheless, Trump can be criticized for missing some key-points. First, the framing could have been better. It would have been easy to explicitly (re)state that it's the western part of Jerusalem that is meant as the capital. Now the vagueness of the statement make it easy for his detractors and critics to pounce on that omission and argue that there is a 'hidden agenda' here that aims to deprive the Palestinians of any rights. Secondly, the timing: if the recognition had been tied to the peace plan allegedly being in the works, allegedly it would have been easier to fit it into a wider peace process, thus blunting some of the impact.

At the same time, the sensitivity of the issue of Jerusalem makes this a potential flashpoint, but not because of anything that Trump said, but because **other actors (<https://goo.gl/yVmZoh>)** might decide to use the speech as an excuse to act. For the many Trump critics, it would be just as rational and politically mature to act with renewed negotiations and demand that the United States come up with some serious proposals, or come up with new proposals, regardless of how much they might disagree with the current U.S. approach.

A special mention should be made of Russia in this regard. Russia **recognized (<https://goo.gl/wDk9FJ>)** West Jerusalem as the Israeli capital back in April and at the same time endorsed East Jerusalem as a future capital of Palestine. That was the first country to do this, but this passed without hardly any mention in any major news media, let alone protestations from the EU or any demands to convene the UNSC.

And then there is the EU. The chosen policy of clinging to the outdated idea of Jerusalem as a Corpus Separatum is a non-starter. The notion of Jerusalem as a Corpus Separatum was included in the first UN proposal to divide the British mandate of Palestine into two states, and it died in the immediate aftermaths of the war in 1948-49. It is noteworthy that the Jewish polity agreed to that plan, but the Arabs, including the Palestinians, did not (it should be mentioned here though that the Palestinian leadership at the time was not democratically elected, and thus it is hard to know what the Palestinian people really thought about the partition plan). The idea of Jerusalem as a Corpus Separatum was always a fiction only existing on paper. And this was because of the Arab refusal to accept the partition plan of 1947 and decision to go to war to stop it from being implemented. When that failed, the result was a divided city with the Western, non-religious part, ending up Israeli (and subsequently as the capital) and the eastern part— including all the important religious sites—ending up under Jordanian control (which barred entry to any Jews to their holy places in eastern Jerusalem). So when the U.S. recognized Israel upon its independence, it would have been easy to also recognize western Jerusalem as the capital.

It is also worth noting that nothing in the present stance by the international community has moved the peace process between Israelis and Palestinians forward. The only breakthroughs have come as a result of direct negotiations between the parties. And, as has been stated, nothing in the speech or even in the eventual move of the embassy precludes any divisions of Jerusalem as a capital of two states.

Violence did follow, and more is sure to come, albeit not necessarily in the region. But that is because several actors — including Hamas, Iran, and Hezbollah—have an interest in escalating things to thwart any budding peace process from seeing the light of day. It is not necessarily because of anything Trump said. And violence has more to do with the fact that there is opposition to any Jewish sovereignty in Jerusalem. In this regard, the recognition helped combat the insidious and anti-Semitic fiction— spread by some Palestinians and even in **UNESCO resolutions (<https://goo.gl/xVuzYs>)** — that there are no legitimate Jewish and Israeli claims to Jerusalem. And of course, the primary casualty of such a stance will be the Palestinians themselves.

The violence and disturbances that did break out in Jerusalem, on the West Bank, and in Gaza, was not nearly on the scale anticipated. Since I am presently in Jerusalem, I have been able not only to view the scene here, but have been traveling around the West Bank (both areas A and B) and apart from some minor disturbances, violence has been very localized. Jerusalem is a major issue and a sensitive one for the Palestinians, but unless the more hardcore Islamists (or local lone-actors) can inflict serious casualties, violence will stay limited. A major reason for this is that

security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians is on-going (as was not the case in July over the Temple Mount), and that there is an understanding between Fatah and Hamas that violence will not get out of hand, for the time being at least.

It is also to be expected that the PA, and surely several of its Arab allies, will be reluctant to engage in any new peace processes for the time being, as a protest towards the U.S. administration. But depending on the new peace plan in the works in Washington, this stance might change by the time this plan is announced, which will not happen until next year. At the same time, there are signs that not everyone being unhappy with Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital will let that stand in the way of working with Washington (<https://goo.gl/wDk9FJ>) on other, more pressing issues.

As for Abbas and the PA, Trump's speech can open up possibilities to shake things up within the Palestinian polity, something that is sorely needed. To help his people come out stronger after the dust has settled, Abbas could **initiate** (<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-1.827682>) political reforms, invite other groups into the PA (instead of only his own acolytes), open up the election process and, finally, announce new elections. Abbas was elected on January 15, 2005 and although his mandate ended on January 9, 2009 in accordance with the Palestinian constitution, he refuses to resign or to hold new elections. A renewed negotiating process concerning peace and Jerusalem can, contrary to what Trump's critics are saying, open up new possibilities for the Palestinians to reach a solid peace agreement with Israel. If Jerusalem is back on top of the agenda, that can be a clear advantage for the PA. As Mohammed Dajani and Meir Margalit **write** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/in-jerusalem-its-time-to-get-out-the-vote>), with nearly 40 percent of the population of Jerusalem being Palestinian, using their right to vote could help turn the tables in Jerusalem City Hall. By using that right to vote, Dajani and Margalit argue, the Palestinians have a good chance of advancing their rights and making sure they are not forgotten in any future peace negotiation.

Right now the assessment is that the PA—despite its fiery rhetoric—does not want an escalation. This message was also conveyed to this analyst by a member of the PA's executive body, who also added that the PA is aiming for some kind of positive statement concerning Palestinian rights in Jerusalem.

For the many critics of Trump's speech recognizing Jerusalem as the Israeli capital, the die is indeed already cast. This has forced everybody to come to grips with a new reality. To come out of this situation with any credibility at all, it is suggested that instead of putting out statements, smashing up the store, or trying the same thing again and again expecting a different outcome (which, incidentally, is a well-used definition of insanity), it would be far more constructive to come up with some serious proposals on their own to, finally, reach a long-term solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

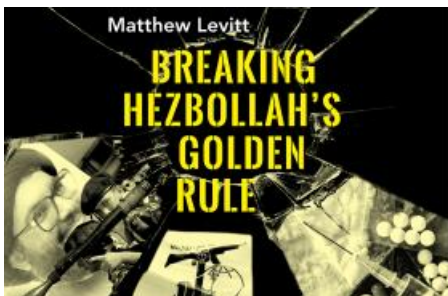
Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)