

In Jerusalem, It's Time to Get Out the Vote

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Brief Analysis

December 14, 2017

President Trump's dramatic declaration to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and his plans to relocate the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem have thrown a spotlight on three goals the Palestinian leadership had so far failed to achieve, namely, to affirm the Palestinian national rights in Jerusalem and acknowledge Arab Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Palestine, to bring the Palestinian cause to the fore on the world stage, and to revive the two-state solution.

On the other hand, Trump's announcement dealt a severe blow to both the Israeli and Palestinian moderate fronts and peace camps since Jerusalem was one of the final status issues for a comprehensive peace agreement. His decision has made the peace prospects dimmer. It was a departure from longstanding U.S. policies of trying to avoid offending one side or the other to safeguard its role as a sponsor of peace negotiations and not damage its credibility as a Mideast peace broker.

In the face of this controversial step, we— Palestinian and Israeli moderates— can speak out and denounce, we can demonstrate in protest, we can show resignation and be bystanders, or we can try to change the balance of power through the known practice of “Judo” in which we take advantage of the power of the adversary to throw him off balance. It is our argument that the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem do possess powerful tools to turn the situation around to their advantage.

The resources, politics, and the police capabilities in Israeli hands are certainly powerful weapons, no doubt, but the demographics are more powerful yet. That is the case providing we know how to derive from it the maximum benefit it offers.

The Palestinian population in Jerusalem represents nearly 40 percent of all the city's residents. This population has

a special legal status in accordance to which they are legal residents of the city but not citizens of the state. Therefore, they are not allowed to vote for the Knesset (Israeli parliament), but have the right to vote in municipal elections. As mentioned, 40 percent is a powerful strength, but it has not yet materialized as the Palestinian Authority urges Palestinian residents not to take part in the municipal elections for the city of Jerusalem under the misperception that it would signify bestowing legitimacy to Israeli occupation and recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the city. Though they constitute 40 percent of the city, the Palestinians, in deciding not to participate in the municipal elections, suffer from taxation without representation, abdicating the city to be governed without any representatives defending their welfare and interests getting merely 10 percent of the budget. This attitude, more than anything else, has served the interests of the Israeli right-wing who have been enjoying a free hand in implementing their own distorted vision of the city.

And the Palestinian residents are not alone in shying from taking part in municipal elections, as aside from their own numbers, the left camp in the city compose about 10 percent of the electorate, therefore rendering a common camp as deep and wide. In addition, there is a good percentage of moderates residing in the city who view Jerusalem as the City of God and thus may find this coalition to be more appealing than the present.

The concrete implications of this demographics is that if the Palestinians and the Israeli Left camps join hands and run together for the municipal elections on an agenda of reconciliation, tolerance, and coexistence they could break the hold of the right-wing parties over the affairs of the city and take the city's government.

If we add to this the fact that the Jewish electorate within the city is itself divided into a number of different parties, the Palestinian-Israeli left-wing chances of success are indeed realistic.

At a minimum the Palestinians could constitute a vocal minority of the city's municipal legislature. Given their sheer numbers, this could be the case even if the Palestinians do not turnout in in overwhelming numbers or vote as a bloc, and even if they do not align with any Jewish slate.

This move will represent a most adequate response to Trump's machinations. In the face of the hostile takeover of the Eastern part of Jerusalem by the Israeli right-wing government, the Palestinian residents can use the tools the Israeli "democracy" makes available to them, and not only change the city's government, but also change the course of the city's history. If the Palestinian residents of Jerusalem will retract their current boycott of the municipal elections and go out to vote in large numbers, all the celebrations of today hailing the Trump declaration will be met with the proper response of action and not words.

No doubt, the time has come for Palestinians to take a second look at their position and adopt a more pragmatic approach and run in the municipal elections that are scheduled for November of next year, eleven months from now. They have a variety of options. They can form a list of their own, but if that is difficult for them, they still have other options: they could run in a joint list with the Israeli left, or they could choose not to form a joint list but still support and vote for independent Palestinian candidates or Israeli Left party and candidates who place reconciliation and peace high on their agendas and who would surely address the needs and interests of Palestinian residents. Be that as it may, Trump's move does leave them with many alternatives, but only a few would be useful to them and this is one option that would better serve their own interests, and therefore this time they must marshal their efforts and run in the next municipal elections, thereby asserting their rights in the city and taking back what has been taken away from them. On the bigger picture, Jerusalem could become the model for peace and trust building paving the road for a final and just comprehensive settlement to this protracted conflict. This is a road not taken by the Palestinians so far but could yield for them serious political benefits. ❖

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