

Moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem: Beyond the Outrage

by [Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](/experts/hassan-mneimneh)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Hassan Mneimneh \(/experts/hassan-mneimneh\)](/experts/hassan-mneimneh)

Hassan Mneimneh is a contributing editor with Fikra Forum and a principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington.



Brief Analysis

As long as the relocation is conducted within the confines of Western Jerusalem, Arabs should recognize it as a normal diplomatic action.

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Since the 1980 annexation of the territories occupied in 1967, Israel has maintained that Jerusalem is its eternal and undivided capital. From the perspective of much of the Arab world, this claim is provocative and vehemently rejected. In addition to its place at the core of the political aspirations of the Palestinians, East Jerusalem, in the recent nationalist past, was part of the Arab collective narrative of unity and purpose. "Jerusalem is Ours" by the iconic Lebanese singer Fayruz was not about territorial losses and gains. Rather, in a world order that failed the Palestinians almost two decades after their 1948 tragedy -- the same world that seemed further apathetic to the repetition of the original plight following the June 1967 war -- the song is about justice sought and denied.

Half a century later, pain and anger has metastasized into cynicism and radicalism while nationalism has faded away. Jerusalem, however, remains "ours," even though the "us" in ours is no longer the same. It is a subject that enrages and enflames. The Arab "street" shows few signs of outrage at the slaughter of hundreds of thousands in Syria but is certain to voice its passionate rejection of any action that affects the undetermined status of the Holy City. The value of symbols superseding the concern for living, breathing, suffering human beings has been demonstrated repeatedly in Arab culture (and naturally beyond). In the case of Jerusalem, it is a further inhibitor of the effort to resolve the Palestinian question. The planned relocation of the embassy may be an opportunity for new questions.

At its most fundamental level, relocating the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem is a sovereign decision that involves only two parties, the United States and Israel. It is rather odd that the national will of a sovereign country to identify its own capital is not honored by its closest ally, which furthermore is the most powerful nation in the world. As long as the location of the embassy is selected within the undisputed Western part of the city, invoking the long-obsolete claim of an international jurisdiction over the totality of Jerusalem, as mandated by the 1947 UN partition

plan, it can readily be dismissed as polemical -- the maligned plan cannot be selectively referenced after decades of rejection. Moving the embassy will certainly engender reactions in the Arab world, but the onus is on Arab culture to manage and ultimately overcome these reactions.

There is indeed a segment of Arab society that has undergone a level of radicalization and animosity toward Israel and the West that cannot be reversed by engagement. Individuals with such an outlook are liable for recruitment by the Islamic State and other violent groups and thus will neither be enhanced by an embassy relocation nor diminished by any concession that Israel or the United States would offer. The concern is for the much wider circles for whom the question of Jerusalem is charged with emotion, as well as the sense of ignored injustice. This large public may benefit to hear from two parties in conjunction with the embassy relocation: the United States and its own intellectual class.

The Trump administration is best advised to present the embassy relocation for what it is: the long overdue correction of an anomaly in the U.S.-Israel relationship. To alleviate fears that are stoked by demagogues, but also nurtured by the vicissitudes of history, Washington may consider issuing a separate statement about its appreciation of Palestinian aspirations and its intent, as expressed on numerous occasions by then-candidate Donald Trump, to reengage negotiations toward a fair resolution.

It is, however, the responsibility of Arab culture to cast the moment in a positive light, debunking the utilitarian portrayal of the event as insult and injury to the Arab and Islamic worlds, and inviting reflection on deeply entrenched, and rarely questioned, corrosive memes. Undoubtedly, historically, culturally, existentially, "Jerusalem is ours." But, it is also theirs.

Herein lies the fundamental question that Arab and Israeli culture has not proven able to address self-critically: "Jerusalem is Jewish." It is a statement that elicits discomfort at the very least, often well beyond, when uttered in an Arab setting. Yet it is not only a statement of fact, but also one of history, consciousness, and deep reality. For centuries past, the longing for a forbidden Jerusalem was at the core of Jewishness. Yet, this emotional, devotional, spiritual bond is virtually never acknowledged in the Arab narrative. Nor is the more concrete fact that, in Ottoman times, prior to the British Mandate, European colonialism, and American imperialism, Jerusalem had most often a Jewish plurality, and at times a straight Jewish majority. The serious question that Arab culture ought to address when formulating a response to the putative U.S. embassy move to Jerusalem is whether the opposition stems from political considerations or from the hard resistance to accepting that Jerusalem is Jewish.

This annuls none of the Palestinian and Arab attachment to the place. From being the first Qiblah, and the third of the Two Holiest Shrines, to embodying the locus of the precarious but still alive desire to forge a Muslim-Christian Arab identity, yes, Jerusalem is Arab, without any prejudice to its Jewish character. The Holy City may claim to be more: Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Greek, Latin. It is the task of a future generation to negotiate the many identities of the place.

Jerusalem may emerge as the first instance in modern history where one city is the capital of two nations. Today, it is the capital of Israel. To dispute this fact with credibility, one has to deconstruct Jerusalem itself. Israeli sovereignty over the Western part of the city cannot be denied in any sincere pursuit of a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As long as the U.S. embassy relocation is within the confines of this condition, it ought to be recognized as a normal diplomatic action. ❖



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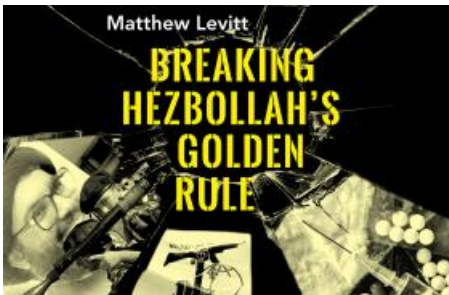
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