

Moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem Is Not a Disaster

[Dennis Ross](#) and [David Makovsky](#)

Foreign Policy

December 7, 2017

The president's statement does not, in fact, concede Palestinian rights and claims, but he must now make this clear to avoid empowering rejectionists.

Few issues in the Middle East are more evocative than Jerusalem. Arab leaders' public responses to U.S. President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital this week have been swift and negative at least in part because they had little forewarning of what was coming and could not afford to look like they were conceding Arab, Palestinian, and Muslim rights in the city and its holy sites.

The irony is that what the president said does not concede those rights and claims. His recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital reflects a reality that it *is* the seat of Israel's government and that, for the Jewish state, Jerusalem will always be its capital -- there is no other city that could be. For Palestinians, they too no doubt cannot envision any city but Jerusalem as the capital of their state, if and when it emerges from moribund negotiations. The president's statement does not rule that out: on the contrary, he said that the United States is not taking a position on "the specific boundaries of the Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem, or the resolution of contested borders." Those questions, he said, "are up to the parties involved."

Given Arab and Palestinian concerns and the potential for Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and al Qaeda to distort what the United States is doing to foment rage and violence, it is essential that the Trump administration's message be clear and consistent about not prejudging the outcome of the status of Jerusalem. Maintaining message discipline has not been the hallmark of the Trump White House, but it is crucial now. No stray tweets allowed. The stakes are too high, particularly if the president's decision is not going to play into the hands of the enemies of peace.

That means repeating and reinforcing President Trump's main theme in his speech: that the United States is drawing a distinction between acknowledging the reality that Jerusalem has been Israel's capital since 1949, and the need for negotiations to resolve all the respective claims that Israelis and Palestinians have, including questions related to Jerusalem. Israelis and Palestinians must resolve these issues directly and without outside interference.

There is a logic to this duality. Israel's prime minister and parliament are located in the part of Jerusalem that is not contested, and there is an honesty in ending the fiction that the city is not the Israeli capital, which has gone on for close to 70 years. At the same time, given the centrality and potentially explosive nature of Jerusalem, it is vital not to appear to be pre-empting the ability of the parties to determine boundaries of the city and whether it will or will not be a capital for two states. Already Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh has called for an uprising, and the violent riots today in the West Bank signal that anger over the president's declaration can be further exploited -- which also helps to explain Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's declaration that the United States can no longer play the mediator's role.

Because there is an emotional lens through which all parties perceive Jerusalem, any decision can be misrepresented by extremists and produce violence. And if the United States appears to be closing the door on Jerusalem or simply adopting the Israeli position that all of Jerusalem should be under Israeli sovereignty, it may allow the jihadis and the rejectionists to hijack this highly sensitive issue. They, of course, will leap at the opportunity to create a provocation against the United States and against America's Arab and Palestinian partners -- especially Abbas and King Abdullah II of Jordan. The administration needs to keep in mind the pressures both of these leaders are likely to be under.

One practical step the Trump administration could take to reduce others' ability to exploit the president's decision is to have senior U.S. officials appear on every Arabic-speaking news outlet and explain what this decision is and what it is not. The announcement, they should underline, is about recognizing what no one questions: that any peace deal would end with Israel maintaining its capital in at least part of Jerusalem. That would help make clear the administration's contention that it is not putting its thumb on the scale against Palestinian interests in Jerusalem -- the United States continues to insist that the basic issues related to the future of Jerusalem, the questions of sovereignty, and competing Israeli and Palestinian claims must be subject to negotiations before there can be a peace agreement. Both elements of this message need to be a mantra, repeated to Arabic audiences by top U.S. officials in the weeks ahead, including by Vice President Mike Pence when he visits the region.

This is the best hope for strengthening the hands of the Arab and Palestinian leaders who must resist the efforts by those like Hamas who will seek to distort the reality and claim that Jerusalem has been given away -- and who clearly want to provoke violence and greater polarization. It can also begin to change the environment in a way that allows Abbas and his negotiators, such as Saeb Erekat, to walk back from some of their statements about ending the peace process and the American role in it.

Conveying this message is important not just to avert violence but also to ensure that the plan the Trump administration intends to present to the Israelis, Palestinians, and Arab countries is not dead on arrival. The reason former Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama invoked the waiver was not that they lacked courage but that they believed this would deny the Palestinians and the Arabs the political space they needed to make hard decisions for peace, thus rendering its achievement more difficult. President Trump argued in his statement that they were wrong. If he wants to prove he is right, he will first need to make clear that their interests and rights have not already been conceded -- and then present a credible peace plan, including on Jerusalem.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship From Truman to Obama](#). David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and editor of its new interactive map site [Settlements and Solutions](#).