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Playing with fire

Donald Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital is a symbolic act – but one with potentially disastrous consequences

On 6 December, Donald Trump defied global opposition and announced he would recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. He also triggered plans to move the US embassy there from Tel Aviv.

The symbolic gesture allowed him to make good on an election pledge to supporters, and won him plaudits from the pro-Israel lobby. But both his allies in the West and Middle Eastern leaders have warned the move could hamper the peace process and lead to more violence in the region. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's Werner Puschra discusses what Trump's announcement means for Israel and the wider region.

How has Donald Trump's announcement been received in Israel? Has there been any criticism of his policy there?

This move was broadly well-received by Israel's Jewish population, but not by its Palestinian minority. In recognising Jerusalem, Trump overturned one of the decades-long principles of American foreign policy, in which Jerusalem's eventual fate would only be decided after 'final status' talks between Israel and the Palestinians. Trump's decision disregards international law, too, in that the 1947 UN Partition Plan declares Jerusalem to be under international control and open to all religions.

But recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital is primarily a symbolic act. The city has long functioned as the nation's capital: all the key governmental institutions are based there, as is the Israeli parliament, the Knesset.

Still, even symbolic acts have consequences – both intended and unintended. It's still not clear why the president decided on this moment to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital. But we can safely assume both the Trump administration and [Israeli prime minister Benjamin] Netanyahu's government were mainly concerned about

how the decision would play at home, rather than internationally.

Trump's fulfilled an election promise and won plaudits from evangelicals. Netanyahu, on the other hand, is facing allegations of corruption at home, and needed to win back some brownie points with the electorate. His coalition's been weakened by multiple police investigations into his affairs. But Jerusalem's changed status let him chalk up an easy win.

There are unintended consequences too. The USA and Israel made painstaking efforts to build ties with Sunni states in the Middle East. The decision could put these relations in jeopardy, strengthening Iran's hand in the region. It could also put further strain on already somewhat fraught relations between the USA/Israel on the one hand and the EU/UN on the other.

The move could push the Israel-Palestine issue head back up the international political agenda, after several years in which the peace process has stalled and no new initiatives had come along to replace it.

Trump hasn't actually specified whether he wants to recognise the whole of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, or just part of it. Neither has he ruled out a two-state solution. Aren't critics exaggerating the impact of his announcement?

In Israel, Trump's announcement has been received with mixed feelings. Among Jews, a prevailing sense of satisfaction is tempered by the fear the announcement won't solve anything, but will just create more problems. People are afraid of a new outbreak of violence. They're also worried about what the move will mean for Israel's foreign relations – and fear Trump could use the announcement as a bargaining chip to demand far-reaching concessions from Israel at a later date. That's why we haven't seen any spontaneous street parties, and why people are still demonstrating against Netanyahu.

Trump's speech was carefully crafted. He didn't speak about a unified Jerusalem, and didn't rule out a division of the city following peace negotiations. He also made his first public statement in support of a two-state solution. For many people in Israel, these two points are unsettling – despite the jubilant headline in the Netenyahu-supporting Hayom newspaper declaring Trump had 'erased the green line' [the pre-1967 boundary between Israel and the West Bank, at the heart of stalled negotiations for a Palestinian state].

At any rate, Jerusalem's status can't be determined by unilateral decree of the US president. It is the people of Jerusalem – Israelis and Palestinians – who will eventually decide how they want to shape the future of their city.

Jerusalem is facing serious challenges. It's Israel's largest urban centre - with a population of 900,000 – and it's split between two dominant groups: Palestinians who make up around 40 per cent of its population, and ultra-orthodox Jews at 35 per cent. Ultra-orthodox Jews are the fastest-growing demographic and will in a few years outnumber the Palestinians. Both groups, however, are among Israel's poorest, which means Jerusalem is also the country's most deprived urban area.

Moreover, despite the high internal population growth, Jerusalem sees an annual net decrease in Jewish inhabitants as they move out to the settlements around the city or to other parts of the country. So in order to make Jerusalem into a prosperous city with a strong place on the international stage, Israelis and Palestinians will need to work together.

The Palestinians are now unwilling to accept the USA as a mediator in the conflict. Who else could take on this role?

In his speech on Jerusalem's status, Trump placed himself too firmly and too partially on Israel's side, casting doubt on the US' neutrality. The Palestinians have subsequently suspended diplomatic ties. When the vice president Mike Pence travels to Israel and the Middle East this month, he won't be received by [Palestinian President Mahmoud] Abbas. He won't get an audience with the Coptic Pope in Egypt, either.

What effects will the decision have on Israel's relations in the Middle East?

For Palestinians, Trump's announcement is just the latest in a series of measures taken against them by the current US administration. He's created a political vacuum that no other power can fill: the EU is too divided on Israel to act. This lack of leadership could lead to more instability, especially if violence increases in the Palestinian areas and across the Arab world where anti-Israeli sentiment is high.

In recent years, Israel's made considerable efforts to strengthen diplomatic ties with what it calls 'moderate' Arab states. It has also managed to somewhat normalise its relations with Turkey. Trump's decision puts all of this at risk. The negative reactions against Israel were pronounced and it could well find itself returned to pariah status. Israel could halt these developments if its government were to regain agency in the issue, making proposals for starting peace negotiations and taking clear steps towards this goal. And would need to demonstrate its commitment to the two-state solution through concrete policy decisions.



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