

### *Dorsey's Column*

## Trump's Recognition of Jerusalem: Letting a Genie out of the Bottle

James M. Dorsey

US President Donald J. Trump has let a genie out of the bottle with his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and intent to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In taking his decision, Mr. Trump was implementing a longstanding US policy dating back to the administrations of Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barak Obama even if none of them were willing to put it into practice.

The key to judging Mr. Trump's move is the politics behind it and the black swan embedded in it. Recognizing Jerusalem formally as the capital of Israel may well kill two birds at the same time: boost the president's standing among evangelists and conservatives at home and give him leverage to negotiate what he has dubbed the ultimate deal between Israelis and Palestinians.

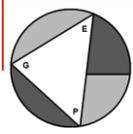
There is no doubt that the move will boost Mr. Trump's popularity among his supporters and financial backers like casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, and allow him to assert that he has fulfilled a campaign promise. Far less certain is whether Mr. Trump will be willing or able to constructively leverage his move to facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal. His move moreover risks sparking an uncontrollable sequence of events.

US officials have been tight-lipped about peace plans being developed by Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law and the US' chief Israeli-Palestinian negotiator. Almost the only confirmed fact about Mr. Kushner's strategy is that, based on his close relationship with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, he is advocating what he describes as an outside-in approach.<sup>1</sup> In this scenario, Saudi Arabia would ensure Arab backing for a peace plan put forward by Mr. Kushner.

Prince Mohammed's United Arab Emirates counterpart, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, working through Egyptian general-turned-president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, has helped put a key building block in place by facilitating reconciliation between rival Palestinian factions, Palestine Authority President Mahmoud Abbas's Al Fatah movement and Hamas, the Islamist movement that controlled the Gaza Strip.

The problem with that scenario is that implicit in US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, notwithstanding Mr. Trump's denial, is a rejection of the notion that any Israeli Palestinian peace deal would have to involve either West Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital, or shared control of Jerusalem as a whole that would serve as the capital of both states.

The rejection of that notion would stroke with readouts of a visit to Riyadh last month by Mr. Abbas in which the Saudi crown prince reportedly laid out the peace plan he had discussed



with Mr. Kushner. According to that readout by Palestinian officials as well as European and Arab diplomats <sup>2</sup>, East Jerusalem would not be the Palestinian capital.

Moreover, the future Palestinian state would consist of non-contiguous parts of the West Bank to ensure that Israeli settlements in the area remain under Israeli control. Finally, Palestinians would have to surrender their demand for recognition of the right of return for Palestinians who fled Israel/Palestine during the 1948 and 1967 wars.

Beyond the fact that it is hard to see how any Palestinian leader could sign up for the plan, it threatens, coupled with Mr. Trump's recognition of Jerusalem, to inflame passions that Prince Mohammed and other Arab autocrats may find difficult to control.

In a region that increasingly and brutally suppresses any form of dissent or protest, Prince Mohammed and other Arab leaders could risk fueling the fire by seeking to suppress demonstrations against Mr. Trump's decision and what Arab and Muslim public opinion would perceive as a sell-out of Palestinian rights.

The situation would become even more tricky if protests, as is likely, would first erupt in Palestine and be countered with force by the Israeli military. It is a scenario in which anti-US, anti-Israel protests in Arab capitals could quickly turn into anti-government manifestations.

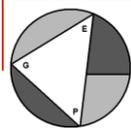
Palestinian groups have already called for three days of rage.<sup>3</sup> Protests would likely not be restricted to Middle Eastern capitals but would probably also erupt in Asian nations like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia.

In some ways, protests may well be the purpose of the exercise. There is no way of confirming whether the readout provided to officials and diplomats by Mr. Abbas of his meeting with Prince Mohammed is accurate. In what amounts to a dangerous game of poker, that readout could well serve multiple purposes, including an effort by Mr. Abbas to boost his position at home by projecting himself as resisting US and Saudi pressure.

Against a history of less than accurate media reporting and official statements often designed to maintain a façade rather than reality, Saudi media reported that King Salman warned Mr. Trump that any decision to move the US Embassy before a permanent peace settlement had been achieved would inflame the Muslim world.<sup>4</sup>

While Prince Mohammed and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu see eye to eye in viewing Iran rather than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the region's core issue, it is hard to imagine that the Saudi crown prince, a man who has proven that he is not averse to unwarranted risks and gambles, would surrender demands for Muslim control of at least part of Islam's third most holy city. It is equally unfathomable that he would allow for a situation in which the Saudi kingdom's position as the custodian of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina could be called into question.

Public Saudi backing for Mr. Trump's recognition and any plan to grant Israel full control of Jerusalem would see the genie turning on the kingdom and its ruling family. Not only with public protests but also with demands by Iran that Saudi Arabia be stripped of its custodianship and that Mecca and Medina be put under some kind of pan-Islamic administration.



In other words, Mr. Trump and potentially Prince Mohammed, are playing a game that could lead to a second phase of this decade's popular revolts and a serious escalation of an already dangerous Saudi-Iranian rivalry that is wreaking havoc across the Middle East.

With his recognition of Jerusalem, Mr. Trump has likely closed the door on any public or Arab support for a peace plan that falls short of what is minimally acceptable to the Palestinians. Moreover, by allowing speculation to flourish over what he has in mind with his ultimate Israeli-Palestinian deal, Mr. Trump has potentially set a ball rolling that neither he nor Arab autocrats may be able to control.

### *Postscript Arab Anger: Governments and Protesters walk a Fine Line*

A little noticed subtext to furious protests across the Middle East and North Africa against US President Donald J. Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is simmering anger at Arab governments. The subtext demarcates a delicate balance between Arab youth frustrated with governments that are seemingly unwilling and unable to stand up for Arab rights, and Arab leaders whose survival instincts persuade them to maintain failed policies.

The anger is driven by a continued display of Arab inability to reverse the Israeli occupation of territories taken during the 1967 Middle East war, a readiness to overtly or covertly cooperate with Israel in the absence of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, and, even worse, reports that Gulf states are willing to support a new US peace plan that fails to meet minimal Palestinian demands for an independent state.

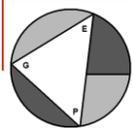
Underlying the anger is frustration that Arab regimes, six years after the 2011 popular Arab revolts and amid years of a brutal and violent United Arab Emirates and Saudi-led counterrevolution that has rolled back the achievements of the uprisings everywhere except for in Tunisia, still fail to deliver public services and goods.

The potentially explosive mix is highlighted by the Arab and Muslim world's response to Mr. Trump's move on the status of Jerusalem that amounts to little more than toothless statements and a glaring lack of diplomatic action.<sup>5</sup>

Virtually no Arab government has summoned a US ambassador or charge d'affaires to protest Trump's decision on Jerusalem. Nor have Arab leaders sought to pin Mr. Trump down on what his statement, that is riddled with apparent internal contradictions and vague assertions, actually means. Only Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas drew a line by announcing that he would not meet with US Vice President Mike Pence when he visits the Middle East later in December 2017.

The strategy of Arab leaders appears one designed to verbally condemn Mr. Trump's move and hope that pro-longed protests will prove unsustainable. Arab leaders have good reason to believe that maintaining the degree of mobilization on the streets of Jerusalem, Palestinian cities and Arab capitals will prove difficult.

Their repressive policies and the Middle East's dissent into chaos and violence as a result of the counterrevolution has dampened appetite for renewed mass anti-government



protest despite calls for a third intifada or anti-Israeli uprising by groups like Hamas, the Islamist group in Gaza, and Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite militia in Lebanon.

That may be a risky calculation in the medium rather than the short term. If the Arab revolts and the escalation of extremism proved anything, it is that Arab leaders ignore frustration and anger at their peril. Explosions of public anger are more often spontaneous than planned.

Gulf leaders are not wholly oblivious to the threat. Forced by lower oil prices, they have announced reform plans that aim to diversify and rationalize their rentier state economies, loosen social restrictions, and unilaterally rewrite social contracts while tightening political control. Yet, leaders like Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, have yet to deliver jobs and greater economic opportunity.

The question also remains to what degree Gulf leaders have their ear to the ground. Bahrain, a Saudi ally that seldom moves without consulting Riyadh, allowed a 25-member interfaith group to make a rare visit to Israel despite Mr. Trump's move.

The timing of Bahrain's decision to violate a 2002 Saudi-driven Arab peace plan adopted by the 57-nation Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) that calls for normalization of relations with Israel only when the Jewish state withdraws from territories conquered during the 1967 Middle East war, could not have been worse. It only helps to reinforce a belief among protesters that Arab leaders continue to attribute greater importance to strengthening informal ties with Israel, whom they view as an ally in their efforts to counter Iran, than to protecting Arab and Muslim rights.

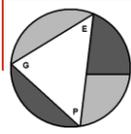
While unwilling to risk their relationship with Washington DC despite deep-seated passions evoked by the controversy over Islam's third most holy city, Arab leaders, paradoxically, have so far failed to exploit the wiggle room offered by Mr. Trump's statement.

A careful reading of Mr. Trump's statement leaves room for interpretation even if there is little doubt that the President has intended to bolster Israel's position.<sup>6</sup> US officials, including United Nations ambassador Nikki Haley <sup>7</sup>, have struggled to explain how the statement furthers the peace process without alienating Mr. Trump's domestic base that endorses the Israeli claim to all of Jerusalem.

Mr. Trump has catered to his base by refraining from qualifying his recognition of Jerusalem with a reference to Palestinian claims. Yet, in the statement he asserted that he was not prejudging the outcome of peace negotiations.

The President insisted that the United States "continues to take no position on any final status issues. The specific boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem are subject to final status negotiations between the parties. The United States is not taking a position on boundaries or borders."

Arab leaders could project themselves as getting in front of the cart by seeking clarification from Mr. Trump on whether and what limitations he may put on recognition of Israeli



sovereignty over Jerusalem in terms of what that means for the status of the city's Palestinian population and Israeli settlement activity in East Jerusalem.

Former Saudi intelligence chief and ex-ambassador to London and Washington DC Prince Turki al-Faisal appeared to allude to that when he warned in an open letter to Mr. Trump that “your action has emboldened the most extreme elements in the Israeli society ... because they take your action as a license to evict the Palestinians from their lands and subject them to an apartheid state”.<sup>8</sup>

Amid the raw emotions, Arab leaders and protesters are both walking a fine line. Protesters' anger is about more than fury with Mr. Trump. It is about their leaders' multiple policy failures. Arab leaders need to be seen as being on the right side of public opinion while not rocking the boat.

If there is a silver lining in Mr. Trump's move, it may be the Arab leaders' need to bridge the gap between public perception and their survival instinct. Leading the charge in pressuring the US President to clarify his statement is an opportunity Arab leaders have so far failed to capitalize on.

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*Earlier versions of the article appeared at [http\[s\]://mideastsoccer.blogspot.nl/2017/12/trumps-recognition-of-jerusalem-letting.html](http[s]://mideastsoccer.blogspot.nl/2017/12/trumps-recognition-of-jerusalem-letting.html) and [http\[s\]://mideastsoccer.blogspot.nl/2017/12/arab-anger-governments-and-protesters.html](http[s]://mideastsoccer.blogspot.nl/2017/12/arab-anger-governments-and-protesters.html) (Postscript)*

### Endnotes—Sources

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