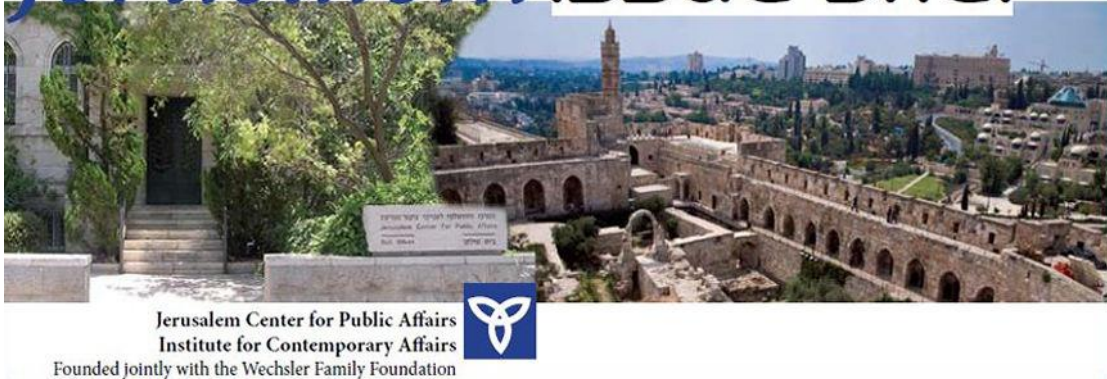


Jerusalem issue brief



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Can the Palestinians Mobilize the Arab World on the U.S. Embassy Issue?

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The U.S. Embassy building in Tel Aviv

- The intention of U.S. President Donald Trump to move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem evoked angry reactions in the Palestinian Authority which is preparing to block the initiative.
- Arab reaction to the embassy move depends on both Palestinian pressure and whether or not the Trump administration intends to follow through with his election promise to move the embassy.
- Jerusalem is very important to the Palestinian Authority and the Muslim Brotherhood and is less important to other Arab countries and Saudi Arabia in particular.
- Husam Zomlut, strategic affairs advisor to PA President Abbas and Palestinian ambassador-designate to Washington, admitted to Hamas TV that the aim of

Palestinian diplomacy is to side-line the United States from its role in leading the peace process in favor of Europe and the UN.

The intention of President Donald Trump to move the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem evoked angry reactions in the Palestinian Authority that is preparing to block the initiative. It is important to note that up until now the Arab world has kept silent on the issue of embassy, with the exception of Kuwait. No Arab country has issued official condemnation of the possibility of the American Embassy transferring to Jerusalem.¹ King Abdullah of Jordan warned Members of Congress of negative consequences of moving the embassy while visiting Washington on January 31, 2017.²

This does not mean that the Arab countries will continue to stay silent in the future. Their reactions depend on both Palestinian pressure and whether or not the Trump administration intends to follow through with his election promise to move the embassy.³

General Secretary of PLO Executive Committee, Saeb Erekat, in an interview to Palestinian Television,⁴ furiously explained why the Palestinian Authority so strongly objected to the idea. He emphasized that the Palestinians reject not only the relocating of the embassy to west Jerusalem, under Israeli control since 1949, but to any part of Jerusalem at all. This means that the Palestinians stick to their old notion that the Jews have *no* place in Jerusalem, no matter where. Dr. Erekat continued that the move would damage Palestinians because it would annul the latest UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which defined east Jerusalem as occupied territory.

Palestinians Threaten Violence

Moving the embassy even to west Jerusalem, Erekat claimed, is an act of approving the Judaization of Jerusalem. One can deduce from this explanation that as far as the Palestinians are concerned, east and west Jerusalem are all the same; all of it is Palestinian, and Jerusalem cannot be recognised as Jewish in any part. The annulling of resolution 2334 would inflict huge damage to the Palestinian cause, according to Erekat, because it would undermine the foundations of Palestinian international legitimacy which the entire Palestinian diplomacy is based on. Palestinian diplomacy is directed at shaming Israel at the UN agencies and issuing condemnations in the international arena. In this regard, the linkage of Judaism to Jerusalem in any way contradicts international legitimacy, according to the Palestinian Authority. This was the essence of October 13, 2016, UNESCO resolution that made no reference to any link of Judaism to the Temple Mount and the Western Wall.

Palestinian officials have also levelled thinly veiled threats about violent reactions to the embassy move. If the move occurs, warned a Palestinian senior official, the PLO would take "crucial decisions," including the cancellation of the PLO recognition of Israel. He referenced the visit of Ariel Sharon in 2000 to the Temple Mount which the PLO blamed for generating five years of intifada. He also mentioned the recent "provocations" of the Likud ministers visiting the Temple Mount which "caused" the "knife intifada." He

threatened Israel with a new wave of violence. Oddly enough, losing Palestinian Authority rule and security control over areas of the West Bank were considered to be major security threats towards Israel; yet the Palestinian Authority is the one levelling threats of violence. In any case, as far as Jerusalem is concerned, in Palestinian eyes, it is a "win-lose" situation, with no room for a "win-win" compromise.



U.S. Consulate Building in (west) Jerusalem

The PA official also directed severe threats towards the United States. He "predicted a windstorm" that would sweep the Arab and Muslim world, hurting U.S. interests. He elaborated the actions that the PA would take to mobilize the Muslim world against the expected move of the president. He stated that the Palestinian flag-raising ceremony in the Vatican on January 14, 2017, was part of its campaign to thwart off the move.

Erekat also explained why this issue is so crucial for the Palestinians, and linked it with the preparatory meetings in Beirut to convene the Palestinian National Council, the PLO Parliament in exile.⁵

According to Erekat, the collapse of Sykes-Picot Agreement which drew borders in the Middle East 100 years ago will determine the fate of Palestine, too, because new boundaries are sure to be drawn. If Palestine will not be on the map now, it will not be at all. In order to realize the existence of Palestine in the forthcoming regional arrangements, Palestinian unity must exist at all costs. In order to overcome divisions, the Palestinians must re-configure a new PLO Executive Committee that would be declared as the government-in-exile and the Palestinian National Council (PNC) as the Parliament of Palestine (and not the elected Palestinian Legislative Council that is controlled by Hamas). The loss of Jerusalem, at this critical moment, would be a blow to the realization of a Palestinian state in the post Sykes-Picot era, explained Erekat.

Arab Position on Jerusalem

All of these threats sound intimidating and serious, but the influential editor of daily *Rai al-Yom*, Abd al-Bari Atwan, a Palestinian based in London, didn't take them seriously and described them as hollow.⁶ In an editorial, he stated that Abu Mazen would never jeopardize the existence of the Palestinian Authority which he heads, and he has already looked the other way on other serious matters. One hundred and fifty families of the top PA bureaucrats rely on the salaries he is paying them. Abu Mazen cannot tell his underlings to organize and participate in protests against moving the embassy lest the demonstrations turn against him.

To examine Atwan's claims, we have to analyse the Arab positions towards Jerusalem, and here we can find profound disagreements. First, there's a disagreement within the Palestinian Authority itself. Erekat said in an interview that "with all respect to the Arab capitals, Jerusalem is more important than all the capitals combined." It is hard to believe that any Arab country would take this insult to its proud capital easily. This Palestinian approach can be understood as an aspiration not only to confirm their existence in the post-Sykes-Picot era but to use Jerusalem/al Quds to establish themselves as a regional power. Through intimidation and a threat to use the artificial crisis over the al Aqsa Mosque as a symbol, they seek to threaten neighbours all around and even exploit the large Palestinian communities in Israel and Jordan to destabilize both countries. The aspiration of the Palestinians to secure sole rule over Jerusalem suggests they will not be satisfied as an ordinary peace-loving state, but only as a regional power casting a shadow at least over Jordan.

As a matter of fact, it was reported that Jordan asked the Palestinians to avoid the language of threats and apply back-channel quiet diplomacy.⁷

Augmenting the importance of Jerusalem may play on the nerves of Saudi Arabia as well, especially since the Saudis are anxious to preserve the supreme holy status of Mecca on the background of the Shiite-Sunnite split and the targeting of Mecca by Shiite missiles from the Yemen.⁸

Actually, Jerusalem is very important to the Palestinian Authority and the Muslim Brotherhood and is less important to other Arab countries and Saudi Arabia in particular, since the status of Mecca is now challenged by the Shia. The Saudis cannot tolerate a rivalry posed by Jerusalem.

At this point, even Hamas and other Muslim Brotherhood affiliates did not endorse the alarm cry of Ramallah. The Muslim Brotherhood's organ in Amman, *a-Sabeel*, emphasized the threat to Mecca rather than to Jerusalem.⁹ Until last weekend, the only report on the issue was that President Trump supposedly notified Abu Mazen about his determination to move the embassy, but *a-Sabeel* gave no comment on the report.¹⁰ However, Hamas TV dedicated a program to the issue in which they issued threats and intimidations.¹¹ At the same time, the Hamas TV program did not present a particular Hamas position, but rather the opinions of several PLO groups. A Hamas participant in the talk show suggested to wait and see whether Trump would indeed move the

embassy. It was the Fatah representative, Fayez Kawasmeh, who threatened to launch a popular intifada.

As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, a very large allowance of \$500 million for Jerusalem was pledged at the Serte Summit in Libya around 10 years ago. The funds were never transferred to the Palestinian coffers because Saudi Arabia blocked the transmission of the funds.¹²

Terrorist Salafist movements, such as the Islamic State, have not yet expressed any reference to Jerusalem. Even leaflets circulated in east Jerusalem, which explicitly targeted Christians, mentioned not a word on Jerusalem or the importance of Al-Aqsa.

On January 8, 2017, the terror truck attack by an ISIS sympathizer in Jerusalem was not formally endorsed by ISIS. Hamas stepped into the vacuum in order to take credit for an operation that did not belong to them.¹³

A Shift in Alliances?

We recently received from Palestinian sources, a report about what happened in a meeting between Abbas and King Salman at their December 21, 2016, meeting. According to this report, while the two were sitting in the king's palace in Riyadh, a telephone call from President Sisi of Egypt was received to update the king that he had decided, while Mahmoud Abbas was in the king's presence, to withdraw the Egyptian Security Council resolution against Israel. [It was submitted later by other Security Council members.] The King told Sisi, "Go ahead." Abu Mazen said, "At least resist Trump's decision to move the embassy to Jerusalem," but Sisi said, according to the sources, "I am with Trump," while the King of Saudi Arabia kept silent.

Saeb Erekat claims that Europe is also against the embassy move and that the Palestinians would mobilize Europe to their side. Considering the reported talk between Sisi and Abbas, we can analyse that in future, there are possible differences that might arise with the Trump administration and the current governments of Europe, while Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia will be on the U.S. side, and the PA will be on the European side.

Indeed, Husam Zomlut, strategic affairs advisor to PA President Abbas and Palestinian ambassador-designate to Washington, admitted to Hamas TV that the aim of Palestinian diplomacy is to side-line the Americans from a leading peace process role in favor of Europe and the UN.¹⁴



PA President Mahmoud Abbas received by King Salman in Riyadh Saudi Arabia, December 21, 2016.

Jordan's Role on Jerusalem

As for Jordan, they have changed their positions over time. After the 1948 war, Jordan annexed the Old City of Jerusalem and West Bank. All Arab countries rejected this annexation and stuck to the UN decision that Jerusalem is an international city.¹⁵ At the same time, one has to remember that the planned international zone of Jerusalem is much larger than the boundaries of the city and engulfs large territory that includes Bethlehem that UNESCO already recognised as part of the PA.

When Jordan announced the disengagement from the West Bank, it specifically retained its ties to east Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa mosque, in particular.

The 1994 peace treaty with Israel was based on the status quo agreed upon after 1967 war, in which Israel is responsible for the security of the mosques, while the Jordanian Waqf is responsible for administration of the Temple Mount plaza. The mosques' plaza is fully Islamic, while the Western Wall is fully Jewish. Jews and Christians can go to mosques as visitors, but not as worshippers. Israel promised to give Jordan a preferential status on the Temple Mount plaza in the permanent agreements.

Although the peace agreement with Jordan deals only with the Temple Mount, Jordan nominated itself as the guardian of other issues, such as the Arabs in east Jerusalem. Jordan floods Israel with complaints and requests in matters of concerning east Jerusalem. Residents of east Jerusalem, outside the mosques, explained their activity as part of the campaign to block the Judaization of Jerusalem.¹⁶

This situation changed completely after two Jordanian officials were expelled out of the mosque in disgrace by a violent Palestinian mob in May 2015.¹⁷



Mob attacking a Jordanian religious figure (wearing the red kaffiya) outside of the al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, May 2015.¹⁸

A furious King Abdullah summoned the representatives of east Jerusalem and informed the Palestinians that Jordan from now on considers itself responsible only for the mosques, and disengages itself of all other matters related to east Jerusalem.¹⁹

The Al-Aqsa mosque is crucial to the Hashemite dynasty that sees itself as the protector of the holy sites. Until the Palestinian Authority joined UNESCO, Jordan did not operate against Israel. However, the Palestinians, upon their joining, brought with them a frenzied push and forced Jordan to compete with them on loyalty to Jerusalem, as seen in the recent UNESCO decision.

Jordan foresaw this eventuality and forced the Palestinian Authority to sign an agreement that left in Jordan's hands the representation of Jerusalem in UNESCO, but as we saw in the last UNESCO decision, the Palestinians did not respect the agreement and took charge of the initiative, dragging Jordan after them.

Basically, as far as Jordan is concerned, if left alone, they would be satisfied with preserving their status at the mosques, with no interest to act against the moving of the embassy, as long as it is located in west Jerusalem.

Historically, both Jordan and Israel provoked the internationalization decisions: in the aftermath of 1948, Israel declared the west side of Jerusalem as its capital, while Jordan annexed the east side.²⁰ On the issue of internationalization, Jordan expressed "strong

rejection," but if there was no other way, internationalization should apply to both parts of Jerusalem – east and west.



King Hussein (center) visiting Temple Mount in Jerusalem in May 1967, one month before the "Six Day War." (British Pathé)

After the 1967 war, Jordan updated its policy to be more "realistic that [Jerusalem] can be solved peacefully," avoiding the threat of becoming a religious dispute and keeping it "political."

After 1967, King Hussein referenced Jerusalem as the "City of Allah"²¹ which can be interpreted as a version of internalization. However, he meant the Old City and "the Holy Basin" not Jerusalem as a whole.

Given its sensitivities, Jordan will try and convince the Trump administration to avoid moving the embassy, but it is less due to its own interests, but rather because of competition forced on them by the Palestinians. Indeed, the daily *Al-Rai Al-Yom* reported that Jordan has been operating in secret channels to persuade the Trump administration not to move the embassy to Jerusalem.²²

Jordan's position towards a solution in Jerusalem doesn't deviate from its main positions in the Arab-Israeli conflict before 1967. Pre-1967, the Arab-Israeli conflict presented an existential crisis for the Jordanians, in which Jordan did not recognize Israel. After 1967, the conflict switched from being an existential conflict to a political one.

Pre-1967, Jordan was strongly against the internationalization of Jerusalem, and that position hasn't changed over the years. According to Palestinian sources, in a recent conversation between Abbas and King Abdullah, King Abdullah promised Abbas that he

would bring up the issue of the Jerusalem embassy with Trump, but that Jordan has many issues that are more pressing to raise with Trump. The Jerusalem issue cannot be at the top of the priority list, the King explained. Abbas requested that the King intercede on his behalf, but the King responded that he wasn't sure of his position vis-à-vis Trump.

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Notes

1 According to this Reuter's report all Arab sources spoke anonymously, except for Kuwait.
<http://www.rense.com/general30/sdje.htm>

2 <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/moving-us-embassy-jerusalem-will-impact-regional-stability%E2%80%99>

3 Al-Monitor raised doubts about Israeli preference on moving the embassy, preferring free hand in construction in east Jerusalem instead. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/12/israel-palestinians-us-donald-trump-embassy-jerusalem.html> but we have to keep in mind that the author of this article is Uri Savir, a shareholder in the Oslo agreement who is keen to preserve the principles of this agreement intact.

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=voy17Tdnfdo>

5 <http://alresalah.ps/ar/post/153935/تفعيل-الوطني-يصطدم-بمواقف-فتح-السياسية>

<http://alresalah.ps/ar/post/153885/إحضيرية-الوطني-رفع-عتب-وفرار-من-مسؤولية-الفضل>

6 <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=600071>

7 <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=599535>

8 For example, <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=522818>

9 <http://assabeel.net/islam/item/210765-بالفيديو-تعرف-على-سبب-منع-الطائرات-المروور-فوق-الكعبة>

10 <http://assabeel.net/فلسطين/item/210894-مقرب-من-ترامب-يبلغ-عباس-بنقل-السفارة-للقديس-بعد-20-الشهر>

11 https://youtu.be/gjJ5Kw2UQ_A

12 <http://jcpa.org/article/the-muslim-schism-over-jerusalem/>

<http://israelagainstterror.blogspot.co.il/2015/09/the-muslim-schism-over-jerusalem-pinhas.html>

13 https://youtu.be/Ni_E5RKH0w

14 https://youtu.be/gjJ5Kw2UQ_A

15 <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/10/30/jerusalem-statusinternationalregime.html>

16 <http://www.rcja.org.jo/page/%D8%A3%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1%D8%A7%D8%AA+%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF+%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B3/58/%E2%80%AA/page/%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1%D8%A7%D8%AA+>

%D8%AA%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AF+%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B3/63/%E2%80%AC

17 Video. <http://www.albawaba.com/loop/watch-moment-jordanian-imam-gets-kicked-out-aqsa%E2%80%A6-palestinians-699102>

18 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqbvRXqxw9o>

19 <https://youtu.be/x-uDsACwSM8>

20 In this formal site one can find the policy and attitudes of Jordan towards Jerusalem.

<http://www.rcja.org.jo/page/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A4%D9%8A%D8%A9+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9+%D9%88%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B9+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%84%D9%88%D9%84+%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%A9+%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%AF%D8%B3/26/>

On the issue of internationalization Jordan expressed "strong rejection," but if there is no other way, but internationalization, it should apply to both parts – east and west. But, after 1967 war Jordan updated its policy to "realistic that can be solved peacefully" that avoid the threat of become religious dispute, but political."

21 http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/views_jerusalem2.html

22 <http://www.raialyoum.com/?p=599535>

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