

COMMENTARY

No.416

Wednesday, 5 April 2017

Relocating the American Embassy to Jerusalem

Alon Ben-Meir

New York University

Should President Trump fulfil his campaign promise to relocate the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, it would have major regional and international repercussions. The Trump administration is currently re-evaluating the implications of such a move and no final decision has been made. Given the sensitivity and far-reaching consequences, if he nevertheless decides to relocate the embassy it is critical that he concurrently takes a balancing act to prevent the potentially disastrous fallout. This could profoundly change the dynamic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for the better while preserving the two-state solution.

Trump should use the occasion of Prime Minister Netanyahu's visit to Washington on February 15th to make it clear that relocating the American Embassy to Jerusalem has a price tag:

- a) it cannot infringe on the prospect of a two-state solution;
- b) the US will recognize that East Jerusalem will be the capital of the future state of Palestine;
- c) the expansion of the settlements cannot continue unabated; and
- d) Israel must not begin the implementation of the new law that retroactively legalizes scores of illegal settlements built on private Palestinian land, which in any case the Israeli Supreme Court will more than likely overturn.

Relocating the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem unconditionally will be a de facto recognition of Jerusalem, east and west, as the capital of Israel. Since the Israeli government insists that Jerusalem is the eternal united capital of the state, the move would suggest that the United States recognizes the Israeli position.

To put things in perspective, it is necessary to first assess the fallout of such a unilateral move on the part of the Trump administration.

First, the Arab states led by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan—which is the custodian of the holy Muslim shrines, the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock—will view such a move as a flagrant assault on Islam itself. Even though the Israelis will make a special provision that will allow Jordan to continue to administer its custodianship over these holy places, under no circumstances would the Arab states allow Israel to have sovereignty over Haram Al-Sharif (the Temple Mount), with the exception of the Wailing Wall (a part of the outer wall of the Second Temple).

Second, such a move will, for all intents and purposes, put an end to the prospect of peace based on a two-state solution. Indeed, for the Palestinians, the establishment of an independent state with its capital in East Jerusalem is non-negotiable. This is not merely a symbolic demand; it is a requirement, which is at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. No one should dismiss the potential breakout of ferocious violence between Israel and the Palestinians joined by other Arab extremist groups if the Palestinians are denied the establishment of their capital in East Jerusalem. Such violence would be incomparable to any such conflagration that we have witnessed in the past.

Third, the United States' standing and credibility in the Middle East, which has eroded since the Iraq War, would suffer another major setback in its relations with its Arab allies in the region. The US must reassert its position and lead with the support of its European and Arab partners to bring about an end to the many conflicts sweeping the region. The US cannot simply provide more openings for Russia, which is eager to capitalize on US setbacks as President Putin is poised to take full advantage of the prevailing chaotic conditions throughout the region.

Fourth, the move could have an extraordinarily adverse effect on Israel's future as this would foreclose any prospect of an Arab-Israeli peace. The move would also embolden the right-wing Netanyahu government to annex more Palestinian territories and further expand the settlements, scuttling any prospect of peaceful Israeli-Palestinian coexistence. While the Trump move appears on the surface to help Israel realize its long-held dream, it will in fact severely undermine Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan and jeopardize their peace treaties, which is central to containing regional instability and limiting the threat against Israel's national security.

Fifth, the move would further alienate the European community, which feels the most affected by continuing turmoil in the Middle East and views the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a major contributor to the upsurge of extremism. They view the rise of Hamas, Hezbollah, and other extremist groups as a direct result of the Israeli occupation. For the EU, relocating the American embassy to Jerusalem is another, if not the final, nail in the coffin of a two-state solution, which would instigate increasing regional violence from which Europe will continue to suffer.

Attaining breakthrough from the potentially disastrous outcome:

Should President Trump still decide to relocate the American embassy, he can convert the prospective disastrous consequences of such a move into a historic breakthrough that could change the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and cement the prospect of peace based on a two-state solution.

Given that the US purchased land in West Jerusalem on which to build the American embassy, which has been postponed by successive American administrations, Trump can announce that the US will soon begin the building of the new embassy in the western part of the city.

In conjunction with that, Trump must reemphasize the US' traditional support for the two-state solution and the establishment of the Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem, provided that the Palestinians move quickly and steadily toward negotiating peace with Israel. The US ought to make it clear that relocating the American embassy to West Jerusalem does not constitute recognition of Israel's sovereignty over East Jerusalem.

That said, the US needs to reaffirm its position that Jerusalem must remain under any circumstances an undivided city and that the rights of every religious and ethnic group are secured. To assure the Palestinians of its intention, the US could purchase land or a building in East Jerusalem for future use for the American embassy in Palestine, because in any case there will be no Israeli-Palestinian peace unless East Jerusalem becomes the capital of the state of Palestine.

There is no doubt that the Netanyahu government would vehemently object to such a move, but due to the fact that US military and political support is indispensable for Israel, no Israeli government can ignore the US' position. Indeed, if Trump is concerned (as I believe he is) about Israel's national security and its future wellbeing, the only way to safeguard that is by insisting that the two-state solution remains a viable option.

The implications of such a move alone will be far and wide:

Notwithstanding Israel's stern objection, it will breathe new life into the two-state solution;

It will prompt the Palestinians to change their approach to the conflict by ending incitement and violence, as they will begin to see the prospect of establishing a Palestinian state could soon become a reality which they do not want to jeopardize;

It will dramatically enhance the US' overall position among its Arab allies and restore its credibility as the ultimate guarantor of regional stability;

It will prompt the Arab states to support the American initiative and pressure Palestinian extremists to accept the inevitable;

It will strengthen the hand of Israel's opposition parties, who will be in a better position to develop alternate policies to that of Netanyahu while weakening the hand of extremist Israelis.

To be sure, President Trump can keep his promise to relocate the American embassy and at the same time, instead of torpedoing any prospect for peace between Israel and the Palestinians, inject new life into it and perhaps put an end to the most debilitating conflict since World War II.

Note: This article was originally published in the web portal of Prof. Ben-Meir and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web Link: <http://alonben-meir.com/writing/relocating-american-embassy-jerusalem/>

Dr. Alon Ben-Meir is a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern Studies at New York University. He is also a journalist/author and writes a weekly syndicated column for United Press International, which appears regularly in US and international newspapers. Email: alon@alonben-meir.com

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, **MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy**