

# A Sound Strategy for Moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem

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With the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States, the time has come to finally right an historic injustice by granting *de jure* recognition to Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moving the American Embassy there. For those who care about the openness and true calling of Jerusalem, the ascent of President Trump to high office is a time for great hope and optimism. His promise to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem may be stirring anger and threats in some quarters, but 2017 is the right time to make this long overdue move, as Israel marks two important Jubilees for the city this year – the liberation of Jerusalem by British General Edmund Allenby one hundred years ago, and the liberation of the Old City of Jerusalem by Israeli forces fifty years ago. As senior leaders of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, the largest pro-Israel Christian organization worldwide, we can assure you that there are tens of millions of Christians both in America and around the globe who wholly support and endorse such a move. Still, this initiative requires a certain caution and sound strategy that will effectively counter any potential negative responses.

## An Unjust Anomaly

In 1950, the newly-reborn nation of Israel declared Jerusalem to be its capital and placed all of its primary institutions of national government in the city, including its parliament (the Knesset), the Offices of the President and Prime Minister, other cabinet-level ministry offices, and the Supreme Court. This despite the fact that Jewish western Jerusalem was precariously surrounded at the time by hostile Arab forces. The lone exception was the Defense Ministry, which was placed in Tel Aviv for security reasons. This decision to establish Jerusalem as the capital of the revived Jewish state reflected the deep spiritual, historic and cultural significance which the Jewish people attach to the city.

Over the ensuing seven decades, the international community has generally extended *de facto* recognition to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, in that nearly all visiting heads-of-state, and other foreign officials and envoys, have all come up to Jerusalem to conduct the affairs of state with their Israeli counterparts. This includes at least five U.S. presidents and scores of other American officials who have come to conduct business in Jerusalem over the past 69 years. This also includes even Arab leaders, such as Anwar Sadat, who made his historic peace mission to Jerusalem, not Tel Aviv. Palestinian leaders Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas also have conducted peace talks and other official meetings with Israeli leaders in Jerusalem, and even attended the state funerals of Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres on the city's revered Mt. Herzl.

However, the United States – as with other members of the international community – has refused to extend *de jure* recognition to Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and thus has placed our nation's embassy instead in the coastal city of Tel Aviv. This is a gross anomaly in that Israel is the only democratic ally of the United States where we do not have our embassy in the capital city as determined by the host country. This diplomatic slight goes even deeper, as the U.S. has never even recognized any part of Jerusalem, even the area of western Jerusalem held by Israel since 1949, as part of the Jewish state.

The origins of this unjust policy can be found in the United Nations Partition Plan of 1947, which recommended a division of Mandatory Palestine into a Jewish and an Arab state, but with Jerusalem and its environs set aside as a *corpus separatum* under international supervision. Though accepted by Israel, this UN decision to “internationalize” the city reflected a certain colonialist attitude, as the leading powers did not think the new Jewish state could yet be trusted with the holy city. This arose, in part, from religiously biased motivations in that many Christian and Muslim nations worldwide were reticent to see the holy sites of Jerusalem and Bethlehem placed under Jewish control. Even so, it is often overlooked that the UN Partition Plan expressly provided for a city-wide referendum within ten years which would

have enabled the local residents to decide the fate of the city. So this “internationalization” of Jerusalem was merely intended as a temporary measure, and the Jewish majority in the city would have soon ensured that it became a part of Israel. Nonetheless, President Harry Truman embraced the concept, setting a course for U.S. policy on Jerusalem over coming decades that has since drifted into folly. Meanwhile, many in the European Union still push for internationalizing Jerusalem, even though it is a defunct idea rejected by all the core parties to the dispute over the city.

After Israel reunified the city during the June 1967 conflict, there has been a continuing effort to deny Israel and the Jewish people their rightful place in Jerusalem under other pretexts. In more recent decades, the United States has joined the international community in espousing the need to be “even-handed” when it comes to Jerusalem, so as not to prejudge the outcome of negotiations over the city between Israel and the Palestinians. But this is a disingenuous argument, as a cluster of nations have located their senior envoys to the Palestinians, some at the ambassadorial level, in Jerusalem, where they reside and conduct business from their offices in the city. If these nations were truly worried about prejudging the issue of Jerusalem, they would not place their senior representatives to the Palestinians in the city even while their Israeli equivalents sit in Tel Aviv. The fact that the United States itself has followed this imbalanced approach demonstrates the vacuous nature of its pronounced policy of neutrality towards Jerusalem.

Further, the United Nations Security Council recently adopted, with the acquiescence of the Obama administration, a resolution which thoroughly contradicts this even-handed approach. UNSC resolution 2334, passed on December 23, 2016, declared East Jerusalem to be “occupied Palestinian territory,” and determined that Israeli actions there were “settlement activities” which constitute “a flagrant violation of international law.” This amounts to the UN’s highest body deliberately prejudging the question of the future status of Jerusalem, and in the process severely undermining the bedrock of all previous international peacemaking efforts, UNSC resolution 242. There is an urgent need on the part of the new American administration to remedy this major diplomatic blunder.

This leaves only one remaining excuse for the United States continuing to refuse to move its Embassy to Jerusalem, and that is fear of the potentially violent Arab and Islamic response. This attitude of weakness is reflected in the way that recent U.S. Administrations have all exercised the presidential waiver authority added at the last minute to the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995, delaying the Embassy move every six months on the grounds that it is in our “national security interests.” This is not a policy based on principle, fairness or historical right, but solely on timidity over the possible Arab/Islamic reaction. This apprehensiveness has effectively granted the Palestinians a veto over U.S. decision-making, while the prospects of peace have become a hostage of their intransigence.

The time has come to finally right this wrong, and at the same time to infuse new life into the Middle East peace process. By officially recognizing Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and moving our Embassy there, the United States will remove this diplomatic blot while also signaling the Palestinians that the time for compromise has come. This show of strength and resolve by the Trump administration, in standing in solidarity with Israel and the Jewish people concerning their holiest city, also will send a message to the entire world that America stands by its allies and that peace and progress for the region will no longer be a captive of irrational actors and brazen intimidation.

Surely, there will be no harm to the outcome of peace talks if the U.S. Embassy is relocated to western Jerusalem. All serious parties know this sector of the city will remain a part of Israel in any final status agreement. Nor is anyone seriously looking for a return to that dismal era from 1948 to 1967 when the city was forcibly divided. And Israel would still be able to work out an arrangement for sharing the city in peace talks with the Palestinians.

Certainly, Jerusalem must be kept open and shared by all those with faith in God. But the Jewish people are the true and proper custodians of the city. Christians and Muslims can trust the Jewish people in this regard, because their own Hebrew scriptures demand that they maintain the city as a “house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7), where all can come to worship and pray to the Lord God. Israel also has committed to religious freedom and tolerance, first guaranteed in its Declaration of Independence, as well as to maintaining the *status quo* with regards to the city’s holy sites. In fact, of all the sovereign rulers over Jerusalem down through the centuries, Israel has compiled the best track record in ensuring freedom of worship in the city and allowing access to its holy places. The International Christian

Embassy Jerusalem can readily attest to this, as for the past 37 years we have hosted the largest annual tourist event in Israel, the Christian celebration of the biblical Feast of Tabernacles, and have always been free to worship as we see fit.

The Jewish claim and connection to Jerusalem dates back 4,000 years to the time when the Hebrew Patriarch Abraham first came to Mt. Moriah to offer up his son Isaac, as recounted in the Bible in Genesis chapter 22. Some 3,000 years ago, King David made Jerusalem the capital of his unified Israelite kingdom, and instructed his son Solomon to build a Temple there. The city has been the center of Jewish religious, political and cultural life ever since. Even during the time of the long Jewish exile, their hopes, prayers and pilgrimages were all directed towards Jerusalem. The deep Jewish attachment to the city predates the rise of Christianity and Islam by centuries if not millennia. No other people or nation has ever made it their capital, save for a short-lived Crusader kingdom.

In comparison, while some Muslims consider Jerusalem the third holiest city in Islam, after Mecca and Medina, this is not true for all Muslims. Many Shi'a Muslims actually revere the cities of Qom, Najaf and Karbala ahead of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, many Sunni Muslims, especially those in the Wahhabi movement, reject Muslim veneration of Jerusalem as a later *hadith* (tradition) and not one of the original traditions of the faith established by Muhammad and his closest companions. As a result, very few Arab rulers and Muslim religious leaders have ever visited the Dome of the Rock shrine or al-Aqsa mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in modern times, even during the 19 years of Jordanian control over East Jerusalem. It just seems that the city only takes on any real significance for many Arabs and Muslims when it is in Jewish hands.

Still, Jerusalem remains a sensitive issue and moving the U.S. Embassy to the city requires a judicious and guarded strategy for dealing with the potential fallout from such a decision.

### **A Sound Strategy**

We advise that the Trump administration should take the next several months to quietly engage with other members of the international community before formally announcing the move of the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem. These discreet contacts should be held quickly and intensely along three simultaneous tracks:

- 1) First, consult closely with the Israeli government to discuss various aspects of such a move and to coordinate the necessary steps, as well as bilateral responses to any potential security challenges;
- 2) Second, confer with officials in key Arab and Muslim nations to address their concerns and elicit their cooperation; and
- 3) Third, identify and confer with countries friendly to the U.S. and Israel which might be open to moving their embassies to Jerusalem as well.

The discussions with Arab and Muslim countries should focus on conveying the determination of the United States to repair a diplomatic offense by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, along with our desire to maintain regional stability and minimize the negative consequences which might ensue. It needs to be made clear that this move will not prejudice the final status talks over Jerusalem nor impede access to holy sites in the city, and that there will be no tolerance for misrepresenting these facts and engaging in baseless rhetoric that only enflames the situation, such as false claims that the al-Aqsa mosque is endangered. While one can expect some venting by extremist elements in the Middle East and beyond, all the recent warnings of pending chaos and destruction should not be taken at face value. It would be demeaning to view all Arab and Muslim leaders as irresponsible actors who will abandon their senses and wantonly incite the masses into an anti-Israel, anti-American frenzy. Further, there also are incentives that could be offered to these nations to ensure their acceptance of this decision, such as firm commitments to counter the Iranian threat to the region, to work for the destruction of ISIS and other radical Islamic militias, and to seek a quick and mutually acceptable end to the carnage in Syria.

The engagement with other nations friendly to Israel and the U.S. would focus on discerning which countries are willing to join the U.S. in moving their embassies to Jerusalem. By leading a group of nations up to Jerusalem, the Trump administration will demonstrate the rightness of this move at this time and also signal that any violence and

resistance is futile. If well planned and executed, we believe that such a strategy for a multilateral return of many freedom-loving, democratic nations to Jerusalem would go far in defusing tensions in the region. Through our international network of contacts with leaders and influential persons in many nations worldwide, the ICEJ believes there are a number of countries ready to move their embassies back to Jerusalem. Some of these nations once had their national embassies in Jerusalem but left because of threats of violence and oil embargoes. Today, a violent response to this peaceful, principled return to Jerusalem could never be justified, while the power of Arab oil embargoes has been largely diminished by the discovery of massive gas and oil deposits elsewhere. Thus, we are convinced there are many nations ready to relocate to Jerusalem under the lead of an American umbrella. The ICEJ stands ready and willing to assist the Trump administration in any way we can towards that end.

The United States should then announce its firm decision to officially recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and to move our Embassy there in the weeks before Israel marks the fiftieth anniversary of a reunited Jerusalem in early June of 2017. We anticipate that other nations would be prepared to take similar actions within that same time frame.

In practical terms, President Trump could designate a business suite or other property in Jerusalem to serve as the temporary official home of the U.S. ambassador, or set up the ambassador's office within an existing U.S. government facility in Jerusalem, until an actual Embassy building is constructed. We understand other pragmatic considerations will take time as well, such as finding housing and schools in the Jerusalem area for the families of American diplomatic personnel who must relocate from greater Tel Aviv. Yet the impact of an astute, timely, and robust American diplomatic effort to finally do right by Jerusalem will hold many potential benefits for the United States, as well as for Israel, the region and the world.

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*The International Christian Embassy Jerusalem was founded in 1980 as a permanent expression of Christian solidarity with Israel and particularly its capital of Jerusalem, in recognition of the ancient Jewish attachment to this city. Today, the ICEJ has branch offices in over 85 nations and supporters from more than 160 countries worldwide.*