



Jerusalem: Conflicting Interests Lead to Diminishing Passion for the 'Cause of the Holy City' in the Islamic World

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INTRODUCTION

The inhumanity of the second World War was summed up in the treatment of prisoners of war in camps like Auschwitz. In contrast, the Germans ran luxury camps for PoWs in the first great war, but only for the Muslim subjects who came from the colonies of enemy nations like Great Britain. Amongst those kept well were the Muslims from the erstwhile British colonies of India and Egypt. The idea was to win their loyalties and, in turn, they would share tales of

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kindness with their co-religionists and become agents of the German Turkish alliance, eventually calling for *jihad* against the British. The Kaiser's men were hoping all the Muslims in the Islamic world will stand behind the Ottoman Sultan, weakening the strength of their enemy—the allied powers. The calculation proved wrong, and it did not happen.

Spread across the world and integrated into local cultures and languages, the Muslims rarely act as a collective, contrary to popular notion. If there is one thing in modern history that has united them, it was Palestine. That is not the case anymore. Support to the Palestinian cause, while obligatory, has become largely symbolic. This report attempts to explain how the muted response from the Islamic world to the US' announcement of moving its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, shows that the Muslim world is fragmented; that states are catering to their own interests with little concern for Palestine and the Palestinians.

WHOSE JERUSALEM IS IT ANYWAY?

Via Dolorosa – the path walked by Jesus Christ on the way to his crucifixion – leads to the 'Wailing wall' which is a part of the western wall of the second Jewish temple built by Herod the great. For the Muslims, it is where Prophet Mohammad tied a mythological animal on his night journey to Jerusalem before ascending to paradise.

Fourteen centuries later, Jerusalem still carries the burden of myths and history. The city has been long seen as a flash point that could throw the region into a religious war and must be managed carefully.

Disregarding the sensitivities and all caution, on 6 December 2017, American President Donald Trump announced that the US now recognises Jerusalem as Israel's eternal capital. Trump also said that the US embassy will be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, completely ignoring the fact that Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem has never been recognised internationally, and every country with diplomatic ties to Israel maintains its embassy in Tel Aviv.

East Jerusalem was seized and annexed by the Israelis in the six-day war in 1967 and is internationally seen as illegitimately under Israeli control. Since 1967, Israel has illegally built a dozen settlements in the East, which are home to about 200,000 Jews and in effect occupying more Palestinian land. If this was not enough to make Trump reconsider his decision, according to the 1993 Israel-Palestinian peace accords, Jerusalem's final status is meant to be discussed in the latter stages of peace talks between Israel and Palestine.

While the US has always watched out for Israeli interests in the conflict, such thoughtless decision has left the world befuddled, to say the least.

WHY HAS TRUMP ANNOUNCED THE MOVE?

The decision to consider Jerusalem Israel's capital and not Palestine's or a shared land or a dispute was made by the 104th US Congress in 1995. They passed a legislation called the 'Jerusalem embassy act', under which the embassy of the US would be moved from Tel Aviv to the holy city. Over the years, however, neither one of presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama implemented the act, all of them signing a waiver every six months. Their decision was taken with the security of the United States in mind.

What led Mr Trump to reverse the policy?

According to reports in the American press, for example from MSNBC, a link has been drawn between Trump's decision and the funding he received as the Republican candidate. The reports have named, for one, Sheldon Adelson—a conservative backer of Israel and a multibillionaire American who donated US\$20 million to the Republican campaign in the last elections. Adelson reportedly gave money as a lobby for the new American administration to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. Trump received the money and made it a campaign promise to announce the move; still, it was not certain that he would go ahead with it. There were sections in the State Department who had hoped that the president would leave it as that, merely a campaign promise, and refrain from complicating matters further.

It is likely that Donald Trump is merely pleasing a campaign donor and his evangelical supporters as his domestic popularity ratings go down. Sadly, though, he failed to consider the loss to America's global prestige as a fallout of his decision. On 19 December, a vote in the United Nations (UN) seeking rejection of the US' recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital was supported by 14 members of the Security Council; it was vetoed by only one, the US itself. This was a clear reflection of how disagreeable the global community was to Trump's declaration. Yet, the reaction on the Arab streets has been only a little more than symbolic. The backlash from the Arab world has been minimal.

HOW DID THE MUSLIM WORLD RESPOND AND WHY?

"Happy Hanukkah to the people of Israel," said Donald Trump as he handed over Jerusalem to Israel. Hanukkah is a Jewish festival, and it seemed like

Trump was gifting historic Jerusalem to the Israeli state, unilaterally and undermining the existing international consensus.

As expected, the Muslim streets spanning countries and continents responded. In Amman in Jordan, in Mogadishu in Somalia, in Istanbul in Turkey and in Beirut in Lebanon, protests erupted following Trump's announcement. In Cairo, protests were held in front of the Al Azhar University and Egypt's President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi – an American ally - urged Trump to not complicate the situation in the region. There were Afghans who burnt Trump's effigy, as the US' other ally, Jordan said that the decision would





Scenes from protests against the US' Jerusalem decision, in Beirut, organised by the Hizbollah. / Photos by Anchal Vohra

undermine efforts to resume the peace process. Some 5,000 protestors gathered in Jakarta in Indonesia, the most populous Muslim country in the world, and Turkey threatened to cut diplomatic ties with Israel. The Saudis called the policy “a flagrant provocation to Muslims”, and Iran and the Lebanese under the Iranian proxy of the Hizbollah chanted, “Death to America and Israel.”

In the past, the aftermath had been more serious and entailed cutting off the oil supply or declarations of war. Comparatively, the threats after a rather severe provocation on nothing less than the most contentious issue this time, seemed empty and the protests, ritualistic. Despite a minor exchange of fire between Hamas in Gaza and the Israelis, the situation remained calm and the reaction can be termed low-key. The protests ended in a few hours in most places without getting out of control. Indeed, in some places, the protests doubled up as a family outing or a picnic. If Jerusalem is so desired and such an important point of contention, some would argue, the region would have been up in flames by now. Yet nothing of that sort has happened, and the response of the Muslim world has been a little more than a whimper.

On the day of rage in Palestine called by Hamas, a Palestinian journalist living in Jordan expressed his fury online, not against the Israelis but his fellow Arabs. His social-media post said: “Lemme tell you what happens when Trump declares moving the US embassy to Jerusalem. Nothing. Yeah, that’s right. All the warnings about enflaming the Muslim world, all the nonsense about the Arab street rising-up, all that stuff; it’s bullshit. The Arab street hasn’t risen to do anything about Israel in a long long long long time, and it won’t now.”

WHO CARES ABOUT PALESTINE?

The Arab nations are either beholden to the US or are simply too fragmented and occupied with their own quarrels with each other to give priority to Palestine and the Palestinians. The regional maths configure more immediate and national concerns.

For Saudi Arabia, for example—the leader of the Sunni Islamic world—rivalry with Iran is the leading foreign policy concern. It would rather cut Tehran to size rather than run for justice for Palestinians.

Over the last wars in the Middle East in Syria and Iraq, Iran has enhanced its footprint drastically. In Iraq, it funded Shia militias called 'Hashed al-Shaabi' which fought ISIS; a jihadi group Sunni by sect. In Syria, groups supported by the Saudis like Jaish al-Islam have failed in making headway and are broadly seen as extremists while Iran-supported Alawite ruler Bashar al Assad has won the war along with the support of Iran's leading proxy in the region based in Lebanon—the Hizbollah.

The loss of power in the region has Saudi Arabia scrambling for ideas. The Hariri episode in November 2017 and the blockade in Yemen ostensibly to hurt the Houthi rebels backed by Iran, has earned the kingdom much criticism. Clearly, crown prince Mohammad bin Salman (or MbS as he is nicknamed), is determined to take on Iran whatever the cost, even if it means starving thousands in Yemen by shutting access to ports under the control of the monarchy or shaking hands with Israel.

In 1979, a cleric called Sayyid Ruhollah Khomeini, launched the Islamic revolution in Iran and called for the 'Death of America and Israel'. It based the foreign policy of Iran on anti-Americanism and on vehemently denying Israel's existence. Neither the Sunnis nor the Arabs, but the Persians who chose the path of Shia Islam, over time became the existential threat to Israel. Saudis and Israel saw a common enemy getting stronger and started conducting secret parleys. A process of rapprochement began.

In November, in an interview with journalist Thomas Friedman, MbS spoke about the respect for Christians and Jews in the time of Prophet Mohammad. He implied that the Saudis were open to negotiating with Israel on Palestine, perhaps even on terms favourable to Tel Aviv.

One would think that Trump's ill-timed and thoughtless move to gift Jerusalem to Israel would make the Saudis reassess their policy, but it only halts

the cooperation temporarily. Besides registering its opposition, a fortnight after Trump's bombshell, the Saudis have disappointed and delivered far less than what is expected from the leader of the Sunni world.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, the seat of the former Ottoman empire, appeared stronger by announcing the relocation of Turkey's embassy to east Jerusalem which it considers Palestine's capital. Albeit, he did not give out any details of how he plans on doing so in an area completely under Israeli occupation. It is important to remember that Turkey, too, cares more about negotiating a deal with the secessionist Kurds. The Turks call the Kurds on its borders, "terrorists" while the Kurds in Syria who are linked to the Kurds in Turkey are "US allies". For the Turkish establishment—marching quickly from its secular past to an Islamist present and perhaps future—Palestine is a leverage tool.

Jordan, which is home to 1.9 million Palestinians, feels sidelined as MbS takes centre stage in middle-eastern politics. Ironically, Iran—and the US' arch enemy, as it were—is the one that benefits. Tehran looks good when Trump marginalises the sentiments of the Muslims. It opts for an extremist position vis a vis the Israel-Palestine conflict but is the only giant in the Muslim world daring to stand up for the Palestinian cause and demands that the historical injustice be corrected.


Trump's provocation plays in Iranian hands. Iran, though, is not a good Samaritan. It uses the pro-Palestine narrative to build up support for itself as the legitimate Islamic power. The Hizbollah – Iran's most effective proxy—bases its existence on the annihilation of Israel and gains domestic approval on its bases. The group even used its claim as a resistance force to Israel for fighting in Syria and expanding its presence.

Interestingly, the Palestinians (who are Sunnis) do not feel indebted to the purported support of Iran and Hizbollah (who are Shias)—and the tensions between the Lebanese and the Palestinian refugees have always been high.

CONCLUSION

The days of Arab nationalism are long over and the running theme in the Middle East is sectarianism. Divisions are expected to be intensified by the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia over the coming years. A unifying factor such as Palestine has seemingly lost steam for many reasons, including the

absence of both a strong Arab leader and an organised call. Over the decades, the Palestinian leadership has been diluted and while the current generation of Palestinians want justice as much as the previous ones, fatigue has settled in. They have stopped believing that help is coming.

Their expectations from the Muslim world have declined as the leaders of the Muslim world are more circumspect and bound by national dynamics. While the Ummah—the Muslims in the Arab world and outside—hold a genuine concern for the Palestinian cause, the passion has certainly diminished. 

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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