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CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and the Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

December 6, 2017

Ynet

Trump May Pay Lip Service to Two-State Solution in Speech

Senior White House officials confirmed in a special briefing Wednesday night that President Donald Trump will be making a historic speech at 8pm (Israeli time) officially recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, while professing his support for the two-state solution if both the Palestinians and Israelis can get behind it. Trump is also expected to announce that he has instructed the State Department to begin the process of transferring the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a process that could take years. The White House officials said recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital will be an acknowledgement of "historical and current reality" rather than a political statement and said the city's physical and political borders will not be compromised.

See also, [*"Trump decision on Jerusalem could have deep repercussions," \(Associated Press\)*](#)

Times of Israel

PM Hails 'Important Expression' of Israeli Identity

In his first public comments alluding to the US's expected announcement Wednesday recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, Netanyahu praised "important expressions" of Israel's national identity, "especially today." Earlier, during a 22-minute speech to foreign diplomats, he did not address Trump's expected announcement.

Ha'aretz

Palestinian Envoy: Trump Move a 'Declaration of War'

Trump would effectively be making a declaration of war if he recognizes Jerusalem as Israel's capital, the Palestinians' chief representative to Britain said on Wednesday. The Palestinian prime minister said Trump's recognition is bound to "destroy the peace process and the two-state solution." In the meantime, Britain itself expressed concern over the change in American policy on Jerusalem, with Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson saying: "We view reports that we've heard with concern." Pope Francis also sounded his dismay over the upcoming move, saying recent developments made him "profoundly concerned."

Times of Israel

Report: US and Israel Were 'Active Partners' on Jerusalem

Netanyahu and his aides have been "active partners" working in "total coordination" with Trump and his administration in the lead-up to the president's anticipated speech Wednesday, Israel's Hadashot TV said Tuesday evening. Netanyahu's team has been "encouraging, supporting, [and] reassuring" the Trump team over the likely fallout, "and this total coordination came while the Palestinians knew nothing about this move" until very recently.

Politico

State Department Warns of Violence

The State Department has warned American embassies worldwide to heighten security ahead of today's announcement. Some Arab leaders have implored Trump not to change longstanding American policy on Jerusalem, saying it could make any peace agreement impossible and that it would spark mass protests and even terrorism. The militant group Hamas has already called for a new Palestinian "intifada," or uprising, if Trump declares Jerusalem the capital of the Jewish-majority state.

Ha'aretz

Eyeing Own Peace Plan, Gabbay Meets With Palestinians

As part of efforts to craft his own policy and peace proposal, the new Labor Party chief, Avi Gabbay, has held dozens of meetings in recent months with foreign figures who have taken part in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. And at the Saban Forum in Washington on Sunday, Gabbay said that as part of confidence-building measures, Israel must stop construction outside the settlement blocs, while "at the same time, we can reduce the number of Palestinians currently under Israeli civilian control as long as there is no security reason for it." He also demanded an end to the "incitement in the Palestinian Authority."

Times of Israel

US House Passes Bill to Slash PA Funds

The US House of Representatives passed on Tuesday the Taylor Force Act, legislation that would cut US funding to the Palestinian Authority unless it discontinues its practice of paying monthly stipends to the families of terrorists who kill Israelis. Last month, the measure unanimously advanced out of committee, including three exceptions: allowing for US funding to Palestinian water and childhood vaccination programs, as well as East Jerusalem hospitals. The bill must now pass the full Senate, which is expected to vote on it this month, when the upper chamber votes on a foreign operations bill it was packaged into last September. It is expected to pass.

The New York Times

It's Official: Lebanese Prime Minister Not Resigning After All

A month after he declared under Saudi Arabian pressure that he was quitting his post, Lebanon's prime minister officially rescinded his resignation on Tuesday, closing a chapter in a curious political saga that threatened to destabilize Lebanon and transfixed the region. The reversal by the prime minister, Saad Hariri, was considered a setback for Saudi Arabia and its brash young crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, who had summoned Mr. Hariri to Riyadh last month.

Why is Trump Undoing Decades of U.S. Policy?

By Shibley Telhami

- It is almost impossible to see the logic of the Trump administration's expected recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and possibly moving the U.S. embassy to Israel there—before it even unveils what's certain to be a controversial plan for Middle East peace, which will be tough enough to sell
- The White House is probably betting that, despite the noises in the Arab world against such a move, their key allies in Saudi Arabia and Egypt will limit their opposition—already publicly voiced—to lip service, as they are all interested in protecting relations with Trump over more urgent issues, such as fighting militancy and confronting Iran. It's also betting that the Arab and Muslim public outcry will be limited, both because of efforts by their governments to contain dissent, and because administration officials may have swallowed the arguments that Arabs no longer care about Palestine, or even Jerusalem. All of this is doubtful, but let's consider for a moment the possibility that the administration's assessment that costs will be limited is accurate. No one, not even President Donald Trump, is arguing that such a move would be helpful to American Middle East policy. This begs the question: Why is Trump doing this?
- Trump certainly doesn't need to solidify his pro-Israel credentials; three of his key Middle East advisers are known to be sympathetic with the Israeli right. More importantly, the American public, including his Republican core, already thinks his policy is pro-Israel. A University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll (among a national sample of 2,000 American adults, fielded by Nielsen Scarborough November 1-6 and released at the Brookings Institution last Friday) found that 59 percent of Americans said they preferred that Trump lean toward neither side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast, 57 percent of Americans, including most Republicans, said he is in fact leaning toward Israel. Our poll also shows that 63 percent of all Americans oppose moving the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, including 44 percent of Republicans.
- How about the Evangelical Christians whose support has been critical for Trump, and who are known to support declaring Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moving the U.S. embassy there? Two-thirds of Evangelicals say Trump's policy is already leaning toward Israel—a proportion that's even higher than that of the rest of the population. Even on moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, the support is hardly overwhelming: While 53 percent of Evangelicals support the move, 40 percent oppose it. Evangelical leaders undoubtedly bring this issue up with the president, but none will abandon him for not making the declaration. Trump has been the president who has arguably given the Evangelical right more than any other president in history has: from favorable key appointments such as Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, to highly favorable policies toward religious schools.
- In the meantime, the administration's assumptions about the limited costs of the move are based on little more than a leap of faith. In fact, the move would go against the very priorities

that the administration has set for itself in the Middle East: fighting Islamist militancy and confronting Iranian influence. Jerusalem is the perfect issue for Iran and Islamist militants to use to mobilize support against the United States and those who endorse its policies. Publicity over likely limited Arab voices, such as the Twitter hashtag, #Riyadh-is-more-important-than-Al-Quds, may have played a role in the assessment—in addition to re-enforcing Israeli government statements. But this is not new. In the lead-up to the Camp David negotiations that President Bill Clinton mediated in 2000, it was not hard to see that the White House underestimated the centrality of Jerusalem to the Palestinians and Arabs broadly (see here and here, for instance) and that this issue could bring the negotiations down. It did.

- Sure, the Middle East is more divided today than it was then. Many Arabs are focused on their immediate tragedies; others may have a diminished connection to Palestine, or even to Jerusalem. But as the region has grown deeply divided, Jerusalem has remained a central symbol that transcends the divide. It remains a mobilizing issue even in a polarized environment: Even if Arabs don't go out into the streets in consequential numbers, a declaration will play into the hands of those plotting in the basement. It's also good to recall what happened just a few months ago, as the same assumptions about the irrelevance of Palestine and Jerusalem prevailed. Following the killings of Israeli policemen, an Israeli government attempt to install security machines to search Palestinian worshippers at al-Aqsa Mosque generated Palestinian demonstrations that quickly mobilized Arab and Muslim public opinion, and led to intervention by governments—ultimately forcing a reversal of the measures.
- There is of course a direct impact on Jordan, whose stability is essential; King Abdullah, an American ally, has been among the first to make clear in his warnings about the impact of the move on his society; since then many have added their warnings including Turkish and French leaders, among others. Then, there is the direct impact on the Palestinians. The move could force Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to walk away, at least initially, from talks. But even if Trump could get Abbas to swallow the move, the leverage Abbas would expend to keep any degree of legitimacy among Palestinians will inevitably come at the expense of his ability to convince the Palestinians to swallow any deal Trump will offer—a nearly impossible task in the first place.
- So, again: Why in the world is Trump doing this? From the outset, most experts understood that the “deal of the century” was most likely beyond reach and that its collapse may lead to President Trump lashing out with such moves as moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and giving the green light to expand Israeli settlement in the West Bank. The fact that the White House may take a controversial step on Jerusalem now, before he even has a chance to unveil his plan, means one of two things. The first is that his advisers live in their own bubble, reinforced by unprecedented inexperience. In fact, this is already a public fear. Despite deep partisanship on almost every issue, Americans come together on this issue: 81 percent of all Americans, including 71 percent of Republicans, prefer Trump relying on experts in his Middle East diplomacy, not on inexperienced family members and personal lawyers. But there is a

second possibility: That the Trump administration has already given up on its “deal of the century” and is looking for ways to pin the blame on someone else.

The President's Guide to Recognizing Jerusalem

By Raphael Ahren

- The United States had eight capitals before settling on Washington, DC. So who are the Americans to deny Israelis' right to determine their own? Jerusalem Affairs Minister Ze'ev Elkin argued along those lines last week at a conference about Jerusalem's legal status, urging the US administration to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and recognize the city as Israel's eternal capital.
- As opposed to other countries, Israel has only ever had one capital city, Elkin noted. "The United States, for example, had eight temporary capitals before President George Washington signed the Residence Act, on July 16, 1790, stipulating the creation of a permanent capital city along the banks of the Potomac River — what is now known as Washington, DC," he said. Elkin was likely referring to the fact that between 1774 and 1790, the US Congress and its predecessor bodies convened in Baltimore, Lancaster, York, Philadelphia, Princeton, Annapolis, Trenton, and New York, before Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and James Madison agreed on the passage of the "Act for Establishing the Temporary and Permanent Seat of the Government of the United States." "No one denies that Washington is the capital of the United States," Elkin said. "No other country would presume to suggest that New York or Los Angeles would be a more fitting capital for the United States, and yet with Israeli this is the case."
- On Monday, US President Donald Trump failed to sign a waiver that would postpone the relocation of the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Such a waiver has been required by US law every six months since 1995, in the absence of actually moving the embassy. He is widely expected to issue a waiver later this week. But at the same time, he is also reportedly poised to publicly recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, a move welcomed by Israel and bitterly opposed by the Palestinians — who claim the eastern part of the city as their capital — and the entire Arab and Muslim world. But will Trump recognize all of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, or only its Western part, as Russia did earlier this year? Depending on the wording of his expected declaration, Israelis may end up disappointed.
- When the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on April 6 saying that Moscow considers "West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel," Israeli officials remained mum. It stands to reason that some of them rejoiced over the first-ever recognition by a foreign power of Israeli sovereignty over any part of city. But they also realized that recognizing only the Western part of it would appear to deny Israel's claims to the eastern part, including the Old City, which it captured in 1967 and subsequently effectively annexed. Russia's statement, for instance, specifically said that Moscow views "East Jerusalem as the capital of the future Palestinian state." Not wanting to anger the Arab world and hoping to keep alive his dream of brokering the "ultimate" Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, Trump could choose a similar formulation.

- Would that be good or bad for Israel? One might argue that partial recognition is better than none. After all, the international community has thus far refused to recognize Israeli sovereignty over any part of the city. Isn't an American recognition of West Jerusalem — where the Knesset, the President's Residence, the Prime Minister's Office, the Foreign Ministry and the Supreme Court are located, as well as most Jewish neighborhoods — a step in the right direction? Not necessarily, said Prof. Shlomo Slonim, a Hebrew University expert on US politics and constitutional law. "Recognition of West Jerusalem as Israel's capital is a step toward redividing the city," he said.
- Ministers Yariv Levin and Miri Regev would presumably agree with Slonim. Last week, they threatened to withdraw state funding from the upcoming Giro d'Italia cycling tournament if organizers continued to say the race would take place in "West Jerusalem." "In Jerusalem, Israel's capital, there is no east or west. There is one unified Jerusalem," the two Likud ministers said in a joint statement. The event organizers quickly apologized and removed the word "west" from their press material — to the annoyance of the Palestinians.
- The 1995 Jerusalem Embassy Act, which was passed by large majorities in the Senate and the House but was left unsigned by then-president Bill Clinton and unimplemented by every president since, is very clear about the parts of the city that it refers to. "Jerusalem should remain an undivided city," it says in Section 3. Since then, countless Congressional resolutions have reaffirmed the US lawmakers' conviction that a united Jerusalem should be recognized as the capital of the Jewish state. In September 2016, after meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York, Trump — then the Republican candidate for president — vowed to recognize a united Jerusalem as Israel's capital. "Mr. Trump acknowledged that Jerusalem has been the eternal capital of the Jewish People for over 3,000 years, and that the United States, under a Trump administration, will finally accept the long-standing Congressional mandate to recognize Jerusalem as the undivided capital of the State of Israel," according to a readout of the meeting.
- On the other hand, Trump is eager to broker an Israeli-Palestinian final-status deal, and he knows that recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital could be "the kiss of death" to the peace process, as Palestinian officials have warned. In recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, Trump thus has three options, said Eytan Gilboa, an expert on US politics at Bar-Ilan University. "He can either say 'Jerusalem,' 'West Jerusalem' or 'United Jerusalem.' There is debate about the right wording even within the administration," he said. Most likely, Trump will merely say "Jerusalem," thus allowing all sides to interpret his statement as they wish, Gilboa speculated. Israel will then be able to cite the law and the president's previous commitments in arguing he meant the entire city. The Palestinians, meanwhile, will be able to cling to the hope that he was only referring to West Jerusalem.