



*INSS Insight* No. 895, February 12, 2017

## **Moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem: Opportunities, Risks, and Recommendations**

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During the American election campaign, one of the promises that President Trump made was to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Unlike other issues, such as immigration and trade, about which Trump made some quick decisions during his first few days in office, he announced that the embassy question is complex and will be discussed in the coming months. King Abdullah's visit to the United States and messages from the Arab world expressed several risks that such a move would entail, possibly causing the president to rethink his commitment. The administration's decision on upholding or curbing the 1995 Congressional legislation on moving the embassy to Jerusalem must be made before June 2017, when a presidential decision is required (every six months).

In principle, Israel cannot but welcome this important US move, should it be approved. Moving the embassy would strengthen Jerusalem's status as Israel's capital in the eyes of the rest of the world, and therefore it would be wrong of Israel to oppose it, apart from any political context and/or considerations of timing. Furthermore, it is important to understand that this is an internal US decision in which Israel was not asked to take a stand, and it therefore behooves Israel to maintain a low profile on the issue. Nonetheless, Israel should calculate the implications and ramifications of the initiative, consider the inherent opportunities and risks, and prepare accordingly. Using discreet channels, Israel should recommend to the administration the manner and timing of the move so that potential risks will be minimized.

### **Potential Risks to Israel**

It would be unwise to ignore the risks involved in moving the embassy, even if we assume that Palestinians and opponents to the move both in Israel and the United States are amplifying these risks. First, there is the threat of a renewed Palestinian intifada, using Jerusalem as its symbol and the inflammatory slogan of "al-Aqsa is in danger" as its rallying cry. This could include another round of fighting in the Gaza Strip, which is already at the boiling point, and could set off riots among Israel's Arab citizens. Second, the warning has been heard against the continued

freeze of the political process, and the embassy's move would make it even more difficult to restart the political process in the future. Third, emphasizing the US Embassy's move to West Jerusalem paradoxically might weaken Israel's claim to a united Jerusalem as Israel's capital and under Israel's control; in other words, it would strengthen international recognition of East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.

Another risk to Israel is a deterioration in relations with Jordan and Egypt. Popular opposition to the move in those states could erupt, threatening the stability of the respective regimes. In recent years, cooperation has flourished between Israel and both states around shared interests in security, resources, and infrastructure, in part because the Palestinian issue has not been at the top of their agendas. But moving the US Embassy might change that, and result in deteriorating relations between Israel, on the one hand, and Egypt and Jordan, on the other, as well as between Israel and all other Muslim states. Such developments might spark terrorist activity by different Islamist groups against US targets around the world, attacks for which Israel would assume the blame.

### **Positive Aspects**

By contrast, from the Israeli perspective, one can point to several positive reasons for moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem. First, strengthening the status of Jerusalem as Israel's capital is a prime Israeli interest. Redressing the anomaly by which the US Embassy to Israel is in Tel Aviv while the US Consulate in Jerusalem serves only Palestinians would finally put an end to the notion of internationalizing Jerusalem as part of UN Security Council Resolution 181. Second, the move would make it clear to the Palestinians that in the Trump era, time is not on their side, a factor that might, in fact, propel them to stop refusing to negotiate, which characterized their conduct during Obama's term in office. Third, from the perspective of international institutions, moving the embassy to Jerusalem would be an answer to UNESCO's unilateral resolution in which it adopted the Palestinian proposal denying any Jewish and Israeli connection to its capital. Fourth, despite the sensitivity of the topic and its broader religious significance, in principle, it would be wrong to give in to threats of popular protests in the Arab streets or threats of terrorist attacks. The Muslim world in general and the Palestinians in particular understand that the expected negative reactions to the embassy's move will deter the United States and Israel, and could affect future actions and debates on other issues. Fifth, an unequivocal American show of support for Israel is needed now and would demonstrate the strategic alliance between the two countries, a bond that is of utmost importance for Israel. The history of US support for Israel has shown that it does not harm the status of the United States in the Arab world; sometimes, the opposite is true.

## Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

In weighing the positive and negative aspects, a clear conclusion is drawn in favor of moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem. This step is appropriate and desirable from the Israeli perspective, if it is made with the right timing and in the proper context such that its inherent advantages are maximized and risks minimized. To this end, it is important that the United States and Israel hold a discrete discussion with Jordan and Egypt to understand their needs on this and other issues in order to prevent the relations between Israel and its two Arab neighbors from escalating and deteriorating.

Most of the risks presented are exaggerated, and can be avoided by taking measured steps. The political process is at an impasse in any case; there is no progress due to the Palestinian strategy, which since 2008 has been to internationalize the conflict as a substitute for bilateral negotiations. The embassy's move may well shock the Palestinians into rethinking their strategy and restarting talks. In fact, Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, was recently quoted as saying—for the first time in a decade—that time is now working against the Palestinians.

The probability of another intifada is not high, because the Palestinian population has no interest in another all-out confrontation. Public awareness and public relations can reduce the negative ramifications of propaganda and incitement, which is expected to present the move as an attack on Islam's holy places on the Temple Mount. Damage to Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan and possible harm to the regimes in those states—and to a certain extent, this is also true of Morocco—pose the greatest risk. But this risk may be mitigated by undertaking the move in consultation with the US administration, and by seeking to meet the vital interests of Egypt and Jordan, while reiterating the Hashemite Kingdom's special status regarding Jerusalem's holy places, as stated in its peace treaty with Israel. One may assume that the Egyptian and Jordanian ambassadors will be recalled for consultation, but that after some time they will return to Tel Aviv, as they have in the past.

The strategic context in which the move will take place will greatly affect the extent to which the risks are realized. It is imperative to avoid increasing the move's explosive potential as a result of actions by Israel, such as by making decisions to annex territories or that affect the Temple Mount (violent clashes, visits by political figures, and so on). Furthermore, it is possible to soften the impact by making positive political moves towards renewing negotiations on relevant parameters; engaging in a significant initiative to improve the socioeconomic status of Palestinians in Judea and Samaria and East Jerusalem; and expanding the PA's powers in Areas A and B. Moreover, the Palestinians should be conferred with an accomplishment, by

emphasizing the role of the US Consulate in Sheikh Jarrah and by making it clear that recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel does not necessarily determine the future status of the eastern part of the city; its fate is to be determined by negotiations, which must be restarted.

Aside from the steps Israel should take to reduce the possibility of the risks from being realized, various parties within Israel must avoid referring to the embassy's possible move in apologetic terms. After all, Israel cannot allow itself to do anything—neither discretely nor publicly—to prevent it from happening.

