

Trump's Jerusalem Decision Ushers in New Era of Unilateralism, Uncertainty

Trump's move has further sidelined the United States in the Middle East. Once again, Russia has an opportunity to step into the vacuum. Closer coordination is expected between Moscow, Ankara and Tehran, observes Thomas Seibert.

WASHINGTON — US President Donald Trump's decision to tear up the rule book of US policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ushered in a new era of unilateral action and uncertainty in the region likely to go beyond the wave of protests triggered by his plan for Jerusalem.

By declaring Jerusalem the capital of Israel and by announcing his intention to move the US Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, Trump reversed decades of US diplomatic positions.

"We cannot solve our problems by making the same failed assumptions and repeating the same failed strategies of the past," Trump said in a televised address on December 6. "Old challenges demand new approaches."

The shift to US unilateralism sparked concern during an emergency session of the UN Security Council two days later. "There is a serious risk today that we may see a chain of unilateral actions, which can only push us further away from achieving our shared goal of peace," UN Middle East Envoy Nickolay Mladenov said.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley was unapologetic about Washington's determination to go it alone. "Israel will never be, and should never be, bullied into an agreement by the United Nations or by any collection of countries that has proven [its] disregard for Israel's security," Haley told the Security Council.

Trump spoke of a "new beginning" for efforts to bring peace to Israelis and Palestinians but did not say how he intends to inject new life into the peace process after handing Israel an important symbolic victory in the long-running

conflict with the Palestinians. European powers pressed Washington for details.

Following Trump's announcement, thousands of Palestinians protested in Jerusalem, in the West Bank and in Gaza. Reports said at least four people had been killed and more than 200 injured in clashes with Israeli police and in attacks by Israeli jets on Hamas positions in Gaza. The air strikes were in retaliation for three rockets being fired from Gaza into Israel. Street protests erupted in virtually all Muslim and Arab capitals.

Trump's decision triggered predictable bluster and threatening talk from radical Islamists. Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, an ultra-conservative cleric and a leader of the Tehran weekly Muslim prayers, pledged to destroy Israeli cities. "If one day the Zionist regime wants to make a mistake, we will level Tel Aviv and Haifa to the ground," he said.

Despite the tensions created by Trump's announcement and the incitement that followed, the unrest was less intense than expected. Among Palestinians and Arab public opinion at large, a sense of despair seemed to take hold. Trump's initiative could have quashed hopes of a two-state solution. Results of a US opinion poll suggested that the public in at least three Arab countries no longer believes in the possibility of a settlement of the Palestinian problem.

Nearly seven years of strife and chaos since the "Arab spring" seem to have taken their toll on the ability of the Arab world to mobilise around virtually any cause, contrary to decades past. Reports said the Trump administration calculated that the negative fallout from the Jerusalem announcement would be limited. "Trump's action signals disdain for the opinion of the whole Arab world," Palestinian-American academic Rashid Khalidi wrote in the Guardian.

However, the president's stated hope that his shock move would insert new energy into Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts suffered immediate setbacks. Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erekat told Al Jazeera the Palestinians would not talk to the United States unless Trump reversed his Jerusalem decision.

In addition, Jibril Rajoub, a senior official in the Fatah movement of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, said Abbas would not receive US Vice-President Mike Pence, who is to tour the Middle East later in December. The White House warned a refusal by Abbas to meet with Pence would be "counterproductive."

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