

Moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem: A Chronic Unfulfilled Promise

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The main question relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict that accompanied the inauguration of Donald Trump as the U.S. president on 20 January 2017 was whether he would move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. In response, the Palestinian leadership formed a committee called the National Committee against Relocating the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, which warned, one day before Trump's inauguration, "that moving the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem would be a wrong move, could have serious consequences and would constitute an act of aggression against the Palestinian people."¹ However, two months later, in March, the question seemed postponed and meetings between the newly formed U.S. administration and both the Israelis and the Palestinians seemed to bypass the question, turning instead to different priorities that seemed to attract greater interest.

Shortly after Trump's inauguration, observers quickly started to notice that other issues – namely Israeli settlements in Jerusalem and the West Bank – could be more critical than the location of the embassy. For instance, Palestinian columnist Hani al-Masri suggested – in an article titled "How Did Moving the Embassy become the Lesser of Two Evils?" – that "there has been a trade-off between the Israeli government and American administration involving postponing the move of the embassy in exchange for the White House giving Israel the green light to execute its largest colonial settlement attack."²

Trump's populist rhetoric and style, and his repeated promises and declarations on the relocation of the embassy, as well as those from his team and Israeli officials, alarmed Palestinians and other parties in the region and led them to believe that such a step could happen and quickly. The promise of relocation is, however, one made regularly by many U.S.

presidential candidates. As the *New York Times* titled one commentary, “An Embassy in Jerusalem? Trump Promises, but So Did Predecessors.”³ The *Washington Post* wrote: “Every four years, presidential candidates routinely signal their support for moving the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. Then, after they’re sworn into office, they balk when faced with the potential ramifications.”⁴

This paper examines the development of the embassy question in U.S. policy. It is difficult to separate the policy and positions on the embassy from the general U.S. policy toward Jerusalem and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Therefore, this paper will study the U.S. position on Jerusalem starting from the early years of the conflict, namely from the British Mandate era. The first section will show how the Jewish Question and Jerusalem entered U.S. politics and electoral campaigns in the first half of the twentieth century. The second section will discuss the U.S. reaction to the Israeli occupation and annexation of East Jerusalem after 1967; how the question of the embassy started to appear in electoral campaigns in the 1970s, largely by the Democratic party; and attempts in the 1980s to propose Congressional legislation imposing the embassy’s relocation. The third section will deal with the period following the 1993 Oslo accords and will discuss the actual adoption of a law on the embassy location in 1995. This section will also demonstrate how, during this period, Republicans showed more interest in moving the embassy, compared to the Democrats, who took the lead on the issue in the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, Trump’s promise and policy will be discussed in the fourth section.

The Entrance of the Jewish Question into U.S. Politics

In 1919, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson appointed the King-Crane Commission, headed by two American scholars, to evaluate the situation in the former Ottoman territories by touring the region, meeting its inhabitants, and, finally, reporting back to the Paris Peace Conference.⁵ This commission was the earliest official American concern with the issue of Palestine. Jerusalem played a crucial role in shaping the commission’s recommendation, which favored the Arabs and found that the Islamic view of the holy places justified Muslim custodianship of them, and opposed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine in accordance with the 1917 Balfour Declaration. According to the report, Palestine was:

the Holy Land for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. Millions of Christians and Muslims all over the world are quite as much concerned as the Jews with conditions in Palestine, especially with those conditions which touch upon religious feeling and rights. . . . With the best possible intentions, it may be doubted whether the Jews could possibly seem to either Christians or Moslems proper guardians of the holy places, or custodians of the Holy Land as a whole. The reason is this: the places which are most sacred to Christians – those having to do with Jesus – and which also are sacred to Muslims, are not sacred to Jews, but abhorrent to them. It is simply impossible, under those circumstances, for Muslims and Christians to feel satisfied to have

these places in Jewish hands . . . There are still other places about which Muslims must have the same feeling. In fact, from this point of view, the Muslims, just because the sacred places of all three religions are sacred to them, have made very naturally much more satisfactory custodians of the holy places than the Jews could be.⁶

Britain and France did not react positively to the idea of sending a commission of this kind and refused to participate in it. The text of the report was suppressed and was not published until 1922.⁷ Nevertheless, the report clearly showed that public opinion in the United States had not yet veered in support of Zionism.

Palestine is not mentioned in the electoral platforms of the two main American political parties until the presidential campaign of 1944. The Holocaust in Europe, Jewish immigration, and the increasing role of the United States internationally can be seen as major factors to start dedicating special space to the Jewish question.⁸ For instance, the 1944 Democratic party platform stated: “We favor the opening of Palestine to unrestricted Jewish immigration and colonization, and such a policy as to result in the establishment there of a free and democratic Jewish commonwealth.”⁹ The Republican party platform for the same year included a longer exploration on the subject:

In order to give refuge to millions of distressed Jewish men, women and children driven from their homes by tyranny, we call for the opening of Palestine to their unrestricted immigration and land ownership, so that in accordance with the full intent and purpose of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the Resolution of a Republican Congress in 1922, Palestine may be constituted as a free and democratic Commonwealth. We condemn the failure of the President to insist that the mandatory of Palestine carry out the provision of the Balfour Declaration and of the mandate while he pretends to support them.¹⁰

Jerusalem was not prominent in official U.S. political thinking. This was clear during the 1947 United Nations (UN) meetings to decide a plan for Palestine’s post-Mandate future, which resulted in UN Resolution 181, known as the Partition Resolution. The United States did not take a clear position during the debate over Jerusalem. On 10 October 1947, both the U.S. and Soviet delegations to the UN Special Committee on Palestine kept silent, each waiting for the other to begin; ultimately, the Indian head of the committee proposed to close the proceedings if no one wanted to speak.¹¹ On 11 October 1947, U.S. sources revealed that the United States would support a plan adopted by the majority of the assembly, although it suggested that members of the UN Special Committee on Palestine that supported partition “should make detailed recommendations on its implementation,” thus assuring that the Palestine problem be kept “out of the arena of the great powers’ conflict.”¹² The U.S. delegation was aware of the special requirements for the implementation of the UN internationalization plan in Jerusalem. On 13 October, it stressed that the partition plan implied that the United Nations would assume

responsibility as the administrative authority of the city of Jerusalem under international trusteeship.¹³ The United States tried to deal with the implementation problem by asking Britain to carry out the task; however, Britain refused.¹⁴ Nevertheless, on 29 November the U.S. administration played an active role in influencing the members of the UN General Assembly to adopt the resolution in favor of partition, although the problem of implementation remained unresolved.¹⁵ Moreover, the failure to create a suitable international role to implement UN Resolution 181 expedited the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.

Between 1948 and 1967, the United States continued to show little interest in finding a solution for Jerusalem. Its policy in the Middle East was influenced more by the escalation of the Cold War and confrontation with the communist bloc. Therefore, American policy regarding Jerusalem at that time avoided provoking either the Zionist lobby or the Arab states, which was generally achieved by adhering to the UN resolution favoring internationalization. This support was expressed on various occasions during the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, in 1952, the United States condemned Israel's decision to transfer its Foreign Office to Jerusalem. The United States also rejected Jordan's intention in 1960 to consider Jerusalem a second capital, declaring its adherence to the international regime and the United Nations' special role in the city.¹⁶

In the presidential election campaign of 1948, the competition between the major U.S. political parties to appear the greater supporter of Israel started. The Republicans, without making a special reference to Jerusalem, said in their platform of 21 June 1948:

We welcome Israel into the family of nations and take pride in the fact that the Republican party was the first to call for the establishment of a free and independent Jewish commonwealth. The vacillation of the Democrat administration on this question has undermined the prestige of the United Nations. Subject to the letter and spirit of the United Nations Charter, we pledge to Israel full recognition, with its boundaries as sanctioned by the United Nations and aid in developing its economy.¹⁷

The Democrats emphasized their support for the establishment of Israel and the role played by the Truman administration to facilitate the passage of UN resolution 181, pledging economic and military support for Israel and making special reference to Jerusalem: "We continue to support, within the framework of the United Nations, the internationalization of Jerusalem and the protection of the Holy Places in Palestine."¹⁸

In the following elections, the two parties largely emphasized their support for Israel and the call for regional peace between the Arab states and Israel, but made no special reference to Jerusalem. Although East Jerusalem – including sites holy to Jews – was controlled by Jordan, the city did not feature as an issue in U.S. elections (nor did it feature in Israeli parties' electoral platforms).¹⁹

The 1967 Occupation to the 1994 Oslo Accords

In the aftermath of the June 1967 war, when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in addition to the Egyptian Sinai peninsula and the Syrian Golan Heights, the U.S. administration increased its political support for Israel. The United States wanted Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories to be part of a comprehensive political settlement that would guarantee Israel's existence and security. For months, the United States prevented the UN's adoption of a resolution calling for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories.²⁰ Israeli security rather than the question of Jerusalem was the main U.S. concern. Therefore, the Israeli decision to annex the eastern part of the city was taken without U.S. approval. On 16 June 1967, around ten days before the Israeli annexation of East Jerusalem, the U.S. secretary of state spoke in strong terms to the Israeli ambassador in Washington about the "unwisdom" of annexing the Old City of Jerusalem.²¹ It was only after Israel's decision to go ahead with the annexation – applying Israeli law and administration within the expanded boundaries of Jerusalem – that the U.S. administration abandoned its attempt to reach an immediate comprehensive solution between the Arab states and Israel. As a result, Soviet-American collaboration led to the passage of UN Resolution 242, which called for Israeli withdrawal "from territories occupied in the recent conflict."²² Washington also issued a statement on Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem stating that it did not "accept or recognize these measures as altering the status of Jerusalem."²³

The failure in 1967 to reach a quick settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict led the United States to consider the long-term aspects of the problem. Over the following years, the U.S. administration continued its efforts to reach a settlement in the region. Calculations reflecting the Cold War context and relations with the Arab world as well as the influence of the Zionist lobby inside the United States remained the main considerations in formulating a political settlement. However, the international aspect of the U.S. position gradually became less crucial. The Soviet Union's abstention from intervening in the June 1967 war and the decline in Arab-Soviet ties after the ascendance of Anwar al-Sadat to power in Egypt gave the United States greater opportunity to increase its support for Israel.

Despite its unwelcoming position regarding the annexation of East Jerusalem, from 1967 the United States was more inclined to recognize Israel's presence in West Jerusalem. In some cases the condemnation of Israeli measures regarding East Jerusalem implied a recognition of West Jerusalem as a part of Israel. For instance, on 1 July 1969, the U.S. representative to the United Nations issued a statement at the UN Security Council regarding Israeli policies in what he termed "occupied portions of the city" – implying that Israel had the right to impose any policies it liked in the remainder of Jerusalem.²⁴ Although the United States refused to accept Israeli action in East Jerusalem, it took no practical steps to prevent it.²⁵ It also discouraged verbal condemnation from the United Nations. For example, in a comment by the U.S. state department on 28 June 1967 concerning the Israeli annexation, there was no mention of Israel by name, and criticism was directed, too, toward other states in the region:

The hasty administrative action taken today cannot be regarded as determining the future of the holy places or the status of Jerusalem in relation to them. The U.S. has never recognized such unilateral actions by any of the states in the area as governing the international status of Jerusalem.²⁶

Yet despite its reference to the “international status of Jerusalem,” the continued focus on and reference to East Jerusalem as “occupied portions,” implied recognition that West Jerusalem was unoccupied and that its status was Israeli rather than international.

Calls to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem started at least as early as February 1972. Gerald Ford, then Republican minority leader in the Congress, declared his support for recognizing Jerusalem as the “historic and lawful capital of Israel” by moving the U.S. embassy there.²⁷ However, President Richard Nixon (1969–1974) and his secretary of state William P. Rogers refused the idea. The Republican election platform committee also refused to include the suggestion in their text.²⁸ Two years later, after Nixon’s resignation, Ford became the president (1974–1977) on 9 August 1974. Twenty days after starting his term, in his first news conference since taking office, Ford responded to a question regarding his earlier proposal to move the embassy by saying, “Under the current circumstances and the importance of getting a just and lasting peace in the Middle East, that particular proposal ought to stand aside.”²⁹

Ford’s position would become the U.S. tradition, whereby candidates promise to move the embassy and presidents delay doing so for the sake of “peace.” While the Republican platforms of 1972 and 1976 did not mention Jerusalem (but confirmed commitment to support Israel), the Democratic platform said, in 1972, that the next Democratic administration should: “Recognize and support the established status of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, with free access to all its holy places provided to all faiths. As a symbol of this stand, the U.S. Embassy should be moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem; and recognize the responsibility of the world community for a just solution to the problems of the Arab and Jewish refugees.”³⁰ In 1976, the party repeated its recognition and support of “the established status of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, with free access to all its holy places provided to all faiths,” and the relocation of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem as “a symbol of this stand.”³¹

The United States gave Israel increasing support at the United Nations by vetoing resolutions against Israeli actions in Jerusalem. This behavior became much more apparent after the signing of the Camp David agreement in 1978 between Egypt and Israel. The administration of Jimmy Carter (1977–1981) promised the Israeli government at the time that Jerusalem was the subject of negotiations that should be held bilaterally, not in an international framework. A famous story describes the beginning of this policy’s implementation in February 1980. Jordan and Morocco had proposed a resolution against the construction of settlements in the occupied territories. Hazim Nusayba, then Jordan’s permanent representative at the United Nations, said that the U.S. representatives engaged him in prolonged negotiations and asked him to change certain words in the proposal, such as substituting “deplore” for “condemn.” Finally, after lengthy discussions in which the

U.S. delegation was in contact with the White House through the secretary of state, Cyrus Vance, the representatives imposed the condition that if the United States were to vote in favor of the proposal, a particular paragraph on Jerusalem had to be removed. Nusayba agreed and the delegation was accordingly instructed to vote in favor. The U.S. decision provoked enormous Israeli frustration and a campaign against Carter. The reason, as Nusayba explained, was that the remaining text of the resolution referred to the “deplored policies” as those implemented in the “occupied territories including Jerusalem.”³²

The U.S. administration declared that it had not intended to vote affirmatively and that a miscommunication with the U.S. delegation was responsible. Carter, whose failure in the next election was attributed in part to this incident, was against including Jerusalem in the resolution because of his promise to Israeli prime minister Menachem Begin that the city would not be discussed internationally. The fault, Carter’s aides asserted, was the result of a misunderstanding: when the delegation told Vance that the paragraph on Jerusalem would be removed, he assumed that all the other references to Jerusalem would be removed as well. However, the delegation saw this paragraph as the reason for the president’s reservations, as the content of the resolution had already been accepted (in the past) by U.S. officials.³³

Jerusalem entered the Republican platform in 1980, but without mention of its status as a capital or reference to the embassy. The platform read: “Republicans believe that Jerusalem should remain an undivided city with continued free and unimpeded access to all holy places by people of all faiths.”³⁴ The 1980 Democratic platform repeated the language on Jerusalem used in its previous platforms of 1972 and 1976, adding: “Jerusalem should remain forever undivided, with free access to the holy places for people of all faiths.”³⁵

Ronald Reagan’s Republican administration (1981–1989) continued in the path of his Democratic predecessor, Carter, on Israel, including pressing for Israeli-Arab negotiations. In 1982, Reagan announced an initiative to resolve the Arab-Israel conflict, known as the Reagan Plan, which called for a peace process to include Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinians. On Jerusalem, Reagan stated: “Jerusalem must remain undivided, but its final status should be decided through negotiation.”³⁶ In this context of a possible peace process, a bill was proposed in 1984 for the embassy’s relocation. Reagan’s administration opposed it and prevented its adoption on the ground that it would “convey a message that the U.S. accepted the position of one party to the issue”; that the issue of Jerusalem “must be resolved through negotiations”; and that relocation of the embassy “would seriously undermine [the United States’] ability to play an effective role in the Middle East peace process.”³⁷ Despite this, Congress passed several resolutions indicating its support for moving the embassy to Jerusalem.³⁸

In its 1988 platform, the Democratic party did not refer to the issue of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital or to the move of the embassy, deviating from its previous four platforms. The Republicans, meanwhile, continued their previous references to their commitment that the city remain undivided, with free access to all holy places by people of all faiths, without referring to the embassy. Also in 1988, Republican senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina, after long negotiations with the Reagan administration, proposed an amendment, which was passed, to the State Department Appropriations Act of 1988, a public law related to diplomatic properties in Israel. According to this amendment, the department of state was:

obligated or expended for site acquisition, development, and construction of two new diplomatic facilities in Israel, Jerusalem, or the West Bank, provided that each facility (A) equally preserves the ability of the United States to locate its Ambassador or its Consul General at that site, consistent with United States policy, (B) shall not be denominated as the United States Embassy or Consulate until after construction of both facilities has begun, and construction of one facility has been completed, or is near completion; and (C) unless security considerations require otherwise, commence operation simultaneously.³⁹

This amendment conditioned the construction of a diplomatic facility in Tel Aviv on the construction of a second facility in Jerusalem, either of which would be equipped to serve as an embassy; in other words, any new construction for the official embassy in Tel Aviv could not take place without parallel building in Jerusalem. This amendment “was not publicized” so as not to harm the U.S. administration’s negotiations with the Palestinian Liberation Organization, which were just starting at that time.⁴⁰ Helms’s amendment had an immediate political goal, which was to delay the decision as to where the new U.S. embassy would be until a new president was elected. Thus, the location of the embassy became part of presidential electoral campaigning. Indeed, Jerusalem and the embassy became a perpetual electoral season issue.

On 18 January 1989, the last day of the Reagan administration, William Brown, then U.S. ambassador to Israel, quietly signed an agreement with the Israeli government to lease a plot of land in West Jerusalem and purchase one in Tel Aviv. This was a necessary step to fulfill Helms’s amendment, though without further immediate implications.⁴¹ The political meaning of this step was the topic of a 13 June 1989 letter from Lee H. Hamilton, chairman of the House subcommittee on Europe and the Middle East, to the State Department. The response from the State Department, on 29 June, stated: “The agreement does not change our policy with respect to Jerusalem. The final status of the city should be resolved through negotiations, and the outcome of such negotiations should not be prejudged by the actions of any party. Jerusalem should remain undivided and there should be free access to the Holy Places.”⁴² The State Department’s letter went on to assert that “the location of the U.S. embassy remains in Tel Aviv. We will address the issue of moving our embassy only in the context of a negotiated settlement of the status of the West Bank and Gaza.”⁴³

The Democrats returned to mentioning Jerusalem in their 1992 platform, affirming recognition of it as the capital of Israel, but without mentioning moving the embassy: “Jerusalem is the capital of the state of Israel and should remain an undivided city accessible to people of all faiths.” In turn, Republicans continued their same position regarding the unity of the city and the free access to holy places, adding that “no genuine peace would deny Jews the right to live anywhere in the special city of Jerusalem”; but they did not mention the embassy. The Oslo accords of 1993–1994, however, would create a new context for the discussion of the question of the embassy’s relocation.

From the 1995 Act to the 2016 Trump Campaign

After Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo accords in 1993 and 1994, Congress reopened the question of the U.S. embassy. In May 1995, 41 senators and 31 representatives signed a bill to relocate the embassy to Jerusalem. President Bill Clinton's administration responded that the legislation would jeopardize the peace process and the United States' role as mediator.⁴⁴ Despite this response and U.S. patronage of the agreement that made Jerusalem part of final status negotiations, the bill passed the Senate by a 95–5 vote and the House of Representatives by a vote of 374–37 in October 1995.⁴⁵ The bill gave the president the right to delay the relocation for reasons of “national security.” It implied, however, that Jerusalem had “been the capital of the state of Israel” since 1950, and that between 1948 and 1967, Israeli citizens of all faiths, as well as Jewish citizens of all states, had been denied access to the holy places in the area controlled by Jordan. However, under Israeli administration since 1967, “persons of all religious faiths have been guaranteed full access to holy sites within the city.”⁴⁶ The bill concluded that U.S. policy should be based on “Jerusalem remaining an undivided city”; the aim that “Jerusalem should be recognized as the capital of the state of Israel”; and that “the U.S. Embassy in Israel should be established in Jerusalem no later than May 31, 1999.”⁴⁷ To date, however, the U.S. administration has still not taken the decision to relocate its embassy. U.S. presidents have repeatedly signed six-month waivers to delay the application of the 1995 act.⁴⁸

In 1996, despite the Congressional act on the embassy's relocation, the Democrats' electoral platform did not mention the embassy, though it reaffirmed: “Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and should remain an undivided city accessible to people of all faith.”⁴⁹ By contrast, for the first time Republicans “applaud[ed] the Republican Congress for enacting legislation to recognize Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel. A Republican administration will ensure that the U.S. Embassy is moved to Jerusalem by May 1999.”⁵⁰

In their 2000 platform, Republicans emphasized their commitment to the urgent fulfillment of the promise to relocate the embassy: “immediately upon taking office, the next Republican president will begin the process of moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Israel's capital, Jerusalem.”⁵¹ This may reflect a sense that the promise to relocate the embassy was starting to be seen as unserious, especially after both the designated date in the prior platform and the five-year interim period by which the Palestinians and Israelis were to have completed a peace agreement according to the Oslo accords had passed. In 2000, President George W. Bush was elected and Republicans spent eight years in the White House without moving the embassy. The 2004 platform merely stated: “Republicans continue to support moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Israel's capital, Jerusalem.”⁵² In 2000 and 2004, Democrats did not mention the embassy and only repeated that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and should remain an undivided city accessible to people of all faiths.⁵³

In 2008, Democrats did not mention the embassy, but added a new element to their traditional reference to Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, namely that its final status was subject to negotiation: “Jerusalem is and will remain the capital of Israel. The parties

have agreed that Jerusalem is a matter for final status negotiations. It should remain an undivided city accessible to people of all faiths.”⁵⁴ Although Republicans also gave implicit acknowledgment to negotiations through reference to the two-state solution in their 2008 platform, Israel was the only state in this envisioned solution with legitimate claim to Jerusalem: “We support the vision of two democratic states living in peace and security: Israel, with Jerusalem as its capital, and Palestine. . . . We support Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel and moving the American embassy to that undivided capital of Israel.”⁵⁵ In 2012, the Republican platform included substantial reference to Israel compared to previous platforms, and repeated almost identically the first part of the paragraph on Jerusalem from the 2008 platform, but it eliminated reference to the embassy.⁵⁶ Nor did Democrats mention relocation of the embassy, merely repeating the language on Jerusalem from the 2008 party platform.⁵⁷

In 2016, both Democratic and Republican platforms retained the essential substance of their respective 2012 party platforms, with Democrats leaving the issue of relocating the embassy unmentioned and Republicans calling “for the American embassy to be moved there in fulfillment of U.S. law.”⁵⁸ The texts of these platforms do not explain, then, why Jerusalem took on such a different character during Donald Trump’s electoral campaign.

Trump’s Promises

The unusual interest, expectations, and fears that Trump’s electoral campaign produced regarding Jerusalem can be attributed to two major causes: first, the tone and populist style Trump used in his campaign in general, especially compared to the relatively careful position that the two major U.S. political parties had adopted in recent years, connecting the relocation of the embassy to Jerusalem with a two-state solution and negotiations; and second, the statements made by Trump’s team and by Israeli politicians.

As early as January 2016, Trump responded to a question about the support for relocating the embassy among the Republican Jewish Coalition, Evangelical Christians more generally, and rival Republican primary candidates Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio: “They want [the U.S. embassy] in Jerusalem. Well, I am for that 100 percent. We are for that 100 percent.”⁵⁹

Trump met Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu in September 2016, during the presidential campaign, and CNN reported that 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.”⁶⁰

Trump said during his electoral campaign that he would relocate the embassy “fairly quickly” after taking office.⁶¹ Moreover, one of the most significant indications during the campaign that Trump’s promise may be different was the joint position paper written by Donald Trump’s two Israeli affairs advisors, Jason Greenblatt and David Friedman, published on 2 November 2016 and outlining Trump’s vision with regard to Israel. According to the paper, “even before negotiations take place between the two sides, the

U.S. will recognize Jerusalem as the eternal and indivisible capital of the Jewish state and move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem.”⁶² This position paper marked a break with previous U.S. presidents who connected the relocation of the embassy to negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

One day after the election, David Friedman, Trump’s adviser on Jewish and Israeli matters, later appointed ambassador to Israel, told the *Jerusalem Post* that relocating the embassy “was a campaign promise, and there is every intention to keep it.”⁶³ Shortly thereafter, Jason Greenblatt, a real estate lawyer who had worked previously with Trump and who Trump appointed in January 2017 as “special representative for international negotiations,” told Israeli Army radio that Trump was “going to do it.”⁶⁴ A few days later, Trump adviser Kellyanne Conway said moving the embassy was a “very big priority” for Trump.⁶⁵ The mayor of the Israeli municipality of Jerusalem, Nir Barkat, visited the United States in December 2016 and said after meeting with Trump’s aides, “they are serious about this. . . I am optimistic that this will happen sooner rather than later.”⁶⁶

Within weeks of Trump’s inauguration, all such promises seemed to return to the backstage. When Netanyahu had his first meeting with Trump after the election in Washington in February 2017, the embassy question almost disappeared, overshadowed by the president’s statement: “I’m looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like,” adding, “if Israel and the Palestinians are happy, I’m happy with the one they like the best.”⁶⁷ This statement led some news agencies and analysts to conclude that Trump was “backing away from a long-held position of the U.S. and the international community in the Middle East.”⁶⁸ However, the statement also showed that the U.S. president had not yet developed a policy on the Palestinian-Israeli issue, and the fact that the embassy was not mentioned in the media coverage of the visit showed that this was not as urgent a question as was presented during the presidential campaign.

In early March 2017, it was announced that an official delegation head by U.S. congressmen would visit Israel to study the possibility of relocating the embassy. It was to be a brief visit (two days) to examine the practicalities and impact of moving the embassy. An Israeli source close to the delegation said, “its leadership intends to return to Congress with a report and a deeper understanding of what to expect, and of some of the decisions that have to be made as well.”⁶⁹ Such a delegation, in reality, creates uncertainty and doubts around the intention of the U.S. political establishment toward Jerusalem, and indicates that the frequent remarks from the United States in support of recognizing Jerusalem, or part of it, as the capital of Israel is intended for media and public relations purposes, without plans for actual implementation.

On 10 March, Trump made a telephone call to Palestinian Authority president Mahmud ‘Abbas, in which he invited ‘Abbas to visit the White House. A statement issued by the White House claimed that the two leaders discussed how to advance toward a comprehensive peace agreement.⁷⁰ A few days later, Jason Greenblatt, in his capacity as Trump’s special representative for international negotiations, visited Palestine and met both Netanyahu and ‘Abbas. The U.S. consulate issued a statement reading, “President Abbas told Mr. Greenblatt that under President Trump’s leadership a historic peace deal is possible, and that it will enhance security throughout the region.”⁷¹ Such communications

and statements, which abstain from any mention of Jerusalem, are strong indications that Trump is following his predecessors in backing away from campaign promises to relocate the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and connecting Jerusalem's final status with peace negotiations. Barring unexpected developments, it seems likely that that Trump will postpone the relocation of the embassy as his predecessors did.

Possible reasons for this retreat from campaign rhetoric include messages from Palestinian and Arab leaders. For instance, King 'Abdallah II of Jordan visited Washington and spoke to U.S. officials, including Trump, in early February and, according to the press, 'Abdallah "warned U.S. president Donald Trump against relocating the American embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem."⁷² Other possible explanations are that Israeli priorities seem more focused on settlements than on the embassy and that the White House found the relocation of the embassy to be a nonstarter for Middle East policy.

Conclusion

It could be concluded that the United States has had two main considerations in mind when dealing with the Jerusalem question in general and the relocation of embassy in particular: the strong influence of pro-Israel groups in U.S. politics and elections make it important to show sympathy with the Israeli status in the city; however, U.S. interests in the Middle East, and its interest in maintaining a process of conflict management and negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis, has connected any actual change in U.S. policy toward Jerusalem with the outcome of negotiations. While in the 1970s and 1980s, Democrats took the lead in promising to relocate the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, Republicans were less clear on the question in those two decades. In the 1990s, the Republicans started to take the lead in making such promises, while Democrats became less interested in announcing their position.

In recent years, as manifested in the electoral platforms of the two U.S. political parties in 2008 and 2012, presidential candidates adjusted the tone on moving Washington's embassy to Jerusalem from expressing enthusiastic promises to connecting the status of Jerusalem with negotiations. Therefore, Trump's promises to relocate the embassy moved in the opposite direction of recent U.S. positions – though they were not totally new in U.S. politics and electoral campaign rhetoric. However, the first few months of this administration show that the traditional position of waiting on the outcome of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations before taking any decision toward Jerusalem and the U.S. embassy will most probably continue to be the policy under Trump.

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Endnotes

- 1 "The National Committee: U.S. Embassy Move Is the Wrong Move," Wafa: Palestinian News and Info Agency, 19 January 2017, online at english.wafa.ps/page.aspx?id=Oh9Z2Ha52141788105aOh9Z2H (accessed 16 April 2017).
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