

TRUMP AND JERUSALEM

Capital error?

President Trump's declaration that the US embassy to Israel will move to Jerusalem has provoked local and international ire – but why is it such a contentious decision?

BY MATTHEW HUGHES

Donald Trump's decision to move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem has caused considerable anger in the Middle East and elsewhere. Why has relocating an embassy from one city that is not a nation's capital (Tel Aviv) to another that the Israelis proclaim as their capital (Jerusalem) sparked such furore?

Jerusalem has an old city split into religious quarters for Muslims, Jews and Christians. This historic enclosure encompasses many religious sites, three of which are highly significant: the remnants of the destroyed Jewish temple; atop that, is the al-Haram al-Sharif, one of the most holy sites for Muslims; and, elsewhere in the city, is the reputed site of Christ's death and burial.

For many years this walled district *was* Jerusalem, ruled by the Muslim Ottoman empire then, after 1917, the British. From the 19th century, urban areas spread beyond the walls. In 1948, what was previously a mixed city of Jews and Arabs now split into western areas that were in Israel (and were all Jewish) and the old city and eastern areas that were in Arab Jordanian hands (and all Palestinian). Conflict divided the city into two halves. Excepting the Arab states, the world recognised Israel diplomatically and, after 1948, moved embassies to the country – but to Tel Aviv, not Jerusalem.

Why not site foreign embassies in Jerusalem? The city's special nature meant that in 1947 the UN designated it *corpus separatum* (Latin for 'separated

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body'), and ambassadors and embassies were sited in Tel Aviv. The idea was that the city would exist under a form of international trusteeship to accommodate all religions. Some nations had sub-embassy level diplomatic missions or consulates in Israel, and some were in Jerusalem, but they were usually appointed as missions to Jerusalem, not to Israel: the world saw the city as a place apart, deserving of a separate diplomatic link. The US had (and maintains) a consulate in west Jerusalem with an annexe in east Jerusalem, but built its embassy on the Tel Aviv seafront.

Then, in the Six-Day War of June 1967, Israel captured all of Jerusalem and annexed the whole area – an act not recognised in international law. Placing any embassy in Jerusalem meant upsetting religious and now political sensibilities, because such a move would recognise Israel's annexation of the area including the old city and Palestinian parts of eastern Jerusalem – districts soon filled with Israeli neighbourhoods, as Jews moved into the newly conquered

territory. In any two-state solution, Palestinians wanted Jerusalem as their capital – but the city was now all Israeli.

So Trump's proposal is very charged diplomatically. If the US were to place the embassy in west Jerusalem – Israeli territory since 1948 – it would mean nothing in international law, because this was not land taken in 1967. Symbolically, however, it would make plain US support for Israel, and its desire that the global community recognises Jerusalem as Israel's capital. It obviously favours one side in the Arab-Israeli dispute, because it shows US support for Israel's 1967 annexation of the whole area that Palestinians want for their capital city. It also puts politics into a religious city, while making it harder for Palestinians to claim Jerusalem as their own capital. And there is no practical need to move the US embassy.

A new embassy takes years to build, and if it ever happens – Trump has form at promising and not delivering – the US will surely not build it in the old city. But though this would not prevent the Palestinians from having their capital in some part of east Jerusalem, the issues are not just practical but religious, emotional and political. Trump's embassy move does not stop in principle the US appointing an embassy to any future Palestinian state in the eastern part of Jerusalem, but right now the proposed embassy does little to further broader US foreign-policy goals. It achieves little, but merely causes trouble.

Diplomacy is about securing national interest through adroit manoeuvring and schmoozing. Trump's move confirms US support for Israel, and on a practical level should cause no fuss, but Jerusalem is charged with passion, and needs careful handling – something for which the mercurial Trump is not renowned. 🌐



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