

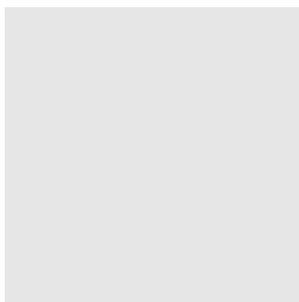
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UNDERSTANDING YOUR WORLD

Middle East inches toward disaster

By Bill Stewart Dec 8, 2017



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Understanding Your World

I have argued in this column for many years that the most fundamental problem in the Middle East is the dispute between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Despite the rise and fall of ISIS and the wars in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, I still believe this to be true.

The Palestinian-Israeli divide is the issue that underlines or stands behind all others in a swath of territory reaching from Morocco on the Atlantic to Iran on the Persian Gulf. This week's announcement by President Donald Trump that the United States officially will recognize Jerusalem as the capital of the state of Israel and will move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem sometime in the next few years only confirms the importance of this issue. World leaders from Pope Francis to France's President Emmanuel Macron have registered their dismay at Trump's unilateral and destructive move.

Why destructive and unilateral? Because ever since the end of the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948-49, both sides have claimed Jerusalem as their capital. The original 1947 United Nations partition plan for Palestine declared Jerusalem as an international city, not belonging exclusively to either the Jews or the Arabs. As a result of the first Arab-Israeli war, the newly created state of Israel retained control of the mostly Jewish western half of the city, where it had established its government. The Palestinians, under Jordanian leadership, retained control of the city's eastern half, which included the ancient walled or holy city, site of the Wailing Wall, the famed Al-Aqsa Mosque, sacred to the Muslims, and the Christian Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Jordan also retained control of what we now call the West Bank.

Because of the delicacy of the situation, no major country moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in deference of the need for a peace agreement between the Israelis and the Palestinians. The issue was much bigger than that of Israel and the Palestinians alone. The entire Muslim Middle East had a vested interest in keeping Jerusalem free of Israeli control. Complicating the matter for the West was oil, a vital commodity possessed by the Arabs but not the Israelis. We had to tread very carefully.

The situation remained this way until the end of the Six-Day War in 1967. After Israel's overwhelming military victory, it occupied not only the Sinai (since returned to Egypt) but also the Gaza Strip (since returned to the Palestinians), the Golan Heights, which had been part of Syria, all of Jerusalem and the Palestinian territories west of the Jordan River. That is why most of the world refers to the territory as the "occupied" West Bank. In October 1967, the United Nations passed Resolution 242, which called for the return of all occupied territory in return for a peace agreement with Israel that included not only the Palestinians but the Egyptians, Syrians and Jordanians. Jerusalem was a final issue to be negotiated between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

For a variety of complicated reasons, 242 was never fully implemented, but it remains the principal document for achieving peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Trump has short-circuited the entire peace framework set up by Resolution 242 by unilaterally deciding — at least for the U.S. — the whole Jerusalem issue. As a result, the Palestinians no longer regard the U.S. as a partner for peace. Israel, of course, is delighted.

Interestingly, the U.S. does not say that the Palestinians cannot have East Jerusalem as their capital in any future peace agreement. Trump's motive may have been simply to carry out a campaign promise and to jolt the entire peace process, which has remained static for years.

Then, too, the world has moved on since 1967. Egypt and Israel have signed a peace agreement, though it is a cold peace. Jordan, too, has signed an agreement. Israel is now the region's superpower and has been for many years. The Camp David agreement brokered by President Jimmy Carter took Egypt out of the military challenge faced by Israel because the Arabs cannot make war against Israel without Egypt. Israel, however, cannot have peace without the Palestinians. That has been true since 1948. The Trump unilateral move has only lessened the chances for making peace.

Bill Stewart writes about current affairs from Santa Fe. He is a former U.S. Foreign Service officer and worked as a correspondent for Time magazine.

