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Guest Columns

Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, period

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President Donald Trump's recent announcement that the United States would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel was met with expected anxiety among concerned Americans, condemnations from the European establishment, and promises of chaos on the Arab street. It remains to be seen whether these concerns are founded. However, rather than a revelation of great consequence, the president's proclamation is instead simply the formal acknowledgement of conditions that have existed in practice since well prior to the establishment of the modern-day state of Israel. Rather than focus on the messenger – a deeply unpopular American president – it is important to instead examine the physical and geopolitical realities facing Israel and the region, and thus understand the why the reaction to Trump's proclamation is much ado about relatively little.

Jerusalem has functionally served as Israel's capital since the state's founding in 1948. The buildings housing the Knesset – or Parliament – plus the headquarters of almost every critical government agency have always existed in West Jerusalem on land that, by any measure, is well within Israel's internationally accepted borders. Indeed, Jerusalem served as the seat of Judaism itself from the time of the city's establishment until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D., after which Judaism ceased to operate as an administratively monolithic religion. Even the land reserved decades ago for an eventual U.S. embassy in Jerusalem sits well to the west of the so-called "Green Line" demarcating Israel's pre-Six Day War borders. Under no circumstances would Jerusalem cease to be the physical, spiritual and administrative capital of Israel under any solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Central to the arguments of those opposed to the announcement is the notion that it will necessarily slow or stop the already tenuous prospects for a two-state final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. In fact, the simple acknowledgement of Jerusalem as Israel's capital – a long-standing practical fact – in no way precludes the eventual establishment of a Palestinian state with a capital in East Jerusalem.

Lost in the outpouring of both elation and trepidation immediately following the announcement was another item not significantly covered by the news media. Contrary to the understanding of most, President Trump did, in fact, sign the waiver of the 1995 Jerusalem Embassy Act, thus following his three most recent predecessors in delaying for at least six months the opening of a United States embassy in Jerusalem. While officially recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital was a departure from past administrations, Trump indeed stood in lockstep with Presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush and Bill Clinton in ensuring that the embassy will stay in Tel Aviv for the foreseeable future.

The largely overlooked signing of the waiver is an important rhetorical symbol. Simply recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is a statement of the obvious. The opening of an embassy in Jerusalem would send a far stronger and more consequential message, and yet it is a move to which the United States is no more obligated today than it was a year ago. This is quite likely by design and represents a deft solution to the long-standing conundrum of how to put to rest the unproductive debate over Jerusalem as Israel's capital while preserving every opportunity for the peace process to move forward.

As we analyze the Trump administration's rational decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, it is important to separate the message from the messenger and from the controversies surrounding this presidency. It is equally important that we acknowledge two inalienable truths: Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, and yet that fact does not preclude the eventual creation of a viable Palestinian state with its own capital in the Holy City.

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