

Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israeli capital sparks anger, protests

By Bill Van Auken
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Upending seven decades of US policy toward the Middle East, President Donald Trump Wednesday delivered a White House speech recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital and vowing that the US would begin preparations to move its embassy there from Tel Aviv, becoming the first nation in the world to do so.

The decision was met with near universal condemnation from Washington's allies and foes alike, along with Palestinian demonstrations in the Israel-occupied Gaza Strip and West Bank, as well as elsewhere in the Middle East.

In a 12-minute speech, Trump cast the decision as a "new approach to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians" and "a long overdue step to advance the peace process."

In reality, the move represents a green light to the extreme right-wing Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to accelerate the expansion and creation of new Zionist settlements and escalate the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from East Jerusalem.

At the same time, the American president engaged in his habitual self-aggrandizement, saying that while previous presidents had promised to move the embassy, they had "failed to deliver." Suggesting that the issue was a lack of "courage," he proclaimed, "Today, I'm delivering."

During his 2016 election campaign, Trump had vowed to become the "most pro-Israel president" in US history and to move the American embassy to Jerusalem. This was part of a calculated bid to win the support of right-wing Christian Evangelicals as well as a far less numerous, but financially critical, sector of right-wing Zionists, most importantly casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson, who poured some \$25 million into Trump's campaign.

Under conditions in which his administration is in deepening crisis, and Trump's own public approval ratings are falling to record lows, the announcement on Jerusalem, while threatening to unleash a new round of bloodshed in the Middle East and potentially beyond, provided a cheap means of solidifying his "base."

The decision was reportedly opposed by both his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary Gen. James Mattis. Trump's action, however, was not merely--as it is widely being cast, particularly in Europe--an act of irresponsibility or even

madness. Rather, it is bound up with broader aims of US imperialism to escalate its military intervention in the Middle East, particularly to roll back the growth of Iranian influence in the wake of the successive debacles suffered by Washington in Iraq, Libya and Syria.

Formally, Trump has based his shift on Jerusalem on a law enacted in 1995, the so-called Jerusalem Embassy Act, which was approved with overwhelming bipartisan support. Included in the legislation, however, was a waiver allowing the US president to put off moving the American embassy on the grounds of national security. Every American president since Bill Clinton--including until now Trump--has invoked this waiver every six months as required by the law.

Trump's action was praised by leading members of both parties in Congress. "Jerusalem has been, and always will be, the eternal, undivided capital of the State of Israel," Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan said in a statement.

The leading Democrat on the Senate foreign relations committee, Ben Cardin of Maryland, responded, "Jerusalem is the capital of the State of Israel and the location of the US Embassy should reflect this fact." While some Democrats expressed reservations about the timing of Trump's action, these were undercut by the fact that just last June the US Senate approved, without a single opposing vote, a resolution reaffirming the demand for moving the embassy to Jerusalem.

This bipartisan policy represents a naked repudiation of international law, endorsing Israel's illegal annexation of territories, including most of the current city of Jerusalem, that it militarily occupied during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Such annexations were declared illegal under the Geneva Conventions enacted in the wake of the Second World War to prevent the repetition of similar actions carried out by Germany's Nazi regime.

Thousands of Palestinians protested in Gaza Wednesday in anticipation of Trump's speech. There were also protests reported at schools in the West Bank. On Wednesday night, large numbers of Palestinian youth poured into the streets of the Jordanian capital of Amman, one of the major centers of Palestinian refugees. Chanting "Down with America! America is the mother of terror!" they called upon King Abdullah's Hashemite monarchy to break its peace treaty with Israel.

Palestinians also took to the streets across Lebanon. Several hundred protesters also gathered outside the American consulate in Istanbul, throwing coins and other objects at the building.

Palestinian organizations have called for three “Days of Rage,” culminating on Friday, when Muslim religious services are held. Attempts by Israeli security forces to prevent access by Palestinians to the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem have repeatedly served to provoke violent clashes. In 2000, a visit to the site by then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon provoked an intifada, or Palestinian uprising, and violence was also ignited in 2015 by attempts of right-wing Zionist settlers to storm the Islamic holy site.

Trump’s reaction was roundly condemned by both Arab regimes and Washington’s erstwhile allies in Western Europe.

Among the most telling reactions came from Germany’s Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel, who on the eve of the announcement said that Trump’s decision was indicative of why the alliance between Washington and Europe had begun to “crumble.” He added, that the determination of Jerusalem’s status had to be the product of “direct negotiations between both parties,” and that “Everything which worsens the crisis is counterproductive.” Trump’s decision has been invoked by the German ruling establishment to promote the country’s rearmament and more aggressive pursuit of its great power interests on the world stage.

Challenged in Parliament over Trump’s action, British Prime Minister Theresa May described it as “unhelpful” and vowed to speak to the US president about the matter. French President Emmanuel Macron called the US action “regrettable.” Both reiterated the position that Jerusalem’s status could only be settled through negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians.

The principal concern of both the European powers, the Arab regimes and the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority is that Trump’s action has pulled the last rug out from underneath the so-called “peace process,” a diplomatic fiction that has limped along for over a quarter century as the Israeli regime has steadily expanded its grip over occupied Palestinian territories.

The prospect of a “two-state solution,” which Trump said the US would support “if agreed to by both sides,” has already been rejected by the ruling layers within the Israeli government and made unrealizable by the continuous encroachment upon and division of Palestinian land into a patchwork of noncontiguous territories. This has only been further confirmed by the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, denying the Palestinian claim that the same city would be the capital of any Palestinian state.

The monarchical, autocratic and dictatorial Arab bourgeois regimes, all of which had been consulted in advance by the Trump administration, issued their pro-forma condemnations of the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

Egypt’s dictator, Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, warned that

Trump’s actions would “undermine the chances of peace in the Middle East.”

Similarly, Saudi King Salman declared that the shift on Jerusalem would “harm peace talks and increase tensions in the area.”

According to multiple media reports, however, Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince and soon-to-be king, summoned Palestinian Authority chief Mahmoud Abbas to Riyadh last month to inform him of Trump’s terms and order him to accept them or face a cutoff of Saudi funding.

Following Trump’s speech, Abbas released a prerecorded response warning that, as a result of the American president’s actions, “the extremist groups which try to turn the conflict in our region into a religious war that will drag the region...into international conflicts and endless wars.”

The leader of the Palestinian Authority, which functions as an adjunct security force for the Israeli occupation and a means of enrichment for a thin layer of the Palestinian bourgeoisie, is concerned that the Trump administration’s scuttling of any pretense that essential issues relating to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be left to negotiation will make its position untenable.

This pathetic appeal will find no sympathy in Washington. The prospect that the provocation over Jerusalem will fuel Islamist terrorism is no doubt already factored into Washington’s calculations. Terrorist attacks serve as useful pretexts for war abroad and repression at home.

At the same time, the Trump administration is clearly calculating that Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf oil monarchies and the autocratic Sunni regimes in the region will not let any concern for the fate of the Palestinians interfere with their determination to cement an anti-Iranian axis together with the US and Israel.

Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu broadcast his own prerecorded statement hailing the US move to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital as “historic” and praising Trump for his “courageous decision.”

The reality, however, is that this recognition represents one more nail in the coffin of the so-called “two-state solution,” further dispelling any lingering illusions that an end to the oppression of the Palestinian masses will be found through diplomatic deals and negotiations between imperialism and the Arab bourgeois regimes. The only alternative left is that of revolutionary struggle, uniting Arab and Jewish workers in a common fight for a socialist solution to the scourges of war, inequality and exploitation produced by the capitalist system.

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