

What is the significance of the Trump administration in recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's Capital?

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Abstract: In 1995, the US Congress passed a law requiring America to move the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Proponents said the US should respect Israel's choice of Jerusalem as its capital, and recognize it as such.

Since then Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama has declined to move the embassy, citing national security interests. Every six months, the President has used the presidential waiver to circumvent the embassy move.

President Trump campaigned on a promise to implement the act, on the 6th of December 2017 he formally recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, reversing nearly seven decades of American foreign policy and setting in motion a plan to move the United States Embassy from Tel Aviv to the fiercely contested Holy City.

The status of Jerusalem remains a crucial issue in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while some terms could be agreed upon, its status was always non-negotiable. When Trump moves the embassy to Jerusalem, it would effectively end the prospect of bringing peace and stability between Israelis and Palestinians.

Trump's move to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital has been widely criticized in the US and abroad. There were those in the administration who pointed out that Trump's decision would make it harder to maintain coalitions against Islamist extremists and argued that it could put American lives in danger.

The decision to move the embassy does not have substantial support across the US population. Some scholars and politicians have pointed out that the majority of Trumps support resonated with Evangelist and Conservative Jews which was a key factor the catalyst behind the controversial decision. Trump's Jerusalem declaration has been widely and enthusiastically welcomed by his religious supporters. He declared Jerusalem the capital of Israel because of the fear of losing the Evangelical voter base. There are no fewer than 50 million Evangelicals in America who, according to research, are convinced of the literal truth of Biblical prophecy. A recent survey found that 82 per cent of white Evangelicals believe that God gave Israel to the Jewish people. (Kim Sengupta, 8.12.2017, Independent)

In this paper I will evaluate the significance of the Trump administration in having decided to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, despite publicly voiced concerns from close US allies in the region and Europe.

Key Words: Jerusalem, Israel, Evangelicals, Palestine, The United States

1. Status of Jerusalem

On Nov. 29, 1947, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution calling for Palestine to be partitioned between Arabs and Jews, allowing for the formation of the Jewish state of Israel. According to that resolution Jerusalem and its environs would be a "corpus separatum", inferring a 'separate' city with a special legal and political status due to its shared religious importance. Under UN trusteeship for up to 10 years, after which the residents would decide its fate by referendum. (Yale Law Edu, UNGA, Res.181)

However, as a General Assembly resolution lacked the authority "designate" or determine anything, it could only suggest. The Israelis accepted the resolution, while all the Arab states denounced it. The city's status has been disputed, at least

officially, since the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. During the war, Israel seized the city's Western half and controlled it, and Jordan was in control of the Eastern half, which included the famous Old City. During the Arab-Israeli war, in 1967 Israel seized the Eastern half. After the 1967 war, Israel annexed the territory and proclaimed the city Israel's "eternal, undivided capital." But the international community, including the United States, continues to regard East Jerusalem as occupied sovereign territory, and to reject Israel's decision to settle its citizens there. (Zahriyeh, Al Jazeera America, 30.10.2014)

In 1980, the Knesset, the house of representatives (the parliament) of the State of Israel declared that "Jerusalem, complete and united, is the capital of Israel," but this law was declared null by the U.N.

Donald Trump announced on 6 December that the United States was recognising Jerusalem as the

capital of Israel. Most notable about his speech was not what he said, or how he said it, but the presence and demeanour of Vice-president Mike Pence. Though an element almost entirely missing from the reams of analysis following Trump's statement, Pence's beliefs do much to explain Trump's motivation.

Worldwide condemnation of the 'recognition' of Jerusalem as Israel's capital raises the question: why did Trump go so far at this time? The answers almost certainly lie in one particular element of evangelical Christianity, most commonly known as Christian Zionism, and one of its most fervent supporters, Vice-president Mike Pence. (Rogers, *Open Democracy*, 14.12.2017)

Trump certainly doesn't need to solidify his pro-Israel credentials; three of his key Middle East advisers are known to be sympathetic with the Israeli right. More importantly, the American public, including his Republican core, already thinks his policy is pro-Israel. The decision to move the embassy does not actually have much popular support across the US population as a whole. A Brookings Institution survey found that 59 percent of Americans said they preferred that Trump lean toward neither side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In contrast, 57 percent of Americans, including most Republicans, said he is in fact leaning toward Israel. Our poll also shows that 63 percent of all Americans oppose moving the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, including 44 percent of Republicans. (Telhami, 5.12.2017)

Jerusalem's religious significance is revered not only by Jews and Muslims, but Christians as well. Vatican and the Christian leaders from the churches and patriarchies across the historic city have collectively appealed to Trump in the form of a letter to continue to observe the current situation in Jerusalem—that its status must be decided through negotiations between all sides—or risk the extended hand of peace slipping away from both Jews and Arabs. (Newsweek Staff, 12.6.2017)

The United States has, for decades, positioned itself as the primary mediator between Israelis and Palestinians. The status of Jerusalem has always been one of the key issues set aside for final status negotiations. American diplomats tend to consider neutrality a bedrock principle and essential for peace. Most foresee a peace deal that gives western Jerusalem to Israel and eastern Jerusalem to a future Palestinian state. But the policy of

neutrality has grown contentious in American politics since the 1980s and the rise of the evangelical Christian right as a political force. The movement's pro-Israel positions — strongly in favour of Israeli control of Jerusalem — have roots in millenarian theology. (Fisher, *New York Times*, 9.12.2017)

American evangelicals, especially those close to President Donald Trump, hailed his announcement on Wednesday that the United States now recognizes Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Paula White, a Florida megachurch pastor who is close to Trump, said the President had fulfilled a campaign promise.

"Once again, President Trump has shown the world what I have always known — he is a leader who is willing to do what is right however loud the voices are of the sceptics and the critics. Evangelicals are ecstatic, for Israel is to us a sacred place and the Jewish people are our dearest friends.

"Jerusalem has been the object of the affection of both Jews and Christians down through history and the touchstone of prophecy. But most importantly, God gave Jerusalem — and the rest of the Holy Land — to the Jewish people," said the Rev. Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas and a member of Trump's evangelical advisory board. (Burke, *CNN Politics*, 6.12.2017)

The evangelists could always site God on their side. For Indiana pastor Paul Begley the embassy move is the beginning of "End of Days": "The Jewish People — I've been there, I'm telling you — they believe when the Temple's built, the Messiah will be revealed to them. Jesus will be revealed to the Jewish people, and they will embrace him." (Sengupta, *Independent*, 8.12.2017)

American evangelicals who support Israel report that they do so because they believe the Bible teaches that the Jews must possess their own country and establish their own state in the Holy Land before Jesus can return. (Gibbs, 2002)

2. Christian Zionism

Zionism simply means "a return to Zion", an ideology which has "permeated Jewish thinking ever since the earliest days of the Diaspora." (Dimont, 1962, p.393)

Zionism, is firmly rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures, which are replete with references to "ZiON". Zion

is synonymous with the city of Jerusalem. (In Wilkinson; Psalm 48: 1-2)

The Balfour Declaration marked a turning point in the history of the Zionist movement, the Zionist aspiration of creating a homeland had become a reality. While Zionists in Great Britain and Europe were engaged in agitating for the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, fundamentalist Christian supporters of a Jewish return to the Holy Land in America actively promoted their vision of God's destined plan for the Jewish people. (Sherbok, 2006, p.95)

Christian Zionism grew out of a particular theological system called pre-millennial dispensationalism. Pre-millennialism is a type of Christian theology as old as Christianity itself. It has its roots in Jewish apocalyptic thought and generally holds that Jesus will return to earth before he establishes, literally, a millennial kingdom under his sovereignty. (Wagner, 2003) According to Rabbi Dan Cohn-Sherbok; pre-millennial dispensationalism in its various forms has had a profound impact on the Christian right. Today, it is the most prevalent form of Christian Zionism, with millions of followers worldwide. (Sherbok, 2006, p.191)

Christian Zionism lays firmly within the Evangelical tradition and it is the fastest growing religious movement in Christianity today, they are promoting common interests between Israel and the Christian World. Christian Zionism lays the biblical foundation for Israel's restoration and the return of Christ.

As Encyclopaedia of Zionism and Israel stated, Christian Zionism is "a purely Christian affair" whose goals have "remained theological". (Encyclopaedia of Zionism and Israel: Vol.II, Patai, 948) Christian Zionists insist that the Land of Israel, the Jewish people, and the city of Jerusalem are "inextricably bonded together in covenant relationship". (Kitson, 2000, p.27)

According to Wilkinson; the establishment of Israel in 1948 cannot be explained "simply in terms of political Zionism, but must take account of a powerful, groundswell movement among Christians that has been running alongside. Based on a literal interpretation of the Bible, this movement influenced British foreign policy in the Middle East in the ninetieth and early twentieth centuries, culminating in the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and is having a major impact on current American foreign policy in the region. This

movement is known as Christian Zionism". (Wilkinson, 2013, Introduction)

Christian Zionists are determined to support Israel against charges of racism and apartheid. They have become a massive lobby and actively involved in Middle East affairs; they have lobbied Western governments on behalf of Jewish State; they promote Israeli products, host pro-Israeli events, and participate in solidarity tours. (Sherbok, 2006, p.181)

Although many Jews have now returned to the Land, and the State of Israel has been re-established, Christian Zionists insist that Israel's present territory is only a fraction of what was promised to Abraham and confirmed to Moses and Joshua. (In Wilkinson, Genesis 15:18; Numbers 34:3-12; Joshua 1:4)

According to Edward Flannery, "Palestine will never belong, by any real right of possession, to any people but the Jews... When the Jews repent and accept the Lord Jesus they will be given not only Palestine but also all the rest of the great Land of Promise, and will be blessing in the midst of the whole earth". Without Christian Zionism "it is highly unlikely that the present State of Israel would have come into being so rapidly as it did" (In Wilkinson; Flannery, 1997)

Christian Zionism has been described by Hamas as "the greatest danger to world truth, justice, and peace" and by the church as "a powerful force" that "fuels the Arab-Israeli conflict" and "encourages the destruction of millions of people" with its "Armageddon theology." It has also been denounced as "pernicious," "biblically untenable," "anathema to the Christian faith," and "one of the most dangerous and heretical movements in the world." (Wilkinson, 2013)

Millenarian concept of the Christian Zionism is the most difficult and dangerous global issues- not only in regards to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, but also the relationship between the West and the Islamic world.

Even before organized Zionism Pre-Millennialists advocated a Jewish state in Palestine. They were more eager to see a restored Israel than most Jews. Towards the end of 1870s, the idea of the 'restoration of the Jews' resulted in the creating of the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and in 1920 the Mandate for Palestine assigned to Great Britain and the State of Israel was established on the 14th of May 1948. Furthermore, the Trump

administration stated on the 23rd of February 2018 that the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem will open in May in order to coincide with the 70th anniversary of Israel declaring its independence.

It is generally accepted that Jews and evangelical Christians have little in common. Yet special alliances developed between the two groups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Evangelicals viewed Jews as both the rightful heirs of Israel and as a group who failed to recognize their true saviour. Consequently, they set out to influence the course of Jewish life by attempting to evangelize Jews and to facilitate their return to Palestine. (Ariel, 2013)

3. Roadmap to Armageddon

Christian Zionist theology of the Millenarian concept strives towards the 'restoration of the Jews' to the Holy Land, which had been developed by Anglican messianism and evangelism, this is evidenced through the established of New Jerusalem, which were common religious themes in seventeenth- to nineteenth-century America. This theology is often thought of as a "literal" reading of the Bible, it's actually a reasonably new interpretation of Bible teacher John Nelson Darby from Great Britain. He was the priest of Angelicin Church of Ireland. "Darby moulded into a consistent Christian Zionist theology, which has exerted great influence within contemporary evangelicalism throughout the World." (Wilkinson, 2013, Foreword by Dr. Thomas Ice)

Darby's extensive writings and 60-year career as a missionary consolidated a form of fundamentalism called pre-millennialism. The nation of Israel and the role of the city of Jerusalem are central in the "end-times" Armageddon theology – a form of what is known as "pre-millennialism" –embraced by many American conservative Protestants.

The basic millenarian concept can be summarized as follows:

" an integral element for the fulfilment of the prophecies about the Last Day was the 'return' of the Jews to the 'land of their fathers', to which they had an 'inalienable right'. The end of their Diaspora, their physical and religious restoration, and their gathering in Palestine and acceptance of the Christian gospel, was thought to be an essential part of the divine plan for human redemption, which would prepare the way for the 'second

coming' of Christ and the establishment of His Kingdom on earth." (Huneidi, 2001, pp.6-7)

At the centre of Pre-Millennialism system "was the belief that before any of the prophesied end-times events could take place, Jews would have to re-establish their own state in the Holy Land. Without a restored Jewish state, there could be no Antichrist, no great tribulation, no battle of Armageddon, and no second coming. In short, everything was riding on the Jews."

(Weber, 2005, p.13)

According to Darby, for this to happen; the Jewish people must have control of Jerusalem and build a third Jewish temple on the site where the first and second temples – destroyed centuries ago by the Babylonians and Romans – once were. In Darby's view this was a necessary precursor to the rapture, when believers would be "taken up" by Christ to escape the worst of the seven-year-period of suffering and turmoil on Earth: the Great Tribulation. This is to be followed by the cosmic battle between good and evil called Armageddon at which Satan will be defeated and Christ will establish his earthly kingdom. (Independent, 8.12.2017)

The first lobbying effort on behalf of a Jewish state in Palestine was not organized or initiated by Jews. It occurred in 1891, when a popular fundamentalist Christian writer and lay-preacher, William E. Blackstone, organized a national campaign to appeal to the then-president of the United States, Benjamin Harrison, to support the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. (Wagner, 2003)

For over one hundred years Pre-Millennialists insistence on the restoration of the Jewish state in the Holy Land seemed farfetched and extremely unlikely. All of this became eminently more possible when the modern state of Israel was established in 1948. They expected a much larger Israel than was established in 1948 that is why they approved Israeli efforts to expand their territory.

After the birth of Israel and its first war with the Arabs in 1948, Israel had gained control of nearly four-fifths of Palestine, expelled most of the Palestinians from these territories. This was a historic moment, a messianic moment, that would be seen by many as the fulfilment of ancient prophecies. This was no time to seek peace by making amends to a weak, defeated enemy. When Israel captured Jerusalem and the West Bank (not to mention Gaza, Sinai and the Golan Heights) in

the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, conservative Christians sensed that history had entered the latter days.

After the Six Day War in 1967 when Israel captured Jerusalem and the West Bank and more aggressively continued its expansion, this promoted Pre-Millennialists ideas with the confidence that Bible prophecy was being fulfilled for all to see. For the first time they believed that it was necessary to leave the benches and get onto the playing field to make sure the game ended according to the divine script.

Pre-Millennialists ignored the ethical issues involved the Palestinians, "whom they saw as the enemies of God's purpose" They supported Israel's occupation of Palestine with great enthusiasm and resisted the return of Palestinian immigrants to the occupied land, especially the city of Jerusalem. (Weber, pp. 15-17)

Protestant fundamentalism views the modern state of Israel as the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy and are therefore deserving of political, financial and religious support. Pre-Millennialists are certain that the trouble in the Middle East is inevitable. Striving for peace in the Middle East in other words, is a hopeless pursuit with no chance of success. They do not believe the road map should succeed. Partitioning is not in Israel's future. Peace is nowhere prophesised for the Middle East not until Jesus comes and brings it himself. Therefore, the worst thing the United States can do is to force Israel to give up land for regional peace. Anyone who pushes for peace is disobeying God's plan for the Armageddon.

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