

The EU Must Recognize the Palestinian State

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MADRID – Once again, US President Donald Trump has taken a unilateral approach to foreign policy – this time, by recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. And once again, Trump has misinterpreted the realities of the Middle East. Given that his latest move – which effectively blew up more than 70 years of international consensus – could precipitate a rapid deterioration in the region, it is imperative that the European Union step up.

The Trump administration's Middle East policy rests on a reinvigorated alliance between the United States and Saudi Arabia. Every American president since John F. Kennedy has made his first foreign visit either to Mexico, Canada, or Europe. Not Trump. He made a beeline to Riyadh, where he participated in a summit with 54 Muslim-majority countries and delivered an inflammatory speech vilifying Iran, which he asserted should be shunned by the international community.

After Saudi Arabia, Trump paid a visit to Israel, where he launched another fusillade of anti-Iran rhetoric. Saudi Arabia and Israel do not maintain diplomatic relations, but they are both US allies, and they have a shared opponent in Iran. In November, the head of the Israel Defense Forces, Lieutenant General Gadi Eisenkot, even expressed openness to sharing intelligence with Saudi Arabia to counter Iran. "With President Trump," Eisenkot told the Saudi publication *Elaph*, "there is an opportunity to build a new international coalition in the region."

The Saudi-Israeli rapprochement has been helped along by Saudi Arabia's new crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), who is pursuing a program of modernization, both domestically and in foreign-policy terms. Earlier this month, MBS was rumored to have proposed an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan that would have been highly favorable to Israel, although the US and Saudi governments have since denied those reports.

In any case, Trump has clearly wanted to take advantage of these circumstances to deliver a diplomatic coup. And yet his decision on Jerusalem forces the Saudis to confront a dilemma: whether to place a higher priority on defending the Palestinian cause, or on normalizing ties with Israel as a means to contain Iran.

Some Saudis seem to hope for the latter, proposing to leave aside thorny questions about the status of Jerusalem and the Palestinians in general. Trump, too, attempted to add nuance to his declaration, asserting that he was not taking a position on the specific geographical boundaries of Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem, and that the US embassy would not be moved from Tel Aviv immediately.

But, as former US special envoy for the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations Martin Indyk put it, the Americans “can try to limit the damage all they want, but they won’t be able to, because Jerusalem is such a hot-button issue.” That reality was reflected in the eruption of street protests across the Middle East soon after Trump’s announcement, though the large-scale violence that some feared has not occurred.

More telling, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation held an extraordinary summit in Istanbul, where its members reaffirmed “the centrality of the cause of Palestine and Al-Quds Al-Sharif [Jerusalem] to the Muslim Ummah,” recognized East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine, and strongly condemned Trump’s actions.

No Muslim, it seems, is prepared to forget that Jerusalem is home to the Al-Aqsa mosque, the third most sacred site in Islam. Saudi Arabia’s King Salman referred to the mosque when he warned Trump just how harmful the Jerusalem decision would be. And when Trump announced the decision anyway, the Kingdom derided it as “unjustified” and “irresponsible.”

The simple truth is that Saudi Arabia cannot distance itself from the Palestinian cause and allow other countries like Turkey and even Iran to carry the banner. That would amount to a tactical mistake akin to severing ties with Qatar a few months ago. It would also be difficult, if not impossible, for the Saudis suddenly to support a plan that was radically different from the Arab Peace Initiative, known as the “Saudi Initiative,” which was approved in 2002 and endorsed by the Arab League this year.

So Trump’s dream scenario – in which Saudi Arabia sides with Israel to pressure the Palestinians to make peace – is not going to materialize. First, Saudi Arabia is not in a position to waive Arab claims on Jerusalem. Second, a strategy that gives the Palestinians no say in their fate, and the fate of Jerusalem, will never succeed. And, third, Trump’s administration – including his son-in-law Jared Kushner, to whom Trump has entrusted the US role in the Arab-Israeli peace process – is staffed with businesspeople, not politicians, as Kushner himself recently pointed out. But Jerusalem, and the Israel-Palestine conflict more broadly, is far too fraught to be treated like a business deal.

Though Trump has not ruled out the two-state solution – the approach endorsed by the United Nations – he may have put the final nail in its coffin. The only way to save it, or even to get the Israelis and the Palestinians to return to the negotiating table, is to work toward a more level playing field. Here, the EU must

take the lead and send a message that is as forceful as it is necessary, by immediately recognizing – as over 70% of UN member states have already done – the State of Palestine.

The path toward a two-state solution should start with the Arab Peace Initiative, which stipulates that the Arab League would recognize Israel if it were to retreat into its pre-1967 borders, though an alternative, more gradual approach could be considered. The two-state solution – which would allow Israel to retain its Jewish and democratic character, and should guarantee the viability of the Palestinian state – still represents the most credible way out of the Arab-Israeli quagmire. But if we are to achieve the “separation because of respect” that Yitzhak Rabin envisioned in the 1990s, there is no time to lose: the point of no return is inching closer with each passing day.



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