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On December 6, U.S. President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Arab and Muslim nations, as well as the rest of the international community, were surprised by the announcement and are urging Trump to rescind his decision. There are concerns that the declaration by the U.S. could become a new source of instability in the Middle East. While the repercussions of President Trump's decision will likely last through 2018, we have prepared a summary of the situation as of the end of December 2017.

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Repercussions of President Trump's Recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's Capital

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Introduction

On December 6, 2017, U.S. President Donald Trump declared Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Trump's sudden break from the U.S. government's position on Jerusalem, maintained over half-a-century, was driven not by diplomatic policies or strategies, but by his desire to fulfill the campaign promises made during the 2016 presidential election. By making good on his campaign pledge, Trump enhanced his appeal among his supporters at home. He even boasted that he was unlike his three predecessors, who had made empty promises to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem after Congress decided on the relocation in 1995. The abrupt shift in the U.S. policy, however, shocked Palestine, Arab nations, and Muslim nations. The international community is critical of the U.S. decision and is

concerned that it would lead to further instability in the Middle East.

1. A “reality” for President Trump

President Trump claimed that Jerusalem was already the capital of Israel and that he was merely acknowledging this reality. He stressed that the United States’ general position on the Jerusalem issue would remain unchanged: the U.S. would respect the results of future negotiations to determine the Jerusalem boundaries and did not intend to change the current status of the holy sites in East Jerusalem. Further, while the U.S. would begin preparation to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the actual relocation would take place in the future. However, Palestine and the Arab world, Muslim nations, and the international community are not satisfied with this explanation. Arab nations and the global community have taken the stance of leaving Israel and Palestine to negotiate the issue of Jerusalem and the final status of the East–West Jerusalem division and of respecting and recognizing the results. For this reason, the international community has avoided making any decisions concerning which parts of Jerusalem would be the capitals of Israel and Palestine, until the agreement is finalized through negotiations. While claiming to be addressing the Jerusalem issue using the same approach taken by the international community, Trump is, in fact, doing the exact opposite. Although he boasts that the announcement marks a “new approach,” the strategy has been seen as a dangerous move that would provoke the Arabs, particularly the Muslims.

President Trump stressed that Jerusalem is already home to Israel’s national legislature and Prime Minister’s Office and is functioning as the nation’s capital. While this is true, Trump failed to mention that approximately 40% of the population of Jerusalem is Palestinian and that the city of Jerusalem continues to be divided into the western and eastern portions. Although the international community recognizes that Jerusalem is where the Knesset and Prime Minister’s Office are located, and the city functions as the country’s capital, this only holds true for West Jerusalem and not for East Jerusalem, where the Palestinians live. Trump’s announcement refers to the existence of East Jerusalem only by inference by stating that the boundaries of Jerusalem are to be determined by the results of future negotiations. The wording strongly suggests that Trump looks at Jerusalem from Israel’s perspective.

2. Trump’s explanation to his supporters at home

By making the announcement, Trump supported Israel’s claims to Jerusalem. Statements by Nikki Haley, U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, at the U.N. Security Council and an emergency session of the U.N. General Assembly as well as President Trump’s

aggressive rhetoric against U.N. members may be considered effective if they are interpreted to be part of Trump's campaign strategies targeting his domestic supporters. The problem, however, is that while President Trump and Ambassador Haley are virtually speaking on behalf of Israel, they are also claiming that the U.S. is perceived by the international community as a fair mediator for the Middle East peace negotiations and that it was willing to broker the final peace agreement between Israel and Palestine, which former U.S. administrations have failed to achieve. No doubt this is unacceptable to Palestine. President Abbas has criticized the U.S. for voluntarily abandoning its role as a Middle East mediator and is refusing to discuss the Middle East peace process with members of the Trump administration. Arab nations, Muslim nations, and the international community, including the EU, are urging the U.S. to renew its commitment to its role as a mediator. While it is clear that Trump is isolated in the international community, he has enhanced his reputation among his supporters in the U.S. as a strong president who stands by his principles, even at the expense of opposing the majority opinion of the international community.

3. Persistent concerns

President Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital immediately set off a wave of emotion across the Arab and Muslim worlds, raising concerns of violent backlash in the region. Fortunately, however, such concerns have proved unfounded so far. The emergency meeting of Arab League foreign ministers held on December 9 in Cairo, and the extraordinary session of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held on December 13 in Istanbul, condemned the Trump administration and adopted a resolution to urge the Trump administration to rescind its decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. These resolutions, however, were adopted as a formality only, and no decisions were made on specific actions. Further, while Trump's decision sparked protests in various parts of the Muslim world, including in Asian nations, such as Indonesia and Malaysia, the anticipated violent demonstrations did not take place. The situation could be interpreted as evidence that the Arabs and the Muslims are not very troubled by President's Trump's decision, but it is too early to tell. Concerns that Trump's announcement will become a new source of instability and lead to further unrest in the Middle East and Muslim nations remain to this day.

Needless to say, Israel welcomed Trump's announcement. Partly in response to the request by the U.S., the Israeli government has exercised restraint in its celebrations and maintained a low-key political and diplomatic tone. There is no doubt, however, that Trump's declaration has emboldened Israel's right wing and extreme right. Any extreme

action on their part could trigger an explosion of anti-U.S. sentiment against Israel. It was reported on December 25 that an Israeli legislator, who is a member of the right-wing Likud party, boarded a bus provided by the Red Cross taking Palestinian families to visit prisoners in an Israeli prison and hurled abuse at a prisoner's mother, calling her son a "dog." If Israel's right wing and extreme right, which are now believed to have the strong support of the U.S., infuriate the Palestinians by taking inflammatory actions like that of the Likud legislator, tensions could quickly rise across the West Bank and Gaza.

4. No substitute for the U.S. as Middle East mediator

President Abbas has expressed his intention not to deal with the Trump administration regarding the Middle East peace negotiations, saying that the U.S. abandoned its role as the Middle East mediator. The Palestinian Authority has indicated its intention to give up on negotiating directly with Israel and instead pursue its diplomatic strategies through the U.N. and join international organizations and treaties. Abbas also sent delegates to China and Russia to seek a new mediator to replace the U.S. However, it is not realistic to look for a mediator other than the U.S. for the Middle East peace negotiations. Although Russia, China, and the EU can supplement the role played by the U.S., none has the political power to replace the U.S. Moreover, there is no possibility that Israel would recognize as a mediator any country other than the U.S., a nation critical for its survival. However, attention should be drawn to the fact that the entire negotiation of the 1993 Oslo Accords, the most important set of agreements related to peace in the Middle East, was carried out with virtually no mediation or pressure by the U.S., from when the negotiation began until the agreement was signed. In other words, a country other than the U.S. may be able to bring the parties to the negotiation table as a mediator depending on the circumstances.

Instead of treating the U.S. as its enemy, Palestine has always tried to bring the U.S. over to its side. This has not changed even after Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Assuming that things will go smoothly, Trump has three more years—or seven years if he is re-elected—left in his term. Depending on the development of Trump–Russia collusion and other political scandals, he may even have less than three years. Waiting for the next president to replace Trump is likely a more realistic strategy for Palestine than seeking a mediator other than the U.S. According to a CNN report on December 22, a public opinion poll conducted in the U.S. showed 71% of supporters of the Democratic Party oppose Trump's announcement, and two-thirds of all respondents believe that the U.S. should not side with one of the parties to the Middle East peace negotiations. Groups that support President Trump exist in some parts of the U.S., but there are also groups that oppose his recent announcement. If a Democratic candidate is elected the next president,

s/he may reverse the U.S. position on Jerusalem to what it was before December 6, 2017. Even if the next president is a Republican, s/he may be capable of understanding the differences between foreign policy and domestic politics. If the next president revises the decision on Jerusalem, the U.S. policy on Israel may also change. A shift in the U.S.–Israel relationship would destabilize the United States’ long-standing support for Israel (i.e., bipartisan support for Israel that remains unchanged even with a change of government). A fundamental change in the “special relationship” between the U.S. and Israel may represent an opportunity to improve the relationship between Palestine and the U.S. To achieve this, Palestine must maintain a good relationship with U.S. government agencies, such as the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA, as well as with the American people, even if they harbor a deeper distrust of the Trump administration. It may not be possible to expect the current Palestinian leaders to take such a step. They may, however, consider it as one of the options, when they analyze the U.S. domestic situation at a later time from a more objective perspective.

5. Priorities for Palestine

Currently, there is no progress in the Middle East peace talks. Nor are there signs that the Middle East plan currently being drafted by the Trump administration is taking shape. Judging from the abrupt decision regarding Jerusalem, Palestine should not have high expectations for President Trump’s peace proposal expected to be announced in 2018. It is also unclear to what extent the top leadership of the administration understands Palestine. A White House source acknowledges that it is natural for Palestine to be unhappy about the decision on Jerusalem, but says that Palestine has no other option than to rely on mediation by the U.S. With its weaker position seen by the U.S., Palestine will likely face challenges down the road. If that is the case, Palestine’s current priority should then be to address its internal problems. At the top of the list is the resolution of the division between the West Bank and Gaza. The reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas appears to have reached a stalemate following Trump’s unexpected declaration on Jerusalem.

Another priority should be to strengthen the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). In a poll conducted in Palestine after Trump named Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, 70% answered that President Abbas should resign. No doubt there is growing dissatisfaction with President Abbas, who has attempted to resolve the issue through negotiations. At the same time, however, changes that have occurred within the PLO also raise serious concerns. The PLO’s position was complicated by the 1993 Oslo Accords. Originally formed to fight Israel with the goal of the “liberation of Palestine,” the PLO has also served as the Palestinian National Authority (PA) since 1993. The PA is an organization responsible for

performing administrative functions and maintaining public order in collaboration with Israel and is expected to eventually serve as Palestine's national government. Although it would be impossible to integrate the roles of the PLO and PA, the PLO-PA dual structure was expected to end after a short period, and any organizational issues were to be resolved as Palestine developed into a nation. However, the situation has remained unchanged for nearly 25 years. The protracted, irregular situation has strained Palestine's political system. Despite the continuing occupation by Israel, Palestine is expected to cooperate with, and not fight against, Israel. As no progress is made in peace negotiations, it is only natural that Palestine's dissatisfaction with the PLO/PA leadership continues to grow.

Palestine had already been discussing how to make the PLO a stronger organization, even before President Trump made the announcement on Jerusalem. As the Middle East peace negotiations continue without a mediator, greater importance will be accorded to the PLO. In one way or another, President Abbas will likely resign from the role of Chairman of the PLO and President of the PA in the near future. Some believe that Trump's announcement will accelerate the move to elect the next PLO chairman. A Palestinian from the West Bank/Gaza, not a Palestinian in exile, will likely be elected as the next PLO chairman. Those who are currently rumored to be candidates to be the next PLO chairman are politicians who have an active role in the PLO/PA organization, have experience serving in an Israeli prison, speak Hebrew, and are part of a generation that is deeply familiar with the behavioral patterns of the Israelis. They are the new leaders of the PLO, but do not have a strong relationship with Palestinians in exile and are not seen as politicians who represent Palestinians in exile. However, the PLO was originally established and developed by Palestinians in exile. The next PLO chairman also needs to help bridge this gap.

6. Repercussions within the U.S.

President Trump's sudden break from the long-standing American policy on Jerusalem could have repercussions for not only the international community, but also for the U.S. domestic situation. Trump's decision was made to fulfill his campaign promise to the Christian right (evangelical Christians) and conservative Jewish-Americans, who support the Republican Party (representing approximately 20% of the entire Jewish population in the U.S.). So far, American support for Israel has been explained by the magnitude of political influence exerted by Jewish-Americans. However, Trump's recent action demonstrated the strong influence of the evangelicals. It also became clear that the enthusiastic support for Israel by the Christian political right had nothing to do with political, diplomatic, or security considerations, but is driven by religious motivations based

on their interpretation of the Bible. The situation may present a good opportunity for American voters to re-examine the foundation of the special relationship between Israel and the U.S. As supporters of the Democratic Party and liberal Jewish-Americans sharpen their criticisms of Israel, the Christian right and conservative Jewish-Americans are enhancing their fervent and uncritical support of Israel. Trump's decision could further intensify the tension between the two sides.

In his December 7 article, Roger Cohen, a columnist for *The New York Times*, wrote that one of the reasons for criticizing Trump's action is it puts American lives in danger. U.S. organizations that could potentially suffer the most serious impacts from Trump's decision are the State Department (DOS) and the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM). Following the recognition of Jerusalem, DOS employees and USCENTCOM officers stationed in Middle East and Muslim nations face new dangers. Deeply familiar with regional affairs, they must be aware that they could become the target of a backlash against Trump's action. They also understand that they are facing a greater threat not as a result of American political, diplomatic, and security policies, but for the interest of presidential election campaigns.

7. Conclusion

The impacts of Trump's abrupt shift in the U.S. policy on Jerusalem cannot be judged on a short-term basis. Repercussions from the action must be analyzed from medium-term and long-term perspectives, not only in the Middle East context, but also in the international context, including the U.S. domestic situation. Trump's pro-Israel announcement may benefit the current conservative government in Israel. However, from mid- and long-term perspectives, the decision may destabilize the structure of the "special relationship" between the U.S. and Israel. Although Palestine has intensified its opposition to Trump, it would be difficult for pro-U.S. Arab nations and Muslim nations to reconsider their relationship with the U.S. in any significant way except to criticize the Trump administration. As the Palestinians mark important historical anniversaries—100 years since the Balfour Declaration and 50 years since the Third Arab–Israeli War in 1967—they are set to face even greater challenges ahead.