

Why Jerusalem Is the Capital of Israel - And Palestine

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, DEC 8 2017

This week the U.S. officially recognized Jerusalem as the capital of the modern state of Israel. From my perspective, this is fantastic news. It reflects, I hope, the beginning of a new era in U.S. and other countries' approaches to Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East in general, one that takes more seriously the empirical situation on the ground in those places at both the level of institutions and the people.

When considering a question such as Jerusalem, my approach is at once institutional and grassroots in orientation. That is, where are the major national or state institutions? And where are the people on the question? In Israel, the main institutions of the national government are in Jerusalem and have been since the years immediately after the establishment of the state (as quickly as was practicable). And, at the level of the people, overwhelmingly, Jerusalem is the capital in the hearts of the people. For me, it is a very practical, empirical issue – a sort of Weberian ethnographic realism (to be distinguished from Realism in IR).

What about Palestinians? First, it is my understanding that the initial decision of the U.S. not to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel had more to do, at the time, with domestic politics, including complicated and varying positions of Christian constituencies in the U.S. For international actors, the desire to make Jerusalem a city controlled by an “internationalized” entity has been important to some. When you read in the news – sometimes as an aside – that some actors wanted Jerusalem to be “internationalized,” that is what it means: controlled by an international body (of Western actors) that would be created for that purpose. Power politics has always been part of the question of Jerusalem.

Many of the debates today center on Israel's taking of East Jerusalem in 1967 and declaring a united East and West Jerusalem to be its capital in 1980. However, regardless of that controversy, which is valid, Israel's Parliament (the Knesset) has been located in Jerusalem since 1949. The current Knesset building was constructed in the late 1950s. Israel's other major national institutions have been located in Jerusalem since roughly the establishment of the state as well. So, the battle is really over the question of whether Israel should control East Jerusalem; I lean to the Palestinian side on that question, so I am not trying to understate its importance. However, the fact of Jerusalem being Israel's capital is simply a matter of empirics on both the institutional level and the level of the people.

Nonetheless, Palestinians are rightfully concerned that naming Jerusalem as the capital of Israel will carry the normative weight of making Jerusalem somehow something that does not belong equally to Palestinians any longer.

In regard to the question of Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian people, if we consider the question at the institutional and grassroots levels, then, again, the answer is that Jerusalem is the capital of the Palestinian people. To begin with the level of the people, overwhelmingly, Jerusalem is the capital in the hearts of the Palestinian people. At the institutional level, many of the most important national institutions of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people (whether now open or closed) are in Jerusalem. Some of these are equivalent to pre-state institutions of the Zionist movement in Mandatory Palestine, such as the Histadrut; the latter became a major building block for institutional and bureaucratic efficacy of the early state in the case of Israel. Because of the situation of ongoing hostilities with Israel, some institutions of the Palestinian Authority are or have been located elsewhere, such as Ramallah or Jericho. But, others are in Jerusalem – and, certainly, all would be in Jerusalem in a situation of non-conflict.

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The current location of some of the national institutions of the Palestinian Authority has to do with limited access to Jerusalem due to the real security situation of the state of Israel. Presumably, in a two-state situation where a peace is respected on both sides, this would no longer be the case. I say this not as a dreamer, but, in a sense, as a statement to both sides. Both sides want peace. Both sides complain about the current state of non-peace. And, yet, in a real sense, the solution is simple: institutional enforcement of the peace on their own populations on the parts of both sides. That is, if ever there is a peace, breakers of it must be punished by their own government and its effective institutional and bureaucratic apparatus.

Reading, together, Max Weber, Michael Mann, and Samuel Huntington on institutions, we can say that the difference between a government and a state lies in their relative levels of development of political institutions and bureaucratic apparatus. That is, a government may be able to offer representative bodies to hear and voice the needs of the people but, without political institutions and an effective and operational bureaucratic apparatus, the needs of the people may be heard endlessly without any chance of ever being met. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and the Palestinian Authority have the unenviable job of selling the decidedly *non-flashy, non-dramatic* modern, systematic, merit-based, and procedural bureaucracy to a good people now used to many decades of statelessness and guerilla warfare. As he does so, I hope that he is also asking Donald Trump for recognition of East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.

If I were a lobbyist today for Palestinians – which I am not – rather than seeing the recognition of Jerusalem as capital of Israel as a stumbling block, I would be walking to the appropriate representative offices on Capitol Hill and elsewhere, putting my gloves in my lap, and asking for the same thing.

About the author:

Dr. Patricia Sohn, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Florida. She is co-editor of *Beyond the Death of God: Religion in 21st Century International Politics*, (University of Michigan Press 2022); and author of *Judicial Power and National Politics: Courts and Gender in the Religious-Secular Conflict in Israel* (SUNY Press 2017 and 2008).