

A stab in the heart of a peace process

An American President taking a pro-Israeli decision related to the Israel-Palestine conflict is no surprise. The U.S. has largely favoured Israel throughout the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories and East Jerusalem. It has offered protection to Israel in the UN Security Council, come to its aid in times of crises, and provided it with advanced weapons. The U.S. has even looked away when Israel was amassing nuclear weapons. In return, Israel has become America's greatest ally in West Asia.

Despite this special relationship, previous American Presidents have been wary of recognising Israel's claims over Jerusalem. Even after the U.S. Congress passed the Jerusalem Embassy Act, urging the Administration to relocate the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to the Holy City, American Presidents have deferred the decision endlessly given international public opinion and the political and moral sensitivity of the issue. It is this consensus that U.S. President Donald Trump has now broken by recognising Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Mr. Trump's supporters claim he was acting on a long-made promise, and that Washington remains committed to the peace process irrespective of the Jerusalem move. They also say that Mr. Trump has just shown the world he is a tough decision-maker and can act decisively while brokering peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. But what these arguments conveniently forget is that Jerusalem is at the very heart of an Israeli-Palestinian solution. By endorsing Israel's claims over the city, the American President has driven a knife into that heart. A President who promised the "ultimate deal" to resolve the conflict has effectively dealt a body blow to the peace process.

This is not diplomacy. If this is a calculated move as part of a diplomatic package, the U.S. would have held talks with both sides and extracted compromises, taking the peace process a step forward. If so, Mr. Trump would also have said which part of Jerusalem he was recognising as Israel's seat of power and endorsed the Palestinians' claim over East Jerusalem, including the Old City. Instead, Mr. Trump has taken a unilateral decision giving the largest concession to Israel, perhaps since the Oslo process, without getting any promises in return. His move will only strengthen the Israeli Right, which is dead opposed to ceding any inch of Jerusalem to a future Palestinian state.

History is not on the side of the likes of Mr. Trump and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Jerusalem has never been recognised as Israel's capital by the international community. In the original UN General Assembly plan to partition Palestine and create independent Jewish and Arab states, Jerusalem was deemed an international city. The Zionists didn't wait for the plan to be implemented by the UN. In 1948, they declared the state of Israel and in the ensuing Arab-Israeli war, they captured 23% more territories than even what the UN had proposed, including the western half of Jerusalem. Israel seized East Jerusalem in 1967 from Jordan, and later annexed it. Since then, Israel has been encouraging illegal settlements in the eastern parts of the city, with Palestinians being forced to live in their historical neighbourhoods.

The Israeli Right has always made claims over the whole of the city. In 1980, when the Likud government was in power, the Israeli Parliament passed a basic law, declaring Jerusalem "complete and united" as its capital. This move invoked sharp reaction from world powers, including the U.S. The UN Security Council (UNSC) declared the draft law "null and void" and urged member countries to withdraw their diplomatic missions from the Holy City. This is the reason all countries have their embassies in Tel Aviv despite West Jerusalem being Israel's seat of power for decades. Israel defying international norms and UNSC resolutions is nothing new, but America publicly endorsing Israel's illegal claims is unprecedented.

In an ideal world, had the U.S. been a neutral power broker, it should have put pressure on Israel to come forward and engage the Palestinians in talks. This is because on the Palestinian side, conditions for talks now look better. Hamas, the Islamist movement that controls the Gaza Strip, recently came up with a new political charter that signals a readiness to deal with Israel and accept the 1967 border for a future Palestinian state — a compromise which has been compared to the group's rhetorical anti-Semitic claims in the past. Hamas and the Fatah, Palestine President Mahmoud Abbas's party that rules parts of the West Bank, also reached a reconciliation agreement recently. This could have been used as an opening to break the logjam in the peace process. Israel's history suggests that it will not agree to any compromise unless it is forced to do so. Over the years, it has continued its illegal settlements in the occupied territories despite repeated warnings from the international community. If it was really bothered about peace it would have frozen the settlements and agreed to having talks with the Palestinians.

The only country that can put effective pressure on Israel is the U.S. American Presidents have done that in the past without upsetting the U.S.-Israel alliance. Notable among them has been President Jimmy Carter who practically arm-twisted Israel's right-wing Prime Minister Menachem Begin to join talks with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and even with the Palestinians (whose claim over the occupied territories was not even recognised by the Israeli Right those days). Mr. Carter's attempts proved successful as Begin and Sadat finally signed the Camp David Agreement. President Bill Clinton also played a key role in the 2000 Camp David negotiations between Yasser Arafat and Israel's Ehud Barak, which eventually failed to reach a deal. But since the collapse of the Second Camp David talks, American Presidents have largely looked away from the issue. President George Bush's 2007 Annapolis Conference was no more than a photo op in the last days of his presidency. President Barack Obama's focus was on the Iran deal, while his administration offered full support to Israel at the UN. And Mr. Trump is least interested in finding cues of peace on the Palestinian side and acting upon them by putting pressure on Israel, the occupying force, for compromises. In his world, what matters is America's cultural and military alliance with Israel.

The real tragedy is the impact Mr. Trump's decision will have on the Palestinian people. The hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, who live in the annexed East Jerusalem without even Israeli citizenship, hope to be free at some point in time. Likewise, the millions of Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank and the blockaded Gaza hope to see East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. The U.S. has struck a blow against these hopes. First they lost their city and now are losing even their claims. This will only lead to their despair mounting. But if the history of Jerusalem states anything, it is that its disputes cannot be settled by force. During the Crusades, both Christians and Muslims captured the city using brutal force. The Ottomans ruled it for centuries only to have it lost to the British a century ago. The Jordanians and the Israelis split it among themselves for two decades after the Second World War. And, now, a millennium after the Crusades, the status of Jerusalem is still disputed. Mr. Trump's move may be a big shot in the arm for the Israelis, but a final settlement is still afar.

stanly.johny@thehindu.co.in

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