



President Trump's Declaration on Jerusalem: Arab Citizens' Response and Jewish-Arab Discourse in Israel

December 2017

On December 1st, American President Donald Trump allowed a waiver of the 1995 *Jerusalem Embassy Act*¹ to expire and in so doing, technically recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and set in motion plans enabling the relocation the American Embassy there from its current location in Tel Aviv. A few days later, on December 6th, President Trump formally and publicly recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital in a televised announcement and issued a directive to the State Department to begin the embassy move. These actions reverse longstanding American and international precedent regarding Jerusalem,² as well as convention since 1993 that “the status of Jerusalem is a core issue to be addressed bilaterally in permanent status negotiations” between Israel and the Palestinians.³

Within the context of Arab citizens of Israel and Jewish-Arab relations in the country, the announcements have had a polarizing effect. While the majority of [Jewish Israeli political leaders](#) seem to be aligned in support of the actions, Arab political leadership [has been vocal in its opposition](#). Even before the official announcement, MK Ayman Odeh, the Chair of the Joint Arab List, called President Trump “a pyromaniac” and warned that he “will set the entire region ablaze with his madness” if he goes through with it. MK Ahmad Tibi, also from the Joint List, said moving the US embassy “is in violation of international law” and will “seriously damage the vision for two states.”⁴

For Arab citizens of Israel, the opposition to the moves has a number of different roots. Arab citizens have close national, ethnic, and familial ties with Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza and feel morally connected to Palestinian concerns that Trump’s actions take Israel’s side while

¹ The Jerusalem Embassy Act is “An Act To provide for the relocation of the United States Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and for other purposes.” [U.S. Cong. Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995](#). 104th Congress, Public Law 104–45, NOV. 8, 1995.

² “When Israel declared independence in 1948, President Truman immediately recognized the new state. But the United States did not recognize Israeli sovereignty over any part of Jerusalem. Nor did it recognize Jordanian sovereignty over the part of the city it controlled. That same year, the United Nations General Assembly, with United States support, passed a resolution stating that Jerusalem ‘should be accorded special and separate treatment from the rest of Palestine.’... In 1967, Israel established control over the entire city of Jerusalem. In subsequent United Nations proceedings, the United States stated that the “continuing policy of the United States Government” was that “the status of Jerusalem . . . should be decided not unilaterally but in consultation with all concerned.” The United States emphasized that it did not recognize any Israeli measures as “altering the status of Jerusalem” or “prejudging the final and permanent status of Jerusalem.” [2014 merits brief in the matter of Zivotofsky v. Kerry](#), as quoted in [Anderson, Scott R. and Schwartz, Yishai, “On Waiving the Jerusalem Embassy Act \(or Not\)” lawfareblog.com, November 30, 2017](#).

³ Ibid. [Anderson, Scott R. and Schwartz, Yishai](#), November 30, 2017.

⁴ Fulbright, Alexander [“Arab MKs accuse ‘pyromaniac’ Trump of ‘diplomatic terror’ with Jerusalem moves” Times of Israel](#), December 05, 2017.

“ignor[ing] the national rights of the Palestinian people.”⁵ MK Ayman Odeh expressed this sense of one-sidedness succinctly saying that “[i]f the Israeli government wants the world to recognize West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, all it has to do is recognize East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.”⁶ In large part, outcry among Arab citizens is—as MK Yousef Jabareen (Joint List) explained about a protest in Um El Fahem, (an Arab city in Northern Israel), an expression of “solidarity with the Palestinian people and their struggle for independence.”⁷

From a religious angle, the move triggered Muslim concerns about control of Jerusalem and its holy sites, [echoing demonstrations over access to the Temple Mount last July](#).⁸ In a protest in the Arab city of Sakhnin, also in Israel’s northern region, on December 8th [Mohammad Barakei](#), Head of the High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel,⁹ called on all Arab and Islamic countries to withdraw their ambassadors from Washington and said “Jerusalem will not be alone. All the Palestinian people will defend it.” Other protesters said “our spirit will prevail because we have the right and the mission to guard Jerusalem,” and signs carried along the route read [“Jerusalem and al-Aksa are a redline \[sic\].”](#)

Finally, many in Arab society perceive¹⁰ Trump’s move as signaling an end to the Peace Process,¹¹ which they emphasized is a shared Jewish and Arab pursuit. “A peace arrangement is in everyone’s interest,” said MK Gouma Azbarga (Joint List). “[T]he people who live here aren’t Trump and the Americans, it’s us together. This is bad for everyone.”¹² Ghazal Abu Raya, spokesman for the Arab municipality of Sakhnin, said that “the future of Israel will not be decided by Trump but rather by the Israeli public, which must live in peace not with New York or San Francisco, but with the Arab nation and the Palestinian nation.”¹³ MK Zohair Bahloul (Zionist Camp) said “[t]here is nothing like peace. If we solve the issue of Jerusalem [unilaterally] and war breaks out on all the fronts, what have we done? There will be endless casualties and tension.”¹⁴

From a broader perspective, the impact on Arab citizens of a perceived end of the Peace Process is a remaining question. Many Jewish and Arab scholars consider the Peace Process begun in 1993 as furthering Arab citizens’ self-conception as Israeli¹⁵ —in large part because Arab citizens

⁵ Harkov, Lahav [“Joint List Joins Palestinians’ Pence Snub”](#) *Jerusalem Post*, 12.13.17.

⁶ Ibid. Fulbright, Alexander.

⁷ Lynfield, Ben. [“Joy Over Trump’s Jerusalem Recognition Is Misguided, Arab Mks Say”](#) *Jerusalem Post*, 12.10.17

⁸ [“Shootings on the Temple Mount: Arab discourse and state-minority relations in the aftermath”](#) *Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues*, July 25, 2017.

⁹ The High Follow Up Committee of Arab Citizens of Israel is “an extra-parliamentary umbrella organization that represents Arab citizens of Israel at the national level. It is ‘the top representative body deliberating matters of general concern to the entire Arab community and making binding decisions.’” [High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel. \(2017, August 29\). In Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Retrieved 02:01, December 26, 2017.](#)

¹⁰ Ibid. Lynfield, Ben.

¹¹ President Trump’s announcements included assurances that the decision [“is not intended, in any way, to reflect a departure from our strong commitment to facilitate a lasting peace agreement,”](#) nor that the US is taking any position on [“any final status issues, including the specific boundaries of the Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem, or the resolution of contested borders.”](#) [www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem/](#)

¹² Lynfield, Ben. [“Joy Over Trump’s Jerusalem Recognition Is Misguided, Arab Mks Say”](#) *Jerusalem Post*, 12.10.17.

¹³ Lynfield, Ben. [“Thousands of Israeli Arabs Protest Trump’s Jerusalem Decision”](#) *Jerusalem Post*, 12.15, 2017.

¹⁴ Lynfield, Ben. [“Joy Over Trump’s Jerusalem Recognition Is Misguided, Arab Mks Say”](#) *Jerusalem Post*, 12.10.17.

¹⁵ A “[f]ew survey studies conducted in the early years after Oslo Agreement, signed in September 1993, indicate that Palestinian identity had weakened and Israeli identity had strengthened among Palestinians in Israel. Smooha (1998: 43) reported, for example, that the percentage of Arab respondents in his surveys who consider the term “Israeli” as fitting to describe their identity increased from 46% in 1988 to 63% in 1995, while the percentage of those who consider the term “Israeli Palestinian” as

received no mention or consideration by Palestinian leadership in the peace discussions nor in the accords signed by Israel and the Palestinians.¹⁶ This sense of marginalization by Palestinian society contributed to the fact that over the last several decades, Arab citizens, while remaining morally and personally connected with the plight of the Palestinian people, have come to increasingly see themselves as “native citizens of Israel who have accepted Israeli citizenship and have developed a connection to the place in which they live.”¹⁷ Thus, if for decades Arabs in Israel thought that they could not shape their relations with the state before the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was settled, today “most believe that they should stand for their fate without connection to this.”^{18,19}

Today the majority of Arab citizens believe they should seek better integration into Israel’s society and economy and these aims have been met by unprecedented government plans for Arab economic development²⁰. However, realizing these aims could become more difficult if there is escalation in the conflict between Israel and its Palestinian neighbors as these cross-border escalations are the greatest cause of increased tensions and fear between Jewish and Arab citizens in Israel.²¹ If Trump’s move is indeed perceived as an end to the peace process, and escalation of the conflict ensues, this is likely contribute to a more difficult atmosphere between Jews and Arabs in the country, making implementation of economic integration more challenging.

Protests in Arab Society

The day following Trump's announcement was declared as a "[Day of Rage](#)" in East Jerusalem, with numerous protests and a general strike affecting most commerce and educational institutions. Protests and violent confrontations [continued](#) and [intensified](#) in the West Bank and East Jerusalem Palestinian neighborhoods, spilling into the [Gaza Strip and Israel's south](#) as well.

fitting to describe their identity decreased from 68% to 60% respectively.⁵ Another survey study conducted by Ghanem in 1994 (Ghanem and Ozacky-Lazar, 2003: 275-276) had shown that about 68% of Arab respondents said that the term "Israeli" fits Arabs and Jews in Israel, and 28% said it fits Jews only. And when the respondents were asked a closed question to define their identity, the majority of them (75%) chose definitions which include the term 'Israeli'. [Mi'ari, Mahmoud "Collective Identity of Palestinians in Israel after Oslo" *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, Vol. 1 No. 8; July 2011, p. 227-228.](#)

¹⁶ “The relative weakening of Palestinian identity after Oslo is explained primarily by Oslo Agreement, which ignored totally the Palestinians in Israel. So, when the refugees question was raised, the internal refugees, forming about a fourth of the Palestinians in Israel, were not mentioned at all. As a result, Palestinians in Israel felt that they have been marginalized not only in Israeli society, but also in Palestinian society.” [Ibid. Mia'ari Mahmoud](#)

¹⁷ Khouri, Jack “[The wild attack by Bennett and Liberman against the residents of Wadi Ara ignores a complex reality](#)” *Haaretz* 12.11.2017.

¹⁸ Levi, Ephraim. “[The Arabs in Israel and the Establishment of a Palestinian State: The Pursuit to Attain Recognized Status as a National Indigenous Minority in the State of Israel](#)” *The Impact of Establishing A Palestinian State on Israeli Arabs*; S. Daniel Abraham Center for Strategic Dialogue. Netanya Academic College. September 2011. P. 36.

¹⁹ One of the key consequences of this new perspective was the release in 2006 of the "Future Vision" documents, in which a number of Arab academic and political leaders tried to formalize for the first time their own societal vision as a "national minority" inside Israel. An English translation of the document can be found here: <http://reut-institute.org/data/uploads/PDFVer/ENG.pdf>

²⁰ For example, see Inter Agency Task Force paper: [Historic Economic Development Plan for the Arab Sector: Overview and Key Allocation Areas, January 2016](#)

²¹ For example, see the Inter-Agency Task Force paper “[Escalations of October 2015: Impact on Jewish-Arab Relations in Israel](#)” iataskforce.org, October 2015.

Within Israel's Arab society, the High Follow-Up [Committee](#) for Arab Citizens of Israel met and called for protests throughout the country, including opposite the American Embassy in Tel Aviv and another during the Deputy Foreign Secretary's visit to the Knesset. On December 8th, numerous protests were held in Arab towns and villages—some [blocking highway traffic](#), clashing with police, and causing damage to vehicles. On subsequent days additional protests in Arab towns and cities, even those [attracting thousands](#), remained by and large, calm and non-violent.

Arab Knesset members announced they will join Palestinian leadership in [boycotting the now-delayed visit of US Vice President Mike Pence](#), and abstain from his planned speech to the Knesset on December 18th. Mayor of Nazareth Ali Salam (known for his strong [criticism](#) of Arab political leadership usually), took a similar stand announcing the [cancellation of the traditional Christmas celebrations](#) usually held in Nazareth this time of year, saying "The decision [by Donald Trump about Jerusalem] has taken away the joy of the holiday, and we will thus cancel the festivities this year."

Impact on Jewish-Arab Discourse

While most public discourse related to the American announcement focused on Jerusalem and on the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Israel's Jewish-Arab relations were riled when Minister of Defense Avigdor Liberman (Israel Beitenu) called on Jewish Israelis to "[boycott Wadi Ara](#)"²² following violence among Arab protestors near Ara-Arara, a village in the region. "Those people don't belong in Israel... They have no connection to the state of Israel and I call on the citizens of the state of Israel simply to boycott Wadi Ara."²³ Liberman's statements were met with a handful of supporting comments from Jewish politicians,²⁴ but for the most part, most Arab and Jewish politicians from the right and left issued numerous condemnations²⁵ (i.e. [MK Shelly Yehimovitch](#) (Zionist Camp) and [MK Amir Peretz](#) (Zionist Camp and former Minister of Defense); Joint List chair [MK Ayman Odeh](#), [MK Yousef Jabareen \(Joint List\)](#), and a statement issued by the [High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel \(Hebrew\)](#).)

In the media, Liberman's call generated heated exchanges including another former [Minister of Defense, Moshe Arens](#), writing that the "hooligans" causing trouble in Wadi Ara do not represent a security threat to the state of Israel, but that Liberman's call for boycott does.²⁶ [MK Ayman Odeh wrote in a column](#) that Liberman's statements are "part of a broad strategy to spark violence between Jews and Arabs" and that for "Lieberman, Israeli identity is built by stripping Arabs of their citizenship."²⁷ Others questioned the [legality of calling for such a boycott](#), or encouraged the Jewish public to [defy the call and shop in Wadi Ara intentionally](#).

In a column aiming to shed light on how this discourse affects Arab citizens of Israel, Haaretz journalist Jack Khouri appealed to the Government of Israel and the Jewish public to understand and acknowledge "the difficult reality in which the Arab public in Israel operates":

²² [Wadi Ara](#) is a region in the Haifa district populated largely by Arab citizens of Israel

²³ Gold, Avraham "[Liberman: Boycott Arab-Israeli Businesses In City Where Protests Broke Out](#)" *Jerusalem Post*, 12.10.17.

²⁴ Ibid. Gold Avraham.

²⁵ Benovadia, Dov "[Right, Left MKs Slam Liberman for Wadi Ara Boycott Comments](#)" *Hamodia*, Dec 10, 2017

²⁶ Arens, Moshe "[Integration, Not Alienation of Israeli Arabs Is Vital to State Security](#)" *Haaretz*, 12.17.17.

²⁷ Odeh, Ayman "[A Campaign of Transfer and Expulsion](#)" *Haaretz*, 12.21.17.

The strong desire [of Arab citizens] to integrate and develop [in Israeli society] is consistent with the desire to achieve a diplomatic agreement that will assure the Palestinians self-determination and an end to the occupation. The expectation that Arab citizens of Israel will be completely indifferent to the suffering of their Palestinian brethren in Gaza or the West Bank is inhumane.” Yet, “Knesset members and ministers exploit time and again political and security crises between Israel and the Palestinians to lash out at the Arab public... Every deviation from them repeatedly puts their loyalty in doubt and calls them traitors and a fifth column.²⁸

Numerous civil society organizations and activists issued responses or took action following Liberman’s controversial statements. [The Abraham Fund Initiatives](#) created a reconciliation visit for a journalist from Yediot Ahronot who was attacked in the violent demonstration in Um El Fahem. [Tag Meir appealed](#) "to the Jewish and Arab public to come to the Arab towns in Wadi Ara.... visit the shops, the cafés, and the art gallery at Um al-Fahem, and speak peace." A joint demonstration of Jews and Arabs under the banner "[Neighbors in Peace](#)" took place in Wadi Ara on Saturday, December 16th. [Darchenu](#), a grassroots movement that promotes "moderation and dialogue" called on the Minister of Defense "to [retracts his statements](#)" as "extremism should not be answered with extremism". Said Abu Shakra, Founding Director of the Um El Fahem art Gallery, sent an [Open Letter to Minister Liberman](#) stating that his "all-embracing generalization calling for a boycott of Wadi Ara is dangerous for everyone." Various Jewish activists posted their pictures while shopping in Wadi Ara and in Um El Fahem specifically, stating these acts as protest against Liberman's statements.

²⁸ Khouri, Jack "Arab Citizens Want to Integrate Into Israel but Refuse to Be a Trampled Minority" *Haaretz*, 12.11.17 (Hebrew) AND Khouri, Jack "[The wild attack by Bennett and Liberman against the residents of Wadi Ara ignores a complex reality](#)" *Haaretz* 12.11.2017. (Hebrew)