

# Jerusalem's Deal of the Century

AZZAM TAMIMI\*

**ABSTRACT** *U.S. President, Donald Trump, could not have gone ahead with his decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel had it not been for the support he secured from three Arab countries: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. The acquiescence of those Arab states, unthinkable until just a few years ago, would not have happened had it not been for the success of the counter-revolution in ending the Arab Spring uprisings, a development that was most detrimental to the Palestinian cause. Yet, Trump's deal of the century seems to have been born still.*

**O**n December 6, 2017, in collaboration with a number of regional actors, foremost among them, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, U.S. President Donald Trump drove the last nail that sealed the coffin of the Middle East peace process and dispelled the illusion of a peaceful settlement for good. By recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and ordering the relocation of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to the holy city, Trump convinced many who still needed convincing that the peace process was nothing short of a mirage.

Yet, most Palestinians knew this very well and did not need any convincing. Despite the fact that their right of return was conceded when the Oslo Accord was concluded with Israel in 1993 by the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), their sole legitimate representative, they never detached from Palestine, their ancestral homeland. Whether living in refugee camps in Gaza, the West Bank, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, or still holding fast to their homes and what remains of their lands in various parts of historic Palestine, or living scattered around the world, returning to Palestine never ceased to be their primary cause.

\* Palestinian writer and commentator

**Insight Turkey**  
Vol. 20 / No. 1 /  
2018, pp. 71-78

**The Arab people, who suffered partition and marginalization first at the hands of European colonial powers and then at the hands of post 'independence' ruling elites, never ceased to see the connection between their own oppression and the occupation of Palestine**

Undoubtedly, Jerusalem occupies a central position in this cause. Its significance extends far beyond its borders. It is the third most important religious site for more than 1.6 billion Muslims around the world. It is also a holy city for Christians and Jews. While the slogan 'Jerusalem is the eternal capital of the state of Palestine' was launched by Palestinians and their supporters in response to Trump's action, the real issue is neither that of a capital nor that of a state. Rather, it is the fact that Palestine, a Muslim territory that was invaded by the British and snatched from the Ottomans nearly a hundred years ago, continues to be occupied by Zionist intruders who, despite their irreligiosity, claim a biblical right to it. Following the model of all previous colonial projects, from the Crusaders' invasion to the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the Zionists used the Bible to justify the crimes of theft and rape. That is why, notwithstanding the symbolism of Jerusalem, it does not really make much

difference whether the U.S. Embassy is erected in Tel Aviv or in any other town or city within Palestine. Tel Aviv or Tal al-Rabi' as its Palestinian name was, is no less Palestinian, Arab and Islamic than Jerusalem itself.

### **How Did We Get Here?**

Trump's arrival in the White House has definitely had an impact on events in the Middle East as in other parts of the world. However, it has not been so much Trump, despite his instability and even insanity, as much as the milieu in which he landed the seat of the U.S. Presidency. Neither Trump nor any other U.S. president would have dared to take such a stance on Jerusalem, let alone take action, had it not been for the dramatic changes that transformed the Middle East since 2011, the year of the counter-revolution that sought to put an end to the Arab Spring.

When the masses took to the streets and squares of Tunisian and Egyptian cities in early 2011, their most notable chant was "the people want the regime brought down, the people want the liberation of Palestine." That passionate slogan summed up the grievances that motivated the Arab young and old to rise in an unprecedented popular revolution that rapidly spread across the Arab world (much of the Middle East and North Africa) like fire in a stack of hay. The region's despotic regimes that reigned for decades did not only oppress the people, violating their basic human rights and squandering their national



**Voting Result:**

IN FAVOUR 128  
AGAINST 9  
ABSTENTION 35

**Voting Result:**

IN FAVOUR 128  
AGAINST 9  
ABSTENTION 35

wealth while incurring failure on the states they ruled but also played a significant role, directly or indirectly, in perpetuating the Zionist occupation of Palestine. The Arab people, who suffered partition and marginalization first at the hands of European colonial powers and then at the hands of post 'independence' ruling elites, never ceased to see the connection between their own oppression and the occupation of Palestine.

Although most Palestinians, like the rest of the Arab masses, welcomed the revolutions of the Arab Spring, the two main Palestinian political factions were sharply divided. Fatah, which forms the backbone of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah, sided with the Arab regimes, acting as if it were equally threatened, while

Hamas chose to support the revolutions. The latter ended up paying a heavy price: it lost both Iran and Syria as allies and was severely sanctioned by the powers that stood behind the counter-revolution.

Unsurprisingly, the Arab Spring uprisings were deemed to pose an existential threat not only to Arab despotic regimes but also to the occupiers of Palestine. The most widely talked about theory among ordinary folks across the Arab world is that the counter-revolution that frustrated the Arab Spring and killed the hopes and aspirations of the masses was the joint project of all the powers who dreaded the promised change.

The counter-revolution did not only bring down the first democratically

Members of the UN General Assembly voted 128-9 to declare the United States' recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital null and void on December 21, 2017.

AA PHOTO / ATILGAN ÖZDİL

elected government in the history of Egypt, stem the democratic transition in Tunisia and devastate Syria, Libya and Yemen. It also sought to punish the Palestinians because they celebrated the Arab Spring and cheered on as the Arab masses revolted.

The Gaza Strip was immediately squeezed like never before, this time not only by Israel but by the military junta that came to power in Egypt through a military coup on July 3, 2013. The honeymoon the people of Gaza enjoyed under the one-year rule of Muhammad Mursi came to an abrupt end. The Hamas-led authority in Gaza was immediately declared an enemy not only because it sided by the Arab revolutions but also because of its historic affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood whose leaders in Egypt ended up in prison, exiled or underground. The Egyptian army began destroying or flooding the tunnels that connected the Palestinian and Egyptian quarters of the city of Rafah, providing Gaza with a life line since 2007. What Israel could not do to Gaza in a decade, the new Egyptian authority did in a matter of weeks.

The siege on Gaza was originally imposed by the Israelis in response to the election victory Hamas achieved in 2006 and the subsequent collapse of the short-lived Palestinian national unity government of 2007. The regime of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who was forced by the Egyptian revolution to step down in early 2011, collaborated with the Israelis to some extent but occasionally loosened its grip allowing people and

goods to pass through. The idea behind the siege was to make life so unbearable for the inhabitants of Gaza so as to rise and topple the Hamas government paving the way for the return of Fatah's Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority with whom Israel had a collaborative working relationship based on the Oslo Accords of 1993. Officially, the Israelis and their Western backers stipulated removing the sanctions imposed on Hamas and the siege imposed on Gaza, upon the unconditional acceptance by Hamas of what became known as the Quartet's three demands: 1) recognition of Israel's right to exist; 2) disarming and the renunciation of violence; and 3) acceptance of all the agreements concluded thus far between the PLO and Israel.

The siege on Gaza and the pressure on Hamas during the years that preceded the Arab Spring were aimed at forcing the movement to concede to international demands, which in essence were Israeli demands. However, in the wake of the July 2013 coup in Egypt, the purpose of the siege was to punish and penalize. The military regime, which considered the Muslim Brotherhood its arch enemy, initially treated Hamas as the Palestinian extension of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. For this crime alone, the entire population of the Gaza Strip has been subjected to the most severe regime of collective punishments.

The two main Arab countries behind the counter-revolution, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, ad-

opted their own measures to penalize the Palestinians and Hamas for siding with the Arab Spring. Sympathies for Hamas in particular and for the Palestinian cause in general, started being treated as an act of treason. Any persons or entities suspected of affiliation with Hamas were proscribed. Dozens of Hamas suspected members or supporters were detained or expelled.

Yet, the infamous visit to Riyadh by U.S. President Donald Trump in May 2017 was a turning point. The siege over Gaza was more severely tightened. Life rapidly turned impossible for the overwhelming majority of the population. After a brief visit to Washington, where he was received by Donald Trump, the PLO's Abbas told his Israeli interlocutors that the Palestinian Authority was not willing to pay the electricity bill for Gaza's power supply. He also suspended all medical aid to Palestinians who needed to travel out of the strip for urgent treatment. In the meantime, the Egyptian regime signaled that it was willing to help only if Hamas would be willing to resume reconciliation efforts with Ramallah so as to set in motion the necessary measures to ease the siege and reduce the sanctions.

Hamas eventually yielded. Its Gaza leadership agreed to hand over to the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority control over the crossings and to enter into negotiations over other disputed matters such as security and civil service in exchange for ending the sanctions. Something was clearly

**In the name of reconciliation, ostensibly to patch up Palestinian differences and end the suffering of Gaza Palestinians, a deal with Hamas was urgently sought in order to make it easier for the Palestinians to swallow a most unpalatable pill**

looming on the horizon. Media leaks started referring to a forthcoming initiative by the Trump Administration known as the “deal of the century.” There was no blueprint and no official declaration. There were, however, strong speculations that the Trump Administration was determined to resolve the Palestinian issue once and for all. In the name of reconciliation, ostensibly to patch up Palestinian differences and end the suffering of Gaza Palestinians, a deal with Hamas was urgently sought in order to make it easier for the Palestinians to swallow a most unpalatable pill.

Apparently, the Trump initiative was born out of intimate discussions between the President's son-in-law Jared Kushner and Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman.

Since then, the Saudis, who, for many decades, prided themselves of being the custodians of the Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina, have been leading the way in the race for Israel's

Ibrahim Abu Thurayeh, a handicapped Palestinian protester who was later killed by the Israeli forces, waves the national flag during clashes with Israeli soldiers.

AFP / GETTY IMAGES / MOHAMMED ABED



heart. Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman is said to have made a secret visit to Israel where he met its leaders and discussed cooperation and normalization.

The Saudi heir to the throne only cares about one thing and that is becoming King. He seems to be convinced that his succession to the throne can only be secured by the Trumps who –according to the recently published book *Fire and Fury*– consider him to be their man, or the guy they put on top in Saudi Arabia. He also seems to be convinced that nothing would prove him to be eligible for such a position more than a determined effort to recognize Israel and normalize relations with it. This, at least partly, explains the eagerness of Muhammad bin Salman to act as a noticeable partner in the project code-named “Deal of the Century,”

which is aimed at resolving once and for all the chronic Middle East problem or what has been known as the Palestinian issue.

It is believed that in addition to the Saudis, the Emiratis and the Egyptians knew beforehand about Trump’s intention to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and decide to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia used their leverage to pressure both the Palestinian President and the Jordanian Monarch to cooperate. They both even tried to dissuade the two men from attending the İstanbul OIC summit on Jerusalem.

According to press reports, when Mahmud Abbas was summoned to Riyadh last November, he was informed about the plan and was told what he needed to do and what he

was to expect. It was explained to him in unequivocal terms that there was nothing he could do about it and he'd better consent. It was even rumored that he was reminded of the fate Yasser Arafat met when he refused to make similar concessions during the Camp David marathon negotiations with Ehud Barak during the last days of the Clinton Administration in 2000. The former PLO Chairman and Palestinian President was liquidated when it became clear to the Israelis that he had been reconsidering his position vis-à-vis the entire peace process. It is widely believed that Israelis used some of his close associates to poison him.

On a subsequent visit to Riyadh, Abbas was more explicitly told that there was only one game in town and that was Trump's. He was forced to cut short an official visit to Paris when the Saudis insisted on him to travel to them in exchange for releasing detained Palestinian billionaire Sabih al-Masri, who heads the Arab Bank, the most influential joint Palestinian/Jordanian banking institution.

Recently leaked telephone recordings prove that while the Egyptian authorities were publicly condemning Trump's decision on Jerusalem, they were doing their best to sell to the Egyptian public the idea that Jerusalem was not at all significant. In the recordings, an Egyptian military intelligence officer appears to be dictating, individually, to several Egyptian TV anchors and artists what they should say when appearing in their respective shows. He suggests to them

**If reconciliation efforts are to resume, the conditions for Hamas and the people of Gaza have considerably improved**

that the Palestinians would do better end their own suffering by accepting a deal that gives them Ramallah as a capital of their future state instead of Jerusalem. The Egyptian public, he insists, need to know that it is not in Egypt's national security interest for a new intifada to erupt in Palestine.

Despite their vulnerabilities, the Palestinian President and the Jordanian monarch acquired unprecedented determination to defy Trump and his regional allies. On the one hand, much of the international community stood against Trump on this issue. Muslims worldwide took to the streets to protest and most Muslim countries were represented by their top leaders at the OIC Istanbul summit. But more importantly for both men, the deal seemed like an end of service notice. Without Jerusalem, both men knew they would lose their legitimacy. So, emboldened by worldwide official and popular opposition to Trump and driven by fear for their own fate, Abbas and Abdullah II held to their guns.

Notwithstanding its symbolism, the UN General Assembly's vote against Trump's decision might have pulled the rug from underneath the deal

of the century. It is yet to be seen if *Fire and Fury* will do the rest. Indeed, all the three men involved directly in the deal: Trump, Netanyahu and Muhammad bin Salman are facing mounting domestic challenges. While Trump's character is being assassinated publicly, and Netanyahu's potential prosecution for an alleged involvement in corruption is giving him sleepless nights, bin Salman is waging utterly losing wars on several fronts, domestically and with his immediate neighbors.

Perhaps a couple of positive things have come from all of this. On the one hand, Palestine has come once more to the fore in regional as well as in international politics after years of marginalization. On the other hand, Hamas has found a worthier cause to rally the people of Gaza around than the mere worry about meeting their domestic needs. In other words, if reconciliation efforts are to resume, the conditions for Hamas and the people of Gaza have considerably improved. ■



# رؤى تركية



Rouya Turkiyyah is a quarterly academic journal published by SETA Foundation since 2012. It covers a broad range of topics related to domestic and foreign policy of the Middle Eastern countries focusing mostly in their politics, economy and social problems. Rouya Turkiyyah seeks to furnish a new regional perspective, through the allocation of new spaces for serious discussions on the World Affairs but more specifically in the Middle East affairs.