

# Why the Istanbul Declaration Must Succeed: “The Whole World to Recognize East Jerusalem as the Occupied Capital of Palestine”

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Global Research, December 18, 2017

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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*The Istanbul Declaration adopted at an Extraordinary Islamic Summit Conference in Istanbul on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 2017 invites “the whole world to recognise East Jerusalem as the occupied capital of the State of Palestine.” It further pledges to ‘mobilize support in the name of entire humanity to strengthen the State of Palestine and its institutions in every field.’*

To obtain the support of the whole world, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) which initiated the Summit will have to go beyond the OIC. An international committee should be established comprising states that are committed to the recognition of East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian State. It should be led by China which has endorsed wholeheartedly the East Jerusalem proposal. Chinese leadership will not only lend weight to the proposal but also make it easier to draw in non-Muslim majority states and make it a truly global endeavour. The Turkish President, Recep Erdogan, who was the driving force behind the initiative, should approach the Chinese President, Xi Jinping.

There are groups that will not be comfortable with this proposal for different reasons. To start with, groups in Palestine and other Arab and Muslim societies will argue that a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital covering only 22% of historic Palestine is a betrayal of justice since West Jerusalem and the 78% that will constitute Israel are also a product of usurpation, annexation and occupation by Jewish settler communities that began aggressively after the Balfour Declaration of 1917. The only real solution, these groups opine, is the restoration of Palestine in its entirety to the Palestinian people comprising Muslims, Christians and Jews. What they have in mind is a single unified, secular nation perhaps structured as a confederation with an undivided Jerusalem as its capital guaranteeing rights and responsibilities to all three faith communities and others, and not dominated by any one group in the constitutional or ideological sense.

While there is much truth in what the proponents of a unified Palestine are suggesting, it does not appear attainable in present circumstances. The decades old animosity and antagonism between the different communities compounded by their deep sense of identity and their conflicting notions of history will impede any endeavour, however noble, to bring Muslims, Christians and Jews together, within the confines of a single home. Besides, their current conflict itself revolves around separate sovereignties.

However, the strongest opposition to the East Jerusalem idea has expectedly come from

Israel. For the Israeli elite and the majority of its citizenry, Jerusalem is the “eternal capital of the Jewish people.” It is sacrilegious to talk of dividing it or giving a portion of it to the Palestinians.

This Israeli position is a travesty of truth and history. For Jerusalem and the land of Israel/Palestine have had a complex, multi-ethnic and multi-religious background. Apart from Jews — once known as “Hebrew tribes” —who have been part of Jerusalem and Israel since antiquity, Rome, Egypt, Syria, Babylon and Persia to name a few civilizations had impacted upon the city and the region for millennia. Jewish rulers appear to have established their authority over Jerusalem and other areas only for periods of time. Kings and Chieftains from other ethnic backgrounds also held sway over the city. Christian rulers for instance were in control of Jerusalem during the Byzantine period from 326 to 638 and the Crusader period from 1099 to 1187. The Muslim period stretched from 638 to 1099 and then again from 1187 right up to 1917. Muslim dynasties associated with the Ayyubid, the Mamluk and the Ottoman played significant roles in shaping the development of Jerusalem and Palestine. This is why any attempt to obliterate the influence of other ethnicities, religions and civilizations upon Jerusalem is nothing less than a blatant distortion and falsification of reality. And this what the Israeli authorities have been doing in the physical sense since they annexed first West and then East Jerusalem.

The concerted drive to erase Jerusalem’s pervasive, deeply embedded non-Judaic characteristics has a larger political purpose. It is integral to the Israeli justification and legitimisation of their dispossession of the Palestinians for decades. It is to convince themselves and others that they have a God-sent right to own and occupy the whole of Palestine. Given this conviction, it should not surprise us that the Israeli elite has never been sincere about a two-state solution or about recognising the right of the Palestinians to a nation of their own. Indeed, the first Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion had made it clear in the 1920s itself that “there is no room in the country for both peoples ....” He was like most other Israeli leaders after him a determined advocate of Israeli expansion, of Erez Ysrael, from the Nile to the Euphrates.

A significant segment of the US elite also subscribes to the view that Israel has the right to occupy Palestinian and Arab lands and to expand its grip. This is especially true of those who are inclined towards Christian Zionism or linked to certain Evangelical groups. Even others in the elite stratum who do not have such connections tend to accommodate Israeli-Zionist interests all the while partly because of their influence within the citadels of US power such as the upper echelons of the financial sector, the media, academe, and in the House of Representatives, the Senate and the White House.

Seen against this backdrop, President Donald Trump’s announcement about Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, in 1995, the US Congress had already accorded this recognition to Jerusalem though it was in violation of International Law which bestowed upon the city a special status in 1947 meaning by which that it would remain under international control. But Israel claimed West Jerusalem soon after the 1948 war and in 1967 after the 6 day war, it annexed East Jerusalem. No country in the world, except the US, has acknowledged Israeli authority over Jerusalem.

This is why lamentations by a number of leaders, including Arabs and Muslims that in the wake of Trump’s announcement, the US is no longer an “honest broker” in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are utterly ludicrous. The US has been Israel’s patron, protector and

provider for decades especially after the 1967 war. It has been unashamedly biased and one-sided. But it kept up a charade for a long while. Now finally as a result of Trump's stark stance the fig-leaf has fallen off, in the words of some commentators.

It is a good time therefore to pursue another approach to peace between Israel, Palestine and other Arab states. The Istanbul Declaration offers some hope. Its language is inclusive and its tone is accommodative.

When its advocates flesh out the idea of two capitals for two states, they should insist that both states should be inclusive and multi-religious in the finest tradition of Jerusalem itself. This new peace initiative should echo the sentiments in the joint statement crafted by the late Palestinian leader Feisal al-Husseini and the Israeli activist, Uri Avnery, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of May 1995, Entitled " Our Jerusalem" it reads, "Jerusalem is ours , Israelis and Palestinians — Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Our Jerusalem is a mosaic of all the cultures, all the religions, and all the periods that enriched the city, from the earliest antiquity to this very day — Canaanites and Jebusites and Israelites, Jews and Hellenes, Romans and Byzantines, Christians and Muslims, Arabs and Mamelukes, Ottomans and Britons, Palestinians and Israelis. They and all the others who made their contribution to the city have a place in the spiritual and physical landscape of Jerusalem. Our Jerusalem must be united, open to all and belonging to all its inhabitants, without borders and barbed wire in its midst. Our Jerusalem must be the capital of the two states that will live side by side in this country — West Jerusalem the capital of the state of Israel and East Jerusalem the capital of the state of Palestine. Our Jerusalem must be the Capital of Peace."

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