

Moving US-Embassy to Jerusalem could be the straw that breaks the camel's back

An Interview on the announced move of the US-embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem with the Palestinian Political Advisor Dr. Sara Hussein

Florian Höllen: US-President Trump expressed his intention, to move the US embassy in Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This would be the implementation of the according decision of the Congress in 1995, which had been postponed so far. How do you evaluate this announcement and what would its execution mean for the status of Jerusalem and the Israeli policy of more and more settlements in (East-) Jerusalem and the West Bank and even the annexation of settlements?

Dr. Sara Hussein: Moving the Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, if President Trump implements this move, would represent a significant change in decades-long US policy. The US, along with the rest of the international community, has never recognised Israel's occupation or annexation of East Jerusalem and has traditionally held the position that Jerusalem is an issue to be negotiated as part of a political solution. Moving the US Embassy would openly contradict the two state formula, and would be a decisive step away from any potential solution.

Even without implementing the move, this announcement has already allowed the Israeli government to be even bolder in its continued attempts to fully annex Jerusalem into Israel, as well as accelerating settlement-building throughout the rest of occupied Palestine, both

of which are illegal under international law. Since the inauguration of President Trump, settlement announcements have come thick and fast, the first being 566 units in East Jerusalem announced two days after the inauguration and the most recent being on February 1st, when the Israeli government announced plans for 3000 new units throughout the occupied West Bank. Israel has a history of taking every opportunity to further its settlement project, whether as retaliation for decisions taken by the UN, immediately after the breakdown of negotiations, or with the election of a new President in the US. The appointment of David Friedman as US Ambassador to Israel, a hardline pro-settler who supports Israel's claim to the entirety of Jerusalem, will also further exacerbate the situation, whether the Embassy itself is moved or not.

Florian Höllen: In difference to Hillary Clinton, who had spent a visit to Israel to show her loyalty to current Israeli politics as part of her presidential campaign, Trump did not. However, later he tried to show much more proximity to Israel. Was there a change in Trumps approach to Israel and if so, what or who caused it?

Dr. Sara Hussein: Uncritical support for Israel remains a key requirement in U.S. politics, especially during election periods. The fact that Trump became more vocal about proximity to

Israel as he began to understand the necessity of this support in terms of winning votes at home is unsurprising.

Florian Höllen: During the last days again some new tones have been heard from US- and Israeli officials. So White House spokesman Sean Spencer said after the first post-inauguration phone call of Trump and Netanyahu "We are at the very beginning stages of even discussing this subject." (Reuters / Guardian 22nd January 2017). And according to the same source Israeli officials informed, that Netanyahu had not sought a commitment from Trump on a move or a time frame for it. Could you analyse these recent developments for us?

Dr. Sara Hussein: There are one or two potential reasons for holding off on this move. One possibility is that President Trump's advisors may have briefed him on the highly sensitive nature of the Jerusalem issue and the potential backlash such a move could trigger, both in Palestine and the wider region. That Mr. Netanyahu has not pursued this issue may also indicate that the Embassy move is not a priority for Israel, or may not be worth the backlash it will cause. Some analysts are expecting Mr Netanyahu to try to 'trade in' this commitment for something else from the US which he feels is more profitable to Israel.

Florian Höllen: The White House's statement on settlements (February 2nd) surprised some in that it appeared to be much closer to the Obama Administration's position than expected. What is your reaction to that?

Dr. Sara Hussein: The statement was more carefully worded than one might have expected from President Trump's Administration, but in substance it is a very different position from the previous government. First of all, Obama, Kerry and others made it clear, on several occasions, that the settlements are the main obstacle to peace. Understanding this is crucial in terms of working towards a solution. Trump's administration stated the exact opposite, i.e. that they don't believe settlements –

which it should be remembered are illegal under international law- are an impediment to peace. Moreover, the nuanced language discouraging the building of new settlements, but allowing

for building within "current borders" will be interpreted by the Israeli government as being given a green light to build in all the land around settlements that it currently controls, and between settlements in the so-called "blocs", which are termed as such in an effort to expropriate more land.

Florian Höllen: Let's have a look on the regional level: Here Israel has developed its relationships to authoritarian ruled Sunni countries like Saudi-Arabia and Turkey. Could the Israeli rationale of not pressuring on moving the US-embassy very much be motivated by keeping these relationships? And would this mean, that the regional power aspirations of Israel are relativizing its stand against the Palestinians?

Dr. Sara Hussein: The Israeli government is certainly aware of the importance of Jerusalem throughout the region. The idea that this awareness may be tempering Israel's oppression of the Palestinians is overly optimistic, however.

If Israel were more concerned about regional ambitions then it would have accepted the Arab Peace Initiative, which has offered normalised relations with 57 Arab and Muslim countries, in exchange for withdrawal to the 1967 borders, acceptance of the State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, and a just and agreed upon solution to the refugees issue- broadly speaking, the two state solution. Instead, we have seen the occupation further entrenched, settlements being built year on year, and Palestinian quality of life deteriorate sharply. According to Defence for Children International, 2016 was deadliest year for Palestinian Children in the West Bank. The UN has predicted that Gaza will be unlivable by 2020, a prediction made before the most recent war, in 2014, which killed over 2000 people including almost 500 children. So while a step like moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem may be a red line in the region, Israel's behaviour in general- and particularly that of its most recent governments- is currently not being relativized by any other power or relationship.

Florian Höllen: To get back to the initial question: Could you share your analysis regarding the perception of the announced move of the

embassy by the Palestinian Leadership and the Palestinian people?

Dr. Sara Hussein: The Palestinian leadership and people have been swift and clear in opposing this move. President Abbas wrote personally to Mr. Trump, warning him of the risks to the peace process and the stability of the wider region, while urging other states to echo these concerns to the then President-Elect. Meanwhile, committees have been formed and demonstrations have been held in a number of Palestinian towns and cities including Hebron, Nablus and Ramallah.

This is a highly sensitive issue. For Palestinians, there can be no solution without Jerusalem, which is the historical, cultural and economic heart of Palestine. During negotiations, various scenarios have been put forward, such as Jerusalem as an open and shared city and the capital of two states. This has been rejected by successive Israeli governments, who claim Jerusalem as the 'eternal and undivided capital of the Jewish people' and have implemented policy after policy to make that claim a reality. This is something which is of great concern for Palestinians, for the wider region, and indeed should be of great concern for the whole world. Jerusalem has a rich history as the cradle of the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. To eradicate the city's Christian and Muslim character is to destroy the unique nature of this city. And, as Palestinians see this happening on a daily basis, it is only a matter of time before there is a straw to break the camel's back. Back in 2000, Ariel Sharon made a provocative 'visit' to the al-Aqsa Mosque Compound- known to Jews as 'Temple Mount'- in the occupied Old City of Jerusalem. That move sparked the second intifada (uprising). It's not hard to imagine that moving the US Embassy, another hugely provocative step, could trigger a similar reaction.

Florian Höllen: How do you see president Abbas' strategy of "internationalisation" against the background of the recent developments discussed and the new leadership in the USA in general?

Dr. Sara Hussein: "Internationalisation" remains an important strategy, fundamentally

because of the deep asymmetry between Palestine and Israel. This power imbalance means that international support is essential, if we are to reach any sort of just or lasting solution.

Despite recent developments, the strategy has yielded some positive results. The international conference took place in January and brought together 70 countries as a step towards changing the paradigm of the peace process, despite strong Israeli lobbying against the conference. The UN Security Council resolution concerning Israeli settlements passed in December with a vote of 14-0, after the United States withheld its veto for the first time in 36 years. Although there is now a new administration in the White House, this has been an important step. Secretary Kerry's speech following the decision seems to have broken a taboo in the US, allowing more space for critical voices in public discourse, particularly on the subject of settlements.

And there are other glimmers of hope. Recent polls suggest that increasing numbers of American Jews are becoming more critical of the Israeli government's actions, which they do not feel represent their Jewish values, and, for the first time, US Democrats appear to sympathise as much with Palestinians as with Israelis.

However, these positive steps have not yet translated into real change on the ground. While internationalisation remains an important strategy, recent developments in the world will undoubtedly require new and creative thinking on how to achieve an end to this military occupation which will have stifled people's lives for exactly 50 years in June, not to mention those Palestinians who have been in exile for even longer.

Florian Höllen: If this strategy had nearly any effect on the ground and becomes even more unlikely to work out with an even more openly pro-Israeli US-Administration: Could Hamas draw new strength out of this situation and challenge Fatah-rule in the West Bank?

Dr. Sara Hussein: It is true that the people in Palestine are becoming increasingly desperate and hopeless as the situation worsens, and

that an even more openly pro-Israeli US-Administration will allow Israel to further intensify its occupation. We've already talked about settlement building and the potential move of the US-Embassy to Jerusalem but that's just the tip of the iceberg. Senior Israeli leaders, who form part of the most right-wing government in the country's history, are now speaking more seriously of complete annexation of the majority of the West Bank. Mr Netanyahu is tweeting Mr Trump, commending his decision to build a wall along the border of Mexico. From a Palestinian point of view, things only seem to be getting worse.

The less that President Abbas is seen to deliver in terms of real change, the less credible he becomes in the eyes of his people. However, I think this has more to do with the credibility of the PLO and PA as institutions or structures, not of any particular political party. What might happen if people lose hope altogether is still unknown. But if the international community does not act urgently and decisively, then things will get much worse.

Florian Höllen: And with regards to the Palestinian people and the further flattening of the so-called "third Intifada": Do the Palestinian people both in the different parts of Palestine and abroad have enough strength to resist in a way, that the US and Israel will be forced to withdraw from shifting the US-embassy to Jerusalem also in medium and long term?

Dr. Sara Hussein: Personally I don't think we have seen a "third intifada" up until now. There have been isolated reactions to an increasingly desperate and hopeless situation, but not a widespread and coordinated uprising.

Palestinians certainly have enough strength to resist- and by strength, I mean resilience, not physical or military strength, fundamentally because they have no other choice. These are people in their own homes, on their own land – what else can one expect them to do? This is a difficult time all over the world: a time where right wing extremism is becoming terrifyingly mainstream, a time when a US President has banned people from entering the US based purely on their religion and nationality, a time when people feel compelled to take to the streets all over the world to stand up against

all forms of discrimination. Palestinians are no strangers to discrimination or protest, and it is more important than ever that we come together as global citizens, to fight these injustices wherever they may occur.

Dear Ms. Hussein, many thanks for sharing your analysis and insights!

Dr. Sara Hussein is a political advisor and analyst. She is a former advisor to the Palestinian Chief Negotiator, the Palestinian Ambassador to Germany and other senior officials. Her particular focus is on the international responsibility vis-à-vis the Palestine-Israel question.

The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (RLS) is one of the major institutions of political education in the Federal Republic of Germany. RLS serves as a forum for debate and critical thinking about political alternatives, as well as a research center for progressive social development. It is closely affiliated to the German Left Party (DIE LINKE). The Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine has supported partners in Palestine since 2000, and established the Regional Office in Ramallah in 2008. Today, the office is in charge of project cooperation with partners in the West Bank, in East Jerusalem, and in the Gaza Strip as well as in Jordan.

PAL PAPERS is a collection of analyses and relevant viewpoints irregularly published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine. The content of PAL PAPERS is the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine.

Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Regional Office Palestine

Responsible: Florian Hoellen
Al-Wa'd Building, Muba'adeen Street, Al-Bireh / Ramallah, Palestine
Phone: + 972 (2) 240 38 30/2
Fax: + 972 (2) 240 39 80
Email: info.ramallah@rosalux.org
www.rosaluxemburg.ps
<https://www.facebook.com/rlfpal>