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Trump's Decision on Jerusalem Might Open the Door for Russia (Op-ed)

Russia is set to make gains by siding against the U.S. move

By Alexei Khlebnikov

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Benjamin Netanyahu and Vladimir Putin / Kremlin Press Service

U.S. President Donald Trump made one of the most contentious foreign policy announcements of his tenure in the White House on Dec. 6: Washington, he said, was recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

Minutes after his speech, leaders across the Middle East and the world jumped to express surprise and discontent. Muslims in capital cities across the world took to the streets.

For Russia, whose stance on the conflict is in line with the international community, the move signaled an opportunity to deepen its role as a power broker in the Middle East. Its response to Trump's announcement was firm.

The move could lead to an escalation in tensions across the region, the Kremlin said, adding that Jerusalem's status should be decided in direct negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

During his Monday visits to Egypt and Turkey, Russian President Vladimir Putin described the U.S. decision as counterproductive and destabilizing. In a statement following talks with the Egyptian president, Putin said Russia's view on the status of Jerusalem was aligned with Egypt's.

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For Trump, the policy change might have been ushered in by problems at home. In 1995, the U.S. Congress adopted the Jerusalem Embassy Act, urging the federal government to relocate its Embassy to Jerusalem and to recognize the city as Israel's capital. Even though successive presidents promised to implement the policy, it never happened, as they always used a waiver. Now, Trump is delivering on his promises.

The move may well help Trump to, at least partly, win back Congress, which has recently rallied against the president. It could also detract attention from the Russia probe and allegations of collusion. It reaffirms Trump's support for Israel and its lobby in the United States, which did not even have to exert any real pressure on the U.S. for the move.

From the perspective of international law and the peace process in general, Trump's decision is a game changer because it goes against the UN's framework for peace and destroys the conventional model for a settlement of the Palestine-Israeli conflict — a two state solution with East and West Jerusalem as the capitals of Palestine and Israel respectively.

Although Trump gets his facts right by saying that the decision is merely a reflection of the reality on the ground (de-facto, Jerusalem is under the complete control of Israeli authorities), that doesn't help to resolve the conflict.

Trump's decision will almost certainly spark renewed anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism throughout the region. It also compromises the security of U.S. diplomats in Arab and Muslim countries.

Moreover, it will have an impact on how new alliances will form in the region.

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Trump's decision served to unify Muslims and Arabs in the region, who have been fragmented by internal conflicts over the last decades. They were again given an opportunity to stand together against a common enemy, in this case—the United States and Israel.

Given rising sectarianism in the Middle East, Shia Iran is the most likely to benefit from the U.S. move. Trump's decision is likely to steal the spotlight from the issue of Iran's growing

influence in the Middle East.

Israel's deepening ties with the Gulf states is likely to stall as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are forced to get in line with the Arab street in criticizing the U.S. and Israel. At the same time, Hamas and Hezbollah will be vindicated based on rising anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism in Arab countries.

U.S. relations with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the UAE will most certainly sour too.

Against this backdrop, Russia can easily improve its public image in the Arab world by siding with Arab countries against the U.S. decision. If Moscow invests carefully, it might increase its influence in the region even further.

Russia, being a member of the Middle East Quartet alongside the United States, the EU and the UN, is increasingly well positioned to take the lead on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, especially since Mahmoud Abbas, who heads the Palestinian Authority, has already said that Washington ceded its credibility in the group by recognizing Jerusalem.

As the likelihood of the U.S. brokering a lasting peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians wanes, Russia's role in the Middle East looks set to deepen.

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