

Cheers and rage follow recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital

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By Michelle Chabin / Religion News Service

JERUSALEM (RNS)—Avihu Mizrachi Minagen generally steers clear of politics, but he applauded President Trump's declaration that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and his vow to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv.

"I think it's wonderful, because it strengthens Jews' historical, cultural and religious claims to Jerusalem at a time when Muslims are trying to deny them," Minagen said in the men's shoe store his family has run in the heart of West Jerusalem for the past 86 years— 17 years longer than Israel has been a country.

Trump made his announcement Dec. 6, in spite of pressure from world leaders who said the move would further incite an already volatile region and make it harder to restart peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians.

Among Israel's large non-Jewish population—the 19 percent that is predominantly Muslim but also includes Christians and Druze—the response was decidedly negative.

Acknowledge history and reality

Minagen's reaction was common among Jews in Israel—to many of them the declaration recognizes what has been true for thousands of years.

"The roots of the Jewish people are right here—the Western Wall, the

Temple Mount,” Minagen said, gazing to the east. “I’m glad the American president acknowledges this.”

That acknowledgment, which Trump delivered in a speech from the White House, spurred a wave of speculation about its political and religious ramifications.

Trump called the planned relocation of the U.S. Embassy “a long overdue step to advance the peace process.” The relocation follows approval from both the House and the Senate.

And while the move divides American Jews, who mostly threw their support to Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, it thrills many white American evangelical Christians—the core of Trump’s base—who long have lobbied for the change.

The United States never before recognized either Israeli or Palestinian sovereignty over any part of Jerusalem, which the United Nations envisioned as an international city. After Arab armies attacked the fledgling Jewish state in 1948, Israel seized control of West Jerusalem while Jordan seized control of East Jerusalem. In war in 1967, Israel extended its control over East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians claim as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

David Rosen, an Orthodox rabbi who is the international director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, expressed doubt Trump’s directive will change the religious status quo in Jerusalem.

“Israel is already in control of Jerusalem and has done its best to maintain the principle of freedom of access for all religions,” Rosen said.

Outrage in the Muslim world

But Muslim leaders and Islamist groups warned of more discord and violence:

- Palestinians throughout the West Bank and Gaza held demonstrations, burning Israeli and U.S. flags as part of the three “Days of Rage” organized by Palestinian factions.
- Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan threatened to cut already strained diplomatic ties with Israel. Recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital is “a red line” for Muslims around the world, Erdogan said.
- Hamas, the Islamist group that rules the Gaza Strip and which the United States has classified a terrorist organization, said the declaration would be “a blatant aggression against the holy city.”
- The head of a Muslim seminary in Egypt promised “the gates of hell will open on the west if it moves its embassy to Jerusalem,” according to Zamnpress.

U.S. Jews divided

Meanwhile, Jews around the world debated whether the U.S. declaration of sovereignty and the embassy’s relocation was a good thing or a bad thing.

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin called Trump’s speech “a landmark in the recognition of the right of the Jewish people to our land, and a milestone on our road to peace—peace for all the residents of Jerusalem, and the whole region.”

In contrast, the U.S.-based Reform movement, the largest stream of Judaism in the United States, called Trump’s announcement “ill timed.”

“It affirms what the Reform Jewish Movement has long held: that Jerusalem

is the eternal capital of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Yet ... we cannot support his decision to begin preparing the move now, absent a comprehensive plan for a peace process.”

Any relocation of the American Embassy “should be conceived and executed in the broader context reflecting Jerusalem’s status as a city holy to Jewish, Christians and Muslims alike,” its statement continued.

As for the Holy Land’s Christians, in a letter to Trump, patriarchs and bishops expressed their hope the United States “will continue recognizing the present international status of Jerusalem. Any sudden changes would cause irreparable harm.”

The Christian leaders predicted Trump’s actions will lead to “increased hatred, conflict, violence and suffering in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, moving us farther from the goal of unity and deeper toward destructive division.”

‘A historic mistake’

Thabet Abu Rass, the Muslim co-director of the Abraham Fund Initiatives, which strives for Arab and Jewish equality, called the announcement “a historic mistake.”

“Jerusalem isn’t just a religious city. It is a symbol of statehood for Palestinians. This move will only inflame Arab-Jewish relations,” he predicted.

Boaz Marcus, a Jewish city resident and marketing executive, said he was unmoved by Trump’s announcement. “It doesn’t make a difference for me,” said Marcus, who is secular. “But I imagine that religious people have more decisive feelings.”

Marcus said that the city “is already largely divided” between Jewish West

Jerusalem and Arab East Jerusalem and that the president's words won't make any difference.

"In the end it's what people do, not what they say."

Ahmed Muami, a Muslim carpenter from East Jerusalem, expressed fears the Israeli government will try to wrest control of Haram al-Sharif—what Jews call the Temple Mount—from the Jordanian Muslim trust that administers it.

"Now that America says that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel, who will try to stop Israel from doing this?" he asked.

Last year, a wave of Palestinian violence spread across Israel, and especially in Jerusalem, amid rumors that Israel was taking steps to destroy the mosque.

Yossi Hadad, the owner of a jewelry store in the city center, said Trump only confirmed what he and other Jews have been saying all along.

"The Torah, Jewish texts and archaeological excavations all come to the same conclusion—that Jerusalem is a Jewish city. All we seek is that acknowledgment, with the understanding that Muslims and Christians belong here, too."