

Reactions mixed to Trump declaring Jerusalem to be Israel's capital

Many Jews in Israel were pleased, while other groups—including among U.S. Jews—were concerned.

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [January 3, 2018](#) issue



A display in Tel Aviv, Israel, with a photo of U.S. President Trump ahead of his speech on December 6, 2017. AP Photo/Oded Balilty.

Avihu Mizrachi Minagen's family has run a men's shoe store in the heart of West Jerusalem for 86 years—17 years longer than Israel has been a country.

He applauded U.S. president Donald Trump for declaring that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel and vowing to relocate the U.S. embassy there from Tel Aviv.

“It strengthens Jews’ historical, cultural, and religious claims to Jerusalem,” Minagen said. “The roots of the Jewish people are right here . . . the Western Wall, the Temple Mount. I’m glad the American president acknowledges this.”

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

Ahmed Muami, a Muslim carpenter from East Jerusalem, expressed fears that the Israeli government will try to wrest control of Haram al-Sharif—what Jews call the Temple Mount, which is also a holy site for Muslims—away 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 there was a wave of violence in Israel, especially in Jerusalem, amid rumors that Israel was taking steps to destroy the mosque on the hill of Haram al-Sharif, or the Noble Sanctuary.

Trump called the planned relocation of the U.S. embassy “a long overdue step to advance the peace process.” Many world leaders have said the move would make it harder to restart peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians.

The United States has 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 over West Jerusalem while Jordan seized control over East Jerusalem. After the 1967 war, Israel extended its control over East Jerusalem, which the Palestinians claim as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

To many Jews in Israel, the declaration recognizes what has been true for thousands of years. 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.”

The response was decidedly negative from the 19 percent of Israel's population who are Muslim, Christian, Druze, or part of another minority religion. Thabet Abu Rass, a Muslim who is co-executive director of the Abraham Fund Initiatives, an organization striving for Arab and Jewish equality in Israeli society, called the announcement "a historic mistake."

"Jerusalem isn't just a religious city," he said. "It is a symbol of statehood for Palestinians. This move will only inflame Arab-Jewish relations."

In the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinians held demonstrations against the declaration. Hamas, the political group in charge of the Gaza Strip, which the United States has classified a terrorist organization, said the declaration would be "a blatant aggression against the holy city."

In Turkey, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan 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, Erdoğan said.

Meanwhile, American Jews debated whether the U.S. declaration of sovereignty and the embassy's relocation was a good thing or a bad thing. David Rosen, an Orthodox rabbi who is the international director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, expressed doubt that 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."

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.

White American evangelical Christians have long lobbied for the change.

Thirteen patriarchs and bishops of churches in Jerusalem wrote in a letter to Trump that changing Jerusalem's status would "yield increased hatred, conflict, violence, and suffering. . . . The Holy City can be shared and fully enjoyed once a political process helps liberate the hearts of all people that live within it from the conditions of conflict and destructiveness that they are experiencing."

Yossi Hadad, the owner of a jewelry store in the city center, said Trump 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."

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.

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." —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on December 20, appears in the January 3 print edition under the title "Reactions mixed to Trump's Jerusalem declaration."