

Debate

World powers in Middle East

**Mark N. Katz**

is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University in the United States. Links to his recent articles can be found at www.marknkatz.com.

Can Putin mediate an Israeli-Palestinian settlement?

US President Donald Trump has self-confidently proclaimed that he can succeed where previous American presidents have failed in bringing about an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement. However, his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and announcement that the US Embassy in Israel will move there have weakened his ability to do this.

With the Palestinians also claiming Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state, Trump's definitively backing Israel's claim to the entire city – in defiance of past American policy – undermined confidence worldwide that he will work for an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement acceptable to the Palestinians.

If Trump cannot or will not do this, can Russian President Vladimir Putin?

Despite his poor relations with the West, there are strong reasons why many, including Putin, see Moscow as a better candidate than Washington for mediating between Israel and the Palestinians. Unlike the United States, Putin has good relations not just with all the major actors in the Israeli-Palestinian arena – Fatah, Hamas and the Netanyahu government – but with all Middle Eastern governments.

Further, Moscow indicated last April that it was willing to consider West Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state, demonstrating a much greater desire to accommodate both sides than the Trump administration.

An ability to talk with opposing sides in a conflict, though, does not necessarily enable an outside mediator to settle a conflict. In addition to being able to talk with them all, an outside party must be able to either persuade or coerce opposing parties to make concessions to the other side. During the Camp David talks between Israel and Egypt in the 1970s, Washington's ability to provide massive assistance to both sides – which continues to this day – played an important role in



No leverage. Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) greets Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas during their meeting in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, Russia, last May. (AP)

getting them both to reach a settlement.

Thus, even though Putin can talk with all sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and is seen by the Palestinians and their supporters as more viable than Trump as a mediator, this does not mean that he can broker peace between them. Especially given the economic constraints from Western sanctions that Russia faces, Putin is simply not in position to offer anything to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu that would induce him to accept a Palestinian state, much less East Jerusalem as its capital.

Similarly, it is doubtful he can offer anything to the Palestinians that would induce them to accept the loss of East Jerusalem in exchange for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza (assuming Israel would agree to even that).

Further, Putin cannot credibly threaten to impose unbearably

painful costs on either (much less both) if they do not accept what Moscow deems as a reasonable settlement. Any Russian threat against Israel would simply drive it closer to the United States and if Israeli forces have been unable to compel the Palestinians to back down, it is difficult to see how Russia could do so. Not only would trying to do so be unproductive, it would hurt Moscow's efforts to portray itself as friendlier than America to the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Moscow's inability to persuade or coerce opposing parties to reach a peace settlement severely limits its ability to bring about an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement. Yet even though he is offering Russian mediation, Putin may well understand that his ability to bring about such a settlement is extremely weak.

Why, then, would Putin offer Russian mediation if he knows that it is unlikely to succeed?

Putin may be less interested in

bringing about an Israeli-Palestinian settlement than in portraying himself as more "even-handed" than Trump. For even if Putin is seen to try but fail to negotiate an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, this outcome will be widely blamed by Arabs, Muslims and many others on US support for Israel and not on Putin.

At the same time, a Russian-sponsored mediation process that does not result in Israel having to make concessions to the Palestinians preserves Russia's economic and security cooperation with Israel.

In other words, offering himself as an Israeli-Palestinian mediator holds out the prospect that Putin can gain even if he fails to make any progress. Indeed, his just trying to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians when Trump is so strongly supportive of Israel may bolster Russia's image as a responsible power and America's as an irresponsible one.

This is an outcome that Putin would be very satisfied with.

“

Putin may be less interested in bringing about an Israeli-Palestinian settlement than in portraying himself as more "even-handed" than Trump.”

”

Will Trump push the EU to more independent stands in Middle East?

**Francis Ghilès**

is an associate fellow at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs.

Whether US President Donald Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of

Israel is akin to an act of vandalism, only time will tell. There can be no doubt it will boost his support among evangelicals and conservatives – although less so among American Jews, who appear to be split on the president's announcement – at home and allow him to assert that he has fulfilled a campaign promise.

It is far less certain he can leverage his move to facilitate an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal, something that has eluded US presidents since Jimmy Carter a generation ago.

Those who have voiced opposition in blunter terms than usual are European politicians, including French President Emmanuel Macron and Federica Mogherini, who runs the foreign affairs of the European Union. They understand only too well that the scenario implicit in US recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is a rejection of the notion that any Israeli-Palestinian peace deal would have to involve either West Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital or shared control of Jerusalem to serve as the capital of both countries.

The future Palestinian state would consist of non-contiguous

parts of the West Bank to allow Israeli settlements there to remain under Israeli control. The Palestinians would have to surrender their right to demand recognition of the right of return for Palestinians who fled Israel/Palestine during the wars of 1948 and 1967.

The Europeans find themselves in the uncomfortable situation of bankrolling many projects in the occupied West Bank and Gaza while having no voice in decisions made in Washington. What is supposed to be an essential part of EU foreign policy is a charade that fools no one.

As the United States under Trump charts an increasingly solitary course – on climate, the World Trade Organisation, Iran, etc. – the question of how far the European Union will dare diverge from the United States remains. Will Trump's unilateral decision on Jerusalem make the Europeans bolder?

Developing a Middle East policy independent of the United States is more difficult in 2018 than it would have been two decades ago. Autocratic self-preservation and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, coupled with disastrous US policies, of which the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel is only the latest, have wrecked countries across the region and fostered anger and frustration to the suffering of the Palestinians. Added to that are concerns about the plight of the Yemenis and the Syrians.

The much hoped-for transition

to democracy has morphed into a battle for the retention of political control that puts Europe in a very difficult position.

Europe has a vital interest in the stability of southern rim Mediterranean countries but it has not played its cards adroitly. It has done little to back the UN-led mission trying to find a solution to the conflict over the future of Western Sahara. It got involved in Libya without a long-term understanding of the consequences of the NATO-led military operation. It was lucky Algeria intervened, with the full consent of Tunisian leaders, to stabilise North Africa's smallest country in 2011-15.

Europe faces an imperial challenge that includes exercising influence in its periphery in ways that have a greater affinity with the requirements of empire than with those of an interstate system.

As Herfried Munkler notes in his book "Empires," Europeans must "keep up a two-way relationship with the more powerful United States; they must take care that they do not simply provide resources for its operations and step in afterward to handle the consequences, without having any say in the political-military decisions." In other words, they must resist marginalisation.

They must also attempt to prevent collapse on their periphery without being drawn into a spiral of expansion that would overtax the European Union.

However, EU foreign policy is al-

ready suffering from imperial overstretch without being an empire.

Until recently, Europeans tended to emphasise their economic strength and visualise their relationship with the United States as one of equilibrium. In so doing, they overlooked or downplayed two points: The erosion or collapse of the United States would pose greater problems for Europe than it would solve and the prospect of equilibrium with Europe could induce the United States to turn more to a military solution.

The uncertainty over future American policy that the unilateral behaviour of Trump is creating, not least over Jerusalem, only adds to Europe's discomfort. As EU relations with Turkey deteriorate, Russia re-enters the region and the Saudi-Iran rivalry proceeds apace, the European Union finds it next to impossible to formulate a coherent set of responses.

Trump's unilateral decision of the status of Jerusalem offers another example of the United States walking away from internationally binding agreements. The United States might yet leave the internationally sanctioned nuclear agreement with Iran.

The Europeans have no option other than to stand up to the United States, however uncomfortable that may be.

In a region wracked by political, ethnic and ideological conflict, respecting the international rule of law is the only way to avoid sliding into all-out war.

“

The uncertainty over future American policy that the unilateral behaviour of Trump is creating, not least over Jerusalem, only adds to Europe's discomfort.”

”