

Jerusalem: why city-shrines make bad capitals

The embattled Trump administration took, at the beginning of the month, the decision to officially recognise Jerusalem as the capital of the State of Israel, by moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv. This undoubtedly opens up a Pandora's Box both in the Arab and the Muslim world where it is perceived as the latest injustice in the decades-old conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The announcement of the move has also provided more rhetorical fuel to extremist and terrorist organisations, exploiting the opportunity of revamping their recruitment capabilities.

In addition, the decision pushed several regional and international actors to question the role of the United States as a neutral broker in the conflict and vocally reject the new US position. No other country followed the US. A wait-and-see-approach is being pursued. If Jerusalem was really to become Israel's capital, there would arguably be more long-term consequences than meets the eye at present. In particular, this would be a unique case in contemporary history where a spiritual religious capital also becomes a political capital of an, ostensibly, secular state, and thus the centre of political power. Such a dynamic could result in gradually gluing together religion and politics at the level of a modern state. The symbolism of having a political capital in one of the holiest cities in the world – for all major monotheistic religions – might, in time, easily transfer to the political discourse, the public sentiment and, finally, the policies and interaction of such a state internationally. It would be traveling back in time to a historic process that civilizations have decided to overcome in a long, painful and, mostly, conflictual way.

In ancient history the overlapping of politics and religion was a given: from the Pharaohs, to the Roman Pontifex and the ancient Shahs of Persia were both political and religious authorities. They were rulers as well as Gods, or God's representatives, and they reigned as such. The population's allegiance to those leaders was not just a rational choice, it was a spiritual belonging, as testified by the waves of forced conversions that often followed a military conquest. However, the centres of political power in the past were often kept distinct from spiritual ones.

When Christianity proliferated throughout the Roman Empire, it represented a new phenomenon. Several Emperors initially tried to fight it, but then the Romans had to recognise the impossibility of eradicating this new religion and they decided to legitimate the faith and coexist with it. Rome became the main religious centre of the Empire. However, around the same time, Roman Emperors moved the political capital to Constantinople (current Istanbul) along with the imperial court. This first distinction between politics and religion was inspired by the Bible, in which it is stated: 'Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.'

Interestingly, such a distinction was enacted even in the Islamic civilization, notwithstanding the fact that the Qu'ran approaches this issue quite differently than the Bible, advocating a stronger relationship between political and religious power. Despite that, Medina was only the capital of the Islamic Empire for a short time, and Mecca was never as such. Following the incredible speed of the Islamic conquest throughout the Middle East, North Africa and parts of Europe in the 7th century, the capital was moved from Medina to Kufa, then to Damascus, then again to Baghdad, where it remained for approximately 500 years. With the expansion led by the Turks and the creation of the Ottoman Empire, the capital moved again to Istanbul, which became the centre of political power. Clearly the holy sites of Islam were never perceived as the right places to put the capital of an Empire. Beyond pragmatism, it was important for a universalistic religion shared by people of different customs, ethnicities and cultures throughout the Empire that the holy sites would stay neutral and open to all the faithful. The Caliph controlled life on earth but the holy places were directly under the authority of God and God alone. Such a perspective survived through time and in Saudi Arabia, for instance, the capital is not placed in the holy cities of Mecca or Medina, but in Riyadh.

A similar reasoning applied to the Shi's branch of Islam and the Safavid dynasty – which ruled Persia – made it their official religion. When the Safavids took such a decision, at the beginning of the 16th century, it was most likely to distinguish themselves from the Ottoman Empire, like many European kingdoms did in adopting Protestantism over Catholicism. Still, despite the great political significance of such religious decision, there was never the intention to move the capital from Isfahan to one of the holy places of Shiism, Qom or Najaf.

A major turning point in the overlap between politics and religion happened in the 17th century, with the emergence of the Westphalian nation-state. In 1648, after the Thirty Years War – caused by the conflict between Catholics and Protestants – the European powers made peace and established the fundamental principle of *cuius regio eius religio* (whose realm, his religion). This made possible for the developing nation-states of Europe to define important differentiations between political and religious power. The city of Rome provided a historical

anomaly by remaining the capital of the Papal state until the 19th century. However when Rome was captured by King Vittorio Emanuele, who unified Italy, the holy area of the city was left to the Pope to rule as the Vatican state — a sovereign entity.

Fast forward to the contemporary era, states have learned to deal with one another as equal political entities, and indirectly protect religion, at least partially, from exploitation for political purposes. No other modern government has ever claimed a spiritual centre as its capital, and indeed those claiming spiritual authority over political efforts are perceived as extremists by the international community. For this reason, proclaiming Jerusalem as Israel's capital comes across as a historical move and possibly, even as the first step, towards the reversal of some milestones reached by modern civilizations.

In the days following the decision to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem many protests erupted in Palestine, and – in the following clashes – some demonstrators lost their lives. That is to say that this decision, even if not yet in effect, has already changed the situation in the region and will probably produce other major effects including the possibility of reviving the conflict between Arabs and Israelis, at a time in which they were forging comprehensive relations based on shared interests. In short, this is a short-sighted policy at the wrong time in history.

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