

# Guatemala Breaks The Mold, But Jerusalem Firewall Intact For Now

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## ***While making inroads, Israel remains a long way off from upending the automatic pro-Palestinian majority at the UN***

Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales has commenced the process of moving his nation's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, following Washington's recognition of the holy city as Israel's capital. The announcement comes four days after Guatemala was one of only nine countries to vote against a United Nations General Assembly resolution denouncing the decision by U.S. President Donald Trump.

Guatemala and Israel have long-standing ties, with the former having supported the 1947 UN Partition Plan, in addition to being one of the first countries to officially recognize the Jewish state after its declaration of independence one year later. Guatemala was one of only a handful of nations to initially locate its mission in Jerusalem, which was eventually moved to Israel's second city amid international pressure.

"Guatemala was the first country in the world to open an embassy in Jerusalem in 1948, which was located opposite the Israeli prime minister's residence," Werner W. Loyal, Honorary Consul of Guatemala, told The Media Line. "Guatemala was always one of the countries to fight for Israel in international forums, mainly because of the people in charge at the time. The Guatemalan ambassador to the UN, for example, organized trips to former Nazi concentration camps to show others what had happened."

Of the thirty-three countries to vote in favor of creating a Jewish state out of Mandatory Palestine, a full thirteen were Latin American or Caribbean. In this respect, Mr. Loyal believes that Guatemala's initiative will not only serve to enhance bilateral ties with Israel but also prompt

other countries to follow suit. "The relocation will strengthen the historical ties between our two nations, which are strongest at the political level and evidenced by the mutual respect between the peoples. It will affect other Latin American countries as well," he continued, "as when Guatemala first moved its embassy to Jerusalem other states did so too."

While Mr. Loyal stressed that President Morales—who visited Israel last year, his first official trip outside of the Americas—is serious about relocating the embassy, he revealed to The Media Line that there is still no time frame for the move.

Nevertheless, Israeli leaders across the political spectrum welcomed the prospect, with the Foreign Ministry hailing the "wonderful news and true friendship!!" Israel's ambassador to Guatemala went a step further, attributing the policy shift to the large evangelical population in the country and the development aid the government receives from Israel.

Guatemala's decision, however, lies in stark contrast to the overwhelmingly negative global response to President Trump's declaration, which has manifested in violent rioting in the Palestinian territories fueled by condemnations by every Arab-Islamic country, most of Europe—save for a few states, most notably the Czech Republic and Hungary—and other major powers including China and Russia (the latter of which, ironically, recognized west Jerusalem as Israel's capital in April).

Despite widespread disapproval, Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu reiterated Monday his contention that other nations will likewise move their embassies to Jerusalem, as the Jewish state continues to make diplomatic inroads. In the past, more than a dozen foreign embassies were located in what Israel considers its undivided capital.

According to Dr. Emmanuel Navon, Professor of International Relations at Tel Aviv University and a Fellow at the Jerusalem Center for Strategic Studies, the Israeli premier's push may end up paying dividends. "Something needed to trigger the cascade and this was achieved by the U.S. move, which a lot of countries will follow. Also," he contended to The Media Line, "people predicted major unrest following the announcement but this never materialized. Thus, other countries are asking themselves why not."

As per Netanyahu's oft-stated assertion that Israel's diplomatic efforts will lead to a change in its standing at the UN, Dr. Navon conceded that "politicians tend to overstate their case and the automatic anti-Israel majority may not be overturned. But," he qualified, "the premier is right to focus on these regions because the effort will have an impact."

In this respect, last week's UNGA vote slamming the change in Jerusalem's status can be viewed as a litmus test of Netanyahu's strategy. In 2012, 138 countries of the 193-member body voted in favor of a resolution—a motion vehemently opposed by Israel—to admit "Palestine" as an observer state, whereas 9 voted against, 44 abstained and 14 cast no ballot. On Thursday, 128 countries voted in favor of condemning the U.S.' recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, while 9 voted against, 35 abstained and 21 cast no ballot.

A further breakdown of the results reveals that there has been a slight positive shift in the voting patterns towards Israel by Caribbean, Central American, African and Asian countries. While this represents a positive development from Jerusalem's perspective (perhaps foremost the abstentions by Mexico and Argentina, which in 2012 voted against Israel), there were an equal amount of disappointments; in particular, India's vote in favor of the anti-Jerusalem resolution as well as adamant opposition by chief European countries.

As such, the situation is a mixed bag of sorts, not entirely unexpected given the intricacies of international diplomacy and, perhaps more importantly, the nature of the UN itself. "There is a big difference between bilateral relationships and what goes on in that forum, which is a show," Dr. Navon asserted. "Many countries pay lip service to various issues even while they do business with Israel. One has to look at ties between individual countries and in this respect Israel is doing well."

In fact, there does appear to be a modest trend indicating a growing appreciation of Israel's importance as an ally, based largely on its contributions in the fields of technology, agriculture and counter-terrorism, among others. The question for Jerusalem, then, is how to translate this momentum into better relations with a greater number of nations.

In many cases, this will probably depend on developments related to the Palestinians, with whom Israel's destiny has become intricately linked. Should there be no progress towards ending the conflict, so-called "normalization" with the Arab-Islamic world is highly unlikely (albeit under-the-table dealings will continue in accordance with overlapping interests, primarily the shared desire to curb Iran's expansionism and potential nuclearization).

And while the Palestinian issue has taken a back seat to the carnage engulfing Syria, Iraq and Yemen, many non-regional countries are liable to resist going all-in with Israel because of their own dependence on states that support the Palestinian cause or due to associated domestic pressures.

For his part, Netanyahu has predicted that Israel's acceptance into the "family of nations" will take another decade, although many suggest it could be closer to a generation, if at all. In the interim, the Jewish state, with much to offer, will in all likelihood become an increasingly attractive partner for many countries; this, even while Jerusalem, somewhat paradoxically, continues to lend credence to lopsided UN votes by paying an inordinate amount of attention them.