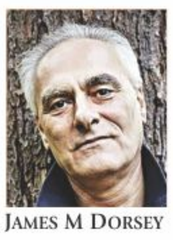
Trading Jerusalem for Iran



JAMES M DORSEY

The notion that Abu Dis could replace East Jerusalem has been around for almost two decades. It failed to garner support during the 2000 Camp David Israeli-Palestinian peace talks because Arab and Palestinian leaders rejected it.

US President Donald J Trump's recognition of Jerusalem potentially sets the stage for a controversial American effort to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The United States and the two Gulf states see a US peace plan-in-the-making as a way of paving the way for more overt cooperation with Israel in confronting Iran, whom they accuse of destabilising the Middle East.

In doing so, the United States, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are navigating a minefield. Protests against Trump's move have so far underplayed the link between the fight against Iran and apparent Saudi and UAE willingness to compromise on minimal Palestinian demands for peace that include East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state.

That could change as US plans for an Israeli-Palestinian peace crystalise and the link to the Saudi-Iranian rivalry manifests itself. At the core of the US draft plan is reportedly the controversial suggestion that Abu Dis, a Palestinian village bordering on Jerusalem, rather than East Jerusalem, would be the capital of a future Palestinian state.

Perceived Saudi and UAE backing for the proposal that is reportedly being drafted by Trump's aide and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, would bring anger at alleged Arab complicity to the forefront, fuel the persistent anti-US and anti-Israel protests, and complicate the campaign by the US and the two Gulf states against Iran.

The notion that Abu Dis could replace East Jerusalem has been around for almost two decades. It failed to garner support during the 2000 Camp David Israeli-Palestinian peace talks because Arab and Palestinian leaders rejected it. Saudi and UAE eagerness to work with Israel coupled with Trump's seemingly unqualified support for the Jewish state has given the proposal a new lease on life.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, despite their official condemnation of Trump's recognition of Jerusalem, have signalled a willingness to be more flexible by continuing to support Kushner's effort and playing a low-key, if not dampening, role in Arab and Muslim rejection of the president's move.

Ironically, differences among Arab leaders about how to respond to Trump's Jerusalem decision may have temporarily prevented Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, from adding Palestine to a string of failed foreign policy moves aimed at escalating the kingdom's proxy war with Iran. Prince Mohammed's devastating military intervention in Yemen, botched effort to force Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign, and hamstrung boycott of Qatar have backfired and only strengthened the Islamic republic's regional influence.

Inadvertently, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Jordanian King Abdullah did Prince Mohammed a favour when they reportedly rejected pressure by Prince Mohammed not to participate in this week's summit of Islamic countries in Istanbul. Saudi Arabia was represented by a lower level cabinet official. Abbas may have further shielded the Saudi leader when his refusal to further accept the United States as a mediator was adopted by the summit.

The two leaders' stand coupled with the Islamic summit's rejection of Trump's move make it more difficult for Saudi Arabia and the UAE to endorse any resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that does not recognise East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. The problem is that Prince Mohammed and his UAE counterpart, Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, run the risk of misreading or underestimating public anger and frustration in significant parts of the Arab and Muslim world.

The link between Israeli-Palestinian peace making and Iran is likely to become undeniable when Trump next month must decide whether to uphold the 2015 international agreement with Iran that put severe restrictions on its nuclear programme in exchange for the lifting of sanctions.

Under US law, Trump has to certify Iranian compliance every three months. In October, Trump refused to do so. He threatened to pull out of the agreement if Congress failed to address the agreement's perceived shortcomings within 60 days. Congress has so far refrained from acting on Trump's demand. Trump wants Congress to ensure that Iranian compliance involves accepting restrictions on its ballistic missile programme and support of regional proxies.

It is anybody's guess what Trump will do. At first glance, US ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley's presentation of Iranian missile parts as evidence of Tehran's support for Houthi rebels in Yemen and Iranian destabilisation of the Middle East would suggest that Trump is preparing to decertify Iran and possibly withdraw from the agreement.

It could however also be an effort to project a tougher US stance towards Iran while cooler heads in the administration prevail on Trump to keep the agreement in place.

In either case, Trump and his Gulf allies are walking a tightrope by fuelling suspicion that they are willing to compromise on minimal Palestinian demands for peace in a bid to cater to Israel, a natural ally in the fight against Iran.

In doing so, Trump and the Saudi and UAE crown princes risk misreading not only the public mood but also Iranian influence and intentions, particularly regarding the Islamic republic's ability to control the Houthi rebels. Haley's evidence that was supplied by Saudi Arabia and the UAE failed to convince many in the international community.

Haley's missile parts display was prompted by the Iranian-backed Houthis firing of a ballistic missile at Riyadh on November 4. It remains unclear whether that missile was supplied by Iran, or possibly North Korea, and when it was given to the Houthis—key questions that need to be answered to determine possible Iranian culpability.

The Houthis, a fiercely independent actor who have repeatedly demonstrated that they do not take orders from Tehran and at times ignore its advice, could throw a monkey wrench into the fragile Middle East mix if they make good on a threat to target not only Saudi but also Emirati cities. A missile strike would no doubt provoke a harsh response, possibly involving a joint US-Saudi-UAE strike against Iran rather than against the Houthis in Yemen.

Anger already aroused by Trump's decision on Jerusalem potentially could then turn against Arab leaders who would be seen to be cooperating with the United States and willing to sacrifice Palestinian rights to work with Israel.

In short, it could open a can of worms in which public anger is directed against multiple parties ranging from the United States to Israel to Arab leaders to Iran and the Houthis and/or prove to be a perfect storm.

Pro-Palestinian protesters chant slogans against US and Israel as they wave Turkish and Palestinians flags during a demonstration in Istanbul on December 10. PHOTO: AFP

Dr James M Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the New Books in Middle Eastern Studies podcast. He is the author of the book The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, among several others.

Exploring the potential of children with disabilities

SHAMSIN AHMED

"Amar chhele kotha bolte pare na, haat tey pare na, tare porai ki hoibo?" (My son can neither speak nor walk; what is the point of educating him?)

These are the words of a mother of a child with cerebral palsy.

I pointed to a picture of Stephen Hawking and she laughed. *"Eita toh bidesh, bideshe toh protibondhira chakri o korte pare. Amar chhele jiboneo chakri paibona"* (This is abroad, where disabled people can even get jobs; my son will never get a job).

This mother, like many mothers, sees no value in investing in the education of her child with disability.

The predecessor of the SDGs was the MDGs, one of which was increasing equitable access to education. Bangladesh claimed to have achieved 100 percent primary education by the end of 2015 whereas it completely left out disabled children. Although eight of the 17 SDGs specifically talk about addressing inequality and inclusion, there are barely any structural initiatives that help achieve those goals, especially where it concerns children with psychosocial disabilities.

All government primary schools in Bangladesh have officially become inclusive schools due to a government order to enrol children with disabilities into regular schools.

Why does this matter?

This situation bespeaks a bigger problem than just inclusive education—what the purpose of education is for all of us. We talk about educational reforms in light of the fourth industrial revolution as we fear our current education system is not preparing our children to cope with it. Our current education system does not give the next generation the capacity to outsmart technology, as debates about Artificial Intelligence (AI) taking over jobs continue. The irony is that technology, which is meant to be our means to advancement and a better future, has become a source of concern.

If technology is the tool, mechanism and means for "our" advancement, isn't it really up to us to decide how that advancement looks?

Quality education nurtures diversity

Our real barrier for advancement is the lack of creativity and diversity, especially when it comes to countries such as Bangladesh. The reason why machines can replace our human capital is because we are still doing what the machines should be doing.

Children are not born with, or acquire, a disability. They are "disabled," meaning they are limited by society and their potentials are never explored, let alone utilised. COURSTESY: HANDICAP INTERNATIONAL

When machines replace our labour, we need to go back to using our most humane skills and that too while also keeping up with technological advancement.

Worse than just mechanising us, our current education system has made us averse to diversity not just through excluding children with disabilities from mainstream schools, but also by making them invisible in society.

But children are not born with, or "acquire," a disability. They are "disabled," meaning they are limited by society, and their potentials are never explored, let alone utilised. Children without any form of physical or cognitive medical limitation, on the other hand, do not develop any capacity to adapt to the challenging environments of disabled children. With increasing use of technology, the idea of physical or learning disabilities will change, as physical work becomes more automated and learning becomes more virtual. This is what we need to nurture and harness.

Designing for disability is universal design

What if we designed for disability first, instead of designing for the mainstream, because not only is that inclusive but also proven to be more effective? What if with basic primary education in reading, writing, and critical analysis we taught people to design for disability—essentially for making our lives easier with the help of children with disabilities themselves.

Technological advancement geared towards creating assistive communication for children with disabilities is an option (for example, developing learning media that change colours to numbers for children with autism, etc.). One could argue these would only serve people with disabilities, but historically, that has been wrong.

When we think about disability inclusion, we think of complex infrastructural changes and sometimes even simpler ones such as ramps. However, for any building, a lift is now a given essential, and we hardly think of its necessity for disabled people. Text messaging was originally designed for people who are deaf but everyone sends text messages with little knowledge of what the original purpose was.

Yes, we need to reform our education and emphasise on science, technology, and unleashing creativity so that our labour force is doing work that requires quick adaptation and change of direction but above all, the moral of being inclusive, something that a machine can never replace.

The International Day of Persons with Disabilities, annually observed by the UN General Assembly resolution since 1992, has been an effort to make visible commitments to disability inclusion. The theme this year was aptly "Transformation towards sustainable and resilient society for all." To do that we need to conduct more research and allocate resources into building technologies that improve the learning of all kind of capacities, and support people with learning disabilities.

Our businesses need to start identifying these opportunities now to be in a position to not only benefit from but also steer the kind of advancement we are looking for. Let machines produce clothes to export and let's think of more potential ways to move ahead. We can start with being inclusive.

Shamsin Ahmed is the founder of the Identity Inclusion project which aims to identify the needs of people with psychosocial disabilities and break the barriers that affect their capacity to participate in the community.

QUOTABLE *Quote*

JOHN RAY
ENGLISH ENVIRONMENTALIST

Beauty is power; a smile is its sword.

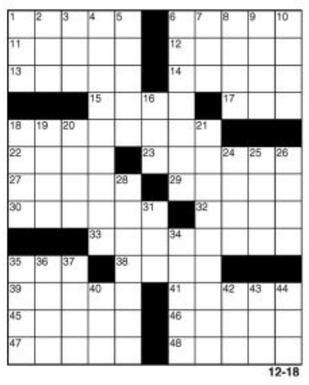
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Small porch
6 Presents
11 San Diego player
12 Flynn of films
13 Bowl game setting
14 Model Campbell
15 Land unit
17 Jewel
18 Colors
22 Not busy
23 Indian lutes
27 Cold forecast
29 Winter quaff
30 December mall workers
32 Bloke
33 Sporty shoes
35 Marshy area
38 Sandwich shop
39 Scarlett's last name
41 Uses one's incisors
45 Christmas tree topper
46 Concur
47 Highways
48 Baltimore suburb

DOWN

1 Relaxing retreat
2 Road goo
3 Lyric poem
4 They're hung at Christmastime
5 " – on Earth"
6 Kind of engineering or code
7 Writer Levin
8 Marsh hopper
9 Big book
10 Narrow
16 Hosp. workers
18 Peach parts
19 Notion
20 Secluded valley
21 They're hung at Christmastime
24 Dull pain
25 Lion sound
26 Easy targets
28 Beach footwear
31 View
34 Pond growth
35 Sow's mate
36 "Dear me!"
37 Music's Lady –
40 Wreath bow color
42 Horace's " – Poetica"
43 Petite
44 Kinsey subject



12-18

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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BEETLE BAILEY — BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES — BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT