



By Aziz  
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## Annexation: Divergent Israeli Opinions

**A**s soon as President Trump announced the political component of the Deal of the Century on January 28, 2020, which explicitly supported Israel's claim to annex the Jordan Valley area and settlements in "Area C," the Israeli scene was divided between those who support the step and those who oppose it. Others, such as the Council of Judea and Samaria Settlements, oppose the Deal of the Century as a whole because it envisages a Palestinian state, even if very narrowly defined, and thus reject the annexation process because they consider it too narrow in scope.

These discrepancies are also present among Israeli research centers. Whereas the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies of Bar Ilan University endorses the point of view that supports the annexation process, similar to the Jerusalem Center for Israeli Public Affairs, the Institute for National Security Studies of Tel Aviv University is on the other side of the spectrum, opposing the annexation process and its consequences. This can be discerned from a review of their latest studies and reports regarding the annexation process and its political and security implications. In the

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meantime, the Washington-based Israel Policy Forum remained on the sidelines of these two opposing stances, calling for the endorsement of the two-state solution and the rejection of any unilateral measures from either side that could undermine this solution.

Annexation denotes the process through which some Israeli officials are attempting to officially integrate the West Bank, fully or partially, into the state of Israel. Israel currently occupies the West Bank in its capacity as a "military or belligerent occupation," according to the Israeli supreme court. Accordingly, Jewish settlers in the West Bank are subject, technically speaking, to the military administration, with Knesset bills being enforced through the military governance structure in the territories. The Knesset passed a bill that applies Israeli criminal law to Jewish settlers, in addition to several similar measures. Some of the isolated settlements, illegal outposts according to Israeli law, have been legalized retroactively. In other cases, Israeli authorities demolished Palestinian homes under the pretext that they lack construction permits. It should be noted that these gradual processes are known as "creeping annexation."

### What does the annexation process mean?

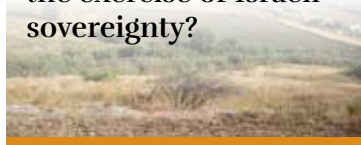


The aim of the pro-annexation camp is to change the status of the West Bank – particularly Area C that constitutes 60 percent of the land and is home to Israeli settlements and 300,000 Palestinians – which is, technically speaking, not currently part of the state of Israel. Annexation would entail the full application of Israeli law, the Israeli judicial system, and administration over individual settlements as well as all of Area C or the agreed-upon annexed area in light of the proposals made by various parties.

Trump's plan grants Israel 30 percent of what it calls Judea and Samaria, i.e., the West Bank. The map committee is currently working on an accurate representation of the borders. It is possible that sovereignty will be applied to the Jordan Valley and the Israeli settlement blocs in Samaria, the Benjamin area, Gush Etzion, and Mount Hebron. The roads that lead to these blocs will also be delineated as part of Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu launched his three election campaigns based on the plan to annex the Jordan Valley area and bring the settlements in Palestinian territories under Israeli sovereignty. US President Trump assisted him by declaring the political component of the Deal of the Century last January, just

## Which areas involved in the annexation process will fall under the exercise of Israeli sovereignty?



two months prior to the Israeli elections. President Trump had already met with both Netanyahu and his opponent at the time, Benny Gantz, to discuss the Deal of the Century and the mechanisms for the annexation and sovereignty process.

The coalition unity government agreement between Netanyahu and the leader of the opposition, Benny Gantz, stipulated the enforcement of sovereignty over parts of the West Bank and all of the settlements. According to the agreement, measures and bills for annexation would be initiated by the beginning of July 2020.

Therefore, the official position of the Israeli government, based on the coalition agreement and the rotation of the position of prime minister between Netanyahu and Gantz, advocates the full and actual adoption of the annexation and sovereignty plan. If the maps and the plan are put to a vote within the Israeli government, they will obtain the necessary votes for implementation.

Some of the government ministers stand on the opposite side of the plan, among them former Labor Party-member Minister Amir Peretz, who declared several times that

he would oppose the annexation and sovereignty process. However, these voices remain among a very small minority within the government and therefore would not have any influence on the implementation of the annexation process.

All indicators point to a situation in which Netanyahu would be reluctant to allow his minister of defense, Benny Gantz, or his minister of foreign affairs, Gabi Ashkenazi, or even the army and the intelligence services to participate in the plan to “exercise sovereignty” over the settlements and some parts of Area C in the West Bank. Netanyahu insists on fast-tracking the steps towards annexation and is threatening his partners in the Blue and White political alliance, saying that without the implementation of the annexation plan and sovereignty, he would dissolve the Knesset and head towards a fourth round of elections.

Furthermore, there are objections by the leaders of the Judea and Samaria Settlements Council who rejected the annexation plans presented to them by Netanyahu. They demand the expansion of the annexed area and request that the plan include 16 settlements in the form of pockets surrounded on all sides by Palestinian towns. Noteworthy is the fact that these maps were not shared with either the minister of defense or the minister of foreign affairs, despite the importance of their positions, not only politically but also with respect to security, given their security background and high status within the government.

Netanyahu considers the completion of annexation a national legacy that would inscribe him as a

hero in the history of the state – a strong incentive for him to move ahead with annexation and impose sovereignty.

To implement the annexation, Netanyahu has to deal with four obstacles. The first is the American obstacle, namely, the concerns that face Trump in terms of an escalating economic crisis due to COVID-19, the unrest and riots following the killing of George Floyd, the cold war with China, and Trump’s preparation for the upcoming presidential elections in November. In addition, there are conflicting opinions and positions within the American administration; for example, between US Ambassador to Tel Aviv David Friedman, who desires to hastily move forward with the annexation plan and others, such as Jared Kushner, who believe in a more calculated and unrushed approach.

Second, Netanyahu must overcome extremist right-wing opposition in his own country. The majority of settlers want the annexation of larger areas and object to the mere mention of a Palestinian state. The Yemina bloc within the Israeli opposition is facing a lot of confusion in terms of its position on the annexation process, especially given the stance of the settlements’ council. The bloc has become

divided between a pro-annexation position and siding with the settlers.

Third, Netanyahu must secure the cooperation of his coalition partners, namely the White-Blue bloc. Israeli sources reported that Gantz’ call to the Israeli army to be ready and alert for the potential explosion of conditions in the West Bank in the aftermath of the annexation was an attempt to draw attention to himself and his presence. Gantz and Ashkenazi, both from a military background, know the field very well and understand the position of the military establishment and the potential repercussions of the annexation. They both understand that this knowledge would influence their positions towards annexation when the final decision is to be made. Moreover, Gantz would like to see the annexation take place through negotiations with the Palestinians rather than unilaterally.

Fourth, the exclusion of the army and the intelligence services could pose a problem. This is the first time in Israel’s history that the military and security establishments have been kept out of the circle of discussions on a matter of such high sensitivity. Gantz asked the army to be prepared for potential security escalations in the West Bank, but the army does not know what to expect in the field and which areas will be annexed.

To better understand these obstacles and how the Israeli government views them, a consideration of the research and study centers in Israel is helpful, given their significance in terms of their political and/or security insights on and interpretations of all the dimensions of the scene that is unfolding before us.

## Will Netanyahu be able to implement the process of annexation and sovereignty?



**Four obstacles face Netanyahu: the lack of solid American support, the far-right settlers who reject annexation and who deem the plan too narrow in scope, the Blue-and-White-party coalition partners who prefer a more cautious approach, and the absence of army and security-apparatus involvement in decision-making.**



A review of published reports and studies of the Begin-Sadat Institute for Strategic Studies, affiliated with Bar Ilan University, reveals its position. The institute encourages the implementation of the annexation process, particularly in the Jordan Valley, as it considers this area to be an advanced post for early warning in terms of Israeli national security. The institute considers this the opportune time to impose sovereignty and to avoid making the mistake of the first prime minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion, who refused the annexation process out of fear of the international community's reactions and his reluctance to anger them.

The Institute for National Security Studies, affiliated with Tel Aviv University, brings together an elite group of Israeli military generals

and political experts from inside and outside the political circles and scene. The studies and reports published by this institute reveal its call to take more time to do careful calculations in relation to the annexation process. The institute supports negotiations with the Palestinians and warns against the security-related and diplomatic repercussions of annexation, particularly with Jordan and Egypt who both have peace agreements with Israel. It warns that these ties may be subject to political and security volatility should the annexation be implemented unilaterally.

The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, headed by Dori Gold, the former diplomat and former Israeli ambassador to Washington, is credited with participating in the development of the annexation plans. The center works relentlessly to convince Netanyahu to go through with the annexation, disregarding what it calls the empty threats of both Jordan and the Israeli left-wing parties.

The Israel Policy Forum, a Washington-based institution established after the signing of the Oslo Agreements in 1995, calls for the endorsement of the two-state solution according to the 1967 borders, advocating this as the only proper solution for the struggle. The forum was one of the first research centers to discuss the process of annexation through detailed security studies. It rejects annexation, given that it would destroy the concept of the two-state solution.

On another note, Palestinians were too late in examining and studying the repercussions and the steps of the annexation process and the exercise of Israeli sovereignty

over the Jordan Valley and the settlements in Area C. Anyone who has read Netanyahu's discourse since his opposition to the Oslo Agreements and his engagement with the protests against Yitzhak Rabin, calling Rabin a traitor, as well as his policies as prime minister since 1996, would realize that Netanyahu belongs to the school of Vladimir Jabotinsky, the founder of the extremist right-wing school of thinking. In 1923, Jabotinsky, the godfather of Netanyahu in the Likud Party, wrote the article titled "The Iron Wall (We and the Arabs)," which states that colonization must proceed under the protection of an outside nation, as the "native population" will not agree to a Jewish majority in Palestine.\*\* Netanyahu, whose program rejects a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders, had already expressed that intention in his Bar Ilan speech in 2009, and presented the same ideas in his book *A Place Among Nations*. We therefore now find ourselves with a man who announced his plans a long time ago. We sat and watched, waiting for the storm without preparing anything to fight against these plans and their repercussions. We adopted a reactive policy rather than a proactive one.

It is not sufficient to rely on the Israeli positions that reject the annexation plan. These voices emanate from a desire to preserve the Zionist project and steer away from having to control any additional Palestinians, while seeking to get rid of and harass those whom they call "Arabs" inside the 1948 territories. However, the annexation plan and exercise of sovereignty provide sufficient grounds for the international community to brand Israel as a version of an apartheid regime, thus strengthening the boycott movement against Israel in the international forums, using the card of the annexation plan. Some rational Israelis, in their political and security reading of the scene, see that Netanyahu, fired up with his megalomania, is leading Israeli society into a maze that could fuel violence in the West Bank – violence that could eventually spread within the state of Israel, similar to what happened during the second Intifada (Al-Aqsa Intifada) back in 2000.

\*This article has been translated from Arabic by Areej Daibas.

\*\*Ze'ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky, "The Iron Wall," November 1923, available at <http://en.jabotinsky.org/media/9747/the-iron-wall.pdf>.

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