

Israel's Annexation Plans and the Hashemite Kingdom

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Key Points

- Emboldened by what could be regarded a unique window of opportunity, Benjamin Netanyahu probably consider annexation of the West Bank an historic moment without acknowledging the risks.
- Benjamin's Netanyahu's annexation plan could end up threatening Israel's long-term interests and - so far - warming relations with Arab and Muslim neighbors.
- Jordan might be left with no other choice but the dilemma of having to chose between its people's demands and its geopolitical/diplomatic interests since it cannot afford to officially sever ties with Israel, and most importantly, with the US.
- The US should resort back to its core values and reconsider the use of military and economic aid as bargaining chips within negotiations.

Introduction

The Palestinians, whose land has been under Israeli military occupation since the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, continue to claim that the West Bank should be part of their future state, in which they still firmly believe. As such, they deem Israeli settlements illegal, as do most of the world powers.¹

At the end of January 2020, President Trump unveiled the long-awaited US peace initiative, dubbed "Peace to Prosperity - A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People," but immediately faced worldwide rejection, especially because of the following items:²

- Israel will not have to uproot any settlements, and will incorporate the majority of Israeli settlements into contiguous Israeli territory. Israeli enclaves located inside contiguous Palestinian territory will become part of the State of Israel.
- The Jordan Valley, which is critical for Israel's national security, will be under Israeli sovereignty. Notwithstanding such sovereignty, Israel should work with the Palestinian government to negotiate an agreement in which existing agricultural enterprises owned or



¹ https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/05/eu-launch-diplomatic-push-israeli-west-bank-annexation-200515223416730.html?utm_source=website&utm_medium=article_page&utm_campaign=read_more_links

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf>

controlled by Palestinians shall continue without interruption or discrimination, pursuant to appropriate licenses or leases granted by the State of Israel.

- Significant improvements for the people in Gaza will not occur until there is a ceasefire with Israel, and the full demilitarization of Gaza.
- The State of Israel will retain sovereignty over territorial waters, which are vital to Israel's security and which provides stability to the region.

Prime Minister Netanyahu has most likely regarded the US peace process a true green light and an "historical moment" to seize without waiting further. Given Israel's intent to annex the Jordan Valley and most of the 130 West Bank settlements, which are key part of the Trump administration's initiative, the biggest challenge for policymakers and military leaders, at this stage, is to assess, anticipate and prepare for the likely fallouts, regionally but first and foremost in Jordan, a key US ally in the region.

An early test could be witnessed next month, as Israel decides whether to "apply sovereignty" in parts of the West Bank, which many observers consider a de facto annexation. According to a 20 April 2020 agreement, Prime Minister Netanyahu will indeed be allowed to bring this issue to a cabinet (or even a parliamentary) vote starting on 1 July, provided he manages to obtain "full agreement" from the US and conducts successful international consultations.³

Any Israeli decision to annex all or part of the occupied West Bank will inevitably extinguish any remaining hope of one day returning to a two-state solution and could even put an end to Israeli aspirations to improve security, economic and cultural ties with the Arab world, while increasing the possible risk of violent uprisings, which Iran will not fail to exploit. Moreover, even if annexation were to unfold smoothly, Israelis could end up having to reconcile remaining both a Jewish and a democratic state since with the annexation of the West Bank, they might have no other choice but to grant the Palestinians full Israeli citizenship - thus risking being outnumbered in the long term, or to resort to anti-democratic apartheid-like policies that would most likely be vehemently condemned worldwide.

Analysis

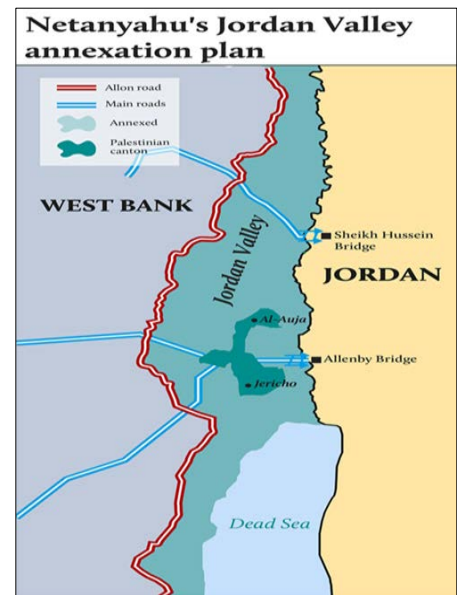
On 14 May 1948, David Ben-Gurion formally proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel and signed the Israeli Declaration of Independence, which he had helped to write. At that time, he knew the risks would be high but, as the British Mandate was about to be handed over to the United Nations, Ben-Gurion firmly believed he could not miss such a unique opportunity to achieve his uncompromising vision of Jewish unity and statehood.

Nowadays, and most likely in the same state of mind, Prime Minister Netanyahu might see a not-to-be-missed and unique historic opportunity to annex parts of the West Bank. However, unlike Ben-Gurion, who perfectly knew the costs would be high (but bearable), he seems to disregard the possible risks linked to such an annexation plan. Israel's relations with its Arab neighbors seemed to have trended towards normalization thanks to shared interests against in a common fight against the current pandemic and a common enemy (Iran). Benjamin Netanyahu might indeed feel emboldened by the fact that, despite warnings against the US move of its Embassy and the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, or the US recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights, or even an overtly biased US peace initiative, nothing really harmful has so far happened. He might therefore believe that he has secured a greenlight from the Trump administration to set Israel's borders further to the east, thus controlling the areas he regards critical to Israel's security, ultimately providing the Hebrew State with a new baseline for any

³ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/israels-rush-to-apply-sovereignty-in-the-west-bank-timing-and-potential-con>

future negotiations with the Palestinians. Indeed, such a baseline would no longer follow the 4 June 1967 terms but the Trump administration's terms, i.e. 70 percent of the West Bank instead of 100 percent.⁴

The Trump administration's efforts to help Israel strengthen and "normalize" ties with the Arab world, particularly with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, have been getting a boost. On the other hand, Gulf Arab investors are likely to retreat from fledgling business ventures with Israel if Netanyahu riles the Palestinians by declaring sovereignty over any of the territory captured in the 1967 Middle East war.⁵ However, Benjamin Netanyahu himself might not even know how or when to proceed.⁶ Indeed, he indicated his annexation pledge could be pushed back past 1 July, the date his coalition deal with Gantz allows him to move forward with his plan, stating *"I wanted to bring annexation for approval soon, but the map still isn't complete... I didn't know what Gantz and Ashkenazi's stance on annexation was."* Meanwhile, sources in Gantz's party told they could not present any clear position on Netanyahu's annexation plans, as they had not been given any clear proposal or maps. Even Washington seems undecided since a three day meeting between aides to President Donald Trump on whether to give Israel a green light ended without any final decision, according to senior US officials.⁷



What could it mean for Jordan?

The Hashemite kingdom, whose King Abdullah II is the custodian of Jerusalem holy sites, is located just across the Jordan River from the West Bank and has a substantial Palestinian population (more than 2 millions). As such, Jordan has always been more sensitive to adverse developments in the West Bank though its border with Israel has been more secure than other frontiers for decades. Besides, the Kingdom's vast territory has provided Israel with irreplaceable strategic depth, thus allowing enhanced deterrence, as well as early detection and interception - both on the ground and in the air - of hostile forces, primarily from Iran.⁸ Regarding counterterrorism and forward basing, Jordan has also remained a critical ally for the US and the D-Daesh Coalition. In fact, "losing Jordan" would be a risky bet given the current geopolitical chessboard.

In a recent interview with the German magazine Der Spiegel,⁹ Jordan's King Abdullah II warned against the possible consequences of an Israeli annexation, stating *"Leaders who advocate a one-state solution do not understand what that would mean...What would happen if the Palestinian National Authority collapsed? There would be more chaos and extremism in the region. If Israel really annexed the West Bank in July, it would lead to a massive conflict with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan... I don't want to make threats and create an atmosphere of loggerheads, but we are considering all options. We agree with many countries in Europe and the international community that the law of strength should not apply in the Middle East."*¹⁰

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/06/05/netanyahu-sees-historic-moment-annexation-he-might-not-be-seeing-risks/>

⁵ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/israel-gulf-ties-boosted-by-covid-19-research-may-trip-over-annexation-plans/>

⁶ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pm-says-us-wants-gantz-on-board-for-annexation-vows-not-to-back-down-report/>

⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/06/officials-remain-undecided-israeli-annexation-plans-200625161810713.html>

⁸ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/23/netanyahus-annexation-plan-is-a-threat-to-israels-national-security/>

⁹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israeli-annexation-how-will-jordan-respond>

¹⁰ <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-05-15/eu-weighs-stance-amid-concern-over-israeli-annexation-plans>

The Hashemite Kingdom has always been clear and has often warned against Israel's attempts to regard Jordan an alternative homeland for the Palestinians, which the recently announced annexation intent tends to feed. Without any path to full citizenship, neither in Jordan nor in Israel, Palestinians, who live both in Jordan and the Jordan Valley, could thus become increasingly marginalized and a major source of tension between Israel and Jordan.¹¹ Jordan's total rejection of any Israeli annexation is based not only on the fact that this would negate one of the key pillars of its peace treaty with Israel, but also because of the probable direct impact on the Hashemite Kingdom's stability, security and even dynasty.

King Abdullah II has indeed been able to rule over Jordan only by balancing the needs of various tribes against those of East Bank Jordanians and Palestinians – some of whom lived in Jordan before 1967, and also prior to 1948, although most arrived as refugees following major wars with Israel in those years. As the first Arab country to become a member of the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Jordan will not hesitate to pursue legal recourse against Israel,¹² especially since more and more Gulf (especially the UAE who stated that Israel has to chose between annexation and normalization) and Arab countries have started to voice concerns. However, apart from Iran and Turkey (and probably Qatar) it remains unclear whether Arab and Muslim leaders will go beyond mere statements of solidarity and take direct steps against Israel if an annexation was to happen as a *fait-accomplis*. Indeed, the US does remain a key partner and security provider for many and pressure from the local populations could easily be muted because of the COVID19 “distraction,” the associated economic uncertainty, ongoing civil wars and disputes (such as the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, etc.). Therefore, the Palestinian cause, though still important, might cease to be regarded the highest priority. In fact, as mentioned by Amaney Jamal, a Princeton professor and co-founder of the Arab Barometer that which gauges public opinion in the Middle East, *“Israel enjoys a less hostile Arab world, a friendlier Arab world and an Arab world that seeks Israel's help with broader geostrategic interests in the region.”*¹³ said. “So why is Israel not saying, ‘Let us maintain this new era of ties, friendships and alliances and resolve the Palestinian issue’? It's in Israel's strategic interest, but Israel is calculating that it doesn't need to.”

Nonetheless, Jordan has been the most outspoken in its opposition to Israel's annexation plans. Denying Israel's claims that annexing the Jordan Valley was necessary to defend itself from outside aggression because of Iranian long-range aggression capabilities (ballistic missiles and drones), retired Maj. Gen. Mamoun Abu Nawwar, explained to the Middle East Eye¹⁴ that *“Jordan has no option except to abrogate the peace treaty [Wadi Araba treaty] with Israel if it annexes the Jordan Valley and settlements.... and this will mean the cancellation of security, military and economic agreements as well... annexation would be an undeclared declaration of war on Jordan. This would be a big geopolitical shift for Jordan within the balance of power in the region,”* whereas with its close ties to the US and Israel, Jordan has so far been the most influential Arab country in changing Israel's mind.

The current situation situation may in fact embolden Prime Minister Netanyahu but annexation could increase short-terms risks, leading to the possible collapse of the Palestinian Authority, a third intifada, the end of the peace treaty with Jordan, the weakening of improving relations with key Muslim and Arab countries or even to the end of Israel's good diplomatic relations with key powers such as European Nations (and possibly sanctions if Israel was to opt for apartheid policies). The International Criminal Court could also come into play, especially if the US presidential elections change the environment.

¹¹ <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/06/06/the-israeli-annexation-plan-and-jordans-west-bank-moment/>

¹² <https://themedialine.org/news/opinion/trump-peace-plan-risks-upending-israels-treaty-with-jordan/>

¹³ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/arab-governments-denounce-israels-plans-to-annex-the-west-bank-warning-it-will-imperil-regional-security-and-peace-building-but-will-israel-listen/2020/06/26/35500c32-b71b-11ea-9a1d-d3db1cbe07ce_story.html

¹⁴ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israeli-annexation-how-will-jordan-respond>

Conclusion

Any Israeli annexation of the West Bank would likely dash any hopes for peace with the Palestinians, on which the Israeli-Jordanian relationship relies. The situation is compounded by US President Donald Trump's Middle East peace plan, which indeed includes calls for annexation.

The historic 1994 agreement between Israel and Jordan is formally still in place. But Jordan's refusal to extend the lease on the two enclaves, along with the fact that neither side held any ceremony to mark the 25th anniversary of the signing of the accord, indicates just how far Israeli-Jordanian relations have deteriorated. Benjamin Netanyahu and King Abdullah have met publicly on occasion but issued no joint statements. Israel and Jordan settled into a cold peace, with no high-level strategic talks in over a decade. Connections are maintained at a tactical level by midlevel diplomats, advisors, and security and economic personnel. Describing the status of Jordan-Israel relations, Abdullah said in a recent interview, "*The rhetoric coming out of Israel is creating tremendous concern. ... [The Israelis] are moving off into a new direction that can only create more instability.*"¹⁵

Risking the hard-won stability between Israel and Jordan for the annexation of territory over which Israel already has full security control makes little sense. Both Israel and the US would thus need to reconsider their position before any beyond-repair damage is done. Opting for annexation, regarded an irreversible step, is likely to trigger a chain reaction beyond Israel's control. The tipping point might well be the termination of Palestinian security coordination with Israel. Once hailed as a symbol of aspiration for statehood, the Palestinian security agencies lost public support as statehood appeared less and less likely. Worse yet, both junior and senior officers report encountering accusations of treason and charges that they no longer serve Palestinian national aspirations—only the Israeli occupation.

Whether the Palestinian Authority itself survives this moment or not, and whether its leadership would still wish for security coordination to continue, could seem irrelevant, but only if those working in the security agencies and refuse to show up for work do not show up with weapons in mass protests against the annexation.

If security coordination ceases to be effective, and because Hamas remains well organized and prepared to exploit any security vacuum, Israel might end up having no other choice but to reoccupy the entire West Bank. Should this scenario materialize, Hamas in Gaza would be unlikely to abide by its cease-fire understandings with Israel. Should Hamas join the confrontation, Israel may have no option but to enter the Gaza Strip as well, at high costs. Indeed, what might start after the 1 July Knesset vote on a partial annexation may soon thereafter spin out of control and lead to a complete Israeli takeover of the West Bank and Gaza, meaning that Israel's military would be the sole entity ruling over millions of Palestinians - with no exit strategy.¹⁶

Above all, unilateral annexation would also damage Israel's twenty-six-year-old peace treaty with Jordan, where the majority of people have Palestinian roots, thus endangering the security cooperation between Israel and the Hashemite kingdom. In this respect, and for months now, King Abdullah has been warning that West Bank annexation would have "*a major impact on the Israeli-Jordanian relationship.*" Nonetheless, while Amman has been vocal about its Jewish neighbor, King Abdullah has never officially threatened to cut ties with Israel, probably because of Jordan's dire economic situation and the need for a critical \$1.7 billion in annual US aid.¹⁷

¹⁵ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/05/14/israel-netanyahu-annexation-plans-threaten-relationship-jordan-king-abdullah-palestinians/>

¹⁶ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/23/netanyahus-annexation-plan-is-a-threat-to-israels-national-security/>

¹⁷ <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/palestinians-fight-skepticism-over-whether-they-can-stop-annexation/>

Therefore, Jordan will most likely focus its retaliation on Israel instead of provoking the Trump Administration. Amman could potentially recall its ambassador in Israel and expel the Israeli ambassador in Jordan. The kingdom could also suspend some parts of the peace treaty with Israel, for instance the Joint Boundary Commission, or halt the military coordination and border security with Israel. But it might be too risky for Amman to annul the peace treaty and return to a state of conflict with Israel, a move that could also jeopardize the US military aid it receives. Jordan might have reached its limits in weighing options, given the country's severe economic crisis, while struggling to cope with the impact of the coronavirus outbreak. Jordan will thus have to walk a fine line between answering to its people's demands and firmly respond (diplomatically) to any annexation move, while not severing ties with both the US and Israel.¹⁸

Recommendations for the US / for USCENTCOM

- Remain fully committed to peace talks/endeavors while avoiding peace enforcement.
- Increase consultations with partners, friends, allies, and international organizations in major decisions as unilateral decisions embolden revisionist states.
- Consider leveraging the support provided to Israel, which often triggers resentment within the Middle East and sometimes put partners in untenable and difficult situations.
- Consider greater economic aid for the Palestinians as a gesture of good will aimed at promoting a more balanced approach.
- Continue regarding and supporting Jordan as one the most important US ally in the Levant.

¹⁸ <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2020/06/06/the-israeli-annexation-plan-and-jordans-west-bank-moment/>