



The Jordan Valley Annexation Dilemma: A Realistic Approach

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The declared intention of the new Israeli government to pave the way for the implementation of sovereignty in certain parts of the West Bank, with the blessing of the Trump administration, is prompting vigorous debate. The dark prophecies by “liberal” Israelis as well as EU officials about the dire consequences that would result from annexation are exaggerated, and they obscure the vital strategic value of the Jordan Valley for Israel’s security.

Article 29 of the national unity government agreement between Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party and Benny Gantz's Blue and White coalition, agreed to on April 20, 2020, opens the door to territorial annexations in the West Bank. The exact wording is: “As of July 1, 2020 the Prime Minister will be able to bring the agreement reached with the United States regarding the application of sovereignty for discussion by the cabinet and the government and for the approval of the government and/or the Knesset.”

The new Israeli government seems keen to promote the application of sovereignty in parts of the West Bank—specifically the Jordan Valley, which is of supreme security importance to Israel. This is not the first time such an initiative has been suggested, but because it is highly controversial, no previous government has dared attempt to make it a reality.

In January 2014, opposition parties struck back at a proposal to annex the Jordan Valley with their own bill to prevent such an action. “The Two-State Bill,” as proposed by Labor MK Hilik Bar and supported by MKs from Labor, Meretz, and Shas, claimed that the West Bank’s final status can only be determined within the framework of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Annexing the Jordan Valley would, the Labor Party said

in a statement, “sabotage Israel in diplomatic negotiations, harm the efforts of the prime minister to come to a two-state solution, and deepen the rift that already exists between us and the US.”

While the Israeli internal debate has remained largely the same, a fundamental change took place in the White House that opened up new possibilities. Donald Trump’s inauguration led to a series of American initiatives in support of Israeli interests. An indication of a renewed American intimacy with Israel were these words by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on April 23, 2020: “As for the annexation of the West Bank, the Israelis will ultimately make those decisions. That’s an Israeli decision. And we will work closely with them to share with them our views of this in [a] private setting.”

This was heard around the world as the providing of an opportunity, perhaps never to be repeated, by the Americans to the Israeli government.

A fierce campaign was swiftly launched by local think tanks and influential Jewish pressure groups to head off any Israeli annexation initiative. One particularly vocal group is the Commanders for Israel’s Security (CIS), which is composed of 220 retired Israeli generals, admirals, and leaders from the Mossad, Shin Bet, and the police. On April 3, CIS placed a full-page ad in Israeli newspapers urging their former colleagues—namely Gantz and Gabi Ashkenazi, both of whom are former IDF chiefs of staff—to insist on blocking unilateral annexation of the Jordan Valley. A few days later, 149 prominent American Jewish leaders joined the Israel Policy Forum in a similar call. Soon thereafter, 11 members of the US Congress issued another warning about the negative consequences of such a move.

All these groups agreed that annexation would be counterproductive if not completely fatal for the prospect of an eventual two-state solution. In addition, they argued that annexation could undermine Israel’s peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, which are a major pillar of US regional strategy. And furthermore, this reckless move wouldn’t just have adverse consequences for Israel’s security; it would also have implications for Israel’s future as a Jewish democracy.

On April 20, a harsh denunciation was issued by J Street pronouncing deep alarm that “in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, Prime Minister Netanyahu has formed a new Israeli government that appears able and determined to carry out unilateral annexation of occupied Palestinian territory in the West Bank, with the approval of the Trump administration, within just months.” J Street warned that “any annexation would be carried out with the deliberate intention of preventing the creation of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel and a negotiated resolution to the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict...It would be disastrous for Israel's interests, as well as a gross violation of Palestinian rights."

Not surprisingly, the UN and the EU warned Israel not to annex any part of the occupied West Bank.

In a detailed document evaluating the idea of an Israeli initiative to annex certain areas in the West Bank within the context of Trump's "Deal of the Century," The Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) at Tel Aviv University concluded on April 26 that "unilateral sovereignty implementation in Judea and Samaria, without an authentic attempt to reach an agreement with the Palestinian Authority...during this period of the coronavirus crisis, not only won't improve the strategic posture of Israel and its ability to cope with the current and future challenges—those related to the coronavirus as well as those not linked to the crisis—but such a demarche will undermine the fundamental vision of Israel, namely, being Jewish, democratic, safe and ethical, who strives for peace with its neighbors."

This standpoint is anchored in the traditional approach of the Israeli left, which preaches for a two-state solution while underestimating the unique benefits for Israel of the "Deal of the Century." The bottom line of their argument is that because Trump's peace plan is fundamentally unrealistic, there is no point in Israel pursuing whatever opportunity his administration seems to be providing to annex the Jordan Valley.

Israeli "liberal" commentators anticipate swift and terrible ramifications of a decision to annex parts of the West Bank. They have dark visions of an intensification of violence between Israel and the Palestinians and a severing of relations by Jordan and Egypt, which might even go so far as to nullify their peace treaties with Israel. They warn that the Gulf States that have been tacitly cooperating with Israel on security and intelligence fronts will end their cooperation; the EU will condemn Israel in the strongest possible terms; scores of countries will recognize the Palestinian state; the BDS movement will significantly intensify; antisemitism will reach new heights; Israel will become a pariah state; and more.

These apocalyptic forecasts are a terrifying nightmare which, if true, should deter any rational policymaker in Israel from implementing annexation on even a small scale. But those uncompromising visions are not realistic, and contain hidden messages that should be exposed and assessed.

Similar warnings were aired by think tanks and left wing politicians with respect to previous Israeli initiatives, such as applying Israeli sovereignty to the Golan Heights (1981), uniting Jerusalem (1967), and even declaring

Jerusalem the capital of Israel (1949) and moving the government's ministries to Jerusalem (1951). As David Ben-Gurion said in 1955, "Our future doesn't depend on what the Gentiles will say, but on what the Jews will do."

Consider the risk allegedly posed by annexation of the Jordan Valley to the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement. The CIS has emphasized this risk on several occasions in a way that suggests an unbreakable bond between the Hashemite kingdom and the Jordan Valley. In fact, the Arabic name of the Jordan Valley is Ghor al-Urdun, which refers to the Jordan River, not the state. Furthermore, on July 31, 1988, the late King Hussein formally announced his decision to politically disengage from the West Bank, leaving the PLO to fill the political vacuum.

It is true that Jordanian officials have made hardline statements about the "Deal of the Century," but it appears their prime concern was possible harm to Jordan's status in Jerusalem. In King Abdullah's words, "Jerusalem is a red line; we are being pressured, but the answer will be a resounding No! The second consideration is the US call for naturalizing the Palestinian refugees in Jordan, which is considered by the regime as a severe threat to the throne and Jordan's stability."

The Jordan Valley was on the agenda of a meeting between Jordanian FM Ayman Safadi and his Palestinian counterpart Riad Maliki on April 24. The ministers warned that an Israeli annexation of the Jordan Valley and settlements in occupied Palestine would "kill" the two-state solution and undermine chances of peace. They called on the international community to combat any such effort and avert a worsening of tensions—especially now, when united efforts are required to tackle the coronavirus crisis.

In an interview on MSNBC on September 29, 2019, King Abdullah issued a warning: "If the policy is to annex the West Bank, then that is going to have a major impact on the Israeli-Jordanian relationship and also on the Egyptian-Israeli relationship, because we are the only two Arab countries that have peace with Israel...If there is a box that is being ticked on a certain government getting everything that it wants, without giving anything in return, what is the future? Where are we going to go unless we are going to be able to get Israelis and Palestinians to come together, to live together, and be the message for the future?" In an interview on France 24 on January 13, 2020, the king said, "What does annexing the Jordan Valley mean, after Trump has already recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, given it permission to annex the Golan Heights, and recognized the legitimacy of some of the settlements?" A few weeks later, a senior Jordanian expert said in

an interview with *Haaretz*, “All of this means Jordan has ceased to be an important element of the peace process.”

The Jordanian approach toward the possibility of Israeli annexation of the Jordan Valley sounds more like lip service to the Palestinian Authority than a “war alert.” If so, this could suggest that the regime is confident it can maintain stability if and when the Israeli initiative is implemented. On the strategic level, this could imply that abolishing the peace treaty with Israel is not considered a realistic option in Amman. A survey conducted in February by the Department of Public Opinion Surveys and Field Surveys at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan supports this assessment by dismissing the severing of relations with Israel as a response to Israel’s declaring sovereignty over part of the West Bank.

Contrary to INSS’s paradigm regarding “annexation under the cover-up of the coronavirus,” which paints it as a short-term opportunity, a more realistic timeframe for applying Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley is President Trump’s tenure in the White House. No one can predict who will be sitting in the Oval Office on January 20, 2021, but Israel has at least until the end of his first term and possibly four years beyond that.

The dark prophecies proclaimed by “liberal” and “progressive” groups in Israel as well as abroad vis-à-vis the possible annexation of the Jordan Valley are overstated, and they obscure the strategic significance of the Jordan Valley to the security of Israel. As Netanyahu said: “The Jordan Valley has supreme importance in the context of the security of the State of Israel. The Middle East is unstable and violent. The Jordan Valley is a strategic defensive belt for the state, and without it, the fundamentalist flood could reach into Israel as far as the Dan region.”

As the great French writer, historian, and philosopher Voltaire observed, “Opportunities are not to be neglected. They rarely visit us twice.”

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