

# Discussing Annexation Scenarios: A Regional Perspective

16 September 2020

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10:00-11:30 AM CET

## Narratives on Annexation scenarios

In light of January 2020 Trump Peace for Prosperity plan and the Netanyahu-Gantz coalition agreement (article 29, signed on April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020), Israel announced it would extend sovereignty over significant parts of the West Bank, beyond Jerusalem, whose annexation would definitely hamper any territorial viability of a Palestinian state. This is not the first de facto or de jure annexation carried out by Israel, suffice it mention East Jerusalem, de facto annexed with the Six Day War in 1967 and de jure in 1980, the Golan Heights from Syria, formally annexed in 1981, both de facto recognized by the US in 2019.

The Israeli government aims at selectively choosing the parts of the Trump plan it will implement, focusing on the provisions more strategically suitable to its interests and security, i.e. annexation of key areas of the West Bank. The plan, beyond recognizing Israeli authority over East Jerusalem, foresees the establishment of a State of Palestine encompassing approximately 70% of the current West Bank and a territorial exchange from substantial territories inside Israel adjacent to the Gaza Strip, with a possible transfer of Israeli-Arab citizens from the Galilee Triangle to the territories under Palestinian authority, an option which has been already rejected by both parties. In addition to the big settlement blocks, Israel would keep control of the sparsely populated and strategically important Jordan Valley bordering Jordan and not be required to dismantle any settlements, although 15–19 Israeli ‘enclave communities’ (settlements) would remain inside a Palestinian state with the settlers able to secure their original status of Israeli citizens<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://fathomjournal.org/israels-dangerous-annexation-policy-why-now-and-what-next/>

The deadline passed without any new facts on the ground being established, but prospects for the annulment of annexation remain slim. Even less likely, after the end of the two-state solution, is the emergence of a binational state scenario as plausible option.

The annexation scenario, in other words, remains the default one, albeit postponed, in a timeframe dependent on three variables: the trajectory of the pandemic within Israel, which is being hit by a second wave in July 2020, and the declining prospects for a second term of a Trump presidency after the November elections. Beyond the timeline of annexation, its extent can range from the “minor option” of annexing only the major 6 Jewish settlements around Jerusalem (Ma’ale Adumin, Modi’in Illit, Ariel, the Gush Etzion Bloc, Givat Ze’ev and Betar Illit) to all of them plus surface water resources (Dead Sea access, Jordan River and its affluents, the major wadis, such as the Wadi Kafrein and Wadi Hisban), and groundwater ones, in particular the mountain aquifer.

The second spike of COVID-19 cases in Israel has postponed annexation, as have widespread protests within Israel over the handling of the pandemic and the economic crisis following the lockdown and the global economic slowdown as well as hesitancy within the US administration.

Given the looming target date of July 1<sup>st</sup> and the calling off security cooperation with Israel by the PA in late May 2020, the month of June saw a sharp rise in violent incidents between settlers and Palestinians as well as of Israeli search and arrest operations towards Palestinians, especially in Hebron, Ramallah, Nablus and Bethlehem. However, both areas bordering Palestine -the Gaza Strip and the line along the Security Fence- despite the lack of previous coordination between the PA and Hamas, remained moderately stable. From the end of May, given the diffusion of Covid in the West Bank and the strict measures taken by the PA to counter it, protests and anti-annexation mobilization have diminished. Peaks of unrest had been previously reached in November 2019 and January 2020.

**Scenario I: no annexation.** This scenario would materialize if the US were and would continue to exert considerable pressure, under the guise of severe cuts or a strict conditionality imposed on military bilateral aid. The latter would be successful if combined with simultaneous diplomatic pressure by Arab countries, particularly Jordan, Egypt, Gulf countries, and a unified EU, openly taking into consideration retaliatory actions such as

Israel's exclusion from EU programs on scientific cooperation, high-tech and technology transfers, doubled by EU single Member States' analogous actions in bilateral trade and agreements, all of which seems highly unlikely. The cold feet of some within the US administration vis-à-vis unilateral annexation, in the absence of negotiations with the PA and of clear security concerns aired by Israel, have led to the postponement of Netanyahu's actions. The decline in popularity both of President Trump and of Netanyahu linked to their mishandling of the pandemic might make them reconsider embarking on such divisive move. However, given a strong support for Israel by the core Republican constituency and the Zionist evangelical forces, the cornerstone of Trump's electoral base<sup>2</sup>, it is unlikely that the window of opportunity for annexation in the US has forever closed. Moreover, the potential competitor Joe Biden has already signalled to AIPAC that he would not reverse any decisions made by his predecessor. He would compensate by restarting dialogue with the PA and reinstating some US financial aid cut by the Trump Administration (between 520- 630 million USD yearly). Arab Gulf countries, with the exception of forceful rejection statements by the UAE and Jordan, have so far failed to take strong public stances beyond timid declaratory policy aimed at deterring any change with regard to the status of the West Bank. Instead, only six weeks after the 1 July deadline passed without nothing changing on the ground, Israel and the United Arab Emirates unveiled a peace agreement that normalised diplomatic relations between the two countries, paving the way for other Arab countries to follow the same path. Despite the Emirati government quickly announced that the agreement immediately stops Israeli plans to annex parts of the OPTs, Israeli prime minister stated that Israel's sovereignty claim over the Jordan Valley was still on the agenda and frozen for the time being.

Furthermore, the low-key profile kept by Egypt on the matter is noteworthy. Whether the peace agreements with Jordan and Egypt would be in danger were annexation to occur remains hard to assess but it is very unlikely that Egypt would jeopardise any military gain with Israel for the sake of neither the PA nor Hamas. Egypt so far has remained quiet, while the Hashemite Kingdom has suspended bilateral security cooperation and has threatened to suspend parts of the 1994 peace deal, but doubts persist over this being mere signaling or

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200716-are-annexation-and-the-deal-of-the-century-really-behind-us-now/>

substantial threats with a deterrent potential and aimed at silencing its own conspicuous Palestinian minority to safeguard the domestic political balance of the Kingdom<sup>3</sup>.

**Scenario II:** The annexation of big Jewish settlements in the area C of the West Bank, including Ma'ale Adumim and Gush Etzion, could range from 6.8% to 23% of the West Bank if all Israeli military facilities, the water sources, the Dead Sea accesses, the major Israeli industrial zones and some natural parks were included. Few dozen thousands of Palestinians would be involved in this scenario, their post-annexation status likely -but not for sure- comparable to Palestinians from East Jerusalem. Israel would try to limit the numbers of Palestinians living in annexed lands as much as possible, in order to avoid demographic ticking bombs. It is very unlikely that the annexed Palestinians would be offered citizenship, in particular in light of the precedent of some 320.000 Palestinians East Jerusalemites being de facto annexed in 1980 and granted a permanent residency status, constantly under threat of revocation so that these Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem are required to constantly proof that Jerusalem is their center of residence, as well as the 2018 Jewish Nation-State Law which does not extend equality to all its citizens but only to the Jewish majority, thereby legally creating different citizenship status' categories<sup>4</sup>. In the best case scenario, they would be offered civil rights without national rights and with limited political rights (vote at the municipal elections). In this scenario, Jordan would bear the brunt of refugees flows of the up to 300.000 Jordan Valley-inhabitants, landowners, peasants and commuters seeking refugee status in the Kingdom or PA-administered area A, either voluntarily leaving Palestine or being forced to relocate within it. Jordan already hosts 2 million Palestinian refugees, almost half of its population, and this number, despite being unlikely to fully destabilise the country, demographically and politically, could set a risky unilateral precedent for both the PA and the Hashemite Kingdom. It is unlikely that the EU or any other international organization would legally stigmatize Israel, for example adopting punitive resolutions or implementing sanctions, while declaratory statements, despite expected, would bear no consequences. The implication for the likelihood of the establishment of a Palestinian state would hit its lowest

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/how-jordan-responded-to-israels-annexation-plans/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/israels-jewish-nation-state-law-prelude-annexation>

point since 1996, while the survival of the PA could not be granted anymore and social unrest in the OPTs and military reactions from the Gaza Strip would have to be expected.

**Scenario III:** large-scale annexation: settlements plus all key strategic resources (including infrastructures, agricultural lands and expropriation of private Palestinian agricultural land in area C, which has been already pronounced illegal by the Supreme Court this June, plus complete isolation of Jericho and cut-off of the Northern West Bank provinces (Tulkarem, Jenin and Ramallah) from the Southern ones (Bethlehem, Hebron), equaling 30% in the West Bank, as envisioned in the Trump Plan. In this scenario, in addition to the Jewish settlements close to the Jordan Valley, Israel would get control of the Mountain Aquifer, the largest and most significant source of high quality drinking water, equivalent to roughly one third of the yearly water consumption in Israel, and in particular the Western Mountain (Yarkon-Tananim) Aquifer<sup>5</sup>, which is fed by rain falling on the western slopes of the West Bank mountains. This scenario would bring about significantly more Palestinians' displaced, would threaten the agricultural subsistence of thousands Palestinian households in the West Bank and would expose Palestinians to severe food insecurity.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/radiocarbon/article/yarkontananim-aquifer-judea-group-israel-what-radiocarbon-can-tell/8F52770237081874EFADD1477262DFF8>