
Will the Center (and Labor) concede to the Idea of Annexation?

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Annexation has been an idea entertained by, flirted with and used as leverage by Israel essentially since immediately after the Six Days War in 1967.

Before delving into the specifics of Annexation, it is critical to emphasize that substantively, **“Annexation” in the West Bank was never a unilateral action that Israel considered seriously, aside from East Jerusalem.**

True, the Golan Heights were annexed in December 1981, but that is an entirely different set of geopolitics, circumstances and demographics.

From the Oslo Agreements of 1993 to the Camp David summit of July 2000 to the [then Prime Minister] Ehud Olmert-Mahmoud Abbas negotiations of 2007-2008, those who advocated annexing parts of the West Bank invariably made it contingent on a framework of understanding with or consent of the Palestinians, and in a way that would not make a future Palestinian State a territorial impossibility.

The question this brief paper addresses is not what the downsides and problems annexation present, but why are the “Centrists” coalition partners in the new Israeli government (Blue-White party and the Labor party) ostensibly supporting it?

The short answer is that for a combination of reasons, they don’t actually think it will happen the way Prime Minister Netanyahu pledges it will.

What exactly is this Annexation about?

There are two distinct “annexations”. That of the **three (3) main Jewish settlement blocs** and that of **The Jordan Valley**.

Settlers comprise 13% of West Bank residents, and almost 5% of the entire Israeli population.

Since the Oslo process and particularly during and after the Camp David summit, the general consensus in Israel was that as part of a peace deal, the three main settlement blocs, comprising 11% of the West Bank land, and home to approximately 80% of the settlers, would be annexed to Israel. That would be concluded with Palestinian consent and in return for a land swap of similar proportion.

So, when Mr. Netanyahu talks about annexing settlements, he has the white spots in the map (below) in mind: The three blocs plus roads leading to smaller settlements.

According to the map he reportedly shared with the US, Mr. Netanyahu intends to annex approximately 1200 square kilometers which equal 20.5% of the entire West Bank area. 23% of the annexation-designated area is privately owned by Palestinians and includes 12 villages, with a population of 13,500 locate in area B according to the Oslo agreements’ demarcations.

As for the Jordan Valley, annexing it was always viewed as an outcome of a Jordanian-Israeli agreement and with Palestinian acceptance.

Aside from making grandiose election-time statements, no Israeli Government ever



contemplated annexing the entire West Bank (and Gaza). Demographically it would create an equilibrium between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arabs **in one geopolitical unit** between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

That poses a profound identity and perhaps even an existential dilemma: Either be a “Democratic Jewish State” or be a “Bi-national Democracy”. Enfranchising the Palestinians would end the Zionist endeavor of a sovereign independent democratic State of the Jews. Disenfranchising the (annexed) Palestinians would constitute Apartheid.

That is why “Annexation” was always a limited concept and a clear distinction between the major settlement blocs - adjacent

to the [1949 Armistice map] “Green Line” and the Jordan Valley was consistently made.

Currently, the concept has gained Flavor of the Month or Plat du Jour status in the diplomatic and public discourse on the (almost forgotten) Israeli-Palestinian relationship.

The European Union, the US Administration, Jordan, the Palestinian Authority are looking at the possibility of Israeli **unilateral** annexation of parts of the West Bank (Judea, Samaria and the Jordan Valley as early as July, and reportedly before the November Presidential election in the US.

But what precisely is “Annexation”? And why have the centrist *Blue and White* party and the *Labor Party* - both parts of the coalition - announce their support in principle to a move that political critics and Israeli security officials, former and current, describe as an inevitable and inexorable step toward a “One Binational-State Solution” and the end of the familiar, internationally accepted but elusive “Two State” model in accordance with UN-resolution 2334?

Three things conspicuously deserve attention and elaboration: (1) What exactly will be annexed? (2) Is this part of [Prime Minister] Netanyahu's policy designed to render the "Two States" model unviable, or is it a policy that can be traced back to 1967? (3) Is this all unilateral, detached from regional geopolitics and Israeli-Palestinian relations?

In January 2020 the US Administration published its *Peace to Prosperity* plan, aka "The Deal of the Century". The US and Israel announced the establishment of a Mapping Committee that would delineate borders and consequently, clarify and enable Israel to annex areas not designated for a future Palestinian State. That the Palestinians weren't consulted or invited to join, and the US supposedly "Green lights" Israeli annexation is a built-in recipe for failure, but it is beyond the scope of this brief paper.

Within hours, Prime Minister Netanyahu, facing in March a third election within a year, announced his plan to bring the issue of "annexing the Jordan Valley and the three large settlement blocks in the West Bank" to the Knesset's approval.

Blue and White leader, Benny Gantz, who was also in Washington for the unveiling of the plan, was cornered into saying that he supports the annexation, although he stressed repeatedly that it must be an integral part of accepting the entire plan, which also creates a Palestinian State.

Netanyahu was then unequivocally told by the US to curb his enthusiasm and postpone any annexation until after the US understood fully what he had in mind and until the Palestinians are at least consulted about the new "Peace Plan".

It is important to stress: Approximately 80% of Blue-White voters are former Labor Party voters. So, for the purpose of this paper, Blue-White represents the original Labor Party, now an irrelevant relic of what it once was.

Labor's History with Annexation

Was the Labor Party, or the "Left Wing" the original annexationists? Yes and no. Yes, when it applied to the Jordan Valley. No, when it referred to other parts of the West Bank, particularly near Palestinian population centers.

Labor always had a hawkish strain in its thinking on the future of the West Bank. Between 1967 and until the Oslo agreements of 1993, Labor was dominated by a security-centered hawkishness (as opposed to an ideological, Bible-based, messianic claim to the land) that saw a Jordanian-Palestinian federation as the only feasible long-term solution.

On July 26, 1967, forty-five days after the end of the Six Days War, the Minister of Labor, Yigal Allon presented [then]PM Levi Eshkol with what became to be known as "The Allon Plan".

This was an era of Labor political dominance and figures like Allon and Moshe Dayan developed the idea that the Jordan River will forever be Israel's security border, and most probably its permanent eastern border.

Allon's plan, which was never accepted but has become a reference point for decades, called for an annexation of most of the Jordan Valley so as to create a territorial buffer between Jordan - and possibly joining Iraqi forces - and Israel. In the Labor-led decade between 1967-1977 Israel began a small-scale policy of allowing isolated settlements of Jews throughout the West Bank. What started as scattered settlements designed to satisfy Biblical-messianic dreams of inhabiting the land of our ancestors, became under Likud governments a landscape-changing political reality that precipitated, but made exceedingly more complex the idea of the "Two State" solution.

Yet Labor, whether in power or sharing power, preferred Israel to maintain the status-quo over seriously considering any form of annexation. Though Defense Minister Moshe Dayan toyed with partial annexation in 1973.

In April 1987, Labor party leader Shimon Peres, at the time the Finance Minister in a Likud-led "Unity Government" negotiated with King Hussein the so-called "London Agreement". Encouraged by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who was concerned about a new Soviet-inspired arms race in the Middle East, the agreement was essentially a framework for an international peace conference that would avoid negotiating with the PLO and instead turn Hussein into the main interlocutor. That was a repeated theme in Labor and centrist thinking: Negotiate with Jordan, secure the Jordan Valley, allow the Palestinians a Jordanian political link and Israel an overriding security hegemony.

Annexation was never mentioned. In fact, once the agreement was derailed by PM Yitzhak Shamir, King Hussein "disassociated Jordan" from the West Bank in 1988.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, in a speech he made in October 1995, a few short days before he was assassinated, proclaimed that "The Jordan Valley will remain Israel's security border". That was a full year after Israel and Jordan ceremoniously signed a peace agreement.

After the year 2000 Camp David grand attempt to reach a final status settlement with the Palestinians, PM Ehud Barak indicated that a small swath of the Jordan Valley may be annexed, but that Israel needs to engage Jordan and **lease** other parts. Unilateral annexation was never an option.

As for the three settlement blocs, a recurring theme in Labor/Centrist views is that they will be incorporated into Israel as an integral part of a peace deal. The "Clinton Parameters", published by departing US President Bill Clinton in a speech in January 2001 were clear: Three settlement blocs will be annexed in exchange for land elsewhere and in mutual consent.

Even more than the case of the Jordan Valley, unilateral annexation was never proposed, not when Labor was a significant political player and not when it sank to its current oblivion.

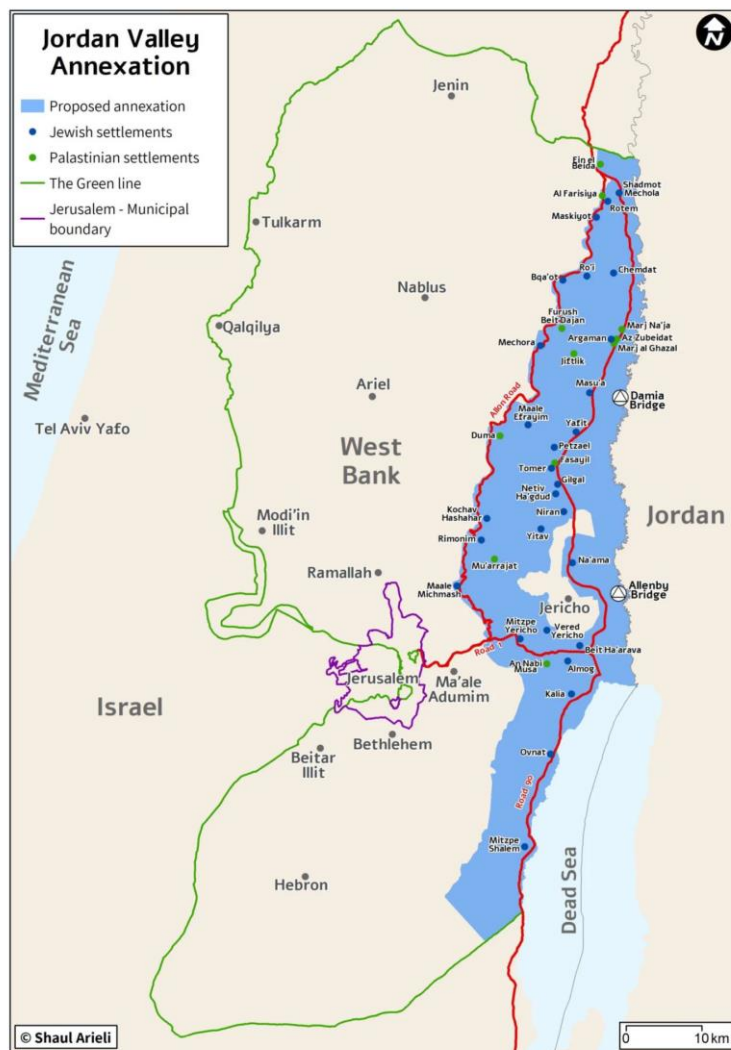
The Jordan Valley

The sparsity of both Palestinian and Israeli population and the general consensus since 1967 that "The Jordan River will be Israel's eastern security border" make the

annexation of the Jordan Valley ostensibly less complex and more palatable, although it potentially and precariously imperils the Israeli-Jordanian peace accord.

The Jordan Valley is a narrow strip 105km long and 10km average width. A geological part of the Syrian-African Rift, it stretches from the sources of the Jordan River in the north (south of the Sea of Galilee) to the northern tip of the Dead sea in the south. The northern-most part of the [Upper Jordan] Valley is not part of the West Bank, but the area subject to annexation is.

(The entire Valley is the orange swath on the map. For more detailed maps, see: www.twostatesecurity.org or www.ecf.org.il or, for a trove and archive of variations of maps and plans: www.shaularieli.com.)



In the east it extends into The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan itself and in the west, to the (eastern) slopes of the Judean mountain ridge.

The Valley is approximately 16,200 square kilometers and constitutes roughly 30% of the West Bank. Excluding the city of Jericho, 90% of the Jordan Valley is “Area C”, according to the Oslo Agreements. For context and perspective, Area C is 60% of the West Bank.

Approximately 60,000 Palestinians live in the Jordan Valley (of which 20,000 in Jericho and 23,000 around the city) although in the strip that Israel is considering to annex, there are only 4,800 Palestinians in scattered little villages.

An annexation of the Jordan Valley would therefore create a Palestinian Area-A “bubble” of 43,000, consisting of Jericho and surrounding villages.

There are 12,800 Israeli citizens residing in the Jordan Valley in 30 Kibbutzim, Moshavim and settlements. The socio-political-cultural profile of the Jordan Valley residents is very different from the Samaria and Judea settlers: They are by and large secular farmers, with historical ties and allegiance to the Labor Party which encouraged them to live there and supported them.

The concept of the Jordan River being Israel's eastern border underlies the current center-left's (Defense Minister Benny Gantz, Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi and Labor Chairman Amir Peretz) qualified support for annexing the Jordan Valley. But the countervailing and salient argument that warrants their concerns is Jordan's vocal resistance to the idea and real fears among Israel's security elite that unilateral annexation threatens the peace accord.

King Abdullah, in an interview to *Der Spiegel* on May 15 said that "*If Israel will really annex the Jordan Valley in July, it would lead to a massive conflict with The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*".

King Abdullah isn't interested in, and has no real claims to the Jordan Valley per se. He naturally prefers an Israeli presence there rather than an unstable, possibly irredentist fledgling Palestinian State. What he is anxious about is a breakdown of the Palestinian Authority, a new round of violence that presents Jordan with another front, given the pressures of Iraqi and Syrian refugees to his east and north.

It is difficult to see how the centrist component of the government reconciles this, particularly if Mr. Netanyahu insists - as is reported from Washington - on annexing **both** the Jordan Valley and the three large settlement blocs.

What will Transpire?

It remains to be seen whether the US administration, five months away from a Presidential election, acquiesces to Netanyahu's annexation urges, given that it is not really part of the "Peace Plan", but entirely unilateral and in violation of international law.

Netanyahu's sense of urgency is fueled by his fear that President Trump will not win reelection and annexation will exacerbate an already existing rift with US Democrats. Democratic presumptive-candidate Joe Biden already expressed his reservation regarding any unilateral move. Netanyahu believes that the predictable barrage of criticism from EU countries, Russia and the Arab world will be offset by Trump's blessing.

Inevitably, an annexation of both the settlement blocs and the Jordan Valley - constituting a combined 30% of the West Bank - not only effectively terminates any hope of renewing a peace process, but it assuredly leads to a reality **of a one binational political unit between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea**. It would render any Palestinian state territorially discontinuous, economically unviable and politically ungovernable.

That is why a likely scenario, one the Centrists could very well live with is a "Pseudo Annexation": Officially applying Israeli law to all Jewish settlements in the West Bank **without** formal annexation. It would be declared a de-facto annexation, short of a de-jure decision that requires major legislation and some form of compatibility with international law.

The Centrists (Blue-White and Labor) may be banking on Netanyahu backing off full annexation. He is a risk-averse politician, not insensitive to signs of dissatisfaction in the US, European criticism and Jordanian threats.

He also knows that the coalition agreement with Blue-White (Articles 28 and 29 of the Coalition Agreement) requires that such a move involve "...full consent of the US...conducting an international dialogue...the need to maintain regional stability. Maintain peace agreements and strive for future peace agreements".

They Centrists feel that supporting a move that will not necessarily materialize beyond a declaration and the launching of lengthy and tedious legislation, carries no political fallout. They may be right.

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