



Israel has lots at stake with annexation

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With Israel's new "unity" government now set, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faces a decision in the coming weeks with huge consequences for Israel's relations with America and the wider world: whether to begin the process of annexing major parts of the West Bank.

That's because an Israeli decision to pursue annexation would strike at the heart of a longstanding belief in major world capitals that an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement establishing permanent borders between the two sides will result from direct negotiations, not unilateral action.

The decision will prove controversial enough in Jerusalem, much less overseas, because the two men who are to share power for the next three years — the Likud bloc's Netanyahu and the Blue and White bloc's Benny Gantz — don't agree on the issue.

Netanyahu has long promised to annex West Bank settlements and the Jordan Valley, while Gantz has been inconsistent on the matter. He has long opposed unilateral action to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but he expressed support this year for the Jordan Valley's annexation while conditioning it on international coordination — even though the international community largely opposes annexation of any kind.

Nevertheless, in a 14-page agreement under which Netanyahu will serve as prime minister for the first 18 months and Gantz will then take over for the next 18 months, Netanyahu can pursue annexation starting on July 1. Although the two leaders agreed to focus on COVID-19 for the next six months and not pursue unrelated legislation on which they don't agree, Netanyahu's authority to pursue annexation represents the lone exception to this rule.

Moreover, Netanyahu has two potential paths by which he can reach this goal. If he can't push annexation through his cabinet, which will be split down the middle between members of his political bloc and those of Gantz's, he can still prevail through Israel's Knesset, where pro-annexation forces will likely outnumber their opponents.

The coming months might seem a uniquely opportune moment for Netanyahu to do so. He has a very close ally in President Donald Trump, whose peace plan assumes Israel will annex all of its settlements and the Jordan Valley. In fact, the Netanyahu-Gantz agreement calls for Jerusalem to work closely with Washington in deciding what land to annex.

Meanwhile, despite ominous predictions that the region would erupt in outrage and violence were Trump to follow through on his promise to move America's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the response when he actually did so was fairly restrained, with governments mostly silent or muted and the "Arab street" mostly quiet. To be sure, annexation would be a far more significant step, with broader implications for Israeli-Palestinian peace, than America's decision to move its embassy to a city that, under any peace agreement, would serve as Israel's capital. Nevertheless, after the region's response to the embassy move, Netanyahu might feel a bit more free to pursue annexation.

Thus, the combination of Trump's support, a world that will remain distracted in the coming months by a global pandemic, and the regional response to the embassy move might convince Netanyahu that this is his moment.

Longer term, however, the move could complicate Israeli relations with both Washington and Europe.

In Washington, after decades of broad bipartisan consensus, Israel has become an issue of growing contention across the political aisle. Republicans are moving toward more unchallenged support of the Jewish state, while Democrats are increasingly critical of Israeli behavior toward the Palestinians and sympathetic to the latter's cause.

With Trump facing off against former Vice President Joe Biden in November, a Netanyahu push for annexation this summer or fall could transform Israel into a central campaign issue, with the two candidates likely taking different sides. Were Biden to beat Trump, annexation could prove a tricky issue for Washington and Jerusalem to navigate.

Europe, however, would likely prove even more difficult for Israel's global diplomacy.

European diplomats reportedly warned Gantz about joining a unity government that would advance annexation. A Netanyahu decision to move forward could trigger European efforts to sanction Israel through the United Nations or other global bodies and add momentum to anti-Israeli boycott efforts on the continent.

Netanyahu is no stranger to controversy, nor does he shy from it. With President Obama pursuing a global nuclear deal with Iran in 2015 in what his aides touted would be his signature foreign policy achievement, Israel's leader denounced the effort in a high-profile speech before a joint session of Congress that outraged the White House and made his relations with Obama even more tense.

Annexation, however, may be Netanyahu's boldest move yet. In making it, Israel's long-time, wily leader will have to balance the unique short-term opportunity with the potential for serious long-term costs.

Lawrence J. Haas, senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, is the author of, most recently, "Harry and Arthur: Truman, Vandenberg, and the Partnership That Created the Free World."