



Israel's Government Is Gambling On Annexation

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Since April of 2019, when the idea was first floated publicly, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu's plan to annex portions of the West Bank and Jordan River Valley has become widely unpopular.

In a recent *Jerusalem Post* poll, only 27 percent of respondents unequivocally favored annexation. Nearly as many (23 percent of those polled) opposed the idea outright, and another 21 percent said the plan should be postponed from its planned July launch, perhaps significantly. Even more tellingly, less than half of all voters in Netanyahu's own Likud party now appear to support the initiative.

Why, then, does Bibi seem determined to push forward with his plan this summer? The answer has a great deal to do with how Israel's long-serving head-of-state sees the current international scene – and his domestic situation.

Internationally, Netanyahu's biggest consideration is undoubtedly America. Since taking office in 2017, the Trump administration has distinguished itself as the most pro-Israel U.S. government in recent memory through such steps as the transfer of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem and a formal recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. And the Administration's so-called "deal of the century" for Israeli-Palestinian peace, which was unveiled earlier this year, laid out a peace plan unequivocally favorable to the Israel side. Netanyahu is eager to capitalize on the current closeness, especially because the coming U.S. elections could very well set the stage for a new – and presumably less sympathetic – administration in Washington.

There are also a range of domestic considerations at play. Most prominently, the clock is already ticking on Netanyahu's latest term as prime minister. If Israel's current government holds, Bibi will need to step aside in September 2021 and cede his post to coalition partner (and political rival) Benny Gantz. There's no guarantee that Gantz, who heads the more left-leaning Blue and White party, will continue down the same path if annexation isn't completed by the time he takes office. If it is, however, Gantz's government will find it exceedingly difficult to roll back Israeli sovereignty over newly-claimed territories.

But Bibi is also animated by other considerations as well. The Israeli Prime Minister is currently in the midst of an acrimonious public trial – one that could very well end with the Israeli leader behind bars. Bibi is understandably eager to change the conversation away from his legal troubles, and annexation provides him with a vehicle to do so. As Israeli commentator Herb Keinon has noted, "all the talk of annexation, of extending Israeli sovereignty, deflects discussion of [Netanyahu's] indictment on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust."

Indeed, it has been successful at doing exactly that. Since Netanyahu's trial began in late May, Keinon observes, "there have been few headlines about his trial, and a plethora of stories dealing with the sovereignty plan (and the coronavirus)." In other words, annexation has turned out to be an exceedingly useful political prop for Israel's beleaguered Prime Minister.

At the same time, however, it is also apparent that Netanyahu's plan is an exceedingly risky one.

For one thing, it threatens to undermine the quiet détente of the past several years that has emerged between Israel and the Gulf states. While that thaw was initially precipitated by shared fears of a rising Iran, they have since evolved into a reconciliation that now includes, among other features, a gradual normalization of economic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the start of direct air travel between the UAE and the Jewish state.

Annexation, however, could slow this trend, and perhaps even derail it altogether. Already, the proposal has created an uproar among Arab governments which, while increasingly disengaged from the Palestinian issue, still find themselves beholden to it. Thus, Yousef al-Otaiba, the Emirati Ambassador to Washington, went so far as to pen an oped in Israel's influential *Yediot Ahronot* newspaper to publicly warn that annexation would cause a "serious setback" in relations between Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem. Other Arab leaders have sent similar signals – while those, like Jordan's King Abdullah, who are closer to the Palestinian question, have been even more strident.

More seriously, from Jerusalem's perspective, the move also risks harming Israel's standing in Washington. Already, prominent Congressional Democrats have publicly warned Netanyahu that moving forward with "unilateral annexation" would undermine "US national security interests in the region." That warning matters, both because Congress has traditionally served as a bipartisan bulwark of support for the "special relationship" between Israel and the United States, and because there is now a growing likelihood that control of the Senate will shift to the Democratic Party following November's elections. An Israel that is seen as unresponsive to Congressional positions will find it exceedingly difficult to marshal the same level of support in the future that it commands currently.

Ironically enough, the same *Jerusalem Post* poll that charted widespread ambivalence among Israeli voters toward annexation also registered an increasingly dominant political position for Netanyahu's Likud Party, which now holds a commanding lead against all of its challengers. That political momentum is liable to propel Likud and its leader to victory in the country's next election. Unless, that is, their current annexation gamble ends up significantly eroding those gains.