

Demanded by Israel's Radical Right-wing and Settler Movement, Annexation Has Become Netanyahu's Crutch

By [Michael Jansen](#)

Global Research, May 21, 2020

[The Jordan Times](#) 20 May 2020

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#)

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Israel's latest "national unity" government has, for the time being, ended 500 days of internal political crisis, the longest in Israel's 72-year history. At the same time, Israel embarked on an external political crisis over the potential annexation of occupied West Bank Palestinian territory. The coalition agreement says that from July 1, the government can apply for Knesset approval for annexations proposed in Donald Trump's "Deal of the Century." His deal, concocted with Israeli past and present Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, has been rejected by Palestine, the Arab League, Arab governments separately, the European Union (EU) and many members of the international community. Their rejection makes no difference to Netanyahu or Trump.

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's determination to annex illegal Israeli colonies and the Jordan Valley, comprising 30 per cent of the West Bank, was the sole issue debated during the formation of this government. The Trump administration, which endorses annexation, has given Israel the freedom to decide when and how to proceed. The EU, Israel's main trading partner, opposes such action and is set to launch a belated diplomatic campaign against annexation. The EU could retaliate by recognising the Palestinian state which Palestinians define as being East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. Although some EU members are not willing to challenge Israel, others could impose sanctions on Israel if the land grab goes ahead. Jordan has warned of dire consequences and the Arab League, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have condemned annexation. The US Democratic party and its likely presidential nominee Joe Biden oppose annexation as does the majority of the US Jewish community which supports the two-state solution.

If Netanyahu goes ahead, this peace time land grab will mirror the 1948-1949 war time Israeli underground army's seizure of Palestinian land allocated to the "Arab State" in the UN plan to partition Palestine. The "Jewish State" had been granted 55 per cent of Palestine but during its war of establishment Israel conquered 78 per cent of the country. Its leaders have yearned for the completion of the "Jewish state," delineated by the Zionist movement at the end of the nineteenth century.

As the first prime minister to formally pledge to annex the West Bank, Netanyahu is dedicated to the Zionist vision of an Israel in the whole of Palestine and seems determined to achieve this goal during the 18 months he will be in office under the current coalition agreement.

By agreeing to form a government with Netanyahu, Benny Gantz has lost the support of key

parties in his own Blue and White bloc and sacrificed whatever political credibility he had. While he insists that annexation can only proceed with the agreement of external powers, he is in no position to enforce this stance. Indeed, few Israelis believe that once Netanyahu completes his 18 months as prime minister in the power-sharing deal he will not hand over to Gantz, who is deputy premier and defence minister and is meant to succeed him in a second 18 month term.

Some commentators argue that Netanyahu might postpone annexation under pressure from anti-annexation US quarters, Europe, the Arab world and elsewhere. But as long as he enjoys the full backing of the Trump administration, he will seriously consider making this move, knowing full well that Israel will not be compelled to reverse annexation once it is a reality on the ground.

Demanded by Israel's radical right-wing and the settler movement, annexation has become Netanyahu's crutch. He has been politically wounded by indictments for corruption, fraud and violating public trust and his trial is set for May 24. He will be Israel's first prime minister to stand trial while in office and he hopes that his position will enable him to avoid jail, at least for as long as he serves. He hopes for the next 36 months when he will be premier and deputy premier.

Netanyahu is in a strong position to do what he wants about annexation. After weeks of dickering, a 36-member cabinet with seven deputy ministers was formed. Netanyahu's Likud secured 14 ministries while Gantz's Blue and White holds a dozen ministries. Religious, right-wing parties and Labour also received a scattering of seats. The Likud and its allies have the majority, giving Netanyahu the advantage over the more cautious Gantz when it comes to annexation.

This wall-to-wall cabinet, which commanded the backing of 73 members of the 120 seat Knesset, has been constructed by Netanyahu to exploit Israel's dysfunctional political system with the aim of ensuring his survival by giving him time and space to stand trial and escape prison by means of appeals.

The sprawl, however, does not represent "unity" among Israeli citizens. It includes no Palestinian or Druze citizens of Israel, although the Palestinian electoral list came in third in the March election. All cabinet members belong to Zionist parties. Critics of the size of the government point out that David Ben Gurion, Israel's founding premier, had a cabinet of 12. But then Israel's political scene was far less complicated in his day.

Now that Netanyahu has his "unity" cabinet, it will have to tackle the ravages of the coronavirus, mass unemployment and other issues as well as annexation which he will want to carry out before the US presidential election in November which Trump might, just might, lose.

Incoming Foreign Minister Gabi Ashkenazi, of Blue and White, expressed enthusiasm for the Trump administration's plan but did not endorse unilateral annexation. It is unlikely that his bloc, diminished by defections, could serve as a brake on Netanyahu. His primary interest is staying in power to stay out of jail. If he thinks he can use annexation to accomplish this feat, he will go ahead. If not, he might not.

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