

A Contest of Wills—and Wagers—between Jordan and Israel

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Brief Analysis

Despite the international praise Jordan has received for the measures it introduced to combat the spread of coronavirus, the country's policy makers remain deeply worried about the likely dire economic fallout from the pandemic. In this context, the Israeli announcement that it plans to proceed with unilateral annexation of large parts of the West Bank and the Jordan valley, already a grave concern for Jordanians, comes at a particularly sensitive time.

It comes as no surprise, then, that in statements made to the German magazine [Der Spiegel](#) (<https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/1842259/الدول-العربية-ملك-الأردن-ضم-إسرائيل-لأراض-بالضفة-سيؤدي-إلى-صدام-معنا>), the Hashemite [King Abdullah II](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/most-palestinians-approve-of-jordan-plus-other-survey-surprises>) issued carefully and strongly worded warnings to the United States, Israel, and the international community over the consequences of implementing Israel's decision to move towards annexation.

The Jordanian monarch reaffirmed his support for a two-state solution and cast doubt on the one-state alternative, forewarning that the first result of annexation would be the dissolution of the Palestinian National Authority, which would lead to chaos and the strengthening of extremist and terrorist groups. At the same time, **he called for the need to prevent the escalation of conflict with Israel** (<https://www.almamlakatv.com/news/39372--الملك-الأردن-يدرس>): **(جميع الخيارات إذا ضمت إسرائيل لأراض فلسطينية)**: “I do not wish to issue threats or create a climate of hostility between our nations, but if Israel annexes parts of the West Bank in July, this will provoke a major clash with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and we have options at our disposal.”

The actions of the Jordanian leadership suggests that it is taking seriously the potential that the Israeli government will move ahead with plans for territorial expansion. One of the catalysts for this view was the collapse of hopes for a

change in political leadership in Israel after [Gantz joined a Netanyahu-led coalition](#)

[\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/israeli-politics-public-opinion-Netanyahu-Gantz-unity-coronavirus\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/israeli-politics-public-opinion-Netanyahu-Gantz-unity-coronavirus), thereby linking his political future directly to the agenda of annexation. The powers that be in Israel also seem to be betting on the fact that any domestic opposition to the annexation plan will no longer be effective in preventing its implementation, as corroborated by Gantz's shift in stance. This is despite the widespread belief among political elites that annexation will have consequences for Israel that it may not be able to bear in the future.

The escalation and timing of Jordanian warnings is linked to the mechanisms it sees as still able to prevent annexation from going forward. Jordanian leadership is aware that Netanyahu's vision does not enjoy the full support of the White House. U.S. officials know that Arab countries will not remain silent over Israeli annexation, let alone lend their approval to it. And though annexation was triggered by sections in Trump's "[Deal of the Century](#) ([\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/arab-reactions-to-trumps-peace-plan-an-analysis-and-recommendation\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/arab-reactions-to-trumps-peace-plan-an-analysis-and-recommendation)," Americans clearly believe that any territorial reorganization must be the result of an agreement reached after negotiations with the Palestinians and other involved parties.

This principle should hold especially true given the generous concessions Trump granted Israel in his proposed plan, which took the issues of Jerusalem and refugees off the table of future Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. A recent visit to Israel by U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo—his first foreign visit since the global COVID-19 pandemic—called on Netanyahu to postpone any decision on annexation until after U.S. elections scheduled for next November.

The U.S. position on Israeli annexation may also be influenced by other differences between Washington and Tel Aviv. Netanyahu is pursuing close cooperation with China on huge economic projects, with a major desalination contract being the most recent example. This is likely seen by [President Trump](#) ([\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/comparing-arab-polls-on-trump-u.s.-policy-israel-iran-and-more\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/comparing-arab-polls-on-trump-u.s.-policy-israel-iran-and-more)), who has been fighting a trade war with Beijing since before the coronavirus outbreak, as a stab in the back. [Israeli economic cooperation with China](#) ([\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/tom-parkers-response-to-david-pollocks-iran-israel-syria-and-the-u.s.-views\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/tom-parkers-response-to-david-pollocks-iran-israel-syria-and-the-u.s.-views)) is all the more remarkable given everything the Americans have offered Netanyahu through their "Deal of the Century" and recognition of Israel's annexation of the Syrian Golan.

Meanwhile, the Jordanian position is based on the official declarations of the Arab League, which has, at least to date, condemned [Israeli annexation and any unilateral action](#)

[\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Crisis-Israeli-Palestinian-security-annexation-economy-west-bank\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Crisis-Israeli-Palestinian-security-annexation-economy-west-bank) taken without the consent of the Palestinians. Both the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah and Hamas in the Gaza Strip have rushed to announce their support for the statements made by King Abdullah II. At the same time, Jordanian officials recognize that the major powers involved in formulating an "Arab" response to Israel's annexation ambitions will stand to benefit from certain aspects of the "[Deal of the Century](#)" ([\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/jordans-balancing-act-overcoming-the-challenges-posed-by-trumps-deal-of-the\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/jordans-balancing-act-overcoming-the-challenges-posed-by-trumps-deal-of-the)" in one way or another. These include projects for development in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and several countries in the region for which billions of dollars have been earmarked.

Jordan is also betting on the international stances of Russia, China, and the European Union, which remain committed to the two-state solution and refuse to compromise on international agreements. The Europeans have coupled their opposition to Israeli annexation with the threat of sanctions against Tel Aviv.

Notwithstanding the strong rhetoric employed by the Jordanian monarch, including his use of the term "clash" and reference to "options" to respond to annexation that he did not elaborate on further in his interview with Der Spiegel, it is certain that Jordan's calculus will not reach the level of military confrontation. Instead, it seems the King's

message was designed to express the willingness of the Jordanian government to reexamine the peace treaty it signed with Israel in 1994. This same threat was made by the late King Hussein when Mossad attempted to assassinate Hamas leader Khaled Mashal in Jordan in 1997. Since then, the Hashemite establishment has used other pressure tactics such as halting security cooperation with Israel and freezing the implementation of agreements, including an attempt to freeze one that allowed Jordan to purchase gas from Israel. In the latter case, however, the Jordanian Constitutional Court ruled that it was not permissible to cancel the agreement despite a parliamentary recommendation to do so.

That being said, the Jordanian leadership's main bets rely on being able to buy more time before Israel decides to take any action to implement its proposed annexation next July. A number of U.S. officials have become convinced that such a move will most certainly unleash a new wave of chaos and terrorism in the region. Moreover, Israel will be the first to bear the brunt of these consequences on multiple levels: Netanyahu's government will witness the very demographic shifts it fears and be held accountable to the full force of international law as it pertains to territorial occupation.

The Jordanian leadership has not openly announced the steps that it may take to prevent the implementation of the annexation decision. But based on Jordan's overarching policies, its historical flexibility, and its reliance on diplomatic options, Jordan has three levels of responses it may pursue in the near future. First, it may seek the support of Arab states through appealing to the Arab league, engaging in bilateral communication with the Palestinian authority and Egypt, and boosting its own view from the Gulf position, which is rejecting the annexation decision in an increasingly public manner. On the regional level, it may seek the support of Islamic states such as Turkey, which adhere to two-state solution approach based on the borders of June 4. The third level involves seeking the support of both parties in the United States, focusing on some elements within Trump's administration as well as the support of the majority of the Democratic Party, while also attempting to rally the international support of China, Russia, and Europe. In this context, Jordan will likely take into consideration the varied weights of these three levels in their ability influence on Israeli intentions in order to leverage the situation.

Based on new indications that the Trump administration is urging Netanyahu to exercise "restraint" vis-à-vis its annexation plan, it would be wise for the United States to move forward with putting more pressure on the Israeli government. The aim here should be to persuade Tel Aviv against taking any unilateral steps, which will only serve to bolster the cause of those opposed to peace in the region while reinforcing the discourse of radical groups. Assurances from Washington about its strategic relationship with Jordan—even including the major financial support to the Hashemite Kingdom—are not enough to allay Jordanian concerns regarding the repercussions of an Israeli annexation of the West Bank and Jordan Valley. Jordan has no interest nor ability to accept such a scenario, especially given its likely impact on Jordan: displacement of more West Bank residents to Jordan along with the compromising of Jordan's own national security. ❖

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