

Israel Has a Lot to Lose by Annexing West Bank Territory

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Jun 12, 2020

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Articles & Testimony

Even if Netanyahu steps away from the precipice this month, the problem will not dissipate until the White House stops incentivizing annexation with offers of American recognition.

I believe in the value of US-Israel strategic cooperation. Not only is this partnership a vital element of our ally Israel's deterrent power—no less important than its F-15 fighter planes and Merkava tanks—but it is of great benefit to America, providing an anchor of pro-US stability in one of the world's most turbulent regions. When Washington and Jerusalem work together, there are few shared problems they cannot solve.

It is precisely because of my appreciation of the importance of this relationship that I now oppose a prime example of it—coordination between the Trump administration and the new Israeli government to enable Israel to annex [up to 30% of the West Bank \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/netanyahus-plan-for-west-bank-annexation-faces-unexpected-opposition-from-settlers/2020/06/10/9db6c694-a744-11ea-898e-b21b9a83f792_story.html\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/netanyahus-plan-for-west-bank-annexation-faces-unexpected-opposition-from-settlers/2020/06/10/9db6c694-a744-11ea-898e-b21b9a83f792_story.html). What no Israeli government since the Six Day War has ever contemplated, the current government may formally consider as soon as July 1.

From the moment the idea of annexation emerged on the Israeli political scene, I asked a simple question: Why? Under the umbrella of its proven commitment to a negotiated peace with the Palestinians, Israel already enjoys complete security control over the West Bank. Its civil law already governs its citizens living there. And it has largely succeeded in normalizing the international community to continued growth in settlement activity.

What, therefore, would Israel gain by discarding 53 years of precedent to take a step [that \(https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/06/10/world/middleeast/ap-m1-israel-germany.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/06/10/world/middleeast/ap-m1-israel-germany.html) virtually the [entire world \(https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/world/middleeast/west-bank-annexation-israel-uae.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/world/middleeast/west-bank-annexation-israel-uae.html)—outside the Trump administration—[considers a serious violation \(https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-10/europe-warns-against-annexation-as-germany-s-maas-due-in-israel\)](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-10/europe-warns-against-annexation-as-germany-s-maas-due-in-israel) of law and reason? The Palestinians' serial rejection of Israeli offers of statehood—including

offers that met virtually all the Palestinians' **[territorial demands \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/abbas-admits-he-rejected-2008-peace-offer-from-olmert/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/abbas-admits-he-rejected-2008-peace-offer-from-olmert/)**—still does not explain what advantage Israel would enjoy from annexation that would justify such a move. After searching long and hard, my hunt for a compelling rationale was unsuccessful.

Israel's potential gain, however, is only half the story. The other half concerns the cost Israel might have to pay as the price of annexation. In my view, the cost is not zero—in fact, it could be substantial and sustained, both in terms of the short-term impact on Israel's security posture in its immediate neighborhood and the long-term deterioration of Israel's status in American politics and key global capitals.

Specifically, annexation threatens to trigger a severe worsening of tensions with Palestinians, a suspension of its peace treaty with **[Jordan, \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/jordan-to-mull-canceling-peace-deal-if-israel-annexes-report/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/jordan-to-mull-canceling-peace-deal-if-israel-annexes-report/)** and an end to the Jewish state's incremental normalization with Arab states, especially in the Gulf. Annexation will distract the world from the urgent threat of a nuclearizing Iran, **[which is working to expand its influence near Israel's borders \(https://www.dw.com/en/israel-iran-conflict-to-be-major-middle-east-issue-in-2020/a-51600787\)](https://www.dw.com/en/israel-iran-conflict-to-be-major-middle-east-issue-in-2020/a-51600787)**. And annexation could even lead friendly countries in Europe and elsewhere to move from a de facto tolerance of Israel's occupation of the territory—which began when it took control of the West Bank in the defensive war of 1967 and has continued pending a negotiated peace—toward a greater emphasis on viewing Israel as an illegal occupier whose continued presence would itself be a crime.

Still, a decision to annex West Bank territory is not a certainty, and many actors have the power to affect the calculus of the Israeli government. These include the **[Palestinian leadership \(https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/world/middleeast/palestinian-authority-annexation-israel.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/08/world/middleeast/palestinian-authority-annexation-israel.html)**, which could stop annexation by agreeing to begin direct peace talks, and key Arab states, who could warn Israel more forcefully about the costs of formalizing its hold over disputed lands. The UAE ambassador to the US, **[Yousef Al Otaiba, \(https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/world/middleeast/west-bank-annexation-israel-uae.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/world/middleeast/west-bank-annexation-israel-uae.html)** recently did this in one of Israel's leading newspapers, writing in an op-ed, titled "It's Either Annexation or Normalization," that "We would like to believe that Israel is an opportunity, not an enemy."

Domestically, Israel's security establishment could play a pivotal role by injecting realism into a debate that, surprisingly, has barely focused on cost-benefit analysis. Perhaps Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu himself comes to the conclusion—as he has so often in the past—that prudence is the wiser course of action.

Through it all, it is important to keep in mind that this is not just an Israeli issue, with repercussions limited to Israel. And it's not just the Palestinians, their hopes and aspirations, and the choices of their leaders, that matter too. Crucially, this is an American issue, as well.

Annexation was born in Israel, but its parentage is at least partly American. In its current incarnation, it grows out of the White House's January **[2020 peace plan \(https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/28/politics/donald-trump-benjamin-netanyahu-middle-east-plan/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/28/politics/donald-trump-benjamin-netanyahu-middle-east-plan/index.html)**, a deeply flawed proposal that took some good ideas—like endorsement of a two-state solution—and twisted them beyond all recognition. As a practical issue, annexation was triggered by a short-sighted shift in US policy by the Trump administration to encourage the move as a way to raise the cost to Palestinians of refusing to negotiate on a plan in which they had no hand in drafting.

In a classic example of a self-inflicted wound, a US-recognized annexation will likely have significant negative implications both for US Middle East policy and the longstanding bipartisan support for Israel in American domestic politics. It will distract the two countries from focusing on common problems and shrink their ability to act jointly against common adversaries.

Hopefully, wiser heads will prevail and Israeli leadership will decide to shelve plans to annex territory in the West

Bank. But even so, the idea of annexation is now a fixture of Israeli politics and is sure to reemerge. This problem will only dissipate when Washington stops incentivizing annexation with an offer of US recognition. Whether it's President Donald Trump or, if he wins in November, a President Joe Biden, who changes course, it won't happen a moment too soon.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute and author of its new study “[Wrestling with Annexation: The Elusive Search for a Policy Rationale](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/wrestling-with-annexation-the-elusive-search-for-a-policy-rationale) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/wrestling-with-annexation-the-elusive-search-for-a-policy-rationale>).” This article was originally published on the CNN website (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/12/opinions/israel-has-a-lot-to-lose-by-annexing-west-bank-territory-satloff/index.html>). ❖

CNN

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab-Israeli Relations \(/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations\)](#)

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)