

Policy Alert

How Will Palestinians Respond to Netanyahu's Annexation Announcement?

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Abbas will likely use it to rally the Arab League and UN against the Trump administration's peace plan, and his success will depend on Washington's own reaction going forward.

On September 10, Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu declared that he would annex the Jordan Valley if he wins [this month's do-over election](#). While the announcement's actual implementation and long-term implications will depend on a variety of factors, the short-term consequences are clear: it will create a political environment among the Palestinian public that demands a strong reaction from their leaders. This domestic pressure may compel Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas to react in a way he does not wish to, though it will also give him diplomatic ammunition to garner international support for his contrary positions toward Israel and the United States.

Indeed, the announcement represents both a strategic challenge and a tactical opportunity from the PA's perspective. Strategically, the rationale behind the PA's very existence—the diplomatic pursuit of a two-state solution within the framework of the Oslo Accords—has been steadily losing domestic support. Earlier this week, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh stated, “This is not a time for negotiations, recognition, or peace,” and PA officials may soon feel the need to express similar sentiments. Fatah and the Palestine Liberation Organization have issued several rulings in recent months calling on the PA to formally disengage from Israel and the Oslo process, and while these demands are largely symbolic, they have created mounting pressure on Abbas to implement at least some of them. Netanyahu's announcement will only increase this pressure; Abbas has already warned that any steps toward annexing the Jordan Valley would spell “the end of all signed agreements with Israel.”

Over the past few years, Abbas adopted a balancing strategy that centered on embracing defiant diplomacy (particularly at the UN) and suspending some peripheral Oslo provisions while still maintaining the core security and economic components laid out in the accords. As his options gradually diminished, however, he was sometimes forced to make financial and security decisions that threatened to destabilize the PA. In July 2017, for example, he briefly suspended security cooperation with Israel in response to clashes at the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif. More recently, he felt politically compelled to reject further transfers of the tax revenue that Israel collects on behalf of the PA, a move that plunged the West Bank into a financial crisis (though both parties are finding ways to at least partially circumvent this decision).

Netanyahu's annexation bid will make this balancing strategy even more precarious. On the one hand, the domestic imperative to respond immediately may spur Abbas to issue strong threats regarding the announcement in order to rally public support around his leadership. On the other hand, the pressure to activate PLO/Fatah rulings and terminate certain aspects of security cooperation with Israel will increase. Although Abbas will try to avoid taking that step (perhaps couching it as a future threat instead), he might find himself short on softer alternatives.

In any case, the most immediate PA reaction will be diplomatic, with Abbas no doubt moving quickly to leverage wide international rejection of Netanyahu's announcement. This likely entails calling for an Arab League meeting that reiterates support for traditional Palestinian positions ahead of the upcoming UN General Assembly sessions—an invitation that would be difficult for any Arab state to refuse. Indeed, according to BBC Monitoring, Saudi Arabia has already requested that the Organization of Islamic Cooperation hold an “urgent” meeting of foreign ministers to discuss the issue and develop an action plan. The peak of this diplomacy will take place this month in New York, where Abbas will center his UN appearance on creating a wider international alliance against annexation. Such a message would fall on receptive ears, including in Europe, where commitment to a two-state solution and opposition to unilateral annexation remains strong.

In addition, the PA will seek to identify Netanyahu's announcement with the Trump administration's still-unreleased peace plan. In that case, Abbas would try to lock Arab and possibly European states into preemptively rejecting any plan that endorses Netanyahu's position. By securing such a commitment in advance, the PA hopes to isolate Washington on this issue and increase the chances of the U.S. plan falling flat.

The chances of that strategy succeeding will depend on Washington's reaction to Netanyahu's announcement. The administration's position thus far—stating that U.S. policy remains unchanged, and deferring the issue to the eventual release of its peace plan—might create sufficient distance from the annexation announcement to avoid

serious fallout. But for this approach to be effective in securing the necessary room for diplomatic maneuver, officials will need to publicly expand on the administration's position, exert message discipline, and actively reach out to key Arab and European states. Failure to do so would allow the PA to define the narrative and, perhaps, sink the U.S. peace plan before it ever sets sail. The other alternative—issuing statements that signal American endorsement of Netanyahu's proposals—would give the PA even more leverage, all but ensuring its success in building a preemptive alliance against the peace plan.

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