Articles & Op-Eds

On Annexation, Netanyahu Must Choose a Lasting Legacy

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The prime minister no longer needs to lean on the transactional politics of partisan campaign promises, so history will judge him harshly if he keeps pursuing policies that threaten Israel's peace prospects and Jewish identity.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made the application of Israeli sovereignty over parts of the West Bank a central plank of his new government. He insisted that this was the one item that could be brought to the Cabinet and the Knesset in the first six months of this government. And he set July 1st as the date when he would introduce the measure.

Some are calling annexation a legacy issue for Netanyahu, and it may well be as he anticipates rotating out of his prime ministerial position in 18 months. But Netanyahu's legacy and the annexation decision should also be put in perspective.

Some seem to believe that Netanyahu is now, at last, able to act on a dream he has had throughout his career: namely annex all 130 Jewish settlements in the West Bank. And yet, the longest serving prime minister in Israeli history, who has been in office 14 years and is about to start his fifth term, has only spoken about his desire to annex all settlements in the last year.

In fact, speaking before the Knesset on May 16, 2011, Netanyahu announced he would seek to annex only a fraction of settlements as part of a negotiated deal with the Palestinians based on the consensus of the Israeli public. Referring to the minority of settlements (termed 'blocs') largely adjacent to Israeli urban areas and within the security barrier where a large majority of settlers live, Netanyahu declared, "we agree that we must maintain the settlement blocs. There is widespread agreement that the settlement blocs must remain within the State of Israel." At the same time, he publicly noted other settlements would be outside of Israel's borders.

Perhaps Netanyahu never made the annexation of all settlements a priority because he rightly feared such a decision would make it impossible to disentangle Israelis from Palestinians and thus turn Israel into a binational state, antithetical to the idea of the Jewish state. Is he less concerned about that outcome now? Is he also less concerned about the very real prospect that annexing 30 percent of the West Bank, as permitted in the Trump Plan, could deal a major blow to the Israel-Jordan peace treaty and preempt the prospect of more openly improving ties with Gulf Arab states? Is he no longer worried that many individual European countries may react to unilateral annexation—including by recognizing Palestinian statehood in response?

How did Netanyahu's focus on the blocs expand into annexing all settlements? It appears political expediency preempted pragmatism. Netanyahu's governments of 2009 and 2013 both included parties to his left and his right. However, the government of 2015 only included parties to his right. Suddenly, the term "settlement blocs" was banished from Netanyahu's political lexicon. In addition, once Donald Trump came into office and put forward his peace plan, Netanyahu did not want to be seen as being to the left of an American president.

With his November reelection bid, Trump's motives are blatantly transactional: aimed at winning evangelical and Jewish votes, even if there is little reason to believe that annexation will factor in our American election. Netanyahu should focus on a horizon broader than Trump's brand of political dealmaking. The 18th century Irish political philosopher Edmund Burke famously said, "your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays instead of serving you if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

If a government is formed, this will likely be the last election for Netanyahu, who is 70. If found innocent of the three indictments he is facing, there are rumors he will seek to transition to the more tranquil waters of Israel's ceremonial presidency.

If it is indeed his last election, Netanyahu can afford to be less transactional than in the past. He is rather unique among Israeli leaders, as they often came to power late in life. Key former prime ministers knew they had little time and acted accordingly. At the end of their careers, they were willing to make difficult decisions often at odds with their traditional constituencies.

Before coming to office, Menachem Begin did not think he would yield the Sinai to Egypt, shortly after Israel just faced Egypt on the battlefield, and set a precedent of withdrawing all Sinai settlements. Before coming to office,

Yitzhak Rabin (who was briefly leader when he was younger) did not think he would shake the hand of a person he and most Israelis reviled as an arch-terrorist, Yasir Arafat. Before coming to office, Ariel Sharon—the architect of the Gaza settlements while head of the IDF Southern Command in 1971—did not think he would be the one to dismantle these very communities.

They knew these moves would be unpopular but they took the step anyway because they felt the context had changed due to developments since taking office. Each believed the national interest necessitated looking at the big picture of Israel's strategic interests in the region, with the US and internationally. They defined legacy by looking at what Israel needed rather than what political constituencies wanted.

By defining legacy in a wider sense and not in terms of what gets the most votes, Begin bequeathed to Israel decades without the kind of conventional war with Arab states that was routine in the first quarter century of its existence and claimed many lives on both sides. Thanks to Rabin and Sharon, Israel has avoided constant war with the Palestinian national movement writ large, even though they clearly were not able to alter Hamas' calculus or resolve all the fundamental issues with the Palestinians more generally. All three of these leaders were also guided by the need to retain Israel's identity as a Jewish and democratic state.

Ariel Sharon was fond of saying: "what you see from here, you do not see from there." He meant that the Israeli prime minister puts the country's future on their shoulders and their perspective, by definition, is different from that of their constituents. Leadership is about doing what is right and not what is popular.

History will not take a kind view to annexation of all settlements, a step that in any case Netanyahu himself did not intend less than a decade ago. Just to be clear: we think that all unilateral annexation is a mistake and hope the prime minister refrains from doing so. At minimum, we hope he will at least recognize the difference between annexing designated bloc areas versus all the settlements, including the Jordan Valley. The former would not close the door to two states, but the latter would doom Israel to becoming a binational state that fundamentally alters its identity. We hope the premier draws a lesson from his key predecessors and chooses a worthy legacy, one that ensures Israel's Jewish and democratic character is secure for generations.