

Opinion – Confronting Israel's Annexation Plans: From Fear to Hope

Written by Mohammed Abu-Nimer

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MOHAMMED ABU-NIMER, AUG 13 2020

The Israeli government's declaration to annex another 30% of the Palestinian Territories in the West Bank provides another example of what is a destructive policy decision in such a protracted conflict reality. Obviously, this is not the first-time that the Israeli government attempted to annex all or certain territories that were occupied in 1967. It has already annexed the Golan Heights and created a non-reversible reality on the ground. The same policy was followed in the decision to annex East Jerusalem in the early 1980s and most recently the campaigning to move foreign embassies from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem. However, in all of these cases, the annexation acts and the harsh realities they created on the ground, failed to force the Palestinian population into accepting or even symbolically recognizing the annexation. On the contrary, the resentment and rejection of the Israeli Jewish presence in the territories have increased and were manifested in different violent and nonviolent resistance activities (the first Palestinian organized nonviolent uprising was in 1987–1992, but through 1970s there were many other popular campaigns to resist the occupation). This most recent threat to annex the Jordan Valley and other territories introduces another level of fear among Israeli and Palestinians who support peace and justice.

First, there is a decrease in hope for mobilizing support for a two-state solution. In an annexation scenario this is no longer accepted as viable or even perceived as possible by the overwhelming majority of Palestinians and Israelis. The plan clearly destroys any chance for two state solutions in the territories. This means that a one-state solution (a state for all its citizens) is the only option that remains at least from the Palestinian standpoint. This contributes to a wider gap between what the average Palestinian and Israeli Jew see as a just resolution. In recent years there has been very small Israeli minority that accepted the one state solution with equal rights for all citizens (less than 5%), while there has been over 40% who accepted two state solution.

A recent poll by Haaretz indicated:

Twenty-five years after the signing of the Oslo Accords, which promised two states for two peoples, only a third (34 percent) said they still back the two-state solution. Nineteen percent prefer a one-state solution (they were not asked to specify whether Palestinians would have political rights with such an option). Twenty-seven percent said they wanted something different altogether — one option, backed by 9 percent of respondents, was an Israeli-Palestinian confederation in which each state would govern itself while some matters would be overseen together.

Second, the annexation means, to the Palestinians, that the Israeli government, and the Israeli society in general, continue to deny the most basic right of Palestinians for self-determination. It brings the public discourse to a pre-Oslo situation in which no mutual recognition for self-determination between Israeli and Palestinian officials (the Oslo accords were signed in 1993) and even back to 1970s and 1980s, when many could not imagine a possible two state solution or a negotiated settlement between the two sides.

Third, the annexation is clear evidence that negotiation or peaceful efforts to resolve this conflict are not possible. After 24 years of engaging in a post Oslo peace process, the annexation comes to bury voices among Palestinians and Israeli Jews who may dare to imagine a just and peaceful situation for Arabs and Jews to live together in the region.

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Fourth, many Israelis who oppose the plan are fearful that the annexation is a threat to the Israeli Jewish narrative of a democratic Jewish state (Shibley Telhami. Stop calling Israel a Jewish Democracy June 8, 2020). As it has been argued in the past, any increase in repression of Palestinians, will have its destructive consequences on the Israeli society too. This one is not so different. As Phillip H. Gordon and Robert Malley stated:

Israel's formal incorporation of parts of the West Bank will not only violate international law and deny Palestinians basic rights, but it will set off a process that will further erode Israeli democracy, isolate Israel internationally, and undermine the bipartisan U.S. support that has been so central to its success.

The "Jewish democratic state" ideology that has been promoted by different Israeli leaders even prior to 1948, will be weakened again by its own supporters. As Yosi Beilin stated "In that situation (Annexation Plan), it would become difficult to deny Palestinians Israeli citizenship without Israel's being accused of creating an apartheid state and jeopardizing the Jewish majority in Israel."

Fifth, Arab Jewish relations inside the borders of Israel will also be affected by this decision. As in other cases when harsh Israeli measures were imposed on the Palestinian people in The West Bank the annexation will further cause the Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel (about 20% of the Population within the 1948 borders) to lose confidence in the Israeli Jewish community's desire or willingness to live peacefully with Palestinians. This erosion in the belief that political solutions can be implemented further alienates the Arabs in Israel and pushes them to search for alternatives beyond the two-state solution, such as the endorsement of one state for all its citizens or a federation arrangement.

Sixth, beyond the above fears and concerns, from a peace-building perspective, the most relevant fear of the annexation plan is related to deepening the already deeply rooted feeling and perception of distrust and suspicion that both Israeli and Palestinian communities have had for each other throughout the past century. The history of this protracted conflict is full of examples of distrust and levels of communal feelings of hatred. Recurring statements such as 'you cannot change them they do not want us here, they do not recognize our basic rights', are few examples of that. This distrust of the other side's intentions is always the first step of resistance in accepting any invitation for a peaceful engagement with the other side, which can easily lead to violent escalation.

Seventh, the annexation plans end the hope for a peaceful political settlement and reset the conflict dynamics to ground zero where the younger generations will restart with a denial of basic rights for Palestinians. It is sad and painful to observe the Israeli Jewish and Palestinian current generations being unable to hand a better reality for peaceful and more just Israeli-Palestinian relations. These are the generations who lived through the hope for peace produced by the 1987-1992 intifada and its immediate Oslo peace process - which both produced mutual recognition of the right for self determination and first formal negotiation between Israeli and Palestinian representatives.

Finally, there is no doubt that the annexation is another clear step to formalize and legalize the apartheid system in the West Bank. It will extend Israeli laws and sovereignty only to Israeli Jewish residents who will live in these areas, and exclude Palestinians. The plan will formalize the existing separation system (such as roads and other physical infrastructures and services) between Jews and Palestinians who live in these territories.

However, despite the above gloomy reality and set backs in the Israeli-Palestinian journey towards a peaceful and just resolution, there is the resilience of the Palestinians who oppose the current annexation plan and managed to stop other past plans throughout the history of this conflict. In addition, there are the voices within Israel who also oppose the annexation plan and have stood in solidarity with Palestinians fight against the occupation. These voices within Israeli are much needed these days to stand against their government's plans and be part of the joint efforts to challenge the occupation system in the territories which is a viable path for future peaceful and just Israeli-Palestinian political arrangement. Finally, if we learned anything from the South African example of transformation of the Apartheid system, it taught us that we cannot give up on the hope and belief that the children on both sides deserve to live in dignity, security, and peace.

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