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Forget Trump's Deal of the Century: Israel Was Always on Course to Annexation

When Israeli prime ministers are in trouble, facing difficult elections or a corruption scandal, the temptation has typically been for them to unleash a military operation to bolster their standing. In recent years, Gaza has served as a favourite punching bag.

Benjamin Netanyahu is confronting both difficulties at once: a second round of elections in September that he may struggle to win; and an attorney general who is widely expected to indict him on corruption charges shortly afterwards.

Netanyahu is in an unusually tight spot, even by the standards of an often chaotic and fractious Israeli political system. After a decade in power, his electoral magic may be deserting him. There are already rumblings of discontent among his allies on the far right.

Given his desperate straits, some observers fear that he may need to pull a new kind of rabbit out of the hat.

In the past two elections, Netanyahu rode to success after issuing dramatic last-minute statements. In 2015, he agitated against the fifth of Israel's citizens who are Palestinian asserting their democratic rights, warning that they were "coming out in droves to vote".

Back in April, he declared his intention to annex large chunks of the occupied West Bank, in violation of international law, during the next parliament.

Amos Harel, a veteran military analyst with Haaretz newspaper, observed last week that Netanyahu may decide words are no longer enough to win. Action is needed, possibly in

the form of an announcement on the eve of September's ballot that as much as two-thirds of the West Bank is to be annexed.

Washington does not look like it will stand in his way.

Shortly before April's election, the Trump administration offered Netanyahu a campaign fillip by recognising Israel's illegal annexation of the Golan Heights, territory Israel seized from Syria in 1967.

This month David Friedman, US ambassador to Israel and one of the chief architects of Donald Trump's long-delayed "deal of the century" peace plan, appeared to offer a similar, early election boost.

In interviews, he claimed Israel was "on the side of God" – unlike, or so it was implied, the Palestinians. He further argued that Israel had the "right to retain" much of the West Bank.

Both statements suggest that the Trump administration will not object to any Israeli moves towards annexation, especially if it ensures their favoured candidate returns to power.

Whatever Friedman suggests, it is not God who has intervened on Israel's behalf. The hands that have carefully cleared a path over many decades to the West Bank's annexation are all too human.

Israeli officials have been preparing for this moment for more than half a century, since the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza were seized back in 1967.

That point is underscored by an innovative interactive map of the occupied territories. This valuable new resource is a joint project of the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem and Forensic Architecture, a London-based team that uses new technology to visualise and map political violence and environmental destruction.

Titled Conquer and Divide, it reveals in detail how Israel has "torn apart Palestinian space, divided the Palestinian population into dozens of disconnected enclaves and unravelled its social, cultural and economic fabric".

The map proves beyond doubt that Israel's colonisation of the West Bank was never accidental, defensive or reluctant. It was coldly calculated and intricately planned, with one goal in mind – and the moment to realise that goal is fast approaching.

Annexation is not a right-wing project that has hijacked the benign intentions of Israel's founding generation. Annexation was on the cards from the occupation's very beginnings in 1967, when the so-called centre-left – now presented as a peace-loving alternative to Netanyahu – ran the government.

The map shows how Israeli military planners created a complex web of pretexts to seize Palestinian land: closed military zones today cover a third of the West Bank; firing ranges impact 38 Palestinian communities; nature reserves are located on 6 per cent of the territory; nearly a quarter has been declared Israeli "state" land; some 250 settlements have been established; dozens of permanent checkpoints severely limit movement; and hundreds of kilometres of walls and fences have been completed.

These interlocking land seizures seamlessly carved up the territory, establishing the walls of dozens of tightly contained prisons for Palestinians in their own homeland.

Two Nasa satellite images of the region separated by 30 years – from 1987 and 2017 – reveal how Israel's settlements and transport infrastructure have gradually scarred the West Bank's landscape, clearing away natural vegetation and replacing it with concrete.

The land grabs were not simply about acquisition of territory. They were a weapon, along with increasingly draconian movement restrictions, to force the native Palestinian population to submit, to recognise its defeat, to give up hope.

In the immediate wake of the West Bank's occupation, defence minister Moshe Dayan, Israel's hero of the hour and one of the architects of the settlement project, observed that Palestinians should be made "to live like dogs, and whoever wants to can leave – and we shall see where this process leads".

Although Israel has concentrated Palestinians in 165 disconnected areas across the West Bank, its actions effectively won the international community's seal of approval in 1995. The Oslo accords cemented Israel's absolute control over 62 per cent of the West Bank, containing the Palestinians' key agricultural land and water sources, which was classified as Area C.

Occupations are intended to be temporary – and the Oslo accords promised the same. Gradually, the Palestinians would be allowed to take back more of their territory to build a state. But Israel made sure both the occupation and the land thefts sanctioned by Oslo continued.

The new map reveals more than just the methods Israel used to commandeer the West Bank. Decades of land seizures highlight a trajectory, plotting a course that indicates the project is still not complete.

If Netanyahu partially annexes the West Bank – Area C – it will be simply another stage in Israel’s tireless efforts to immiserate the Palestinian population and bully them into leaving. This is a war of attrition – what Israelis have long understood as “creeping annexation”, carried out by stealth to avoid a backlash from the international community.

Ultimately, Israel wants the Palestinians gone entirely, squeezed out into neighbouring Arab states, such as Egypt and Jordan. That next chapter is likely to begin in earnest if Trump ever gets the chance to unveil his “deal of the century”.

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