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Israel to Annex the West Bank – Why Now? And What are the Likely Scenarios?



Image by Ash Hayes.

Israel is getting ready to annex the occupied Palestinian West Bank. The annexation will be a major step backward on the road to Palestinian freedom and will likely serve as a catalyst for a new Palestinian uprising.

Though annexation has been on the Israeli agenda for years, this time around a ‘great opportunity’ – in the words of extremist Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich – has presented itself and, from an Israeli point of view, cannot be missed.

“I hope we’ll have a great opportunity with the new US administration to create full normalization (of the Israeli occupation),” the minister was quoted as saying by Israeli media. This is not the first time that Smotrich, among other Israeli extremists, has made the connection between Trump’s advent to the White House and the illegal expansion of Israel’s borders.

Two reasons make Israel's far-right optimistic about Trump's arrival: One, the Israeli experience during Trump's first term in office, where the US president allowed Israel to claim sovereignty over illegal settlements, the Syrian Golan Heights, and occupied East Jerusalem; and, two, Trump's more recent statement in the run-up to the elections.

Israel is "so tiny" on the map, Trump said while addressing the pro-Israeli group 'Stop Antisemitism' at an event last August, wondering: "Is there any way of getting more?" The statement, absurd by any definition, caused joy among Israeli politicians, who understood it to be a green light for further annexations.

Israel's aims for colonial expansion also received a boost in recent days. Following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria, Israel immediately began invading large swathes of the country, reaching as far as the Quneitra governorate, less than 20 kilometers away from the capital, Damascus.

What is taking place in Syria serves as a model of what to expect in the West Bank in coming months.

Israel had occupied nearly 70 percent of the Syrian Golan Heights in 1967. It cemented its illegal occupation of the Arab region by formally annexing it in 1981 through the so-called Golan Heights Law.

That illegal move came shortly after another illegal annexation, that of occupied Palestinian East Jerusalem the previous year.

Although the West Bank was not formally annexed, the boundaries of East Jerusalem expanded well beyond its historic borders, thus swallowing large parts of the West Bank.

The West Bank, like East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, are all recognized as illegally occupied territories under international law. Israel has no legal basis to maintain its occupation, let alone annexation of any Palestinian or Arab region. It is allowed to do so, however, due to US-western support and international silence.

But why is Israel keen on annexing the West Bank now?

Aside from the 'great opportunity' linked to Trump's return to power, Israel feels that its ability to sustain a genocidal war on Gaza without any international intervention to bring the extermination to an end, would make the annexation of the West Bank a far less consequential matter on the international agenda.

Even though the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had issued a decisive ruling on the illegality of the Israeli occupation on July 19, followed by the issuing of arrest warrants of top Israeli leaders by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on November 21, no action was

taken to hold Israel accountable. The annexation of the West Bank is unlikely to change that, especially as Israel conducts its wars and illegal actions through direct US support.

Indeed, the Democratic administration of Joe Biden has financed and supported all Israeli wars, including the current genocide. Trump is expected to be equally generous, or at least, not at all critical.

All of this in mind, the annexation of the West Bank in the coming weeks or months is a real possibility.

In fact, Smotrich had already informed “workers of the Defense Ministry body in charge of Israeli and Palestinian civil affairs in the West Bank” about his plans to “shut down the department as part of an envisioned Israeli annexation of the area,” Times of Israel reported on December 6.

While such annexation will not change the legal status of the West Bank, it will have dire consequences for the millions of Palestinians living there, as annexation is likely to be followed by a violent campaign of ethnic cleansing, if not from the whole of the West Bank, certainly from large parts of it.

Annexation will also render the Palestinian Authority legally irrelevant – as it was created following the Oslo Accords to administer parts of the West Bank in anticipation of a future sovereignty, which never actualized. Will the PA agree to remain functional as part of the Israeli military administration of a newly annexed West Bank?

Palestinians will certainly resist, as they always do. The nature of the resistance will prove critical in the success or failure of the Israeli scheme. A popular Intifada, for example, will overstretch the Israeli military, which will likely use an unprecedented degree of violence to suppress Palestinians but will unlikely succeed.

Annexing the West Bank at a time that Palestine, in fact, the whole region is in turmoil, is a recipe for perpetual war, which, from the viewpoint of Smotrich and his ilk is the actual ‘great opportunity’, as it will secure their political survival for years to come.

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