

Senior Jordanian Officials: Annexation Endangers Israel-Jordan Relations

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Insights from the Mitvim Institute's Israel-Jordan Policy Dialogue

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The second wave of the coronavirus sweeping Israel has overtaken the annexation issue in the headlines and relegated it to the margins of the public agenda. However, although Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his ministers have rarely mentioned the annexation since July 1, and have abandoned public activity related to the issue, the world keeps discussing the inherent dangers of such a move. Warnings against the hasty move that could have crucial repercussions for regional processes continue to be heard, especially in Europe and the Hashemite Kingdom. King Abdullah recently [declared](#) that his country would reject any kind of territorial annexation, big or small, warning that “annexation would undermine prospects of achieving peace”. His restrained diplomatic language reflects a real fear that prompted by political considerations of one kind or another, the annexation issue will soon be restored to the table and the headlines. In July 2020, Mitvim Institute experts conducted a policy dialogue with several leading Jordanian figures from the diplomatic, political, academic and military fields, in order to understand the thinking in Amman about annexation and what Jordan fears in that sense. This document sums up key insights from the dialogue.

A. Jordan Stands Alone Against Annexation

The former senior military officials, veteran diplomats and political figures, and scholars with whom we spoke are under no illusions. They all agree that the Arab world is busy with its many problems more than it is with prospects of annexation. The Europeans are perceived in Amman as incapable of exerting significant pressure on Israel to block the move. “Most Arab states are currently busy with other issues and that gives Netanyahu and his government room to move ahead with annexation. The Arab world is not coordinating within itself, not even on the Arab Peace Initiative. There is currently no single, solidified Arab position as regards annexation. It clearly does not go down well with the citizens of these states, and therefore no Arab leader will accept it, but it is unclear whether condemnation would be translated into real action,” a former senior official told us.

“When Israel was advancing toward annexation, the only protest in the region took place in Tel Aviv, not in any Arab capital. Opposition to the Trump Plan did not gather momentum, either,” another senior Jordanian dialogue participant summed up. Nonetheless, according to the assessments voiced by of our interlocutors, Jordan is not expected to amend its regional treaties nor to draw closer to elements hostile to Israel. Jordan feels it is on the frontlines of the battle against annexation, whereas other states in the region and beyond

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are busy with their own issues. It assumes that even if the annexation plan has been sidelined in recent weeks, slightly easing the pressure level in Amman, the issue is likely to resurface on the agenda.

B. Annexation Violates the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty

Our Jordanian counterparts have firm views regarding the development of relations with Israel since the 1994 signing of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. In October 2019, when a Mitvim Institute delegation visited Jordan, it heard disappointment about the state of bilateral ties. The Jordanian frustration stems from Israel's failure to implement a single major, significant project proposed in the 1990s – such as the Red Sea-Dead Sea Canal, a shared airport, industrial parks and more. The peace agreement has thus failed to yield the anticipated prosperity. The Jordanians sense that Israel has neglected their country despite the major potential of the relationship and is not trying to imbue the peace agreement with substance.

Annexation is perceived in Jordan as a flagrant violation of the treaty. When Jordan signed the agreement, "It left the issue of the border with the Jordan Valley open for negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, hoping these borders would be determined within the framework of a peace agreement. Israeli annexation of territory in the northern Jordan Valley would violate the peace agreement with Jordan," a former senior military official told the Israeli team. "The Jordan-Israel treaty recognizes Jordan's role in negotiations with the Palestinians, so that what is going on now with annexation violates the agreement. The idea of the treaty is that each side respects the sovereignty of the other, and annexation is a measure that threatens Jordan's sovereignty. Therefore, Jordan will be entitled to re-open the agreement and its economic annexes with Israel" in case annexation takes place.

C. Annexation Might Eventually Lead to Transfer of Palestinians

As far as the Jordanians are concerned, any annexation, whether large or small, is dangerous. In their view, annexation will gradually cut off the West Bank Palestinians from Jordan's Palestinians (two groups that conduct significant communal ties) because the Palestinians will have to go through Israeli territory to get to Jordan and the West Bank. Currently, Palestinians go back and forth directly through the Israel-run Allenby crossing.

The continued construction in the settlements and other obstacles for Palestinians in the West Bank are perceived as intended to catalyze a Palestinian exodus eastward. In recent months, Netanyahu has personally declared that the government would not grant Israeli citizenship to the Palestinians residing in annexed areas. Absent prospects of establishing a Palestinian state, and with no hope of obtaining citizenship, the Palestinians would be completely controlled by Israel. If that happens, Israel will be able to expel them immediately if it decides to do so, or to create conditions that will make people leave, several senior Jordanians said. Many in Jordan also believe annexation will once revive the "Jordan is Palestine" concept, which the radical Israeli right advocates.

Our interlocutors remind those in Israel who support undermining Jordan's security and regime of the Jordanian role in ensuring Israel's security. "The border between Israel and Jordan is the longest front between Jordan and its neighbors and the most stable border right now. It must be protected. The Jordanian army and the IDF do the job, but instability along the border would open the way for nearby radical groups – ISIS, the Iranian militias in

Iraq, and Hezbollah. Border instability is a regional danger. The argument put forth repeatedly by the Likud and by radical elements in Israel that Jordan is the homeland of the Palestinians constitutes a threat to Jordan and the Hashemite regime, but in fact, such a development would be no less risky for Israel," according to Jordanians who have maintained close contact with their Israeli military and government counterparts for years.

D. "The Sky Will Not Cave In", but Israel-Jordan Ties Will Be Harmed

How will Jordan react if annexation takes place at some point? Our interlocutors are certain that Jordan will have to look out for its own interests, first and foremost, and will try to do all it can to stabilize the situation. They differ on the concrete measures Jordan might take – for example, would it recall its ambassador and ask Israel's ambassador to leave Amman? All agree that Jordan would launch a diplomatic initiative against the Israeli move, including an appeal to the EU, the UN, the Arab League, the Quartet, and more. And what about the natural gas deal that Jordan recently signed with Israel and the security coordination between the sides? "Undermining cooperation on security, water issues, Jerusalem and agriculture would be detrimental to Jordan's interests. The Jordanian response to annexation is expected to be cautious in order to protect Jordanian interests, which include preserving relations with Israel. It is important for Jordan first to see what the US says, how the Palestinians respond and what will happen in Israel itself," we are told.

The natural gas issue has generated significant controversy in Jordan from the get-go, and some in the Kingdom told us that they believe annexation could provide an excuse for Jordan to exit the expensive gas deal. "There is an uncomfortable feeling in Jordan that it is paying too much for the gas. An amendment of the agreement with Noble Energy could occur even unrelated to annexation. The price of gas from Israel must be cheaper than that of liquid gas, because it is supplied directly, without the need for liquefaction or gasification. It is quite possible that the annexation will provide a legal out from the expensive agreement with Noble Energy."

The senior Jordanians emphasize that even if annexation does not result in immediate upheaval, it would encourage radicals and weaken moderates in the region. "Annexation would strengthen the standing of Iran and Turkey in the region and benefit the radicals. If Israel wants to be a key regional player in terms of technology and security, a decision to annex and revoke Palestinian rights would make that impossible. Turkey is successfully expanding its influence in Syria and Libya. Iran is successfully advancing its interests in Yemen and Iraq. Annexation would provide these states with a tailwind and undermine efforts by pragmatic Sunni states to create a different reality in the region," they sum up.

Jordan continues its close monitoring of political developments in Israel. It expects annexation to resurface, at which point it will confront the move and try to block it with the help of its friends in the Arab world and elsewhere, even if it cannot completely prevent it.