

## Now Is the Time for an Israeli Diplomatic Initiative, Not Annexation

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Israel has always had trouble effectively formulating a diplomatic initiative that balances its given (and favorable) strategic-diplomatic circumstances with its long-term national interests. Now is not the time to delve into the reasons why. Now is the time to emphasize the vital need for such an initiative in the face of proposed unilateral measures (annexation in the West Bank) that could severely undermine Israel's standing and long-term diplomatic-security interests.

The new Israeli government's annexation intentions are generating political and public discourse, which ideally should be more vibrant and in-depth given its implications. Many of the arguments raised by annexation opponents do not give due consideration to the viewpoint and reasoning of annexation proponents, as well as to the current domestic, regional and international circumstances. Without delving into the nature and extent of the annexation (although this, too, is important and will shape international reactions), its supporters raise a series of arguments, some implied, of which opponents must be aware in order to counter them.

Regarding **the Palestinian arena**, the arguments point to the inherent weakness of the current Palestinian leadership, for which Israel is probably to blame to a significant degree, and casts doubt on its ability to engage in a true diplomatic initiative. Paradoxically, and even tragically so, the man leading the Palestinian national movement to its diplomatic nadir – Mahmoud Abbas – is the most “diplomacy oriented” Palestinian leader ever in terms of his clear rejection of armed struggle and his continued adherence to the path of diplomacy. This leadership will probably be unable to reach a permanent agreement with Israel, but would be able to advance diplomatic moves and provide the essential underpinnings of a final-status agreement.

In terms of the **regional arena**, proponents point to the repercussions of the Arab Spring over the past decade that have weakened the Arab world as a collective and almost every one of the Arab states in the region. At the same time, these developments have strengthened or cast into prominence other states such as Iran and Turkey (and non-state actors, too), leaving states such as Syria, Yemen and Libya riven by extended bloody strife from which it will take them years to recover. These developments have served Israel's diplomatic and security interests and, as we know, have marginalized the Arab interest and commitment to the Palestinian issue. The peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan are robust, having withstood a series of challenges and upheavals in the region, and could possibly survive an initial annexation move.

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On the **international arena**, President Trump has provided clear backing for Israel's positions (the embassy transfer to Jerusalem, recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights) and supports potential annexation moves, albeit in conjunction with his "deal of the century". This support coincides with the current administration's clear decision to abandon America's leadership of the free world and the resulting decline in its involvement and influence in the international arena. It also comes even as the Democratic Party distances itself from unequivocal support for Israel and for its annexation intent. The international arena has been trying to digest these developments in recent years: US allies are internalizing that the needle on the moral compass that the US proudly displayed since World War II has shifted. Its rivals, China and the US are wondering whether they can take advantage of this "window of opportunity" to restore the previous bi-polar or multi-polar world order. Europe is troubled by a series of economic and diplomatic challenges.

On the **domestic level**, for almost two decades, Israeli leaders have imbued the public with the belief that the Palestinians do not want to or cannot make peace. This conception has achieved rare and stable public consensus in recent years even among supporters of the peace process – despite the Palestinian Authority's adherence to security coordination with Israel and its rejection of armed struggle. Annexation opponents usually hang their hopes on external international community pressure to illustrate the (heavy) toll exacted by the absence of a peace process. However, such pressure is slow in coming, or, unfortunately is not sufficiently assertive to elucidate to Israeli public opinion the price that Israel might end up paying in the long term.

So why is annexation so negative?

1. Ostensibly, a unilateral Israeli move appears fitting and beneficial given the absence of a reliable and effective Palestinian partner. However, the diplomatic wisdom of such a move is questionable. The disengagement from the Gaza Strip, which was obviously necessary, did not relieve Israel of its responsibility for subsequent events in Gaza for the simple reason that it was not carried out in agreement with the other side. It resulted in the rise of a non-state player who believed that absent a peace process, the path of resistance was preferable. Israel's ongoing efforts to reach convoluted and complex arrangements with Hamas (a "terror organization" as we know) illustrate the need for dialogue, compromise and agreement.
2. Unilateral annexation moves violate international law and risk an unknown response on the part of the international community, as reflected in two different examples among many - Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula or Turkey's establishment of the Republic of Northern Cyprus following its invasion of the island. The international community did not recognize either move and imposed sanctions on the aggressors. Even if we argue that in both cases the international response was weak, the fact is that international recognition of the newly created reality in both instances is not forthcoming. And obviously, Israel is far more vulnerable to external pressure and economic and diplomatic price tags than many other players in the international arena.
3. US support is crucial at this time and is the impetus for any annexation move. However, the wisdom of risking the broad consensus that Israel enjoys in the US arena is questionable. Should Israel not reconsider its intentions given the positions taken by Democratic candidate Joe Biden on annexation and the nuclear deal with

Iran? What is more, does the growing divide between the Trump Administration and US allies in the international arena truly serve Israeli interests, or does it weaken Israel's traditional allies, including the US?

4. Annexation would seriously undermine Israel's peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, which have proven resilient over the years. Annexation would create cracks in the convergence of the strategic interests that have protected these agreements. Even if annexation does not result in their abrogation, response measures by these states would set back the relationship with Israel, increase domestic pressure on these regimes, threaten their stability and in the longer term cast serious doubts on future relations with Israel.
5. The overall relationship with the Palestinian Authority (PA) is a positive one, in terms both of the security coordination and a myriad of economic-civilian issues, despite the complete absence of diplomatic dialogue. Annexation would increase pressure on the PA to undertake countermeasures, including suspension of the security coordination, strengthening those agitating for a more violent struggle. The absence of a diplomatic horizon in addition to significant annexation measures would fatally undermine the foundations of the PA's legitimacy.
6. European states would reject out of hand any annexation decision on the principle that rules out unilateral changes in the legal-diplomatic status of the West Bank in contravention of international law. The European Union would probably have a hard time reaching consensus on imposing significant sanctions against Israel. However, that would not preclude specific states from doing so, to the detriment of research and scientific cooperation, and perhaps economic cooperation too, in the future. One must not underestimate the severity of the growing diplomatic-moral gap between Israel and the critical mass of liberal European democracies that constitute Israel's true power base.

Why is an Israeli diplomatic initiative essential?

1. The conclusion derived from the circumstances described above actually points to the opportunity now facing us. A favorable international climate, unprecedented US administration support, a weaker and more divided region, a weakened and divided Palestinian opponent – all these cogently illustrate the essential strategic need for a diplomatic initiative.
2. The goal of such an initiative is to create renewed Israeli-Palestinian dialogue, which would translate the above-mentioned conditions into improved understandings, absent in the past, serving Israel's national interests. The diplomatic-security lessons of recent years have generated better regional and international understanding of Israel's positions on a series of issues, among them security arrangements and the refugee issue.
3. A diplomatic initiative by a courageous and far-seeing Israeli leadership stems from a sense of responsibility and vision made feasible by conditions perceived as more favorable from Israel's point of view. Israel's relatively brief history, and especially the years that preceded the 1973 Yom Kippur War, prove the extent to which lack of

diplomatic initiative, a rigid mindset and aggressive exploitation of given circumstances generally lead to conflagration and violent response.

4. A diplomatic initiative would boost the relationship with Egypt and Jordan, strengthen the growing convergence of interests in recent years between Israel and many Arab states, especially in the Gulf, and help moderate elements in the region vis-à-vis radical ones. In the Palestinian arena, such an initiative in the waning days of Abbas' leadership would bolster pragmatic forces against those who do not view the peace process as serving the interests of the Palestinian national movement.
5. A good faith diplomatic initiative would boost Israel's standing among members of the international democratic-liberal club, standing seriously eroded in recent years that poses potential long-term danger. It will also place Israel's relationship with the Diaspora, especially with American Jewry, on healthier and more stable ground.

In conclusion, diplomatic wisdom and a sober historic perspective, certainly of the Jewish people, requires strategic insight, humility, and a measured dose of power along with recognition of its limited benefits, while taking advantage of better cards in order to achieve progress under improved conditions. These may not move us ahead immediately to a final-status peace agreement with the Palestinians, but will place Israel on an easier and more fitting path to the future.