



Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab issues

Arab Citizen Perspectives on Annexation: Leadership, Civil Society and Public Discourse

August 2020

In September 2019, in the lead-up to Israel's second general elections, PM Netanyahu announced intentions to annex parts of the West Bank and later made this a top and even urgent priority of the new unity government, formed in May 2020. While no action has been taken thus far and the parameters of possible annexation remain unclear, the declaration has generated strong responses within and outside of Israel, mostly in the context of its anticipated impact on the two-state solution, the viability of Palestinian statehood, relations with the wider Arab world and Israel's standing in the international community.

In the ensuing controversy, less focus has been placed on the potential impact on and perspectives of the Arab minority living within Israel. Arab citizens of Israel comprise almost one-fifth of Israel's population, approximately 1.6 million people.¹ At once part of Israel's national fabric as citizens living, studying, working and voting in the country, Arabs inside Israel also share a strong sense of identity and peoplehood with—and concerns for—Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. In some circles, Arab citizens of Israel envision serving as a bridge between the populations.



Arab public discourse in Israel is quite consistently opposed to the proposed annexation. This view is reinforced by a June survey by aChord Center, which found that 92% of Arab polled oppose annexation, and a May poll by the [Israel Democracy Institute](#) which showed only 8.8% of Arab respondents in support. The only positive take has been that, if advanced, annexation may serve a powerful unifying factor ([Hebrew](#)) for Jews and Arabs on the progressive left in Israel.

¹ Including the Arab population in East Jerusalem, Israel's Arab population is roughly 1.9 million. However, the East Jerusalem Arab population have Israeli residency but not citizenship. Residency includes various civilian rights including welfare services such as National Insurance, health services, and municipal services, but not an Israeli passport and or voting rights in national elections (only local).

As indicated by political, civil society and public discourse, this opposition reflects several major areas of concerns:

- (i) **Trump Peace Plan:** The proposal is widely seen as a first step in implementing the [Trump administration's 2020 peace plan](#), criticized by Arab citizens for being unilateral and for a [clause enabling the transfer of ten Arab communities](#) in the Triangle region along with the citizens living there to Palestinian sovereignty.²
- (ii) **Two-State Solution:** Whether as part of the Trump peace plan or simply enabled by it, annexation is expected to be a blow to a bilateral, two-state solution and thus to Arab citizen's aspirations to see improved conditions and statehood for Palestinians. A polarizing move, it also reduces the ability of Arab citizens to serve as a bridge in support of a two-state solution.
- (iii) **Democracy and Equal Citizenship:** If Palestinians living in annexed territories are not ultimately granted full citizenship, and if annexation does bring an end to the two-state solution, this is seen as a weakening of Israeli democracy by uneven granting of citizenship and civic rights according to ethnic and national identity.
- (iv) **Intergroup Relations:** Annexation is expected to increase tensions in Jewish-Arab relations within Israel especially if it ignites conflict across the border. It is also a politically divisive issue and further positions Arab citizens in a progressive camp in opposition to mostly right-wing supporters.

It is important to note that with the second wave of the Coronavirus, annexation has largely dropped off the main streams of Jewish and Arab public discourse in Israel. Though the issue is interwoven into widespread public protests throughout the country, it is as part of the broader frustrations with government management of the pandemic. In addition, Arab citizens have by and large [not been part of the protest movement](#).

Annexation Proposals³: Demographic Impact

To date, little official detail has emerged about the specific terms of the proposal—neither about the extent of territory under discussion nor the status of the Palestinian population living within those boundaries. [The Institute for National Security Studies](#) maps out the three possible approaches: “(1) an approach that adopts [President Donald Trump's plan](#) and calls for the annexation of half of Area C which constitutes some 30 percent of the West Bank; (2) the annexation of the Jordan Valley which constitutes 22 percent of the West Bank; or (3) a limited

² Read more about the transfer clause, here: [Inter-Agency Task Force on Israeli Arab Issues, “Peace Plan Draws Strong Responses from Arab Citizens”, February 5, 2020.](#)

³ For more detail and maps illustrating various approaches, see the follow sites: [Foundation for Middle East Peace: Settlement Report \[The Trump Plan Edition\]: January 31, 2020](#); [The Institute for National Security Studies](#); Hilton, Daniel, [Israel's annexation plans explained in nine questions](#), *Middle East Eye*, June 30, 2020; [Arab nations condemn Netanyahu's Jordan Valley annexation plan](#), *BBC News*, September 11, 2019; Oceans of Injustice, [Settlement Building](#); Makovsky, David, [Mapping Mideast Peace](#), *The New York Times*, September 11, 2011.



Vision for Peace Conceptual Map published by the Trump Administration on January 28, 2020

approach, which seeks to secure the existing Israeli settlements and prevent their future evacuation.”

The first and most extensive approach encompasses some 400,000 Israeli settlers and roughly [135,000 Palestinians](#) (4.5% of the Palestinian population of the West Bank) living in the territories under discussion. The more limited options vary between prioritizing major settlements with large Israeli populations, and territory that is strategic for security purposes. The more limited approaches encompass anywhere from a few thousand to roughly 56,000 Palestinian residents.

It is not clear what status Palestinians who, post-annexation, would be living under Israeli sovereignty would have. According to [PM Netanyahu](#), most of the population would remain in Palestinian enclaves under Israeli security, and therefore the question of Israeli residency or citizenship would be moot. For those not in enclaves, Israeli legal experts argue that residency and eventually citizenship will need to be offered for Israel to retain democratic integrity where members of a minority group have conditional access to citizenship, while a majority has full exercise of those rights.⁴

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In a letter [sent to Democrats in the US Congress](#) this June, all 15 MKs of the Joint List party wrote as “the third most supported Party in recent elections, representing the Palestinian minority in Israel as well as progressive Jews,” they view the American administration’s enabling of annexation via the Trump Peace Plan as an “embrace of the positions of Israeli hardliners” who would otherwise not have been able to advance the option.

MK Aida Toume-Sliman, who initiated the letter, connected the struggle against the annexation plan with the demand for equality to Arab citizens within Israel: “We understand that part of our reality and part of the situation where we don’t get rights and equality is [because we are Palestinians and because Israel continues the occupation of the Palestinian people](#)”.

Joint List Chairman Ayman Odeh reinforced the position of the Joint List against annexation as representative of shared Jewish and Arab interests in a [speech at an anti-annexation rally in Tel Aviv](#): “There is no such thing as democracy for Jews alone,” he said. “We are at a crossroads. One path leads to a joint society with true democracy and civil and national equality for Arab citizens. The second path will lead us to hatred, violence, annexation, and apartheid.”



June 2020 Anti-Annexation Rally in Rabin Square

⁴ See: Prof. Friedman, Daniel, [If annexation cannot be stopped at least stop the robbery](#), *YNET*, June 11, 2020 (Hebrew); Prof. Cohen, Amichai, [Deal of the Century” and Annexation – Overview](#), *Israel Democracy Institute*, February 13, 2020; Prof. Shany, Yuval, [Legal Ramifications if Israel Decided to Annex the West Bank](#), *Israel Democracy Institute*, May 16, 2019.

MK Odeh also attended a joint teleconference in Ramallah where leaders from Fatah and Hamas, competing political factions in the West Bank and Gaza, [declared their intention](#) to work together to achieve an independent Palestinian state and foil the annexation plan. Drawing [significant criticism from across the Israeli Jewish political spectrum for engaging with Hamas](#), Odeh argued that [he came to show support of internal Palestinian reconciliation](#).

In Arab public discourse, the event was seen more as a Jewish misunderstanding of Arab connections to their Palestinian brethren: “The Arab population in Israel is part of the Palestinian people, as are those living in Gaza under Hamas rule and those living in the West Bank under Fatah rule” wrote Odeh Bisharat. “We grew up on the slogan that the Arabs in Israel are a bridge to peace with the Arab world. But when the Arabs in Israel roll up their sleeves and rush to fulfill the role of the bridge, they are denounced as supporters of terrorism ([Hebrew](#))”.

In the meantime, by some indications, annexation may form a basis for Jewish-Arab political cooperation within Israel. Political activist Ameer Fakhoury argues ([Hebrew](#)) that this plan can serve a unifying factor for the Joint List, the Jewish left, and possibly also parts of the center-left—providing more unifying power than the shared interest, over recent elections, of [changing the incumbent administration](#). On June 22, there was early indication of such potential cooperation in the Knesset when the center party Yesh Atid collaborated with Meretz and the Joint List, voting together in favor of a no-confidence motion submitted by the Arab Party, titled “The Government of Annexation and Apartheid ([Hebrew](#)).”

Civil Society

Various Arab and Jewish-Arab civil society and activist organizations in Israel have also expressed firm opposition to the annexation plan and many have issued statements. Examples include:

- [The Abraham Initiatives](#) expressed “fears that the planned annexation may create an Apartheid-like reality in Israel. This reality will be created by Israel absorbing West Bank Palestinians who will be deprived of basic civil and human rights.” Furthermore, “annexation will [likely] cause a severe increase in tensions between Israel’s Arab and Jewish citizens. It will inevitably lead to a higher level of alienation among Israel’s Arab citizens towards the state, as chances for a peaceful solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the Two State Solution—a top priority for Israel’s Arab citizens—will be diminished. Thus, annexation may cause a growing rejection of the definition of Israel as a Jewish and Democratic state amongst Arab citizens.”
- Already in April, [Adalah – The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel](#), sent a letter to Israeli Attorney General Avichai Mandelblit, Defense Minister Benny Gantz, and Prime Minister Netanyahu, arguing that the government’s plan to apply sovereignty over the West Bank is illegal and a further step closer to bypassing international legal barriers and ignoring Palestinians' right to self-determination.
- [Standing Together](#), a Jewish-Arab progressive grassroots movement, circulated an online petition against annexation saying: “It deepens the occupation and excludes the possibility of achieving Israeli-Palestinian peace, and it also obscures the right of Palestinians in the occupied territories to live in freedom and independence. Because it will prevent us from living safely. Because it will increase the incidence of racism in Israeli society. Because it is part of a plan that includes transfer and deprivation of citizenship

from residents of Wadi Ara and the Triangle. Because it will shift budgets and resources from social welfare services to building settlements and intensifying the presence of border police officers in the West Bank areas, to dominate its civilian population.”

- In advance of a June 6 anti-annexation demonstration, [Sikkuy, a Jewish-Arab Civil Equality NGO](#), posted the following statement: “Ganz has already informed the IDF to prepare for annexation: It is no longer a mere hallucination of the Messianic right, annexation is a dangerous work plan of this government, and it must be stopped! The annexation will perpetuate the occupation, remove the Palestinian people from the attainment of the right to self-determination and eliminate any possibility of establishing an independent state with territorial continuity. In areas under the threat of annexation live thousands of residents who will be forcibly displaced from their homes, or will remain living there in enclaves - as disenfranchised citizens and not as citizens. The annexation that Netanyahu and Trump are promoting will give a kosher certificate to apartheid - and we, the Jewish and Arab citizens in this country, are not willing to accept that. The annexation ignites hatred and violence, and may deeply hurt the relations between the Jewish and Arab-Palestinian citizens who live here, and we are not willing to pay the price. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be resolved through dialogue and partnership - and not through a unilateral move that exacerbates hostility and violence”
- [The Association of Civil Rights in Israel](#) (ACRI) argued that “the Knesset has violated the fundamental rules applying to an occupied territory and has restricted the rights the laws of occupation seek to provide for the protected residents. In this reality, with its mixture of occupation and annexation, the Palestinians lose out at every turn. They are denied the protections and rights of international humanitarian law and international law, and they are excluded from the protections and rights of Israeli law. This situation is illegal and intolerable in terms of the protection of human rights”.
- [Women Wage Peace](#), a joint Jewish-Arab peace movement, argued that “Unilateral annexation might harm the existing peace agreements with our neighbors, and it might ignite the entire region. It can block an honorable and respectful agreement with the Palestinians. As women, we know that reciprocity, listening, respect and compassion are necessary components for building a better future for us and for our neighbors. We call on Netanyahu, Gantz and all the parties in the new government to avoid unilateral annexation. Any change must be agreed upon and accepted by both sides. Unilateral action is harmful to human rights and may perpetuate violence. We call on the government-in-the-making to promote a sustainable peace with our neighbors”.

Demonstrations and Public Discourse

Among the wave of protests throughout the country, several in recent weeks have been focused on annexation. In early June, organizers of an anti-annexation rally in Tel Aviv [issued a statement that](#) “Netanyahu and Trump are reinforcing a violent reality of hatred and segregation, and now they want to divide and annex parts of the West Bank, uproot residents, and deny citizenship from Israel's Arab citizens from the Triangle region and Wadi Ara.”

Although towards July 1, it became quite clear that the annexation plan would not be carried out (at least in the original date), there was still fear within Arab society that the government would

try to make a last-minute move. Hence, several actors within this society called for wide-scale anti-annexation activities that day. For example, Ghadir Hani of AJECC-NISPED [called on people to take to the streets](#) the following day to prevent last-minute action. Indeed, on July 1, several anti-annexation demonstrations took part in various locations in Israel, the main one being in Wadi Ara. Demonstrators held banners denouncing the annexation, and called for Palestinian unity in order to foil it. (Arabic).⁵ [Rula Daood from Standing Together](#), which organized several of these demonstrations and ones prior, posted that “it is time to go to the streets and let the government understand that we won't be safe with the occupation and that we won't give up the struggle for our future”.

Arab media discourse reflects the almost consensual position against the application of Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank. In an article in Panet, journalist Ahmed Hazem called this plan an “occupational colonial project”, suggesting that it might lead to a third intifada (uprising) in the West Bank (Arabic).⁶ In an article in Bokra, Rajab Abu Saria warned even from the more limited forms of annexation, arguing that it may begin by declaring the application of Israeli law only over the three major settlement blocks, but the “Israeli appetite” will drive the government to annex the Jordan Valley and then to dismember the entire West Bank by annexing all settlement, including the most remote ones (Arabic).⁷

In interviews to Israeli and international media, Mohammad Darawshe, Director of the Centre for Equality & Shared Society at Givat Haviva, correlated annexation to the 2018 Nation-State Law, seeing it as a reflection of an “[Israel \[that\] wants the land without the people on it, without equal status.](#)”

Reflecting on the longstanding residency status of East Jerusalem Arabs, [activist Aziz Abu Sarah, explains](#) that “Our experience with annexation has not proven it to go well. [East Jerusalem Arabs] remain marginalised as a community and I think those who live in the areas that are going to be annexed will be marginalised,” he says, pointing to existing inequalities in East Jerusalem, on subjects as varied as housebuilding to school budgets.

⁵ Haj Yahya, Dhia, [Wadi Ara: a protest against the annexation plot and an arrest of a demonstrator](#), *Arab 48*, July 1, 2020 (Arabic).

⁶ Hazem, Ahmed, [Will a third intifada break out in the West Bank after the annexation?](#), *Panet*, July 10, 2020 (Arabic).

⁷ Abu Saria, Rajab, [The annexation between "gentle" and "rough"](#), *Bokra*, July 3, 2020 (Arabic).