

Netanyahu pledges to annex Jordan Valley if re-elected

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced that he would extend Israeli sovereignty over all the settlements as well as the Jordan Valley and the northern Dead Sea area in the occupied West Bank, if he is re-elected prime minister in Tuesday's general election.

The following day, he said he would ask cabinet to approve a proposal to retroactively legalize a wildcat outpost, a settlement built without official sanction, in the Jordan Valley.

Israel has illegally occupied and built settlements in the West Bank, as well as in Syria's Golan Heights and East Jerusalem (after annexing it), since capturing them in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Netanyahu's proposed annexation is another and even more flagrant breach of international law, which Israel has long disregarded with impunity, courtesy of the US veto in the UN Security Council. The Geneva Conventions, enacted in the wake of the Second World War to prevent the repetition of similar actions carried out by Germany's Nazi regime, outlawed the annexation of territory captured in war.

Netanyahu made a similar pledge to annex the settlements if reelected prime minister just days before the last election in April, called ahead of schedule in a bid to secure a majority government that would provide him with immunity from prosecution on a raft of corruption charges.

In the event, he was unable to form a government without the support of Avigdor Lieberman's nationalist Israel Beiteinu. Lieberman refused to join his coalition unless he introduced legislation to force the ultra-Orthodox Jews to serve in the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), leaving Netanyahu no option but to call for fresh elections this September.

The polls show Netanyahu's Likud party in a close run with Blue and White, the so-called "centre-left" opposition bloc led by Benny Gantz, the former IDF chief

of staff, with neither able to secure a majority bloc in the 120-seat Knesset. Lieberman, who is expected to be the kingmaker, has demanded Likud form a national unity government, excluding the religious parties; otherwise he will support Gantz.

Netanyahu's announcement is aimed at diverting the votes of fascistic layers of the settlers and religious nationalists from his far-right rivals to his own Likud party, driving Israel's capitalist political setup ever further toward outright apartheid, fascism and military dictatorship. Ayelet Shaked, leader of the United Right leader, which is expected to win up to 10 seats in the Knesset, had included annexation of the West Bank in a list of "core values" her slate's members had to swear by.

The annexation is a prelude to an apartheid state, stepped up repression—both within Israel and across the occupied territories—and intensified Israeli military aggression in the occupied West Bank, Gaza and the broader Middle East.

Speaking on television on Tuesday, Netanyahu said, "With God's help "we will extend Jewish sovereignty to all the settlements as part of the [biblical] land of Israel, as part of the state of Israel."

He added that US President Donald Trump's so-called "deal of the century," which has yet to be announced, presents a "historic opportunity" to extend Israeli sovereignty. This plan would allow Israel to "apply our sovereignty over our settlements in Judea and Samaria [West Bank] and other places key to our security, our heritage and our future."

The Jordan Valley, the most fertile part of the West Bank, stretches from the Dead Sea in the south to the Israeli city of Beit Shean in the north, bordering Jordan in the east, and accounts for nearly 30 percent of the West Bank. According to B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights group, there are 65,000 Palestinian residents, as well as 11,000 settlers living in kibbutzim and moshavim, in the

Jordan Valley. Jericho, the main Palestinian city in the region, with about 28 villages and small Bedouin communities, will not be annexed.

The Jordan Valley is part of Area C, which comprises about 60 percent of the West Bank and includes the vast majority of the 241 Israeli settlements, where more than 600,000 settlers live. Although, under the 1993 Oslo Accords, Area C was supposed to be transferred to the Palestinian Authority (PA) in 1999, this never happened, leaving the territory under Israel's full control.

Netanyahu's terminology in his TV broadcast was highly significant. First, by insisting on "Jewish sovereignty" not "Israeli sovereignty" and referring to "the land of Israel," he sought to demonstrate the priority of Jewish nationality over Palestinian nationality in both Israel and the occupied territories. This includes Jews living overseas who have the "right of return," meaning the right to Israeli citizenship, which Palestinians who were expelled or driven from their homes in what is now Israel, and their descendants, do not. He placed greater emphasis on this than the more traditional pretext of "security."

Second, by referring to the "land of Israel," he was invoking the mantra of what was always the stated aim of Vladimir Jabotinsky's Revisionists, the political antecedent to his Likud Party, who sought to establish a Jewish state in biblical Palestine, including what is now Jordan.

Third, by referring to the Trump administration, he sought to infer that his plan had support from Washington. Since Trump took office, the US has moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, recognised Israeli sovereignty over Syria's Golan Heights, closed the Palestine Liberation Organization's offices in Washington and the US Consulate General in Jerusalem, which worked with Palestinians, and cut its funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which assists Palestinian refugees, and to other Palestinian organisations and programs.

Last April, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, an evangelical Christian, broke with longstanding tradition by officially visiting the Western Wall while accompanied by Netanyahu, thereby supporting Israel's assertion of sovereignty over Arab East Jerusalem.

To cap it all, last week, Jason Greenblatt, Trump's special representative for international negotiations, who along with Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and US Ambassador David Friedman was supposed to be formulating a peace plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict, resigned.

His mission, now largely accomplished, was never more than a cover for Washington's open and explicit shift toward Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians, ending the decades-long pretense of supporting a "two-state solution" and the Palestinians' right of return to their homeland. At the same time, the American trio presided over Israel's normalization of relations with Saudi Arabia, the other Gulf oil sheiks and Egypt.

But the incorporation of the West Bank, or part of it, into a Greater Israel can only be achieved and sustained via the imposition of military rule. To this end, the Netanyahu government has passed a series of measures, including the openly racist "Nation-State Law" enshrining Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state. The law provides the framework for an apartheid state that would ghettoize an entire people, the Palestinians, who comprise nearly half of the total population of Israel and the occupied territories, taken as a whole.

The so-called "centre-left" opposition in the elections, led by Gantz, has not challenged Netanyahu's annexation pledge, merely accusing him of using the Jordan Valley residents as extras in a campaign video, thereby signaling consent by omission.

Next week, Gantz will be the defendant in a civil suit in a Dutch district court hearing to determine whether it has jurisdiction to consider a claim for compensation brought by a Gaza-born Dutch citizen over alleged war crimes committed during the 2014 Gaza war, when Gantz was IDF chief of staff.

Ehud Barak, a former prime minister and IDF chief of staff, now leader of the Democratic Union, said that any unilateral moves toward annexation would harm Israel's security.

There was a further escalation in the tensions with Gaza that have mounted over the last few weeks, with almost daily air strikes against Hamas targets in Gaza in response to rockets fired from the besieged enclave that had caused little or no damage or injuries. The rockets were in turn a response to the weekly killing of young Palestinians during the Friday March of Return border protests.



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