

**The Implications of Unilateral Annexation for Israel's Relations with
Egypt**

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While most of the Israeli public debate around the subject of applying sovereignty in the West Bank has focused on the impact on relations with Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, Israel should also consider the consequences of this move for its relations with Egypt. Egypt tended to interpret Israeli declarations on the subject of unilateral annexation as election “spin,” but since the signing of the coalition agreement between the Likud and Blue and White, the attitude in Cairo has changed, and it has begun taking action to dissuade Israel and the United States from pursuing this move. If the annexation takes place, Egypt will have to choose between diplomatic measures against Israel in the Arab and international arenas, and more concrete bilateral measures that will directly harm the relations between the countries. Considering Egyptian current interests and past behavior, Cairo will likely prefer a restrained response. At the same time, wide-ranging Israeli annexation, a severe violent escalation of the situation between Israel and the Palestinians, and internal public pressures could propel it toward a stronger response. Moreover, unilateral annexation would be perceived in Egypt as the end of the Israeli-Palestinian political process, and it could therefore both damage the constructive role that Egypt stands to play in promoting the Trump plan, and reinforce trends that encourage the Palestinians to examine one-state alternatives to the settlement with Israel.

At a press conference in December 2019, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was asked to respond to statements from Israel regarding annexation of the Jordan Valley, and replied with a smile that “there is a difference between promises given before elections and their implementation afterwards.” But it appears that the coalition agreement between Likud and Blue and White, whereby as of July 1 the Prime Minister can ask the government and the Knesset to approve the imposition of Israeli sovereignty on parts of the West Bank, has changed Cairo’s assessment of Israel’s intentions in this context. At the request of the Palestinians, on April 30, 2020 the Arab League held a special video conference at the foreign minister level, and issued a warning that annexation could destroy chances of peace in the region. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry condemned what he called Israel’s attempt to exploit the coronavirus crisis in order to

promote unilateral moves and determine facts on the ground, while breaching international law.

Egyptian objections to moves by Israel toward unilateral annexation comprise several layers. At the foundation is the traditional Egyptian solidarity with the Palestinians and with their demand for an independent and sustainable state based on the 1967 borders. In addition, these objections reflect particular Egyptian national interests: the desire for a renewal of negotiations on an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, which will contribute to regional stability and could – according to the Trump plan – lead to projects worth billions of dollars in Egypt's own territory. Moreover, Egypt is worried about violent escalation in the West Bank – a third intifada – that might foment extremism and instability throughout the region, strengthen radical forces such as Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and cast a shadow over essential cooperation with Israel – for example, on gas.

At this stage, Cairo is mainly looking for ways to persuade Israel and the United States to withdraw from ideas of annexation, and to bring Israel and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table. On May 2 the deputy head of the Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies (ECSS), Maj. Gen. (ret.) Mohamed Ibrahim, published a policy paper on the subject of Jordan Valley annexation, calling for Arab states to put this issue at the top of their diplomatic and public relations agendas, in order to pressure Israel to renege on its intentions and to embarrass it in the international arena. This would occur by convening the Security Council to discuss the implications of the move, present a united Arab-Palestinian vision of an overall settlement to the UN General Assembly, and send a warning to the United States that annexation will damage the security situation in the West Bank, undermine regional stability, and weaken the Palestinian Authority vis-à-vis Hamas.

It was also hinted that Egypt expects the PA to show more flexibility, so that Israel and the United States will not be able to justify unilateral moves by saying that the Palestinians have rejected the Trump plan. Ibrahim called on the PA to reconsider its actions and work with Arab states to promote preliminary steps to thwart the annexation plan. He said that such steps would include drawing up an Arab-Palestinian alternative to the American peace plan, to avoid leaving a vacuum for Israeli moves toward annexation; this in turn would give the Palestinian Authority a basis for entering negotiations and proving that it is a partner for peace. In articles in the Egyptian press, Hamas – in the name of fighting the annexation – is also urged to respond to Egypt's efforts to promote internal Palestinian reconciliation and accept the legitimate Palestinian leadership in Ramallah.

Egypt's Possible Responses

In the event of annexation, Egypt will have to decide how to respond. It seems likely that Egypt will be content with a restrained response that will not risk its essential strategic interests in its relations with the United States and Israel. Chief among these are American military and economic aid, whose importance has increased in light of the corona pandemic; American mediation between Egypt and Ethiopia in the Renaissance Dam crisis; and security cooperation with Israel in the fight against terror in the Sinai Peninsula. At the same time, Egypt's considerations could change following extensive annexation, particularly if there is an outbreak of severe violence between Israel and the Palestinians, and there is increased domestic pressure urging a stronger response. In addition, it will be hard for Egypt to lag behind Jordan, and certainly behind European countries, if their reactions to the move are harsher.

A "restrained" reaction is not expected to deviate significantly from Egypt's reaction to the transfer of the US Embassy to Jerusalem and American recognition of Israeli sovereignty in the Golan Heights. In this scenario, Egypt will likely focus on action in collective Arab and Islamic frameworks, from a desire to avoid direct bilateral friction with the United States and Israel, and will coordinate its moves with Arab countries to criticize Israel in relevant international forums and promote punitive measures against it. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry and the President's Office are also expected to issue announcements condemning Israel, alongside anti-Israel campaigns in the Egyptian media.

A "strong" response could include concrete damage to bilateral relations with Israel at various levels of intensity, from limiting public expressions of peace, through suspending cooperation, to recalling the ambassador to Cairo. In this case, there could be a decline from the measured improvement in relations between the countries in recent years, such as stopping the positive momentum that developed regarding the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), established in Cairo in January 2019, and whose legitimacy is based inter alia on the participation of Jordan and the Palestinian Authority – those who will suffer principally from the annexation. Increasing difficulty is also expected in the promotion of cooperation in other fields, both bilateral and regional. This coincides with a global medical crisis that stresses shared interests, creates new opportunities for collaboration, and reduces the importance of traditional political barriers.

Moreover, unilateral annexation could strengthen trends in Egypt – which are already part of the debate – of examining alternatives to the two-state formula adopted by Cairo when it first supported Resolution 242 in November 1967, and which since the peace agreement with Israel has become a foundation of its policy. In the official Egyptian media there are increasing voices claiming that unilateral annexation by Israel will put an

end to the peace process and force the Palestinians to change the paradigm and adopt new strategies to promote their cause, including: abandoning the Oslo Accords; dismantling the Palestinian Authority; striving for one state with equal rights and obligations for all its citizens; and adopting the non-violent model of the South African struggle against apartheid.

Egypt still supports the two-state solution, but annexation could make it unrealistic in its eyes. This means undermining its willingness and ability to play a constructive role – alongside other Arab states – in promoting an Israeli-Palestinian settlement based on the Trump plan. So far Cairo has avoided expressing formal opposition to the plan, and its responses have even shown that it appreciates the economic potential embodied in the plan, understands the need to anchor Israel's security interests in that framework, and is open to a discussion on creative compromises over the core issues of the dispute. Although Egypt cannot force the Palestinians to accept the Trump plan as it stands, it can encourage them to adopt more realistic positions and to understand that time is not on their side.

Conclusion

Before deciding on unilateral annexation, Israel must seriously weigh the possible negative implications on its contacts with Egypt. These will not necessarily be limited to rhetoric and criticism in the Arab and international arenas, but could even damage bilateral relations and hasten fundamental changes in Egypt's attitude to the two-state principle and its role in promoting an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. Therefore it would be better for Israel to gain the support of the pragmatic Arab axis, with Egypt at its core, for a genuine attempt to pursue the political opportunities embodied in the Trump plan and avoid unilateral and volatile actions that will undermine even further the possibility of achieving a breakthrough to a political settlement.