

Cases of Territorial Annexation Around the World— What Should Israel Know

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In recent weeks, voices in the Israeli political arena, particularly from the settler lobby beyond the Green Line, have intensified their call for annexing territories in Judea and Samaria, as well as in the Gaza Strip—namely, the application of Israeli sovereignty to these areas—in response to the growing wave of declarations by many states to recognize a Palestinian state. Annexation, which is by no means a new phenomenon, is intended to block any path toward Israeli disengagement from the West Bank, either from it or within it, and to prevent the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the future. To help clarify the possible implications of annexation, this article examines cases of unilateral annexations around the world since 1945. The analysis shows that annexations tend to ignite prolonged resistance and rarely create conditions that enable two populations in conflict—ethnically, nationally, and religiously—to live side by side. Annexation attempts tend to succeed when the side implementing them enjoys clear military and economic superiority, as in the Israeli–Palestinian case. Even in this context, however, no Palestinian capitulation should be expected. Should annexation take place, terrorism and other forms of violent resistance are likely to continue and even intensify. Moreover, peace relations and normalization processes between Israel and regional states would likely be frozen, while Israel would also face international isolation, which would gravely undermine its standing, security, and economy. Even if annexation is confined to a limited area, it would inflame tensions.

This article is the first in a series examining the issue of territorial annexation in Judea and Samaria and in the Gaza Strip—specifically the application of Israeli sovereignty and law to these areas—in order to present possible implications that could arise from such a move. This article focuses on lessons drawn from cases of annexation elsewhere in the world, from the end of the Second World War to the present. While the case studies differ in terms of how annexation was carried out, the characteristics of the international system, and the immediate and long-term outcomes, it is nevertheless possible, with due caution, to infer potential implications for the annexation of territories in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza.¹

¹ **Annexation** is defined by [Pinfold and Eiran](#) (2024, pp. 3–4) as the effort of one political entity to unilaterally expand its sovereignty over territory beyond its declared and recognized borders (“when one political entity unilaterally *attempts* to extend its sovereignty over a piece of territory outside its declared and recognized boundaries”). Under this definition, a formal and official declaration of annexation is not required for the State of Israel to advance de facto annexation of Palestinian territories in Judea and Samaria and in Gaza.

Main Findings

In the overwhelming majority of the 20 case studies, the primary motive for annexation was related to strategic and national security considerations. However, in most cases, the move was justified through claims of a historical connection between the annexing state and the annexed territory or population.

In nine out of the 20 case studies, annexation attempts failed for two main reasons: the undermining of security given the absence of an adequate military response to suppress armed resistance by other states and/or by the annexed population to the move; and the inability to provide significant economic benefits to the annexed population, which fueled its opposition to the move.

In the cases where annexation was successful (only four), there was no significant opposition. Annexations imposed by force succeeded when there was a clear asymmetry of power in favor of the annexing state (China–Tibet; Indonesia–West New Guinea, also known as Papua) and when the issue did not significantly engage the international system. By contrast, in the two cases of annexation carried out peacefully (India–Goa; India–Sikkim), there was economic asymmetry favoring the annexing state, which enabled it to offer the annexed populations, who had long suffered under colonial rule, the prospect of improved socio-economic conditions, thus preventing resistance to the move.

In seven other cases, annexation remained contested and unresolved. In most of these cases, the annexation became entrenched; it was neither possible to restore the pre-annexation situation nor to achieve full integration. The unresolved cases are all located in areas of ongoing conflict (Israel–East Jerusalem; Israel–Golan Heights; Morocco–Western Sahara; Turkey–Northern Cyprus; Russia–Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Russia–Crimea; Russia–Eastern Ukraine). A recurring feature in these cases is that the annexation issue continues as the core of the conflict, both between the affected populations and between neighboring states in the surrounding region.

In the overwhelming majority of the case studies, annexation did not promote the resolution of conflicts but rather exacerbated them. In 10 cases, protracted armed resistance by the annexed population developed, varying in scale and duration and exacting heavy costs in lives, economic resources, and the social fabric of the annexing state. In five cases, the annexation attempts were foiled by military intervention from other states.

In the vast majority of the case studies (14 out of 20), annexation attempts were accompanied by population transfers, either through the expulsion of population and/or the transfer of population from the annexing state into the annexed territory—that is, “settlement.” In at least 10 cases, settlement was an integral part of the annexation strategy. With the exception of two cases (India–Goa; India–Sikkim), the integration of the annexed population into the annexing state has been marked by ongoing difficulties and friction.

Motives and Justifications

The main considerations in the annexation of territory were linked to national security, aspirations for territorial expansion, and the improvement of geopolitical standing vis-à-vis the surrounding environment. At the same time, all the annexing states declared historical ties to the annexed territory and population as a justification for annexation—apparently as a means of mobilizing and sustaining domestic support while also seeking to secure international legitimacy for the move.

Table 1 presents representative examples from the case studies:

Table 1. Case Studies of Annexation

Case study	Motives	Justifications
Jordan–East Jerusalem and the West Bank, 1950	Strategic: aspiration to promote a Greater Hashemite Kingdom	Defensive buffer against Israel; historical ties
China–Tibet, 1951	National security: creating a buffer zone	Historical and ideological claims
India–Goa, 1961	Completion of the struggle for independence and against colonialism	Defense against Portugal's threat to India's national security
Ethiopia–Eritrea, 1962	Strategic: access to the Red Sea	Security considerations; historical ties
Indonesia–West New Guinea (Papua), 1962	Preservation of Indonesia's unity and security	Inheritance of former colonial holdings in the region
Israel–East Jerusalem, 1967	Historical–religious ties	Historical–religious ties; security considerations
India–Sikkim, 1975	Strategic value for India's national security	Response to the request of the local population; prevention of Chinese influence
Indonesia–East Timor, 1975	Strategic–security: preventing communist takeover and separatism within Indonesia	Historical ties; decolonization process; geographic unity

Morocco–Western Sahara, 1975	National security: unity, creation of a buffer, and economic considerations	Historical ties
Mauritania–Western Sahara, 1975	Strengthening geopolitical standing; exploiting natural resources; creating a buffer against Morocco	Historical ties
Israel–Golan Heights, 1981	Strategic–security considerations	Syrian use of the Golan Heights to threaten northern Israeli communities
Iraq–Kuwait, 1990	Economic and strategic considerations	“Greater Iraq” narrative; historical ties
Russia–Crimea, 2014	Geopolitical and strategic: control of the Black Sea Fleet; prevention of Western expansion	Protection of Russians in Crimea; historically part of Russia
Russia–Ukraine, 2022	Geopolitical and strategic: strengthening Russia’s position; preventing Western influence	Protection of the Russian population; part of the “Greater Russia” historical narrative

Success Versus Failure

The assessment of success versus failure relates to the actual outcome of annexation. Three categories can be identified: (1) the annexing state permanently and fully incorporated the desired territory; (2) the annexation processes have not completed or they are disputed; (3) the annexing state’s efforts to annex territory ultimately failed.

In four cases, annexation succeeded according to the annexing states’ objectives: The annexed territory became part of their domain without significant internal and/or international costs. In seven other cases, annexation remains disputed by the local population and/or the international system. Yet in most of these cases, the annexation has become entrenched, making it difficult to envision how it can be reversed without the annexing state’s consent. In nine additional cases, the attempt at annexation failed due to armed resistance by the population and/or other states, combined with international sanctions, leading to the abandonment of the annexed territory.

Table 2. Successful Versus Failed Annexation

Successful annexation	Disputed annexation	Failed annexation attempts
China–Tibet, 1951*	Israel–East Jerusalem, 1967	Jordan–East Jerusalem and the West Bank, 1950
India–Goa, 1961	Morocco–Western Sahara, 1975	Ethiopia–Eritrea, 1962
Indonesia–West New Guinea (Papua), 1962	Israel–Golan Heights, 1981	Libya–Aozou Strip, 1972
India–Sikkim, 1975	Turkey–Northern Cyprus, 1983	Indonesia–East Timor, 1975
	Russia–Abkhazia and South Ossetia, 2010	Mauritania–Western Sahara, 1975
	Russia–Crimea, 2014	Iraq–Khuzestan, 1980
	Russia–Ukraine, 2022	Argentina–Falkland Islands, 1982
		Iraq–Kuwait, 1990
		South Africa–South West Africa, 1950

* Although the annexation remains disputed, there is no real ability to challenge Chinese control over the territory.

Annexation as a Trigger of Security Escalation

In half of the cases examined, annexation triggered armed resistance by the local population, often with external support. These struggles continued for prolonged periods with varying intensity. The shortest was in Tibet (three years) and in Western Sahara against Mauritania (about four years), while in other cases, armed resistance persisted for decades.

Of the nine annexation cases that ultimately failed, five were thwarted by direct external military intervention, and four collapsed under prolonged local armed resistance. Among the seven cases in which annexation remains contested, four continue to face some form of ongoing armed resistance.

Confronting these armed struggles required the annexing states to invest significant and sustained military resources. This not only strained their economies but also damaged their international standing, diplomatic relations, and internal social cohesion. In most cases, the residents of the annexed territory suffered violations of their human rights.

Table 3 presents representative examples of armed struggles and the responses by the annexing state.

Table 3. Examples of Armed Struggles

Case of armed struggle	High intensity	Medium/low intensity	Response of the annexing state	Foreign involvement
China–Tibet, 1951	1956–1959 (3 years)	Sporadically	Excessive military force	Not significant
Ethiopia–Eritrea, 1962	1975–1977: resistance intensified with establishment of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF); 1978–1988: growing successes of Eritrean forces; 1991: major military effort to expel Ethiopian forces	1961–1974: beginning of the struggle of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF)	Significant military deployment in an attempt to impose order; harm to civilians	Sudan served as a refuge for Eritrean forces; Ethiopia lost US support in 1974 with the rise of the Marxist regime; in the late 1980s, Soviet support weakened
Indonesia–West New Guinea (Papua), 1962	2018–present: armed struggle intensifies and expands geographically	1962–1999: low-intensity struggle; 1998–2018: the struggle expanded geographically	Use of excessive military force by Indonesia; human rights violations; transfer of Indonesian population into the territory	Limited
Indonesia–East Timor, 1975	1975–1999: armed struggle		Significant military force, with human rights violations	Increasing pressure from the 1990s due to ongoing human rights abuses

Morocco– Western Sahara, 1975	1975–early 1980s	From mid-1980s, Morocco succeeded in limiting intensity through building the “wall” (a ~2,700 km barrier); 1991–2020 ceasefire; from 2020, renewed attacks against Morocco in a limited and sporadic manner	In the early years, Morocco struggled against Polisario guerrilla tactics; from mid-1980s, with the building of the “wall,” Morocco succeeded in limiting attacks	Polisario Front supported by Algeria; from 2020, Morocco gained support from France, the United States, and Saudi Arabia
Mauritania– Western Sahara, 1975	1975–1979		Military difficulty coping with the rebellion	French assistance—ineffective
Russia–Crimea, 2014		Partisan resistance	Military suppression	International pressure—ineffective
Russia– Ukraine, 2022	Armed resistance at the outset	Partisan resistance	Military suppression	Military support for Ukraine and sanctions on Russia

Population Transfer

In most cases (14 out of 20), population transfers accompanied annexation. These included the movement of the local population within the annexed territory, the expulsion of the population, and/or the transfer of population from the annexing state into the annexed territory. Even when population transfers were not imposed, population movement often occurred into the territory of the annexing state, driven by economic factors and the search for improved living standards.

Table 4 presents representative examples of how annexing states dealt with populations.

Table 4. Population Transfer and Integration under Annexation

Case	Transfer of population to annexed territory	Official and directed policy	Encouragement of departure of the original population	Extent of integration of the population into the annexing state
Jordan–East Jerusalem and the West Bank, 1950	No	No	No	Granting Jordanian citizenship to Palestinians; rise of questions of identity and loyalty, which over time contributed to internal instability
China–Tibet, 1951	Yes	Yes	No	No significant or voluntary integration; efforts to impose Chinese identity on the population
India–Goa, 1961	Yes	No	No	Political and economic integration, alongside efforts to preserve local cultural identity
Ethiopia–Eritrea, 1962	Yes	No	Partially	No integration due to severe tensions from political and cultural repression and armed struggle

Indonesia–West New Guinea (Papua), 1962	Yes	Yes—in some years	No	No significant integration
Israel–East Jerusalem, 1967	Yes	Yes	Practically, but not officially	Economic integration between the populations
India–Sikkim, 1975	Yes	No	No	Integration while preserving local culture, identity, and traditions
Indonesia–East Timor, 1975	Yes	Yes	No	Limited integration, ultimately failed
Morocco–Western Sahara, 1975	Yes	Yes	Yes	Population transfer led to a Moroccan majority in Western Sahara; partial and contested integration
Mauritania–Western Sahara, 1975	No	No	Yes	Minimal and failed integration
Israel–Golan Heights, 1981	Yes	Yes	No	Population transfer led to a Jewish majority; limited but pragmatic Druze integration
Russia–Crimea, 2014	Yes	Yes	Yes	Very limited integration

Russia– Ukraine, 2022	Yes	Yes	Yes	Attempt to impose integration
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The Impact of International Pressure

Various forms of international pressure have been applied against states pursuing annexation. During the Cold War, responses were linked to the division between the blocs and were largely ineffective. Moreover, there is a clear distinction in the ability of the international arena to exert pressure on global powers (such as China and Russia) carrying out annexation moves versus its ability to pressure smaller states. In recent years, annexation cases in a multipolar world system (Russia–Crimea; Russia–Ukraine) have resulted in prolonged high-intensity wars. These conflicts have been marked by diplomatic involvement, weapons transfers, and economic sanctions from states and international actors.

Direct military intervention by states and/or the international system foiled annexation attempts in four cases: Libya, Iraq (twice), and Argentina. In other cases, international pressure alone did not reverse the annexation but rather functioned as a complementary factor where local armed resistance thwarted annexation efforts (Ethiopia–Eritrea; Indonesia–East Timor; Mauritania–Western Sahara; South Africa–South West Africa).

International pressure is most effective when accompanied by economic sanctions, arms embargoes, and the isolation of the annexing state. In most cases, there is no international recognition of annexation—certainly not when it is carried out against the will of the annexed population. The prevailing tendency in the international system is to allow the annexation crises to persist over time (Israel–East Jerusalem; Morocco–Western Sahara; Russia–Crimea) rather than reconcile with them.

Relevance to the Israeli Case

What lessons can be learned from these annexation cases examined, and what might Israel expect if it decides to annex territories in Judea and Samaria and/or Gaza?

- A. In the overwhelming majority of cases, annexation ignited prolonged violence by the annexed population and/or neighboring and interested states. It is therefore reasonable to assume that Israeli annexation would intensify terrorism by armed Palestinian factions and potentially by the Palestinian Authority's own security apparatuses ("turning the guns"). Such a move could also trigger broad popular resistance, with violence spilling over into Israel proper. To sustain a long-term response to this resistance would require the wide deployment of IDF forces, while Israel simultaneously faces security challenges in other arenas. This would necessitate the allocation of significant resources to manage the confrontations—necessarily diverting them from other national goals of Israel.

- B. Israel's confrontation with intensified Palestinian resistance could lead to the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, placing responsibility for 2.7 million Palestinians directly on Israel. This outcome would require significant economic inputs, both direct and indirect. At the same time, Israel would likely face international isolation, boycotts, and the severing of trade relations (especially with European states, which account for over 40% of Israel's trade), causing severe economic damage.
- C. Depending on the scope of the annexation (Area C; areas A and B under PA responsibility; or all of Judea and Samaria), the Israeli government would then need to decide how to manage the Palestinian population in the annexed territory—whether to grant them full civil rights or restrict them. Granting Israeli citizenship to large numbers of Palestinians would challenge Israel's identity as a Jewish state, while withholding citizenship would undermine its status as a democratic state. Even if Israel grants only residency status, a migration of Palestinians into Israel could be expected, perceived as an opportunity to improve living conditions and quality of life.
- D. Refusal to grant Israeli citizenship to the annexed Palestinians could result in Israel being defined internationally as an "apartheid state" ([Lustick & Samuel, 2024](#)). In this context, Israel could face a problematic situation—similar to that of South Africa from the 1960s until 1990, marked by an internal armed struggle in Judea and Samaria and Gaza alongside international sanctions and boycotts.
- E. Representatives of Israel's right-wing camp, who advocate for annexation in Judea and Samaria and the Gaza Strip, promote Palestinian "voluntary emigration," effectively a code name for actual expulsion. If realized, such a policy would strip Israel of its democratic-liberal identity and transform it into a racist state.
- F. As long as the United States does not actively oppose annexation, international pressure alone will not suffice to prevent it. However, Israel would be subjected to severe political and economic sanctions from numerous states, international organizations, and economic and technological corporations. It could also be forced to contend with legal proceedings in international courts, potentially culminating in expulsion from international organizations.
- G. Annexation would also challenge the interests of regional actors. It could freeze or cancel peace agreements and the Abraham Accords, reignite the so-called "Axis of Resistance" led by Iran, and provide justification and motivation to harm Israel. In addition, annexation could destabilize the Jordanian regime and undermine security along Israel's eastern border.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on an examination of cases of annexation worldwide, it can be presumed that annexation of territories in Judea and Samaria and/or in the Gaza Strip would worsen Israel's security and strategic situation. It could lead to the freezing—or even cancellation—of peace agreements, cause growing friction between populations, and result in international

isolation and boycotts, which would gravely damage Israel's economy. Over time, annexation would result in Israel becoming a "single Israeli-Palestinian state" in two possible forms: a "state of all its citizens"—that is, no longer a Jewish state—or an "apartheid state"—which would undermine Israel's legitimacy and internal cohesion. In both scenarios, Israel would face severe harm to its security stability inside the state itself, along its borders, and across other arenas—as well as population movement, not migration out of the country, but rather to the center of Israel.