



The plan to annex the occupied West Bank: Palestinian interactions and regional constraints

Introduction:

The fifth report reviews the rapid developments following the aggression on the Gaza Strip, which opened the way for the interaction of many sensitive issues at the local and international levels. During this period, the statements of the occupation government regarding the plan to annex the West Bank emerged, placing this file at the forefront of local and international political interest.

The report focuses on analysing the proposals of the Israeli parties

participating in the government regarding the annexation project, and examines the challenges and limitations facing these plans. In the same context, the report seeks to shed light on the Palestinian positions and the extent to which a national consensus can be achieved to confront the new Israeli threat.

In the final section, the report examines regional positions on the annexation plans and their impact on international transformations. It also highlights the importance of investing in the growing international solidarity to push for the activation of the «responsibility to protect» principle to safeguard the Palestinian territories and the rights of the Palestinian people.

First: The plan to annex the West Bank and the Israeli approach to it

Since Donald Trump's victory in the US elections, the Israeli plan to annex all or part of the West Bank has returned to the fore, pushed by the extreme religious right as a strategic priority for the next stage. These proposals have increased, especially after Bezalel Smotrich, the finance minister in the occupation government and the additional minister in the defence ministry responsible for strengthening civil authority in the West Bank, announced that 2025 will be the year of the actual annexation of the West Bank. Smotrich formed a special committee to follow up on this file and present proposals to the next US administration with the aim of demarcating the civil control of the occupation over all the settlements. The annexation plan has actually begun and has accelerated since the formation of the current Israeli government with its extreme religious right-wing orientation. This plan is being implemented in an undeclared

way through the transfer of administration from military to civilian rule, embodied in the formation of the Civil Administration headed by Smotrich. The measures include the geographical and demographic expansion of the settlement infrastructure and the annexation of some settlements to the Civil Administration in an attempt to close any future horizon for the formation of a Palestinian state. The extreme right categorically rejects this scenario, which represents a real challenge to the Trump administration, which has linked the establishment of a Palestinian state to geographically fragmented borders, as stated in the «American Peace Initiative».

The local and international political situation provided a suitable environment for the Israeli right to once again promote the project of annexing the West Bank, an old project that was reintroduced during Trump's first term but temporarily frozen in order to pass the «Abraham Accords» in 2020. With the start of the war on Gaza following the attacks of 7 October 2023, the Israeli army and settler leaders took advantage of the situation to carry out intensive movements in the northern West Bank and the Jordan Valley, where many areas were actually annexed without official announcement. The settlers were also armed and motivated to carry out hundreds of attacks on Palestinian villages.

The domestic and international political context

The plan to annex the West Bank reflects a high level of partisan solidarity in Israel, as it seeks to restore balance to a political system that has experienced successive political and security shocks since the events of 7 October. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu did not hesitate to support this project after Smotrich announced the annexation plans, but he preferred to postpone the official announcement until the Republican

Trump assumes the presidency again, especially after the statement of the new US ambassador to Israel, Mike Haley, who confirmed in an interview on 13 November 2024 the support of the expected Trump administration for the decision to annex the West Bank.

The movements of the Israeli extreme right were also embodied in the decision of the Israeli Minister of Defence, Yoav Katz, who cancelled the administrative detention of settlers in the West Bank on 22 November. Although this measure does not significantly affect the settlers, who enjoy the support of the Israeli army, it is a response to European decisions regarding settlement groups. The decision also effectively nullifies any attempts to dismantle illegal outposts, giving settlers greater freedom to establish new outposts and carry out organised attacks aimed at displacing Palestinians.

Betting on American support, the ruling coalition in Israel is counting on future American support, as the American commitment to prevent annexation expires at the end of 2024. Therefore, the official announcement of the annexation plan is linked to the results of the US elections and Trump's return to the presidency.

For its part, the Israeli opposition, led by Yair Lapid, described the annexation plans as «illusions», but did not oppose the annexation itself, but rather its timing. Lapid linked the continuation of the war and the announcement of the annexation plan to the efforts of the religious right to continue the escalation in Gaza and Lebanon. The opposition is calling for a reformulation of Israeli policy to achieve stability and end the war, focusing on normalisation projects, in contrast to the approach of the ruling coalition, which is pushing for escalation and the annexation of the West Bank.

Internal Israeli differences Despite the apparent internal solidarity on the

issue of annexation, the project does not reflect a major division in Israeli society. This is because both Netanyahu and Gantz have used it to improve their political positions and gain the support of religious parties, as a tool to strengthen party alliances amid the political instability that began in 2019 and has continued for two years.

The Israeli security and military establishment are providing unprecedented support to the settlers, providing cover for their attacks on Palestinian villages. The annexation plan is thus a means of increasing Israeli influence in the West Bank while reducing political and security risks.

Conclusion:

The practical measures to annex the West Bank depend on an explicit political decision by the Netanyahu government, which is counting on several factors, including its military successes on the Gaza and Lebanon fronts, the weakness of the Palestinian and regional situation, and Trump's return to the presidency. However, the opposition is calling for the issue to be postponed until after the war or within a political path that opens the door to new normalisation projects.

The future of the annexation plan remains dependent on regional and international developments and the balance between Israeli political interests and expected American support.

Second: The Palestinian parties' position on the West Bank annexation plan

At the official level, the Palestinian Authority announced its categorical rejection of partial annexation plans, even if they are linked to the establishment of a limited and geographically fragmented Palestinian

state. The Authority stressed that these plans constitute a clear violation of international law and a threat to the two-state solution, which enjoys international consensus. In the context of confronting these trends, the Authority resorted to escalatory steps, including turning to international forums, such as the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, to file complaints against Israeli violations, in addition to mobilising international and regional support to confront these plans. At the level of the Palestinian factions, their statements expressed agreement with the position of the Authority in rejecting the annexation plan in all its forms, considering it an existential threat to the Palestinian component in the West Bank from a geographical and demographic perspective. However, the reality shows a lack of coordination of confrontation strategies at the Palestinian level, as a result of the different approaches to resistance between the Authority and the factions.

Palestinian options for confronting the annexation plan

The Palestinian options are presented along three main axes:

1. **Strengthening popular and field resistance:** This option aims to embarrass Israel internationally and put pressure on it internally. However, it is marked by a division between the Palestinian parties, with the Palestinian Authority supporting the peaceful framework of popular resistance, while factions such as Hamas tend towards comprehensive resistance, including military action. This division weakens joint efforts and leaves the field open for settlement expansion and the implementation of annexation plans without comprehensive resistance.
2. **Broadening political and diplomatic action:** The Palestinian Authority is taking this approach alone, trying to mobilise international support and

consider annexation a clear violation of international law. However, the lack of coordination with the Palestinian factions remains an obstacle to achieving this objective effectively.

3. Achieving national reconciliation: This axis is essential to unite Palestinian efforts under a single strategic vision. Despite the parties' agreement on the need to end the division, the lack of seriousness in reaching a practical agreement hinders the formation of a national unity government, which weakens the Palestinian position in the face of annexation plans.

Challenges facing the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian factions

The Palestinian Authority occasionally threatens to dissolve itself as a means of pressuring Israel to assume its responsibilities as an occupying power, but this option remains impractical for a number of reasons:

- The Palestinian economic reality is tied to the Authority, which is a source of support for some 170,000 employees and their families.
- The Authority's dependence on Israeli-controlled tax revenues, which account for about 60% of its budget.

On the other hand, some resistance groups believe that the Authority's existence reinforces the occupation rather than confronting it, as it is seen as an intermediary body between Palestinian society and Israel and not as the core of the Palestinian state project. Therefore, these factions call for escalating armed action against the occupation and its settlers in order to weaken the role of the Authority and redefine the status of the Palestinians in the West Bank as occupied territory under international law.

Different strategies

The Palestinian Authority is attempting to develop alternative political and

diplomatic means, such as expanding relations with international parties such as Russia and China, in order to reduce its dependence on American sponsorship. However, the complex international reality limits these efforts in the face of clear American support for Israeli plans.

In contrast, Palestinian factions such as Hamas, Jihad and the Popular Front focus on field resistance as the primary option to confront settlement expansion. They believe that escalation on the ground is more effective than diplomatic moves, which often fail to force Israel to stop its illegal actions.

Challenges of the current phase

Despite the different visions, the Palestinian parties agree on the urgent need to rearrange the Palestinian internal house to confront the Israeli plans, especially the annexation plan, which is part of the «decisive plan» to liquidate the Palestinian cause. However, the Palestinians face several major challenges:

- War of genocide: Palestinians face systematic attempts to break their will and force them to emigrate by undermining their livelihoods in Gaza and increasing economic and security pressures in the West Bank.
- Settlement and Judaisation: The pace of annexation and settlement is accelerating, especially in Jerusalem.
- Lack of consensus: Efforts to form a national unity government have failed, as have attempts to reach consensus on how to deal with the situation in Gaza, including the «Community Support Committee» proposed during the Egyptian talks.

The need to invest in international positions

The Palestinian leadership faces a major challenge in investing in

international changes that reject genocide and annexation plans. This requires achieving a broad internal consensus among Palestinian political forces, supported by a unified regional and international alliance. This path is necessary to strengthen efforts to protect Palestinian rights and revive the chances of establishing a Palestinian state, while confronting Israeli settlement projects that threaten the future of the entire issue.

Third: The annexation of the West Bank in regional terms

As the war unfolded, fundamental challenges to the future of the Palestinian territories and the state emerged, as the statement by Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich regarding the annexation of the West Bank sparked widespread controversy over regional positions and their ability to confront the occupation policy and impose alternative facts to Palestinian legitimacy. Although the international discussion initially focused on the situation in the Gaza Strip after the war, the situation in the West Bank has become the focus of increasing interest.

The Israeli bias and its dimensions

The significance of the Israeli orientation is not limited to the statements of the ministers, but rather goes back to the complexity of the circumstances of the war and its repercussions, which affect the legitimacy of the Palestinian entities and lead to the dispersion of regional influence on the war and the political settlement. In this context, the occupation government has accelerated its steps to prepare local conditions to facilitate the seizure of land in the West Bank, taking advantage of the change of power in the United States and presenting annexation plans within the strategy of negotiating by force. Regardless of the legal and political nature of these

trends, the regional positions agreed to describe them as a serious threat to regional security and the Palestinian cause.

Arab and regional positions

1. Egypt: Egypt described the occupation government's statements as extremist and in violation of international law, noting that they exceed the occupation's borders as defined by UN resolutions, especially the partition resolution and the 1967 borders. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry considered these statements a direct threat to regional peace and a pre-emptive step to deprive the Palestinian people of their right to self-determination, which makes the Israeli government unfit to be a party to achieving regional stability.

2. Qatar: Qatar saw that the occupation's attempts to change the basic structure of Palestinian independence in the West Bank pose a direct threat to peace, with multiple repercussions as a result of the war on Gaza. It also stressed the need for the international community to unite to confront the occupation's settlement and racist policies.

3. Saudi Arabia: Saudi Arabia considered the imposition of the occupation's sovereignty over the West Bank to be contrary to the two-state solution and a step that pushes the region towards more wars and long-term instability. In a statement issued on 13 November, the Saudi Foreign Ministry said that annexation by force would set a dangerous precedent and threaten regional security.

4. Jordan: The Jordanian statement linked the annexation plans to the incitement of settlers to attack West Bank residents, stressing that these policies aim to undermine Palestinian life and constitute a flagrant violation of international law.

5. Turkey and Iran: The Turkish Foreign Ministry rejected the annexation plans as their ultimate goal is to seize Palestinian land, stressing that these policies are the result of the impunity of successive occupation governments. Turkey called for firm international measures to confront Israeli violations.

Iran, for its part, described the annexation plans as an extension of the policy of genocide and settlement expansion and considered it a dangerous step for regional security, according to a statement by Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ismail Baqaei.

Challenges to regional positions: Despite the relative cohesion of Arab and regional positions, Arab policy faces a major challenge posed by explicit American support for creating facts on the ground in favour of the occupation. In his first statements, the US ambassador to Israel expressed the possibility of annexing the West Bank, reflecting the orientations of the new US administration. The US policy during the aggression on Gaza also showed a bias towards the continuation of the Netanyahu government in order to ensure political stability in Israel during the ceasefire negotiations.

Regional efforts and means of confrontation: Despite US support for the occupation, regional positions showed an acceptable degree of political cohesion and cooperation in confronting the aftermath of the war. These efforts were not limited to political positions, but included support for the Palestinian National Authority and a security umbrella for the resistance as a national liberation movement.

The Egyptian and Saudi approaches:

Egypt linked the prevention of displacement in Gaza and the West Bank and saw them as leading to the same chaotic results. It therefore adopted positions in favour of preventing the transfer of the battlefield to Jordan.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia provided funding to fill the gap left by the reduction in US support for UNRWA, with the aim of helping the Palestinian Authority to manage the affairs of the West Bank.

- The Turkish approach: Turkey adopted an integrated policy to support the local economy in the West Bank, which included increasing direct trade with the Palestinian Authority and working to develop the local economic structure.

Conclusion:

Regional packages of political and economic support provide a framework for addressing the effects of war and annexation. However, achieving real stability in the region remains dependent on a ceasefire in Gaza and the start of serious negotiations on a two-state solution. This path increases international pressure on Israel under the umbrella of international law, while activating the principle of «responsibility to protect» as a framework for condemning the occupation policy, imposing a political and economic blockade, an arms embargo and increasing the possibilities of humanitarian intervention.