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## US Smooths Israel's Path to Annexing West Bank



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Seemingly unrelated events all point to a tectonic shift in which Israel has begun preparing the ground to annex the occupied Palestinian territories.

Last week, during an address to students in New York, Israel's education minister Naftali Bennett publicly disavowed even the notion of a Palestinian state. "We are done with that," he said. "They have a Palestinian state in Gaza."

Later in Washington, Bennett, who heads Israel's settler movement, said Israel would manage the fallout from annexing the West Bank, just as it had with its annexation of the Syrian Golan in 1980.

International opposition would dissipate, he said. "After two months it fades away and 20 years later and 40 years later, [the territory is] still ours."

Back home, Israel has proven such words are not hollow.

The parliament passed a law last month that brings three academic institutions, including Ariel University, all located in illegal West Bank settlements, under the authority of Israel's Higher Education Council. Until now, they were overseen by a military body.

The move marks a symbolic and legal sea change. Israel has effectively expanded its civilian sovereignty into the West Bank. It is a covert but tangible first step towards annexation.

In a sign of how the idea of annexation is now entirely mainstream, Israeli university heads mutely accepted the change, even though it exposes them both to intensified action from the growing international boycott (BDS) movement and potentially to European sanctions on scientific co-operation.

Additional bills extending Israeli law to the settlements are in the pipeline. In fact, far-right justice minister Ayelet Shaked has insisted that those drafting new legislation indicate how it can also be applied in the West Bank.

According to Peace Now, she and Israeli law chiefs are devising new pretexts to seize Palestinian territory. She has called the separation between Israel and the occupied territories required by international law "an injustice that has lasted 50 years".

After the higher education law passed, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told his party Israel would "act intelligently" to extend unnoticed its sovereignty into the West Bank. "This is a process with historic consequences," he said.

That accords with a vote by his Likud party's central committee in December that unanimously backed annexation.

The government is already working on legislation to bring some West Bank settlements under Jerusalem municipal control – annexation via the back door. This month officials gave themselves additional powers to expel Palestinians from Jerusalem for "disloyalty".

Yousef Jabareen, a Palestinian member of the Israeli parliament, warned that Israel had accelerated its annexation programme from "creeping to running".

Notably, Netanyahu has said the government's plans are being co-ordinated with the Trump administration. It was a statement he later retracted under pressure.

But all evidence suggests that Washington is fully on board, so long as annexation is done by stealth.

The US ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, a long-time donor to the settlements, told Israel's Channel 10 TV recently: "The settlers aren't going anywhere".

Settler leader Yaakov Katz, meanwhile, thanked Donald Trump for a dramatic surge in settlement growth over the past year. Figures show one in 10 Israeli Jews is now a settler. He called the White House team "people who really like us, love us", adding that the settlers were "changing the map".

The US is preparing to move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in May, not only pre-empting a final-status issue but tearing out the beating heart from a Palestinian state.

The thrust of US strategy is so well-known to Palestinian leaders – and in lockstep with Israel – that Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is said to have refused to even look at the peace plan recently submitted to him.

Reports suggest it will award Israel all of Jerusalem as its capital. The Palestinians will be forced to accept outlying villages as their own capital, as well as a land "corridor" to let them pray at Al Aqsa and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

As the stronger side, Israel will be left to determine the fate of the settlements and its borders – a recipe for it to carry on with slow-motion annexation.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat has warned that Trump's "ultimate deal" will limit a Palestinian state to Gaza and scraps of the West Bank – much as Bennett prophesied in New York.

Which explains why last week the White House hosted a meeting of European and Arab states to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

US officials have warned the Palestinian leadership, who stayed away, that a final deal will be settled over their heads if necessary. This time the US peace plan is not up for negotiation; it is primed for implementation.

With a Palestinian "state" effectively restricted to Gaza, the humanitarian catastrophe there – one the United Nations has warned will make the enclave uninhabitable in a few years – needs to be urgently addressed.

But the White House summit also sidelined the UN refugee agency UNRWA, which deals with Gaza's humanitarian situation. The Israeli right hates UNRWA because its presence complicates annexation of the West Bank. And with Fatah and Hamas still at loggerheads, it alone serves to unify the West Bank and Gaza.

That is why the Trump administration recently cut US funding to UNRWA – the bulk of its budget. The White House’s implicit goal is to find a new means to manage Gaza’s misery.

What is needed now is someone to arm-twist the Palestinians. Mike Pompeo’s move from the CIA to State Department, Trump may hope, will produce the strongman needed to bulldoze the Palestinians into submission.

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