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King Abdullah: Annexation would spark massive conflict with Jordan

Amos Harel

King Abdullah II's statement that Jordan is "studying all the options" for responding if Israel annexes part of the West Bank, expresses the magnitude of Amman's concern over the steps Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is considering. Before that statement King Abdullah, in an interview in the German newspaper Der Spiegel, issued more detailed and harsher warnings, which have been conveyed in recent months from Amman to Jerusalem.

The Jordanian concern about steps to impose Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank and annex the Jordan Valley has also been expressed in messages to the Israeli defense establishment as well as in conversations with people close to Kahol Lavan chairman MK Benny Gantz, Netanyahu's presumptive partner in the new government. The experts in the defense establishment believe that under extreme circumstances domestic pressures might even lead the king to cancel the peace treaty with Israel.

The royal family also fears demonstrations against the king throughout Jordan and organized protests by the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan. Jordan has so far dealt well with the coronavirus, but its economy is still in difficult straits and the king's status is considered quite unstable in light of the crisis, which began even before the global spread of the virus.

Abdullah told Der Spie-



A Palestinian arguing with a Border Policewoman Friday during a protest near Nablus marking the 72nd anniversary of the Nakba.

Mohamad Torokman / Reuters

gel that "if Israel really annexes the West Bank in July, it would lead to a massive conflict with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan." He said that this was not the right time to discuss a one-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to which annexation could lead, and

he called on countries in the region to work together against the coronavirus.

The possibility of annexation came up last year, ahead of the presentation of the Trump administration's peace plan and against the backdrop of three Knesset election campaigns in a row

in Israel. Netanyahu considered declaring the annexation of the Jordan Valley in September 2019, on the eve of the second election. He recanted at the last minute, apparently also under the influence of a telephone consultation in which he heard warnings from the Israel De-

fense Forces chief of staff, Aviv Kochavi, and Shin Bet security service chief Nadav Argaman, of the impact of such a move on ties with Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, and the possibility of increased violence in the territories.

The issue came up again

for discussion in January when the United States presented what President Donald Trump calls the "deal of the century" peace plan. The coalition agreement between Likud and Kahol Lavan states that Netanyahu

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can move annexation to a vote beginning on July 1. But over the past few days the administration has signaled that annexation must be carried out in the framework of the peace initiative, in consultation with Washington.

The U.S. State Department spokeswoman told Israel journalists in the context of Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Israel last week that annexation "should be part of discussions between Israel and the Palestinians on the Trump administration's peace plan." Meanwhile, the European Union is preparing for the possibility that joint projects with Israel will be suspended in response to moves toward unilateral annexation. The EU is expected to issue a warning Monday to Israel against annexation.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Amos Gilad, chairman of the Herzliya Conference, told Haaretz on Saturday that damage to Israel's ties with Jordan would be "a blow to Israel's national security." Jordan, Gilad added, "provides us with quiet on the eastern border and keeps threats away from Israel. Annexation will erode our ties with Jordan. It would be a political move without a strategic advantage. I'm sure the IDF brass understands this."

West Bank heating up

Without any direct link to the question of annexation, tensions began heating up considerably in the West Bank last week. In a series of incidents an IDF soldier, Sgt. 1st Class Amit Ben Yigal, was killed by a rock thrown during an arrest operation in the village of Yabad near Jenin; another soldier was severely injured in a Hebron area car-rammage attack in which the driver, a 15-year-old Palestinian, was killed; another Palestinian teen was shot to death by soldiers in another incident in the Hebron area; and soldiers shot and wounded three Palestinians who set off an improvised explosive device in the Ramallah area.

The increase in the number of incidents is attributed to several factors. There

might also be a connection to the decline in reporting on the coronavirus following the Palestinian Authority's relative success, as in Jordan and Israel, in reining it in. But beyond the pandemic and concerns over future annexation is the economic situation in the West Bank.

The coronavirus worsened the economic crisis there because it brought most economic activity to a halt. The number of Palestinians working in the settlements and inside the Green Line gradually declined as the Israeli economy shut down. At first, it was agreed that Palestinian workers could remain in Israel to work in construction and agriculture, but some returned to their West Bank homes af-



Palestinians burning a poster of Pompeo.

Majdi Mohammed/AP

ter the PA feared that there would be a worse outbreak in the West Bank due to laborers who had stayed in Israel returning home.

Another economic difficulty was Israel's decision to freeze the return of tax money it collects for the PA, as part of the long-term struggle the Netanyahu government is waging against the funding the Palestinian government in Ramallah gives to security prisoners in Israel.

A blow to Sinai peacekeepers?

The economic crisis generated by the coronavirus accelerated processes in the U.S. defense establishment dealing with cuts to activities the Trump administration does not consider essential. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Mark Milley, said recently in Congress that every mission will be checked for its relevance to U.S. strat-

egy. Noting that he had been stationed in Sinai in 1981 as part of a multinational peacekeeping force, Milley asked whether that was "still a valid mission" for U.S. forces.

Only 450 American soldiers are serving in Sinai; about half are U.S. Army personnel and the rest are from the National Guard. But a U.S. decision to pull its personnel out of the force, which was established to monitor the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt, could lead to the collapse of the entire force and the departure of other countries.

The Sinai peacekeeping force currently has personnel from 13 countries, including Colombia, Uruguay, Italy, Czech Republic and Fiji. The Americans assume that other

cess was through American oversight and mediation," he added.

According to Orion: "The savings the Americans will achieve if they cancel their participation in the force will be minimal. There is a true commitment in Egypt to peace with Israel, together with a desire by its army to impose its sovereignty in Sinai by doing away with the restrictions imposed on it by the agreements. Continued U.S. oversight is needed so things don't get out of hand."

Last week 12 U.S. senators and Congressional representatives sent a letter to Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper, calling for continued American membership in the multinational force, which, they wrote, "in an unpredictable region such as the Middle East...represents an anchor of stability."

The multinational force, they wrote: "has been vital to the peace treaty's durability. Since its establishment in 1981, the MFO has supervised the implementation of the security provisions of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and employed best efforts to prevent any violation of its terms. While the current Egyptian and Israeli governments both recognize the importance of the peace treaty and have every interest in sustaining it, the MFO's oversight and mediation ensures that disagreements between the two sides are resolved diplomatically and discreetly. The MFO's credibility in the eyes of both the Egyptian and Israeli governments depends, in large part, on America's continued leadership role in the MFO, including the U.S. military men and women who are currently deployed to the Sinai Peninsula.

For these reasons, the lawmakers wrote, "it would be a grave mistake if the U.S. withdrew its forces from the MFO. While resourcing the National Defense Strategy (NDS) means reexamining aspects of U.S. force posture in the Middle East, the U.S. should maintain adequate support for an organization that has bolstered regional stability through its peacekeeping role. Failing to do so could result in a less stable Middle East and ultimately make it more difficult to implement the NDS.