

Israel's Illegal Annexation of Palestine

American and European Responsibility

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Global Research, June 16, 2020

[The Jordan Times](#) 15 June 2020

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Law and Justice](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

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With Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu promising to annex portions of the West Bank, liberal critics here in the US and across Europe are in a tizzy. They have been quick to point fingers blaming this crisis on Netanyahu and US President Donald Trump, since Trump's "Deal of the Century" allows for Israel to claim at least 30 per cent of the West Bank. The critics, however, are wrong since paternity for this imminent extension of Israeli sovereignty over occupied Palestinian lands goes beyond the current Israeli government or the Trump Administration. There are, in fact, three culprits.

In the first place, blame must be placed squarely on the shoulders of all Israeli governments going back to the beginning of the occupation over one-half century ago. Since then, Israel has repeatedly violated international law by establishing settlements in the occupied territories, initially claiming it was for "security reasons:" to thicken its border, to surround and lay claim to an expanded Jerusalem and to control the Jordan Valley.

In the late 1970s, Likud embraced a plan to both accelerate settlement construction in these areas while also expanding settlements in the interior of the West Bank. The plan also called for building roads to connect these settlements to pre- '67 Israel for the expressed purpose of carving up the West Bank making a contiguous Palestinian area impossible.

After signing the Oslo Accords, the pace of settlement expansion in the West Bank intensified with settler population doubling in the first eight years. In the past two decades, the number of settlers doubled once again.

In reality, whether Israel formally extends sovereignty or not, today Israel has virtually annexed much of the West Bank, exercising near complete control over the occupied territories. They have moved over 650,000 of their citizens beyond the internationally recognised border, built roads and infrastructure to connect these settlers to Israel proper, constructed a 466 kilometres wall, much of it on Palestinian land, and set up over 100 checkpoints, denying Palestinians freedom of movement. In the Jordan Valley, they have burned thousands of acres of Palestinian agricultural land and fenced off much more. As a result, the West Bank and what the Israelis call "East Jerusalem" (actually 24 Palestinian villages now termed "neighbourhoods" in the fiction Israelis call "Greater Jerusalem") are now even further divided without access to land and water.

Fault must also be found with successive American administrations which protested or complained, but ultimately acquiesced to this Israeli colonial conquest. During this half-century, US policy shifted from calling settlements "illegal", to "obstacles to peace", to "unhelpful", to saying "continued settlement expansion is illegitimate".

Beginning with the Bush Administration and continuing under the Obama Administration, while new settlement expansion was frowned upon, existing settlements were viewed as “realities”. For the Israelis, the lesson was clear, settlement expansion might be frowned upon, but once built, they were accepted, so why not let the US whine while continuing to build? The refusal or inability of the US to act decisively to put the brakes on settlement expansion led to an Israeli sense of impunity. In this context, the approach taken by the Trump Administration in its “Deal of the Century” is the logical extension of 50 years of US acquiescence.

Even liberal US voices who oppose annexation fall short in their criticism. Their critiques are all too often hollow and toothless, since they refuse to couple their warnings with any promise to cut aid to Israel or any other sanctions that might cause an Israeli government to reconsider. Their pious claims of wanting to protect the “two state solution” are, at best, hollow — more of a “two-state absolution” — as if this show of support absolves them of their failures to call for the very measures that might make such a Palestinian state a reality.

Last but not least, Europe must share some of the blame. We are 100 years after the notorious San Remo Conference, which not unlike the Trump “Deal of the Century”, arrogated to itself the right to carve up the region and support the Balfour Declaration without any consultation with or consideration for the rights of the indigenous people of whose lands they were giving away. In the intervening years Europe changed, but only somewhat.

It was 40 years ago this month, that nine major European countries, frustrated with the lack of US leadership, issued the Venice Declaration, in which they called for an end to the occupation in accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolutions 224 and 338, the right of the Palestinians to be represented by the PLO, and their right to self-determination.

But in the four decades that have passed, while Europe has passed numerous declarations and voted to condemn Israeli policies on a number of occasions, including a recent statement warning against Israel’s annexation of the territories, they continued to cede control of Israeli-Palestinian peace to US. In addition, European declarations are without teeth, so their warnings have been ignored. And so, while the US has become either Israel’s coat holder or cheerleader, Europe has rendered itself an impotent bystander in a conflict for which they have some paternity and toward which they could have an impact.

If we are to learn any lessons from past failures, on the eve of Israel’s threat to formally annex parts of the West Bank, here’s what must be done:

First, Israel must be called to account not only if it moves forward with annexation, but for its half-century of lawless behaviour. To end impunity, there must be accountability. The response cannot just be recognition of a Palestinian state. Because this state will still not be in control of its territory, economy, and resources, such recognition will be a hollow gesture. Accountability requires sanctions, because if there are no economic and political consequences, then bad behaviour will continue.

In line with this, it is of critical importance that the human rights of the Palestinian people be elevated as a concern by the international community. The Palestinian people cannot remain defenceless as they continue to be victimised by the Israeli occupation and settler violence. Land theft, home demolitions, collective punishment of civilian populations, mass

incarceration, abuse of children, the daily humiliation at checkpoints and other forms of repression will continue to scar Palestinians as long as the international community feigns powerlessness.

Exposure of these Israeli crimes is the first step. Accountability and sanctions are the remedy.

Europe, or at the European states who issued the Venice Declaration, should recognise that the factor, the US inability to act as an honest broker, that led them to assert (but then fail to deliver on) their "special role" and responsibility still exists. They should assume a greater role to balance that played by the US. That will, of necessity, require political and economic sanctions, because mere statements of condemnation will continue to be ignored.

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