This note will address the local and global, political and diplomatic developments around a potential further extension of Israeli sovereignty in parts of the occupied West Bank, or annexation. This would be a first act of Israel extending its sovereignty into occupied areas since East Jerusalem was annexed in July 1980 and parts of the Golan Heights in December 1981, and would formalize an ongoing process of extending Israeli control, the application of Israeli laws, and diminution of the possibility of sovereign Palestinian statehood.

Israeli moves towards annexation are not new, the remit of Israeli authorities and jurisdiction with regard to Israeli settler communities in the West Bank have been extended in a gradual fashion as have both laws and de facto practices which discriminate on an ethnic-national basis between residents in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, based on whether they be Israeli-Jewish or Palestinian-Arab. Addressing the possibility of an act of formal annexation and its repercussions has taken on a new urgency in recent months and even days and we have now reached a moment where the various key actors have all staked out their initial positions in relation to such a proposition.

The potential tipping point was reached with the publication of the Trump plan on January 28, 2020, followed by the inclusion of the extension of sovereignty option in coalition agreements reached as part of the formation of a new Israeli government which took office on May 17, 2020. Following the meeting of the PLO leadership and statement of its chairman on May 19, 2020, we are now in possession of a critical mass of positions staked out by the key players in relation to the prospect of annexation.

The U.S. president as well as the presumptive Democrat candidate for president, the Jordanian king, Arab League and other regional leaders, the EU and others are all now on the record. A mythology is also beginning to gather steam in the policy debate vis-a-vis annexation – surrounding the intentions of key players, and the significance and consequences for the morning after if some form of annexation is enacted – suggesting that annexation can readily be averted and should not change the two state peace process anyway. The bottom line of the analysis guiding this paper is that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in significant coordination with the most hard-line pro-annexationist wing of the U.S. administration, will be very much primus inter pares in making a final decision; that Netanyahu has not yet taken that decision; that his decision will be based on a range of political and personal factors, not all to do with the conflict and territorial ambitions; and that an Israeli move to exert some variation of sovereignty over parts of the West Bank, is more rather than less likely between July and November.
1. **A Starting point: What is meant by annexation? What has the new Israeli government actually committed itself to? Is a momentum toward preventing annexation gathering pace?**

   a. The coalition agreement reached in Israel revolves around a document signed by Netanyahu and Gantz on behalf of their Likud and Blue and White parties delineating the division of power and modalities of functioning of the new government, vague on policy but detailed on how decisions are to be made.

   The entire government is predicated on a prime ministerial rotation, parity and a mutual veto between Likud and Blue and White, with one crucial exemption—that the extension of Israeli sovereignty or **annexation can be advanced by Netanyahu** and the Likud **without the agreement of Gantz**/Blue and White. To be clear, this is the only area of policy regarding which such a veto override clause exists (for a more detailed analysis of the new Israeli government, its makeup, coalition agreements and prospects, see USMEP briefing memo “Israel’s New Governing Coalition: what happened and what to expect?”).

   A further special exception exists in the coalition agreement to exclusively pave the way for annexation. The government is defined as a ‘National Emergency Unity Government’ whereby the emergency is the Covid-19 crisis and as such the parties agree to suspend all non-Covid legislation for the first six months of the government, bar one issue, you guessed correct, the annexation option. That clause in the agreement was subsequently nullified when the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that the government could not limit its own remit in that way.

   b. The precise wording in the coalition agreement stipulates in **Article 29** that as from July 1, 2020, it is in Netanyahu’s purview to bring to a vote an extension of Israeli sovereignty. While there are clauses tying such a move to overall implementation of the Trump plan and regional peace efforts, according to the text, there is **only one condition that needs to be satisfied** in order for Netanyahu to move forward with annexation while remaining in adherence with the coalition agreement. That condition is not the agreement of Gantz and Blue and White (unlike on any other issue), it is that such legislation will be in **agreement with the U.S.**

   Article 29 allows the prime minister to “be able to bring the agreement reached with the United States on the application of sovereignty to a debate in the cabinet and the government for approval by the government or the Knesset” beginning on July 1. Netanyahu is also empowered to bring the annexation proposal via one of his own MKs from Likud, effectively pushing Gantz out of the process.

   c. This governmental pledge followed a series of commitments during the three-election cycle of the last year in which Netanyahu promised to extend Israeli sovereignty notably to the Jordan Valley and occasionally to all settlements, a commitment Netanyahu repeated in his speech during the swearing in ceremony for the new government. Gantz’s own Blue and White party also committed to extending Israeli sovereignty, also including the Jordan Valley, albeit according to a more convoluted formula that put annexation in the context of regional and international support, thereby giving Gantz wiggle room on the issue.

   d. The details of how an extension of sovereignty or annexation would be enacted do matter—both the specific **legal packaging** to be introduced and the **geographical extent** of the **annexation**. Those will have implications for the exact nature of the regime that will be applied in the West Bank and the extent to which it will simply continue the current discriminatory policies towards the Palestinians or add new variations. Those specifications are not currently known. For a more detailed discussion of what the extension of sovereignty might look like legislatively, where it might
be applied and its implications for daily life, there are these two papers by Israeli NGOs – this from Yesh Din and this draft from Breaking the Silence. The Palestinian human rights NGO Al-Haq has put out this call from Palestinian civil society which focuses on measures it suggests should be taken internationally to stop annexation.

e. In terms of the geographical extent of a potential application of Israeli sovereignty, one key player, U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, has spoken in terms of annexing 30 percent of the West Bank in line with the Trump plan. The inclusion of the Jordan Valley would be a major part of that 30 percent. Other proposals have suggested the inclusion of so-called settlement blocs or of areas considered to have a broader consensus of Israeli support. The more useful lens from which to view this might be to avoid drawing distinctions between varying degrees of annexation and to focus not only on the illegality of the act but on the signal it sends in marking a new phase in the conflict and emboldening the irreversibility of the demise of a two-state notion. It is worth taking that same logic a step further and remembering that irrespective of any formal annexation announcement, the reality on the ground is one of ongoing and far-reaching de facto annexation.

f. There is a currently fashionable spin suggesting that despite the Israeli coalition guidelines and commitments around annexation, any such plans are on their way to the backburner and that an effective international mobilization against annexation is showing results and is on its way to carrying the day. The proof on offer to back up this spin points to the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo and the suggestion he switched the American position from a green to orange light on annexation, and that a perfect storm of Palestinian, Jordanian, and regional opposition together with a nascent uptick in violence in the OPTs is causing Israel to think again, will stiffen Gantz’s spine and convince Netanyahu to abandon annexation plans. As this paper will explore in detail below, there is little at this stage to back up this spin. The net effect of such spin will be to encourage insufficient preparation for possible annexation, not only in more effective efforts to thwart annexation plans but perhaps more realistically, in preparing for the morning after.

2. What does Netanyahu want on annexation?

a. The ultimate decision mostly rests at PM Netanyahu’s door, so what he wants matters greatly. The continued emphasis Netanyahu places on getting annexation done has now moved beyond declarations of intent that are driven by the needs of an election campaign. Even having achieved a coalition deal, the issue remains central to Netanyahu’s message box and platform. He speaks of extending Israeli sovereignty as something of historic import. Annexation as the realization of “the justness of our rights in the Land of Israel.” It is about writing “another glorious chapter in Zionist history” (from Netanyahu’s Knesset speech on being re-appointed PM, May 17th) This is beginning to sound very much like legacy talk – with Netanyahu claiming that only his leadership has made it possible to reach this point where annexation is possible. Of course, this is in part self-aggrandizement, but to suggest that annexation is somehow not something Netanyahu wants or believes in is irresponsible.

b. Ideologically, Netanyahu is a Jewish nationalist maximalist, at the same time, he is also risk averse and pragmatic, which often translates into a policy preference for gradualism. He believes in entrenching permanent Israeli control over maximum territory and to paraphrase the adage of the American right vis-à-vis government, he believes in shrinking the Palestinian issue and Palestinian claims to “such a size where they can be drowned in a bathtub.” There is an argument made that if annexation was so important to Netanyahu, then after 15 years in power (during which he frequently had a pro-annexation right-wing majority in government and in parliament), it is something he would have already done.
What that fails to take into account is changing circumstances. Until recently, there would have been a legitimate concern regarding the consequences of annexation for a leader who is cautious, loath to take unnecessary risks, loath to make major decisions that might negatively impact his own longevity in power, and who has no problem with delay. Changed circumstances have created an alignment of forces whereby annexation is a less risky move; something that would have seemed a reach too far can now be reasonably tested. Key in this recalibrated equation is of course the Trump administration, but one should also factor in the historic weakness and division among the Palestinian political leadership, a shifting global zeitgeist which favours Netanyahu and that has also delivered a more quiescent region, and the doubling down of pre-existing trends of the weakness of Israeli liberalism and of European pushback.

Netanyahu has spent the last several years pushing the envelope and testing the waters in terms of what he can get away with in increasingly egregious policies towards the Palestinians. Nothing seems to have constituted overreach or generated real consequences. He has gotten away with it. The Covid-19 crisis could also be perceived as adding to the attraction of undertaking annexation at a time when the world is particularly distracted, providing a greater degree of cover for such a move. In short, annexation would now seem to be possible at an acceptable price.

c. To sum up, is annexation desirable for Netanyahu? Yes. His overriding priority? No. What is most likely, and understandably so, is that Netanyahu wants to keep his options open and will (as always and as one would expect) want to be able to make a decision in his own time based on what is personally and politically most propitious for him (with his own court case also under way). Currently, it is more likely the case that annexation will align with Netanyahu’s short-term interests and complements his longer-term ideological and legacy goals.

3. Israeli political dynamics

a. The fact that Gantz’s Blue and White were willing to fold on the issue of annexation in the coalition negotiations cannot be easily dismissed. That the tiny remnant of the Israel Labor party did likewise might at this stage merit only a footnote, but it also speaks volumes. To now expect Gantz, Ashkenazi and Labor leader Amir Peretz to mount a successful rear-guard action to prevent annexation requires quite a leap of faith. It is the case that they are not enthusiastic about an annexation with a narrow base of support from a U.S. president in a tough re-election fight, that would face a wall of at least rhetorical international opposition, that could destabilize relations with the Palestinian Authority and with Jordan and endanger their version of a solution with the Palestinians based on separation and nominal Palestinian statehood on Israeli terms. The clauses included in the coalition agreement that speak to pursuing peace, international and regional consensus reflect these positions.

Gantz and Ashkenazi will have two of the most relevant ministries on this issue at their disposal, the defence and foreign ministries. The security establishment, especially with Gantz as minister, is likely to raise concerns as to the security consequences of annexation, especially if PA withdrawal of security cooperation is deemed credible. However, to successfully orchestrate and weave together a constellation of forces, both internal and external, sufficient to decisively override Netanyahu and the Americans (if they go for annexation), would appear to be a mission beyond their collective ability and ambition.

b. Netanyahu now faces parliamentary opposition to his right. Were Netanyahu to avoid an annexation move between now and November, then whatever excuse he offers, he will face a severe backlash from within his own camp that will be led by the Yamina faction of Bennett and
the religious right, with probable support from Lieberman and perhaps the Telem and Yesh Atid factions. While this will not be a problem for his ultra-orthodox allies, it could begin to generate discomfort within the Likud, even despite the grip Netanyahu has on that party. It will give an ideological cause (rather than an anti-Netanyahu personal dimension) for Netanyahu’s long-suffering and thoroughly fed-up potential successors and internal party opponents to rally around. The contemporary Israeli right – its institutions, its media, its social movements – are personally loyal to Netanyahu but have also developed an ideological commitment to an extremism which he has nourished. What would happen in that moment of dissonance were Netanyahu to dodge annexation is unpredictable, but an unprecedented level of vocal criticism from his own camp can be expected.

c. It is undoubtedly the case that **Netanyahu has a majority in this Knesset for an extension of Israeli sovereignty** into some parts of the West Bank. The composition of that majority does though change depending on which specific parts of the territory one is applying the sovereignty to. That in turn gives rise to speculation that while a theoretical majority for annexation exists in the Knesset, a specific majority for a specific territorial delineation of annexation will be far trickier and perhaps even impossible to achieve. Such speculation likely suffers from being a little too cute.

First of all, Netanyahu could theoretically do this without legislation, as a Governmental Cabinet decree and therefore without a Knesset vote. Let us, as is reasonable, assume that’s not the case. Netanyahu’s starting point for any annexation plan put forward is a strong one with the almost automatic support of the 54 members of his own bloc within the coalition (his own Likud plus the ultra-orthodox and the two defectors from other parties who joined his bloc to become ministers). That leaves him requiring only seven votes or less than that combined with some abstentions in order to achieve a Knesset majority. If the annexation is considered to be of more modest dimensions, then Blue and White’s leadership and all or enough of its members are likely to vote in favour. If it is an annexation considered to be more far-reaching, then the Blue and White votes may be lost but the challenge in saying no switches to the Yamina and perhaps Lieberman faction (in addition to the small two-member hard-rightist breakaway faction from Blue and White named Derech Eretz). There will undoubtedly be a domestic fight over the extent of any annexation. Netanyahu has a choice of potential villains to blame for scuppering annexation should he so wish – from Yamina and his over-zealous settler friends for insisting on too much, to Blue and White for not being ready to annex enough – but those are better understood as part of the Netanyahu political calculation not immovable obstacles.

Bottom line, the current Knesset has 68 MKs with a hard-right territorially expansionist position vis-à-vis the Palestinians and another 31 members for whom it would seem universal human rights carry little weight. Under those circumstances, for a skilled politician like Netanyahu to find a majority to formalize Israeli permanence on Palestinian land should prove an achievable assignment.

4. America tipping the scales

a. **Probably more influential than the Israeli domestic political scene in determining the course of annexation will be the U.S. administration.** As noted above, the only box that Netanyahu has to tick in order to fulfil the coalition agreement requirement to bring forward annexation as of July 1st is American consent. Following the presentation of the Trump Plan, Israeli and U.S. teams have been working on mapping areas of the West Bank that Israel could initially annex in the context of the Trump plan.
One theory put forward is that, as in the past, the teams will be unable to agree on a map and that this will trip up the option of annexation. While agreement on a final map may prove challenging, that is not necessary here, and if a political decision is taken to move forward, then there seems no reason to prevent the sides from agreeing on a preliminary map for a first phase of the extension of Israeli sovereignty.

b. The rather sudden, short and extremely unusual in the time of Covid-19 visit of Secretary of State Pompeo to Israel on the eve of the swearing in of the new government, and Pompeo’s meetings with Netanyahu, Gantz and Ashkenazi led to a wave of speculation that the U.S. administration was having second thoughts on giving its endorsement to an Israeli act of annexation. While Senior Advisor to President Trump, Jared Kushner, had asked Israel to wait until after its March 2nd election before annexing, he placed no other restriction.

Pompeo declared in April that “as for the annexation of the West Bank, the Israelis will ultimately make those decisions”, a message he repeated on his visit to Israel in May, and Ambassador Friedman reinforced that this was an Israeli choice to make while taking a step further in actively goading Israel to go ahead with annexation and suggesting a maximalist interpretation of the territory to be annexed.

Media commentary suggested that Pompeo might be conveying a message revisiting this green light following pushback from Arab allies and concern from the Kushner wing of the team that the otherwise sterling prospects of their peace plan might be undermined by premature annexation. While speculation as to the purpose of the Pompeo visit has subsequently shifted to focus on the Iran file and concerns over cyber-attacks and escalation, the question of American intentionality lingers.

c. After three and a half years, this administration now has a track record when it comes to decision-making on Israel-Palestine, they have form. Every important decision has been driven by the most hard-line axis consisting of settler-friendly Ambassador David Friedman, the extremist camp around the RJC donor network and specifically Sheldon Adelson, and the pro-Greater Israel Evangelical dispensationalist wing of the Republican base.

While there might be certain quarters in the administration naively believing that their putative so-called peace efforts could be undermined, they have not carried the day so far and there is no reason to expect that to change. In fact, quite the opposite As elections in the U.S. near, expect the hold of the Evangelicals and the donors to become fiercer. Pompeo is not leading a pushback against the annexation camp. It is reasonable to speculate that Pompeo wanted a one-on-one read from Bibi and Gantz as to their intentions, but not more.

Any bet that has been placed on this administration being a little less extreme on Palestine has been lost. At every important crossroads – the Jerusalem embassy move, Golan recognition, settlement redefinition, UNRWA de-funding, encouragement of annexation – the tripartite axis has prevailed. For two years there was speculation that were a U.S. plan to be put forward, it would be unbalanced but lean just enough in the direction of sensible as to be hard to dismiss. That did not happen. The eventual plan was redolent in its extremism. If anything, the U.S., via this axis, will act as a pressure group in encouraging Netanyahu to go for annexation and could conceivably tip the scales.

d. Presumptive presidential candidate Biden and the Democrats are not in a position to stop annexation, but they could wield influence.
Were Biden to take a strong forward leaning position in opposition to annexation outlining consequences for future US-Israel relations, that would feature prominently in the kind of perfect storm that might optimize the prospects of averting an annexation move. It would play out in important ways in the domestic political debate in Israel, significantly strengthen Gantz’s hand were he to take this fight on and it would encourage him to do so.

That however will not happen as Biden has chosen to pre-emptively neutralize his own ability to impact this debate by promising an essentially consequence-free response from any future administration he would lead.

Any attempts to generate a sense of possible strong pushback from other quarters in the Democrat party (which are indeed changing) and that these will impact future Democrat administration calculations in meaningful ways would be overshadowed by the stance Vice President Biden has adopted. Similar to his position on the Jerusalem embassy move, Biden is expressing opposition to annexation while guaranteeing business as usual. Express regret, move on.

It previews the likely return to a U.S. position where Israel is asked quietly and politely to do something it has no intention of doing regarding Palestinian statehood while at the same time making clear that an Israeli refusal will be met with a full and uninterrupted continuance of U.S. diplomatic, political and financial support at a level no other state receives. Unsurprisingly and invariably, Israel’s own response is to take the support and do whatever it likes to the Palestinians.

5. The Palestinian quandary

a. The advancing threat of annexation comes amidst an ongoing and deepening Palestinian leadership vacuum. The Palestinians have been caught in a political trap for a prolonged period of time and while not of their own making, the Palestinian political class is complicit in the continuation of a status quo in which Palestinian interests and prospects are ever-more squeezed.

Palestinian political institutions remain divided, most notably with the West Bank-Gaza split. Those institutions remain unrepresentative and unaccountable, and have failed to pursue an alternative in the face of the ever-diminishing returns of the Oslo co-option model. Palestinian economic dependence on Israel and on the outside is likely to be exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis and its impact on Palestinian socio-economic life in the OPTs and on PA revenue. No one can take the Palestinians place in leading a struggle for Palestinian rights and liberation, and while it is necessary to reintroduce Palestinian political agency which challenges the status quo, that is not something that will realistically happen in the short-term horizon of annexation between July and November.

b. Shrinking Palestinian political influence is part of the backstory that has brought us to the brink of annexation. It has been one of (but far from the only) factor emboldening Israeli maximalism. It is fair to acknowledge that the Palestinian leadership was not the only one to be caught off-guard by the unique set of challenges posed by the Trump administration. Almost nothing has been left unscathed by the scorched earth of the past three and a half years and Palestinians had a particular target on their backs.

Nonetheless, the so-called peace process was broken long before Trump. The need for a radically retooled Palestinian strategy is not a realization of recent vintage. There is no shortage of ideas and plans to fill that vacuum coming from Palestinians – there is great dynamism amongst Palestinian civil society, thought leaders and courageous activists, whether in the OPTs, in Israel itself or among the Palestinian diaspora, but the national movement, recognized internationally and tasked with representing the Palestinians is thoroughly stuck.
In short, the discussion around how to prevent or respond to annexation requires a Palestinian strategy, a **Palestinian-led alternative that others can coalesce around, engage with or challenge.** Until that alternative strategy exists as a central vector in this conflict, then responding to the threat of annexation, to plain old occupation or whatever comes next, will continue to be severely hamstrung.

c. Palestinian responses to the Trump plan and the subsequent annexation proposals, up to and including the [presidential statement](#) on May 19th, can only be correctly analysed in this context. The threats issued have been made repeatedly in recent years. They have not been followed through and that is because they are not part of an actionable plan and strategy to fundamentally break the status quo. A decision to do that has not yet been taken by the Palestinian leadership.

The only practical commitment contained in the PLO announcement was for the State of Palestine to sign accession documents to international agreements and conventions not yet joined – a lingering issue of little interest. The headline of the Palestinian announcement was to absolve the Palestinians from all agreements and commitments with the U.S. and Israel. Were that to be systematically applied, it would be highly disruptive, including to daily Palestinian life. It requires a far-reaching reorganization of the relationship between the PLO and the PA, its people and their employment, their struggle, their safety nets as well as their physical wellbeing and security. It requires a re-imagining of the relationship with East Jerusalem and with Gaza, an end to the Area A, B and C division in the West Bank.

Given that none of that is happening, the threat itself is unlikely to prove sufficiently potent. The area that receives most attention is that of security cooperation with Israel. The spectrum of that security cooperation is broad, ranging from withdrawing so-called intelligence sharing (Palestinians handing over details of suspects for Israelis to arrest or receiving instructions from Israel to make their own arrests), through to vacating Palestinian security personnel whenever Israeli forces conduct operations inside Palestinian towns and villages. Will Palestinian security personnel start to protect their own people from Israeli raids? Is there a plan for decoupling from the IDF? Despite certain practical steps being taken and attempts to portray a major U-turn, it can be envisaged that this shift will not be far reaching enough or sustained. This leads to the conclusion that the Palestinian political leadership has not positioned itself to have a major impact on calculations around annexation in the short-term.

d. Alongside these threats, the major Palestinian political focus would seem to be an effort to generate diplomatic momentum around some kind of alternative international peace convening in the hope that this may induce the Americans to impose a timeout on Israeli annexation plans. There have been rumours of a Russian-led initiative (subsequently denied) and the [Quartet held consultations at a working level,](#) inconclusive to date. One idea being floated is for Palestinians and Americans to re-engage, perhaps under Quartet cover.

Other international actors, notably from the EU, are encouraging the Palestinians to put forward their own plan with a similar goal in mind. The logic would be that the Americans can claim a diplomatic win in that the Trump Plan would be one of the options on the table and that would be sufficient reward to intervene and halt Israeli annexation moves.

There is **nothing to suggest that these ideas will tip the scales against annexation,** at most they could become one of the cover stories on offer should Netanyahu, together with the Americans, decide for their own reasons to not move forward. More importantly, these are options that all come from within the existing failed paradigm and could even exacerbate existing problems by
mainstreaming the Trump Plan; even were annexation to be averted, the denial of Palestinians rights and freedoms will continue apace.

6. Regional and international dynamics

a. Jordan
The other player that will be frequently looked to as this potential crisis plays out will be **Jordan, whose own interests and stability are considered to be most at risk.** Palestinians are the largest national grouping in Jordan maintaining close ties and affinities with the West Bank and internal dynamics inside Jordan are impacted by events on the other side of the Jordan river. Warnings from Jordan and threats to Jordanian stability gain much more traction in Israeli policymaking circles than direct Palestinian concerns and will be seized on by those in the Israeli ether seeking to avoid annexation.

Jordanian King Abdullah will align with the Palestinians in taking a firm stance against annexation. He has warned in an interview with *Der Spiegel* that “if Israel really annexes the West Bank in July, it would lead to a massive conflict with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan”. However, as Israel has moved more aggressively in recent years to definitively scupper prospects for anything resembling a Palestinian state, a gap has opened up between the traditional Israeli position of seeing the relationship with Jordan as a cornerstone national security plank versus an approach which already prepares for increased future tensions and is willing to risk and even abandon the Jordan relationship assuming that at some stage the Israel’s pushes against the Palestinians will induce a crisis.

Israeli-Jordanian relations have witnessed deteriorations and points of crisis recently. While Jordan could traditionally rely on a sympathetic hearing in Washington and continues to be considered a reliable ally in the American defence establishment and in Congress, relations with the Trump administration itself have been significantly strained. Jordan matters, but it has no trump card to play in thwarting annexation.

b. The region
The Arab League will continue to be the vehicle for issuing the most pointed condemnations regarding annexation, and while individual member states will echo variations on that theme, on a bilateral basis, whether with Israel or other relevant third parties, expect the traditional balance between words and actions to be maintained. **Egypt** will line-up with that opposition but is unlikely to put at risk the very close military, intelligence and security cooperation it maintains with Israel and the knock-on benefits in its relationship with the U.S., especially since (unlike in the case of Jordan) Israel is reciprocally supportive of Egyptian requests as long as nothing impacts its freedom of operation with the Palestinians.

Some of the gains made by Israel in its relations with certain Gulf states may be put on temporary hold but there the overall trajectory of relations, at least with the current group of leaders, is unlikely to be permanently derailed. Expect a more robust response from some, for instance Qatar and Kuwait. But everyone in the region is busy calibrating their key equities in their relationships with the U.S. and the Palestine file plays into that as do the new challenges of a Covid-19 reality, not least regarding energy markets.

Israel’s other Arab neighbours in **Syria and Lebanon**, and notably Hezbollah and its allies, will receive succour for their resistance positions vis-à-vis Israel, while closely following any potential security fallout implications if and when events develop following any annexation. The extent to
which Iran will be able to cash-in regionally might be curtailed by the current circumstances, nonetheless annexation will have America’s allies squirming and Iran claiming vindication.

c. Europe

Europe is Israel’s largest trading partner and for a non-member, Israel is especially integrated with European cooperation programs, in particular in the fields of education, research and development which brings significant mutual benefits. So, the EU is a potentially influential external actor. The EU’s position on annexation is clear and has been consistently stated, the EU “will not recognize any changes to the 1967 borders unless recognized by Israelis and Palestinians,” and the EU notes “with grave concern” the prospect of annexation “we strongly urge Israel to refrain from annexation.” However, beyond statements of principle, the divisions that are never far from the surface in Europe, emerge to paralyze the prospects for actions that go beyond condemnation. This helpful twitter thread from the EUMEP outlines various possibilities for European action.

The European External Action Service is thought to be preparing an options papers on possible responses to annexation. Any annexation will have legal and political implications and practical consequences for the basis of EU-Israel relations. The integrity of the EU’s internal legal order would be challenged in new ways in Europe’s daily interface with the illegalities of any annexation. This would play out over the months and years following annexation. Unsurprisingly, certain member states have therefore suggested that annexation will not go unchallenged. Unified consequential action is however unlikely in the short-term. Action could also be taken by a coalition of likeminded EU-member states.

Israel can be susceptible to European pressure, but it has to be real. The most one could probably expect under present circumstances would be for strong signals from Europe, which in turn encourage Gantz to actively oppose annexation and form part of the backdrop of a reconsideration by Netanyahu. The close relationships Israel has forged with likeminded illiberal and ethno-nationalist regimes in Europe have served as an effective buffer and have guaranteed that Europe consistently strays from its professed upholding of international law and norms when it comes to the Palestinian issue (Israel’s new energy partners amongst EU-member states in the Southeast Med have also lent a helping hand).

The key EU players on this issue, led by France and Germany, will though not be able to hide, whether in attempting to prevent annexation or in dealing with the new realities post-facto. Even if Europe ends up being ineffective in preventing annexation, the trajectory of EU-Israel relations post-annexation will enter a whole new minefield.

d. Remaining P5 and other international players

There is no other constellation of actors waiting to coalesce around a significant and consequential pushback on Israel. There will certainly be opposition and possibly public protests and harsh leadership condemnations from other Muslim states, for instance Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan. By contrast, India is formalizing its own annexationist moves in Kashmir and under Prime Minister Narendra Modi can be expected to continue strengthening ties with Israel, annexation or no annexation.

China and Russia will adhere to their existing positions based on UNSC resolutions and international law, aligning mostly with the Palestinian position while working to prevent this harming their good bilateral relations with Israel. Russia has distanced itself from reports suggesting it might lead a Quartet intervention to bring Palestinian and American negotiators back
together as a way of circumventing the annexation momentum. Given the direction of U.S.-China relations, Palestine and annexation could be an issue for China to wield against America and to embarrass America in large parts of the world. That is not a position China is currently taking nor the way China tends to conduct its politics of maintaining good ties with everyone, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere.

The one international institution which Israel is paying attention to right now and which has not yet folded in the face of pressure is the International Criminal Court (ICC) which awaits the ruling of a three-judge pre-trial chamber that could lead to Israelis being charged with war crimes. Annexation could further expose Israelis to action at the ICC and the palpable threat of an ICC ruling would be one of the few currently existing tools that might impact Israeli behaviour. Israel, America and other allies are therefore pushing hard for the ICC to not take up the issue of Palestine (those include European allies who on other issues are strong backers of the ICC and its remit but have carved out an exception clause against Palestinian rights).

7. Closing thoughts

a. This paper has been an attempt to assess the current landscape in relation to the prospects of an Israeli move to extend its sovereignty over additional occupied Palestinian lands. It may well be the case that such an annexation move cannot be averted if there is a decision by Netanyahu and his American allies to take this action. The best prospect for preventing annexation would be in the ability to generate a perfect storm of coordinated local, regional and international pushback while acknowledging that this will not only be difficult to achieve but that it also may be insufficient.

b. The likely focus on annexation in the coming months should not obscure the already dire situation, denial of rights and the direction of travel of Israeli policy. The debate around annexation offers an opportunity to refocus attention on the Israel-Palestine issue and to raise ideas regarding the way forward. If annexation is put on hold, the situation will not have improved, it will be just as bad. In fact, the good will that may accrue to a Netanyahu government which sidesteps annexation could give rise to a further deterioration as it provides cover for steps that could more deeply entrench inequality, control and disenfranchisement vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

c. If Israel does move ahead with annexation, then the short-term repercussions and fallout may not appear to be so dramatic. Do not expect the sky to fall. It would be wise to dial-down expectations of an immediate explosion. When those are not borne out, it tends to only empower the hard-line camp who feel vindicated.

The most serious consequences of annexation are likely to be felt over the medium to long term and in particular how much further this takes us down the irreversibility road away from the possibility of two states. That is less about any particular territorial move or its dimensions and more to do with the cognitive realities with which people live and organize their thinking, even subconsciously.

If there is limited blowback from annexation, then part of the explanation is particularly sinister for those committed to two states. Crucially, for many constituencies the loss of the two-state model has already been discounted, its eclipse is prebaked into their assumptions – in different ways and with different goals in mind for Israelis, Palestinians and others in the region and beyond. For some, it offers a new vista for Israeli victories; for others, an improved terrain for advancing a Palestinian struggle for equal rights or a harbinger of Israeli overreach and unprecedented
vulnerabilities; for others still, a headache for future, but hopefully not current policymakers to contend with.

d. The **morning after annexation**, or indeed the morning after annexation has been temporarily parked, the most important thing will be to **avoid the temptation of a return to business as usual** on Israel-Palestine. That is a very real prospect, even from quarters opposing annexation - that whatever happens it will be digested as something that need not be disruptive of pre-existing peace efforts. One can for instance envisage financial assistance and other inducements being proffered to the Palestinians in exchange for a return to the peace process.

That would be to continue with the failed approach that has gotten us to this point in the first place, it would **guarantee the further erosion of prospects for peace and equality** and would encourage Israel to do its worst, further empowering hard-liners.

e. **Israeli impunity** is the key driver of the current journey away from peace and equality. Israel’s cost/benefit calculation will need to change to prevent that journey continuing down the same path and to usher us onto the path less travelled. A better way forward would have to challenge that impunity. It would necessitate desisting from the **delegitimization and criminalization of sanctioning Israel for its policies** or of conditioning various preferential arrangements that Israel enjoys, **while guaranteeing the space for legitimate Palestinian political expression and alternative visions for the future** (especially as two states becomes ever-less attainable). Open debate and policy options certainly cannot be foreclosed in the service of cheapened and scurrilous accusations of antisemitism.

None of the above makes the demand of two-staters to abandon that vision in favour of one state or anything else. It does speak to both the legitimacy of alternative approaches which guarantee equality and to the realization that if the two state option is to re-emerge as a viable formula, it would have to be a very different and just two-state proposal as well as a very different approach for achieving it.