

“Quiet Annexation” amid UAE-Israel Normalization

The UAE-Israel deal sends the message that defying international law and consensus can become a useful bargaining tool to obtain strategic political and economic advantages.

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The Trump administration’s August 13th announcement that the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is normalizing ties with Israel explicitly [rewards](#) Israel for “freezing” the act of annexation, which is [opposed](#) by the overwhelming majority of international organizations and almost all UN member states. The rewarding frame sets a dangerous precedent, both at the local and international levels. It sends a clear message: defying international consensus on settlements, the status of Jerusalem, or any other aspect connected to the conflict can become, in due course, a useful bargaining tool to obtain strategic political and economic advantages.

To better understand the implications of these aspects, we should start by framing the broader [context](#): the occupied Palestinian territory is the only area in the world where millions of civilians have lived for over fifty years both without a formally recognized state or citizenship to any country. Palestinians have the full right to overcome this legal limbo and to struggle to attain equal rights. Considering that the alleged suspension of Israeli annexation will not change or impact the protracted challenges that Palestinians face, this context is even more relevant.

The Netanyahu administration suspended the annexation process because it is more convenient for the Israeli authorities to continue pursuing its “[quiet annexation](#)” as opposed to an official (though selective) annexation. Palestinians have endured Israel’s “quiet annexation” for decades, and Israel will continue the process through means such as the [denial](#) of fair access to water, the 98 percent [rejection](#) of Palestinian building permit requests in the West Bank’s “Area C,” and the perpetuation of dual legal systems, where settlers are governed by Israeli civil law and Palestinians are subject to military courts that report an almost [100 percent conviction rate](#). The Israeli authorities will also continue to capitalize on Palestinian resources: about 94 percent of the materials produced today by Israeli quarries in the West Bank are [transported](#) to Israel

and a considerable portion of Israeli waste is [buried](#) in the West Bank. These, and a plethora of similar policies, will continue with or without the normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE, or any other Arab countries.

The UAE is the first Gulf Arab state and the third Arab nation—after Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994—to announce active ties with Israel. UAE citizens—a [population of less than one million](#) — are subject to [heavy censorship](#) on freedom of expression and therefore it is difficult to gauge their true sentiments toward this historic policy shift. This historic deal, like the Trump administration’s January 2020 “Deal of the Century,” has little to do with the West Bank or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and is more likely driven by each country’s domestic and regional policy goals.

Ceasing official annexation has several benefits for Israel—such as opening the door to new energy, technology, and tourism opportunities between the UAE and Israel—but most significantly, halting this process prolongs Israel’s ability to pretend that the West Bank’s occupation is temporary. This continues to protect Israel from clarifying, to the international community and all involved parties, whether its presence beyond the 1967 lines represents an occupation or not. Expressing an official position on this matter would mean that the Israeli authorities would finally be ready to take responsibility for the millions of civilians fully or mostly under its control. In fact, if the Israeli presence does not constitute an occupation, Palestinians cannot continue to be subject to a military power that, in Israeli lawyer Eyal Benvenisti’s words, “has [established](#) a distinct military government over occupied areas in accordance with the framework of the law of occupation.” If Israel’s presence beyond the 1967 lines does constitute an occupation, Israel must begin to apply and adhere to the Fourth Hague Convention’s [provisions](#), including the [prohibition](#) against transferring civilians into occupied territory.

The normalization process between Israel and the UAE—which [includes](#) arms deals and intelligence service sharing with Israel—enables the Gulf state to increase its regional influence. Due to this agreement, Abu Dhabi, [heavily involved](#) in the Yemen war, can bolster its reputation in Washington, counter Iranian and Turkish influence in the region, and increase its chances to access American-made advanced **weapons**—including the **F-35** stealth fighter jet. The U.S. military’s arms production capacity enables it to provide its allies in the Middle East—Israel first and foremost—with a technological advantage over all other militaries in the region.

In the face of these regional and domestic challenges, the Palestinian leadership is, once again, a passive—but also [unrepresentative and despotic](#)—spectator to geopolitical shifts that will shape their future. Meanwhile, Israeli authorities will work to maximize the ongoing “quiet annexation” while simultaneously pressuring the European Union (EU) to subsidize the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in the West Bank, and pushing [Qatar](#) to continue providing millions of dollars to keep the Gaza Strip alive. The Gulf states will continue to increasingly use the Israeli-Palestinian context to bolster their regional credentials.

In light of these recent developments, many activists and policymakers will work to foster a rights-based resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict through a single state framework. However, redefining Palestinians’ self-determination and shifting the focus away from statehood is not only largely an [illusion](#), but also a risky gamble. In Palestinian businessman Sam Bahour’s [words](#), the moment in which the struggle becomes a purely civil rights one, “the game is over—even if the struggle for full civil rights lasts another one hundred years.” A rights-based resolution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict would fail to bring about real change, and could even foster unintended detrimental dynamics, if it is not rooted in the necessity of strengthening the right for self-determination of Israelis and Palestinians alike.

Rather, securing the recognition of a Palestinian state—comprised of the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza strip—by all member states of the EU, Israel’s [largest trading partner](#), might prove more effective. This initiative should be coupled with a more incisive focus on “[the differentiation agenda](#)” and the imposition of tight economic and political sanctions against any actor who is not ready or willing to comply with international law and consensus. While none of these measures is itself the recipe for peace, each represents a needed step in that direction.