

The Trump Administration and the Jordan Valley

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Both Prime Minister Netanyahu and his chief rival Benny Gantz, a former chief of staff of the IDF, agree that for vital security reasons, Israel must annex the Jordan Valley. Very few Israelis would disagree. This is a strip of land in the West Bank, 65 miles long, with a width averaging 6.2 miles, narrowing to 2.5 miles over most of the course, before widening out to a 12-mile-wide delta when reaching the Dead Sea. The possession of the Jordan Valley is deemed by Israel's military to be essential to the country's defense; control of the Jordan Valley can halt or hinder any potential invaders of Israel from the east. Netanyahu has announced his intention to annex this territory if re-elected. Benny Gantz, his political rival, is in full agreement.

But surprisingly, the Trump Administration has declared that it is opposed to Israel annexing this land before the unveiling of the Trump peace initiative. That story is [here](#).

The Trump administration is opposed to an Israeli annexation of the Jordan Valley before the long-delayed unveiling of its peace initiative, according to an Axios report on Wednesday.

The report – authored by Israeli Channel 13 journalist Barak Ravid – came after comments made in recent days by both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and his top rival, ex-IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, advocating such a move.

Citing unnamed US officials, Ravid said the Trump administration “has made its position clear to the Israeli government, and Netanyahu is aware that the US doesn’t want Israel to take any unilateral steps before the peace plan is published.”

Ravid further noted, “It is still unclear when the US peace plan will be presented. US officials say Trump is expected to announce his decision in the next few days.”

Israel’s Kan public broadcaster quoted on Wednesday sources in Netanyahu’s Likud party as saying that the prime minister wished to bring the issue to a vote in the Knesset as soon as possible and was seeking a “green light” from the Trump administration.

“This position by the White House reduces dramatically to [sic] chances of that happening,” Ravid pointed out on Twitter.

The Jordan Valley has long been viewed by a wide swathe of the Israeli populace as a part of the West Bank that should be retained in any potential peace agreement with the Palestinians. Israel took control of it, along with the rest of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, from Jordan in the 1967 Six-Day War.

Netanyahu pledged to annex the Jordan Valley during the run-up to last September's Knesset elections, but the inconclusive outcome put off the plan indefinitely. The proposal was generally considered a sop to right-wing voters whose support Netanyahu wished to retain in a tough election fight.

The issue arose again this week, however, when Gantz endorsed annexation as well.

Gantz said the Jordan Valley must remain part of Israel in "any future scenario."

"Governments that previously discussed the possibility of giving it back were gravely mistaken," he asserted. "We consider it an integral part of the State of Israel, and after the elections we will work to annex the valley in coordination with the international community."

This demand by the Administration that Israel not annex the Jordan Valley before Trump's peace initiative is announced puts Israel in a quandary. Can it afford to ignore the wishes of its best friend in the world, that has already done so much for Israel, by moving the American Embassy to Jerusalem, by recognizing the annexation of the Golan, and by steadfastly supporting Israel at the U.N.'s kangaroo court? Netanyahu has been placed by the Administration in a box, and he is now likely to wait, with a sense of urgency, for that Trump peace initiative. He and Gantz will be in Washington at the end of January; they will be meeting with Trump, according to news reports, just after the President's "peace initiative" is announced.

We should note one very good thing: that the Trump administration carefully did not say that it opposed such annexation by Israel – only that it opposed it taking place before Trump's "peace initiative" was revealed. Why? I suspect it's because that initiative already makes provision for

Israel to retain the Jordan Valley, and Trump didn't want that part of his plan to be merely an echo of what Israel had already announced; he wants credit, instead, for proposing what Israel will then immediately do. It's far better for Israel to delay its announcement – it will only be a matter of a few days at most – in order to go along, at this point, with the Administration. Israel should trust that it can count on the Trump Administration's sympathetic understand of Israel's need to hold onto the Jordan Valley. The Trump Administration has never let Israel down before, and is unlikely to start doing so now. In any case, no matter what the Administration proposes, the Palestinian Authority will reject it. That leaves Israel in an excellent position to accept those parts of the initiative that it favors, and proposing to discuss further with the Americans and the Palestinians other parts of the plan to which it might have objections. But the Palestinians won't engage in any talks. From the moment the details of the peace initiative are announced, the Palestinians will declare their refusal to discuss anything with either the American or the Israeli governments, period. From Mahmoud Abbas and Saeb Erekat on down, they'll be howling with rage.

Full of victimhood and fury, the Palestinians will be crying to the high heavens. Any annexation of any part of the West Bank will be denounced. Abbas (or Erekat, or Ashrawi): "These proposals have destroyed all chances for peace. This is a crime against the Palestinian people, who still placed their hopes, despite so many betrayals, in Mr. Trump; they thought just possibly he might try to be, even a little bit, fair. We see that we were wrong." When, after the peace initiative is revealed, and Israel announces its annexation of the Jordan Valley, it should also, at the same time, make sure to lay out the two separate justifications for its claim to such annexation, based on both the Mandate for Palestine and on U.S. Resolution 242.

Israel has two independent claims which support the Jewish state's retaining all – or as much as it deems necessary for its security – of the West Bank. The first is found in the Palestine Mandate itself, which assigned to the future Jewish state all the land from Mt. Hermon in the north to the Red Sea in the south, and from the Jordan River in the east to the Mediterranean in the west. Indeed, that territory was originally to have also included a great swath of land east of the Jordan River out to the desert, constituting 77% of the territory, according to the Mandate for Palestine, assigned to the future Jewish state. The British, however, in order to create a state for the Hashemite Prince Abdullah, as a kind of consolation prize (Abdullah had previously sought to rule over Syria, which France, as the Mandatory for Syria and Lebanon, rebuffed), without seeking approval of any Zionist representatives, closed off all the territory east of the Jordan to Jewish immigration and settlement. But all the territory west of the Jordan River would remain, as before, part of the future Jewish state.

Israel's legal claim to the West Bank did not disappear when the Jordanians held that territory from 1949 to 1967; Jordan was only the military occupier of that land, and after the Six-Day War Israel became able at long last to enforce its preexisting legal claim. It is too bad that both Israel, and the Trump Administration, have not made Israel's legal claim to the West Bank, based on the League of Nations' Mandate for Palestine, clear to a public largely unaware of the Mandate's express provisions, and the territory to which it was meant to be applied. That claim ought to be frequently repeated by Israeli leaders and diplomats, quoting the relevant excerpts from the Mandate itself – especially Articles 4 and 6 – so that it can no longer be ignored. And the Trump Administration should do the same. When called upon by opponents of the peace initiative to justify its endorsing Israel's continued possession of much of the West Bank, it should be prepared, and even eager, to explain the purpose of the Mandate for

Palestine, to quote its provisions, and to note what territories it included.

Israel's second, and distinct claim, to part or all of the West Bank, is based on U.N. Resolution 242. That resolution's chief author, the British ambassador to the U.N. Lord Caradon, insisted that Israel did not have to withdraw to the pre-1967 lines – that is, to the 1949 armistice lines. He said that those were terrible lines, that he knew them well, and that they reflecting nothing more than where the parties stood at the cessation of hostilities in 1949. Caradon also said Israel was required to withdraw only “from territories” occupied in the recent conflict, and not “from all the territories” – wording that the Arabs had kept trying, in vain, to have included. Lord Caradon said that the Arabs, having failed to see their preferred wording adopted, had subsequently claimed, meretriciously, that “from the territories” meant “from all the territories” occupied in the recent conflict. It never did. According to Lord Caradon, the most important phrase in Resolution 242 was that about the need for Israel to have “secure and recognizable boundaries.” “Secure” meant “defensible,” and only Israel could decide what territorial adjustments would have to be made to provide it with “defensible” borders.

Not only Israelis, but also American military men have studied Israel's security needs, and concluded that retention of the Jordan Valley is indispensable for its defense.

In 1967, President Johnson asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to study what territorial adjustments would be necessary to meet Israel's minimum defense needs. They duly presented their military assessment of what, for Israel, would constitute “secure and defensible borders.”

The Joint Chiefs endorsed Israel maintaining control of a strip of land to the immediate west of the Jordan River, and extending southward to the Dead Sea. This means it is the

Jordan Valley, and the Judean heights to its west that overlook it, that would provide Israel with “a militarily defensible border.” Indeed, the Joint Chiefs also recommended that Israel retain Gaza, and some small part of the Sinai, both of which the Israelis decided in the end not to retain. But the Jordan Valley is very different: there may be some disagreement among Israeli leaders over which settlements elsewhere in the West Bank to annex, but there is no disagreement among Israel’s military men as to the need to retain the entire Jordan Valley.

The Israelis should keep emphasizing both their legal claim, according to the Mandate for Palestine, to the West Bank, and their other claim, based on U.N. Resolution 242, to “secure” borders that requires, at a minimum, retention of the Jordan Valley. Palestinians will howl – that’s what they do best – when Israel annexes the Jordan Valley, but there’s not much they can do. The Arab states have other fish to fry; they are tired of the “Palestinian problem” and preoccupied with their own problems – civil wars (in Libya, Yemen, and Syria), the Iranian threat (in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq, which most alarms Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt), and with popular rage building at corrupt and incompetent governments (in Lebanon and Iraq).

Many predicted all hell would break loose when the Trump Administration moved our Embassy. Nothing happened. Then many people predicted a tsunami of unassuageable fury from the Arabs would erupt in response to the American recognition of the Golan as part of Israel. Again, nothing happened. And now, when Israel annexes – as it must for security reasons – the Jordan Valley, there will be the same exaggerated worries about the Arab reaction. There will be Arab anger at that annexation, and even more at Trump’s entire peace initiative, which is said to include retention by Israel of most of the West Bank, but that anger will be short-lived; there are so many other things for the Arab states to worry about that have

nothing to do with the Palestinians. There will, of course, be continued impotent rage from Ramallah. The Arab saying is fitting yet again: The Dogs Bark, The Caravan Moves On.

First published in