

Emboldened Netanyahu free to pursue annexation

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With his recent electoral victory, Benjamin Netanyahu is now poised to become Israel's longest-serving prime minister. Having held the job for the last decade, Netanyahu has become a symbol of stability in an otherwise turbulent region. Despite the continuity in government, however, Netanyahu is now likely to pursue a major policy departure. He is set to reverse 50 years of Israeli strategy, becoming the first prime minister to propose legally annexing Jewish settlements in the West Bank, a move that would have lasting implications for Israeli democracy and any future peace process with the Palestinians.

Though Netanyahu is regularly associated with [creeping encroachment](#) over the occupied territories, as prime minister he has consistently acted as a moderating force. Indeed, under pressure from the Obama administration, he even voiced lacklustre support for a two-state solution, and in 2018 he blocked legislation that would have led to the formal annexation of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. But during the recent election campaign, [Netanyahu promised](#) that he would “extend” Israeli sovereignty in the West Bank, to include the major settlement blocks, if he formed the next

government.

Netanyahu's previous coalition governments were internally divided between two camps: territorial minimalists and maximalists. The former are intent on keeping only segments of the West Bank, such as the major settlement blocks and those areas that are seen as essential for Israeli security. The latter seek to annex all of the territories occupied in the 1967 war. While territorial minimalists seek to reduce the number of Palestinians who would fall under future Israeli sovereignty in an effort to preserve Israel's Jewish majority, territorial maximalists see no contradiction in occupying the territory where millions of unwilling Palestinians live and continuing Israeli political dominance.

Implementing the maximalist position would force Israel to decide whether it wants to be Jewish or democratic. Under such a plan it cannot remain both. If Israel rules over millions of Palestinians, it will not be democratic. If it enfranchises them, it will no longer be Jewish.

Until now, Netanyahu has been unable to reconcile these disparate positions. Instead, he has had to referee between the two camps in order to keep his tenuous coalitions intact, mollifying them by building more new settlements without legal annexation.

That approach is no longer necessary. This election was a referendum on annexation, spelling defeat for the maximalist position. Territorial minimalists, like former defence minister Avigdor Lieberman of the Israel

Our Home party, are in, while territorial maximalists, like Naftali Bennet and Ayelet Shaked of the Jewish Home party, failed to meet the electoral threshold.

With territorial maximalists like Bennet and Shaked out of the next Knesset, Netanyahu will be free to pursue the minimalist position. Israel can extend its sovereignty in the West Bank to encompass the majority of the Jewish settlements, but few Palestinians. In so doing, Israel will enjoy expanded territory without having to either rule over or enfranchise millions of Palestinians. Israel could remain both a Jewish and, at least nominally, a democratic state.

However, other states are obligated not to recognize the annexation of territory conquered by force, because such moves are a clear violation of [international law](#). And, historically, few states have recognized earlier annexations. Israel's claims to sovereignty over East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, for example, have been [broadly rejected](#) by the international community. The EU and successive American administrations have denounced Israeli settlement expansion.

But that is changing as well. In 2018, President Trump moved the [US embassy](#) from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, implicitly recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the contested city, and during the Israeli elections in April he announced a willingness to recognize Israeli rule over the [Golan Heights](#).

And while Israel, claiming to be the Middle East's only democracy, traditionally allied itself with the democracies of the West, it has increasingly sought allies among non-Western states, countries less concerned with violations of international law. Under Netanyahu, stronger ties have been forged with Viktor Orbán of Hungary and Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, leaders with authoritarian tendencies. He has developed closer ties with Russia, which supported Israel's enemies during the Cold War and continues to prop up the regime of Bashar Assad in Syria. Indeed, Netanyahu has even built a fledgling relationship with Saudi Arabia, a state that has historically espoused anti-Zionist positions and provided funding to Palestinian militant groups.

For Netanyahu the future is rosy. Finally insulated from external criticism and free of internal strife, he will be able to take up the minimalist position, annexing the major settlement blocks that crowd Israel's 1967 borders. But annexation will leave the Palestinians with little more than Israel's leftovers, discontinuous islands hardly sufficient to establish a viable state. For the Palestinians, such transformations leave little reason for optimism.

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