

Final Step of Israeli Occupation: West Bank Annexation

As the world struggles against the Covid-19 pandemic, Israel wants to expand its occupation of Palestine. It brings up its annexation plan to legitimize its presence in the West Bank, with the aim to continue its role as the de facto occupier in the area.

Populated with more than 3 million people, the West Bank is an important part of Palestine with its rich agricultural land and vast area. It also hosts over 900,000 Palestinian refugees.

According to the Oslo II Accord (1995), area C, which accounts for 60% of the West Bank and divided into three areas, is under Israeli control. Israel, which does not address oneself to the state of Palestine, seeks to expand its area of control and weaken the Palestinians through different aggressive policies.

The 712 kilometer-long separation barrier, which began construction in 2002, surrounded the entire West Bank and turned it into an open-air prison. Once the wall is completed, 52,667 hectares of land, corresponding to 9.4% of the West Bank, will be severed from the West Bank. [1] The barrier, 85% of which runs through West Bank territory, completely separates Jerusalem from the West Bank. It also restricts agricultural activities by preventing Palestinians from reaching its territory. Palestinians have to go through checkpoints to cross to the other side of the wall every day for reasons such as work, health care, or education. With 572 checkpoints set up in the region, Israel follows every movement of Palestinians. In the area between the wall and the Green Line, Israelis can move without restrictions. But at least 11,000 Palestinians in the area are forced to obtain residence permits in order to continue living in their homes. [2]

Obtaining housing licenses has been made very difficult for the West Bank residents, citing different reasons. In the last 10 years, 6,707 buildings have been destroyed by Israel and 10,312 people have been displaced. 78% of the destructions were carried out in Area C and 20% in East Jerusalem. [3]

Israel is implementing a systematic intimidation policy as a tool to expand its occupation in the region. Direct attacks constitute the most important part of this policy. In this context, Israel occasionally carries out attacks - such as the Jenin refugee camp attack in April 2002 - which Amnesty International described as "war crime". But attacks are usually organized to target individuals. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), at least 558 Palestinians have been killed and more than 100,000 Palestinians injured in such attacks in the past 10 years. [4]

The sole way for Israel to solidify its presence in its occupied territories is through the establishment of Jewish settlements. Therefore, the Zionist regime is pursuing every possible policy to establish a dense Jewish settlement in the West Bank. The number of illegal settlers in the area has increased by around 600% in the last 30 years. Today, the number of settlers, which was about 120,000 in the beginning of the 1990s when the Oslo Accords were signed, has exceeded 600,000. [5] At present, 22.7% of the West Bank population is made up of Jewish settlers.

In summary, Israel tries to intimidate Palestinians by raiding Palestinians' homes and businesses in the West Bank, dividing fields and houses by separation barriers, encircling the area and people from all sides, imposing curfews, organizing attacks and continuously increasing the number of illegal settlers.

The Israeli occupation, which has been imposed step by step since 1967, has now reached its latest move on the agenda. Israel is trying to turn more area into its territory, starting with an area involving 30% of the West Bank consisting of illegal Jewish settlements. The utmost significant reason for accelerating the annexation plan is the US presidential election. Israel has obtained its biggest political gains in its history since Donald Trump took office as president in January 2017. Now it wants to add yet another one to its gains while Trump is still the US President.

On the other hand, the current Israeli government is composed of actors who have led to three elections in a year, while differences within the government continue. Benny Gantz, leader of the Blue and White Party and Minister of Defense, said cautious steps should be taken on the annexation of the West Bank and that they would not support the annexation of areas where Palestinians live heavily. [6] So it appears that

Netanyahu is bringing up the annexation plan to manipulate the agenda of both the fragile nature of Israeli politics and the corruption cases filed against him.

The failure of other countries and international organizations such as the EU and the UN to react against the steps taken in violation of international law in terms of the US-Israel partnership is the most important factor that facilitates Israel's policy in the annexation process.

In addition, the events in areas of intense conflict such as Syria and Yemen, the coronavirus agenda that has caused the Palestinian issue receded into the background, as well as political division both among the Arab world and inside Palestine itself, has enabled Israel to push ahead with its annexation plan.

It is known that a large number of Israelis do not support their government's annexation. In fact, some pro-Zionism Jewish organizations in Europe and the United States are also against it. Various countries including Jordan, Turkey, and the Gulf states made statements condemning the annexation. Some of the Trump-era US policymakers on Israel – like Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner - think the annexation should be phased in. Because they are worried that the dialogue between Israel and the Gulf states, which began in late 2018, could be disrupted.

Israel has been developing strategic partnerships with several Arab countries, notably the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, over its opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran. It also has military partnerships with these countries in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libyan crisis. Israel, along with the UAE in Libya, is backing warlord Khalifa Haftar. It is on the same side as Egypt regarding the future of natural gas in the Eastern Mediterranean.

In May, the normalization of relations between Israel and Turkey was especially on the agenda in the Turkish media. Israel's relatively cautious political steps in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the Libyan crisis are thought to likely to improve relations with Turkey. Israel's diplomatic representative in Turkey Roey Gilad said that although there are points of disagreement between Turkey and Israel, a diplomatic relationship could be developed through common interests. [7] But the biggest obstacle to improving relations between Turkey and Israel is Israel's violations of right against the Palestinians. The annexation of the West Bank is also Turkey's "red line".

The Israeli government was expected to submit its annexation plan to the Israeli parliament Knesset on July 1. But it was announced that the plan had been delayed. The delay came following warnings from the US to prevent Israel's deterioration of relations with countries of the region, prevent increasing reactions against it, and to prevent doubt over its legitimacy. But the annexation plan is not entirely shelved. Israel will bring up the West Bank annexation plan again as soon as possible.

[1] "The Separation Barrier", B'Tselem, 2017, https://www.btselem.org/separation_barrier

[2] "Israeli Occupation", PASSIA, 2019, <http://www.passia.org>

[3] <https://www.ochaopt.org/data/demolition>

[4] <https://www.ochaopt.org/data/casualties>

[5] "Number of Settlers in the Israeli Settlements in the West Bank, by Year and Region, 1986-2018", PCBS, <http://www.pcbs.gov.il>

[6] "İsrail Savunma Bakanı Gantz: Filistinlilerin yoğun olduğu bölgelerin ilhakına karşıyım", AA, 18.06.2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr>

[7] "Türkiye ve İsrail'in İdlip ve Covid-19 Dahil Ortak Çıkarları", Roey Gilad, Halimiz, 21.05.2020, <https://www.halimiz.com>