

'Creeping Annexation': Why Israel Shelved the 'Greater Jerusalem Law'

By Ramzy Baroud

The postponing of an Israeli Knesset bill that would have annexed major illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank to the Jerusalem municipality is the result of behind-the-scenes [US and, possibly, European pressure](#). But the story of the so-called "Greater Jerusalem law" does not end there.

Israel wants to maintain an absolute demographic Jewish majority in Jerusalem, including in occupied and illegally annexed Palestinian East Jerusalem. There is enough support in the Knesset and among the public to ensure that coveted Jewish dominance. But the political balances, and possible drawbacks, are just too delicate and great for Israel to get exactly what it wants, even if there is a clear consensus among Israeli Jewish politicians and the public to permanently change the status of the city.

One of the factors that the Israeli government is considering is the support of the Donald Trump administration. How far will Trump go to support Israeli transgressions, while continuing to advocate an ["ultimate deal"](#) – his own version of finding a political resolution to the conflict resulting from Israel's illegal occupation of Palestine?

True, the Trump administration has done its utmost to reassure Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of its undying loyalty. [Trump's last visit to Israel](#) was a major step in that direction, where US commitment to Israel's security and future were made abundantly and repeatedly clear. Moreover, the joint US-Israel push against the United Nations and its smaller institutions – like UNESCO and UNHRC – led by US Ambassador to

the UN, Nikki Haley, aims to torpedo future [international initiatives](#) that are critical of Israel's military occupation of Palestine.

Yet, on the other hand, using back channels and without much fanfare, Trump has been [promoting his own plan](#) for "regional peace", marks of which are still unclear.

While Israel is routinely allowed to slowly alter the landscape of occupied Palestinian areas, construct walls and expand its illegal settlements, an explicit, major plan to annex large regions of the West Bank would have ignited the kind of backlash that could likely bring an end to Trump's Middle East politicking and complicate his relations with various Arab governments.

The "Greater Jerusalem law" [would have done just that](#).

According to Israeli commentator [Shlomo Elder](#) the idea of expanding Jerusalem's municipal borders "to increase the city's population and to ensure its Jewish majority" was proposed by hardline Likud party member Yisrael Katz in 2007. It was deferred then, due to the fear of a strong international reaction.

The idea did not die. It morphed into a movement and politicians from all ideological backgrounds joined in, fearing that, in the future, Israel will lose the "demographic war" in Jerusalem, as well as in the rest of historic Palestine.

["Save Jewish Jerusalem"](#) was launched in 2016 and quickly enlisted the support of politicians, academics and other well-regarded Israelis, all united by their fear that they "would wake up with a Palestinian mayor in Jerusalem."

So, when the "Greater Jerusalem law" was introduced earlier this year, it seemed like the logical evolution of a current that has been on the rise for years.

The [bill proposed](#) to expand the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem to include major illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank, including Ma'aleh Adumim and the Gush Etzion settlement cluster. Moreover, it endeavored to bring 150,000 Jewish settlers into Jerusalem as eligible voters, who would have naturally tipped the political scene more to the right. Concurrently, the law would have further demoted the status of 100,000 Palestinians, who would find themselves in a political grey area.

The authors of the bill were hardly discrete about its intentions. One of the two authors is Katz himself, who is now a minister in Netanyahu's right-wing government. Explaining the motives behind the bill, Katz [blatantly said](#): The bill aims to "ensure a Jewish majority in the united city."

Israelis agree. According to a [national poll](#) published on 3 November, 72 per cent of Israeli Jews want Israel to [maintain control](#) over Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem; 68 per cent want Jews to be able to pray in these holy sites; and 58 per cent support Katz's initiative to expand the Jerusalem municipal boundaries and merge major illegal Jewish settlements under one municipality.

While members of the Israeli government (the majority in the Knesset) work towards the same goal of expanding illegal settlements, ensuring Israel's uncontested control over Jerusalem and thwarting Palestinian aspirations for an independent state, their political approaches are not always the same.

While paying lip service to peace, Netanyahu has no intentions of allowing a Palestinian state [to ever take shape](#), and is tactically working to ensure a complete physical partition between East Jerusalem and the West Bank, while, simultaneously linking major settlement blocs to Jerusalem.

One of such efforts includes the recent decision to completely

destroy two Palestinian villages of [Khan Al-Ahmar](#) (located in the E-1 corridor which connects Jerusalem to Ma'aleh Adumim) and Susya. The ethnic cleansing plan was [described](#) by Israeli rights group B'Tselem as "virtually unprecedented".

But Netanyahu had to temporarily flout his own method of "[creeping annexation](#)" of Palestinian land to join the burgeoning movement championed by Katz and others, who call for wholesale annexation and dramatic steps to ensure Jewish dominance.

By doing so, he was prepared to deal with another [popular Palestinian revolt](#), similar to the one that [culminated last July](#) in protest of Israel's closure of Al-Haram Al-Sharif/Al-Aqsa compound.

However, pressure [emanating in Washington](#), which reportedly took place just as the Knesset's ministerial committee on legislation was preparing to approve the bill on 29 October, ended the Israeli maneuver for now.

It was Netanyahu's office that [postponed](#) the bill again, fearing to upset the special relationship he has managed to espouse under the Trump presidency.

So, at least for now, Israel will resume its "creeping annexation" tactics, paying no heed to [international protests](#), and oblivious to the injustice inflicted on Palestinians. But, of course, the battle in the Israeli Knesset is not over, and more aggressive efforts at driving Palestinians out, while slowly annexing their land, are likely to follow.

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