

Gantz Vows to Annex Jordan Valley; Netanyahu Wants Sovereignty 'Without Exception'

Palestinian President Abbas responded that annexation of West Bank territory would 'eradicate the foundations' of the political process and throw region into instability.



Gantz and Kahol Lavan member Moshe Ya'alon during a tour of the West Bank
Elad Malka

Benny Gantz, chairman of Kahol Lavan, said Tuesday that he would work to advance Israel's annexation of the Jordan Valley after Israel's March 2 election, adding he is expecting the publication of the Trump administration's Mideast peace plan. In response, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who in the past has promised annexation not only of the Jordan Valley but of Area C territories comprising over 60% of the West Bank, said he will apply Israeli law to all Israeli settlements "without exception."

Speaking during a tour of the region, Gantz said "The Jordan Valley is Israel's eastern defensive barrier in any future conflict. Israeli governments that spoke of the possibility of returning the area [to Jordanian control] were making a grave strategic and security mistake, and we see this strip of land as an inseparable part of the State of Israel."

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When asked about the Trump administration's plan for Middle East peace, Gantz said, "I hope that President Trump will hurry and release his plan. Several weeks have passed. Many dramatic things are happening in the Middle East, and I'm looking forward to the plan's release."

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Shortly after, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israel will soon be extending its sovereignty to the Jordan Valley and northern Dead Sea area. Speaking at a Jerusalem campaign event, he said, "Not only will we not uproot anyone, but we will also apply Israeli law to all Israeli communities without exception."

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas responded Tuesday to Gantz's announcement, saying it will eradicate the foundations on which the political process is built, and put the entire region into a dangerous new phase of instability.

In the past, Gantz opposed the publication of the plan during an election campaign, saying such a move would be a gift to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and "outright intervention."

Gantz emphasized that the process of extending Israeli sovereignty over the area will be done legally and in coordination with international government bodies. "Until then we will assure the continued development of this land, we have to move forward," he added.

"We cannot allow for more incidents like the loss of Tzofar and Naharayiim, a grave event that only occurred, in my opinion, due to an ongoing policy of neglect of our relationship with Jordan," Gantz said, referencing two farming enclaves that were leased to Israel under the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan and were returned to Jordanian control in November.

Netanyahu responded to Gantz, asking "Why wait until after the election if we can apply sovereignty over the Jordan Valley right now with broad consensus in the Knesset?"

“Benny Gantz, I expect your answer by tonight, unless Ahmad Tibi vetoes you,” the prime minister concluded, referring to the Arab-majority’s Joint List co-chairman.

Gantz retorted by tweeting at Netanyahu: “First we’ll discuss immunity and then we’ll manage applying sovereignty,” addressing the premier’s request from the Knesset to be exempt from prosecution in the three corruption cases he is charged in.

Yisrael Beiteinu Chairman Avigdor Lieberman also expressed his support for the annexation of the Jordan Valley on Tuesday, saying his party had tabled a law on the matter last month.

Head of the Joint List, Ayman Odeh, reacted to Gantz’s statements saying, “Israel’s citizens deserve hope, not imitation – this is not how you overturn a prime minister. Annexation is the annihilation of any chance at democracy and peace. It seems you forgot that life goes on after the campaign. The pathetic attempt to gather a couple of votes from the right isn’t worth destroying our collective future.”

Leader of Meretz, Nitzan Horowitz, added, “So Gantz is also for annexation... If this is Kahol Lavan’s answer to the right’s hollow campaign promises – it shows a lack of confidence. If this is actually his intention, to unilaterally annex 40 percent of the territories and destroy any chance of an agreement – it shows a lack of common sense. I don’t know what’s worse. One way or another, it’s clear that there’s nothing for central-left voters in Kahol Lavan.”

Over the course of Israel’s last election campaign, Netanyahu reiterated that he plans to annex the Jordan Valley, saying he had discussed the issue with U.S. President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who at the time declared that the settlements are not illegal under international law.

“The time has come to apply Israeli sovereignty to the Jordan Valley and to normalize all the communities in Judea and Samaria, those that are in the [settlement] blocs and those outside them,” Netanyahu said during a conference in December. “They will be part of the State of Israel.”

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