



INTERNATIONAL LAW
JOURNAL

**WHITE BLACK
LEGAL LAW
JOURNAL
ISSN: 2581-
8503**

Peer - Reviewed & Refereed Journal

The Law Journal strives to provide a platform for discussion of International as well as National Developments in the Field of Law.

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With this thought, we hereby present to you

“OCCUPATION OR ANNEXATION? LEGAL ANALYSIS OF TERRITORIAL CLAIMS IN CONTEMPORARY CONFLICTS”

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Abstract

This research critically examines the legal distinction between military occupation and annexation under public international law, focusing on how these classifications are defined, interpreted, and applied in contemporary territorial conflicts. Grounded in a doctrinal methodology, the study analyzes primary legal instruments—including the Hague Regulations of 1907, the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, and Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter—alongside customary international law, judicial opinions, and relevant UN resolutions.

To contextualize the legal framework, the paper explores three case studies: Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Israel’s occupation and settlement policies in the West Bank, and the evolving sovereignty dynamics in Nagorno-Karabakh between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Through these examples, the research highlights how international law distinguishes between temporary military control and permanent territorial acquisition, and how actions such as citizenship policies, administrative integration, and international recognition or condemnation influence legal classification.

The study finds that while international law clearly prohibits annexation and regulates occupation, enforcement mechanisms remain weak, selectively applied, and often undermined by political interests, including UN Security Council vetoes. It concludes that preserving the legal distinction between occupation and annexation is critical to upholding territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the broader integrity of international legal order.

The paper offers reform recommendations, including greater use of ICJ advisory opinions, ICC

jurisdiction, regional legal mechanisms, and codification of non-recognition doctrines, to strengthen enforcement and reinforce international accountability.

Keyword: *Military Occupation, Annexation Territorial Sovereignty International Law (IHL) Self-Determination, Legal Framework*

1. Introduction

Territorial disputes have historically been among the most volatile and enduring sources of conflict in international relations. Despite the development of an extensive body of international law aimed at protecting state sovereignty and territorial integrity, contemporary global politics continue to witness military occupations and unilateral attempts at territorial annexation. These actions pose fundamental challenges to the legal order established by the United Nations Charter and other international treaties. This research paper critically examines the legal distinction between military occupation and annexation under international law and explores how these categories are applied to current territorial conflicts.

1.1 Defining Occupation and Annexation Under International Law

Military occupation is primarily governed by the Hague Regulations of 1907 and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. The Hague Regulations define occupation as the effective control of a territory by hostile forces without transferring sovereignty. It is generally considered a temporary situation, with the occupying power obliged to respect the existing laws and protect the civilian population during the period of control. The Fourth Geneva Convention further elaborates on the duties of an occupying power, emphasizing humanitarian protections and the prohibition against altering the occupied territory's status permanently.¹

In contrast, annexation involves the unilateral assertion of sovereignty over territory belonging to another state, typically following military conquest or occupation. Annexation violates the fundamental principle enshrined in Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, which prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.² The international community widely regards forcible annexation as illegal, prompting

¹ Hague Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, Oct. 18, 1907, 36 Stat. 2277, T.S. No. 539, arts. 42–56.

² Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, Aug. 12, 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 287 [hereinafter Geneva Convention IV].

condemnation and nonrecognition by international bodies such as the United Nations General Assembly.³ However, the line between occupation and annexation can blur, especially when occupying powers establish administrative control and attempt to integrate the territory politically and legally.

1.2 Research Question

This study centers on the following question: How does international law differentiate between military occupation and annexation, and how are these classifications applied to contemporary territorial conflicts? This question is critical in light of recent geopolitical developments, where occupying states have often sought to justify or legitimize territorial claims that many other states and international organizations view as illegal annexations.

1.3 Methodology and Scope

The research adopts a doctrinal approach, analyzing core sources of international law including treaties, customary international law, judicial decisions, and resolutions from the United Nations. This normative framework is supplemented by case study analyses of three high-profile territorial disputes: Crimea (Ukraine and Russia), the West Bank (Israel and Palestine), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia and Azerbaijan). These cases highlight the complexity and diversity of legal and political issues surrounding occupation and annexation.

The paper explores the legal criteria that distinguish occupation from annexation, such as the duration of control, attempts to alter the territory's political status, and international responses. While the paper does not engage in resolving the political aspects of these conflicts, it critically examines the extent to which international law provides tools to regulate territorial claims and protect the rights of affected populations.

1.4 Importance and Contribution

This study contributes to the scholarly and policy discourse on territorial sovereignty and conflict resolution by clarifying the legal parameters governing occupation and annexation. It also addresses challenges to enforcement and the political realities that often undermine legal principles. In doing so, the paper aims to inform international legal practice and support peaceful resolution of territorial disputes consistent with international law.

³ U.N. Charter art. 2, ¶4.

1.5 Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Define and clarify the concepts of military occupation and annexation under international law, highlighting key legal instruments and customary principles that govern each.
- Examine the legal frameworks and criteria that international law employs to differentiate occupation from annexation, with particular attention to state practice and judicial interpretations.
- Analyse prominent contemporary territorial disputes—specifically Crimea, the West Bank, and Nagorno-Karabakh—to illustrate how the concepts of occupation and annexation are applied in practice.
- Assess the legal and political consequences of occupation and annexation for the sovereignty of states, the rights of affected populations, and international peace and security.
- Evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of international legal mechanisms in addressing and resolving territorial conflicts involving occupation and annexation.

By addressing these objectives, this paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of how international law functions in complex territorial disputes and the challenges faced in enforcing its principles in the modern geopolitical context.

2. Conceptual Framework: Legal Definitions and Norms

Territorial sovereignty remains a foundational principle of international law, enshrined in the United Nations Charter and supported by an evolving framework of treaties, customary norms, and judicial interpretations. Understanding the legal distinction between military occupation and annexation is crucial for classifying and addressing modern territorial disputes. This section provides the conceptual basis for such a distinction, drawing from codified international legal instruments, case law, and practice.

2.1 Occupation: Temporary Military Control Without Sovereignty Transfer

The law of occupation is primarily codified in the Hague Regulations of 1907 and Geneva Convention IV of 1949. Article 42 of the Hague Regulations stipulates that “territory is considered occupied when it is actually placed under the authority of the hostile army,” and that occupation extends only to the territory where such authority has been established and can

be exercised.⁴ Occupation is thus defined by effective military control and is inherently temporary, without conferring sovereignty or altering the status of the territory.⁵

The Fourth Geneva Convention expands on this by imposing duties on the occupying power to protect civilians, maintain public order, and refrain from making permanent legal or political changes to the occupied area.⁶ Article 47 of the Convention clearly states that protected persons in occupied territory must not be deprived of the benefits of the Convention by any change in the government or annexation by the occupying power.⁷ These instruments collectively create a strong legal presumption that occupation does not entail or justify territorial acquisition.

The International Court of Justice (ICJ), in its Advisory Opinion on the Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, reaffirmed that the West Bank is considered occupied territory and that the presence of Israeli settlements constitutes a violation of international law.⁸ The ICJ emphasized that the occupying power is bound by both treaty law and customary international humanitarian law. This demonstrates that prolonged military control, even if exercised for decades, does not confer legality upon sovereignty claims.

2.2 Annexation: Unlawful Acquisition by Force

In contrast to occupation, annexation refers to the unilateral and permanent acquisition of territory by a state, typically following the use or threat of force. Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter prohibits “the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.”⁹ Annexation resulting from military conquest or occupation is widely regarded as illegal under contemporary international law.

This principle was robustly affirmed in UN General Assembly Resolution 2625 (XXV), which declares that “*no territorial acquisition resulting from the threat or use of force shall be*

⁴ Hague Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, art. 42, Oct. 18, 1907, 36 Stat. 2277, T.S. No. 539.

⁵ Id. at arts. 42–46.

⁶ Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War arts. 27–34, Aug. 12, 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 287 [hereinafter Geneva Convention IV].

⁷ Id. at art. 47.

⁸ Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Advisory Opinion, 2004 I.C.J. Rep. 136, ¶¶ 78–101 (July 9).

⁹ U.N. Charter art. 2, ¶ 4.

recognized as legal."¹⁰The ICJ reaffirmed this in the Nicaragua v. United States case, where it found that the prohibition on the use of force is a peremptory norm (*jus cogens*) of international law.¹¹

In the context of Crimea, General Assembly Resolution 68/262 on the territorial integrity of Ukraine rejected the Russian Federation's claim of annexation and affirmed the non-recognition of changes to territorial status achieved through the use of force.¹² Similarly, in the case of Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem, UN Security Council Resolution 478 declared Israel's Basic Law proclaiming Jerusalem as its capital to be a violation of international law and called on states not to recognize the annexation.¹³ These examples reinforce the legal consensus that annexation through force is a breach of international obligations.

2.3 Customary International Law and the Principle of Non-Recognition

Beyond treaty law, customary international law strongly supports the distinction between occupation and annexation. The principle of non-recognition—derived from the Stimson Doctrine and reinforced by widespread state practice—holds that states must not recognize as lawful any territorial acquisition resulting from aggression.¹⁴ This principle was further articulated in the Namibia Advisory Opinion (1971), where the ICJ concluded that South Africa's continued presence in Namibia after the revocation of its mandate was illegal and that other states had a duty not to recognize the resulting situation.¹⁵

Thus, the contemporary legal framework underscores that occupation, while regulated and permitted under specific conditions, cannot be transformed into lawful annexation through unilateral acts, prolonged control, or administrative integration. The distinction lies not merely in intent but in legal effect and international response. The norms of international law compel states to distinguish between lawful military occupation and unlawful annexation, ensuring that territorial changes occur only through lawful and consensual means.

¹⁰ G.A. Res. 2625 (XXV), Declaration on Principles of International Law (Oct. 24, 1970).

¹¹ Military and Paramilitary Activities in and against Nicaragua (Nicar. v. U.S.), Judgment, 1986 I.C.J. Rep. 14, ¶¶ 190–191 (June 27).

¹² G.A. Res. 68/262, Territorial Integrity of Ukraine, U.N. Doc. A/RES/68/262 (Mar. 27, 2014).

¹³ S.C. Res. 478, ¶¶ 1–5, U.N. Doc. S/RES/478 (Aug. 20, 1980).

¹⁴ Quincy Wright, The Legal Effects of the Stimson Doctrine, 33 Am. J. Int'l L. 526, 529 (1939).

¹⁵ Legal Consequences for States of the Continued Presence of South Africa in Namibia (South West Africa), Advisory Opinion, 1971 I.C.J. Rep. 16, ¶ 125 (June 21).

3. Legal Standards and Criteria: Distinguishing Occupation from Annexation

Distinguishing between military occupation and annexation in contemporary conflicts requires a contextual analysis of factual circumstances and legal intent. While both involve the presence of a foreign power on a territory, international law provides certain criteria and legal indicators to evaluate whether a situation constitutes a lawful occupation or an unlawful annexation. These include the duration of control, installation of administrative structures, changes to legal and political status, citizenship policies, international recognition or condemnation, and the right to self-determination of peoples.

A. Duration of Control and the Presumption of Temporariness

One of the core distinctions between occupation and annexation lies in the temporal nature of the foreign power's control. As per Article 42 of the 1907 Hague Regulations, occupation is defined as the effective control by a hostile army, but it is inherently temporary and does not transfer sovereignty.¹⁶ Even long-standing occupations are presumed to lack permanence unless accompanied by explicit acts of annexation. For instance, Israel's occupation of the West Bank, ongoing since 1967, is still classified as an occupation by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the United Nations, due to Israel's expressed intent to maintain control but without formal annexation of the entire area.¹⁷

In contrast, annexation involves a permanent claim to sovereignty, typically accompanied by legal declarations or constitutional amendments. Russia's incorporation of Crimea in 2014—through a constitutional amendment and integration of Crimea into the Russian Federation's legal and administrative structure—is widely regarded as a case of annexation.¹⁸

B. Installation of Administrative and Legal Structures

The installation of administrative structures, including local governance, judicial institutions, tax systems, and security forces under the direct control of the foreign power, is a strong indicator of annexation. While an occupying power is permitted under Article 43 of the Hague Regulations to maintain public order and civil life, it is prohibited from instituting permanent

¹⁶ Hague Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, art. 42, Oct. 18, 1907, 36 Stat. 2277, T.S. No. 539.

¹⁷ Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Advisory Opinion, 2004 I.C.J. Rep. 136, ¶ 78.

¹⁸ G.A. Res. 68/262, U.N. Doc. A/RES/68/262 (Mar. 27, 2014).

structural changes.¹⁹

Annexation becomes apparent when the foreign power introduces its national legal system, integrates the territory into its electoral framework, and eliminates local governance autonomy. This was observed in the case of Indonesia's annexation of East Timor, where Indonesian law and administration were imposed on the territory following military invasion.²⁰ The UN General Assembly and Security Council consistently rejected Indonesia's actions and affirmed East Timor's right to self-determination.²¹

C. Citizenship Policies and Demographic Engineering

A further indicator of annexation is the extension of citizenship or nationality to the population of the occupied territory. While humanitarian obligations exist for the protection of civilians during occupation, granting or imposing citizenship seeks to legally assimilate the population into the sovereign structure of the occupying power.

Russia's policy of mass passport distribution in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Crimea is often cited as a form of "passportization," used to establish a claim over people and, by extension, territory.²² Such actions contravene Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the transfer of the occupier's population into occupied territory and vice versa.²³

D. Recognition and Condemnation by International Bodies

The international community, particularly through the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and Security Council (UNSC), plays a central role in identifying and condemning annexation. The principle of non-recognition of unlawful situations, as emphasized in UNGA Resolution 2625 (XXV), is critical in delegitimizing annexation.²⁴

In the case of Crimea, UNGA Resolution 68/262 upheld Ukraine's territorial integrity and called upon states not to recognize changes resulting from Russia's use of force.²⁵ Similarly, UNSC Resolution 497 declared Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights "*null and void and without international legal effect.*"²⁶ The overwhelming international condemnation reinforces

¹⁹ Hague Convention, supra note 1, art. 43.

²⁰ José Ramos-Horta, East Timor and the United Nations, 45 J. Int'l Aff. 57 (1991).

²¹ G.A. Res. 3485 (XXX), U.N. Doc. A/RES/3485 (Dec. 12, 1975); S.C. Res. 384, U.N. Doc. S/RES/384 (Dec. 22, 1975).

²² Agnia Grigas, Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire 52–55 (Yale Univ. Press 2016).

²³ Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War art. 49, Aug. 12, 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 287.

²⁴ G.A. Res. 2625 (XXV), Declaration on Principles of International Law (Oct. 24, 1970).

²⁵ G.A. Res. 68/262, supra note 3.

²⁶ SC. Res. 497, U.N. Doc. S/RES/497 (Dec. 17, 1981).

the legal standard that annexation, when achieved through force, is inadmissible.

E. The Principle of Self-Determination

The right of peoples to self-determination, enshrined in Article 1 of the UN Charter and common Article 1 of the 1966 Covenants, remains a core criterion in evaluating territorial claims.²⁷ Occupations that suppress or obstruct the exercise of this right are likely to be viewed as illegal and potentially constituting annexation.

In the Namibia case, the ICJ held that South Africa's continued presence and control violated the right to self-determination of the Namibian people²⁸ Likewise, in Western Sahara, the ICJ emphasized that the wishes of the people must be the determining factor in any status resolution.²⁹ An occupation that transitions into annexation without the free and genuine consent of the affected population contradicts this foundational principle of international law.

4. Case Studies

To evaluate how international law distinguishes between occupation and annexation, this section examines three contemporary territorial disputes: Crimea (Ukraine v. Russia), Palestinian Territories (West Bank), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan v. Armenia). Each case presents complex legal challenges surrounding issues of sovereignty, effective control, and the principles of territorial integrity and self-determination.

4.1 Crimea: Ukraine v. Russia

The 2014 annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation is one of the most prominent contemporary examples of an alleged illegal annexation. Following the ouster of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, Russian military forces entered Crimea and quickly established de facto control. A referendum held on March 16, 2014, purportedly resulted in over 96% of voters favoring joining the Russian Federation.³⁰ Russia then formally incorporated Crimea as part of its territory.

²⁷ U.N. Charter art. 1, ¶ 2; International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights art. 1, Dec. 16, 1966, 999 U.N.T.S. 171.

²⁸ Legal Consequences for States of the Continued Presence of South Africa in Namibia (South West Africa), Advisory Opinion, 1971 I.C.J. Rep. 16, ¶ 52.

²⁹ Western Sahara, Advisory Opinion, 1975 I.C.J. Rep. 12, ¶ 59.

³⁰ Marc Weller, Russia's Annexation of Crimea: The Mills of International Law Grind Slowly but They Do Grind, 1 J. Conflict & Security L. 1, 4–6 (2014).

A. Legal Issues

From the standpoint of international law, several violations are apparent:

Violation of Ukrainian sovereignty: Russia's intervention and the holding of the referendum occurred without Ukraine's consent and involved the use of military force. This directly contravenes Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.³¹

B. Validity of the Referendum:

The Venice Commission and other international observers have argued that the referendum was held under coercive circumstances and lacked international legitimacy.³² As such, the result cannot be considered a valid expression of self-determination.

UNGA Resolution 68/262: The UN General Assembly passed this resolution affirming Ukraine's territorial integrity and declaring the referendum and annexation to have no legal validity.³³ The resolution calls on states not to recognize any alteration in the status of Crimea.³⁴

C. Legal Conclusion

Based on these facts, the Russian presence in Crimea began as a military occupation but rapidly transitioned into a de facto annexation. Russia's constitutional and administrative integration of the territory, issuance of passports, and extension of laws confirm its intent to permanently claim sovereignty — a direct violation of international law and Ukraine's territorial integrity.

4.2. Palestine and Israeli Settlements in the West Bank

The Israeli occupation of the West Bank, initiated during the 1967 Six-Day War, remains a central issue in the Middle East conflict. More than five decades later, the territory is under effective Israeli military and administrative control, raising questions about whether the situation still qualifies as an occupation or has elements of annexation.

³¹ U.N. Charter art. 2, ¶ 4.

³² Eur. Comm'n for Democracy Through Law (Venice Comm'n), Opinion on the Legal Questions Raised by the De Facto Referendum in Crimea, CDL-AD (2014)002 (Mar. 21, 2014).

³³ G.A. Res. 68/262, U.N. Doc. A/RES/68/262 (Mar. 27, 2014).

³⁴ Id

A. Legal Status

Under international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention, the West Bank is classified as occupied territory.³⁵ The ICJ, in its 2004 Advisory Opinion, confirmed this status, stating that Israeli settlements in the West Bank are in violation of Article 49(6) of the Convention.³⁶ Israel, however, disputes the applicability of the Convention, arguing that the West Bank was not sovereign territory prior to 1967 and thus is “disputed” rather than occupied. Nevertheless, this position has been rejected by the international community, including the UN Security Council.

B. UNSC Resolution 2334 (2016)

The most recent legal condemnation came with UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which reaffirmed that Israeli settlements have “no legal validity” and constitute a flagrant violation under international law.³⁷ It also demanded that Israel cease all settlement activity in occupied Palestinian territory.

C. Legal Conclusion

Although Israel has not formally declared sovereignty over the entire West Bank, its policies—such as settlement expansion, extension of Israeli law in parts of the territory, and citizenship benefits to settlers—suggest a creeping annexation strategy. Nevertheless, the international consensus remains that the West Bank is under occupation, and any claims to sovereignty are legally void.

4.3. Nagorno-Karabakh: Azerbaijan v. Armenia

The Nagorno-Karabakh region, internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, has been the subject of a long-standing dispute with Armenia, particularly following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

A. Historical Context

Between 1991 and 1994, armed conflict resulted in Armenian forces, along with local ethnic Armenian authorities, establishing de facto control over Nagorno-Karabakh and several

³⁵ Geneva Convention IV, *supra* note 8 in previous section, art. 49.

³⁶ Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Advisory Opinion, 2004 I.C.J. Rep. 136.

³⁷ S.C. Res. 2334, U.N. Doc. S/RES/2334 (Dec. 23, 2016).

surrounding Azerbaijani districts. A ceasefire was maintained for years, but Armenia maintained military and political influence in the region.

B. Legal Issues

The legal status of Armenian control prior to the 2020 war was widely regarded as unlawful occupation. Although Armenia did not officially annex Nagorno-Karabakh, it provided military and financial support and treated it as an extension of its territory. This control violated Azerbaijan's territorial integrity, as confirmed in multiple UN Security Council resolutions calling for withdrawal of occupying forces.³⁸

The argument of self-determination was raised by Armenian authorities and ethnic Armenians in the region. However, the ICJ's Advisory Opinion on Kosovo clarified that while self-determination is a right, it does not necessarily entitle a region to unilaterally secede without the consent of the parent state.³⁹

C. Restoration of Sovereignty in 2020

The 2020 conflict resulted in Azerbaijan regaining significant control over the region. Following this, Azerbaijan has reaffirmed its sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh, with increasing international recognition of its legal claim.

D. Legal Conclusion

The Armenian control of Nagorno-Karabakh prior to 2020 was effectively an occupation, unsupported by international recognition. Post-2020 developments have shifted the legal landscape in favor of Azerbaijani sovereignty, while the question of self-determination remains unresolved.

5. Legal Consequences of Annexation and Occupation

The distinction between occupation and annexation is not merely semantic; it has profound legal and political consequences. International humanitarian law (IHL), particularly the Hague Regulations of 1907 and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, impose specific obligations on occupying powers. In contrast, annexation — especially when achieved through force — is illegal under international law and triggers a distinct set of consequences, including the doctrine

³⁸ S.C. Res. 822, 853, 874, 884, U.N. Docs. S/RES/822–884 (1993).

³⁹ Accordance with International Law of the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Respect of Kosovo, Advisory Opinion, 2010 I.C.J. Rep. 403, ¶¶ 78–82.international legal norms upholding territorial integrity.

of non-recognition, the imposition of sanctions, and international state responsibility for violations of human rights and peremptory norms.

5.1 Obligations of Occupying Powers under IHL

Under Article 42 of the Hague Regulations of 1907, a territory is considered occupied when it is “*actually placed under the authority of the hostile army.*”⁴⁰The Fourth Geneva Convention, particularly Articles 27–34 and 47–78, sets out the duties of an occupying power.

The core obligations of the occupying power include:

Maintenance of public order and civil life while respecting the laws in force in the occupied territory (Hague Regulations, art. 43).⁴¹

Protection of civilians, including prohibitions against collective punishment, torture, and deportation (GCIV, arts. 27, 31, 49).⁴²

Prohibition of settlement activity or demographic changes in the occupied territory, particularly the transfer of the occupying power’s own population into the territory (GCIV, art. 49(6)).⁴³

Importantly, the occupier may not acquire sovereignty over the territory. The occupation is considered temporary, and sovereignty remains with the occupied state.

5.2. Legal Consequences of Unlawful Annexation

Annexation — the unilateral incorporation of foreign territory into a state’s sovereign domain — is prohibited under customary international law and Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which bars the use of force against the territorial integrity of another state.⁴⁴ When annexation is conducted through coercion or military force, it constitutes a serious violation of international law and triggers a range of legal consequences.

⁴⁰ Hague Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, art. 42, Oct. 18, 1907, 36 Stat. 2277.

⁴¹ Id. art. 43.

⁴² Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War arts. 27, 31, 49, Aug. 12, 1949, 6 U.S.T. 3516 [hereinafter GCIV].

⁴³ Id. art. 49(6).

⁴⁴ U.N. Charter art. 2, ¶ 4.

A. The Doctrine of Non-Recognition

The doctrine of non-recognition, first articulated in the Stimson Doctrine (1932) and reaffirmed by UN General Assembly Resolution 2625 (1970), provides that states are obligated not to recognize territorial changes brought about by the use of force.⁴⁵ This principle was further elaborated by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in its Wall Advisory Opinion, which stated that third states must not recognize or assist in the unlawful situation.⁴⁶

In the context of Crimea, for example, UNGA Resolution 68/262 called upon all states and international organizations not to recognize any alteration of the status of Crimea.⁴⁷

B. Sanctions and International Accountability

States involved in unlawful annexations may face economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and international criminal accountability. For instance, the annexation of Crimea led to a range of sanctions imposed by the European Union, United States, and other countries targeting Russian individuals, entities, and sectors.

These measures serve both a deterrent and punitive function, aiming to pressure the violating state to reverse its actions and uphold international norms.

5.3. Responsibility for Human Rights Violations and Population Transfer

Both occupying powers and annexing states may bear international responsibility for violations of human rights and humanitarian law during their control of territory. This includes:

A. Forced Population Transfers and Settler Colonialism

The Fourth Geneva Convention prohibits both the deportation of protected persons from occupied territory and the transfer of the occupier's own population into the territory (art. 49).⁴⁸ Violations of this provision may constitute grave breaches and war crimes under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (art. 8(2)(b)(viii)).⁴⁹

This has particular relevance in the West Bank, where Israeli settlement activity has been widely condemned as a form of settler colonialism, violating both IHL and the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people.

⁴⁵ G.A. Res. 2625 (XXV), Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation Among States (Oct. 24, 1970).

⁴⁶ Legal Consequences of the Construction of a Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, Advisory Opinion, 2004 I.C.J. Rep. 136, ¶ 159.

⁴⁷ G.A. Res. 68/262, U.N. Doc. A/RES/68/262 (Mar. 27, 2014).

⁴⁸ GCIV, *supra* note 3, art. 49.

⁴⁹ Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court art. 8(2)(b)(viii), July 17, 1998, 2187 U.N.T.S. 90.

B. Human Rights Obligations

While IHL applies during armed conflict and occupation, international human rights law also continues to apply concurrently. This includes rights enshrined in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The Human Rights Committee and the International Court of Justice have consistently held that these obligations extend extraterritorially, including to occupied or annexed territories.⁵⁰

Occupying or annexing states are thus responsible for:

- Arbitrary arrests and detentions
- Suppression of freedom of speech and assembly
- Violations of property rights and due process

Where such violations occur systematically, they may amount to state responsibility, necessitating reparations under the Draft Articles on the Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts (ARSIWA).⁵¹

6. Critical Analysis of Legal Framework

The legal frameworks governing occupation and annexation under international law are well-established. However, their effectiveness in practice is deeply contested. While instruments such as the UN Charter, Geneva Conventions, and customary international law provide a normative basis for regulating state behaviour, the enforcement of these norms remains fragile, selective, and politicized. This section critically assesses whether existing legal mechanisms are adequate, how enforcement is undermined, and the impact of double standards and regional responses on the legitimacy and efficacy of international law in territorial conflicts.

6.1. Sufficiency of Legal Frameworks

The foundational legal norms that prohibit annexation and regulate occupation are clear and comprehensive. Article 2(4) of the UN Charter categorically prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.⁵² The Fourth Geneva Convention and Hague Regulations outline the obligations of occupying powers, providing a

⁵⁰ Human Rights Comm., General Comment No. 31, U.N. Doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.13 (2004), ¶ 10.

⁵¹ Int'l Law Comm'n, Draft Articles on Responsibility of States for Internationally Wrongful Acts, with commentaries, U.N. Doc. A/56/10 (2001), arts. 1–2, 31–34.

⁵² U.N. Charter art. 2, ¶ 4.

robust legal structure to govern military occupations.⁵³

However, the **interpretation** and **application** of these rules in practice reveal several shortcomings:

- The law does not adequately address prolonged occupations (e.g., Israel's control over the West Bank since 1967), which blur the line between occupation and de facto annexation.
- The lack of consensus on self-determination vs. territorial integrity creates legal ambiguity in contested territories such as Nagorno-Karabakh and Kosovo.
- There is an absence of automatic enforcement mechanisms, leaving compliance dependent on political will, which is often lacking.
- Thus, while the legal framework is normatively sound, its operational sufficiency is undermined by enforcement deficits and interpretative gaps.

6.2. Political Interests and the Problem of Enforcement

A critical weakness in the international legal order is the lack of consistent enforcement. The UN Security Council (UNSC) is the principal organ empowered to take enforcement action under Chapter VII of the UN Charter.⁵⁴ However, the veto power held by the five permanent members (P5) — particularly Russia, the United States, and China — has paralyzed the Council in several major territorial disputes.

A. Crimea

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 was swiftly condemned by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) through Resolution 68/262, affirming Ukraine's territorial integrity.⁵⁵ However, attempts to pass binding resolutions through the UNSC were vetoed by Russia, effectively shielding itself from sanctions or legal consequences.

B. Palestine

Conversely, the United States has used its veto power to block or weaken numerous resolutions critical of Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories. For example, UNSC Resolution 2334

⁵³ Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War, Aug. 12, 1949, 6 U.S.T. 3516 [hereinafter GCIV]; Hague Convention (IV) Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, Oct. 18, 1907, 36 Stat. 2277.

⁵⁴ U.N. Charter ch. VII, arts. 39–51.

⁵⁵ G.A. Res. 68/262, U.N. Doc. A/RES/68/262 (Mar. 27, 2014).

(2016), which declared Israeli settlements a “flagrant violation” of international law, passed only after the U.S. abstained — a rare exception.⁵⁶ This highlights the selective application of enforcement, eroding the legitimacy of international law.

6.3. Double Standards in Application

The contrasting international responses to Crimea and Palestine expose the double standards in the enforcement of occupation and annexation norms.

- In Crimea, swift sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and widespread non-recognition were imposed on Russia, a geopolitical rival of the West.
- In Palestine, despite decades of recognized occupation and continued settlement expansion, meaningful enforcement remains largely absent, with Israel facing minimal consequences.
- This differential treatment undermines the credibility of international legal principles, reinforcing the view that international law is politicized and unequally applied based on strategic alliances

6.4. Role of Regional Organizations

Regional organizations can supplement international efforts, particularly when the UN system is blocked. However, their impact varies significantly by region.

A. European Union (EU)

The EU has played an active role in non-recognition policies, imposing targeted sanctions on Russia following the annexation of Crimea and supporting Ukraine’s territorial integrity.⁵⁷ It also maintains a legal position that Israeli settlements are illegal, yet lacks unified enforcement.

B. Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

The OIC has consistently condemned Israeli occupation and supports Palestinian statehood, but lacks coercive capacity or a unified enforcement mechanism beyond rhetorical declarations.⁵⁸

C. African Union (AU)

The AU adheres strongly to the principle of territorial integrity, shaped by its colonial past. It

⁵⁶ S.C. Res. 2334, U.N. Doc. S/RES/2334 (Dec. 23, 2016).

⁵⁷ Council of the European Union, EU Sanctions Against Russia Over Ukraine Crisis (2022),

⁵⁸ Final Communiqué of the 14th Islamic Summit Conference: Hand in Hand toward the Future, OIC Doc. No. 14-SUMMIT-FC (May 31, 2019), <https://www.oic-oci.org/docdown/?docID=4567&refID=1250>.

opposed Morocco's withdrawal from the OAU over the Western Sahara issue and supports self-determination there.⁵⁹ Yet, intra-African disputes (e.g., Ethiopia-Eritrea, Sudan-South Sudan) show the AU's limited enforcement ability.⁶⁰

These regional efforts are valuable but often fragmented and politically constrained. Without coordination with global institutions, their influence is largely symbolic.

This critical analysis reveals that international legal norms on occupation and annexation, while normatively robust, suffer from selective enforcement, political manipulation, and regional fragmentation. The UN Security Council's paralysis, driven by P5 vetoes, prevents consistent accountability. Meanwhile, regional organizations lack enforcement teeth and are hindered by internal political dynamics. The disparity between the treatment of Crimea and Palestine exemplifies how strategic interests overshadow legal principles, weakening the authority of international law.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

The study titled "Occupation or Annexation? Legal Analysis of Territorial Claims in Contemporary Conflicts" undertakes a comprehensive legal analysis of how international law distinguishes between two closely related but fundamentally different concepts: military occupation and annexation. Through doctrinal and case study methodologies, the research examined the normative frameworks and legal criteria that differentiate these two forms of territorial control and assessed their application to prominent contemporary conflicts — namely, Crimea (Russia-Ukraine), the West Bank (Israel-Palestine), and Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia-Azerbaijan). The findings not only reinforce the doctrinal clarity of international law on these matters but also expose the significant gaps in enforcement, double standards, and political selectivity that undermine the very principles the legal system seeks to protect.

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

A. Legal Clarity in the Distinction Between Occupation and Annexation

The first key finding is that military occupation, as regulated by the Hague Regulations of 1907 and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, is deemed a temporary control of territory without

⁵⁹ <https://www.peaceau.org/en/article/communique-of-the-peace-and-security-council-of-the-african-union-au-at-its-496th-meeting-held-on-27-march-2015-on-the-situation-in-western-sahara>

⁶⁰ Tim Murithi, *The African Union's Transition from Non-Intervention to Non-Indifference: An Ad Hoc Approach to the Responsibility to Protect?*, 103 *Afr. Aff.* 1, 9–14 (2004)

sovereignty transfer. ¹ Occupying powers must adhere to humanitarian obligations, such as maintaining civil order and protecting civilians, while refraining from altering the political or legal structure of the territory.²

In contrast, annexation constitutes the permanent and unilateral assertion of sovereignty over another state's territory, typically in violation of Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, which prohibits the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state.³ The legal doctrine of non-recognition, affirmed in UNGA Resolution 2625 and customary international law, mandates that the international community not recognize such territorial changes.⁴

The legal criteria distinguishing occupation from annexation include:

- Duration and permanence of control
- Introduction of national administrative and legal structures
- Issuance of citizenship or demographic manipulation
- Recognition or condemnation by international bodies
- The impacted population's right to self-determination

In all three case studies, these criteria were useful in legally characterizing the actions of the occupying or annexing power:

- Crimea represents a clear case of illegal annexation in violation of Ukraine's sovereignty, where the UN General Assembly affirmed non-recognition through Resolution 68/262.⁵
- The West Bank, though not formally annexed in its entirety, is undergoing a process of de facto annexation via settlement expansion, legal assimilation, and demographic changes — all widely condemned by the UN Security Council (Resolution 2334) and other international bodies.⁶
- In Nagorno-Karabakh, Armenia exercised effective control without formal annexation but lacked legal title. The post-2020 shift in favor of Azerbaijan's sovereignty further complicates the legal balance between self-determination and territorial integrity.

B. International Law as a Shield Against "Might Makes Right"

The second finding is the fundamental role international law plays in safeguarding territorial integrity and preventing power politics from overriding legal norms. The development of a

legal framework governing occupation and annexation aims to uphold an international order where sovereignty, non-aggression, and peaceful dispute resolution are paramount.

However, the credibility of international law is tested when powerful states violate these norms with minimal repercussions. As seen in Crimea and Palestine, selective enforcement, Security Council paralysis, and political alliances can hinder accountability. Nevertheless, international law remains essential:

- It provides normative clarity and juridical mechanisms for defining unlawful behavior.
- It empowers victim states to frame their claims within legal parameters.
- It allows for diplomatic and symbolic responses like non-recognition, sanctions, and ICJ advisory opinions.

The continued invocation of these legal principles by states, international organizations, and civil society confirms that international law still commands moral and legal authority, even when enforcement is imperfect.

C. Gaps, Selectivity, and Double Standards

While the normative framework is largely robust, the paper identifies several practical deficiencies:

- **Lack of Enforcement Mechanisms:** There are no automatic sanctions or penalties for states engaging in unlawful annexation. Enforcement relies on the political will of other states and institutions, often absent due to strategic interests.
- **Security Council Paralysis:** The veto power held by permanent members (e.g., Russia, the U.S.) undermines consistent enforcement. Russia's veto prevented action against its annexation of Crimea, while U.S. vetoes have shielded Israel from legal consequences regarding settlements.⁷
- **Double Standards:** The swift international response to Russia's actions in Crimea — including sanctions and diplomatic condemnation — stands in sharp contrast to the muted enforcement in Palestine, despite comparable violations. This selective application erodes trust in international legal institutions and undermines their legitimacy.
- **Limited Role of Regional Bodies:** Organizations like the EU, OIC, and AU play constructive but fragmented roles. The EU has been most active in sanctioning Russia, but lacks a unified policy toward Israel. The OIC and AU issue statements but lack coercive authority to enforce legal outcomes.

7.2 Recommendations and Reform Proposals

To bridge the gap between legal norms and actual enforcement, the study recommends the following reforms:

A. Strengthen the Role of the ICJ

The International Court of Justice should be more frequently engaged to issue advisory opinions on contested occupations and annexations. For example, its Wall Advisory Opinion on the West Bank helped establish the illegality of Israeli settlements.⁸ More frequent engagement can help clarify legal ambiguities and increase international pressure.

B. Expand ICC Jurisdiction Over Annexation-Linked Crimes

The International Criminal Court should actively pursue cases involving forcible population transfer, destruction of civilian property, and other grave breaches of IHL that often accompany annexation. This would impose individual criminal responsibility in addition to state responsibility.⁹

C. Codify Non-Recognition into National Legislation

States should legislate the non-recognition of territorial acquisition by force into domestic law. This could prohibit trade, investment, and diplomatic representation in annexed areas, reinforcing international law at the national level.

D. Create Automatic Sanctions Triggers

The international community, through the UNGA or regional organizations, should establish pre-agreed sanctions mechanisms that are triggered upon clear violations of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. This would bypass the gridlock in the Security Council and ensure consistent responses.

E. Reform Veto Power in the UNSC

Though politically challenging, reforming or restricting the use of veto power in cases of serious violations of jus cogens norms, such as illegal annexation, is crucial for the long-term credibility of the Security Council.

F. Empower Regional Legal Mechanisms

Regional organizations should be equipped with legal and quasi-judicial institutions capable of

reviewing and responding to territorial disputes. This includes strengthening the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, ECtHR, and expanding the jurisdiction of regional human rights bodies.

7.3 Final Reflections

The global legal order is at a crossroads. On the one hand, the legal norms regulating occupation and annexation are deeply embedded in treaties, court decisions, and state practice. On the other hand, these norms are increasingly undermined by strategic power politics, creating a dangerous precedent where territorial acquisition by force is met with impunity or passivity.

Yet, international law remains a living system, not merely dependent on state behavior but also shaped by civil society, legal scholars, courts, and non-state actors. Upholding its principles requires persistent engagement, critical scrutiny, and above all, a renewed commitment to the rule of law.

This study reaffirms that the line between occupation and annexation is both legally significant and politically consequential. Preserving that distinction, and enforcing the legal consequences of each, is vital for ensuring that force does not replace law, and that sovereignty is protected not by might, but by right.

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