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The Middle East: intractable conflict?: Jordan's unavoidable stake in the Middle East peace process

Report

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Jordan's Unavoidable Stake in the Middle East Peace Process

If we don't plan for ourselves, we will be planned for.' King Hussein's adage about the risks inherent in the Middle East peace process for Jordan remains as true today as it did when it was delivered three decades ago. Despite the signature of a bilateral peace treaty with Israel in October 1994, almost exactly fifteen years ago, Jordan retains an unavoidable stake in the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The reasons are straightforward but worth repeating. Jordan has religious, economic, historical, political and social ties to the West Bank which, despite King Hussein's July 1988 announcement of the severance of administrative links, remain salient today. The two decades of Jordanian rule between 1948 and 1967, the Hashemites' role as custodians of the Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem, the regular traffic across the Allenby bridge, the interests of its substantial Palestinian population and the simple facts of geography mean that Jordan must always retain a large interest in the future status of the West Bank. In particular, the questions of the fate of Jerusalem, the right of return of refugees, and water rights in the Palestinian-Israeli final status talks directly concern the Hashemite Kingdom. Continuing sensitivities on the issue of the Palestinian right of return were reflected in a speech by King Abdullah on 4 August in which he denounced rumours circulating in Amman to the effect that Jordan had offered Israel and the US a secret deal denying the Palestinian refugees resident in Jordan the right of return to their former homes in Israel. According to the King these rumours were harmful to Jordan's 'national unity and stability'.

The same theme was recently reflected from another, perhaps more surprising quarter. Hamas leader Khaled Misha'1 took the opportunity, while visiting Jordan to attend his father's funeral in August, to make a sophisticated speech in support both of Palestinian-Jordanian



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solidarity, and Jordan's national integrity. Rejecting the notion of any Palestinian-Jordanian confederation prior to the creation of a Palestinian state, he emphasised that Hamas opposed any American-Israeli project which would 'harm Jordan and disrupt its demographic balance'. Proclaiming his family's Jordanian roots, Misha'1 declared 'I am the son of Karak and the son of Jordan. This is my country in which I grew up and for which I feel love, loyalty and belonging. Damned be the Sykes-Picot agreement which divided Jordan and Palestine into two states.' Misha'1 blended his protestations of friendship with a plea to the Jordanian regime: 'hear from us instead of hearing about us.' 'Hamas is part of the solution, not the problem', he claimed.

But, despite these pleas, it is unlikely that Jordan will again become involved in a dialogue with Hamas and in the search for Palestinian unity with its rival Fatah. The regime had its fingers badly burnt when the tentative efforts at bridge-building with Hamas, launched by the then Chief of Intelligence Mohammed al-Dahabi, were torpedoed by the Gaza war in December 2008. Under apparent US pressure, contacts with Hamas were terminated, and Dahabi

was removed from his post. Although Jordan retains good links to the Fatah leadership on the West Bank, it is likely to confine itself in future to public calls for unity, and private criticisms of all parties involved, rather than directly re-engaging in the search for Palestinian unity.

The under-cutting of its efforts to engage with Hamas during the Gaza war reflects one of the continuing uncomfortable realities of the peace process for Jordan. As outlined above, the regime has clear interests in the outcome of such a process, but very little ability to influence it. It must therefore use its contacts with the US, Israel, Fatah and the other Arab states to try to keep abreast, but not ahead, of developments. But the lessons of the 1990s' peace process suggest that this relatively passive strategy on its own will be insufficient. Despite King Hussein's close contacts with all of the parties involved during those years the Oslo process between Israel and the PLO still emerged from out of the blue for Jordan.

The best chance Jordan has to add a proactive element to its strategy, to plan rather than being planned for in Hussein's terms, lies in its relations with the Obama

Administration. Under the Bush Administration, while Jordan's economic ties with the US blossomed on the back of the earlier signature of a free trade agreement, its political role was largely overlooked by the Administration. Under Obama, there has been a definite change in tone. To begin with, King Abdullah was the first regional leader, whether Arab or Israeli, to visit Washington to meet the new president in April. Both the public and private tone of the meeting was positive and businesslike: it was clear that the new Administration saw more of a role for Jordan than its predecessor had done in helping to shape a positive Arab response should the Israeli-Palestinian peace process begin to move forward. On the personal level, there was also something of a generational bond in evidence between King Abdullah and President Obama. In private, though, the Jordanians also voiced their fears, particularly about the dangers posed by various Israeli actions in Jerusalem, including certain 'archaeological' works in the vicinity of the Haram al-Sharif.



King Abdullah was the first regional leader to visit Washington to meet Barack Obama

These Jordanian hopes and fears were both reflected in an important interview King Abdullah gave to *The Times* newspaper in May in the wake of his US visit. This appeared under the somewhat sensationalised headline of 'King Abdullah of Jordan's Warning: Peace Now or It's War Next Year'. The King's hopes centred on the ambitious regional peace plan which he believed the Obama Administration was preparing. This would involve not just a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but a '57 state solution' whereby the entire Muslim world would recognise the Jewish state as part of the peace deal. His fears meanwhile centred on what might happen if this ambitious agenda was stillborn. 'If we delay our peace negotiations then there is going to be another conflict between Arabs or Muslims and Israel in the next 12-18 months', he warned.

The dangers for Jordan itself should the Israeli-Palestinian peace process remain stalled were underlined by the political storm surrounding a draft resolution endorsed by 53 members of the Israeli Knesset in June calling for 'two states for two peoples on the two banks of the River Jordan'. While the resolution was put forward by a member of the far right National Union Party the fact that it attracted the support of figures such as Labour Party leader Ehud Barak made it an even greater cause of political concern in Jordan. The fear that the 'Jordan is Palestine' slogan reflected in the resolution might one day be translated into policy by a frustrated right-wing government in Israel remains a persistent worry for the regime. The Knesset resolution prompted Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh to summon the Israeli ambassador to deliver a formal diplomatic protest. While the peace treaty between the two states should in theory preclude any such threatening development in Israeli policy in practice the regime has pursued an extra insurance policy in the form of intimate intelligence cooperation aimed at making itself indispensable to Israel. Evidently, though, none of this weighed particularly heavily in the scales for the 53 Knesset members who supported the resolution.

For similar reasons, Jordan is likely to remain wary of attempts on the part of the Netanyahu government to draw it into some sort of economic solution to the Palestinian question on the West Bank. Thus, Prime Minister Netanyahu's offer in July to extend the opening hours for traffic crossing the Allenby Bridge between the West Bank and Jordan was received circumspectly by the Jordanian government.

In sum, then, for Jordan, it has always been the process part of the peace process which holds out the greatest dangers. No wonder that King Abdullah told *The Times* correspondent that 'we are sick and tired of the process.' While a stable peace, involving the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, which develops close economic and political ties with Jordan and lives at peace with Israel and its other Arab neighbours, would be the ideal, the process of getting there holds out many potential dangers. Will Jordan's interests be taken into account as the process unfolds, or will they be swept to one side as more powerful parties pursue their own agendas? While Jordan is undoubtedly trying to plan for itself as the process unfolds the nagging question still remains: 'are we being planned for?'