



TEL AVIV NOTES

AN UPDATE ON POLITICAL AND STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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UNCROSSING THE JORDAN BRIDGE

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On June 11, Jordanian Interior Minister Awad Khulayfat announced a new set of restrictions on Palestinians traveling into Jordan via the King Hussein Bridge. Khulayfat declared that the move was coordinated with the Palestinian Authority, and the Jordanian media even quoted the Palestinian Ambassador to Jordan, Omar Khatib, as saying that the change was "supportive of the Palestinian people in their ongoing struggle for freedom and independence."

Under the new regulations, which came into force a few days later, West Bank or Gaza Palestinians holding "green cards" (equivalent to two-year passports) must have relatives in Jordan, state the reason for their visit and, above all, obtain prior permission from the Interior Ministry before crossing the River. Upon arrival, they are required to register at the nearest police station. Jordanian passport holders, Palestinians holding "yellow cards," and businessmen, students and visitors seeking medical treatment or traveling elsewhere via Jordan are exempt from these regulations. Calling the change "temporary" and "precautionary," Jordan maintained that the move does not "restrict" the movement of "green card holders" across the Bridge but

only "regulates" their residency in Jordan.

At first, PA officials went along with the argument that the moves were part of a "streamlining" reform in the Interior Ministry and were not directed at the Palestinians. Within days, however, discord between Jordan and the PA came out into the open as Palestinians began to express their displeasure. Stories about "stranded" Palestinians were widely reported in Arab media and references were made to a previous agreement between the late King Hussein and PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat according to which existing procedures were to remain in effect until the advent of Palestinian statehood.

On June 19, Palestinian Civil Aviation Minister Jamil al-Tarifi met Khulayfat in Amman to sort out the problems posed by the new restrictions. Following the meeting, Tarifi told the media that the problem had been resolved and that there would not be any impediment to travel by Palestinians via the Hussein Bridge. But this optimistic conclusion was quickly denied and Khulayfat maintained that the regulations would continue in force.

Since its opening following the June 1967

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war, the King Hussein Bridge has been the only land exit route for the residents of the West Bank and keeping it open was a cornerstone of Jordanian policy vis-à-vis the territories. For its part, Israel occasionally closed the Bridge for security reasons. The Tel Aviv discotheque bombing carried out by a Palestinian from Jordan at the beginning of June added a new dimension to the situation.

The recent Jordanian move raises a number of questions. Officially, it was portrayed as a preemptive step against any Israeli conspiracy to "empty Palestine of its population." Ambassador Khatib endorsed it as a means of thwarting "Sharon's settlement policy, which seeks to displace the Palestinians and replace them with colonialist Jewish immigrants." And some Jordanian officials declared that the new measures were necessary because of widespread criticism that the Kingdom was "easing" the entry of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza and even "assisting Palestinians to vacate their cities and villages."

However, the recent reduction of violence, growing diplomatic activity and Israeli restraint raise serious doubts about the official explanations. After some initial noises about Israel's alleged transfer policies, even Jordanian and Palestinian media discounted the fears of expulsion as exaggerated and suggested that migration into PA-controlled territory actually exceeds emigration from it. Furthermore, since the controversial deportation of 400 suspected Hamas activists in December 1992, a move that was eventually rescinded, Israel has not resorted to individual or collection expulsion of Palestinians. In the words of one Jordanian critic, Jordan acted, not during a "diplomatic vacuum," but during "diplomatic abundance," and this raised suspicions about its motives.

Coming amidst Jordanian "steadfast support" for the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the nature of the

restrictions provides some clues to the whole episode. The restrictions do not apply to Palestinians holding five-year Jordanian passports or to "yellow card" holders. Unlike the "green card" holders, the holders of "yellow cards" have permanent residency rights in Jordan. In other words, Jordan is seeking to restrict the flow of Palestinians who do not have Jordanian passports or residency rights in Jordan. By demanding that they seek permission from the Interior Ministry to use the Bridge, Jordan tries to ensure that they do not overstay their visit. This is a normal procedure for foreigners in other countries, but its application now to West Bank and Gaza Palestinians is another step in the formalization of Jordanian disengagement from the territories. It comes amidst growing debate about Jordan's identity and the future of Palestinians in the Kingdom. While committed to the unity of Jordanians of Transjordanian and Palestinian origin, King Abdallah is clearly drawing a line of separation between Jordanian and Palestinian citizens. These restrictions do not resolve the "Palestinian problem" inside Jordan, but they do provide a clue to Jordan's determination to disengage from the future Palestinian entity.

Secondly, this change complements the classification of Hamas as a non-Jordanian organization. In the past, Hamas leaders used Jordan as a platform for virulent anti-Israel statements, thus placing the Kingdom at odds with Israel. Having already proscribed the membership of Jordanians in foreign organizations, Abdallah is now seeking to control the movement of Palestinian Hamas members into Jordan.

Finally, the Bridge is the lifeline for the majority of Palestinians to the outside world. This gives Amman some leverage vis-à-vis the Palestinian Authority on economic and political issues of concern to Jordan.