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JORDAN: ISRAEL'S (USUALLY) QUIET NEIGHBOR

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The incident that took place in the northern sector of the Israel-Jordanian border on 25 December, in which an Israeli soldier and two terrorists were killed, was an unusual occurrence. Incidents such as this are not unprecedented, but they tend to happen only once every few years and are by no means the norm on Israel's border with the Hashemite Kingdom. The terrorists, most probably Palestinian, may have come from Syria with the object of not only attacking an Israeli target but also complicating Jordan's relations with Israel; some groups have tried to do this in the past at the behest of their Syrian minders. But if this was their goal, they did not succeed. On the contrary, the level of cooperation between Israeli forces and their Jordanian counterparts at the scene was most impressive and instrumental in putting an end to the terrorist operation.

Israel has no such intimate and reliable cooperation in security matters with any of its other neighbors. The complete collapse of any semblance of security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority only serves to highlight the extraordinary understanding with Jordan. Indeed, the level of mutual interest and trust

built up between Jordan and Israel over decades culminated in the signing of a peace treaty in 1994 that does not include any security arrangements at all -- no demilitarized zones, no early warning stations and no international forces -- even though Israel shares a longer land border with Jordan than with any other state in the region. By way of contrast, such arrangements were part and parcel of Israel's treaty with Egypt and would be essential components of any future treaty with Syria. The critical importance of the peace treaty, like so much else in Jordan's relations with Israel, is not linked to the two countries' bilateral problems, of which there are few, but rather to their far more complex relations with third parties. The two most prominent of these are the Palestinians, on the one hand, and Iraq, on the other.

Due to Jordan's geopolitical centrality, situated between Israel and Iraq and at the core of the Palestinian question (about half of its population is of Palestinian origin), Jordan is of far greater importance to regional order and stability than its modest size and power would otherwise suggest. The peace treaty between Israel and Jordan was designed to prevent the



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deployment at any time in the future of Iraqi forces in Jordan and to secure Jordan as a stable buffer between Israel and Iraq. It follows that Israel has a vested interest in the stability of the Hashemite Kingdom. This has always been true and is even more so today. With Israel virtually at war with the Palestinian Authority and deeply concerned about Saddam's Iraq, instability in Jordan would be a strategic nightmare for Israel. It is easy to imagine, for example, the consequences for Israel of a Palestinian entity stretching from the eastern outskirts of Greater Tel Aviv to Baghdad.

In the Palestinian domain, the treaty was designed to cement a strategic rapport between the two leaders who signed it, Yitzhak Rabin and King Husayn. Such understanding was meant to pave the way for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement that would take full consideration of Jordan's interests and essentially allow for the formation of a Palestinian state, contained between Israel and Jordan. But Rabin and Husayn have left the scene and Israel's agreement with the Palestinians is in tatters, leaving the Jordanians very uncertain about the future. King Abdallah has chosen to lower the public profile of the relationship with Israel in order to keep his domestic critics at bay and simultaneously to shore up Jordan's ties with its Arab hinterland, for both domestic and critical economic reasons.

As a result of these decisions, Jordan's intimacy with Israel at the highest level has eroded somewhat (there is presently no Jordanian ambassador in Tel Aviv). This makes it difficult for Jordan to have any input into Israeli policy on Israeli-Palestinian affairs, in which Jordan has longstanding and profound interests. The revival of a vehicle for regular

high-level consultations with Israel could help prevent a situation in which Jordan feels excluded from this track.

Meanwhile, Jordan's relations with Iraq, particularly in the economic sphere, have steadily improved. Iraq continues to supply all Jordan's oil at special below-market rates and is now once again firmly reestablished as Jordan's major trading partner (the trade protocol being raised to \$450 million in 2001). Close economic ties with Iraq may prove to be beneficial for Jordan's economic recovery, thereby contributing to the domestic stability in which Israel has a major stake. But they may also intensify Jordanian dependence on Iraq, which could influence Jordanian foreign and security policy in ways detrimental to Israeli interests. Israel could help ward off such a trend by moving Jordan and its wellbeing higher up on Israel's own agenda than they appear to be at present. In particular, it could reduce Jordan's dependence on Iraq by acting to expand Jordanian trade, not only with Israel itself, but more so with the West Bank and Gaza. It is there that the Jordanians believe they may have a better chance of establishing a sizeable market for their own goods (to the tune of \$200-300 million per year).

This suggests that facilitating Jordanian trade with the Palestinians could well become an Israeli priority as soon as some mode of normality is reestablished in the territories under the control of the Palestinian Authority. Even if that entailed some economic disadvantage for Israel in the short term, any commercial cost would be outweighed by the benefit for the broader Israeli strategic interest in Jordanian and regional stability.