

# The Jordan Valley – an Area of Vital Security to Israel in a Changing World

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**T**here can be no doubt of the need to reexamine the basic assumptions pertaining to the security importance of the Jordan Valley to Israel. In the long years that have elapsed since the Alon Plan formulated the foundations of security concepts as they pertain to the Jordan Valley, Israel's strategic circumstances have changed enormously. These changes — in addition to possible future realities — require a new examination, in order to ascertain just how vital the Jordan Valley is to Israel's security.

This article will endeavor to examine to what extent future circumstances might require Israeli control over the Jordan Valley to ensure its own security. This discussion will not, however, deal with other aspects of the area's importance to Israel.

By way of introduction, it should be noted that control over the valley encompasses two elements of varying significance:

- Military control of the valley (or more precisely, of the territories that overlook it from the west) as a line of defense against hostile forces deployed to the east of the Jordan river;
- Control over Jordan river crossings, which would be needed to ensure that restrictions on arms acquisitions (beyond those agreed upon in a permanent settlement) imposed on a future Palestinian state are enforced, and to prevent the infiltration of terrorists attacks and

materials required for terrorist operations from entering the Palestinian state.

## Jordan Valley – A Region Vital to Israel's Security?

A renewed examination of the basic premises of the Alon Plan led Shlomo Brom to the conclusion that, given an agreement with the Palestinians, Israel would do well to waive control either control over or annexation of the Jordan Valley. Brom argued that such control would in fact have an adverse effect on Israel's long-term security. This conclusion is supported by a number of assumptions, which mostly derive from the prevailing security situation facing Israel:

- So-called defensible borders cannot prevent war: the 1967 border did not prevent the Egyptians from launching the October War, whereas the IDF pullout from Sinai in the context of the peace treaty with Egypt ensured calm along the present, post-withdrawal border.
- Changes in both the regional and global order have considerably reduced the threat of an Arab overland offensive against Israel on the eastern front. The Arab countries, still preoccupied with developing their military strength, are focusing on the development of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction — issues for which the Jordan Valley has no relevance.
- Changes in strategic circumstances and in modern warfare management

have increased the importance of long-range fighting capabilities. New capabilities enable serious damage to be inflicted upon enemy forces long before they come in direct contact with Israeli forces.

- Jordan's commitment under the peace treaty with Israel to deny territorial access to hostile forces operating against Israel has made the whole of Jordan into a security area that protects Israel from the east. In the event that enemy forces nonetheless enter Jordanian territory, Israel will be legitimately entitled to take action against them there, and not necessarily in the Jordan Valley.

- Should Israel be required to defend itself against an attack on its eastern front, it would be able to deploy forces into the territories that control the terrain from west of the Jordan Valley, without the Palestinians being able to prevent this. To be on the safe side, limited Israeli forces could be stationed in these territories for a brief predetermined period close to the signing of an agreement with the Palestinians.

- Dealing with Palestinian terrorism will depend mainly on Israel's relations with the Palestinian state, and not on any assistance accorded to the terrorists by elements outside the Palestinian state. Israeli control of the Jordan Valley — and most certainly its annexation — would detrimentally affect the stability of the Palestinian state and its ability to develop. Over time, such control would heighten its

sense of siege and affects its ability to settle refugees in the only major land reserve at its disposal, thereby diminishing its readiness to combat terrorism.

## Coping with Threats from the East

The point of departure for an examination of the essential nature of the Jordan Valley as a security area for Israel within the context of an overall agreement with the Palestinians is the assumption that sweeping changes *have*, in fact, positively affected Israel's strategic environment in the last generation. These changes include the peace agreements signed with Egypt and Jordan, the recognition of most of the Arab world of the need to resolve the Arab-Israel conflict by political - not military - means; the collapse of the USSR, which deprived Syria of strategic super-power support; the significant weakening of Iraq, resulting from its defeat in the Gulf War; and the economic crisis that has beset the Arab world since the eighties, also affecting the ability of the Arab states to sustain a prolonged military buildup. These changes considerably diminish risks of an all-out Arab-Israel war. Presumably these conditions will not change significantly within the coming years, and the probability of war will therefore remain remote during this period.

However, the present positive (from Israel's perspective) circumstances by no means guarantee what

may happen in the longer term. The present reality already contains the seeds of substantial future changes, and the likelihood that they may negatively affect Israel in the next ten or more years:

- Iran will certainly have greater military strength. It will likely also

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possess long-range missiles and possibly nuclear weapons. In the meantime, long-term implications of the present domestic changes taking place there, and their possible effect on that country's threat to Israel are unclear.

- Iraq will almost certainly resume, at least in part, its pre-war military buildup, including weapons of mass destruction. Indeed, Iraq has already begun to extricate itself from the UN-imposed regime of sanctions and supervision.
- No peace agreement with Syria exists so far, and prospects for one in the next few years remain unclear.
- The Arab countries may revert to

an accelerated military buildup, particularly if recent increases in oil prices prove lasting.

- With or without an agreement, it is apparent that an independent Palestinian state will come into being in the coming years. The implications of this for Israel and the region are as yet unclear.

Moreover, the fall of the Shah's regime, the outbreak of the war between Iraq and Iran, and the Gulf War have all taught us that surprising changes are part of life in the Middle East, and cannot always be predicted. Therefore, even if the probability of an all-out Israel-Arab war remains low in the short to medium term, this could change within a decade or even earlier. Characterizing the Middle East as an unstable area requires Israel to undertake significant security precautions in areas where it could be affected.

It must be noted that most of these changes pertain to the area east of Israel. Israel's eastern front differs considerably from its western front, and the calm on the border with Egypt, following the signing of a peace treaty with the latter, can in no way be considered a bellwether for the eastern border. Egypt is the lone factor determining security along the western border; a stable peace treaty with it guarantees calm on this front.

On the other hand, Israel's eastern front is composed of four states, of which only Jordan has a peace treaty with Israel. Beyond it lie three enemy

states with considerable military power and potential — Syria, Iraq and Iran — all extremely hostile to Israel, and in part possibly hostile to Jordan. They will not be bound by Israeli peace treaties with Jordan or the Palestinian state and, in the absence of a significant change in their relations with Israel, a possible military confrontation with some or all of them must taken into account. A further important difference exists between the two fronts: stability on the western front was also achieved by means of the large buffer zone in Sinai and Egypt's geographical distance from Israel's population centers. The eastern front, by contrast, has no such buffer zone; it is close to Israeli population centers and its industrial infrastructure, and Israel and Jordan are separated only by the Palestinian state, with all the security problems this entails.

True, the countries hostile to Israel will now and in future focus on developing their ballistic and non-conventional capabilities, but this does not mean that they have relinquished the option of a land attack. No grounds exist to assume that Iraq and, to some extent, Syria have abandoned the original concept that perceives Jordanian territory as a base for an overland offensive against Israel. It is no coincidence that Iraq, which led the Arab world in the production of mass-destruction weapons, has concurrently built a sizeable land army. It must thus be taken into account that the development of weapons of mass destruction — a part of which will presumably be retained as an option in situations of extreme duress — will constitute an addition to conventional overland attacks, and not a substitute

for them. This assumption mandates the consideration of continuing control over strategic assets for as long as possible, until the regional picture emerges.

Changes in modern war management have, in effect, granted Israel the capability to inflict more effective damage on enemy forces moving toward the Jordan Valley, and Jordan's commitment to prevent hostile forces from entering its territory provides Israel with an added security coefficient. It would, however, be a mistake to perceive Jordan as a buffer zone protecting Israel from the east, for two principal reasons:

- The Hashemite regime has achieved considerable domestic stability over recent decades, and is not facing an imminent threat to its survival. But this regime will shortly be required to deal with an extremely serious challenge to its future — the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. This state is likely to create a national identity focus for the Palestinian population of Jordan. Neither Israeli nor Jordanian leaders know what the outcome of such a development will be, and how it will affect the regime's stability. There can be no doubt as to its important implications on Israel's security. This uncertainty also calls into question Israel's ability to rely on Jordan as a factor that will over time prevent hostile forces from setting foot on its territory. Should Jordan find itself in an unstable situation, the need for Israeli control of the Jordan Valley would increase concomitantly.

- Despite Jordan's commitment to deny territorial access to enemy forces, there is no guarantee that it will

actually wish, or be able, to do so in every given situation. There could be situations where Iraqi forces enter Jordan against the will of its leadership. There could also be situations where Israel may be unable to take measures to prevent the entry of such forces into Jordan, despite the formal legitimacy granted for such measures. For instance, were Israel to be involved simultaneously in a different crisis that paralyzed its resources, it might have no wish to create further complexities by undertaking an attack to dislodge Iraqi forces in Jordan. It should be recalled that for over three years, between 1967 and 1970, an Iraqi division was deployed in northwest Jordan, within artillery range of Israeli territory, without any attempt by Israel to dislodge it from Jordanian soil.

Israel will ultimately need to consider every situation according to its merits, without reflexively reacting to a move that involved a risk of all-out deterioration, notwithstanding the legitimacy accorded to it by the peace agreements with Jordan and the Palestinian state. The possibility that situations could develop in which neither Israel nor Jordan could prevent Iraqi forces from entering Jordan calls for Israeli control of the Jordan Valley. If Israel waives this control, it will need to think twice in any crisis before sending forces into the valley via the Palestinian state and violating the latter's sovereignty, even when it considers its action justified. Ultimately, Israeli military intervention on the territory of a sovereign state is considerably restricted, regardless of whether this occurs in Jordan or in the Palestinian state; such action would only be



acceptable in extremely special circumstances.

An Israeli presence in the Jordan Valley also has a deterrent impact on Iran and Syria. The mere fact of Israeli control in the valley region will compel these two countries to think twice before moving troops into Jordan. Their decision would be made easier in a situation where Israel withdraws to the 1967 lines, with no presence in the valley. While there is no guarantee that Israeli control of the valley would deter future aggression, we may assume that a situation in which Israel maintains control of the line west of the valley presents a different set of considerations than would a situation in which Israeli ground forces would have to cross Palestinian territory in order to curb an Iraqi incursion.

There is another favorable aspect to Israeli control of the Jordan Valley. The Hashemite Kingdom, while it may not admit as much, presumably has its own interests in ongoing Israeli control over the crossing points that link the two banks of the Jordan river, in order to reduce direct contacts and harmful influences between the Palestinian state and Jordan. Israel's control of the valley could therefore effectively correspond to both Israeli and Jordanian interests.

### **The Palestinian Aspect**

Israeli control of the Jordan Valley would have significant implications on the situation of the future Palestinian state and on Israel's relations with it, cutting off the Palestinian state from Jordan and completing Israel's total encirclement of the West Bank. Some therefore contend that Israel would do well to

waive control of the valley, thereby removing a stumbling block from the road to fruitful relations with the Palestinian state, and encouraging a major effort by the latter to curb terrorism.

However, the present crisis that now affects Israeli-Palestinian relations indicates that Israel is not nearing the end of the conflict with the Palestinians, even if an agreement with them is attained. Even if a Palestinian state is established by

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agreement, its relations with Israel could well be beset by crises and confrontations — not necessarily by fruitful cooperation. The strengthening of the Tanzim forces and local Palestinian militias in the current crisis may well be a harbinger of future domestic power struggles in the Palestinian state-to-be. The Palestinian state, if and when it is declared, may not be on the path to stability and prosperity.

If these apprehensions prove solid in the near future, they will constitute additional justification for Israeli control of the Jordan river crossings. The current crisis has brought home the volume and quantity of arms present in the Palestinian territories.

Granting the PA control of the Jordan river crossings will enable it to import whatever weapons systems it can afford to buy, including those that are not in its possession at this time, and would deny Israel the ability to supervise or monitor these acquisitions. There is no doubt that the Palestinian state would aim to create a substantial armed force once it has gained its independence. Even if the PA agrees to limitations on the quantities and types of weapons its organs are permitted to maintain, we cannot assume that it will uphold the agreement on this issue. Palestinian control of the Jordan river crossings will assist it in this, enabling the almost unrestricted flow of weapons and personnel to organizations that continue to deal in terrorism. Even if Israel can legitimately take action against the Palestinian state on this issue, experience has taught us that it will not hasten to do so.

In the PA's view, the transfer of the Jordan Valley into Palestinian hands is significant, as it means the West Bank will not remain encircled permanently. An insistent demand on Israel's part for control over the Jordan Valley could well cost it an agreement with the Palestinians. Israel's control of the valley — even if agreed upon — would also clearly cut into the already scant percentage of what it obtains in terms of West Bank territory. The above comments, therefore, should not be taken as a recommendation that Israel annex of the Jordan Valley (though this would constitute a better solution for the security problems likely to arise in future). Rather, this article advocates a form of compromise: that Israel maintain control of the Jordan Valley

and the Jordan river crossings for a considerable period of time, after which it could be handed over to the PA. Such a compromise would make it possible to reach an agreement with the Palestinians and provide a reasonable response, over a certain number of years, to Israel's security problems, and reduce their inherent risks.

It is true that standing Israeli control of the Jordan Valley would contribute to a Palestinian sense of encirclement, and that this will not make for an atmosphere of good will in its relations with Israel. However, if the Palestinian state's relations with Israel are plagued by crises, the advantage of Israeli control over the valley is clear, providing it with leverage for additional pressure on the Palestinian state. Alternately, the development of regular relations between the sides could enable Israel to relinquish its control of the valley in time, provided the regional surroundings develop favorably.

## Conclusion

The examination of the importance of the Jordan Valley in terms of a security area for Israel is based on uncertainty with regard to the security situation and the strategic environment that will surround Israel in the coming years. In the last two decades Israel has functioned in a relatively comfortable strategic environment, as reflected in

the declining probability of an all-out Arab-Israel war — a probability that will presumably remain low in the coming years. But there is no guarantee that this situation will prevail over the longer term, or that the risks of war will remain low. The principal question marks are directed at several issues:

- To what extent will the Palestinian state remain stable? What manner of relations will it maintain with Israel?
- To what extent would the Palestinian state 'radiate' instability toward the Kingdom of Jordan?
- Will a peace agreement be attained between Israel and Syria?
- To what extent will Israeli security be jeopardized by Iran, and mainly Iraq?

Developments pertaining to these four questions will have an important impact on the importance of the Jordan Valley to Israel's security. If, for instance, Syria takes steps towards a genuine peace with Israel, this would favorably recommend that Israel waive control of the Jordan Valley, and *vice versa*. Alternately, if the Palestinian state's relations with Israel are disrupted and the Palestinians fail to take adequate measures to prevent anti-Israeli terrorism, or cause an erosion in the stability of Jordan — the importance of the Jordan Valley to Israel's security would rise.

Since we do not at this time have the answers to these questions, it is

vital that Israel continue its control over the Jordan Valley — both military control on the ground, and control of the Jordan river crossings. This does not refer only to the period close to an agreement with the Palestinians. The problem is that one, or possibly two, decades will be needed to clarify the salient components of the strategic situation. Should Israel face an overall confrontation on its eastern front during that time, there are no guarantees that it would be able to rely on Jordan as a protective buffer zone, or the IDF's ability to operate advanced weapons systems from a distance in order to stop enemy forces from moving towards the Jordan Valley. Doubts in this respect will inevitably increase if a lack of stability manifests itself in the kingdom of Jordan over the long term. This uncertainty requires an Israeli control of the Jordan Valley, over a relatively protracted period of time.

This control could prove to be an unwanted cost to Israel in its relations with the Palestinian state, and to insist on maintaining it could make an agreement between them difficult to attain. This difficulty can be overcome by lending Israeli control in the valley area a transient dimension: Israel, could, for example, refrain from annexing the valley and extending its sovereignty there, undertaking to relinquish control over the region within a period of one to two decades.