

The Future of Strategic Relations Between Jordan and Israel

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Question Marks

After 46 years of rule by King Hussein - a lengthy period by any standard, and certainly in terms of the Middle East - it is difficult to assess how the Kingdom of Jordan will be managed without him. During the course of his long rule, a strong link was established between Hussein, the man and leader, and his regime. His passing has created a shadow of uncertainty over the character of the Hashemite regime, its stability, and its policies in the coming period. Such uncertainty would have existed even if Prince Hassan, groomed for the job by Hussein over a generation, had inherited the throne; with the last-minute accession of King Abdullah, it is all the greater. Abdullah still has only limited experience with Jordan's domestic and foreign policies, and his stands on issues central to the country's management are not sufficiently clear. He promises, as might have been expected, that he will continue his father's policies. It is fair to assume, however, that he is only beginning to formulate his own policy lines, and that these will be shaped through a process of trial and error over the coming years.

One of the major questions is that of Jordan's policy regarding its future relations with Israel. This is a critical issue for Jordan, one that is strongly linked to its very existence, its national security, its status in and relations with the Arab world, and to the internal stability of the Hashemite regime. Relations with Israel

comprise a complex and problematic issue, exposed to pressures both from within and outside the country, an issue that has known crises in the past, with ups and downs even under King Hussein. Hussein's personality, wisdom and experience carried great weight in shaping policy toward Israel; the question now is how important this personal element will be in shaping the future policy of King Abdullah.

To a great extent, Jordan's strategic ties with Israel have been affected in the past, and will be so in the future, by its geopolitical location - by political and economic processes developing in the region, by its relations with the key Arab countries, and by its internal problems. Equally important, these ties are also a function of Israel's policies and actions, both directly, with regard to Jordan, and in connection with issues in which Jordan has a vital interest.

The Future Stability of the Hashemite Regime

The starting point for examining the future of the strategic relations between Jordan and Israel must be the question of the future internal stability of the Hashemite regime. As well as can be judged, Abdullah has received a fairly stable kingdom. Though not without problems, it is certainly much more stable than the country Hussein inherited in 1952. The refusal of some of the Arab states to recognize the legitimacy of the kingdom

and the Hashemite rule disappeared a generation ago, and the degree of enmity against Jordan has diminished significantly. Attempts by outside forces - primarily Syria and, to a lesser degree, Iraq - to undermine the regime still occur from time to time, but they cannot be compared with the severity and the threat of those of the 1950s and 1960s.

The regime faces some domestic opposition - primarily from the Islamic movement and forces on the left. This opposition is not strong enough to pose a threat to the regime, and it is not violent. It is primarily interested in changing the regime's policy, rather than bringing it down and replacing it. On the other hand, the Jordanian army, the central pillar of the regime, was almost unequivocally loyal throughout Hussein's rule; it is fair to assume that the army will rally around Abdullah, who comes from its ranks and evidently enjoys its support. And the Jordanian security services have proved, over the years, to be very efficient in neutralizing potential threats to the regime.

Two major problems threaten this positive picture. One is the continuing economic crisis Jordan has been experiencing since the mid-1980s, primarily because of the decline of the oil prices and the results of the Gulf War, including the break with Iraq. The Jordanians are concerned that the country's economic difficulties will have a negative impact, first and foremost, on

the social strata that form the main foundation of support for Hashemite rule - among them, the Bedouins - and will give renewed strength to the Islamic movement in Jordan.

The second problem is the threat to the monarchy from the Palestinian population on both sides of the Jordan River. There is no doubt that this issue is of great concern to the Jordanian regime and affects its actions. The regime fears that the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the West Bank might awaken national sentiment of identification among Palestinians living in Jordan, and that this state might demand the right to represent Jordan's Palestinian population. The Jordanian government is also worried by the possibility that the establishment of a Palestinian state will trigger migration to the East Bank and undermine the delicate demographic balance there. Despite Jordanian concerns, however, there seems little likelihood of Jordan's stability being undermined to any significant degree by the Palestinians. The Palestinian community in Jordan, which comprises more than half of its population, has never organized itself politically in any significant manner and has never acted against the regime - not even during the days of Black September in 1970. Many Palestinians feel rooted in Jordan and see themselves as connected to it and linked to its fate.

All in all, no real or immediate danger to the Jordanian regime is foreseen at this stage. There is no external force threatening it to any degree, nor has there been, for years, any internal element that

has attempted in any significant or ongoing manner to topple the regime. The problems the regime faces, difficult as they may be, are not so severe as to threaten its survival. As far as can be ascertained, these facts are not about to change in the near future under Abdullah's rule.

Common Strategic Interests with Israel

Strategic relations between Jordan and Israel have taken shape gradually, primarily since the 1970s, receiving additional momentum with the signing of the peace treaty between them. Their relations are, to a great degree, the product of shared strategic interests, supported by the personal leadership of King Hussein. From Jordan's perspective, these common interests can be summarized as follows.

First, over the course of many years, including periods of belligerence and military confrontation, there has been a duality in Jordan's perception of Israel. On the one hand, Jordan viewed Israel as the central threat to its national security - usually, the greatest threat. At the same time, Jordan has seen Israel as an important factor contributing to its national security, because of Israel's keen interest in the survival and stability of the Hashemite regime.

Beginning in the early 1970s, the perception of the Israeli threat gradually diminished, though it never entirely disappeared, for one key reason: The loss of the West Bank in 1967 and the repression of the Palestinian organizations in Jordan in 1970-71 eliminated the main cause of military confrontation between the two

countries. At the same time, Israel became a more important factor in improving Jordan's national security. The peace agreement between Israel and Jordan gave formal expression to this situation: From that moment, Israel no longer posed a threat to Jordan. Moreover, Israel has an interest in increasing Jordan's military strength and its ability to defend itself.

Second, Israel serves to deter other external rivals that might threaten Jordan and its regime. Even in the absence of an explicit formal agreement in this regard, it should be clear to countries like Syria and Iraq that any attempt to threaten Jordan's security means confronting Israel. In addition, Israel and Jordan have shared the view, particularly since the Gulf War, that Jordan must not be turned into an arena of military confrontation between Israel and Jordan's Arab neighbors. The Jordanians also evidently believe that cultivating a connection with the growing defense cooperation between Turkey and Israel will also strengthen its status in the region.

Third, Israel and Jordan have a common interest in reducing the threat deriving from the Palestinian problem. The Jordanians expect that because of this mutual interest, Israel will cooperate in safeguarding Jordan's security, when it is time to draw up final status accords with the Palestinians. For the Jordanians, it is especially important that Israel protect their interests in a permanent agreement, since the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, in the framework of the agreement, would create new threats to Jordan.

Fourth, Jordan has a special interest in utilizing peaceful relations with Israel in order to increase its economic growth and its water supply. Jordan assumes that Israel's economic advantages can be exploited to draw investments and development projects into Jordan. It must be noted, however, that since the signing of the peace treaty, Jordan has been deeply disappointed with the economic achievements so far and feels that Israel has not fulfilled all its obligations and promises to Jordan.

Fifth, Jordan wants Israel's help in obtaining increased American aid. Traditionally, Jordan has had close ties with the United States, which also find expression in an informal US commitment to Jordan's security and stability. It is clear to Jordan, however, that there are limitations to America's ability and willingness to assist it. In the past, these limitations partly derived from America's concern for Israel's security requirements. Jordan hopes, however, that Israel's special ties with the United States can help win more significant American economic and security assistance to Jordan, thus strengthening its standing in the region. In addition to American defense assistance, Jordan is also interested in developing direct security cooperation with Israel, especially in the field of logistics.

Under Abdullah's rule, these fundamental interests can be expected to continue to weigh heavily in Jordanian eyes. They derive from Jordan's problematic geopolitical position, its military inferiority relative to its neighbors,

and its internal problems – basic facts that will not change. It can therefore be assumed that Jordan's new ruler will be disposed to maintaining close ties with Israel, at least as long as these are not overshadowed by conflicting interests.

The King's Personal Contribution

The nature and purpose of Jordan's relations with Israel over the last two generations were established by King Hussein, not only because of the perception of strategic interests, but also under the influence of his personal approach. It can be said that Hussein was the "added value" of the special relations with Israel. The personal warmth and charisma, the love accorded him by most of his people, and his position as the unquestionable and supreme decision-maker in the Jordanian leadership - all of these contributed to his ability to manage domestic crises. Hussein's leadership style, seniority as a ruler, extensive experience, prestige and international standing also gave him a unique status and respectful treatment in the Arab world. His position also enabled him to be involved, though to a limited extent, in the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Hussein's personal standing was particularly significant for Jordan's ties with Israel. He personally established the content and set the pace of Jordanian moves toward Israel, and he was uniquely able to withstand those who opposed these actions, both from within Jordan and without. His personal authority enabled him to look straight into the eyes of his

people and tell them explicitly that it was time to work toward a warm and real peace with Israel.

It is not yet clear to what extent King Abdullah will be ready and able to develop the peace with Israel. Even if he desires to do so, it appears that, at least in the short term, he will lack the broad personal authority his father enjoyed both domestically and internationally. Even Hussein had to accumulate many years of experience and weather a series of crises before establishing his unique status, beginning in the early 1970s. While Abdullah has already begun to create a circle of personal contacts with Israeli leaders, the Israelis will miss, at least for now, the intimate dimension that existed over decades in the relationship with Hussein; a dimension that also played a role in creating the close relations between the two countries.

Because of his limited experience in managing affairs of state, Abdullah will need the counsel of experienced advisors, at least in the first stage of his reign. During this period, policy toward Israel will therefore be affected by the attitude of those Abdullah chooses to be close to and assist him.

The Key Issues

The interests common to Jordan and Israel, and Abdullah's personal stand in connection with them, will be put to the test in the coming period through a series of central issues, the outcomes of which will influence the direction of relations between the two countries. At least four of these issues can be defined.

One is the development of the peace process. Jordan has a vital interest in advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and seeing it completed; failure of the process, Jordan fears, would lead to crisis and unrest that might also involve Jordan and its Palestinian population. On the other hand, Jordan is worried about the negative ramifications for Jordan that might arise from the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. It is therefore seeking, through Israel as well, to minimize these risks in the framework of a permanent settlement. In Jordan's view, a balanced political process in which its interests are protected will make it possible to minimize the Palestinian threat toward Jordan; Palestinian interests would be focused on their own state, while Jordan would continue to cultivate its separate national identity.

It is therefore obvious that suspension of the peace process, or the lack of sufficient Israeli sensitivity to Jordanian interests within the framework of Israel-Palestinian accords, would have a negative effect on Jordan-Israel relations. It is also fair to assume that progress in the peace process between Syria and Israel will make it easier for Jordan to develop its relations with Israel.

The second issue is the economic situation. There were great expectations in Jordan - some of them unrealistic - that a rapid, significant improvement in the economy would result from the peace treaty with Israel. This has not happened. In particular, Jordan has bitter complaints about Israeli limitations - which in its eyes are meant to protect Israeli products - that

prevent the expansion of Jordanian exports to the Palestinian territories. Jordan is also disappointed that the peace treaty has not led to sufficient investments and the initiation of large projects that could create new jobs and lead to a tangible decrease in its level of unemployment.

In this framework, one of the most important issues is the supply of water by Israel to Jordan. Last year Israel supplied to Jordan 55 million cubic meters of water from the Lake of Galilee. This amount included 25 million cubic meters as a special gesture to King Hussein, upon his request, following a severe crisis in the supply of drinking water to Jordanian cities. Yet, in March 1999 Israel told Jordan, that this year it would be compelled to cut 60% of that quota, due to the severe drought. The Israeli decision caused a short storm in Jordan. The Jordanians rejected the Israeli decision, presented it as a violation of the peace treaty, and complained that it was made without consulting, or negotiating with, the Jordanian government.

The mini-crisis was ended by renewed agreement regarding the water supply, after the Jordanians announced that Israel had withdrawn from most of its decision. Yet, the mere decision concerning an issue so important for Jordan, that necessarily will affect the relations between the two countries, as well as its timing - shortly after Abdullah's coming to power, and when Syria and Egypt are courting him - do not reflect an over-sensitivity to Jordan's position.

If the feeling of disappointment in the economic field, whether justified or not,

continues, it will seriously impede the development of friendly relations between the two countries. Disillusionment about the economic rewards of the peace, on the other hand, puts at risk the development of ties with Israel in other areas. By contrast, visible economic gains that are regarded as an outcome of peaceful relations would broaden the ties between Israel and Jordan, enlarge the circle of supporters of peace among Jordan's elite and general public, and assist the regime in convincing its people of the importance of these ties.

The third issue is the state of relations between Jordan and other Arab countries. Syria clearly opposes the peace between Jordan and Israel; signing of the peace treaty between them brought a chill to Syria-Jordan relations. Egypt and other Arab countries also object to the development of further ties between Jordan and Israel, at least as long as the Israel-Palestinian peace process is not progressing. Assad has already suggested to King Abdullah that a new chapter be opened in Syria-Jordan relations. If the new dialogue between them is developed, it seems safe to assume that the question of relations with Israel will arise. Assuming that Abdullah recognizes the importance of close ties with Israel, it is still unclear how he will seek to balance these ties with his relations with the Arab states. Even without harming the essence of the peaceful relations with Israel, a significant improvement in Jordanian ties with Syria, for example, could have a negative effect on Jordan-Israel relations, at least as long as the peace process between Israel and Syria is frozen. As a general rule, the

continuation of the decline in Israel's relations with Arab States, if it takes place, will impede the development of its relations with Jordan.

Finally, there is the domestic dimension of Jordan's relations with Israel. A large number of individuals, groups and organizations in Jordan opposed to any broadening of ties with Israel, and some, primarily the Islamic movement, oppose the very concept of peace with Israel. Others - even among the upper strata of society - object to the price Jordan is paying for this peace, or who believe that Israeli policy since the signing of the peace treaty does not justify closer ties. This objection is evident, for example, among

the intelligentsia, the media and the labor unions, as well as in the parliament, that the majority of its members supported last year an announcement calling to end the normalization with Israel.

In this area, too, it is difficult to judge how King Abdullah will act and how he will respond to domestic demands to curtail contacts with Israel. The Jordanian military command is likely to call for broadening contacts with Israel, at least in the defense area, and the fact that Abdullah comes from its ranks, and is apparently supported by it, is apt to contribute to developing these contacts. At the same time, the stance on this issue by the group of advisors expected to coalesce around the

new king will be no less important.

It should be remembered that even during the period of King Hussein's reign there were periods of ups and downs in Jordan-Israel relations. The late king slowed down the development of ties with Israel when its policies were not to his liking. It also should be emphasized that, because of its problematic geopolitical position, Jordan always strove to develop close relations with at least one other country in the region. Over the years, Jordan would change such partners, depending on regional circumstances: At different times Iraq, Egypt and even Syria were its principal partner. In recent years, Israel has partly fulfilled this role.

Conclusion

The strategic interests common to Jordan and Israel create a basis for the assumption that King Abdullah will seek, in principle, to continue the close relationship with Israel. He has declared as much since ascending the throne. However, even if the framework of the relationship remains firm, there is still a large question mark regarding the degree of warmth the new king will pour into that framework.

The difficulty in answering this question derives not only from the fact that Abdullah's concrete stands are not yet sufficiently known, but also because his experience in affairs of state is still limited. It is doubtful that he himself has yet formulated his positions. Consequently, it is not clear how he will act when the development of relations with Israel would have to be weighed against opposing

Jordanian interests, how he will act in the face of future crises, and how he will react to curtail pressures from within and outside Jordan.

In the absence of sufficient data to answer these questions at this stage, it must be assumed that Jordanian policy with regard to strategic relations will be affected by the following primary factors:

- The extent to which pressures are exerted on the Hashemite regime, from home and abroad, to curtail ties with Israel
- The progress of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as between Israel and Syria, and the degree to which Israel is able to protect Jordanian interests in the framework of the permanent settlement with the Palestinians
- The extent of economic benefits accruing to Jordan from its special relationship with Israel, given Jordan's high expectations.

- The success of King Abdullah and Israeli leaders to develop credible personal relations.

Many of the answers to future Jordanian policy depend on Israel. This involves, first and foremost, Israeli policy vis-a-vis the peace process and its economic cooperation with Jordan. It was already evident under King Hussein that these factors have a significant bearing on Jordanian actions. Thus, Israel will have to demonstrate sensitivity to the pressures on the Jordanian regime that derive from its peace policies; to the delicate linkage to - and problematics of - the issue of the Palestinians; and to the fact that, above all, the Hashemite regime is a Muslim and Arab regime. Israel must bear in mind that taking relations with Jordan for granted, or embracing them too tightly, or acting in a patronizing manner toward the kingdom will damage these delicate relations.