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Israel-Jordan: The Peace Agreement's 20th Anniversary

Oded Eran

Twenty years have passed since the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan was signed, the official and public culmination of decades of secret talks.

The dialogue was based on a shared, identical interest that remains relevant to this day: containing their common competitor in this part of the Middle East - the Palestinians. Israel's 1948 War of Independence dramatically changed King Abdullah I's thinking: after years of conducting a secret dialogue with the Jewish leadership, he found himself ruling the area west of the Jordan River as well as East Jerusalem, which forced him to confront the problem of the Palestinian refugees, most of whom fled east of the river. Following Jordan's conquest of the West Bank and the refugees' flight, King Abdullah annexed the West Bank and Jerusalem, contrary to any Hashemite rationale that should have focused on maintaining a trans-Jordanian majority and limiting the Palestinian presence within the kingdom.

Fifteen years after the War of Independence King Hussein, Abdullah's grandson, renewed the dialogue with the Israeli leadership, but the young king's limited room for maneuvering was insufficient to withstand the pressure by Egyptian President Abd al-Nasser to join the war against Israel in June 1967. This move, too, was completely inconsistent with any Jordanian political and strategic rationale. However, as it happened, the loss of the West Bank reduced the Palestinian population under Jordanian rule, which to this day makes it easier for the Hashemites to overcome the fact that they are a minority in their own country. It also made it easier for Jordan to cope with the awakening Palestinian nationalism manifested by the establishment of the PLO in 1964. Palestinian organizations operated against Israel from the West Bank when it was still a part of the kingdom and were forced to move their bases of operation to Jordan because of Israeli military pressure. Then after 1967 another paradox arose: Israel, attacked by Jordan a mere three years earlier, came to the kingdom's defense in 1970 to protect it against Syria, which sent forces to support the Palestinian organizations in their struggle against the Hashemite regime and protect them against the Jordanian army.

Throughout the years, Israel and King Hussein were engaged in a secret dialogue that created yet another paradox: the Israeli leadership, belonging to what is now the Labor

Movement rejected every one of the king's proposals to assume gradual control of parts of the West Bank. The failure of a move planned by then Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and King Hussein in 1987, designed to allow Jordan to assume a role in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, caused the king to declare in July of 1988 his formal disengagement from the West Bank. This disengagement, which also generated a change in the PLO's attitude towards Israel, paved the way to the Oslo Accords signed in 1993 between Israel and the PLO. It also provided the seal of approval for negotiations to begin between Israel and Jordan, leading to a peace treaty between the two states, signed a mere 13 months after the Oslo Accords. That is to say, King Hussein did not wait for Israel and the Palestinians to reach a final negotiated settlement; he was in a hurry to conduct talks with Israel and lift the veil of secrecy from the relations between the two countries, a relationship that was by then a fairly open secret.

The king's assumption, however, that negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians would yield a permanent settlement within five years was not only left unrealized, but Israel formed a government that viewed the Oslo Accords as Israel's 'original sin'. Since 1996, many members of Israel's governments think of Jordan as the Palestinians' alternate homeland. This notion causes sleepless nights to the leaders of the Hashemite regime and is, in fact, the foundation for Jordan's overall policy on the trilateral relations among Jordan, Israel and the Palestinians.

The harsh criticism King Abdullah II has voiced at Israel for growing radicalization on issues linked to the conflict with the Palestinians, especially Israel's Jewish settlement activity in the West Bank. It stems from deep-seated anxiety that the radicalization will instigate a third Intifada and lead to a third wave of Palestinian flight to Jordan, a development liable to spell the end of the Hashemite rule. The peace treaty with Israel recognizes Jordan's special status when it comes to Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem, though Jordan gives a wider interpretation to this article. Israel makes a point of including Jordan in all moves concerning these sites in the eastern part of the city, but because of internal and regional political considerations the Jordanian government continues to criticize what happens in the city even if the events have no direct bearing on the sites holy to Islam.

Still, the criticism – no matter how harsh – has so far not been translated into concrete action, even though Jordan, as a member of the U.N. Security Council in 2014-2015, could have caused considerable damage to Israel in the international arena. Jordan's recognition of Israel's influence in the U.S. Congress also plays an important role in moderating Jordan's responses to what it views as Israeli provocations: construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This forbearance reflects a broad view of the kingdom's overall system of interests, especially in light and as a result of the Middle East upheavals of the last four years.

The peace treaty, for instance, allows Jordan to receive water from Israel. Jordan suffers from chronic water shortage, which has grown worse in recent years because of the influx of some two million Iraqi and Syrian refugees into the kingdom. Israel is the immediate and, at this point, only supplier of water to Jordan, and is fulfilling its obligations reliably. The interruption in the supply of natural gas from Egypt to Jordan because of terror in the Sinai Peninsula has caused tremendous damage to Jordan's economy; at this point, the only feasible gas supply is from Israel. Jordanian exports through Syria's seaports have come to a complete stop because of the civil war in Syria; trucking from Jordan to Haifa's port is the current alternative.

Recently, King Abdullah II compared Israeli political radicalization to the radicalization evident in the Arab world. The comparison is offensive, but it does underscore Jordan's growing concern with the Islamic State and similar factions within its borders. Trials of IS supporters in Jordan and demonstrations by the organization's supporters in the southern city of Ma'an indicate support for radical Islamic organizations within the kingdom. In light of this, security cooperation between Jordan and Israel takes on greater importance than ever before.

The 20th anniversary of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty is not a holiday but also not a day of mourning. This agreement – as well as the peace treaty signed between Israel and Egypt – may be viewed as a disappointment. There is no warmth in relations between the two countries. Most of the formal agreements about various types of cooperation have never been implemented. There is hardly any remnant of civil society cooperation; the thousands of Israeli travelers visiting Jordan's famous tourist attractions in the past are steering clear of the country because of fears of terrorism. On the other hand, the peace agreements with Jordan and Egypt provide the formal setting allowing cooperation that meets the vital interests of Israel and those of its two neighbors. Israel, interested in maintaining the stability of the existing regimes in Jordan and Egypt, must show sensitivity to internal pressures with which the regimes must contend, using the political process with the Palestinians as a tool to strengthen regional cooperation with the moderate regimes.

