

The Jordanian role: An Israeli perspective

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Jordanian-Israeli relations, as viewed through the lens of international relations, are a typical example of a non-zero-sum game. Their areas of national and regional interest see them converging at some points, and diverging at others. Despite having different motives, both countries maintain close ties with western powers. An observer might thus conclude that the two countries fulfil similar international roles. Indeed, if one were to consider, for example, the two countries' stances towards Iran, militant Islam, and so forth, their regional positions on these issues would seem to confirm such an observation.

When we consider the nature of the internal decision-making environment of both states, as well as the regional pressures and the fluctuations around international power dynamics on the region, it is unsurprising that their respective policies have inevitably resulted in conflict – even to the point of military confrontation. This can be seen in the conflicts of 1948, 1967, 1968 (the Battle of Karameh), and 1973 (the October War).

The Palestinian issue is central in determining the trends of convergence and divergence between the two states. Even though the countries have similar population sizes, it is necessary to keep in mind the disparity between their respective capacities. The gross national products of the two countries show a very large imbalance that favours Israel (about thirty-four billion dollars versus 217 billion dollars). There is also a significant gap, again in Israel's favour, between the countries' military capacity, levels of technological advancement and international influence.

If we accept that international relations – with their material and moral variables, and the art of managing these variables – are the product of interactions in the balance of power, then Israel looks, at Jordan's expense, to utilise its points of convergence with Jordan to resolve the Palestinian problem. The difference between the varying Israeli perceptions in this regard lie, on the one hand, in the degree of danger posed to Jordan, and, on the other hand, in how feasible such a position would be at the official and popular levels in Jordan – or among Palestinians, or to international and regional powers.

Israeli decision-making and the cost for Jordan

During the period 1967 to 1994, Israel's attitude to a solution to the Palestinian issue has centred around two strategic scenarios:

1. The solution proposed by the Labor Party that calls for a return of as much of the West Bank as possible to Jordan, whilst maintaining control over the Jordan River and widening the boundary-line between the West Bank and the 1948 territory. The main motive behind this position is to circumvent the possibility of a bi-national state that could emerge from Israel's continued subjugation, and de facto control, of residents of the West Bank and Gaza.
2. Likud's rejection of a solution that would see Israel maintain only a minimum portion of the West Bank, and would thus compel Israel to cede its control over the autonomy of the inhabitants. This rejection is based on Likud's position that such a solution would result in the loss of strategic depth required from a defence and security standpoint.

This means that, from the beginning, Israel's vision for a solution rested on two contradictory positions: the first arguing for strategic depth, even at the expense of the state's 'national' identity; and the second willing to sacrifice strategic depth for considerations of ethnic purity and a nation-state identity.

Clearly, Egypt's exit from the Arab-Israeli conflict and the turmoil within the Palestinian political arena has allowed Israel's political strategy to capitalise on the 'flexibility' of the regional political environment. The scenarios developed within this strategy are based on the search for a solution that ensures strategic depth and ethnic purity, as well as support by the majority of Israeli voters. Such a solution is epitomised by ensuring strategic depth, gaining Arab and Palestinian recognition of the Jewish character of the Israeli state, and, in turn, ensuring ethnic purity through finding an alternative homeland for the Palestinians. Such a solution would enjoy widespread support from the Israeli electorate.

This strategic vision has formed the basis of a number of Israel's strategic plans with regards to Jordan, and has been promoted through direct and indirect diplomatic channels – at times explicitly, and at other times more equivocally.

The following points examine some of the most important projects that have served to deepen Jordanian concerns regarding Israel:

1. The 'alternative homeland'. This position asserts that Palestine already exists, and is called Jordan. It is clearly illustrated in the proposal by Aryeh Eldad, Knesset member for the National Union, that is based on the following factors:
 - The British Mandate's partition plan in the 1920s that posited a two-state partition – one on each bank of the Jordan River. According to Eldad, 'Jordan has been Palestine from the moment of its creation ... Seventy-five percent of its population are Palestinians, and there can be settled the refugees [from] Judea, Samaria and Gaza, Syria and Lebanon. Large investments can facilitate that process, thus providing a solution to the refugee problem.'
 - The entire area from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea would remain under Israeli sovereignty.
 - Israel would grant autonomy to the municipal authorities of the seven cantons of non-refugee Arabs who wish to remain in their homes in Palestine. The cantons would not be geographically contiguous, nor would they have any political authority. They would, however, have a police force to maintain public order.
 - The population of these cantons would hold Jordanian citizenship, and participate in Jordanian parliamentary elections.

This argument goes further in an attempt to deflect Israel's territorial and demographic concerns around the Palestinians onto Jordan. It explores the idea of transforming the Jordanian political system into a constitutional monarchy, and discusses how majorities and minorities should be determined within this system.

2. The federal vision. This was best expressed by Giora Eiland, who had served as chair of Israel's National Security Council and of the army's planning directorate. Eiland bases his 1987 proposal on the idea of a confederation between Jordan and Palestine, as was discussed between Shimon Peres and King Hussein in London.

Such a confederation would include the east and west banks of the Jordan River, as well as the Gaza Strip. Each of these areas would be endowed with full powers

to manage its internal affairs, with the exception of foreign and military affairs which would remain under the control of Amman – the confederate's capital. Such a solution would emerge from negotiations with a joint Palestinian-Jordanian delegation (as was later exemplified at the 1991 Madrid Conference). Yitzhak Shamir rejected Eiland's idea outright, leading to Jordan's disengagement from the West Bank in 1988. This was partly in order to shift the burden of the solution onto Israel's shoulders. It also served to open the way for the Jordan-Israel peace treaty in 1994, as Jordan could no longer consider its territory (the West Bank) to be occupied by Israel.

According to Eiland, such a solution, with modifications, would be to Jordan's benefit. He argued that the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank would otherwise end up in the hands of Hamas, and that would in turn strengthen the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, thus posing a threat to the Jordanian political system as a whole. A federal solution would, however, keep the military and foreign affairs in the hands of Amman.

Eiland also asserted that negotiations with the Palestinians, as part of a Jordanian federation, would render them more amenable to territorial compromise. This assumption is based on the belief that the participation of Palestinians – as part of a Jordanian entity – would make them feel part of a geographical arrangement that would allow for the possibility of expansion, thus opening up the possibility of relinquishing their claim over what Eiland deems as Israel's territory. Negotiating with Palestinians within the confines of the West Bank, however, makes the possibility of giving up what is already a small territory more difficult given the lack of land. The plan also assumes a demilitarised West Bank, and the projected Jordanian acceptance of such demilitarisation is based on Egypt's acceptance that the Sinai would remain demilitarised.

Eiland's proposal also calls for Egypt to surrender 720 square kilometres of the Sinai's Mediterranean coast in return for an equal-sized territory in the southern Naqab (Negev). Jordan and Egypt would be connected to this stretch of land, appended to Egypt, by tunnel. In addition to other benefits to Egypt (not discussed here because they go beyond the scope of the subject under discussion), the proposal sees several benefits accruing to Jordan. The most important of these is that it will encourage the 70 000 Gazans living in Jordan to return to the Strip. It would also offer Jordan a network of roads, a railway and an oil pipeline to transport oil from the Gulf to the port of Gaza through the tunnel linking Jordan and Egypt. Moreover, this tunnel would act as a 'bottleneck' for the transfer of goods from Europe to Iraq and the Gulf, bringing substantial economic benefits to the Hashemite kingdom.

Israel's strategic imagination also sees Jordan's possible entry into the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a potentially beneficial opportunity, particularly with regard to Israel's policy on Iran.

3. The hybrid vision: This is a strategy based on the consideration of Jordan as being concurrently an opportunity and a risk. Some Israeli strategists categorise Jordan as part of the group of countries that can be viewed as being the least hostile towards Israel on an official level, while the level of popular hostility remains a central concern of others. The result is that Israeli strategists fluctuate in their position, particularly as it pertains to strategic policies at a regional level and in the context of Israel's position in relation to international strategies for the region.

Israel: Fluctuations in the strategic vision

Israel's difficulty in determining where Jordan really stands, even at a tactical level, becomes clear if we consider the following:

- Jordan's position towards Iran: Israeli experts believe the Jordanians have shifted from viewing Iran as a regional threat towards the possibility of rapprochement. An indication of this is the King of Jordan potentially accepting an invitation to visit Tehran – an invitation that is yet to be issued. This is in addition to Jordan's official and public rejection of military action against Iran. One Israeli commentator explained this as a result of a significant development: 'Iran has become stronger, and is on its way to acquiring nuclear weapons, on the one hand, and on the other hand Jordan is no longer confident or certain of US protection. US acceptance of regime changes in Arab countries like Egypt and Tunisia may have deepened Jordan's need to adapt to the regional network of relations.'
- The critical role that Jordan played at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in its issuing of the verdict on the wall constructed by Israel. Jordan perceived Israel's wall as the beginning of an attempt by Israel to depopulate the area and argued that this action could threaten its demographic balance. Its actions at the ICJ are an indication that Jordan will move from a strategy of compromise (with regards to external factors) to a strategy of adaptation (to respond to internal variables).
- Jordan's shift on the establishment of a Palestinian state: Jordan has shifted its position from viewing the establishment of a Palestinian state as a source of concern, to seeing it as vital to Jordanian national interests. This might be related to the idea of strategic adaptation, and 'Transjordanian' elites connected to official decision-making may perceive the Zionist project as a danger to the Jordanian political entity – which reinforces Jordanian state policies. Indeed, sections of this elite exhibit strong concerns towards 'sectors of the Palestinian elite' that may approve, even tacitly, of the plans discussed above.
- Israel considers Jordan to be a 'buffer state, and peace with it prevents the deployment of Arab troops hostile to Israel on its soil.' Furthermore, changes in Iraq and recent developments in Syria, Egypt and other Arab states have raised contradictory concerns in Israel. For Israel, there are some encouraging changes such as the reduced attention on Palestine, and Arab unity during the Arab revolutions, with added emphasis on issues of corruption and democratisation. The recent developments are a source of concern insofar as they have raised the possibility that religious or leftist anti-Zionist movements may benefit from the Arab revolutions through the ballot box or through other means. These are possibilities that cast uncertainty on the expansion of the peace process.

Israel's ability to employ its international lobby to affect Jordanian policy cannot be ignored. This is a factor that Jordanian policy-makers are undoubtedly cognisant of, and may see their country's possible admission to the GCC as a factor that strengthens its negotiating position vis-à-vis disadvantageous international pressure.

Jordan's quest for nuclear power to help solve its energy and water problems illustrates the point. Jordanian attempts to acquire nuclear energy were strongly rejected by Israel, with the US supporting the Israeli position. The Israeli newspaper Haaretz described the Jordanian reaction as 'angry and intransigent'. Jordan's response to Israel's position is reflected in a decline in Jordanian-Israeli relations, as expressed in King Abdullah's 2010 statement that

relations between the two countries ‘were not as bad and tense in any period since the peace treaty as it is now.’

Prospects for future relations

A historical examination of Jordanian-Israeli relations reveals periodic changes and shifts. The development of the Zionist project in the region, however, indicate that the general medium and long term trend of Israel’s regional relations (including those with Jordan) will become increasingly tense. This is evident from the following:

- The growing weight of the Arab street in Arab political decision-making. The Arab street is generally more hostile towards Israel than most Arab ruling elites. The increasing democratisation of Arab states would bring those less amenable to Israel to power, thus potentially enhancing the possibility of a clash.

If the democratic process fails and there are military coups in the region, the new leaders will seek to establish their legitimacy through slogans that resonate with the street, and the Palestinian cause will be represented in this. Despite the differing specificities of each Arab state, Jordan cannot remain unaffected by these changes. This increases the likelihood of tensions being reignited between Jordan and Israel.

- The persistence of Israeli leaders, parties and intellectuals in raising the issue of the ‘alternative homeland’ in the media and in Israeli government institutions. This has led to a growing number within the Jordanian elite viewing Israel’s consideration of this issue not as mere ‘political propaganda’, but more as a viable Israeli strategic option. Their concern is heightened by what they see as the danger resulting from this type of thinking entering US decision-making circles through America’s powerful Zionist lobby. This is especially a concern given the US’ record of abandoning its ‘allies’ in various Arab and non-Arab cases (including South Vietnam, Chile’s Augusto Pinochet, the Shah of Iran, Taiwan, Georgia, and Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Yemen’s Ali Saleh).
- The dynamics of Jordanian-Israeli bilateral relations. We have noted these in discussing the case of Jordan’s nuclear energy project, and in Israel’s attempts to manipulate Jordanian-Palestinian relations to its advantage in various ways (such as the relationship with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, and the issue of Jerusalem). This is in addition to a decline in relations as is evidenced by the king’s statement cited above.
- The emergence of new Jordanian political blocs that see the confrontation with Zionism as essential. This is evident in the formation of the National Front for Reform which has included political forces from the left and right who share a common ground of hostility to Israel.
- Israel’s practice of resolving problems that it faces at the expense of the regional political environment. If Jordan moves further away from Israel – whether geopolitically or geo-strategically – Jordanian society will further gravitate towards viewing the Zionist project as a danger to the Jordanian political entity.

The above leads us to see Jordanian-Israeli relations as likely to decline in the short-term (in the next two to three years). However, the nature of the Arab political regimes that will emerge from successive revolutions and the extent to which they will be democratic will have a marked effect on the medium and long-term (the next five to ten years). The revolts will

also inevitably impact on the Jordanian political regime and on its regional and international policies – including on its relations with Israel.

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