



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Trump, the Mideast Conflict, and the Jordanian Option

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 407, February 5, 2017

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Instead of fixating on an independent Palestinian state, the new US administration should look east to the Hashemite Kingdom as a stabilizing influence on Palestinian politics. President Trump has an opportunity to help Jordan prosper while furthering the interests of the US and its allies.

In his first meeting with President Donald Trump, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is likely to stake out common ground on the issues that have most troubled American-Israeli relations over the past eight years: the problem of Iran, and Israel's settlement policy in Judea and Samaria. Particularly in light of recent UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which labeled Israel's settlement activity illegal, Netanyahu will need to seek American support for renewed Israeli building in Jerusalem and the blocs, and a renewal of the guarantees of the "Bush letter."

Beyond that, the inauguration of a new American administration presents an opportunity for Israel to take the lead in advocating a far more ambitious initiative: a major investment in the economic prosperity and political stability of the Kingdom of Jordan.

The gravitational force of a prosperous Jordan would expand the functional links that have always existed between the cities of the West Bank and Amman. It would encourage Palestinians in the West Bank to look to a link with Jordan as the best guarantee of their political and economic future.

Because of this, Jordan has the potential (once again) to become a major stabilizing influence on Palestinian politics, which would serve the interests of Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian people.

The reemergence of a Jordanian role in the disposition of the West Bank is much preferable to the current international fixation on the concept of an independent, contiguous Palestinian state whose border is based on the 1967 lines. Such a state would be no less of a long-term strategic threat today than it was before the advent of Oslo. So too is Palestinian irredentism a threat to Jordan's security.

A Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria is likely to succumb to a Hamas takeover and Iranian influence, and to become a theocratic and autocratic state along the lines of the Hamas regime in Gaza. Moreover, it is unobtainable.

Despite Israel's acceptance of the two-state concept and its agreement to unprecedented territorial dispositions, Israeli concessions have not met the minimal Palestinian demands required for a peace agreement. Nor are they ever likely to do so if the Palestinian Authority is seen as the only possible partner in the peace process.

The inauguration of an American administration uncommitted to the principle of an independent Palestinian state provides Israel with the opportunity to advocate a long-term strategic vision of building up a prosperous Jordan. A strong and stable Jordan could provide an alternative to the model of a two-state solution that depends on the Palestinian Authority.

Such a vision will not only attenuate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Equally importantly, it will bolster Jordan, whose importance to regional stability has never been so crucial.

Even more critical is Jordan's role in containing growing Iranian influence. This is particularly vital now that Iran, along with its terrorist arm Hezbollah, has succeeded in placing its candidate in Lebanon's presidential palace, making Beirut the fourth capital Iran basically controls in the Arab world. The recent rout of the rebels from eastern Aleppo and the complete takeover of the city by Syrian, Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed forces have major implications for the Sunni-Shiite balance of power.

The pivotal roles Jordan is playing in the fights against IS and against the Iranian-Syrian axis are interrelated. The population of Jordan is Sunni, and is extremely fearful of the growing Shiite menace. If the Jordanian state appears

unable to stem the tide, the population might turn to IS, as did many of the Sunni tribes in Iraq in the past.

Jordan has traditionally been a pro-Western state ruling through cooption and consensus. Though Jordan is not quite a Jeffersonian democracy, it is far closer to that ideal than any other Arab state in the region.

Critics of a plan to involve Jordan in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be quick to point out that it would entail thrusting a role on Jordan that it does not want. This is certainly the case rhetorically.

Jordan has been committed to a two-state solution since the Oslo Accords, but there are two pieces of evidence that the Hashemite Kingdom is flexible and open to political opportunity. The first is that the Kingdom, throughout the twenty-five years since its announcement of the severance of ties with the West Bank, has refrained from amending the 1952 constitution, which enshrines a Kingdom that unites the two banks of the Jordan River – the East and West Banks.

The second are the trial balloons the Kingdom raises from time to time regarding the feasibility of renewing the Jordanian option. The last was in May 2016, when former Jordanian prime minister Abd al Salam Majali met 100 notables in Nablus at a meeting arranged by Ghassan al-Shak'a, a Nablus-based member of the Executive Committee of the PLO. Simultaneously, in the Hebron area, Jordanian MP Muhammad Al-Dawaimeh launched the "One Million Hebronites" initiative to promote a Palestinian-Jordanian confederation. The Hebron delegation was to meet with King Abdullah to discuss this issue, though it should be noted that al-Shak'a stressed that such a confederation could only come into being after a Palestinian state is created.

Several actors can play a critical role in making Jordan prosperous, and they all have a vested interest in making it happen.

The Saudis and the Gulf states should provide the finance. The US should prod them to do so for their own good, but also to reciprocate for the American security umbrella under which they have been living ever since Saddam Hussein occupied Kuwait. Throughout his campaign, President Trump stressed that he wants US allies to pay for the security umbrella the US provides. This is one way the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia can comply.

Regionally, Jordan has never been a more important strategic asset for Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies or more worthy of investment. It defends what remains of these states' northern flank against Syrian-Iranian encroachment

and helps balance the threat Shiite Iraq poses to Saudi Arabia's eastern border, critically close to its major oil fields.

Internationally, the current leadership of the EU – the champion of the two-state solution, almost to the point of obsession – has been considerably weakened by events such as the takeover in Crimea and Brexit. With the vast increase in Islamic terrorism on its home ground, the EU might be inclined to join a venture that will be part of the front against terrorism rather than create a state that might well promote it.

Channeling money to the Palestinians through Jordan would also improve transparency and assure that less money is channeled to incitement and terrorism. It will be important to gradually wean international aid away from the PA and towards Jordan to enable the latter to extend its influence in the West Bank. Israeli-Jordanian security cooperation, historically extensive, can also play a vital role in securing the cooperation of the security forces currently operating under the PA.

Recent trends bolster the prospects of such a project. Locally, the possible breakup of the PA into north and south as a result of the struggle over Abbas's succession could revitalize the links between Nablus and Amman, as well as Hebron and Amman. Should a breakup occur in the PA, its inhabitants will likely pine for the stability Jordanian influence can offer.

Above all, an incoming president who is new to politics, beholden to no political establishment, and a seasoned businessman with a history of making opportunities come true is moving into the White House. The vision of making Jordan prosperous, and the gains of such a venture in the interests of the US and its allies, might well fire his imagination.

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*This is an edited version of an article that appeared in The Jerusalem Report on January 29, 2017.*

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family