



PERSPECTIVES

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A Peace Treaty Is Not a License to Extort

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: For years, Egypt and Jordan have exploited their peace treaties with Israel as a tool of extortion to prevent Israel from pursuing its security and political interests.

In speeches by the new defense minister Benny Gantz and foreign minister Gabi Ashkenazi at their swearing-in ceremonies, both declared fealty to the path of peace. "I am obligated to do all that is possible to promote political settlements and to strive for peace," Gantz declared, while Ashkenazi stated: "President Trump's peace plan is a historic opportunity.... It will be promoted responsibly and in coordination with the United States, while maintaining the peace treaties."

If not for the unique political context—the debate over applying Israel's sovereignty to the Jordan Valley—the talk about the peace treaties would be both routine and proper. But in light of the threats about Israeli measures voiced by Jordan's King Abdullah and Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas, along with the Israeli controversy on the matter, the words bear a special significance. They connote a kind of pledge to make Israeli decisions on sovereignty conditional on regional consent.

There is no disagreement that striving for peace is a worthy goal. The picture is made more complex, however, by the ways the peace treaties between Israel and its neighbors have been implemented. In the dynamic that has developed, those neighbors' conduct toward Israel has frequently entailed the logic of granting "peace" in exchange for protection.

The Hashemite Kingdom's role in keeping the long border with Israel quiet is praiseworthy, and its value should be acknowledged. But when experts on Israeli-Jordanian relations recommend that for the sake of continued quiet on that long border Israel should refrain from steps it needs to take to realize its

security interests in the Jordan Valley lest it forfeit the “gains of peace,” they are essentially acceding to that dynamic of extortion. It constitutes consent by the one receiving protection to the one providing it.

Countries that live in peace should certainly take each other into account when they make decisions. But the duty of mutual consideration, as reflected in Israel’s peace treaties with Jordan and Egypt, is far from symmetrical. From the start of the peace negotiations with Egypt, the demand that Israel solve the Palestinian issue was an essential condition. And indeed, senior officials in the Israeli Foreign Ministry and various commentators have long explained the coldness of the peace with Egypt by pointing to Israel’s supposed failure to meet that obligation. This is despite the fact that it was Yasser Arafat who rebuffed President Jimmy Carter’s request to join Israel, Egypt, and the US in the autonomy talks. A similar situation exists regarding the peace with Jordan.

The peace treaties gave Jordan and Egypt a means of influence and pressure that constrains Israel’s ability to implement its interests in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Jordan Valley. As far back as 1978, when the Egyptian-Israeli Camp David Accords were being drafted, the prominent Labor politician Yigal Allon warned of the danger of conditioning the Israeli-Egyptian peace on progress in the Palestinian sphere. He demanded an end to any interdependency: “What will happen if the Arab side, when setting up the autonomy, poses conditions that Israel cannot accept? Clearly Egypt is seeking to maintain an explicit option to disengage from the normalization.”

For many years before the peace treaty with Jordan in 1994, Israel provided invaluable assistance that ensured the survival of the Hashemite regime, from vital intelligence information and diplomatic aid to deterring Syria from an all-out invasion of Jordan during the “Black September” events of 1970. Many aspects of this covert assistance have continued all the more in the era of official peace, along with considerable overt benefits for Jordan such as Israel’s annual provision of one hundred million cubic meters of water. In other words, if Israeli-Jordanian peace has assumed the character of “coexistence in exchange for protection,” it is not because of its asymmetrical benefits to each country. Rather, it is because Amman—by far the weaker of the two parties—uses it as a means of extortion to stop Israel from pursuing its security and political interests, while Israeli governments have inexplicably acquiesced to this coercion.

At the critical geopolitical junction where Israel now stands, its free pursuit of its national interests would be nothing short of a declaration of independence.

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