



Israel-Jordan Relations: Possibilities and Risks

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Even if the improving ties between Jordan and Israel yield a certain diplomatic benefit for Israel, they may indicate a worrisome direction in terms of Israel's state interests.

An Israeli-Jordanian thaw is finally taking shape after years of tense relations. In what was supposed to be a secret visit, Israeli PM Naftali Bennett met with Jordan's King Abdullah II in Amman, and FM Yair Lapid met with his Jordanian counterpart. According to reports, Bennett and the king agreed that Israel would transfer millions of cubic meters of water from the Sea of Galilee to Jordan. They also reached agreement on trade cooperation, mainly involving Jordanian exports to the Palestinian Authority.

These understandings, in which Israel is the giver and Jordan the receiver, are not, however, the main story. Even if Israel reaps a certain diplomatic benefit from the understandings, they could point to a worrying trend in Israel's strategy toward the Middle East.

The longstanding special relations between Jordan and Israel have undergone numerous changes, but throughout, they were always shaped by the Palestinian issue. But beyond the basic Israeli-Jordanian effort to contain the Palestinian national movement, and particularly the PLO and its supporters, the two states' interests have not always overlapped.

Ever since 1988, when Jordan—more than half of the population of which is Palestinian—declared its disengagement from the West Bank to forestall any possibility that the Palestinian national idea would come to fruition at Jordan's expense, the Hashemite Kingdom has cultivated a strategy of promoting the two-state solution (Israel and a Palestinian state). The assumption is that fulfilling the Palestinian movement's aspirations in the West Bank (and Gaza) would prevent Palestinian influences from seeping into

Jordan and undermining its domestic stability. It is therefore not surprising that the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO enabled King Hussein's signing in 1994 of a formal peace treaty with Israel, after he had been assured that under the two-state approach his kingdom would not be part of the solution to the Palestinian problem. With that cloud removed, Israeli-Jordanian relations flourished in the 1990s.

However, Arafat's terror war (euphemized as the "Al-Aqsa Intifada") and the collapse of the Oslo agreements renewed Jordan's strategic anxieties. Over the past decade, with the declining centrality of the Palestinian question and the total collapse of the two-state paradigm, those fears have intensified. Jordan has found itself in a defensive posture, concerned that these trends could wear down the demographic, political, and physical "iron wall" between the West Bank and the kingdom.

The fact that right-wing governments—identified historically with the thesis of turning Jordan into the Palestinian "alternative homeland"—held sway in Israel only intensified Amman's fears. To this was added President Donald Trump's "Deal of the Century," which implied a relinquishment of the two-state idea in favor of economic-functional arrangements between Israel and the Palestinians. From Jordan's standpoint, this development indicated that its strategic status was declining.

For Israel, however, a new reality emerged that was the inverse of Jordan's apprehensions. The waning of the "Palestinian question," alongside the changes in the Middle East that followed the upheaval of the so-called "Arab Spring," allowed Israel to shift its gaze from relations with its immediate neighbors to the rich and advanced states of the Persian Gulf.

As an energy, technology, and economic power, Israel was able to collaborate extensively with these countries—particularly in the security domain, given their common interest in containing Iran. That was the background of the signing of the Abraham Accords, which were based on an economic-utilitarian paradigm that superseded the national identity paradigm that underpinned the diplomatic process with the Palestinians—a paradigm with which Jordan (along with Egypt) was identified.

At present, a clear trend is emerging of enhanced Israeli ties with its immediate neighbors—meaning not only Jordan but also Egypt, which, against the backdrop of the Gaza war in May, once again took the role of mediator between Israel and Hamas. Meanwhile, a certain weakening of the Abraham Accords axis is afoot as the Biden administration continues to strive for a new nuclear deal with Iran, forcing the Gulf States to seek paths of dialogue with the neighborhood predator in order to survive.

The warming of Israel's ties with its neighbors is undoubtedly an important development. It appears, however, to presage a possible halt to the last decade's positive trends in Israel's relations in the Middle East, particularly Arab-Israeli normalization, in favor of a renewed focus on what was defined until not long ago—without justification—as the heart of the conflict in the region, namely “the Palestinian problem.” From that standpoint, Jordan could be the factor that brings Israel back to the old, familiar, and unavailing path of “the peace process.”

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