

The King is Back, and 'Final-Status Talks' May Be Just Around the Corner

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Brief Analysis

While the Tehran Islamic summit and the new Israeli spy scandal have garnered the Middle East headlines this week, important developments have taken place in Jordan that both suggest the Israeli-Palestinian peace process may be poised for progress and point to the re-engagement of a critical player—King Hussein.

Diplomatic context: Since the suicide bombings in Jerusalem last summer, "peace process" diplomacy has focused on U.S. efforts to rejuvenate a dormant negotiation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. At first, Washington's emphasis was on security as the sine qua non for the process; over the past two months, this shifted to the elements of a "package deal" which would combine Israeli and PA demands to jumpstart the talks. For the Palestinians, these items are mostly "tangibles"—from outstanding "interim" issues, such as the Gaza airport, Gaza seaport, and the Gaza—West Bank land bridge, to the larger political issues of Israeli settlement activity and commitments to make the "further redeployments" (FRDs) in the West Bank, originally envisioned under the Oslo Accords. For the Israelis, demands have been less definitive, targeting "reciprocity" and agreement on a "new security concept." But throughout, the Israelis have kept one clear objective—gaining U.S. support for an accelerated "final status" negotiations.

Knowing the Israeli government's eagerness to move into the "final status" phase (and fearing that such a shift would effectively end any leverage they may have to win further concessions on "interim" issues), the Palestinians have refused to accept a number of Israeli concessions and are holding out for big prizes, like significant FRDs. Similarly, the Clinton administration has signaled in none-too-subtle ways that it is also wary of Israel's desire to focus on final status, possibly as a way to avoid fulfilling existing Oslo commitments. This has given Washington an opening to take up the banner of a settlement "timeout" and a suspension of "provocative acts" (e.g., land confiscations, revocations of Jerusalem residence permits) and to pose itself as the judge of what constitutes a "credible and significant" FRD. In practice, this position itself undercuts the Oslo timetable by giving the Palestinians an excuse not to take up "final status talks" which symbolically opened in May 1996 and were scheduled to resume under the Likud government in March 1997—i.e., simultaneous with, not subsequent to, the FRDs. It also seems to obviate a U.S. commitment to Israel that deemed the determination of the size of FRDs to be a unilateral Israeli responsibility. Nevertheless, the Israeli government has been willing to swallow the Palestinian refusal to accept the

first, U.S.-endorsed FRD from last March as well as greater American intrusiveness into the process as the price to gain eventual U.S. backing for a re-focus of the entire process onto "final status" issues.

> The bottom line is that the administration seems to have set the end of 1997 as a deadline for Israel's decision on the scope and timing of the FRD, the key component of the "package deal" that would trigger "final status talks." At times, U.S. officials have suggested that an Israeli refusal to act by the new year may prompt the U.S. to adopt new declaratory positions about the peace process—not a "Clinton Plan" outlining U.S. preferences for "final status" but still a clear statement of U.S. expectations regarding each side's outstanding "interim" commitments in advance of "final status" talks. Currently, therefore, the key issue on the agenda of the peace process—which has effectively become an American-Israeli, not Arab-Israeli, negotiation—is whether or not Jerusalem will satisfy Washington.

The Jordan factor: Here's where recent events in Jordan come into play. On November 29, the King delivered his annual "speech from the throne" opening the newly elected Parliament. While only a few passages concerned the peace process—including one that asked Jordanians to draw a "distinction between the position of the government and the position of the people of Israel"—what caused a major furor was a phrase declaring Jordan's support for "the Palestinian people's legitimate rights and establishing their independent state on their national soil, with its capital in Jerusalem." Was the King trying to suggest a new position by substituting the usual formulations—"with Jerusalem as its capital" or "Holy Jerusalem"—with new phraseology that might presage some sort of compromise on this hot-button issue? Although it was not the first time the King used the phrase "with its capital in Jerusalem," most parliamentarians smelled a shift. Indeed, when it came time to vote its acceptance of the King's speech, only 37 of the 80 members of parliament endorsed the Jerusalem passage, while more than a quarter of the Jordanian Upper House (Senate)—a remarkably high figure given that all its members were appointed by the King just last month—also withheld their assent.

Faced with such questioning of Jordan's position on a key issue, the King immediately responded. On December 4, he issued an extraordinary letter to his prime minister, Abdul Salam al-Majali, detailing Jordan's policies toward "final status" issues. While citing "what appears to be the continuous attempt on the part of the Israeli Prime Minister to demolish the Palestinian-Israeli Oslo agreements," this 22-paragraph document quickly turns to a specific discussion of Jordan's position on each of the seven items to be addressed in "final status negotiations": security, Jerusalem, sovereignty, refugees, borders, settlements, and water. That the King articulated his sometimes-provocative views on each of these subjects can only suggest that he believes the "final status" talks are themselves imminent. Several items in the King's letter deserve special notice.

Security: Apparently in response to claims made by Ariel Sharon and others that Israel needs to retain the Jordan Valley not just for its own protection but also to protect Jordan from an irredentist Palestinian entity, the King shot back—"these claims are baseless and they are categorically and unequivocally rejected," he said. But instead of resorting to the usual exhortation that Jordanians and Palestinians are one family and therefore have nothing to fear from each other, and instead of any reference to a possible future confederation or federation between the East and West Banks, Hussein offered this blunt answer to Sharon and Arafat alike: "Jordan is quite capable of defending itself." Translation: Jordan recognizes the potential danger of Palestinian statehood but refuses to take the inter-Arab blame for Israel's retention of West Bank territory.

Jerusalem: Not only did the King reaffirm his "capital in Jerusalem" formulation but he also highlighted the Israeli commitment to Jordan's special status in the city, as mandated in the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. This leaves Jordan in the awkward position of relying on Israel to serve as its advocate when Jerusalem issues arise in Israeli-Palestinian talks. In addition, the King signaled possible compromise positions by suggesting that the Holy Places should be "above the sovereign considerations of any state" and by stating that Jordan has "just as much" responsibility to "our Palestinian brethren" as to the overall objective of "achieving the peace of the believers."

Translation: Jerusalem is one issue in which Jordan envisions itself playing a major, long-term role.

Sovereignty: Perhaps the most eye-catching sentence is the King's announcement of his intention to play a direct role in the next phase of negotiations. "The overlapping [Arabic, tadakhul] of Jordanian and Palestinian interests in the interim and final status negotiations require us to coordinate with our brothers... while having full respect for the independence of their negotiating track and for their absolute right to negotiate their rights," the King said.

Translation: Israel and the PLO may have negotiated Oslo on their own, but now that the ultimate disposition of the Palestinian question is on the table, Jordan has given notice that it plans to be deeply involved, every step of the way, though not actually in the bargaining room.

Conclusion: In its immediate impact, the King's letter is a strong indication that one key "peace process" player believes that "final status" talks are imminent, with Jordan apparently operating on the assumption that Israel is likely to do what is necessary to satisfy Washington to get to "final status." In a larger sense, the letter highlights a truth that is often overlooked in the peace process—if there is to be a "final status" accord, it will not only include a contractual arrangement between two parties (Israel and the Palestinian Authority), but it will also comprise a wider understanding, if not full-scale agreement, among three parties (Israel, the PA and Jordan).

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