

Jordan-Israel Peace: Taking Stock, 1994-1997

by [Lori Plotkin Boghardt \(/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt\)](/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Lori Plotkin Boghardt \(/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt\)](/experts/lori-plotkin-boghardt)

Lori Plotkin Boghardt was a senior fellow in Gulf politics at The Washington Institute from 2013-2018.



In-Depth Reports

Despite the multitude of regional, bilateral, and domestic political complications frustrating efforts to build upon peace, Jordan and Israel have made substantial gains toward normalizing relations since signing their peace treaty at Wadi Araba on October 26, 1994. The treaty and more than one dozen subsequent sectoral agreements have established a solid framework for bilateral cooperation and yielded results in each of the political, economic, and cultural fields discussed therein. Heightened tensions surrounding Israel's Operation Grapes of Wrath in Lebanon, the Jerusalem tunnel crisis, Israeli decisions on Har Homa and the first of three further redeployments from the West Bank, and regional reactions to these moves have significantly exacerbated Jordan-Israel ties, but the personal commitment of King Hussein and the royal family to securing bilateral relations has sustained Jordan's support for peace during difficult periods.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

Various indicators provide evidence that the first two years of peace produced economic benefits -- albeit limited ones in many areas -- to both Jordan and Israel. The rise in the number of people traveling to the two countries during this period represents one of the most prominent examples, although regional political crises in 1996 had negative consequences for their respective tourist industries. Israelis crossed the border into Jordan at a rate of 10,000 per month during the first two years of peace, representing over 10 percent of total travelers to the Hashemite Kingdom; Jordanians entered Israel at a significantly lower rate. Peace has also contributed to an increase in foreign investments in both countries. In the two years following the treaty's signing, foreign investment in Israeli companies more than doubled to \$5.5 billion, and foreign direct investment in Jordan increased more than 14 times to \$43 million between 1994 and 1995 -- in part a result of Jordan's austere economic restructuring program.

The implementation of the trade and transport agreements in 1996 has facilitated the flow of people and goods across the border. Bilateral trade from June 1996 (when commercial trade began) to December of that year totaled \$18 million. By the second anniversary of the peace treaty, fifteen joint projects between private Israeli and Jordanian businesspeople were operating in Jordan, employing 1,000 Jordanians. However, most joint projects in the Jordan Rift Valley and Aqaba-Eilat areas -- specifically identified in the treaty for integrated development -- remain in the planning stages. The two states have pursued joint water, environmental, and energy projects

(including water pipelines and dams, oil monitoring stations, and the linking of electricity grids), but many have been delayed or canceled as a result of bilateral and regional political tensions. In general, the drive to strengthen bilateral economic ties has been hindered by complications arising from decades-long economic segregation, the wide disparity between the two countries' economies, various local economic and political interests, and popular Jordanian apprehension about normalizing relations with Israel.

OFFICIAL POLITICAL RELATIONS

Relations between the two countries' leaderships have remained one of the most solid components of peace, although they have not been immune to the tumult of wider Arab-Israeli political issues. The close personal relationship between King Hussein and the late Yitzhak Rabin set the tone for bilateral ties throughout much of the first year of peace, but Israeli activities perceived as provocative by Jordan -- including military action in Lebanon in April 1996 and the opening of a tunnel alongside Jerusalem's Temple Mount in September of that year -- contributed to the erosion of ties between Amman and Rabin's successors, Shimon Peres and Binyamin Netanyahu. The tunnel opening, which Jordan felt violated treaty provisions that give it a "special role" regarding the city's Islamic holy sites, deeply offended Jordanian sensitivities and resulted in the deterioration of bilateral ties to their lowest ebb in the first two years of peace. The Hussein-Netanyahu relationship has also been complicated by what Jordan -- and many others in the Arab and wider world -- perceive as Netanyahu's reluctance to fulfill Israel's obligations under the Oslo accords. Despite this, King Hussein's pivotal role in concluding the January 1997 Hebron agreement and his efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations during the Har Homa crisis in March 1997 illustrate the monarch's continued commitment to both bilateral and multilateral peacebuilding.

NORMALIZATION AND THE JORDANIAN OPPOSITION

Jordan and Israel have established a solid legal and diplomatic framework for cooperative efforts in many fields, but actually fulfilling the promise of cooperation has been slow and produced mixed results. Heightened regional tensions in 1996-1997 have strengthened Jordan's uncompromising opponents to normalization, who have dominated the kingdom's domestic political debate since the establishment of formal relations with Israel. Although Jordanians routinely travel to Israel for advanced medical treatment, and some Israelis enjoy less expensive Jordanian dental services, Jordan's professional healthcare associations and the negative popular sentiment surrounding normalization have discouraged the more substantive links between healthcare institutions that are called for in the bilateral health accord. Implementing the scientific and cultural exchange agreement has met similar problems, although several non-governmental peace societies have sprouted in Jordan and a handful of students and teachers have participated in bilateral exchange programs.

REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The peace between Jordan and Israel addressed fundamental security issues for both countries. For Israel, it transformed Jordan into a buffer against hostile states to the east. For Jordan, it invalidated the notion promoted by some Israeli political figures that "Jordan is Palestine" and qualified the Hashemite Kingdom for significant U.S. economic, military, and political support. At the end of 1996, however, Jordan's focus appeared to shift eastward with the re-emergence of Iraqi oil on the international market as a result of UN Security Council Resolution 986. The restoration of Jordan-Iraq ties may impact upon the Jordan-Israel relationship both politically and economically, through the re-opening of more traditional avenues for governmental relations and trade.

If there is fragility in the Jordan-Israel relationship, it is not because of a lack of commitment by King Hussein but rather because so few people and institutions in Jordan beyond the royal palace share his commitment. Without a broader foundation of support within Jordan's body politic-and especially its political and commercial elite-the durability of the Jordan-Israel peace relationship will remain an issue of intense concern.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lori Plotkin is a 1996-97 Soref Research Fellow at the Washington Institute. She received a master's degree in public administration and a bachelor's degree in government and Near Eastern studies at Cornell University. Ms. Plotkin has also studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and worked for U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in Washington, DC. ❖

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