

Jordan's Agenda: Israel, Iraq, and the Home Front

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Brief Analysis

With Arab League foreign ministers, meeting in Cairo today, taking their most critical stance against Israel since the start of the Madrid peace process—"recommending" that member-states "stop all normalization" with Israel, suspend participation in the multilateral talks, and "reactivate" the Arab boycott—tomorrow's meeting between President Clinton and Jordan's King Hussein assumes added importance. Hussein, after all, is the Arab leader most conciliatory toward Israel, and his envoy in Cairo already announced that Amman will not implement the Arab League recommendation. His visit to Washington provides an opportunity to air new peacemaking ideas that may have emerged from Special Middle East Coordinator Dennis Ross's weekend trip to the Middle East, including suggestions for an accelerated move to "final status" negotiations.

This visit also comes at a time of strategic flux for Jordan. On its western front, Jordan's relations with Israel sank to their lowest ebb earlier this month with the bitter exchange of letters between Hussein and Prime Minister Netanyahu, followed by the killing of seven Israeli schoolgirls by an apparently deranged Jordanian soldier; subsequently, the king's unprecedented series of condolence calls on the bereaved families restored his status among Israelis and smoothed over tensions in his relationship with Netanyahu. At the same time, however, the Jordanian government has been trying to assuage its own disgruntled public, which appears to be turning sharply against normalization. On its eastern front, Amman has begun to look eagerly on the prospect of deepening economic ties with Iraq, in the process criticizing Washington for its reaffirmation of a strict "containment" policy toward Baghdad. The newly installed cabinet of regime stalwart Prime Minister Abdul Salam al-Majali appears to have these three objectives—maintaining relations with Israel, restoring ties with Iraq, and massaging domestic public opinion—high on its agenda.

Security Concerns: The Naharayim attack represented an aberration in normally secure and cooperative Jordan-Israel border relations. In a statement to military officers following the attack, the king urged his troops "to be vigilant to prevent any treacherous or hateful agents from infiltrating our ranks" and argued that "it is a mark of shame on all who saw [the murderer] in his act" and did not shoot him "immediately." In addition to issuing a steady stream of condemnations following the ambush, Jordan announced the appointment of an investigative committee that would include an Israeli representative (Police Commissioner Anton Ayov) despite criticism that this step would

be perceived as an infringement on Jordan's sovereignty.

At the same time, the Hamas suicide bombing in a Tel Aviv restaurant one week after the Naharayim attack focuses attention on the latitude which Jordan gives the organization inside its own borders. While Amman arrested numerous Hamas sympathizers following the anti-terrorism conference in Sharm el-Sheikh one year ago, the status Jordan affords Hamas remains unclear. Hamas's political wing has continued to operate in and issue frequent statements from the kingdom, even though at least one Jordanian minister has described Hamas as an "illegitimate organization" in Jordan and another has said that "there are no Hamas leaders present in Jordan." Hamas's sister organizations—the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated political party, the Islamic Action Front—are tolerated and legal bodies, respectively, and Islamic trends remain the most powerful locus of domestic political opposition to government policy. For the most part, Jordan's close cooperation with Israeli security forces has deflected U.S. and Israeli criticism of the kingdom's uneven stance toward Hamas.

Opposition and Public Opinion: Jordan's Islamist and leftist movements opposed to the peace process have taken full advantage of the Naharayim attack, with several groups—including the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the Jordanian Bar Association (JBA), and the Arab Organization for Human Rights (AOHR)—arguing among themselves for the rights to defend the murderer in court. The JBA led a group of more than one hundred supporters to visit the soldier's family in a show of solidarity, although they were blocked by the police from entering the family's village. Instead, they prayed for the soldier's "victory" and the "Jews' defeat," and announced a committee to provide moral and material support to the soldier's parents. In the first move of its kind, several hundred residents of the al-Baqah Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan protested against Jewish construction on Har Homa, also proclaiming the soldier a "hero."

According to Jordanian press accounts, most Jordanians believe that the attack was provoked by Israeli actions, including Har Homa construction. While a recent shift in favor of the anti-normalization camp seems apparent, popular support for ties with Israel has remained difficult to gauge due to the dearth of public opinion polls. Shortly after the peace treaty's signing, Jordan Times editor George Hawatima suggested that 20 percent of Jordanians rejected peace treaty with Israel unconditionally, 20 percent supported the treaty as they do the regime on all other issues, and 60 percent would determine their position after assessing peace's economic and political dividends. Today, despite the write-off of U.S. debt, the lease of U.S. F-16 aircraft and the naming of Jordan as a "major non-NATO ally" of the United States, most Jordanians believe they have reaped few rewards from peace; many of the limited economic benefits stemming from peace have been offset by Jordan's austere economic restructuring program and a comprehensive Arab-Israeli political settlement is far off. Two polls reported by the U.S. Information Agency in early and mid-1996 indicated that Jordanian support for "normal relations" even in the event of a comprehensive settlement only hovered between 40 and 60 percent.

Meanwhile, Jordan's business community has taken advantage of the popular mood to campaign for reconciliation with Iraq so it can reopen trade routes with a more "natural" trading partner than Israel. (In January 1997, Amman and Baghdad signaled their intentions by signing two trade protocols.) Businessmen note that Jordan has so far received none of the contracts for the supply of humanitarian goods to Iraq permitted under UN Security Council Resolution 986. Moreover, Jordanian traders are quick to note that all Baghdad-bound Aqaba shipments - even goods that are allowed under the original cease-fire rules - are still subject to inspection by agents of Lloyds of London; no such inspections occur on Iraq's other borders.

The Majali Government: In this context, the new government of Dr. Abdul Salam al-Majali—who negotiated and signed the peace treaty in his previous term in office—will balance these three concerns: Israel, Iraq and public opinion. His task seems to be to maintain cordial and constructive ties with Israel, at a time when the Arab world is crystallizing an anti-Israeli consensus; restore amicable relations with Iraq, by distancing Amman from outgoing Prime Minister al-Kabariti's support of Washington's tough containment policy (already, Majali has criticized

Albright's Iraq speech as an infringement on Iraq's domestic affairs); and shepherd Jordan through its third, all-party parliamentary election this autumn. Amman's strategy seems to be to insulate itself from criticism for any rapprochement with Iraq by continuing to serve as the indispensable Arab interlocutor between Israel and the Palestinians. However, the king's letter to Netanyahu and signs that Jordan's public opinion is veering against the peace process serve as a reminder of the strong forces luring Jordan toward closer alignment with lowest-common denominator Arab positions vis-a-vis Israel. The king's visit to Washington—less than a week after Secretary of State Albright's strongly worded reaffirmation of Iraq policy—will be the first test of whether Jordan can turn both east and west at the same time.

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