

King Hussein, Hebron, and the Jordan-Israel Relationship

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Brief Analysis

King Hussein's contribution to closing the Hebron deal reaffirms his special role as an Arab leader that Benjamin Netanyahu and Yasser Arafat both talk with and listen to. His optimism after leaving a pivotal Tel Aviv meeting with Netanyahu shortly before the deal was concluded -- "I leave here confident everything will move in the right direction" -- was important not only for its contrast with comments from other Arab leaders but also because it represents a much more upbeat approach to Jordan-Israel relations, which have soured in recent months. Since the Hasmonean tunnel incident and the subsequent Washington Summit, bilateral ties -- especially on the popular level -- have fallen to their lowest ebb since the signing of the peace treaty in October 1994. Hussein's actions, however, signal that at the highest political level, the relationship remains firm and resilient.

Resistance to Normalization: At the "street level," Jordanian hostility toward Israel and reluctance to engage in normal economic and trade relations run deep. These sentiments are nourished by Jordan's Islamic and leftist political parties and 12 professional associations. When Labor was in power in Israel, Jordan's political echelon took pains to delegitimize this effort and associate closely with normalization initiatives; in recent months, as violence flared in the West Bank and the regional political climate soured, the regime took the pulse of the people and stepped back. As Jordanian analyst Rami Khouri noted on October 15 in the Jordan Times, the tunnel crisis helped transform the Jordanians' "passive skepticism" toward Israel into "mildly active opposition;" in response, he said, the Jordanian leadership's "willingness...[to] foster patience and understanding of the Israeli government...slipped a notch, toward a context in which the leadership now seems more to reflect and articulate Arab anger with Israel than to dissipate or alleviate it."

This opened more room for the opposition to press its case, such as in a popular declaration issued on October 12, calling for resistance to "all forms of normalization with the Zionist enemy." Such declarations had been made before but this time it was signed by an extraordinary array of 38 groups, representing a wide range of political parties, professional associations, and non-governmental organizations. More recently, on January 8, Amman witnessed its largest public demonstration since the Gulf War -- a mass protest against the first Israeli trade fair in Jordan. Organized by former Prime Minister Ahmad Obaydat, the demonstration was supported by 20 of Jordan's 23 recognized political parties. According to press reports, 65 Israelis companies were represented but only "several dozen" Jordanian businessmen -- and no official government representatives -- made their way through the 4,000

protesters into the conference site. Meanwhile, across town a similar conference held by the Jordanian Businessmen Association -- also the first of its kind -- attracted 600 Arab businessmen. Further, the declining interest of Jordan's business community in regional peacemaking initiatives was underscored by its role at the November 1996 Middle East/North Africa (MENA) economic conference in Cairo, as compared with last year's event in Amman. In 1995, Jordan's private sector submitted a package of 137 projects worth \$1.2 billion for review by global investors; in 1996, the private sector did not produce a collective wish list and only around 40 Jordanian businessmen participated.

Bilateral Actions: Paradoxically, this chill on the business-to-business level comes at a time when Jordan and Israel are making great strides toward liberalization of their trade relationship. Just last month, Amman and Jerusalem signed two important agreements on transport and trade that should ease the process of trade and make it less expensive for businessmen. The transport agreement signed December 2 abolishes the cumbersome and costly "back-to-back" transport system -- an Israeli security stipulation requiring goods moving from Jordan to Israel (and from Jordan to the Palestinian Authority) to be unloaded from Jordanian vehicles onto Israeli (or Palestinian) vehicles -- in favor of the "door-to-door" system for bilateral trade. A "Memorandum of Understanding" on trade signed two days later adds nearly 100 new products to the list of those eligible for duty reductions on three grades (100 percent, 50 percent or 30 percent) and recognizes the need to simplify and rationalize the three separate agreements that define trade rules between Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority. This has been a major bone of contention for the Jordanians, who have been prevented by these rules from exporting fully and freely into the West Bank, a natural market. However, these bureaucratic successes are regularly overshadowed by political tensions. Earlier this month, for example, the Hebron impasse was cited in Israeli press reports as the reason why no senior Jordanian official -- including scheduled attendees Prince Faisal bin Hussein and the ministers of transportation and tourism -- participated in the inauguration of Royal Jordanian Airlines' Haifa-Amman route. (The new route was canceled by the airline one week later due to "economic considerations," according to Ha'aretz.) Symbolically, this tension was perhaps best reflected in the opening of Israel's new embassy in Amman (a positive note) which was attended by no senior Jordanian government official (a negative note).

A Strong Foundation: Despite these difficulties, it is important to underscore those areas of the relationship that so far have remained relatively impervious to political tensions. High-level communication is frequent; bilateral tourism continues without incident; security cooperation remains strong and unimpaired; and the king, if not his ministers, continues to press for normalization, even suggesting that it should be pursued with more vigor as a way to counteract the opposite trend.

The most tangible evidence of relations that transcend state-to-state agreements is in the areas of tourism and economic intercourse: an average of 10,000 Israelis per month travel to Jordan (representing more than 10 percent of visitors to that country) and an unexpected flood of Jordanians requesting Israeli visas last summer prompted the Israeli embassy in Amman to increase its staff and expand its quarters; fifteen joint projects between Israeli and Jordanian businessmen operate in Jordan, employing 1,000 Jordanians; and bilateral trade has followed a steadily upward trend since air transport was opened in April 1996 and ground transport two months later. In October alone, the total exchange of goods was valued at \$4 million, with December's new trade and transportation agreements promising continued growth.

Between Hebron and Baghdad: King Hussein's role in bridging the Israel-PA disagreement on the timing for "further redeployments" gave a temporary lift to Jordanian-Israeli relations, at least at the official level. A key question in coming weeks is whether the Jordanian leadership takes advantage of the Hebron agreement to take a more active role in bolstering public support for normalization back home. Recently, there have been persistent anecdotal reports that increasing popular pressure against trade with Israel has spread a chill over the small community of Jordanian businessmen who have, in their own way, taken "risks for peace." This has been amplified by the growing

appeal of Baghdad as a commercial magnet, now that United Nations Security Council Resolution 986 has permitted Iraq to resume limited oil sales on the world market. Given the strategic importance in supporting the strength and vitality of Jordan-Israel peace, finding ways to keep Jordan's private sector turned westward is an important interest for Jordan, Israel and the United States alike.

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