

## Jordan:

### Between Israel and Iraq

Dec 30, 1996



#### Brief Analysis

Jordan's position as a bridge between the Levant and the Persian Gulf, coupled with her small size and lack of natural resources, have created its unique geopolitical role in the Middle East. Despite being surrounded by powerful neighbors, Jordan consistently exercises an independent approach to achieve its national interests. Perhaps the two most complex and interrelated influences on Jordanian behavior are Amman's relations with Israel to the West and Iraq to the East.

Abbas Kelidar: Jordan and Iraq

Because of their intertwined political history, which dates to the British Mandate, relations between Jordan and Iraq have always been of vital national interest to the Jordanians. Iraq has frequently served as a counterweight to pressure on Amman from other Arab states, but has also been a major threat to Jordan on occasion. Jordan has consistently supported the regime of Saddam Hussein, most notably after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 and Iraq's ensuing eight-year war with Iran. During this period, Jordan assisted Iraq in every way possible, serving as a major trading partner, a diplomatic advocate, an oil conduit, and an arms pipeline, all in an effort to safeguard her own territory against the alliance of Iran and Syria. The strength of this relationship was positively demonstrated by Jordan's sympathy for Iraq during the Gulf War.

After the Gulf War, tensions between Jordan and Iraq were strained as a result of Saddam's defeat and the subsequent isolation of both countries. King Hussein seized on the perceived weakness of Saddam's regime (publicly illustrated by the defection of Husayn Kamil to Jordan) in an effort to restore his credibility. To finally embrace the anti-Saddam coalition, the King publicly called on the Iraqi people to overthrow Saddam's regime. But these overtures did not materialize and never posed a serious threat, by themselves, to Saddam's power in fact, they provided Saddam a rallying cry, as many perceived in King Hussein's initiative a bid to restore the Hashemite monarchy to Iraq.

With the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 986 the "oil for food" deal and pressure toward reacceptance of Saddam Hussein among some of the GCC states, Jordan's policy vis a vis Iraq seems to be shifting once again. Jordan is not only looking to a renewed trading relationship with Baghdad but also to a rehabilitated Iraq as a check on Iran's growing strength. King Hussein looks forward to a future role mediating between Saddam Hussein and the United States, but, over the long run, Jordan remains wary of a strengthened Iraq still under Saddam's control and does not view him as a long-term partner. If Saddam remains in power, Jordan may seek an alliance with Turkey as a counterbalance. For its part, Israel might view warming relations between Jordan and Iraq and the reacceptance of Iraq in the Arab fold as a possible mechanism to advance the peace process. An Iraqi regime set on mitigating its economic woes may seek Israel out for peace. A renewed relationship between Jordan and Iraq could also be the catalyst that pressures Syria into a peace agreement with Israel.

Asher Susser: Jordan and Israel

A long list of regional states and external powers see a stable Jordan as a key to regional stability in the Middle East. Israel must be considered to be at the top of this list. This key role, among other factors, has contributed to the kingdom's survival in the face of numerous threats. In essence, Jordan serves as a buffer between Israel and less friendly "outer ring" countries of the Persian Gulf. The recent peace treaty between Jordan and Israel takes this geopolitical reality into account with security arrangements that keep Iraq at a distance by precluding the stationing of potentially hostile foreign troops on Jordanian soil. The true test of this peace treaty, however, is whether Jordan can maintain a balance between peace with Israel and the preservation of its vital links with the Arab hinterland. If Jordan is successful, it would provide a positive model to the region that peace with Israel can be accepted and cultivated along with stable relations with the Arab world. Thus, Israel will look on with great interest to see whether Jordan eventually renews full relations with Iraq without adversely affecting the peace between Jordan and herself.

Jordan has long been forced to maneuver back and forth among Israel, Syria, and Iraq to ensure its own security and independence. For decades after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, it was a well-known secret that Jordan held negotiations with Israel and maintained a clandestine, working relationship with its Labor governments. However, in the late 1970s a number of regional developments led to a realignment of Jordanian foreign policy. Jordan's trust of Israel began to erode with the election of a Likud government in 1977, and its slogan of "Jordan is Palestine." Moreover, the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and its opposition to the regional status quo, was also perceived as a direct threat to Jordanian security. These challenges to Jordanian stability led Amman to look again toward Iraq as a bulwark against Iran throughout the 1980s. Relations between Israel and Jordan warmed again after the Gulf War, when Israel reassured Jordan of its interest in continued Jordanian stability, and Jordan began to distance itself from Iraq with the launching of the Madrid process. This trend picked up steam with the election of Rabin's Labor government in 1992 and subsequent breakthroughs in the peace process. As a result Jordan reestablished its strategic rapport with Israel. In summer 1996, the pendulum swung back once again. The increased tension in the Arab-Israeli peace process which followed Binyamin Netanyahu's electoral victory in May has resulted in a renewed erosion of Jordanian-Israel relations. A pervasive sense in Jordan that peace with Israel has not delivered the expected economic dividend, coupled with the relaxation of sanctions on Iraq through UNSCR 986, is leading once again to a subtle shift and upgrading of relations between Jordan and Iraq.

Ultimately, Amman will probably link continued high-level normalization between Jordan and Israel to the extent of progress on the Palestinian track. Still there is a disturbing sense that Jordanians increasingly believe that expanded economic ties with Iraq not Israel are more likely to provide for Jordan's economic well-being. Jerusalem will presumably monitor Amman's maneuvering between Iraq and Israel closely, to ensure that Jordan's re-engagement with its Arab hinterland does not lead to an erosion of its established peace with Israel.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ron Dolin.

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