King Hussein's Peace Moves in Historical Perspective

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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Brief Analysis

For Jordan, July 1994 may be recorded as the month of breaking down historic barriers. Last week, King Hussein announced to a televised session of parliament his willingness to meet publicly with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Next week -- on the very anniversary of the murder of Hussein's grandfather, King Abdullah, at the hand of a Palestinian assassin -- Israel's foreign minister (and former prime and defense minister) will be welcomed publicly on Jordanian soil by Jordan's foreign minister (who also serves as prime and defense minister). Together, these acts not only bring the Jordanian-Israeli relationship in from the cold, but they also mark the kingdom's "declaration of independence" from three restraints that have impeded progress toward peace in the past: Palestinian nationalism, Syrian hegemonic designs, and the temerity of Jordan's domestic politicians.

Jordan and the PLO: The Race is On

Historically, one of the most powerful shackles on Jordanian rapprochement with Israel was the fear that too open a relationship would ignite the ire of Jordan's large Palestinian population, estimated at half or more of the East Bank. In the early years, before 1967, Jordan suffered from the conundrum of its territorial achievement of the 1948 war: namely, that while the conquering of the West Bank in 1948/49 meant the extension of Hashemite rule westward, the integration of the two populations meant the extension of Palestinian society eastward. Even when Jordanian and Israeli negotiators worked out partial arrangements advantageous to both sides, as was the case on a number of occasions in the 1950s, popular opinion rose to quash them, fearing that some sacred Palestinian right, especially the "right of return," would be sacrificed on the altar of Hashemite/Zionist expediency. In a more violent way, extremists reminded the Hashemites of the latter's vulnerability by murdering Abdullah on the steps of the Al Aqsa Mosque, by blowing up one prime minister -- cousin of the incumbent -- while he was sitting at his office desk, and by gunning down another in a hotel lobby in Cairo.

With the loss of the West Bank in 1967 and the rise of an organized guerrilla movement representing Palestinian nationalism, the challenge faced by the Hashemites shifted to the home front. Jordan was no longer just fearful of the anger of Palestinians offended at sly diplomatic moves with Israel; it was afraid that the guerrillas would oust the monarchy altogether. In 1970/71, the king, army and East Bank elite rallied to suppress ruthlessly the guerrilla state-within-a-state and to evict its forces to Lebanon. The lesson of Black September has lived on in the minds of Jordan's Palestinians, evidenced by the fact that none of them joined in food riots five years ago for fear they would remind

East Bankers of their insurrectionary activity of the 1970s. By the same token, Black September's bloody legacy has prevented Hussein from ever being bolder than the Palestinian leadership in publicly reconciling with Israel.

Therefore, Hussein's post-1970 policy was to stay one step ahead of the assassin's bullet but one step behind the PLO in diplomacy. Because the PLO rarely took a step forward, this left Jordan little room for diplomatic progress. The Oslo Accord finally opened the door, and the day after the White House signing, Jordan and Israel signed their own substantive agenda. Arafat's arrival in Gaza and Jericho opened the door even wider. Now that Arafat has agreed to postpone the "refugee" issue to final status talks, Jordan is free to move at its own pace with Israel; Amman's goal is to define the new Israel-PLO relationship rather than be defined by it.

Bucking the Syrians

The other potent external constraint on Jordan's peacemaking has been Syria. Whether Ba` thist or Syrian nationalist, whether Sunni or Alawi, Syrian leaders have historically liked to see themselves as the dominant authority in Greater Syria, an area extending over present-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and the West Bank/Gaza. Under Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad, this meant that while Damascus countenanced the independence of a Jordanian state (in contrast to Syria's view of Lebanon), it took active measures to ensure that Amman would never move too far outside Syria's orbit on fundamental issues, like peace with Israel.

In 1985, for example, King Hussein undertook what was then a bold plan of peacemaking based on the concept of Jordan-PLO "confederation." The effort was undermined from the start by differences between Hussein and Arafat and, at any rate, never went far enough to entice the Israelis. It did, however, anger the Syrians, who feared isolation and were angered by the king's failure to consult with Damascus. Syria then unleashed a wave of terror and assassination against Jordanian diplomats throughout the Middle East and elsewhere. In the end, Hussein retreated from his plans, and was even cowed into offering an apology to Assad for his own previous provocations.

Today, Hussein seems undeterred. Whether this is because of Syrian weakness, Assad's good intentions, or Jordanian boldness is unclear; some combination seems likely. Syria certainly retains some residual power of intimidation, as it shows in Lebanon, but it has so far restricted its attacks against Jordan to verbal volleys. That may be a positive sign of Syrian intentions or simply a reflection of Syria's loss of perceived power. For the first time, Hussein seems to be betting that Assad's anger will not reverberate too severely against Jordanian interests.

Bucking Up the Locals

Much overlooked by analysts has been the historic reticence of Jordan's civilian leaders to follow the king's lead in the peace process. That was an essential reason why Abdullah's peace moves were aborted: his prime ministers and cabinet members failed to support him and, at critical moments, Abdullah (and his successors) were always burdened with politicians who would deflect, if not actually reject, peacemaking initiatives. Evidently, this too has changed. Hussein's televised speech to parliament, with its large Islamist bloc, was a watershed, but it is no more significant than the public hosting of Shimon Peres by Prime Minister al-Majali of Kerak, head of one of Jordan's most royalist families. This is complemented by the powerful symbolism of the composition of Jordan's main peace team: led by an East Banker of impeccable loyalist ties (Ambassador Fayez Tarawneh, also of Kerak), it includes a Jordanian of Palestinian origin (Abdullah Tuqan) in charge of security issues; a Jordanian of Christian heritage (Munther Haddadin) in charge of water issues; and an East Bank military officer (General Shurdum) in charge of border demarcation.

In the end, it will surely take time before the Jordanian "street" catches up with the king's policy. Indeed, it is much too early to rule out the chance that Islamic fundamentalists may make common cause with leftists, as they did during the Gulf War, and force a retrenchment on the peace process. Nevertheless, with a peace team so composed, it does appear that Hussein's approach toward Israel may no longer be running against the grain of elite opinion, a

historic problem. Together with Jordan's apparent willingness to act against Syrian wishes and in its own interests vis-à-vis the PLO, this bodes well for the overall success of the peace process.

Robert Satloff is the executive director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the author of From Abdullah to Hussein: Jordan in Transition (New York, 1994). ❖

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