

The Forgotten Peace at Twenty-Five: How to Protect and Strengthen Israel-Jordan Ties

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Brief Analysis

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the peace treaty, both parties and the United States have strategic interests in upholding and reinforcing the relationship.

The optimism that characterized the signing of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty a quarter-century ago has long since dissipated. Today, the peace rests on a strong security foundation but lacks popular support, particularly on the Jordanian side. Nevertheless, there remain important opportunities for strengthening Israel-Jordan relations and preserving that pillar of America's steadily eroding security architecture in the Middle East. It is critical for Washington to prioritize Jordan on its agenda. This includes urging the still-to-be-formed Israeli government to take responsible action on two fronts: keeping Amman's interests in mind when formulating policy toward the West Bank, and implementing long-delayed initiatives that would help Jordan's struggling economy.

THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE, THE JORDAN VALLEY, AND JERUSALEM

For political, historical, demographical, and geographical reasons, Jordan regards a two-state solution to the Palestinian issue as a national security priority. Today, the impasse in that peace process has harmed bilateral relations with Israel. On the popular level, Jordanians overwhelmingly blame Israel for the absence of a Palestinian

state and the suspension of meaningful negotiations. This has created a negative environment that political opposition elements in the kingdom have been able to exploit.

Even at an official level, Jordanian decisionmakers are deeply concerned about Israeli policies toward the Palestinians. In addition to their fears about the potential collapse of the two-state solution and the Israeli threat to unilaterally annex parts of the West Bank, the status of Jerusalem has been a constant flashpoint. This is partly because the king's custodianship over the city's holy sites—recognized as Jordan's "special role" in the treaty—gives Amman an outsize part to play in Arab and Muslim affairs and compels it to take a strong stance whenever tensions rise in the Old City, especially developments that could lead to a change in status-quo arrangements surrounding the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.

These fears have led to a nearly nonstop string of mini-crises over the past two years. In July 2017, for example, Israel restricted access to the Haram following a terrorist attack; another tragic incident occurred that same month when an Israeli security guard at the embassy in Amman killed two Jordanians. After a brief improvement in top-level relations, they reached a nadir when Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu **promised to annex** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-will-palestinians-respond-to-netanyahus-annexation-announcement>) the Jordan Valley during last month's election campaign, spurring King Abdullah to warn that such a step would have a "major impact" on bilateral relations.

Throughout this period, anxieties about the Trump administration's much-anticipated Middle East peace plan aggrieved Amman, in terms of both process (i.e., being kept in the dark about the plan's details) and substance (i.e., leaks indicated that the plan would endorse Israel's retention of substantial West Bank territory). Formally unveiling the plan now would only accentuate the differences between the two governments and lead to further tensions, particularly if aspects of the deal relating to Jerusalem and annexation are implemented without Palestinian consent or broader Arab buy-in.

THE TIES THAT BIND, THE ISSUES THAT SEPARATE

Befitting a treaty reached between wartime leaders—the late King Hussein and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin—the two countries have largely insulated their security and intelligence ties from the relationship's political tensions over the years. This is due to their common interests in countering extremist states and groups—from Iran to the Islamic State to Hamas—that view Israel and pro-American Jordan as threats to their worldview. Yet these strategic ties should not be used as an excuse to ignore the long list of bilateral political differences:

The special land arrangement. In October 2018, Jordan notified Israel that it intended to use a clause in the treaty to terminate the twenty-five-year arrangements granting special access to two small parcels of land farmed by Israelis for decades, Baqura (or Naharayim) in the north and Ghamr (or Tzofar) in the south. At the time, the announcement was celebrated in Jordan as a reassertion of nationalist rights. Yet the issue has never risen to the top of the Israeli political agenda, with Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz recently declaring that negotiations to renew the arrangements had failed. While Amman has said it will continue to respect the private property rights of non-Jordanians, no resolution is likely before the special access arrangements officially expire.

Natural gas. Jordan imports almost all of its energy, so finding reliable and inexpensive sources is essential to limiting its extensive public debt. Since the flow of discounted gas from Egypt largely stopped last decade, the kingdom has had to purchase its supplies at much higher prices on the open market. The resulting billion-dollar-plus annual deficit accumulated by the National Electric Power Company (NEPCO) forced Amman to take out huge loans. And when it accepted a \$2 billion loan program from the IMF, it was required to enact unpopular subsidy reforms and tax hikes in return.

During that period, Jordan agreed to a fifteen-year deal in which it would pipe in 45 billion cubic meters of gas from

Israel's Leviathan field in the East Mediterranean, with the first supplies expected to flow in early 2020. Jordan's parliamentary opposition turned the agreement into a major political issue; sorely in need of the gas, Amman protected the deal by referring the matter to the Constitutional Court, which ruled that an agreement between private companies (NEPCO and the American firm Noble Energy) did not require parliamentary ratification. The fact that the government had to rely on the court to protect something manifestly in Jordan's interest underscores the current sensitivity of economic relations with Israel—a dynamic that would likely improve in the context of better Israeli-Palestinian relations.

West Bank trade. Energy deals aside, Israel has not provided Jordanians with anything concrete to demonstrate the “economic dividends” of peace, particularly given its restrictions on the kingdom's access to the West Bank market. From 2013 to 2017, Jordanian exports to that territory constituted less than 3 percent of the Palestinian Authority's total imports, with Israel sending twenty times the value of goods there. Amman has repeatedly asked the Israelis to renegotiate aspects of the 1994 Paris Protocol governing their economic relations with the PA, mainly to allow for expanded Jordanian export of agricultural products, light manufactured items such as home appliances, construction materials, and textiles. So far, though, the Israeli government has prioritized domestic business interests over strategic relations with Amman, even though just a small increase for Jordan would have a disproportionate impact on its economy. This is a natural arena for Washington to play a mediating role, though the absence of official U.S. contacts with the PA hinders the Trump administration's ability to serve as an effective conduit.

Red-Dead impasse. Israel has an excellent track record of providing Jordan with water per its treaty commitments, yet one of the most high-profile projects still stuck on the drawing board is the massive desalination and reclamation initiative known as the Red Sea-Dead Sea Conveyance Project. The plan envisions construction of a desalination plant across from Aqaba to provide Jordan with much-needed fresh water, some of which would be sold to Israel and the PA. The remaining brine would be piped to the Dead Sea to offset the worrisome decline in its water level. While successive Israeli governments have committed to the project, including a recent promise to contribute \$40 million annually for twenty-five years, Prime Minister Netanyahu has never officially signed off, reportedly due to concerns expressed by economists and hydrologists that the effort would be a technical failure. For Jordan, the plan has become a symbol of national pride and Israeli insincerity. Meanwhile, the U.S. Congress has appropriated \$100 million to support the project and would likely continue helping Jordan with water needs under the right circumstances.

SUSTAINING PEACE

The Israel-Jordan treaty is the “quiet” agreement—it lacks both the barrier-breaking quality of the Egypt-Israel treaty and the bitter disappointment of the Oslo Accords. Still, it is a cornerstone of peace and stability in the Middle East and one of the foundations of the U.S.-led regional security architecture. Investing in its long-term success may not be a headline-grabbing policy, but it is essential to prevent further erosion that could make the peace vulnerable to unforeseen shocks.

In this regard, Washington should consider ways in which it can work with the parties to strengthen the political and economic components of peace. At the very least, it should avoid initiatives that would exacerbate Israel-Jordan tensions, which President Trump's still-secret peace proposals would almost certainly trigger if reports about their substance are accurate.

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