

# Making the Most of Jordan's Peace Diplomacy

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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**To follow up on the king's Ramallah trip, Washington should encourage further engagement in the peace process beyond the diplomatic realm, including economic stabilization initiatives and tie-ins with the Abraham Accords.**

**O**n March 28, King Abdullah of Jordan traveled to Ramallah for his first visit to the Palestinian Authority's headquarters since 2017. Although the meeting comes at a sensitive time—with Ramadan, Passover, and Easter set to coincide in the coming weeks—it also signals that Amman is reinvigorating its engagement in Palestinian-Israeli issues. Washington should welcome this shift and work with the kingdom and other Arab allies to prevent destabilization in the West Bank.

## Amman's Interests and Concerns

**J**ordan is the Arab country with the most direct interest in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, for reasons of geography (it has the longest borders with Israel and the West Bank) and demography (a large segment of its citizens are of Palestinian descent). Moreover, its role as custodian of Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem—as recognized in the 1994 peace treaty with Israel and a separate 2013 agreement with “the state of Palestine”—gives it direct equities in the conflict's most sensitive and volatile issue. During the peak years of the U.S.-led peace process, these factors were reinforced by Amman's close relationship with Washington, emboldening the kingdom to play an active, constructive role in various diplomatic efforts. Although it largely supported Palestinian positions, it was willing to exert pressure on the PA when needed.

As for Jordan's wider relationship with the PA, it's complicated. The kingdom champions the two-state solution and has long promoted the PA's diplomatic agenda, but in private, Jordanian officials often express frustration with PA president Mahmoud Abbas. Many view him as an unreliable interlocutor who is often less than forthcoming in his dealings, whose periodic failure to think through diplomatic strategy has sometimes threatened Jordanian interests, and whose successor has yet to be named despite his advanced age of eighty-six. Another cause for concern is the

ongoing volatility in the West Bank—a product of Israeli measures and the PA’s poor governance. Still, Jordan has significant leverage in Ramallah, partly due to historical and diplomatic reasons, and partly due to the fact that senior PA officials and other Palestinians rely on the kingdom for many practical needs, including travel outside the West Bank.

In recent years, the advent of the Trump administration made Jordanians anxious about potential American abandonment of the two-state solution—a fear compounded by their deep suspicion of Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s designs for the Palestinians, his commitment to Jordan’s stability, and his willingness to respect Amman’s role in Jerusalem. In the twilight of his premiership, the political relationship between the two countries came under tremendous strain and only survived because of their strong military and security relations. As a result, Jordan assumed a defensive position regarding the peace process during that period and grew closer to Ramallah, becoming its closest Arab ally in opposing Trump’s peace plan.

## A New Reality

Following the departure of Trump and Netanyahu, Jordan’s relationship with Washington quickly recovered, and its relations with Israel have begun to defrost as well. Initially, the emergence of Naftali Bennett as Israel’s prime minister was met with some trepidation in Amman given his rejection of Palestinian statehood. Yet early interactions reassured the kingdom about his commitment to restoring bilateral relations and enabled progress on a number of practical fronts, including an agreement to increase Jordanian exports to the West Bank.

This new sense of confidence has empowered Jordan to take bolder steps in 2022. On January 5, for example, the Royal Hashemite Court made the symbolically important move of publicizing the king’s meeting with Israeli defense minister Benny Gantz in Amman—a shift from the government’s usual practice of keeping such visits secret. Subsequent Israeli meetings in the kingdom have been publicized as well.

Jordan also became more willing to engage with dynamics surrounding the Abraham Accords, the Arab-Israeli normalization agreements that garnered a tepid reaction from Amman when they were unveiled in 2020. Last November, the kingdom signed a letter of intent with Israel and the United Arab Emirates under which UAE-funded Jordanian solar farms will **export power to Israel (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uae-fund-israel-and-jordans-solarwater-deal>)** in exchange for Israeli deliveries of desalinated water. Yet Amman is still navigating this issue delicately because the accords remain controversial at home—which partly explains the kingdom’s absence from this week’s **[Arab-Israeli summit in Sde Boker \(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-regional-role-israel-washington-shows-signs-stepping-back>\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-regional-role-israel-washington-shows-signs-stepping-back)**.

Subtle shifts have been seen on the Palestinian-Israeli front as well. During the Trump/Netanyahu period, Jordan was unwilling to engage on economic initiatives, fearing that this would facilitate a retreat from the conflict’s core political dimensions. Since then, however, Amman has been reassured by the Biden administration’s return to traditional American support for a two-state solution, and therefore more open to engaging with the current U.S. focus on concrete stabilization measures rather than high diplomacy. Although Jordanian messaging continues to highlight the need for a two-state solution, official statements now regularly note the importance of addressing the PA’s economic concerns.

Beyond Jordan’s understanding of the challenges involved in reviving the moribund peace process, this shift can also be attributed to its deep concerns about instability in the West Bank. The overall situation there is turbulent, whether one is looking at the embattled Palestinian economy, the legitimacy crisis facing the PA, the violence committed by Israeli settlers, the effects of certain Israeli government policies, the ongoing Hamas efforts to commit terrorist attacks, or other factors. Conditions on the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif during Ramadan merit

special attention, particularly given Jordan's persistent concerns about Israeli challenges to the status quo arrangements there. In 2017, for example, Israeli actions at the holy site sparked a crisis that nearly severed bilateral relations.

Although King Abdullah addressed the issue of Ramadan calm when he visited Ramallah this week, it was not the primary reason for his trip. Such issues are usually handled at the operational level, and Jordanian officials had already been discussing it with their counterparts in Israel, the PA, the United States, and other relevant governments. Moreover, Abbas is a frequent visitor to Amman, so the king has ample opportunities to discuss any political-level concerns without needing to travel to the West Bank. Instead, the visit was intended to signal Jordan's willingness to resume a more energetic role in the peace process.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

**W**ashington should welcome this reinvigorated Jordanian engagement, which can be harnessed to advance the current U.S. policy of addressing immediate economic and security challenges while keeping a long-term eye on the two-state solution. In particular, Amman can be an effective channel for urging the Palestinian leadership to facilitate progress on the ground, as has been the case with efforts to de-escalate tensions ahead of Ramadan. The kingdom might also be able to help dilute the PA's opposition to the Abraham Accords. Some preliminary efforts to that effect have been made, but Washington can encourage Jordan to intensify them. Moreover, Amman has significant leverage to budge the PA on some of the West Bank's urgent governance challenges if the Biden administration decides to address those issues.

On the broader regional front, Jordan's increased comfort with the Abraham Accords should prompt the parties to explore more ways for the kingdom to benefit from them, similar to the UAE solar-for-water deal. The United States can strengthen Jordan's involvement by urging other Arab governments to diplomatically support Amman's efforts, and by reminding them about the kingdom's proven willingness to pressure the PA, which can absolve them from that politically sensitive task.

Jordan is already coordinating closely on such issues with Egypt and the UAE. And although its relations with Saudi Arabia have been frosty for some time, there have been recent signs of a thaw, including King Abdullah's March 21 phone call with Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman, their first in nearly a year. Current U.S.-Saudi relations may lack the bandwidth to take this issue further at the moment, but Riyadh's support will ultimately be needed for a full-fledged regional approach to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In the nearer term, existing efforts could culminate in a meeting of senior U.S. and Arab officials in Ramallah—both to show the PA that its concerns have not been marginalized and to pressure it to engage positively with Washington's current approach.

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