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Perfect Tense: Comparing Israel's Ties with Jordan and Turkey

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Brief Analysis

The strategic interests of Jordan and Israel overlap to a remarkable, multilayered fashion. Both countries have shared the unenviable position of being primary targets of Arab, Islamist, and other radicals since their respective founding in 1946 and 1948. Yet their common challenges have not obviated real and recurring divergences of interests that previously culminated in armed conflict. In their case at least, the adage that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” did not always hold.

Ultimately, however, the concurrence of state interests has won over the centrifugal forces pulling the two neighboring states apart. The signing of the peace treaty in 1994 produced a clear, albeit sporadically interrupted, deepening of relations on all levels between the Hashemite Kingdom and Israel. In the economic sphere, the most remarkable developments have included agreements to export cheaper Israeli natural gas to Jordan; arrangements to export Jordanian agricultural products through Israel to Europe and Russia; the joint creation of a free trade zone on a borderland plot that once served as a minefield. In addition to the building of a new border crossing near the Dead Sea to facilitate both tourism and labor movement following the Aqaba-Eilat precedent; and the ambitious Red-Dead Canal, now temporarily stalled, which required extensive joint study of ecological impact, resource management, and institutional integration between the two states.

No less important is bilateral security coordination, which, though largely veiled, remains one of the most robust in the region. This coordination has become institutional in both countries and covers short-term and strategic threats. This includes counterterrorism, border security, containment of Hamas, cooperation along the shared Syrian frontier, and more.

Serious issues, most notably the Israeli-Palestinian stalemate, continue to stress the relationship to a dangerous

level. The fact that this issue is also the primary stressor on Turkish-Israeli relations invites a comparison between the Jordanian and Turkish relationships with Israel.

Friends and Enemies

Despite their very different size, ethnic identity, and geopolitical positions, Jordan and Turkey share several characteristics relevant to their relationship with Israel. These two Sunni Muslim-majority countries have long been members of the regional pro-Western grouping that includes Israel. They also have common borders with Syria and a deep interest in the outcome of the war there. The Iranian (i.e., Shiite) presence in Syria, in both its direct and proxy forms, worries Ankara and Amman. Both see in Israel a natural check on Iranian regional ambitions.

Now and for the foreseeable future, the primary dynamic of Middle Eastern politics is the Israeli-Iranian regional rivalry. Other states in the region, regardless of their size, must position themselves carefully between these two military powers. It is also clear to these states that, for ideological, demographic, and geostrategic reasons, Iran is the more dangerous of the two. Developing defense and security relations with Israel is therefore an understandable necessity for countries like Jordan and Turkey. Such relations have been kept largely secret because of Islamic popular sensitivities, but they are no less substantive for that reason.

These popular sensitivities are inflamed periodically by developments in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Managing their substantive relationships with Israel while publicly keeping it at arm's length has been the modus operandi in both Jordan and Turkey for the past two decades. Turkey, however, has shown that it can carry out a better balancing act.

In this connection, it must be recalled that the political divergence between Turkey and Israel long preceded the Erdogan era. As early as 1975, Turkey voted for the controversial UN General Assembly resolution equating Zionism with racism. It has supported the Arab position in nearly every UN Security Council resolution on the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, this enduring anti-Israel diplomatic posture coincided with a conscious determination not to harm the substantial economic aspects of the relationship.

The Turkish Model

Long-term interests between Jordan and Israel necessitate that Jordan develops a model governing its relationship with Israel; which allows it to overcome political differences (or at least to keep them political) without affecting cooperation in commercial and civic arenas, or slowing down progress in joint water and energy projects. Such a model would have a conflict-management mechanism enabling Jordan to separate the inevitable and passing political crises from the economic and strategic elements in the relationship.

This is not the case today. Recent political crises resulting from security incidents involving Jordanians have led to recalls of ambassadors, suspension of visa issuance, and stoppages of commercial traffic and non-security coordination between the Kingdom and Israel. Such interruptions can cause serious damage to the Kingdom's economy with palpable social and political repercussions. The damage to the Israeli economy is smaller and much more tolerable.

By contrast, at the peak of the Israeli-Turkish spat over the Navi Marmara, commerce and tourism between the two countries continued with little abatement. Between 2010 and 2014, a period of very public and acrimonious accusations and counter-accusations between Ankara and Jerusalem, trade between them surpassed five billion dollars, despite the reduction of mutual diplomatic representation to a bare minimum. Today, after the restoration of full diplomatic relations, the two countries are contemplating new ways to build this mutually beneficial economic relationship: Israel hopes to use natural gas exports to Turkey as a gateway to the European market, and Turkey sees strategic benefit in diversifying its sources of energy.

What Jordan Can Learn, and Teach About Ties to Israel

This tension between the Turkish government's public posture towards Israel and the country's thriving material ties to the Jewish state presents an attainable model for Jordan, a country that seems strangely unable to separate the two. The reason, one could argue, is that Jordan's formal relationship with Israel is younger (since 1994) than that of Turkey's (since Israel's founding in 1948). As a result, Turks have had a considerably longer time to develop civic and commercial relations with Israelis. Add to that the fact that Jordan had waged two wars against Israel, lost land to Israel in one of them, and is the adoptive country of a large number of the descendants of refugees from those wars. Jordan's peaceful relationship with Israel is not only younger, but was preceded by a history fraught with conflict and multi-generational public ill will.

Depending on the will of the political class in Jordan, this last point may prove to be either the most malleable or the most difficult factor stunting the development of a healthier Israel-Jordan relationship. Unfortunately, for the time being, the Jordanian government has shown extreme reluctance to educate the Jordanian public on the strategic importance of the country's relationship with its most powerful neighbor. Both the royalist intelligentsia and the bureaucracy seem to have abandoned the discussion regarding the pivotal relationship with Israel to decidedly anti-Israel forces in Jordan. This abandonment is manifested in the overt hostility displayed towards Israel in the country's media, in the parliament, and in other public fora. At times, even government officials themselves feel compelled to join in token condemnations of Israeli actions.

For intimate observers of the Kingdom, this is a curious situation considering the widespread popular support the monarchy enjoys in the country. In short, Jordan's leadership can use its considerable popular political capital to narrow the gap between the country's clear interest in a normal, thriving relationship with Israel on the one hand, and the adversarial popular feeling towards it on the other.

Speculation on why this has not been attempted range from cultural inertia, to bureaucratic timidity, to bad counsel. However, the divergence between the postures of the Jordanian government and its citizenry towards Israel cannot be indefinitely strained. At some point, Jordan's leaders must make a determined and systematic attempt, beginning with school curricula, to educate Jordanians on why it is in their interest to solidify and normalize the peace with Israel. The authority, logic, and evidence for that argument abound. Only the will to make it is missing. ❖



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