



Why Israel Should Listen to Jordan on the Temple Mount

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Aug 11, 2017

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Brief Analysis

There is much disagreement over how to engage with the deteriorating situation in Jerusalem with regard to security and politics. The recent Temple Mount crisis could have been avoided if there had been a proper assessment of the situation at the political level. Stronger consideration and cooperation with the Jordanian side on issues like this will help Israel find effective solutions to similar situations in the future.

Looking Back:

When Israel occupied East Jerusalem in 1967, then-Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan decided that it would be best if the Jordanian Ministry of Awqaf continued to manage the site in order to avoid any larger conflict with the Islamic world. He decided to allow Jews to visit but not to pray there. Jordan asks Israel to maintain that arrangement, which was legally and formally enshrined by the Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty, signed in 1994. Article 9 of the treaty stipulates that “Israel respect[s] the present special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Muslim Holy shrines in Jerusalem. When negotiations on the permanent status will take place, Israel will give high priority to the Jordanian historic role in these shrines.” This was then confirmed in the meeting between King Abdullah, American Secretary of State John Kerry, and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in Amman in November of 2014. Netanyahu committed to maintain the status quo and to only allow Jews to visit the site, while ensuring Muslims’ exclusive rights to pray there. In October 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu declared openly and unequivocally that Jews were banned from praying at the Temple Mount, something which no previous prime minister had stated in Israeli history.

Meanwhile, the Palestinians’ current position affirms the Hashemite’s custodianship of the holy sites through an agreement signed in Amman in 2013 between King Abdullah and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, which underscored Jordan’s right to oversee the sites until a Palestinian state is established. The agreement also reaffirmed Jordan’s decision to disengage from the West Bank in 1988, apart from the holy sites.

The Jordanian Perspective:

If Israel considers peace with Jordan to be a strategic asset, then it should address Jordan's anxiety and fear about Arabic and Islamic intervention—by, for example, Turkey, Qatar, and other Islamic groups—in the crisis, which the latter want to pursue to expand their influence at Jordan's expense. These groups seek to aggravate the situation in Jerusalem in order to pressure Jordan to take escalatory steps against Israel; it could reach a similar point as November 2014, when Jordan recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv amidst a similarly tense situation at the Temple Mount. Any exacerbation of the relationship between Amman and Tel Aviv should be avoided.

The mutual interests between the two countries require maintaining a framework to manage any discrepancies. Jordan cannot exercise its custodianship over the holy sites and preserve its influence there outside the scope of diplomatic relations with Israel. Similarly, Israel has nothing to gain from the presence of any influence other than Jordan's at the Temple Mount.

However, Jordan's concerns go beyond that. Jordan sees implementing changes at the Temple Mount, such as installing metal detectors at the entrances to the al-Aqsa Mosque or limiting the freedom of prayer-goers by allowing a limited number and preventing others, as a change in the status quo and an Israeli attempt to impose new realities on the ground. This creates tensions not only with Jordan, but with the entire Islamic world. In some ways, the al-Aqsa Mosque is considered the greatest common denominator between Palestinians and the greater Islamic world. Unilateral Israeli decisions concerning the Temple Mount create violent tensions for Israel and the region. They also destabilize the confidence of Arab and Islamic peoples in Jordan's capacity to protect the holy sites in Jerusalem. From the legal side, Israel's unilateral measures destroy the gains in Jordan's legal position made as a result of the peace treaty, as well as the rights resulting from the agreement signed with the president of the Palestinian National Authority.

The most radical groups in the Middle East view the latest incident in Jerusalem as an opportunity to destroy the rapprochement between moderate Sunni Arab states and Israel. There is no easier way to achieve that goal than making use of the Temple Mount and embroiling the al-Aqsa Mosque at the core of the conflict. That would transform the conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis from a national conflict into a religious one, from political maneuverings into an escalating standoff with the entire Islamic world - something Jordan may not be able to control. They have succeeded in this to a certain degree.

Developments which came to fruition over years can be destroyed in days, especially if religious fundamentalists get involved. The Sunni Arab-Israeli rapprochement has reopened a path for Iran's surgeon, Hezbollah, and other extremist Islamic groups. It is in Israel's power to deprive these groups of that opportunity. Since the 1967 agreement, Israel has been responsible for security around the site's grounds, whereas the Jordanian-controlled *waqfs* have been responsible for the site itself. Israel's responsibilities require that it maintain security and ensure freedom of access to worship, without changing the status quo. Israel can achieve security outside of the site, but taking actions like installing metal detectors through which prayer-goers are forced to pass suggests to the world that the Temple Mount is under Israeli control.

Israel's Dilemma:

It is clear that the decision to install metal detectors was imposed by the security agencies at the political level. This is not a problem only in and of itself but rather reflects a chronic historical dilemma in Israeli politics, whereby domestic considerations determine the Israeli government's foreign agenda. That occurred at the secret summit held at Aqaba in 2016, between Netanyahu, King Abdullah, and Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi. Reportedly, the American Secretary of State presented a regional peace plan at the secret summit. The plan included the recognition of Israel as a Jewish state and the resumption of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians with the support of the Arab states. Netanyahu had reservations about the presentation and said that it would be difficult for him to get support for the plan from his governmental coalition. Internal matters again imposed themselves

upon Netanyahu's foreign policy when he presented the American Secretary of State, John Kerry, with a series of measures designed to bring the Palestinians back to the negotiation table; these included providing large-scale building permits in Area C of the West Bank, where administration and security matters are completely under Israeli control. After that meeting, the Israeli Prime Minister tried to advocate the implementation of his plan among the government coalition, but the governmental members of the Jewish Home Party, Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, rejected the ideas, and Netanyahu promptly retracted the proposal.

Consequently, it is not possible to deal with the Temple Mount by taking the internal considerations of Israeli politics as a starting point. Instead, the views of Jordan, Egypt, and other Sunni Arab states must be taken into account. They all share the same geostrategic risks which result from the expansion of Iranian influence in the region.

Going Forward:

Jordan and Israel can meet to create a proposal or a mechanism for future conflict management; this includes forming Jordanian-Israeli committees at the official level and also at the level of the two countries' civil society organizations. Palestinian participation will ensure that any future security or administrative measures will not damage the status quo and will preserve the juridical and historical realities of the holy sites.

Jordanian, Israeli, and Palestinian civil society organizations should participate in creating a conflict management framework. The public should have access to an understanding of the status quo as well as how to preserve it and knowledge about the rights and obligations of every party with regards to the holy sites. This knowledge helps to dampen incitement campaigns as well as tranquilize doubts and the frustrations of the general public. Likewise, it pulls the rug out from under the extreme groups that are trying to ignite a religious war in the region.

The U.S. administration must send a clear message to all of the groups in the area that Jordan alone is the custodian of the holy sites and must not allow any entity to gain a foothold in the Temple Mount at Jordan's expense. ❖



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