

Beyond Elections in Israel and Jordan: The Ties That Bind

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Brief Analysis

Israelis and Jordanians go to the polls hours apart facing strikingly similar political and strategic dynamics. While the results may appear to change little in either government, the issues at stake could hardly be more important to American interests in the region.

On January 18, 2013, Washington Institute executive director Robert Satloff addressed a Policy Forum with David Makovsky and David Schenker. The following are his prepared remarks; read [Mr. Makovsky's observations \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-israeli-election-implications-for-u.s.-policy\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-israeli-election-implications-for-u.s.-policy), or watch [video of the event \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/elections-in-israel-and-jordan-implications-for-u.s.-policy\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/elections-in-israel-and-jordan-implications-for-u.s.-policy).

Why should Washington be interested in these elections? These are two of our closest allies in the Middle East; in an ancient region, these are two very young countries, both with still-maturing, still-evolving political systems. On the surface, they could not be more different. They have very different political cultures and very different political orientations. One is a proportional-representation democracy, the other a not-quite-absolute-but-not-quite-constitutional monarchy. They fought wars against each other in 1948 (when both gained people and territory) and 1967 (when both gained people and only one gained territory). Ultimately, they made peace in 1994.

They are also remarkably similar in important ways. First, both are deeply concerned about the threat of regional turbulence overwhelming them. For both, part of the answer is to make the best of bad situations. That is what the outcome of the recent Gaza conflict was for Israel -- an effective military effort (both for offensive and defensive purposes) that ended with a poorly drafted ceasefire that enshrined few of the objectives for which the battle was fought. For Jordan, the analogue is the decision to let in massive numbers of Syrian refugees, which has stretched its system but which the Jordanians have learned to do as a way to absorb regional shocks.

But both approaches have their limits. For Israel, the limit of its brush with regional turbulence is reflected in the

building of fences -- the security barrier inside the West Bank, then a fence along the Egyptian border, now along the Syrian frontier, and, in all likelihood, eventually on the Jordanian border, too. For the Jordanians, the limits of their flexibility are reflected in their reluctance to get too deeply involved in the Qatari/Saudi effort to arm the Syrian opposition -- they know that if there is blowback, it won't be against Doha or Riyadh, it will be against Syria's near-abroad, i.e., Jordan.

Second, Israel and Jordan also have leaders who are out of step with -- and to the left of -- their country's political center of gravity. Strange as it sounds, Binyamin Netanyahu is the most liberal, left-wing peacenik in the Likud Party; reportedly, he is one of only two Likud parliamentary candidates to support the two-state solution. Similarly, King Abdullah is the most pro-peace, pro-American person among the Jordanian political elite, which itself is much more isolationist and internally focused than Jordan's historic foreign policy suggests. Neither leader reflects the consensus of his governing elite; rather, each defines the margins of that elite.

Third, as is readily apparent, both countries also have difficult, complex relations with Palestinians, internally and regionally. Ironically, Israel provides more representation for its Palestinian population -- Israeli Arabs -- than Jordan does for its own. Regionally, the fate of the Palestinian Authority is of great concern to both Amman and Israel. Alone among Arab states, Jordan has a vital national interest in the survival of a non-Hamas-led Palestinian Authority; for others it is, at most, a preference, while some are openly opposed to the idea of a PA led by leaders even theoretically committed to a nonviolent strategy of negotiated peace. Israel, of course, shares Jordan's interest. For all the posturing, security cooperation -- which has been a key (though not the sole) element in preventing terrorism from the West Bank for several years -- is one of Israel's only two redlines for continued support of the PA. The other is whether the PA decides to use its newfound status at the United Nations to press cases against Israel at the International Criminal Court.

Fourth, both Jordan and Israel also rely on the United States for their security and well-being. Yes, each is independent and fiercely so, but they both have unique vulnerabilities as well. Jordan has relied on external patrons since 1921, including Britain, America, Japan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Today, U.S. political, military, economic, and psychological support is essential to Jordan's survival, both materially and in terms of the message it conveys. This is not to say that the United States always makes the best choices with the assistance it provides. Case in point: rewarding King Hussein for signing the peace treaty with Israel by providing him with F-16s, a decision that carried a high dollar cost but minimal political payout.

As for Israel, U.S. support is a critical element of its deterrent posture. America's role in preventing Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons is essential for Israel, but it goes beyond that, as U.S. support for the Iron Dome rocket defense system underscores. And it is more than financial -- a country with a \$250 billion gross domestic product did not need Washington to provide \$205 million to facilitate the development and deployment of Iron Dome. The strategic connection was what mattered most.

Fifth, both countries also worry that America will be attracted elsewhere and turn on them. As a result, they need continual reminders of U.S. loyalty and commitment. This is a well-known fact about Israel, but it is also true of Jordan.

At the moment, it is *au courant* to compare President Obama to President Eisenhower; many assume this is the image Arabs would welcome given Eisenhower's position on the Suez crisis. Unlike others in the region, however, Jordanian leaders are unlikely to feel this way. They know it was Eisenhower who, in an effort to reach out to the forces of Arab nationalism -- considered the authentic politics of the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s -- signed off on a National Security Council policy directive (NSC 5820/1 of November 4, 1958) that envisioned the partition and demise of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as a reasonable price for good relations with Gamal Abdul Nasser and his ilk. So when the Jordanians see the current administration widely perceived -- justifiably or not -- as an enabler

of the Muslim Brotherhood and Obama as a modern-day Eisenhower, they go on alert.

Similarly, Israeli leaders connect the dots in ways that aggravate their natural sense of worry. They see President Obama nominating a new defense secretary who might do an excellent job in the varied responsibilities that come with managing the Pentagon, but who also has no track record in support of the president's signature Middle East policy, the prevention of an Iranian nuclear bomb. They also heard the president lay down a redline months ago regarding the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons, only to hear the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff recently say -- and I paraphrase -- "Oops, gee guys, it's a lot harder than you think." One cannot begrudge Israelis -- and our Arab friends, for that matter -- considerable concerns about what all this presages for dealing with the Iran nuclear challenge.

So when we look at these two elections, we see two small, resource-poor countries that rely on the wits of their people and the export of something intangible for their national income. In Jordan's case, it is the idea of moderation, a political culture that is fundamentally more peaceful and enlightened than those of its neighbors. Here, it is useful to recall that Jordan's neighborhood includes Iraq, which committed genocide against its own people; Syria, which is currently committing genocide against its people; and Saudi Arabia, which has no compunction about severing limbs as a criminal punishment. By contrast, in Jordan, the usual punishment for insulting the king or other such crimes is to lose one's passport or spend a few days in jail. In Israel's case, the intangible asset is twofold -- first, the idea that the country is the remedy for one of the world's oldest hatreds, and second, that it not only *is*, but *should be* held to a higher standard than other Middle Eastern states.

Elections have little bearing on these realities; in fact, the outcome of the voting may be the least consequential in these countries in recent times. In Israel, there has been stunningly little suspense about the broad shape of the results, and little substance to the policy debates during the campaign. And in Jordan, the question on everyone's mind -- will the winds of the "Arab Spring" blow into the kingdom? -- has very little to do with the election. That is because reform, in the traditional sense of the word, is not the pivotal issue there. Reform in Jordan is not a unifying clarion call for the opposition because the very word means something different depending on who you are. To Palestinians, reform means more political power to complement their economic and demographic weight in the kingdom; to Transjordanians, it means the opposite, i.e., more economic certainty that they will not lose out to Palestinians, and certainly no shrinking of longstanding political privileges.

The real variable in Jordanian political change is whether a critical mass of disaffection takes hold among the regime's core East Bank supporters. So far, that has not happened, but Amman must take more urgent and effective steps soon to ensure that the situation remains so. The United States has a strong interest in that outcome and can do much to help.

Chances are likely that the political situations in Jordan and Israel will look pretty much the same after the elections as they were before, though each government will still face profound internal and external decisions with enormous implications for their country's health, national security, and political stability. In this regard, Jordan and Israel sound a lot like the United States. ❖

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