

Jordan and Palestine

May 8, 2006



Articles & Testimony

Last month, King Abdullah II appointed his former minister of finance, Bassem Awadallah, as director of his office. Awadallah is considered one of the major architects of Jordan's economic liberalization program, which has topped the king's agenda ever since he came to the throne.

The regime's old guard considers Awadallah problematic. But by bringing him back to public service the king is sending a message to the old guard and empowering moderates and liberal forces against the rising Islamic Action Front and their tribal allies.

The king also recently visited the Bakaa refugee camp in northern Amman and openly called on Palestinian refugees in Jordan to "participate in decision-making." Most Palestinian refugees in Jordan are citizens. The king's invitation won many hearts and minds among the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, huge amounts of food and medicine are regularly loaded onto trucks for delivery to the West Bank to help Palestinians survive the consequences of a Hamas-led government.

In the absence of a more open political system and with Jordan's polity fractured along tribal lines, it is significant that Awadallah and former foreign minister Farouk Kasrawi, now special advisor to the king, are both of Palestinian origin.

Perhaps for the first time in the kingdom's history, the king's closest aids are West Bankers -- or at least that's how the majority of Jordanian citizens perceive them. But the king makes it a point to call his palace "The House of all Jordanians."

UNRWA figures show that around 60 percent of Jordan's 5.7 million population are Palestinian refugees. Given that the West Bank was under Hashemite custody between 1948 and 1967 it's not surprising that a majority of Jordanians are descended from areas occupied by Israel in 1967. They have full Jordanian citizenship, though they're politically marginalized.

Recently a debate has emerged among some Arabs and Palestinians about a possible PA-Jordanian security and political reengagement.

Many Palestinian, Jordanian and foreign intellectuals say that the current weakened prospects for a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has forced them to revisit the possibility of unity between the two sides of the river under one political system. The possibility is enhanced by several political and economic signals:

- The appointment of Ma'arouf el-Bakhit as prime minister last summer was a technocratic one. But he amassed vast experience as a military officer while serving in the West Bank and was involved in the Israel-Jordan second-track peace negotiations. Furthermore, he was Jordan's ambassador to Israel, and in charge of the Israel-Palestinian Affairs section in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ever since the Wadi Araba peace treaty.
- Shaping Jordanian and Palestinian public opinion toward the idea of unifying their political interests are news items and commentaries that provide in-depth coverage about the other side of the bank.

- Al-Rai, a state-owned daily newspaper with huge influence on public opinion, has lately been publishing a joint edition with the West Bank al-Quds daily. Both newspapers are circulated together every morning throughout Jordan and the West Bank.

- The Jordan-based Arab Bank has strong ties with both the Palestinian Authority and the Jordanian government, and is considered an economic and financial stronghold of Palestinians in Jordan (and elsewhere). The bank has offered 3.52 million shares at preferential prices to members of the Jordan armed forces. The gesture appeals to the East Bank tribes, who enjoy privileged status and dominate the military and security establishment but fear unity or integration -- or even increasing the number of Jordanians officers of Palestinian origin.

Jordan is running a massive budget deficit. But the Arab Bank has capital reserves of \$580 million and net profits reached \$385.8 million. Its assets are estimated at over \$27 billion and its shares on the Amman Stock Exchange enjoy the highest trade volume.

- Prince Ali bin al-Hussein, the king's half-brother (who is also half-Palestinian) is considered the closest member of the royal family to the monarch.

The position of crown prince remains vacant. And while the palace maintains absolute secrecy over such matters, many suspect that al-Hussein may soon be appointed. He has a down-to-earth demeanor and an interests in sports (he is chairman of the Football Association). He's also managed to become popular among the refugee population and at their sports clubs in Jordan.

Several months ago the prince attended a private dinner at the White House along with the king, President George W. Bush and the First Lady, and members of Congress.

The following day the president described Ali bin al-Hussein in an official White House statement as Jordan's crown prince. There was no official response from the Jordanian embassy in Washington or further clarification from the White House about the reasons behind the president's description.

The king has begun to realize that regional dynamics in Israel and the PA territories are providing all the reasons to revive his father's legitimate political interests in the West Bank -- all without any loud debate of the subject. So while Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his government talk about drawing Israel's final borders before 2010, it remains to be seen whether the map of the West Bank and Jordan -- demographically and politically -- might also be redrawn in the near future.

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