A U.S. Strategic Opening:

America and the Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty, Five Years On

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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Articles & Testimony

I was on a bicycle trip with my wife in the faraway Canadian Rockies in July 1994 when our guide received a call on an ancient two-way radio from my office in Washington.

Jordan and Israel had reached a deal, I was told, and an agreement was soon to be signed on the White House lawn. If I could make it back, there was an invitation waiting for me. We had planned to go on to a wedding in Vermont--a friend of my wife's--but in the argument that followed, I prevailed. Peace, after all, does not happen every day.

I had been present on the South Lawn the previous September, one of the 2,000 or so to witness the jarring handshake that changed Middle East history forever. It was a very different day the following July when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and King Hussein--the two now-dead giants of the peace process--first made their public peace in what was known as the "Washington Declaration."

The ceremony was not only a more intimate affair, with just 400 in attendance, it was also more relaxed and convivial, lacking any of the anxiety of the Rabin-Arafat tête-à-tête. The two leaders clearly liked and respected each other; the two delegations seemed to have forged professional bonds that bordered, in some cases, on friendship. The bit players in the drama--the Jewish and Arab American leaders in the audience who had eyed each other warily in September 1993--had more subdued and complex roles to play this time. To the former, Hussein was the most-liked Arab leader but he provoked among the latter profound ambivalence, given his legendary competition with the PLO. As for the host, I don't particularly recall anything President Bill Clinton said or did that July day, no gentle nudge was necessary to get these protagonists to clasp each others' hands heartily.

Given the relatively small US role in the final making of Jordan-Israel peace, it is fitting that the formal treaty was signed not in Washington--as was the case with Camp David's follow-on accord, the Egypt-Israel peace treaty--but in the Arava three months later. In that regard, the making of Jordan-Israel peace through the personal diplomacy of Rabin and Hussein completed the abortive efforts of King Abdullah and Golda Meir, Samir al-Rifa'i and Reuven Shiloah, almost a half-century earlier.

That is not to say that the US role was inconsequential. Determinative, no; important, yes. Clinton's promise to Hussein to write off Jordan's $700 million debt and campaign for further relief from US allies was, for example, a key

factor in the king's decision-making.

But it is wrong to conclude that such a strategic move for Jordan was made on pecuniary grounds. Peace as a vehicle to heal the still raw wounds inside the US military and security establishment, emanating from Jordan's "belligerent neutrality" in the Gulf War, was a factor, as was Hussein's desire to finally win US help for Jordan's long-delayed military modernization plan, symbolized by the dispatch to Amman of a wing of F-16s. The prospect of the US lobbying estranged Gulf states like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to reopen markets and perhaps provide a petroleum safety net so Jordan would no longer be beholden to Saddam Hussein's Iraq contributed, too. (Despite repeated entreaties, the latter never materialized.)

However, there can be little doubt that Jordan's decision to make peace with Israel was driven first and foremost by the outcome of an internal struggle within ruling circles as to how to react to the Israel-PLO Oslo accords: either to turn inward to an East B ank-oriented "fortress Transjordan" or to seek to shape the surprising, new Israel-Palestinian relationship via Jordan's own peace with Israel.

When Hussein and his brother Prince Hassan bucked much of Jordan's political establishment to move boldly toward open peace--ending three decades (or more, depending on what is counted) of an intensive, multifaceted sub-rosa relationship--Washington heaved a sigh of relief. That happened, one must recall, barely 24 hours after the September 13, 1993 White House signing of the Oslo accords, when Jordan and Israel initialed a "common agenda" for peace that had been ready for almost a year but was left unratified lest Jordan be viewed as making peace with too much independence and iconoclasm. Oslo had changed everything, including the historic Jordanian reluctance to move out of the shadows and into the glare of public peacemaking.

For the US, Jordan-Israel peace was more than just the culmination of years of diplomacy and an important milestone on the road to "comprehensive peace." Within the Madrid process, the Jordan-Israel peace provided the final nail in the coffin of Syria's veto over Arab negotiating strategy, innovative ways to make peace a win-win situation for both parties (that is, the leaseback of lands option), and the strategic depth for Israel to proceed ambitiously down the road to peace with the PLO. In the contest of Arab-Israeli relations, the warm, can-do attitude envisioned in the Israel-Jordan peace treaty may prove to be its most important legacy. Though only partially implemented in the five years since--and despite the fact that Jordan's domestic "antinormalization" campaign is gaining steam--the Israel-Jordan treaty at least offers a benchmark of cooperative peacemaking that goes far beyond the sterile "I'm-over-here-you're-over-there" approach of the Egypt-Israel peace. This agreement certainly provides the yardstick by which to judge all future peace treaties.

For US strategic interests, Jordan-Israel peace has also opened opportunities long constrained by Arab-Israeli animosities. Topping this list is the emergence of the Turkey-Israel-Jordan strategic triangle.

Though more subdued in recent months, this alignment of US friends in the region represents one of the most seismic shifts in Mideast politics since the Gulf War. Building on this, Jordan also offers the additional potential of serving as a bridge between America's non-Arab Middle East allies--Turkey and Israel--and Washington's Arab allies in the Gulf on such issues as missile defense. And despite Jordan's lingering ties with Iraq--Baghdad remains Jordan's largest source of foreign assistance--the Israel-Jordan peace treaty ties Jordan inexorably to America in its contest of wills with Saddam.

Since ascending the Hashemite throne, King Abdullah II has increasingly left his own mark on Jordanian policy, in a way that generally advances US interests. While affirming his own relationship with Israel, especially in military and security matters, he has succeeded in restoring ties with Kuwait and building a relationship with the Saudi crown prince. In so doing, he has helped normalize Jordan's relationship with Israel in the Arab world.

To be sure, it would be reassuring to see Abdullah actually visit Israel (this will come) or lend his personal

imprimatur to a trilateral Amman-Ankara-Jerusalem military exercise. But his courageous crackdown on Hamas--which his father was never willing to do--affirms the strategic worldview Jordan shares with both Israel and the US.

Today, in its capacity as "godfather" of the peace process, Washington needs to deepen its political and financial investment in Jordan and its peace with Israel. Now that "final status" talks are upon us, peace diplomats must recognize that the success of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations depends in no small measure on Jordan's role.

While the "Jordanian option" is a thing of the past, it remains apparent that solutions to virtually every sensitive issue--borders, security, water, economics, refugees, and (despite recent statements to the contrary) Jerusalem--either need or will be eased by positive Jordanian participation. (This does not necessarily mean a formal role in talks.)

What lends special urgency to this task is the deepening popular disenchantment with peace in many parts of Jordanian society and--whether justified or not--the unfulfilled expectations of a "peace dividend."

For Washington, the twin goals of deepening the Jordan-Israel peace and broadening it as a model for other Arab partners remain at the heart of US interests. Obstacles to both are daunting. But building on a realistic appraisal of the five years since the Israel-Jordan treaty was signed and the leadership potential of the heirs to Rabin and Hussein now in power, the former is still attainable and the latter is not impossible.

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