

# Jordan, 'Final Status Talks,' and Regional Challenges

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**W**hen Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian chief negotiator Mahmud Abbas met to discuss final status negotiations this week, one key player was absent: Jordan. But if the Jordanians' role was essential to bring the Wye River talks to closure, their participation in reaching a solution to the more complex final status issues is infinitely more important. Hence, the meeting yesterday between Crown Prince Hassan and Palestinian Legislative Council Speaker Abu Alaa for "effective coordination" on final status issues. Just as King Hussein's heroic contribution to the Wye talks was bound up with Jordanian national interest as well as a more general concern for the sake of peace, so too Jordan's role in final status talks -- largely invisible but always felt -- will have a direct impact on Jordanian security and stability.

Interests in the Peace Process: Jordanian interests in the success of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process are both ideological and pragmatic. While Secretary of State Albright referred to King Hussein's "passion for peace," from a more utilitarian perspective, a complete breakdown in the process could destabilize the foundation of the Hashemite rule. In many ways, Israeli-Palestinian peace is as important to Jordan as it is for the Palestinians and Israelis. The list of Jordanian interests connected to the Oslo/Wye process is long and ranges from the future of Jerusalem and its holy places to the disposition of water in the Jordan River basin. Three overarching interests are:

Demography: Though demographic statistics are hard to come by, Jordan is almost certainly home to up to three million Palestinians, more than one-third of the world's Palestinian population, including about 1 million still classified as refugees from past Arab-Israeli wars. The vast majority of Palestinians living in Jordan, however, are Jordanian citizens. In fact, "refugee" status is often maintained to insure eligibility for "right of return" and/or financial compensation in the event of a final status accord.

Because such a high percentage of Jordanians are of Palestinian origin, any solution to the "refugee" problem will necessarily have significant repercussions for Jordan. Yet because Oslo did not designate Jordan as party to the "final status negotiations," Jordan's formal role is limited to its participation in the moribund refugee working group of the multilateral peace process. Nevertheless, one way or another, Jordan is sure to have a role in the settlement of the refugee issue. Israel and Jordan agreed -- first in the September 1993 Israel-Jordan Common Agenda and later in the October 26, 1994 Peace Treaty -- to include Jordan in these discussions. However, it remains to be seen how the

Palestinians will approach this issue. In his negotiations with Israel, Arafat will most likely want to speak on behalf of the world's entire Palestinian community -- including the Palestinian community in Jordan (and perhaps even the Palestinians inside Israel, i.e., Israel's Arab population). This would be considered an infringement on Hashemite sovereignty, and pose a direct challenge to the stability of Jordan. In effect, by appealing to Palestinian identity without regard to the existing political borders, Arafat could revive the "Jordan is Palestine" option once advocated (and now jettisoned) by Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon.

**Economics:** For several years, Jordan has been seeking its share of the Palestinian market, especially since outlets to Iraq, Syria and the Gulf are severely limited. A combination of Israeli protectionism, security concerns, and existing agreements between the Palestinians and the Israelis have thus far prevented Jordan from establishing itself as a significant factor in the Palestinian economy. In 1997, total Jordanian exports to the Palestinians were only about \$15 million. As the Palestinian economy gains greater autonomy from Israel, however, Jordan will be especially well placed to become the natural source for goods and services to the Palestinians. A closer economic relationship would have several mutually beneficial aspects, and would undoubtedly serve Jordan well. Indeed, the signing of the Wye Memorandum may already be benefitting Jordan: On October 31, Tarawneh met with Arafat in Gaza to discuss Jordanian-Palestinian economic cooperation and an increased flow of Jordanian exports to PA- controlled territory. An improved Jordanian economic relationship with the Palestinians could also provide Jordan with better entry into the Israeli marketplace. In 1996, Jordanian exports to Israel were only \$5 million dollars. Through the first half of 1998 alone, Jordanian exports to Israel exceeded \$20 million.

**Security:** There is little doubt that Jordanian security will be enhanced by continued progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track. Stability in the West Bank almost always translates into stability on the East Bank; anxiety on the West Bank means anxiety on the East Bank, too. Moreover, if Israeli-Palestinian tensions are kept in check, Jordan has a free hand to deepen its own security cooperation with Israel, which has assumed many mutually advantageous forms since the signing of the peace treaty in 1994 -- notwithstanding the stain of the botched assassination attempt on Hamas leader Khalid Mish'al in September 1997.

In a regional sense, progress on the peace process-front has also attenuated lingering residue of Jordan's tilt toward Iraq in the Gulf War and, more recently, opened opportunities for Jordan to participate in and benefit from the flowering of Turkish-Israeli ties. This three-way relationship has many dimensions. In January 1998, a Jordanian officer participated as an official observer to operation Reliant Mermaid, an Israeli-Turkish naval exercise in the Mediterranean Sea. The Jordanian army conducts joint maneuvers with Turkey, and there are plans for the navies to start joint training exercises. Like Israeli pilots, Jordanian F-16 pilots train over Turkish airspace, and it has been reported that Jordanian special forces units have undergone joint training exercises with Israelis. Reports also indicate a high level of collaboration in counter-terrorism intelligence sharing between the countries. In addition, Israel has indicated a willingness to deploy batteries of Arrow anti-ballistic missile missiles in Jordan in times of need. Pursuing these cooperative security initiatives would be much more difficult in a climate of Israeli-Palestinian friction.

**Backdrop of Syrian-Jordanian Tensions:** Emerging security collaboration between Jordan, Israel and Turkey has exacerbated the already tenuous ties between Jordan and Syria. While tension in Syrian-Jordanian relations has deepened as a result of Jordan's peace with Israel, which Syria vociferously opposed, this already bad relationship took a turn for the worse in the weeks prior to the Wye summit meeting. This was exemplified by an October 6, 1998 interview on Lebanese TV, in which Syrian Defense Minister Mustafa Tlas stated "There is no such country as Jordan. It is the south of Syria."

In recent weeks, a significant bone of contention between the two countries has been the issue of Jordanian prisoners in Syria. According to Jordanian Prime Minister Tarawneh, over 700 Jordanians are now jailed in Syria

without justification. On October 19, just two days after Wye convened, the Saudi-owned Al-Hayat reported that a number of Jordanian officials had disappeared while in Syria. Jordanian spokesmen accused Damascus of kidnapping; in response, Syrian officials "challenged" Jordan to provide the names of the missing individuals. Since then, Jordan has released the names of the officials, but the situation remains unresolved. In an interesting twist, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Mousa -- who had just completed a round of shuttle diplomacy between Syria and Turkey -- visited Jordan to offer his efforts as a mediator in the Jordanian-Syrian crisis. An official Jordanian government source welcomed Mousa's visit, but rejected Egyptian mediation.

Most recently, Jordanian-Syrian tensions peaked over the harsh criticism of Jordanian foreign policy leveled by Syrian "academics" broadcast on the Doha-based Al-Jazirah satellite TV station. During the program, which was broadcast in early November, Syrian nationals accused Jordan of conspiring with Israel and surrendering Palestinian land "without any resistance." On November 4, Jordan closed down the station's Amman office. This Syrian behavior is symptomatic of what is clearly the crux of the decline in Syrian-Jordanian relations: the increasing activism of Jordan in support of the Oslo process and the emerging pro-American alignment with Israel and Turkey.

Conclusion: Living in a rough neighborhood, the Hashemites ruling Jordan have long sought to maintain cordial ties with oftentimes rejectionist neighbors even as they advance a pro-peace process agenda. To its credit, Jordan has preserved a remarkable degree of regional equanimity, particularly given the current crisis on the Syrian front and its troubled relations with Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The emerging trend toward a system of regional alliances will only accentuate the Jordanian focus on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. With the onset of final status talks, the stakes for Jordan will be extremely high. The top issues slated for discussion -- refugees, water, borders, security, Jerusalem, and potential Palestinian statehood -- all have a Jordanian dimension. While the talks with appear to be bilateral (or perhaps trilateral, counting the U.S. facilitation role), little progress will be made without reference to Jordan, the party that looms behind the tough decisions on almost all the main explosive topics.

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