

25 YEARS OF WADI ARABA: THE STATE OF JORDANIAN-ISRAELI RELATIONS AND THE FUTURE OF THE PEACE TREATY

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26 October marks the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Peace Agreement between Jordan and Israel, commonly known as the Wadi Araba Treaty. The accord, signed by “the best of enemies” (Ashton, 2008) Yitzhak Rabin, Prime Minister of Israel, and Hussein, King of Jordan, was aimed at ending the state of war between the countries and to facilitate the acceptance of Israel in the region.

Twenty-five years later, serious doubts arise with regards to the future of the treaty. The lack of implementation of most of its clauses, coupled with the continuous worsening of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the short-sighted policies under Netanyahu’s government, have seriously damaged the relations between Israel and Jordan. Against this background, Abdullah II announced in October 2018 the decision of the Jordanian government to not renew the territorial annexes of the treaty. These annexes targeted the lands of al-Baqoura and al-Ghamr, which returned sovereignty to Jordan but were allowed to be used by Israelis for a period of 25 years, after which it renews automatically unless one of the parties decides not to do so, notifying it one year prior to the deadline. The decision, which many Israelis blamed Prime Minister Netanyahu for, should be understood as a wake-up call to Israeli authorities to not take the current situation for granted.

Difficult Historical Relations

Relations between Jordan and Israel have not been easy since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The 1948 war led hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to cross the border and settle in what was then Transjordan, becoming half of the country’s population. This situation and the belief that for some Israeli leaders the Israeli state does not finish on the right bank of the Jordan River conditioned relations between Jordan and Israel until 1994.

This fear explains the Jordanian stance in the 1956 Suez crisis, where the Kingdom sided with Nasser despite their differences, due to the fear of being attacked by Israel, something only stopped thanks to the British intervention (Raad, 1994: 300). During the 1958 crisis, the Israelis looked favourably upon the overthrow of the Jordanian monarchy by the Iraqi revolutionaries, who had previously deposed the Hashemite in Iraq, in order to conquer the West Bank. Later, Hussein reluctantly joined the Six-Day War in 1967 with the sole intention of keeping the West Bank under Jordanian rule. Finally, the Jordanian alliance with Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the 1980s can only be explained in a scenario where Jordan was afraid of becoming an Israeli-Iraqi battleground. This fear of being occupied by Israel or turned into the alternative homeland for Palestinians was the main powerful reason behind the Jordanian predisposition to sign the peace agreement.

This is not to say that there were not relations between the two countries. From the beginning of his reign, Hussein tried to establish secret diplomatic channels with his Israeli counterparts but often they did not work. That was the case specifically between 1966 and 1970, when the growing activity of the Palestinian commandos using Jordanian soil to attack Israel put Hussein in a very complicated position. The king tried to use these diplomatic channels to avoid the harsh retaliation of the Israeli army, which usually claimed many civilian lives. However, the channels failed to stop the 1966 attack on the village of As-Samu, in the West Bank, the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1968 Battle of Karameh.

However, both sides understood that the best way to counter possible threats was to ally with each other. It was not until 1970 that the Israeli leadership came to believe that Hussein (and Jordan) was not as "expendable" (Ashton, 2006: 98) as they were pretending. Since 1970 and following the Black September events, security cooperation started to develop to counter common threats stemming from Palestinian nationalism and, later, from militant Islamism. "The relationship between Jordan and Israel is predominantly a strategic one, and its closeness is expressed predominantly in the national security realm" (Krasna, 2019). This is why the peace treaty is most valued among security officials.

Why Has the Accord Failed to Improve Bilateral Relations?

As we have seen above, the most successful cooperation between Jordan and Israel relates to security matters. However, this dimension predates the existence of the agreement, so cannot be considered a result of it. This collaboration only takes place at the level of the high-ranking officials in the security apparatuses and does not trickle down to public opinion.

This is an issue that requires attention. The Jordanian population was not informed about the peace negotiations and was caught by surprise when the signing was announced. This strategy of deliberately misinforming the public with regards to the negotiations with Israel continues

unabated until today. As a result, political and diplomatic relations have a very low profile as coordination continues through secret channels, something that discomforts Israeli diplomats in Amman.

The failure of the peace accord can be attributed to different factors, which include the almost non-existent economic “peace dividends”. In 1994, Jordanians were told that this agreement would bring substantial economic benefits to the country. This was an essential reasoning behind the signing of the peace agreement since Jordan was trying to recover from the punishment it received for its position with regards to the 1991 Gulf War. Immediately after the signing, the United States wrote off part of Jordan's foreign debt and other arrangements worth over \$3 billion, and aid from the Gulf countries started to pour in.

However, the reality is that 25 years later these benefits have not materialised. Despite the economic growth during the 2000s, since 2010 the Jordanian economy has worsened due to the intake of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees and a rampant public debt. Projects like the Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs) that started in the 1990s were short-lived and bilateral trade between Jordan and Israel is negligible, amounting to just \$100 million in 2015 (Krasna, 2019). Neither have the joint projects, announced with so much fanfare, become a reality. For instance, the Jordan Gateway Project was intended to establish a cross-border economic area where freedom of movement will exist. However, to date, there is only one industrial area with seven operative companies on the Jordanian side, while on the Israeli side just the building of a bridge that gives access to the area has been recently completed.

Besides, the Red-Dead Canal, sold as the epitome of regional peace, is still a draft. The project is intended to alleviate water shortages in both Jordan and Palestine by pumping water from the Red Sea to a desalination plant in Aqaba, half of which will be sold to Israel while the other half will be used in Jordan, with the leftovers being pumped into the Dead Sea to mitigate its decreasing water level. At the same time, Israel will sell water from the Sea of Galilee to both Jordan and the Palestinian Authority. Jordan is very keen to carry out this project since it will make it less dependent on Israel for its water supplies. However, Israeli authorities prefer what they call the “Northern option”, a connection between the Mediterranean and the Dead Sea. Analysts say that the Israeli unwillingness to meet its international commitments prompted Jordanian authorities to not renew the aforementioned treaty annexes.

Contrary to this, the Gas Deal signed in 2016 to export gas from Israel's Leviathan gas field to Jordan was presented as a successful joint project. The deal will allow Jordan to import 45 million cubic metres of gas during 15 years in exchange for \$10 billion, helping it to

diversify its electricity production, heavily reliant on oil. Yet the deal had already attracted great opposition in Jordan from 2014, even though its exact terms were not known until MP Saleh al-Armouti aired them in a conference in July 2019 (Bustani, 2019). Opponents to the agreement criticise it since it runs against the investments in renewable sources but also because it deprives Jordan of money that could be invested in other projects, accusing the Jordanian government of supporting the occupation of the Palestinian territories.

The policies carried out by several Likud governments have undermined the spirit and the letter of the treaty. The death of Rabin in November 1995 struck a blow to the agreement since the ensuing relations between Hussein and Shimon Peres and Benjamin Netanyahu were not warm. During the second half of the 1990s, some actions such as the opening of a tunnel in the Western Wall of the Temple Mount and the attempt to assassinate Khalid Misha'al, Head of the Political Bureau of Hamas, in Amman threatened relations. Abdullah II has continued his commitment to the treaty but has shifted from stronger relations with the Israeli government towards the Americans as brokers of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, this approach is backfiring with the Trump administration.

The anti-normalisation camp in Jordan has strengthened. Before the signing, the Jordanian government led a campaign to garner support for the treaty among the population, where the king himself acted as its guarantor, meaning that opposition to the treaty was opposition to the monarchy itself. 80% of Jordanians were supportive of the Washington Declaration in July 1994 and even in 1997 half of them still believed that the treaty would bring economic benefits for the country (at that moment this belief was shrinking among the elites) (Lucas, 2004). But the actions of the Israeli government, especially in the Temple Mount and the attempt on Khalid Misha'al's life, put an end to it. Opposition to normalisation of ties with Israel has brought together sworn enemies like the Islamists, the leftists and the Arab nationalists. This opposition increased after the 2006 war in Lebanon and the 2008, 2012 and 2014 wars in Gaza, the answer to the 2019 March of Return and the continuous clashes between Palestinians and Jewish zealots in the Temple Mount. Nowadays, the rejection of ties with Israel is widespread not only among the population but also in the political and intellectual class, proven by the many calls for the cancellation of the treaty issued by the Parliament, the last one on 16 October.

Last but not least, **the failure to solve the conflict with Palestinians** is at the root of the "cold peace". Israel's inability to understand that peace with Jordan is directly tied to peace with the Palestinians has seriously undermined the efforts to improve the relations between the two countries. Until a Palestinian state is established, Jordanian fears of becoming an alternative for a Palestinian state will remain in place (Barari, 2019). However, recent developments, such as the last electoral campaigns in Israel, have shown that this is not a priority for any of the political parties.

Dark Clouds over the Horizon

The cold relations between both countries have worsened during the last decade. Despite joint security cooperation in the face of the conflict in Syria and the growing threat posed by ISIS to both Israeli and Jordanian borders, relations between the countries have not improved. On the contrary, they have suffered severe blows with developments such as the killing of a Jordanian judge at the Allenby Bridge border crossing by IDF soldiers in 2014 and the 2017 incident at the Israeli embassy in Amman, which resulted in the death of two Jordanian workers. The handling of the incident by the Israeli government infuriated the Jordanians, who expelled the ambassador and closed the embassy until the Israeli government agreed to compensate families of the deceased.

The US “Deal of the Century” to solve the Middle East conflict (or what is known of it) is not favourable to Jordanian interests. It challenges the Hashemite custodianship of Jerusalem holy sites, which is enshrined in the treaty and that Abdullah II has publicly declared as a “red line”. Rumours about the possibility of giving special status to Saudi Arabia and Morocco on the Temple Mount are a source of concern for Jordanians. In general, the Jordanian authorities feel undermined in their position with regards to the resolution of the conflict since the Trump administration seems to ignore their concerns and there are rumours of reviving the idea of a confederation between Jordan and Palestine. There is real fear in Jordan about a return of the so-called “Jordanian option”, which will turn Jordan into the Palestinian state. Coupled with the recent promises by Netanyahu of annexing the Jordan Valley if elected again as prime minister, these developments cast real doubts about the genuine validity of the treaty itself, which for Jordan is, first and foremost, a guarantee against its conversion into a Palestinian state. Although there is some support in Jordan for the idea of establishing a confederation with the Palestinians, a fundamental condition for that is the previous establishment of a Palestinian state.

Jordanian authorities gave a wake-up call to Israelis when they decided not to renew the territorial annexes to the treaty. How Israeli authorities respond to it will determine if relations between the two countries will improve, remain the same or become even worse. Nevertheless, the acceptance of this “peace” by Jordanians is out of the question until a political solution to the conflict with Palestinians is envisaged.

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