

Briefing Summary: Israel-Jordan Relations

Dr. Abdullah Swalha
Director of the Center for Israel Studies, Jordan

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On 22 March 2017, the Mitvim Institute hosted Dr. Abdullah Swalha for a briefing on Jordan's foreign policy and its relations with Israel. Dr. Swalha, founder and director of the Center for Israel Studies in Amman, discussed the main challenges that Jordan is currently facing, fields of cooperation between Israel and Jordan, sources of tensions between the countries, public opposition in Jordan to cooperation with Israel, Jordan-US relations, and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. This document summarizes the themes discussed in the briefing, which was held at the Jerusalem Van Leer Institute

A. Three Main Challenges that Jordan is Facing

1. **Economic crisis** - Over a million and half Syrian refugees have arrived in Jordan since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, in addition to those from Iraq (400,000), Yemen, and Libya, as well as Palestinian refugees. This has created a big strain on an already problematic economic eco-system. There is a significant water and resource shortage in Jordan, schools are operating in two shifts a day, the healthcare system is in bad shape, and the unemployment rate is high. Around eighty percent of civil society action is dedicated to various aspects of dealing with refugees.
2. **Terror threat** - The international community demanded Jordan open its borders and absorb refugees, and Jordan has done so. This has created an internal security threat, because it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between refugees and individuals affiliated with Islamic State.
3. **The stagnation of the peace process** - Advancing the two-state solution is a Jordanian national interest, but Israeli policies are making this solution unviable. Jordan is wary of alternative scenarios such as an Israeli eviction of Palestinian population in the West Bank to Jordan or a Hamas takeover of the West Bank.

B. Fields of Cooperation between Israel and Jordan

1. **Natural gas export** from Israel to Jordan has been promoted via two agreements signed between the countries. These agreements are of great financial importance to Jordan, however they face opposition from domestic actors in Jordan that reject normalized relations with Israel.

2. **Environmental and agricultural projects** are being developed in the Jordan Valley.
3. **A new border crossing** is being set up near the Dead Sea, in cooperation with Israel's Ministry for Regional Cooperation. This crossing will enable Jordanian workers to work in the hotels in the Dead Sea, as is already done in Eilat.
4. **Jordanian goods**, especially fruits and vegetables, are being exported to Europe and Russia through the port of Haifa as a way of circumventing the limitations imposed on Jordan's trade routes by regional developments.
5. **A free trade area** between the two countries is being advanced at a cost of around 15 million dollars. It is the first infrastructure project promoted between the countries in a long time. Symbolically, the intended location of this area is a cleared mine field.
6. **The Red Sea-Dead Sea Canal**, which would link the Red Sea with the Dead Sea, is moving forward. This project would help Jordan carry water from the north to the south as well as help save the Dead Sea.
7. **Security coordination** is taking place against the Islamic State, and in order to curb Iran and Hezbollah in the Syrian Golan Heights, especially near the Jordanian border. This cooperation happens mostly behind the scenes, and involves high level officials from both countries. It assists Jordan in maintaining stable borders, especially in its north and east.

C. Sources of Tensions between Israel and Jordan

1. **The holy sites in Jerusalem** - Jordan is interested in maintaining the status quo in the holy sites in Jerusalem but Israeli right-wing politicians want to increase the numbers of Israelis that have access to the Temple Mount, including access to pray there. This is causing much friction between the two countries.
2. **The new border fence** - Israel has started building a border fence from Eilat northwards. Israel is doing this in order to stop infiltrators from Jordan, following the closing of the border with Egypt (in Sinai), and to prevent the smuggling of weapons and drugs. In Jordan it is seen differently, it appears to Jordanians that Israel has turned its back on Jordan, that it thinks Jordan is about to collapse and so a physical barrier has to be put up. There is also a fear in Jordan that Israel will eventually decide to evict Palestinians to their side of the fence.
3. **Airport in Timna** - Israel is building a new airport in Timna, to be opened soon, which will be about 10km away from the Jordanian airport in Aqaba. The new airport would harm tourism to Jordan. The dispute about the airport was submitted to an international court.
4. **The Muezzin law** - Because of the special status of the Hashemite family and its responsibility for the places sacred to Islam, there is much anger in the Jordanian leadership about the Muezzin law, which is currently discussed in the Knesset. The law will prohibit the use of loudspeakers by places of worship, and Jordan indicates that it is ready to take political action to stop it.

5. **Settlements and annexation** - It is believed in Jordan that Israel is on its way to annex Ma'ale Adumim and area C of the West Bank. King Abdullah has warned President Trump of the dire consequences of such a move.
6. **Statements by Israeli right-wing politicians** - Politicians from right-wing parties in Israel – including ministers (i.e. Naftali Bennett) – often refer to Jordan as the ultimate Palestinian state, and issue other problematic statements regarding Jordan. Such statements are perceived in Jordan as representing official Israeli policy.

D. Public Opposition in Jordan to Cooperation with Israel

Anything coming from Israel's direction, even if it is to Jordan's benefit, is received in Jordan to no end of public criticism. For example, a statement by IDF Chief of Staff that Israel would be willing to assist Jordan, was perceived in a negative light. This statement was made in the context of a briefing by Israel's Ambassador to Jordan to the Chief of Staff. In the briefing, the Ambassador [stated](#) that she is worried about Jordan's increasing instability. However, it may be possible that she was referring to Jordan's economic instability (due to the refugee flow from Syria) rather than to its political or security instability.

The atmosphere on the Jordanian street is hostile to Israel. The pitiful celebrations which took place after the recent release of the Jordanian soldier who perpetrated the massacre in Naharayim in 1997 showed this. The Jordanian public does not desire a relationship with Israel. It is difficult to even promote a substantial public dialogue concerning Israel. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Jordanian's problem is not with Israelis but with the Israeli government's policy towards the Palestinians. There is almost no civil society cooperation between Israel and Jordan. Cooperation projects that do exist are done in relative secret and are often presented as international rather than bilateral projects.

In the past there were more significant ties between Jordan and Palestinian citizens of Israel, many of whom attended Jordanian universities. There used to be around 10,000 Arab students from Israel studying in Jordan, but today, due to raised fees and a multitude of alternative options, their numbers are down to 1,500. A tighter relationship with the Palestinian citizens of Israel could benefit the bilateral relations of Israel and Jordan.

Cooperation between the countries should receive more public attention. Israeli-Jordanian relations should be more like those between Israel and Turkey. The Turkish government is openly cooperating with Israel while simultaneously criticizing the Israeli government's policy towards the Palestinians, and this is accepted in Turkey as legitimate. Jordan should be able to do the same. In the past, leaders in both countries have been able to rally their publics to war. Now they must rally them to peace. Acceptance and openness towards the other must be promoted, especially in the education system and on social media.

E. Jordan-US Relations

Traditionally, Jordan is a close ally of the US. It receives wide military support from the US, and there is substantial economic and security cooperation between the countries. Jordan takes part in the American efforts against the Islamic State, and there are American soldiers stationed on its soil.

King Abdullah has good ties with Washington, and he is the first Arab leader to have met with President Trump. There is hope in Jordan that Trump will take care of the Iranian threat

better than Barack Obama did. Obama gave Iran the keys to the region at the expense of America's traditional allies in the Middle East. Iran is now in control of four Arab capitals – in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. Bahrain and Kuwait are in danger of joining that list. Iran is perceived as an existential threat to the Arab world, and it is hoped that Trump will tackle the issue head on and act decisively. This could also help promote the peace process.

Trump's declarations regarding moving the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem worry Jordan. As far as Jordan is concerned, such a step would signal that the two state solution is no longer relevant. King Abdullah has warned Trump of the consequences of such a move, and in so doing has contributed to Trump's back-track on his promise on the matter. It is also feared in Jordan that Trump would compensate Israel for this back-track by allowing further building in the settlements

F. The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process

The international community is not showing enough interest in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and is not succeeding in advancing it. The actions of the Quartet are also showing minimal results. In this reality the Arab Quartet – composed of Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – can fill a more central role in the process.

Arab states have a vested interest in promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace. It would help them in the fight against the Islamic State and Iran, and contribute to their economic wellbeing. They have leverage over both the Israeli and the Palestinian sides (including Hamas). The Palestinians, on their part, can benefit from having broad Arab backing on the way towards peace.

Last year, there were several reports about efforts by some Arab leaders to convince Mahmoud Abbas to recognize Israel as the nation state of the Jewish people, in return for progress in the peace process. Despite this, Netanyahu retreated, proof that he is not interested in advancing peace.

The question of what should come first – Israeli-Palestinian peace or Israeli-Arab regional cooperation – is futile. There is no contradiction between the two and they should take place in parallel. Genuine progress in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations needs to be accompanied in tandem with steps by Arab states towards Israel. This is what happened in the past, in the Oslo process of the 1990s.