

## **The Quality of Israel's Peace with Jordan is Dependent on the Israeli-Palestinian Issue**

**Dr. Lior Lehrs \***

**November 2019**

The question of the affinity between the Israeli-Palestinian track and the Israeli-Arab track is a contentious issue in Israeli public discourse. Prime Minister Netanyahu repeatedly claims that the Palestinian issue can be bypassed on the road to normalization with the Arab world, even without progress on that front. However, the history of Israeli-Jordanian relations attests to the strong and intrinsic link between these two arenas. The breakthrough that led to the 1994 peace treaty with Jordan was enabled by progress in negotiations with the Palestinians, and every crisis since in the Palestinian arena is reflected in relations with Jordan. All attempts to warm relations with Jordan and increase cooperation on civil issues (beyond the intelligence and military cooperation) require a parallel move vis-à-vis the Palestinians.

On September 13, 1993, Israel and the PLO signed the Declaration of Principles (the "Oslo Accord") on the White House lawn. The next day, Sept. 14, 1993, an Israeli-Jordanian Memorandum of Understanding was signed at a more low-profile State Department ceremony, laying out an agenda for talks on a peace agreement between the two states. The timing was no coincidence. The back-to-back events point to the strong link between the two channels and the effect of developments in the Israeli-Palestinian context on relations between Israel and Jordan. The joint document had been prepared a year earlier, but King Hussein held up the signing, which was made possible only after the breakthrough with the Palestinians. The King sensed that progress was being made on the Palestinian issue and that he was therefore entitled to move forward on the separate path with Israel.

The Oslo Accord set off an acceleration in Israeli-Jordanian contacts and two weeks after it was signed, a secret summit meeting was held in Aqaba between Hussein and then PM Rabin. In early November 1993, Hussein and Foreign Minister Peres launched discussions on details of the peace agreement. However, at that point the King was still cautious and the meetings remained secret. The May 1994 Israel-PLO Cairo Agreement and Israeli withdrawal in Gaza and Jericho (adjacent to the Jordanian border) led King Hussein to green light a public meeting with the Israeli leadership and to advance toward a peace treaty. On July 25, 1994, Rabin and Hussein signed the "Washington Declaration" that ended the state of war between their two countries, and following further negotiations, the peace treaty was signed on October 26, 1994.

The intrinsic link between the Palestinian arena and Israeli-Jordanian relations was reflected in the opposite direction, too. The crises in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which increased after the 1996 formation of the Netanyahu government, had an immediate and clear effect on the relationship with Jordan. Thus, for example, King Hussein reacted harshly

---

\* Dr. Lior Lehrs is a Policy Fellow and Director of the Program on Israeli-Palestinian Peacemaking at the Mitvim Institute. He is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

to the opening of the Western Wall tunnels in September 1996, and only agreed to renew ties with the Netanyahu government following the intervention of Efraim Halevy, the Mossad man who enjoyed special status in Jordan. Hussein also sent Netanyahu a lengthy, harsh letter following the 1997 Israeli decision to build Har Homa, a new Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem. At the same time, the Jordanian monarch did all he could to save the Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts. In October 1998, suffering from lymph node cancer and undergoing chemotherapy in the US, he nonetheless attended the Wye Plantation summit, alongside Netanyahu and Arafat, to press the sides to compromise on outstanding controversial issues and to take part in the signing ceremony of the agreement.

The escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian arena in the ensuing years was translated into an escalation in Jordanian protest measures toward Israel under King Abdullah, who replaced his father. Following the September 2000 outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, the newly appointed Jordanian ambassador to Israel did not take up his post, and for over four years, there was no Jordanian ambassador in Tel Aviv. Jordan only named a new ambassador following the Sharm Al-Sheikh summit and February 2005 declaration of an Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire. However, Israel's "Cast Led" military operation in Gaza (from December 2008 to January 2009) led Jordan to recall its envoy and a new ambassador was only named in 2012. At the same time, King Abdullah was one of the key Arab players in promoting the Arab Peace Initiative as a tool for Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Jordan is also relevant and connected to virtually all the core issues at the heart of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and it therefore has an important role in any future solution. Thus, for example, Jordan is a key player in the Jerusalem issue and especially on the question of the holy Muslim sites, and both sides have recognized its special status. This recognition is included in the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement and the 2013 agreement between King Abdullah and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) on Jerusalem. Jordan has therefore played a role in various diplomatic efforts to manage Jerusalem-related crises. It was instrumental, for example, in resolving the crisis over the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site at the end of 2014, including meetings by King Abdullah with Netanyahu, Abbas and Secretary of State John Kerry. Jordan was also involved in diplomatic moves to resolve the al-Aqsa Mosque metal detector crisis in 2017 and the 2019 crisis at the Gate of Mercy (Bab al-Rahema).

In the peace agreement with Jordan, Israel committed to give "high priority" to the Jordanian role in the Muslim holy places once negotiations are conducted on a permanent Israeli-Palestinian agreement. Indeed, in the 2007-8 negotiations between then-PM Olmert and Abbas during the Annapolis process, Olmert proposed that Jordan form part of a special regime that will govern the so-called "Holy Basin". The refugee issue, too, relates to Jordan. Some two million Palestinians with UNRWA-issued refugee identity cards reside in the Hashemite Kingdom. Any arrangement on the fate of the refugees would have a dramatic effect on Jordan, meaning that it must be part of future discussions on resolving the issue. Another important issue, which constituted a central controversy in past peace talks and also relates to Jordan is the future arrangement in the Jordan Valley. The debate focuses on security arrangements in the Valley and on the Jordanian border, and also on this issue Jordan is expected to be involved in any agreed-upon future mechanism. On the economic issue, too, there is an affinity with Jordan. Throughout the whole Israeli-Palestinian peace process, different ideas were raised for economic, tourism, technological and environmental projects to be carried out jointly by Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians.

These days, Jordan clearly leads the most assertive line in the Arab world [against a US peace plan](#) (the “deal of the century”), which will not be based on accepted international parameters of the peace process (two states based on the 1967 borders and two capitals in Jerusalem). Jordan also led [the harshest protest](#) against Netanyahu's September 2019 election eve declaration suggesting Israel would annex the Jordan Valley. At the same time, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority (PA) appear to be boosting their cooperation as part of a Palestinian attempt to reduce its dependence on Israel. Representatives of the two sides [recently signed](#) energy, health and transportation cooperation agreements. Jordan and the PA are also leading an axis of diplomatic coordination vis-à-vis Israel and the US. The Jordanian [decision](#) to expand the Muslim Waqf Council tasked with administering the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif compound to include prominent Palestinian figures attests to an attempt to join forces against any change in the status quo at the site.

The recent Jordanian [decision](#) not to renew the 25-year lease arrangement for the Tzofar and Naharayim border enclaves (stipulated in the peace agreement), and reports of Jordan's rejection of a Netanyahu-Abdullah meeting, also point to the deterioration in ties, inter alia against the backdrop of the deep crisis in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Other contributing factors include parliamentary and public pressure in Jordan against relations with Israel, and additional crises such as the 2017 shooting at the Israeli embassy compound in Amman, successive delays in the “Red Sea-Dead Sea” project, and the August 2019 administrative detention of a Jordanian woman. Today's mirror image of the trust and personal relationship between Hussein and Rabin, when they promoted peace moves in the mid-1990s, is the current relationship between the countries' leaders, which is one of deep mistrust. Israel's next government will have to strive to change this situation, to invest resources in bolstering the dialogue with Jordan and to promote diplomatic measures vis-à-vis the Palestinians that would favorably affect relations with the kingdom to the east.