

The Crisis in Israel-Jordan Relations

Summary of a special conference at the Knesset, held by
MK Ksenia Svetlova and the Mitvim Institute

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MK Ksenia Svetlova (Zionist Union) and the Mitvim Institute held a joint conference at the Knesset on the crisis in Israel-Jordan relations. The conference took place on 10 January 2018, after six months of crisis between the two countries, triggered by the shooting incident at the Israeli embassy in Amman on July 2017. The conference was moderated by Jacky Hugi of *Galei Tzahal*, and featured Members of Knesset (MKs) as well as civil society representatives. It also included an intervention (via video) by the Director of the Center for Israel Studies in Amman. The conference speakers emphasized the importance of Israel-Jordan relations, highlighted the common interests of both countries, stressed the need for quick resolution of the crisis, and identified policy steps that can assist the mending of relations. This document summarizes the main points raised at the conference. To view the conference (in Hebrew) on Mitvim's YouTube channel, [click here](#).

A. Opening Remarks

MK Ksenia Svetlova, Zionist Union: Jordan is important to Israel and Israel is important to Jordan. Resolving the crisis between the two countries is a strategic need, but the relations are currently at a low point. We must not neglect our only peace partners in the region – Egypt and Jordan. Resolving the crisis requires complex diplomatic action, but since the beginning of the crisis, there has not been a single discussion in the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee on the subject, despite repeated requests by MKs. It is also not known who on the Israeli side is responsible for the negotiations between the countries and what is actually happening there. The parliamentarians who are supposed to supervise the government's activities are not being briefed and are not receiving any answers about this issue.

Dr. Nimrod Goren, Head of the Mitvim Institute: Peace with Jordan is an asset for Israel, and we must act to mend the relations between the countries. Despite differences of opinion on the Palestinian issue, the two countries have succeeded throughout the years to find paths for cooperation in a range of areas, not just security issues, also including advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and mitigating tensions in Jerusalem. Today, all this is in jeopardy. Israel should clarify the importance it attaches to relations with Jordan, appoint – in public – a senior diplomatic official who will be responsible for resolving the crisis, and apologize for the killing of the innocent Jordanian at the embassy incident. The upcoming visit of US Vice President Pence in Israel and Jordan is an opportunity to convey messages and to make diplomatic progress.

Dr. Abdullah Swalha, Director of the Center for Israel Studies, Amman: Political disagreements should not be allowed to overshadow the cooperation between Jordan and Israel, and a joint mechanism is needed to resolve the bilateral disputes. The two countries should focus on confronting Iran's presence in southern Syria, promoting joint economic projects, and preserving the special role of the Kingdom of Jordan in Jerusalem (Hashemite custodianship over the holy sites for Muslims and Christians) so as to allow Jordan, rather than Turkey, to continue influencing the reality in Jerusalem. There are ways to resolve the crisis that has emerged following the embassy incident, including the appointment of a new Israeli ambassador to Jordan, the prosecution of the Israeli security guard that was involved in the incident, or the joining of a third party as a mediator. It will be possible to reach a solution if the two states discuss this in a constructive and calm manner.

B. Members of Knesset

MK Isaac Herzog, Chairman of the Opposition, Zionist Union: The relations between Israel and Jordan are of strategic importance, and we must support them and improve them in all aspects. We are in a difficult deadlock on the Palestinian issue, and this also affects relations with Jordan. External developments also influence and slow down efforts to mend relations. It is necessary to preserve a positive regional infrastructure as an inseparable part of the efforts to move forward with the Palestinians. I call upon the Israeli government and the King of Jordan to make every effort to mend the relations between Israel and Jordan. Symbolic steps must be taken to bring the peace treaty with Jordan to the fore.

MK and former Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Zionist Union: Peace with Jordan is of great importance to both countries, and the crisis between them could have been prevented by wise statesmanship that does not currently exist in the Israeli government. Instead of dealing with foreign policy and security, the government deals with domestic politics. It makes political gain at the price of a crisis with Israel's strategic partner. The relationship with Jordan affects the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In light of the current window of opportunity that Israel is facing in the Middle East, we must maintain the alliance with Jordan, take action in order to separate ourselves from the Palestinians, and have additional Arab states join our efforts against Islamist terrorism.

MK Nachman Shai, Zionist Union: The peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan are important anchors that provide us with the security that is so important for our future. If we do not uphold these precious peace agreements, we are losing the hope that one day we will be able to live in peace with the Palestinian people. Time is against us, because the more we get used to the idea that the Israeli embassy in Jordan is closed, the more difficult it is to change the situation, and to convince that there is more to Israel-Jordan relations than just the security cooperation between them.

MK Yael Cohen-Paran, Zionist Union: The environmental issue is essential for creating a different existential experience in the Middle East, and it is therefore important to continue developing joint environmental projects with Jordan. The Red Sea-Dead Sea Canal project, for example, is an Israeli-Jordanian endeavor with significant regional implications. Efforts to promote it have been underway since 2002. However, since the outbreak of the Israel-Jordan crisis, the project has been officially halted and question marks are hovering over its future. Although Israel and Jordan have peaceful relations, they still lack mutual trust. Joint regional projects – apart from their practical benefits – can also help build such trust.

MK Oren Hazan, Likud: Israel has peace with Jordan, Israel provides Jordan water and maintains Jordan's security. But Jordan does not pay in kind. The Jordanians could have stopped the crisis in Jerusalem last summer, but they did not do so. It is inconceivable that a state with which we have peace has sat quietly instead of preventing terror and an *intifada*. We want to keep Jordan as our ally in order to distance the enemy from our eastern border. It is also a Jordanian interest. But only when Jordan understands that they are the ones who endanger the peace agreement, from which they benefit immensely, then the attitude towards Israel will change in Jordan. The efforts to resolve the crisis must be done openly, not secretly.

MK Mossi Raz, Meretz: The time has come to stop patronizing the Jordanians. Such an attitude is manifested by the killing of the Jordanian judge at the Allenby crossing in 2014, the shooting incident at the Israeli embassy in Amman last summer, and other incidents. Jordan is taken for granted in Israel and is treated with disrespect. The absence of government representatives from this conference is an example to that.

C. Civil Society Representatives

Prof. Elie Podeh, Board Member at the Mitvim Institute: We must be aware of the seriousness with which the embassy incident is seen in Jordan and understand and refute Jordanian concerns about Israel's intentions in Jerusalem and toward the Palestinians. Trump's declaration just fomented these fears. Jordan should not be taken for granted and efforts should be made by Israel to nurture relations with this country. There are historical examples of serious incidents with our neighbors, which the Israeli political echelon has dealt with effectively, but this has not happened with Jordan, and it is harmful. We need quick action, the involvement of senior politicians in the process, and an apology from a key Israeli public figure regarding the killing of the innocent Jordanian at the embassy incident. Israel also has to pay closer attention to the needs of the Jordanian public opinion, and try to address them.

Former MK and Ambassador Colette Avital, Board Member at the Mitvim Institute: The restoration of peace with Jordan should be in the interest of the Israeli government as well as of the opposition. The Foreign Ministry has to take a leading role in the efforts to mend relations with Jordan, and should have accepted the invitation to speak at this conference. In order to resolve Israel's crisis with Jordan, it is necessary to stop the claims made by Israeli right-wing politicians that the Jordanian King is dependent on Israel for security purposes. There is also a need to reiterate Jordan's special status in Jerusalem, to update Jordan on what is happening on the Temple Mount/al-Aqsa Mosque, and to share information with Jordanian legal experts about the developments in the investigation of the Israeli security officer. As a confidence-building measure, Israel can release some Jordanian security prisoners.

Dr. Gershon Baskin, Chairman of IPCRI: There are many common interests for Israel and Jordan, but the relations between the two countries have reached a low point. Peace with Jordan must also be peace between the two peoples, not just between the governments. King Abdullah is very attentive to his people and Israel is often seen by Jordanians as an enemy. Peace with Jordan is a strategic asset to Israel and in order to preserve it we must build bridges to the Jordanian people. This cannot be achieved without building bridges to the Palestinian people. The Oslo agreement enabled the peace agreement with Jordan, and the collapse of the Oslo agreement could also lead to the collapse of peace with Jordan.

Ofer Zalberg, Senior Analyst at the International Crisis Group: Most Israelis are not aware of the benefit that Israel derives from peace with Jordan and consider it self-evident. It is vital today to explain to Israelis and Jordanians why this peace is important because moving away from the two-state paradigm will probably further undermine Israel-Jordan relations. Jordan is Israel true strategic depth from the east, by virtue of its commitment in the peace agreement to not allow the presence of foreign armies in its territory. When the peace agreement was signed, it enjoyed sweeping support in Israel, both on the political right and left, and it is necessary to maintain such bipartisan support. It is worthwhile launching a public campaign that will emphasize the importance of peace with Jordan.

Uri Ginott, Government Relations Manager, EcoPeace Middle East: Israel benefits a lot from its relations with Jordan, and is not only the giving side. However, there is not enough awareness in Israel of the benefits of the peace agreement with Jordan. In order to advance regional cooperation and have the public support it – especially in Jordan – it is important to emphasize the needs it is addressing and its economic benefits for ordinary citizens. Israel and Jordan can and should develop additional projects that bring strategic economic benefits for both sides, such as water desalination, renewable energy initiatives and the Jordan River rehabilitation. Cooperation should continue even in times of crisis, including issuing entry visas to Israel for Jordanians who are willing to work with us.