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# Middle East Brief

## Israel and Jordan: A Peace in Ruins

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On the afternoon of November 10, 2019, the last Israeli farmers left the tiny peninsula of al-Baqoura (known in Israel as Naharayim), located at the confluence of the Jordan and Yarmouq Rivers, and closed the bridge gates behind them. In the peace treaty signed between Jordan and Israel in 1994, this parcel of land and another small territory called al-Ghamr (or Tzofar by Israelis), in the southern desert, were recognized as being under Jordanian sovereignty but were officially leased to Israel for a twenty-five-year period.<sup>1</sup> The Israelis hoped that Jordan would renew the lease, but one year before it expired, Amman made clear that it had no intention of doing so. Pleas and remonstrations were rebuffed, and the Israeli government finally ceded the territory. The text of the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, often referred to as the Wadi Araba Treaty, emphasized the desire to develop friendly relations and cooperation between the two countries; many in the region hoped that it would also open the way for reconciliation between Israel and the wider Arab world, and place Jordan in a position to mediate a fair settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. None of that has happened.

The failure to resolve the Palestinian issue is often cited as the reason why Israeli-Jordanian relations have remained a “cold peace” twenty-five years after the signing of the treaty. This Brief argues that although this is an important factor, other domestic, bilateral, and regional issues also contributed in critical ways. Ambitious post-treaty cooperative projects meant to link Israel and Jordan economically and in terms of infrastructure failed to materialize.

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*The opinions and findings expressed in this Brief belong to the author exclusively and do not reflect those of the Crown Center or Brandeis University.*

Violence between Israelis and Palestinians set the Jordanian public against cooperative endeavors with Israel. Relations between the security services of Israel and Jordan remain strong, and the border is still open for business and tourism. But hostility and mistrust between the peoples are at this point even greater than they were before the treaty was signed, and each side blames the other for the failure.<sup>2</sup> The peace treaty was hollowed out and is now no more than an empty shell.

President Trump's recently-published plan to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict threatens any vestiges of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty. According to the plan, Israel would annex the western side of the Jordan Valley without consulting Jordan, with whom Israel would share that border. Jordan is also fearful that it will lose formal control of the Noble Sanctuary in Jerusalem and might once again be inundated with Palestinians.

Today, instead of seeing Jordan as its interlocutor with the Arab world, the Israeli government hopes that common interests—especially shared fears of Iran—will push other Arab states, mainly in the Gulf, to cooperate, or even sign peace treaties, with Israel. But while Iran is indeed a common threat and Arab leaders are interested in cooperation, Israel's bungled peace with its closest neighbor—one of only two Arab states with whom it has signed a peace treaty—signals to many in the region that real peace with Israel may not be possible. As long as Jordan and Israel cannot find a way to revitalize their peace and demonstrate its intended benefits, other Arab publics will likely be reluctant to support their leaders' similarly signing formal peace treaties.

### Before the Treaty

Israel's border with Jordan, which runs 200 miles from north to south, is Israel's longest border, and its relationship with its eastern neighbor has always been one of Israel's most valuable strategic assets. In 1970, the Jordanian government crushed what many saw as an attempt by the Palestine Liberation Organization to topple the monarchy by force and make it a launching base for liberating Palestine. In the 1990s, Jordan served as a buffer against Saddam Hussein's expansionist ambitions. In the past decade, Jordan withstood attacks from terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq and consistently prevented infiltrations by militants of all kinds into Israeli territory.<sup>3</sup>

The foundations of relations between Israel and the Hashemite family in Jordan were laid in the 1920s by Jordan's first king, Abdullah (then known as the emir of the Emirate of Transjordan), and the Zionist leadership.<sup>4</sup> Abdullah's grandson, King Hussein, was a frequent guest in Tel Aviv long before any peace treaty was signed. It is now well known that in September 1973, in a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, Hussein gave her the first—unheeded—warning that Egypt and Syria were planning an attack, one that materialized in the Yom Kippur/October war a few weeks later.<sup>5</sup>

These relations were clandestine, however, and known at the time only to the political leaderships of the two countries. Most Jordanians and Israelis were more suspicious of the other side than their ruling elites were. Enmity between the two publics deepened with the occupation of the West Bank by Israel in 1967, as another flood of refugees arrived in Jordan. Infiltrations of Palestinian militants into Israel in the wake of the Six-Day War and Israel's repeated retaliatory attacks

against them on Jordanian soil—including the disastrous Battle of Karameh in 1968—did not contribute to reconciliation between the peoples.<sup>6</sup>

A certain détente could be discerned after the 1991 Gulf War, during which Jordan quietly supported the coalition against Saddam Hussein, and at the subsequent Madrid Conference, aimed at restarting various peace processes. It crystallized after the talks between Israelis and Palestinians in Norway were made public in 1993 and the first steps agreed upon in the Oslo Declaration of Principles were implemented. Peace was in the air, and the treaty with Jordan was signed on the border between the two countries by Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Abdul Salam al-Majali in October 1994. U.S. President Bill Clinton witnessed the signing, while King Hussein and President Ezer Weizman of Israel looked on. Many believed that a sequential series of peace treaties with other Arab states would soon follow.

## The Promise of Peace Shattered

The advantages of the peace treaty for Israel are clear. Since the treaty was signed there have been almost no clashes between Jordanians and Israelis, or between Palestinians and Israelis, across the Israel-Jordan border and almost no successful attempts by militants to infiltrate Israeli territory from Jordan. The IDF is therefore able to defend this long border with a tiny force of a few hundred soldiers. But the peace soon lost its steam, and a cold wind swept away hopes of wider benefits. There were many reasons for this: Quite a few were the result of policy choices, others emanated from regional security tensions, and still others had to do with bilateral issues.

Exactly one year after the signing of the treaty, Prime Minister Rabin—King Hussein’s personal friend and a co-architect of the treaty—was assassinated. Soon afterwards, the Oslo process with the Palestinians sputtered to a halt. Palestinian suicide bombers blew themselves up in buses and malls in Israel, and the Israeli army responded with a heavy hand. After a failed attempt by Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat to find a permanent solution to the conflict at the Camp David summit in the summer of 2000, a second Palestinian uprising erupted, more violent than the first. Witnessing the daily clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces and the killing of Palestinians on their television screens, the Jordanian public’s feelings about peace soured.

One part of the peace that has shown signs of success and remains alive is the joint attempt to create special “Qualifying Industrial Zones” (QIZ) that take advantage of the free trade agreements between the U.S. and Israel. Such zones, in which mostly Israeli entrepreneurs employ cheap local and imported labor, were established in several Jordanian towns. In 2018, work began on another such zone on the border between the two countries, which is projected to employ some 10,000 workers, mostly Jordanian.<sup>7</sup> In order to make QIZ projects work, both sides have attempted to maintain a low profile.<sup>8</sup> But even this aspect of the peace, which is to both sides’ advantage, has encountered many problems and never reached its expected potential. Israel’s attempt to move textile production to Jordan was threatened by the allure of cheap labor in East Asia. QIZ projects were also subject to boycotts and strikes by Jordanians, sometimes supported by Jordanian labor unions. In 2003, this was given further impetus by a *fatwa* published by the influential cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who called on Muslims to refrain from purchasing Israeli and American products.

There were other cooperative projects that did not materialize because Israel failed to comply with commitments that were mentioned in general terms in the treaty and elaborated and agreed upon in subsequent bilateral talks. In other cases, Israel carried out such commitments only grudgingly. The most important one was the plan to connect the Red Sea to the Dead Sea by a canal and water pipeline, an idea enthusiastically embraced by Jordan. Nicknamed “Red-Dead,” this project had several aims. First, it would use the altitude difference between the Red Sea and the Dead Sea (a salty lake approximately –1400 feet below sea level, the lowest point on land) to generate electricity. It would also replenish the supply of briny water to the Dead Sea, which was (and still is) rapidly drying up as a result of irrigation upriver and years of drought.

Another part of the “Red-Dead” project was using electricity generated by hydroelectric power to operate a large-scale desalination plant that would supply the water needs of Amman and its vicinity. A related cooperative project also envisioned building a joint airport for Aqaba and Eilat, thereby creating a joint tourism venture.

But a combination of Israel’s skepticism about whether cooperation with Jordan could be maintained in the long run (including the question of whether the Hashemites would remain in power) and potential environmental impacts raised concerns about the entire Red-Dead venture.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, economic estimates performed

by Israel's Ministry of Finance found that a pipeline from the Mediterranean to the Dead Sea that ran solely through Israeli territory would be less costly and more profitable. The Red-Dead project was, accordingly, quietly abandoned. Even the desalination plant and the proposed joint airport, so crucial for Jordan's economy, did not materialize. Israel finally decided to build a new international hub—now called Ramon Airport—on its own soil, rather than a shared one on the border.

Another article of the peace treaty recognized Jordan's historic role as guardian of the Islamic holy sites on the Noble Sanctuary (*al-Haram al-Sharif*) in Jerusalem (Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock, in an area which Israel refers to as the Temple Mount—*Har HaBayit*) and implied that Jordan should have a function in overseeing these shrines in any agreement on the permanent status of the city.<sup>10</sup> This was in the interest of both sides. For the Hashemite family, Jerusalem was a kind of consolation prize for losing Mecca and Medina to the Saudis seventy years earlier: The former custodians of the Kaaba could still keep one major Islamic holy site under the family's control. For Israel, this was insurance against Palestinian claims to sovereignty over what came to be known as “the Holy Basin” in Jerusalem. As long as Jordan controls this area, Israel can claim that it is bound by a treaty with a Muslim-majority country.

Today, Jordan is still officially in charge of the Noble Sanctuary area, but its control is challenged on all sides. Although Israel recognizes Jordan's role, it has allowed archeologists to excavate the foundations of the compound without Jordanian consent, asserting its right to archeological study of the ancient Temple site. It has also attempted several times to monitor the entrances to the compound. Finally, Israel allows members of an Orthodox Jewish movement known as the Temple Mount and Land of Israel Faithful to enter the area in groups and pray on the platform of the holy shrines, sometimes provoking both guards and Muslim worshippers.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) also strives to wrest that role from Jordan, precisely in order to claim it as part of the Palestinians' heritage and, therefore, their responsibility. It has taken over from Jordan the appointment of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem—currently Muhammad Ahmad Hussein—who regularly preaches at Al-Aqsa Mosque. The PA also organizes crowds to demonstrate against Israeli conduct on related matters, and in its negotiations with Israel it demands sovereignty over the compound. Lately, Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has joined the fray, seeing involvement in Jerusalem as a way for Turkey

to carve another niche as the champion of Sunni Islam and patron of the Palestinians. Finally, Saudi Arabia has suggested several times that control of the holy shrines should be entrusted to an international oversight body—which, in practical terms, would be led by the Saudis.

## Jordan on the Brink

Jordan is at a critical crossroads. More than a million Syrian refugees have fled into the country through its northern border, joining hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and others who found refuge in the kingdom in the last two decades, not to mention the millions of Palestinian refugees who fled to Jordan in the wake of the 1948 and 1967 wars. (Most of those Palestinians were given citizenship, but some are still alienated from the state.) All this has placed an enormous strain on the Jordanian economy. The unofficial unemployment rate is around 30 percent, and about 40 percent of the youth in the country are unemployed. The public debt is almost equal to the country's GDP.<sup>11</sup>

Jordan's Bedouin tribes, whose members see themselves as the original inhabitants of the land and as its rightful owners, have had enough. Some lost their livelihood as the newcomers took jobs and enjoyed government assistance; almost all feel the strain of a struggling economy. Their sheikhs claim that the Hashemite family, enthroned over Trans-Jordan by the British government in the wake of World War I, is to blame for their woes. This was our land, some of the more radical tribal leaders claim, and the Hashemites were our guests. Instead of repaying us for our kindness and hospitality, they sold our land to foreigners.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the economic and demographic pressures that Jordan is under owing to the immense number of refugees it houses, another dynamic that has shaken the country is, from the Jordanian perspective, Israel's repeated breaches of Jordanian sovereignty. In 1997, the Mossad sent agents to Amman to poison one of the leaders of Hamas, Khaled Mashal. The assassination attempt failed, and the operatives were caught. Suspected by many in the Arab world of complicity in the plot, the Jordanian monarch insisted on punishing the perpetrators. In order to have them released from prison in Jordan, the Israeli government paid a steep price, including the release of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin and other Hamas leaders from prisons in Israel.

Already seriously compromised by this and a series of subsequent incidents, relations between Israel and Jordan suffered another blow just two years ago, when

a Jordanian worker in Amman tried to stab an Israeli security guard in an embassy apartment. (Some details were later denied by the Jordanians.) The guard shot and killed the attacker, but the shots also hit and killed the owner of the apartment, an innocent bystander. The guard was arrested, and indignant Jordanians demanded that the Israeli ambassador, Einat Schlein, who was summoned to Jerusalem for consultations, be refused re-entry to Jordan. After lengthy negotiations the guard was released and deported, on the condition that the Israeli government maintain a low profile about the entire affair. But, unable to resist the temptation to score points with his constituency over his success at freeing a member of Israel's security services, Prime Minister Netanyahu held a televised meeting with the ambassador and the guard, commending the guard for his bravery under attack. Jordan's media were infuriated.

Israeli populist politicians continue to pour gas on the fire. Calling for the annexation of the West Bank, they claim that, being majority Palestinian, Jordan, rather than the West Bank and Gaza, should serve as the national home for the Palestinian people.<sup>13</sup>

## Making New Friends, Forsaking Old Ones

In recent years, Israel's ties with Saudi Arabia and the GCC have tightened, often at the expense of Jordan. Instead of supporting Jordan economically, allaying its fears, and finding ways to reassure its population that it intends to solve the Palestinian issue without destabilizing the kingdom, the Israeli leadership has neglected its neighbor. Worried about Iran's growing power and influence and about America's loss of influence in the region, both Israel and the Gulf states have been anxiously looking for new alliances. For the Israeli government this is convenient, as such relationships are openly flaunted as proof that Israel's occupation of the West Bank is not an obstacle to improving international relations, or even regional ones. Thus, Netanyahu visited Oman in October 2018 to great acclaim; his ministers (such as Foreign Minister Israel Katz in June 2019, who took selfies near famous landmarks) visited Dubai; and Israeli athletes are frequent guests in Qatar. Israel announced its intention to build a pavilion in Dubai's international Expo 2020 and will negotiate with Qatar over visas for Israelis to attend the 2022 FIFA World Cup.<sup>14</sup>

These new regional friendships are at odds with Israel's older ones. Relationships between the Saudi and Jordanian kingdoms have seen many ups and downs over the years, but the new generation of Gulf leaders,

led by Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and Abu Dhabi's crown prince, Muhammad bin Zayed, have little patience for Jordan's constant pleas for assistance and see King Abdullah's equivocating support as an obstacle to their regional ambitions of creating a strong, contiguous front to counter Iranian regional proxies and using Israel to prod the U.S. into action against Iran.

President Trump's recently-unveiled peace plan for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which some in the region nicknamed "the deal of the century," has caused a further deterioration of relations between Jordan and Israel. Many in the Kingdom suspect that the plan will end up making Jordan an alternative homeland for the Palestinians. King Abdullah could be pressured to give Jordanian citizenship to West Bank residents, allowing Israel to annex more of the territory without granting citizenship to its inhabitants. Many also believe that one of the selling points Gulf leaders are using to garner support against Iran on the part of the American administration is their purported ability to bring the Jordanian and Palestinian leaderships to heel and convince them to accept such a plan in return for financial assistance. In this scenario, the Saudis and Americans would pay, and King Abdullah would sell Jordanians' birthright. Moreover, the plan recognizes Israel's annexation of the valley west of the Jordan River without consultation with its Jordanian neighbor and accepts Israel's de-facto annexation of the Noble Sanctuary in Jerusalem, weakening Jordan's traditional role as its guardian. Many in Jordan now see a clear, nefarious conspiracy against their homeland in this new American peace plan and associate it with Israel's burgeoning friendships with the Saudis and the Gulf emirates.

With an Israeli prime minister beholden to his right-wing constituency and trying to get reelected before his trial for bribery and abuse of power begins—and with hardly any professional and even-handed policy planning in the United States executive branch as far as the Middle East is concerned—both the American and Israeli political leaderships are oblivious to these concerns. It appears that the Trump administration believes it can buy the acquiescence of the parties involved and sideline Jordan, while Israel trudges along, incapacitated by a series of stalemated elections and with a right-wing government pushing for Trump's "deal of the century" in the hope of retaining its hold on power.

## Leaving al-Baqoura

As the deadline for evacuating the leased territories approached, the media in both countries tried to fan

the flames. The island of Naharayim/al-Baqoura carried historical significance for both Israelis and Jordanians. It was there that the first hydroelectric power plant in Palestine was constructed by Pinchas Rutenberg, a Russian-Jewish pioneering engineer, in the early 1930s. The plant, supplying electricity to both sides of the Jordan Valley, was memorialized in songs and novels as an early manifestation of Theodor Herzl's dream of an ultra-modern Jewish homeland. But it was there, also, that in 1997, three years after the peace treaty was signed, a Jordanian soldier shot and killed seven teenage Israeli girls on a school trip from the town of Beit Shemesh. The incident was etched into memory for Israelis and Jordanians alike when Jordan's King Hussein came to Beit Shemesh in Israel in a chivalrous gesture of reconciliation and, seated on a low stool as is the Jewish custom of grieving families, asked for the families' forgiveness. Despite the tragedy that preceded it, Hussein's gesture became a symbol of the peace between the two countries.

For the Jordanians, Israel's admission in the treaty that al-Baqoura is part of Jordan was a source of pride and a sign that Israel was willing to make concessions for peace. But by 2019, insisting on its return as the twenty-five-year lease neared expiration and not caving in to Israel's pressure to renew, it had become symbolic in different and deeper ways. It was seen by Jordanians as an act of defiance against American policy in the region; it was a way to punish Israel for its transgressions against the Palestinians; and, above all, it was a personal test of King Abdullah's resolve and patriotism. Allowing the lease to expire was seen by the Jordanian people as a small victory against Israel, but also as one against their own king and against President Trump's administration and its unchecked support for Israel.

In the beginning of December 2019, a mere month after the al-Baqoura affair, Netanyahu—trying to hang on to his prime ministership under indictment and with new elections looming—declared that Israel would soon annex the Jordan Valley with President Trump's blessing. President Trump's peace plan will allow Israel to annex part of these territories. Israel's next-door neighbor, the one with whom it had signed a peace treaty twenty-five years ago so that such matters could be discussed in a context of friendly relations, was completely ignored, demonstrating once again what little remains of the peace treaty's once lofty promise.

## Endnotes

- 1 See Article 3, clauses 8–9 of the peace treaty ([“The Peace Agreement between Israel and Jordan—English”](#)). Details are laid out in Annex I (b) and (c).
- 2 In a recent poll conducted by Arab Barometer, the two countries most distrustful of Israel in the Arab world (aside from the Palestinians) were Jordan and Egypt. See [Michael Robbins, “Does Iran Pose Greater Threat to the Region Than Israel? Here Is What Arab Citizens Think,” \*Arab Barometer\*, January 3, 2020.](#)
- 3 See, for example, Curtis R. Ryan, *Jordan and the Arab Uprisings: Regime Survival and Politics beyond the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), esp. chapter 8, pp. 175–87.
- 4 This is most famously analyzed by Avi Shlaim in *Collusion across the Jordan: King Abdullah, the Zionist Movement, and the Partition of Palestine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).
- 5 [Mitch Ginsburg, “Account of King Hussein’s 1973 War Warning Still Deemed Too Harmful to Release,” \*Times of Israel\*, September 12, 2013.](#)
- 6 In March 1968, less than a year after the Six-Day War, as Palestinian Fatah fighters reestablished bases on the eastern side of the Jordan Valley from which to launch raids into the West Bank and Israel, the IDF carried out a massive attack on the main base, near the town of Karameh. Fatah strongholds were destroyed, and the Jordanian army and Palestinian guerillas suffered many casualties. But several dozen Israeli soldiers were also killed or wounded, and some Israeli armored vehicles were destroyed. Karameh was presented by the Fatah as a heroic battle against the “invincible” Israeli army.
- 7 [Royal Scientific Society of Jordan and the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, “The Future of Jordan’s Qualified Industrial Zones \(QIZs\),” \(Amman, 2013\), and Ari Liebsker, “In Five Years This Place Will Look Like Rothschild,” \(Be-od hamesh shanim ha-makom ha-zeh yera’eh kmo rotshild\) \[in Hebrew\], \*Kalkalist\*, August 23, 2019.](#)
- 8 [Sa’eda Kilani, “Boycott Fever in Jordan,” \*Middle East Report\* 226 \(Spring 2003\), p. 25, and Russell E. Lucas, “Jordan: The Death of Normalization with Israel,” \*Middle East Journal\* 58, 1 \(December 2004\), pp. 93–111.](#)
- 9 See the summary of a feasibility study by the World Bank: [Coyne-et Bellier in association with Tractebel Engineering and Kema, Red Sea–Dead Sea Water Conveyance Study Program: Feasibility Study \(“Final Feasibility Study Report: Summary”\) \(Report No. 12 147 RP 05, March 2014\).](#)
- 10 [“The Peace Agreement between Israel and Jordan—English,” Article 9, clause 2.](#)
- 11 [Central Intelligence Agency, \*The World Factbook: “Middle East: Jordan”\* \(page last updated on January 08, 2020\), and “Jordan Youth Unemployment Rises to Almost 40 Percent,” \*Al Jazeera\*, October 3, 2019.](#)

- 12 “Jordan’s Angry Tribes,” *Al Jazeera* (People and Power), July 4, 2019; “Former Jordanian MP Laith Shubeilat Criticizes King Abdullah over ‘Deal Of The Century,’” *MEMRI TV*, June 24, 2018; and “Former Jordanian MP Ahmad Uweidi Abadi Vehemently Criticizes King Abdallah and Queen Ranya Prior to His Arrest on Charges of High Treason,” *MEMRI TV* (Jordan Days Web TV, January 18, 2012).
- 13 For example, former MK Professor Arie Eldad: “Despite the Problematic Relationship with Jordan: We Must Take Advantage of the Trump Presidential Term and Annex the Jordan Beqaa Valley,” *Maariv*, December 7, 2019; Mordechai Nisan, “A State without a Nation: Jordan and the Palestinian Question,” (Medina lelo le’om: yarden vaha-she’elah hafalastinit) [in Hebrew] *Mida*, December 16, 2019.
- 14 For a small sample of the buzz around these relationships, see Raphael Ahren, “Top UAE Minister Urges Strategic Shift in Arab-Israeli Ties; Boycott Was Mistake,” *Times of Israel*, March 28, 2019; Tovah Lazaroff, “Israel to Attend Expo 2020 Dubai, an Arab State with Whom It Has No Ties,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 10, 2019; Ivan Levingston, “Israel and Gulf States Are Going Public with Their Relationship,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, October 24, 2019; Tyler Kotler, “Israel–Saudi Arabia Relations in Focus,” *Honest Reporting*, June 16, 2019; and Ian Black, “Why Israel Is Quietly Cosying Up to Gulf Monarchies,” *The Guardian*, March 19, 2019.



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