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## Middle East Research and Information Project

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### No Jordan Option

by [Marc Lynch \(/author/marc-lynch\)](#) | published June 24, 2004

Could the plan of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to "disengage" from the Gaza Strip "include a Jordanian presence" in the West Bank? So Sharon told his cabinet on June 1, according to the Israeli daily Haaretz. Since then, rumors about such a role for Jordan, far-fetched as they seem, have spread like wildfire through Israeli and Arab political circles. Seeking to assuage fears that Hamas would dominate the Palestinian territories from which Israeli forces withdraw, Israel and the United States have approached Egypt about providing security assistance in Gaza. On June 17, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak met with CIA Director George Tenet, presumably to discuss the details. Reports that a Jordanian security team toured the West Bank in mid-June, without notifying Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, have fueled speculation that Jordan may be amenable to an arrangement similar to Egypt's. The prospect of Jordan's return to territory it occupied from 1948 to 1967 has been taken seriously enough that, on June 14, Jordanian spokeswoman Asma Khader found it necessary to repeat her government's long-standing opposition to the idea. Two days later, King Abdallah II is said to have told George W. Bush of his worry that the Israeli premier might be attempting to revive the "Jordan option."

A renewed Jordanian foothold in the West Bank is highly unlikely. Nearly four years of intensified Israeli occupation policies have devastated the Palestinian economy and radicalized the population, certainly reducing any interest Jordanian officials might have had in taking a poisoned chalice from Israel's hands. The territory nominally on offer, of course, would be much smaller in area than what Jordan formerly controlled, since the Israeli government is determined to hold on (with US approval) to most of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and all of the settlements ringing East Jerusalem. Since ascending the throne in 1999, Abdallah has strongly emphasized economic development over regional politics, and his recent calls for a Marshall Plan for the Middle East would seem to leave him little time or energy for managing a risky West Bank venture. A Jordanian return to the West Bank would draw fierce Arab and Palestinian criticism, making Abdallah—already viewed with suspicion for his close ties to Washington—a lightning rod for the growing anger of the Arab public. The Bush administration, increasingly perceived as a failure, would probably be unwilling or unable to supply the financial or political compensation that might make such a dangerous gambit worthwhile for the young monarch.

Another, less appreciated reason why the king could not contemplate sending troops back over the river is the major transformation that took place in Jordanian identity politics over the course of the 1990s. People of Palestinian origin—many of them descendants of refugees who fled to Jordan in 1948—make up well over half the Jordanian citizenry, outnumbering those with origins on the East Bank of the river Jordan. For the past decade, the Hashemite regime has sought to fashion a national consensus identity that includes the Palestinian-origin citizens while not encroaching upon the prerogatives of the ethnic Transjordanians who compose its main power base. Amid this tenuous balance of forces and identities, talk of the Jordan option is political dynamite. For the current generation of Jordanian nationalists, it is axiomatic that any role in the West Bank would be the first step down the slippery slope of a silent Palestinian takeover of real power within the kingdom.

### Hussein's Maneuvers

The so-called Jordan option has a long and tortuous history. In 1948, the first King Abdallah took advantage of the Arab-Israeli war to lay claim to the West Bank and parts of Jerusalem. He annexed these territories to his kingdom (then known as Transjordan) and granted their residents full citizenship. In the mid-1960s, the Palestine Liberation Organization, with its claim to represent all Palestinians, emerged to threaten Jordan as much as it did Israel. When Jordan lost the West Bank and East Jerusalem to Israel in 1967, it found itself locked in a bitter struggle with the PLO over the right to sovereignty in those lands—a struggle which culminated in the bloody and unforgotten "Black September" war of 1970. Jordan reluctantly acceded to the consensus of the 1974 Arab Summit in Rabat that declared the PLO to be the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people," but the Jordanian state remained largely convinced of the legitimacy of its own rule over the lost territories and their inhabitants. King Hussein maneuvered to keep the Jordan option alive as a matter of both principle and self-interest.

Prior to the breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian "peace process" at Oslo in 1993, Israel and the US were fearful of the PLO and so backed the more pliable Hussein's claim to be the appropriate interlocutor for the Palestinians of the West Bank. Ariel Sharon and the right wing of Israel's Likud Party, however, had a very different conception of the Jordan option. By their lights, there was no need to create a state for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza because a Palestinian state already existed in Jordan. In opposition to the US and Israeli governments, Sharon saw the Hashemite monarchy as an obstacle rather than an ally, and advocated the overthrow of Hussein and the creation of a Palestinian state on the East Bank. The Jordanian regime watched with great trepidation as the Likud governments of the 1980s rapidly established settlements on the West Bank (creating what Sharon called "facts on the ground") and encouraged a quiet exodus of Palestinians across the Allenby Bridge into Jordan. Many Jordanians feared that Israel would solve its Palestinian problem at Jordan's expense.

### "Severing of Ties"

When the first Palestinian intifada broke out in late 1987, the Jordanian regime was struggling economically and increasingly repressive politically. In 1988, Hussein shocked almost everyone by declaring a "severing of ties" with the West Bank. Perhaps even to his own surprise, his move turned out to be considerably more than just another tactic for gaining temporary advantage. In September 1989, massive unrest throughout the kingdom spurred the regime to initiate a process of liberalization that included competitive parliamentary elections as well as a dramatic opening to press freedom and political activity. From the ensuing public debates over Jordanian-Palestinian relations emerged a new consensus enshrined in the National Charter of 1991: Jordan is Jordan and Palestine is Palestine. A careful and firm distinction between the Jordanian East Bank and a Palestinian West Bank came to be seen as the key to Jordan's survival as an independent entity, as well as a way to resolve the mutual Jordanian-Palestinian suspicions that had festered since 1948. In conjunction with the Nablus-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies carried out a series of workshops and opinion surveys in the mid-1990s that confirmed the great sensitivities on both sides and made vividly clear that the time for a Jordanian return to the West Bank had passed.

Jordan's 1994 peace treaty with Israel was widely taken as ratifying this distinct Jordanian national identity. One of the decisive arguments in the treaty's favor in Jordan was that it would finally dispel the Sharon vision that "Jordan is Palestine." (For his part, Sharon

abstained from the vote on the treaty in the Israeli Knesset.) The new identity consensus in Jordan had sweeping implications for the kingdom's politics. Hussein's regime maintained an inclusivist national identity discourse emphasizing tolerance and coexistence. The country's Palestinian citizens refrained from overt political activity challenging the regime in exchange for the state's support for the PLO in its dealings with Israel. Islamist political movements, though they draw heavily on Palestinian citizens for members, boosted their popularity with ethnic Transjordanians by avoiding explicit invocation of a Palestinian identity.

### **"Jordan First"**

Most emboldened by the "severing of ties" with the West Bank were a group of outspoken Jordanian nationalists—many of them pillars of the Hashemite regime—for whom Jordan could only "be Jordan" if dominated by ethnic Transjordanians. For these figures, including the popular columnist Fahd al-Fanik and the powerful politician Abd al-Hadi al-Majali, as well as more radical intellectuals such as Nahid Hattar, any signs of Palestinian political activity in the kingdom were ipso facto threats to Jordan's identity. Today, the new Jordanian nationalists aggressively police public life for such signs, often inflaming ethnic controversies to score political points. On questions as disparate as whether Hamas should have political offices in Amman and economic development plans, these conservative nationalists—known in Jordan for their "regionalism" (iqlimiyya)—intimidate the opposition by assigning it a Palestinian face. Even more than the Israeli right, the nationalists have kept alive the idea of the "alternative homeland" as a trump card in all political arguments.

In October 2002, Abdallah II launched a campaign to mobilize the country under the slogan "Jordan First," unambiguously taking the new identity consensus as a starting point. Economic development, modernization and incremental political reform would take precedence over the "external" concerns, such as Palestine, that had run through his father's reign. This campaign has brought ambiguous results for Jordanians of Palestinian origin. On the one hand, the Palestinian origins of the king's beautiful and widely admired wife Rania (who was recently appointed a colonel in the Jordanian armed forces) offer a source of pride and hope for greater integration into the political and economic order. On the other hand, the election law that was painstakingly engineered prior to the June 2003 elections produced a parliament containing only 18 members of Palestinian origin out of a total of 108. Despite the new consensus, Jordanian-Palestinian relations remain a raw wound. Ariel Sharon and the "alternative homeland" hover like a specter over these delicate internal politics. Even relatively low-level Jordanian involvement in West Bank security arrangements will likely trigger ugly disputes over national identity in the kingdom.

### **Old Fears, New Times**

Such a distraction might not be altogether unwelcome for the regime. Behind the confident and progressive facade offered at the World Economic Forum at the Dead Sea and the G-8 summit in Georgia, Jordan remains an economically and politically troubled country. The gerrymandered parliamentary elections of June 2003 generated little excitement, and the uninspiring body that was elected has done little to improve public perceptions. Prime Minister Faisal al-Fayez and his government of technocrats evoke comparably little enthusiasm. Few of the restrictive "temporary laws" passed by executive fiat after Abdallah dissolved the legislature in 2001 have been rescinded, and many have actually been ratified by the new pro-government parliament. Despite generous economic assistance from the US, including a free trade agreement, and a rigorously implemented International Monetary Fund structural adjustment program, the Jordanian economy remains stagnant, with poverty on the rise and the gap between rich and poor continuing to expand. In the spring of 2004, the arrest of opposition journalist Fahd Rimawi (later released after a barrage of negative publicity) and the conviction of feminist politician Toujan Faisal for "defaming" the prime minister symbolized the continuing authoritarian sensibilities of the regime. Few Jordanians today share the common American view of the kingdom as an oasis of democratization and pro-American sentiment.

The collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the tightening spiral of misery in Palestine have cast doubt upon the stability of the Jordanian-Israeli relationship. At a March 2004 meeting in the Negev desert, Abdallah reportedly warned Sharon that Israel's separation barrier in the West Bank threatens the survival of Jordan as a state and urged the Israeli premier not to encourage talk of the Jordan option. Indeed, in 2003 Jordanian criticism of the multiple walls and fences led a number of prominent Israeli officials to describe Jordan as "an enemy." The Jordanian public—and not only citizens of Palestinian origin—identify deeply with the Palestinians across the river and hostility to Israel remains at a fever pitch. Despite government efforts to clamp down on "anti-normalization" activism, professional associations and other organs of civil society continue to agitate against "normal" relations with Israel. In mid-June, the Jordanian parliament found itself unable to pass legislation concerning a National Human Rights Center due to an intense controversy over a clause forbidding the center to deal with "the Jewish entity." Jordanian horror at the images of Palestinian suffering broadcast in the pan-Arab media has deepened fury with Israel, the US and, most alarmingly for the regime, with Arab leaders who do nothing to stop the closures and invasions. The Jordanian public is angry, mobilized and frustrated with its government.

In such a climate, the reaction of the Jordanian public to the rumors of a Jordanian role in the West Bank has been predictably unanimous in opposition. Opposition parties have warned against participating in a "conspiracy against the Palestinian people." Critics of a return to the West Bank use the regime's own words against the idea, while government spokesmen have rushed to repeat the standard line that Jordan would play only a role supportive of the Palestinian Authority.

Meanwhile, speculation about a new Jordan option comes as a gift from heaven to the conservative nationalists who have dominated recent Jordanian governments. They have spearheaded the criticism of a security role in the West Bank, rehearsing their frequently aired mantra that such a return would mean "national suicide" for Jordan. Over the last month, the nationalists stirred up a firestorm over the appointment of Palestinian-origin journalist Omar al-Kullab as a media advisor to Interior Minister Samir al-Habashneh, who had already been under fire for his efforts to improve conditions for Palestinians crossing the bridge into Jordan. Stories about the harassment of a Jordanian media delegation at the hands of Palestinian security officials in the West Bank provided more grist for the mill, as did the reports (denied by the Jordanian government) of the Jordanian security delegation's tour of the West Bank. As Nahid Hattar warned ominously, "any Jordanian role in the West Bank, whether security or practical, is impossible because it is not possible politically."

For Israeli columnist Ehud Yaari, all of this pales against Jordan's absolute dependence on the US, combined with potential economic rewards associated with refugee compensation and economic assistance. But neither argument is convincing. The US recognizes the fragility of Jordan's political system, and can hardly be eager to see its favorite model of Arab reform collapse into ethnic strife. Major economic compensation for Palestinian refugees and reconstruction seems a pipe dream, and would be more than balanced by the massive expense involved with salvaging even a rudimentary economic life for the besieged Palestinians of the West Bank.

### **Difficult Dependence**

King Abdallah has placed the highest priority on maintaining close relations with the US, and has been rewarded with frequent meetings with George W. Bush, as well as aid dollars and the free trade pact. Abdallah has been one of the most outspoken Arab leaders in backing US calls for political and economic reform in the region, as at the G-8 summit in early June. Jordanian intelligence has cooperated closely with the US in the struggle against Islamist extremists, cooperation that grew even closer after allegations of an al-Qaeda plot to use

chemical weapons against American and Jordanian targets in Amman. Jordan played a quiet but active supporting role during the Iraq war and continues to train recruits for the Iraqi police force (though it has thus far refused to send troops to join the US-led multinational force).

Yet Jordan's dependence on the US has not been easy on the kingdom. The US occupation of Iraq has been extremely unpopular, with many Jordanians equating it with the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Moreover, for his pains, Abdallah has repeatedly found the ground pulled from beneath his feet by the Bush administration. Bush's fervent support for Ariel Sharon has been the most devastating. The April 14, 2004 press conference at which Bush handed Sharon a letter expressing support for the "disengagement" plan humiliated the Jordanian king to the point that he postponed his own trip to Washington. Bush's statement during the press conference that the right of return for Palestinian refugees was "not sacred" set off tremors within Jordan. The identity consensus underlying the new Jordan depends on maintaining the fiction that Palestinians might someday have the choice to return to their homes in what is now Israel—even if few would actually exercise this right. These policy shifts can only have soured the attitudes measured by the March 2004 Pew Global Attitudes Survey, which found that only 12 percent of Jordanians supported the US "war on terror," only 5 percent had a favorable view of the US and only 3 percent had favorable views of Bush.

Rumors of the Jordan option persist. On June 19, Husni Mubarak's top political adviser Usama al-Baz told the pan-Arab daily al-Hayat: "Egypt does not object to a Jordanian security role...we welcome a Jordanian role." Such statements feed suspicions that Jordan's forceful renunciation of the rumors is for public consumption only. Clearly, though, the Jordan option has resurfaced because of its utility for Sharon's plan for unilateral disengagement from select parts of the Occupied Territories, not because of Jordanian ambitions or Palestinian interests. The idea has no more potential to ease conflict now than in the past. Few Palestinians would accept a Jordanian return, and the major armed groups have offered no support. As reported in the June 18 Financial Times, a leader of the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, an offshoot of the mainline Fatah organization, told the visiting Jordanian security delegation that his group would reject an Arab military presence aimed at stamping out the uprising. The Jordanian public is almost universally opposed to any West Bank presence, seeing little to gain and much to lose. While new ideas are certainly needed to break the deadlock between Israel and the Palestinians, the Jordan option remains an elusive fantasy that can only obscure real and difficult choices.

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