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Jordan's Frustration with the Middle East Peace Process

LSE Ideas

By Nigel Ashton

In a widely quoted interview with The Times last May King Abdullah of Jordan warned that 'if we delay our peace negotiations then there is going to be another conflict between Arabs or Muslims and Israel in the next 12-18 months'. 12 of the 18 months are now up and Israeli-Palestinian negotiations seem further away than ever from even beginning, never mind reaching, fruition. If King Abdullah's frustrations were great a year ago, they have only increased in the course of the past month. The recent collapse of Palestinian-Israeli proximity talks before they had even begun, coupled with the intransigence of the Netanyahu government on the issue of settlement-building, give little reason to believe that the next six months will bring significant progress.

It is no surprise, then, that the tensions in US-Israeli relations which have made headlines in recent weeks have been mirrored in a further worsening of the already bad bilateral relationship between Israel and Jordan. In an interview with the Wall Street Journal given just before his recent trip to the US, King Abdullah was frank about the troubled nature of the relationship.

The background in personal relations between Abdullah and Netanyahu was unpromising from the outset. The first three months of Abdullah's reign in 1999, after the death of his father Hussein, were a period of strained relations with the outgoing first Netanyahu government. Despite this, when Netanyahu returned to office in 2009, Abdullah claimed to have given him the benefit of the doubt, waiting to judge him on his actions in office second time round. 'I was extremely optimistic by the vision he had for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians and the Israelis and the Arabs.'

Albeit that this comment may have significantly exaggerated the true extent of the King's hopes for the new government, the experience of the past 12 months has been one of unrelieved frustration. 'Everything I've seen on the ground has made me extremely sceptical, and I'm probably one of the more optimistic people you will meet in this part of the world' Abdullah told the Wall Street Journal. Abdullah's judgement was that relations with Israel are now at their lowest ebb since the signature of the peace treaty in 1994.

Sceptics might question why this should matter to Israel. After all, despite the frustrations expressed by the Jordanian monarch, there is no prospect of Jordan reneging on its peace treaty with Israel. Nor does Jordan have the power to harm Israel either economically or politically. But, there are two reasons why the dire state of bilateral relations should matter to Israel.

Firstly, if a peace process is to be initiated before the window of opportunity closes for a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it will likely need a constructive role on the part of Jordan. Although Jordanian officials from the King down never tire of underlining that there is no Jordanian solution to the Palestinian question, any Palestinian state created through negotiations with Israel would also depend on close relations with Jordan. Precisely what political structure might govern this relationship could be a matter for future discussion.

King Abdullah implied as much in an interview which he gave to Fareed Zakaria at the end of January during the Davos economic summit. Although he denied for the umpteenth time that there was any 'Jordanian option' which might substitute for a peace deal negotiated directly between Israel and the Palestinians, Abdullah implicitly left open in his remarks what might happen after the creation of a Palestinian state. He did not explicitly rule out some form of future association with Jordan if a Palestinian state were created.

Secondly, as Abdullah suggested in his interview with The Times last May, Jordan can play a constructive role in helping to marshal broader support for an Israeli-Palestinian solution. This role might be particularly important given the centrality of the question of the future status of Jerusalem to these negotiations. As Abdullah put it, what could be on offer would be not just a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but a '57 state solution' whereby the entire Muslim world would recognise the Jewish state as part of the peace deal.

These considerations might seem distant and utopian to an Israeli government overwhelmingly preoccupied with the present. But, with the projected shifts in the demographic balance between Arab and Jew in Israel and the occupied territories, together with the likely spread of weapons of mass destruction in the region, the status quo is inherently unstable.

The clock is still ticking down towards Abdullah's deadline.

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