

Hardly a savory combination

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Situated between Israel and Iraq, Jordan has tended to vacillate strategically between its Arab hinterland to the east, in which Iraq has been the linchpin, and the US-Israeli protective umbrella to the west. This was well illustrated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when Jordan was at first heavily reliant on Iraq both strategically and economically, as right wing governments set the tone in Israel. With the crushing of Iraq by the US in 1991, Jordan lost both its strategic hinterland and its main export market. For lack of any better choice it turned toward the protective orbit of Israel and the US, eventually securing the peace treaty with Israel in 1994.

Jordanian expectations from the peace treaty were twofold. First, Jordan banked on the implementation of the Oslo accords, signed a year before their treaty, and the conclusion of a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. This, it was calculated, would stabilize Jordan's western front and enhance the identity of the Jordanian state, as distinct from Palestine, finally putting to rest the contention that "Jordan is Palestine." Second, on the economic front, Jordan expected a silver-lined windfall. None of these expectations materialized. Jordan's economy did improve, thanks in part to the peace treaty, but not nearly as much as Jordanians had initially imagined. But more ominously, Israel and Palestine went to war instead of making peace, thus realizing Jordan's nightmare scenario --coupled with the constant anxiety that Israeli-Palestinian armed conflict might eventually end with massive Palestinian migration across the river into Jordan, irreparably upsetting the already precarious demographic balance of Jordanians and Palestinians in the kingdom. The election victory of Hamas has rekindled these fears as the chances of a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians have receded even further.

Hamas poses a direct challenge to Jordan in two different but interrelated ways. First, it serves to bolster the self assurance of Jordan's own Islamist opposition, which might also benefit from Hamas' influence among Jordan's large Palestinian population. The Islamists have strong support in Jordan's major urban areas that are heavily populated by Palestinians. This does not appear to bode well for the hitherto very carefully balanced relationship between the monarchy and the Islamists. But it should also be remembered that the Palestinian population in Jordan is socially stratified and politically diverse and certainly not a single monolithic bloc of opposition to the regime. Secondly, Hamas promotes Islamism and Islamic identity as a bond between the Muslim peoples on both banks of the Jordan River, thus undermining the distinct Jordanian identity that Jordan has been trying to promote for decades as a counterweight to a Palestinian identity. It is worth recalling in this context that the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan opposed King Hussein's disengagement from the West Bank in 1988, which among other things was deliberately designed to bolster the particular Jordanian identity. King Abdullah II has taken this trend even further in his "Jordan First" policy, which he inaugurated in late 2002.

On its eastern front, after the treaty with Israel Jordan urged its Iraqi neighbors to behave with moderation to secure the removal of sanctions and thus pave the way for the unhindered resumption of Jordanian exports. But Jordan's expectations on this front, too, were dashed. Iraq did not heed Jordan's advice and, following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the Sunni-controlled Baath party in 2003, Iraq has become the first Shi'ite-dominated Arab state. The Shi'ites are also on the rise in Lebanon, and Jordan's King Abdullah was therefore pretty much on the mark in his anxious reference in late 2004 to the emergent "Shi'ite crescent" of Iranian influence.

The combination of the Hamas victory to the west with the Shi'ite crescent to the east is hardly a savory combination for Jordanians.

As the bombings in Jordanian hotels indicated in late 2005, the terror and total chaos in Iraq could spill over into Jordan. Worse still, Iraq faces possible disintegration. A weak Sunni Iraqi state, sandwiched between the Kurds and the Shi'ites and denied Iraq's oil wealth, could become an insufferable menace to its neighbors, especially Jordan, to which many may emigrate, thereby bringing even greater pressure to bear on an economy and infrastructure already straining under the burden of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who have taken refuge in the kingdom.

Jordan fears that if it were to be inundated with refugees from both Iraq and Palestine, the kingdom might not be able to withstand the pressure. Policy-wise, Jordan does not have many options other than to try and encourage the parties in Iraq to come to terms with each other and to urge moderation on Hamas in the hope that the worst can be avoided. But unfortunately for the Jordanians, it is not they but others who really have the wherewithal to shape the regional political environment.

Jordanian resilience, however, should not be underestimated. Jordanian staying power still rests on three main pillars: 1) the cohesion and determination of its political elite; 2) the strength and effectiveness of the country's armed forces and security establishment; and 3) the value of the kingdom's geopolitical centrality, due to which many powers, in the region and without, continue to support Hashemite Jordan politically, strategically and economically as an essential link in the chain of broader regional security.

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