

Jordan and the Peace Process

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On June 24, 1994, Dr. Abdul Salam Al-Majali, prime minister of Jordan and head of Jordan's delegation to the Madrid peace conference and the bilateral talks, addressed an off-the-record session of The Washington Institute's Policy Forum. The following is a rapporteur's summary of his remarks.

Jordan's Peace Policy

Comprehensive peace between Israel and Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinians is Jordan's ultimate goal. Jordan recognizes that each negotiating track will proceed at a different pace and that progress on one negotiating track should not impede progress on the others. While Israel may send signals warning the other parties that they will be left behind in the process, Jordan is not secretive about the steps it takes toward peace with Israel and believes that in the end all parties will arrive at the same goal.

King Hussein's announcement this week that he is willing to take major steps toward normalizing relations with Israel independently of progress in Israel's negotiations with the other parties is consistent with Jordan's past policy. Amman has always desired peace, but until recently Israel insisted on discussing its own interests first and waiting until after signing a formal peace treaty with Jordan before negotiating Jordanian priorities.

Israel's decision to seriously discuss three major items -- borders, water, and refugees -- before the completion of a formal peace treaty represents a significant change in its position and led to the latest Israel-Jordan agreement, which incorporates both Israeli and Jordanian priorities. The commission on borders, which will hopefully meet next month, will demarcate the border line from the bottom of the Dead Sea to the Gulf of Aqaba.

Economic and Security Constraints

In the recent meeting between King Hussein and President Clinton, the American president expressed support for Jordan's economic recovery. Jordan's debt is one of the highest in the world and results from the huge price of Jordan's efforts to maintain stability in the Middle East. Jordan hopes that all parties interested in achieving peace in the region will help relieve Jordan of its debt, since peace is unrealistic in a region riddled with economic disparities.

Jordan's economy suffers further from the unfavorable trade balance between Jordan and the West Bank; Jordan has imported goods from the West Bank for the past twenty-six years but has not exported products there. Moreover, the Israel-PLO accord raises the probability that the Palestinians will create their own currency, which will damage the Jordanian economy.

In the aftermath of peace, Jordan's economy will incur additional costs related to security. Jordan has approximately 1.9 million refugees and displaced people, who place a huge economic strain on its economy. More than one million of these people are refugees from 1948 who were not provided for in the Israel-PLO accord and are concerned about their future. As a result, it is becoming more and more difficult to gain their support for the peace process.

Yasser Arafat's Impact on Regional Peace

Arafat's arrival in Jericho will most likely have a positive effect on the Palestinians, since it will symbolize the Palestinian political entity becoming a reality. The event will be largely psychological and some Palestinians may remain negative because they do not believe in the peace process.

Formula for Progress

The decision to negotiate essentially creates peace; the negotiations themselves simply determine the shape of that peace. The participation of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinians in the peace process indicates a shared intention to achieve peace, but the process must be gradual in order to succeed. In the meantime, as long as Israel and Jordan agree, they can implement certain elements of their recent agreement -- those pertaining to borders and water, for example -- without waiting for the final comprehensive peace settlement.

This special Policy Forum report was prepared by Jennifer Sultan.