

25 years since Israel-Jordan peace, security cooperation flourishes but people kept apart

Most involved say when it comes to relations, it's a 'chicken and egg' situation: If public support for ties among the Jordanian public continues to shrink, advancing joint civilian projects will face even more difficulty

Noa Landau | Oct. 13, 2019 | 8:38 AM | 8

Along Israel's border with Jordan, not far from Kibbutz Tirat Zvi, a desolate site is symbolic of the peace agreement that the two countries signed 25 years ago this month. The empty Jordan Gateway Bridge was due to serve a joint Israeli-Jordanian industrial zone, an idea that goes back to 1994, but the project has been stalled, just like relations between the two countries' populations.

The bridge was built and then dedicated this February under the direction of Regional Cooperation Minister Tzachi Hanegbi, but among the myriad problems that still need to be addressed is one minor one: an access road to the bridge itself. Israeli ministries have been at odds over which of them should fund the 60 million shekel (\$17 million) highway – a relative paltry sum for a country where billions of shekels in supplemental funds are approved for aerial defense, but it still requires cabinet approval.

But for nearly the past six months, since the first round of Knesset elections in April, Israel has been governed by a transitional government, and no cabinet resolution has been passed for the money. The way the case of the bridge has unfolded is an indication of a familiar problem. Attention and funding are generally forthcoming when it comes to wars and defense, but less so when it comes to peace.

And the issues with the Jordan Gateway Bridge are nothing compared to the disappointment in the Jordanian capital regarding other promises tied to the peace agreement that have not come to fruition, including a joint airport and the plans for a canal between the Red Sea and Dead Sea.

Despite Israeli promises over the years to provide water to Jordan, water shortages in the kingdom have worsened, undermining Jordanian officials' confidence in their Israeli counterparts. Jordanian frustration over the conduct of a string of Israeli governments when it comes to joint civilian projects, along with strong opposition to the agreement from the Jordanian public, was also reflected in a recent statement by Jordanian King Abdullah II. He declared that this year, he would exercise the clause in the peace treaty that will restore two border enclaves, at Tzofar and Naharayim, to Jordanian control.

In the wake of the king's declaration, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has decided, against the advice of his national security adviser and Israeli water authority officials, that despite all of the reservations in Israel over the feasibility of the Red Sea-Dead Sea canal, there is no choice but to move forward with it for diplomatic reasons. Jordanian public opinion would have a hard time swallowing an alternative proposal for an internationally-sponsored pipeline running from the Mediterranean to the Sea of Galilee, which is in the theoretical planning stages, instead.

At the same time, secret negotiations are underway to give Israeli farmers access to the two Jordanian border enclaves, which could allow them to continue farming the land there even after the areas revert to Jordanian control on November 8. But the peace treaty gives Jordan the clear right to reclaim the land, and that's what the Jordanian public expects.

The tensions between the Jordanian authorities' stance and public opinion in Jordan on the subject of Israel, and the disparity between the open and behind-the-scenes relations between the two countries, was a topic that came up in interviews that Haaretz conducted with a number of experts and senior officials on both sides of the border for the 25th anniversary of official diplomatic relations. A number of conversations also included comments about purported missed opportunities. In such an atmosphere, it's no wonder that the two countries have decided to forgo a ceremony to mark the occasion.

Peace in the security sense

Most of those who know what's currently going on behind the scenes agree that the intelligence and security cooperation that began covertly even before the peace agreement was signed has greatly improved and become more sophisticated over the years, and that it's in good shape. The border between the countries, Israel's longest, is considered relatively secure. The countries' various security entities are in close touch with one another and there is regular tactical and strategic coordination that is very much needed by Israel amid a changing regional situation.

The head of national security in the Prime Minister's Office, Meir Ben-Shabbat, a former senior Shin Bet security service official and a fluent Arabic speaker, established a new division in his office when he took the job: one that deals with the "nearby" security arena. The division is headed by another Shin Bet veteran.

In its most recent annual strategic assessment, the National Security Council mentioned strengthening ties with surrounding countries as a major goal. The various entities involved differ on how much the new division is contributing to cooperation in the field, or whether it is impeding it amid a competitive system in which every agency wants to take precedence. However, they agree that it has been holding a considerable number of consultations, which have been attended by all the relevant bodies in an effort to increase coordination – sometimes weekly. In addition to border security, foiling terrorism and a large number of additional joint subjects, the covert ties also include cooperation in the fields of energy and aviation.

The key word in all of this is covert. Similar to what people say about Israel's diplomatic relations with Egypt, when it comes to contacts between Jerusalem and Amman, the preference is for quiet cooperation between the governments and security agencies that few members of the public are exposed to on a daily basis. That's in contrast to civilian and economic ties, the long-term relations between the two peoples, in which most of the projects are stalled and it seems as if there is not enough creativity, resources or initiative being devoted to improving the situation. An exception is the employment of Jordanians at Israeli hotels across the border in Eilat, which has jumped from 500 to 2,000 workers. There are plans to expand the program to hotels on the Israeli side of the Dead Sea.

Most of those involved say that when it comes to relations, it's a "chicken and egg" situation: If support for ties among the Jordanian public continues to shrink, it will become harder to advance joint project out in the open, which would improve civilian ties between the countries. The absence of investment in civilian-based "soft power" and the covert ties' exclusive dependence on governments is also liable to create problems if, for example, those in charge are replaced one day.

Temple Mount and the Palestinians

The factors that have led to this low point in overt ties are varied and complex. Some have historical roots while others are based in the current situation. Some are Amman's fault and other's Jerusalem's.

But there is no doubt that the No. 1 factor in the tensions between the countries has always been Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. The peace agreement 25 years ago included an understanding and a Jordanian expectation that the solution to the conflict with the Palestinians would include the establishment of a future independent Palestinian entity. On the other hand, the theory of the "Jordanian option," which figures on the Israeli right wing have promoted since 1967 and which states that Jordan is the national home of the Palestinians, has always been perceived as a direct threat to the stability of the Hashemite royal court. Over the years, with the stalemate in talks regarding a two-state solution, concerns over such a prospect have intensified. Every mention by a junior Israeli politician – or the prime minister's son – of the "Jordanian option" sparks Jordanian ire.

Netanyahu's recent declaration to carry out an annexation plan in the West Bank's Jordan Valley was another public blow. King Abdullah roundly condemned the remarks and warned that the absence of a two-state solution would turn Israel into an apartheid state. Officials familiar with the talks between Jordan and Israel expressed the belief that in principle, Jordan actually prefers Israeli security control over the Jordan Valley, but that annexation, resulting in Israeli sovereignty, is something different entirely.

Another major factor has been and remains the situation on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem's Old City. The legitimacy of the king's rule is rooted,

among other things, in his religious and historical role as the patron of the Temple Mount as a Muslim holy site. In recent years, the Hashemite Kingdom's special status at the site has been undermined because of Israeli changes to the status quo as rabbis have permitted more and more Jews to visit the Mount, and also due to friction with Palestinians themselves and the injection of new players, such as Turkey.

Controversy over the opening of a mosque on the compound at the Golden Gate, or the Bab al-Rahma in Arabic, is also complicated. Right-wing Israeli groups have sought to have the compound vacated, but for the time being, the government prefers a compromise that would avoid a violent eviction that could also endanger Israel's ties with Jordan.

The standstill in the peace process and the erosion of the Hashemite dynasty's standing on the Temple Mount, in addition to deepening Israeli control in the West Bank, declarations regarding annexation or "the Jordanian option" and the sidelining of Jordan in discussions regarding President Trump's peace plan, all play a prominent role on a list of challenges that Israeli-Jordanian relations are facing. But there are also individual instances that have contributed to the situation.

There was the July 2017 incident in Amman in which an Israeli Embassy security guard shot two Jordanians because he said one of them attacked him with a screwdriver. Netanyahu gave the guard a warm reception in Jerusalem, to the astonishment of the Jordanians. The embassy only resumed operations after Israel expressed regret over the incident and paid compensation to the families of the two victims, both of whom died.

The Jordanian newspaper Al-Ghad reported that Israel paid the families \$5 million, in addition to compensating the family of a Jordanian judge that was killed at the Allenby Bridge border crossing in 2014. The two incidents had a very negative impact on Jordanian public opinion regarding Israel and made it difficult for the authorities there to deflect ongoing pressure from opponents to the peace agreement.

Another factor in the complex situation is sometimes described as a purported lack of trust between the leaders of the two countries. Officials

refused to provide details as to when the two last met, but said it would not be correct to say that contacts between Abdullah and Netanyahu have been entirely cut off. In August, the London-based Al-Quds al-Arabi newspaper reported that Abdullah had refused Netanyahu's request to meet, but that has not been officially confirmed.

The Trump administration's steps to withdraw from the Middle East are also mentioned as an impediment in Israeli-Jordanian relations. There has not been a U.S. ambassador in Amman for about three years, and there have been threats of cuts to American aid as Trump takes a growing liking to Saudi Arabia. In the past, Israel was seen as an important Jordanian ally in Washington, but now, in the face of Trump's impulsive policy style, it's not clear that Israeli support for Jordan would help.

'The fruits of peace?'

Last month at a conference held by Israel's Institute for National Security Studies, the former head of the Mossad, Efraim Halevy, who conducted extensive covert contacts with Jordan, described how it was decided that the two border enclaves, Tzofar and Naharayim, could be returned to Jordanian control after 25 years.

"We sat around the table with the [late King Hussein's] bureau chief and argued over whether to postpone it for five years, 10, 15 years, until we finally got to 25 years. It was like the [biblical patriarch] Abraham's negotiations over the righteous of Sodom," Halevy remarked. "We thought, after all, that by then there would be no problem."

Another senior source who is familiar with contacts with Jordan, retired Supreme Court Justice Elyakim Rubinstein, who earlier in his career headed the Israeli delegation to the peace talks, raised a rhetorical question: "That's our longest border. Have we treated them [the Jordanians] with enough respect?"

Government officials currently in office also acknowledged that the situation is far from rosy. Reuven Azar, the prime minister's diplomatic adviser, said: "We are not doing enough to take advantage of [our] geographic proximity." And the deputy head of the Middle East division at the Foreign Ministry,

Haim Regev, added: “The failures are the fault of both sides.”

Israel’s former ambassador in Amman, Einat Schlein, who is now the ministry’s deputy Africa director, focused at her remarks at the conference on the civilian sector. “You don’t only make peace between two governments but between the peoples. When I was ambassador, they always asked me: ‘Where are the fruits of peace?’ I said that they were under the table, because we are basing everything on military ties. But that will not last over time if everything stands on this military footing. The public in Jordan needs visible accomplishments.”

Amir Weissbrod, the current Israeli ambassador to Jordan, appointed following the shooting incident, said: “The Jordanians also need to understand that it’s impossible to hide the ties all the time, and on their side subjects such as trade in building materials have also been delayed.” Nevertheless, he said, there are positive developments in the civilian sector, including an increase in the number of Israeli tourists going to Jordan and flying via the country.

More than anything, the presence of two former Jordanian generals at the conference made the sorry state of relations clear. They insisted on remaining anonymous over concerns that people in Jordan would find out about their participation. They crossed the border without having their passports stamped, and they are not alone.

In the absence of government encouragement, fewer and fewer Jordanian civilians are daring to openly visit Israel to advance the dialogue. This is another reminder that despite the successes in certain fields, there remains a lot to be done on both sides to advance peace for the next 25 years.