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Thirty Years of Clandestine Meetings The Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty

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As war between Iraq and the U.S.-led coalition became a virtual certainty in early 1991, King Husayn of Jordan requested a meeting in secret with his Israeli counterpart, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. And so, on January 5, 1991, a mere eleven days before the outbreak of Operation Desert Storm, the two men met clandestinely at the king's residence in London.

The recent signing of a peace treaty between Jordan and Israel makes it possible to reveal here for the first time what happened at that meeting: The king noted Israeli government complaints about cooperation between the Iraqi and Jordanian air forces, and asked Shamir to respect the Kingdom of Jordan's territorial integrity on land and in the air. Would Shamir commit not to harm Jordan's territorial integrity in the event of war between the coalition and Iraq? Husayn explained that he needed an Israeli commitment to help him get a parallel promise from Iraq, and so to keep his kingdom out of the arena of war about to erupt.

The Israeli premier conceded Husayn's request, but with a condition: that Jordan not become a base for Iraqi aggression against Israel.¹ The king kept his part of the bargain, and so did Shamir. Indeed, this understanding goes far to explain the Israeli government's extraordinary policy of restraint during the Kuwait war: despite SCUDs landing in Tel Aviv, despite a well-earned Israeli reputation for hitting back hard, despite Shamir's own toughness, the Israeli air force remained sheathed. For to have conducted operations against the missile-launching bases in Iraq would have required the breaching of Jordanian air space -- and not living up to the commitment in London.

THIRTY YEARS OF SECRET MEETINGS

This story highlights the degree of intimacy that has long prevailed between King Husayn and Israeli leaders, as well as the trust that has developed on both sides. From the time of their first meeting in London on September 24, 1964, the two parties have looked forward to peace between them. At that time, the king told an Israeli emissary: "Until we reach a permanent settlement, we shall require much time. Accordingly, our historic duty is to develop in a suitably discreet manner areas of cooperation leading toward a permanent settlement."²

The king and his Israeli interlocutors logged more than seven hundred hours of conversation in such diverse locales as London and Paris, a safe house near Tel Aviv, the king's own palace in Amman, and the Coral Coast in the Gulf of Aqaba. They even met on an Israeli Navy vessel in the Gulf of Aqaba.

All participants agree that the talks took place in a relaxed atmosphere. The king's measured, deep voice promoted a calm atmosphere among the Israelis. The leaders sometimes exchanged gifts. The king received an Israeli Galil rifle; he in turn gave Yigal Allon an ancient Arab sword, Moshe Dayan a pistol, and Abba Eban a pen with the royal emblem.

The two states reached thirty-nine agreements over the years, mostly verbal, all of them secret. These dealt with many subjects: intelligence cooperation in the war against terrorism and border arrangements to prevent hostile acts; an accord on the use of textbooks with the royal Jordanian emblem in schools in the West Bank under Israeli control; and two agreements on the redeployment of the Israel Defense Forces from areas in the Arava and the transfer of territory to Jordan.

While the policy of open bridges across the Jordan River began as an improvised step, it was maintained only through careful coordination and joint arrangements. These also governed the procedures for imports and exports of agricultural produce and other goods across the bridges, as well as shipments in transit to Persian Gulf countries. The two governments arranged to return hikers from both sides who crossed the border mistakenly -- a practice quite at odds with the official state of war between them. So close were their ties that Israeli intelligence information helped thwart many attempts to assassinate King Husayn.

The confidence-building measures adopted during those years rested on a strategic cooperation consolidated during the conversations between the king and Israeli representatives. For thirty years, in effect, Jordanians and Israelis engaged discreetly in building the infrastructure for a peace treaty.

Further, the many understandings laid the basis for the specific peace treaty signed at the desert border on October 26, 1994. For example, the treaty's terms broadened an agreement for the sharing of the waters of the Jordan River reached in 1964; and accords of 1970 and 1975 demarcating the border in the Arava region laid the basis for Israeli withdrawals from areas belonging to Jordan.³ These latter two agreements deserve special note: in 1970, Israel handed over more than 75 square kilometers southeast of the Dead Sea, in the A-Safi and A-Fifi sectors; in 1975, at Jordan's request, Israel straightened the border line in the vicinity of the Ketura and Yahel kibbutzim to allow the Jordanians to pave the highway to Aqaba along a roadbed determined by foreign planners.

The process began with the terrible experience of the June 1967 war, in which King Husayn reluctantly began hostilities against Israel and lost part of his kingdom as a result. That event strengthened Husayn's conviction that under no circumstances should Jordan get entangled in a war. Accordingly, he tried to sound the alarm to prevent the outbreak of war in 1973 and, after fighting had broken out on October 6, sought not to confront Israel directly. Yes, for the sake of Arab solidarity, Husayn dispatched a Jordanian army brigade to the Golan front, but even this he

did only after the battle for the Golan Heights had nearly ended. Henry Kissinger, "Years of Upheaval," Pg. 506.

Husayn recoiled from war, seeing it as a danger to his regime's stability. He has striven for peace through most of his reign but, fearing the angry reaction of the Arab world, has had to watch his steps. Thus, just three weeks after the June 1967 war, Yaacov Herzog, a senior Israeli representative, asked Husayn, "Is Your Majesty ready to sign a peace treaty with Israel?" The king replied, "Yes, definitely yes, but give me time; I must go along with the Arab world."⁴ The Arab world made him wait twenty-seven years.

Despite his gratitude to Israel for its help in saving his throne in 1970, King Husayn showed little enthusiasm two years later for a proposal forwarded by Moshe Dayan, the Israeli defense minister, that the two states formalize the commitment as a defense pact. In it, Israel would promise to hasten to Jordan's aid in time of need, in return for which the Jordanians would promise not to join any military alliance directed against Israel.⁵ Until then, all the understandings had been verbal and the king preferred to keep them that way, so he evaded replying to Dayan's proposal. The many Israeli verbal promises had stood the test of time and adversity.

NEGOTIATIONS IN THREE STAGES

How did King Husayn move from quiet cooperation with Israel to a very public peace treaty with the Jewish state? The Madrid conference was the key turning point in Husayn's decision to shift gears. Open negotiations between Israel and its neighbors paved the way for a formal peace between Jordan and Israel. The negotiations progressed in three stages:

(1) An agenda. The two sides agreed to an agenda for Jordanian-Israeli talks in Washington, where they decided on a peace treaty as the goal of the talks. Though agreed upon in October 1992, the agenda was not signed until September 14, 1993. The text had earlier been published unofficially by the Amman press, arousing a wave of protests in the Arab world.

It is important to stress that the first stage did not take place in response to developments on the Palestinian-Israeli track, as is often thought, but to two earlier developments: Husayn's administrative disengagement from the West Bank in July 1988 and the coalition war against Saddam Husayn in early 1991.

Jordan's administrative disengagement from the West Bank enabled the king to sign a peace treaty with Israel without having Israel return to the 1967 armistice lines -- for this no longer is Jordan's responsibility. Until that disengagement, the fact that all Israeli governments had insisted on not returning to those lines meant that the West Bank constituted a stumbling block in the way of a peace treaty. The disengagement meant that Israel could sign a peace treaty on the basis of international borders and not armistice lines. (Interestingly, this was also the case in the peace treaty with Egypt, in which Israel did not return the Gaza Strip.)

The American intervention to defend Kuwait changed the assumption prevailing in Amman and other Arab capitals that the Vietnam syndrome would prevent an American president from

dispatching an army to help an attacked country. The energetic U.S. action proved to Husayn that Americans had broken free of their Vietnam-era inhibitions and could use force in the Middle East. This sent him an important message: he could take the risks of peace with Israel without having to rely exclusively on Israeli protection.

Because Husayn feared that leaks would arouse premature opposition to a Jordan-Israel peace treaty, he preferred that the U

Working out the Details

(2) The Washington Declaration. These changes prompted Husayn's decision to turn the dialogue with Israel into negotiations for a joint declaration. That is what he announced at his London meeting with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on May 28, 1994. Rabin and Husayn decided right then that the joint declaration would be signed at a public summit at the White House in President Clinton's presence. But Husayn asked Rabin to keep secret the text of the joint declaration to be signed at the White House, even from the American sponsors. The two leaders exchanged drafts through a secret channel. Because Husayn feared that leaks would arouse premature opposition to a declaration, he preferred that the U.S. State Department and the Israeli foreign ministry not be let in on the secret. It was only fourteen hours before the declaration was signed on July 25, 1994, that Rabin showed U.S. secretary of state Warren Christopher the draft, which the U.S. government then endorsed.⁶

(3) Peace Treaty. After the signing of the Washington Declaration, work began on a peace treaty. This required three more Husayn-Rabin summit meetings, as well as many trips by senior Jordanian and Israeli officials, to overcome differences over water quotas and border demarcation. The negotiations finally concluded with an Israeli concession to Jordan of territory covering an area of more than 300 square kilometers in the southern Arava and an increase of 50 million cubic meters as Jordan's share of water drawn from the Sea of Galilee.⁷

In returning territory to Jordan, too, there were the precedents of 1970 and 1975. That was territory not occupied in the 1967 war. On the matter of water, the peace treaty states that

The Parties agree mutually to recognize the rightful allocations of both of them in Jordan River and Yarmouk River waters and Arava/Araba ground water in accordance with the agreed acceptable principles, quantities and quality.

That provides an additional tier to the understanding reached between King Husayn and an Israeli representative on May 2, 1964 to share the waters of the Jordan according to quotas established by the American mediator, Eric Johnston, President Eisenhower's special envoy, in 1955. The main difference was in the increase of the water quota in Jordan's favor.

On October 26, 1994, Husayn and Rabin signed a peace treaty in a dramatic ceremony on their common border, with President Clinton and thousands of guests in attendance. The text of the treaty faithfully reflects the understandings reached over a thirty-year period, ever since the long-ago meeting in London. The peace treaty finally codifies those agreements on paper and in public. For example, in the treaty, Husayn undertook not to aid any military alliance directed

against "the other party." Article Four of the security provisions of the peace agreement minces no words:

Consistent with the era of peace and with the efforts to build regional security and to avoid and prevent aggression and violence, the Parties . . . agree to refrain from the following:

"(a) Joining or in any way assisting, promoting or cooperating with any coalition, organisation or alliance with a military or security character with a third party, the objectives or activities of which include launching aggression or other acts of military hostility against the other Party. . . .

"(b) Allowing the entry, stationing and operating on their territory, or through it, of military forces, personnel or materiel of a third party, in circumstances which may adversely prejudice the security of the other Party.

The last point implicitly alludes to the Jordanian-Iraqi air cooperation before the Kuwait war: nothing like that is to take place again.

HUSAYN'S INCENTIVES

Husayn had many incentives to work with the Israelis -- a common interest in preserving border quiet; desire to share the waters of the Jordan and the Yarmouk; economic, industrial, and transportation benefits; border rectifications; and the like. But five reasons have particular importance, and these remain valid for the long-term future as well:

Take out an Israeli insurance policy: Husayn requested, and received, repeated assurances from Israeli leaders that they regarded the independent existence of Jordan as a vital interest of the first order for Israel. From the 1960s, they promised Husayn to come to Jordan's defense but Husayn wanted to confirm this commitment. In 1970, he had a chance to test the validity of his Israeli insurance policy. In that year, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) set up a "free government" in Irbid, and Syrian tanks invaded Jordan in his support. The Israelis came through: Army concentrations along the border with Syria helped deter the Syrian force, which retreated from Jordanian territory.

Preserve Jordan's economic interests in the West Bank: The PLO-Israel negotiations in the past year laid bare Jordanian anxiety about the West Bank's liberating itself from economic dependence on Jordan. Although the king had announced Jordan's administrative disengagement from the West Bank back in 1988, he did not intend by this an economic disengagement.

Benefit from Israeli relations with Washington: At his first meeting with an Israeli official in 1964, King Husayn complained that "the U.S. is helping my adversaries in the Arab world."⁹ Indeed, Israel's dialogue with Husayn had opened a few months before, in September 1963, when the king asked the Israelis to recommend an increase in American political and economic assistance to Jordan. Some months earlier, Premier Ben-Gurion had sent an official note to President Kennedy expressing his concern that the Egyptian-Syrian-Iraqi Federation, just established, represented a danger to Jordan's safety and independence. They did; and did so more than once in subsequent years. In the 1960s, the Israelis argued against an American tendency to

ignore Jordan in favor of the Arab nationalists; in the 1990s, they fought to repair U.S.-Jordanian relations after King Husayn had sided with Iraq against Kuwait. Lately, Husayn hopes that good relations with Israel will prompt the U.S. government to increase economic aid to Jordan.

Contain the PLO: At first, Husayn sought to ensure exclusive Jordanian rule in the West Bank; after the Arab summit conference of 1974 in Rabat, which deprived Jordan of the right to represent the Palestinians, he worked to make the PLO agree to a Jordanian-Palestinian partnership and economic ties.

Ensure the Hashemite dynasty's special status in Jerusalem: After losing control of Jerusalem in the Six-Day War, Husayn tried to maintain his status as custodian of Muslim holy places even under Israeli rule. He has invested close to \$300 million to support Jerusalem's Supreme Moslem Council over the years, as well as \$8.2 million in renovating the Dome of the Rock (the Mosque of Omar). A Jordanian-Israeli understanding on this question existed even before the Israelis publicly undertook in the Washington Declaration to "respect the present special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Moslem holy shrines in Jerusalem." Israel accorded Amman priority status in regilding the Dome of the Rock despite Egyptian pressure to hand the endeavor over to Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ By paying the salaries of officials at the Jerusalem Moslem Council's staff, Husayn also acquired the authority to make appointments. To retain this status in the face of PLO attempts to break away from the dependence on Jordan and the Saudis' attempts to attain influence in Jerusalem, too, Jordan needed Israel's support.

These last two points have special importance for the future, so we end with an appraisal of their impact on Jordan-Israeli relations.

HUSAYN SURPRISED

The moment Husayn discerns a threat to the important achievements in his dialogue with Israel -- blocking the PLO, ensuring economic ties with the West Bank, and (especially) guaranteeing Jordan's special status in Jerusalem -- he intensifies links with Israel. More than anything else, the threat posed by the PLO-Israel negotiations explains his decision to go public with his long-standing dialogue with Israel.

Husayn was taken by surprise at the PLO-Israeli moves in Oslo, which diametrically contradicted the Jordanian-Israeli understanding at the Madrid conference in the fall of 1991. Then and in subsequent discussions, the Israelis insisted on a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation at the Washington talks and encouraged Jordan to assume they would oppose a separate deal with the Palestinians. The abrupt change in Israeli policy caused Husayn to worry how faithful Rabin would stay to the historic Jordanian connection. Israelis tried to allay these fears with a number of steps favorable to Jordanian economic interest; and by favoring Jordanian religious claims in the struggle over Jerusalem.

In the economic realm, the Israelis approved additional Jordanian bank branches in the West Bank; insisted that the Jordanian dinar remain legal tender there; and approved the import of Jordanian produce worth \$30 million into the West Bank. They also reached an agreement with Jordan calling on the Palestinians to join with the two of them to form "a tripartite forum" with

the objective of reaching a joint agreement on trade, banking, and financial questions affecting the three parties. In brief, they undertook to maintain the economic link between the two banks of the Jordan, just as Husayn wished.

JERUSALEM

Even more important, Rabin assured the king of a foothold in Jerusalem by preserving the Hashemite Kingdom's special role in the Islamic holy shrines of that city. Husayn felt strongly about this, as he told the Jordanian Parliament: "We oppose any attempt to exclude Jordan from the responsibility for the [Islamic] holy places in Jerusalem."¹¹

The Israelis fulfilled their commitment to preserve Jordan's special standing as custodian of the Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem in the peace treaty:

In accordance with the Washington Declaration, Israel respects the present special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Muslim Holy shrines in Jerusalem. When negotiations on the permanent status will take place, Israel will give high priority to the Jordanian historic role in these shrines.

This Israeli promise to Husayn angered Yasir Arafat, who regarded it as a denial of his claim to exclusive control over East Jerusalem and a contradiction of the letter of October 11, 1993, from Foreign Minister Shimon Peres to Norwegian Foreign Minister Johan Jorgen Holst, in which Peres states that

All the Palestinian institutions of East Jerusalem, including the economic, social, educational and cultural, and the holy Christian and Moslem places, are performing an essential task for the Palestinian population. Needless to say, we will not hamper their activity; on the contrary, the fulfillment of this important mission is to be encouraged.¹²

Arafat launched a campaign to amend this Jerusalem clause, including mobilizing the Arab League against the clause and taking steps in Jerusalem to emphasize PLO authority over the holy sites. King Husayn replied unequivocally to the Palestinian claims in a Speech from the Throne before both houses of the Jordanian Parliament: "We shall not yield the rights of the Hashemite family in Jerusalem."¹³

When Palestinian pressure on Jordan increased, the kingdom announced on November 22, 1994, that it would transfer custodianship of the holy sites to the Palestinians after they attain territorial rule in East Jerusalem. On the surface, this appears to acquiesce to the Palestinian claim; in fact, it is a sophisticated tactic to deflect Palestinian pressure from Husayn, for it postpones the showdown with the PLO on Jerusalem into the hazy future. Husayn presumes the Israelis will not hasten to transfer to the PLO rule over East Jerusalem, and therefore his special rights vis-à-vis the holy sites will be maintained.

The struggle between Husayn and Arafat reached a climax at the Casablanca meeting of the Islamic Conference on December 14, 1994, when the two of them had a showdown about rights of custodianship over the Islamic holy places in Jerusalem. Husayn again declared there that

when the Palestinians achieve territorial rule in East Jerusalem, he would be ready to transfer to them custodianship of the holy sites. Then he left the conference in anger. Associated Press, Dec. 15, 1994.

The confrontation continues. Israel holds the keys to Palestinian-Jordanian conflict. Indeed, Israel's ability to contain the PLO's drive to erode Jordan's special status in Jerusalem will be the critical test for the Jordanian-Israeli treaty.

¹ Conversation with former prime minister Yitzhak Shamir, Aug. 9, 1994.

² Report by Yaacov Herzog to Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, Sept. 24, 1964.

³ Moshe Zak, "Israeli-Jordanian Negotiations," *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 1985, p. 170; Conversation with Yitzhak Rabin and Thomas Pickering (then U.S. ambassador to Jordan); and eyewitness reports of officers in the Sayeret Shaked, the special mobile unit of the Israel Defense Forces.

⁴ Report by Herzog to Eshkol, July 2, 1967.

⁵ Minutes of conversation between King Husayn and Moshe Dayan, July 1972.

⁶ Interview with Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, Nov. 1, 1994.

⁷ Conversation with Elyakim Rubinstein (chief Israeli negotiator), Nov. 21, 1994.

⁸ Report by Herzog to Eshkol, May 2, 1964.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Conversation with Yossi Ben-Aharon (director-general of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's office), May 12, 1992.

¹¹ Petra News Agency, Nov. 23, 1992.

¹² For the letter's complete text, see *Middle East Quarterly*, Dec. 1994, p. 31.

¹³ Jordan television, Oct. 21, 1994.