

**An Exchange of Letters Between King Hussein of Jordan and Israeli
Prime Minister Netanyahu
(9-10 March 1997)**

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**King Hussein of Jordan, Letter to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu on the Peace Process
(9 March 1997)**

The king's letter was written against the background of Israel's decision to move ahead with the Har Homa settlement in Jerusalem and the minimal scope of Israeli redeployments in the West Bank announced on 6 March. The crisis in Jordanian-Israeli relations triggered by the letter and Prime Minister Netanyahu's response was dissipated in the aftermath of a shooting rampage by a Jordanian soldier on 13 March that killed seven Israeli schoolgirls visiting the Jordan Valley: Two days after the killings, the king traveled to Israel and, in the presence of the prime minister, asked forgiveness of the victims' families. The text of the letter was made available by the Jordan Information Bureau in Washington.

Prime Minister,

My distress is genuine and deep over the accumulating tragic actions which you have initiated at the head of the government of Israel, making peace—the worthiest objective of my life—appear more and more like a distant, elusive mirage. I could remain aloof if the very lives of all Arabs and Israelis and their future were not fast sliding toward an abyss of bloodshed and disaster, brought about by fear and despair. I frankly cannot accept your repeated excuse of having to act the way you do under great duress and pressure. I cannot believe that the people of Israel seek bloodshed and disaster and opt for peace. Nor can I believe that the most constitutionally powerful prime minister in Israeli history would act on other than his total convictions.

The saddest reality that has been dawning on me is that I do not find you by my side in working to fulfill God's will for the final reconciliation of all the descendants of the children of Abraham. Your course of actions seems bent on destroying all I believe in or have striven to achieve with the Hashemite family since Faisal the First and Abdullah to the present times. You cannot send me assurances that you would not sanction any further construction of settlements and tell me of your decision to construct two roads to help all concerned Israelis and Palestinians alike and then renege on your commitment.

In pushing matters to the point of securing a U.S. veto at the Security Council, you have ill served the image and interest of your major ally and benefactor and our partner in peacemaking as the honest balanced peace broker.

Mr. Prime Minister, if it is your intention to maneuver our Palestinian brethren into inevitable violent resistance, then order your bulldozers into the proposed settlement site without doing much which is needed in recognition of Palestinian and Arab sensitivity, anger and despair and ameliorating the situation, then order the young Israeli members of your powerful armed forces surrounding Palestinian towns to commit wanton murder and mayhem, possibly resulting in creating yet a fresh exodus of hapless Palestinians from theirs, and their ancestors, homeland and bury the peace process for all times.

On the question of your withdrawal from territories you have committed Israel, before the U.S., Jordan, and the world, to complete the process by mid-1998, what good did it serve to offer such an insignificant first phase withdrawal? Why the apparent continued deliberate humiliation of your so-called Palestinian partners? Can any worthwhile relationship thrive in the absence of mutual respect and trust? Why are Palestinians still confirming that their agricultural products still rot awaiting entry into Israel and export? Why the delay when it is known that unless work is authorized to commence on the Gaza port before the end of this month, the complete project would suffer a year's delay? Finally, the Gaza airport—all of us have addressed the subject numerous times with a view to having a legitimate Palestinian need met and to give their leaders and people their own free access to the world rather than their present confinement and need to exit and return through other sovereign territories. I had requested permission and intended to fly President Arafat myself, in Jordan's official State Tristar, to the Palestinian airport of Gaza as I had requested earlier, during my Hebron intervention, to fly by a fixed-wing aircraft accepting your refusal then only because there were far more important issues at hand.

I anticipated your positive response this time. I believe it would have helped improve the atmosphere considerably but, alas, it was not to be. Now, suppose I had taken off nonetheless for Gaza, in the full right of a friend, then would you have ordered my fellow pilots in the Israeli air force—those who escorted me on the same aircraft over Israel in what became known as the "First Flight of Peace"—it seems so long ago—to prevent me forcibly from landing or worse? You will never know how close you came to having to make a decision on the subject had I, on this occasion, not planned to carry guests back home. How can I work with you as a partner and true friend in this confused and confusing atmosphere when I sense an intent to destroy all I worked to build between our peoples and states. Stubbornness over real issues is one thing, but for its own sake, I wonder. In any event I have discovered that you have your own mindset and appear in no need for any advice from a friend.

I deeply regret having to write you this personal message but it is my sense of responsibility and concern which has prompted me for posterity to do so in the face of the unknown.

**Prime Minister Netanyahu, Reply to King Hussein's Letter
(10 March 1997)**

Your Majesty,
I read your letter with deep concern. The last thing I want is to cause you anguish and disappointment.

But your thorough knowledge of recent events must surely make you aware that the difficulties we face in the peace process did not begin with my government. Had there been a successful and vibrant peace process in May 1996, I would not have been elected by the Israeli public. I was chosen to lead Israel because of the bitter dissatisfaction of the Israeli people with the way the peace process was progressing.

I inherited a process that was failing. The country was suffering its worst terrorist wave in its history, with bus bombs going off in the heart of Israeli cities and a devastating mini war taking a heavy toll in Lebanon. By election time, the peace process was in its death throes.

But rather than let the Oslo process die after the elections, I sought to revive it. I have taken decisions that even my predecessors were extremely reluctant to attempt: the redeployment in Hebron, the release of female terrorists who had killed Israelis, the easing of the closure, and the transfer of VAT funds to the Palestinian Authority ([PA] despite PA debts to Israel).

The release of the prisoners, in particular, was for me an excruciating decision. In recent decades our finest soldiers had given their lives to prevent the release of convicted terrorists, even when Israeli hostages were taken.

Nor was the further redeployment (FRD) that we undertook at the end of last week insignificant. I know there are those around Chairman Arafat who built up his expectations about its dimensions. But the fact is that the Oslo II interim agreement says nothing about the size of the FRD: It leaves this decision wholly to Israel's discretion. This may not be what Mr. Arafat wants, but it is the reality of the agreement that he signed.

My predecessors Prime Minister Rabin and Foreign Minister Peres only turned over 2.8 percent of the West Bank to area A status-to complete Palestinian control. After our FRD, 10.1 percent of the West Bank will have this status. This is an increase by more than a factor of three. And this is only the first of three FRDs. As you know, nearly all Palestinians in the territories now live under Palestinian rule. Washington clearly understood that Israel had provided a credible FRD when it announced that the redeployment was "a demonstration of Israel's commitment to the peace process and a positive first step."

What made the FRD particularly difficult for my government was the lack of Palestinian reciprocity. As you recall, the post-Hebron "Note for the Record" listed the obligations of both parties to the continuation of the Oslo process. Since Hebron, we explained to the Palestinian Authority that they had violated their obligation by releasing Hamas and Islamic Jihad hardcore terrorists-many of whom were involved in the 1996 bus bombings. The Palestinian Authority failed to respond to our presentations. We informed them that at least four of the twenty or so PA institutions in Jerusalem had unquestionably violated the Palestinian undertaking to restrict PA activities to areas under its jurisdiction. Again, the PA failed to respond.

For the peace process to work in Israel, it must produce a "peace of consensus"—not a peace which rests on a fragile and question-able parliamentary majority. I delivered such a peace when eighty-seven Knesset members voted for the Hebron agreement as opposed to the sixty-one members who supported the 1995 Oslo II interim agreement. The narrowly-supported peace of Oslo II could not have lasted—it was already leading to a dangerous polarization of Israeli society. Only my government can deliver the more stable "peace of consensus." But it cannot do so if it is forced to ignore more than half of the Israeli electorate.

The Oslo process has not left us an easy legacy. It put off the greatest differences between Israel and the Palestinians to later stages. The process began with Gaza-Jericho, then turned to

the cities of the West Bank, and finally the countryside surrounding the cities. Each stage represented a higher level of sensitivity and risk for Israel. Moreover, as we turn from these interim issues to final status questions, the degree of difficulty in the process naturally increases. We cannot make the Jordanian-Israeli relationship hostage to the Palestinian-Israeli negotiating track. We cannot give every Palestinian-Israeli impasse the power to hurt our own relationship.

Nor can I understand how the building inside Jerusalem's municipal borders of 2,500 housing units for Jews and 3,015 housing units for Arabs can be construed as "further construction of settlements."

I believe my record speaks for itself. Despite tremendous resistance from some in my own constituency, I have chosen the path of the Oslo process. But I believe that once a decision to take this path is made, both sides must decide that the option of violence has ceased to exist.

Let me assure you that I have always appreciated the courage and resolve with which you have helped keep the peace process alive. I hold you in the highest esteem and I value our friendship and understanding. That is why I must confess that I am baffled by the personal level of the attacks against me. In all my exchanges with leaders in the Middle East—whether in private or in public—I do not use this sort of idiom. We cannot allow the periodic and inevitable disagreements in the peace process to cause such volatile fluctuations in the relations between nations. I can only conclude that you are not being fully apprised of the true picture of the situation in Israel as well as our overriding responsibility to ensure the survival and future of our country. The quest for peace belongs to both camps of the Israeli political spectrum.

Israel and Jordan faced worse crises in the past than the problem we are facing to-day. It is up to us to realize our historical mutual interests and not let the setbacks of the Palestinian track cloud the understandings that were begun by my predecessors. Surely, we can achieve this end in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding and with the unrelenting hope and resolve to secure a better future for all the peoples of this region.

Sincerely yours,

Benjamin Netanyahu