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Jordan's renewed peace involvement

Jordan and the Arab initiative

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Jordanians today have a profound sense of strategic anxiety, with Iraq to the east in seemingly endless turmoil and Palestine to the west in confrontation with Israel and often on the verge of total breakdown into civil war between its own rival factions. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees are already bringing immense pressure to bear on the kingdom's infrastructure. The Jordanians are hardly in need of another flood of refugees from a disintegrating Palestine.

Jordan has never been able to shape the regional context in which it operates and it is therefore invariably on the receiving end of regional trends shaped by others. The fact that this has always been true and remains so is no consolation for the Jordanians who are desperately looking for ways and means to stabilize their environment. There is precious little they can do about Iraq, and thus they are focusing with ever increasing urgency on Palestine in an effort to extricate the Palestinian-Israeli peace process from its present moribund state.

Way back in 1988, King Hussein announced Jordan's disengagement from the West Bank. But as Hussein knew then and as King Abdullah II knows today, Jordan cannot fully disengage from Palestine even if it would like to. Jordan is situated at the geopolitical core of the Palestinian question and its own large Palestinian community makes up about half of its total population. Jordan would be deeply affected by whatever developments took place in the West Bank, whether peaceful or otherwise.

Jordan therefore still seeks to influence the ultimate outcome of any Israeli-

Palestinian peace process. But Jordan's dilemma has for long been how to go about engineering a mechanism to exert such influence without actually assuming responsibility for the negotiations, which the Jordanians presently have no intention of doing.

Led by the efforts of King Abdullah II, Jordan would genuinely like to help Israel and the Palestinians get their act together. But the Jordanians will not negotiate on the Palestinians' behalf lest they be accused, as they once were, of usurping Palestinian inalienable rights. The Arab initiative provides an ideal cover for Jordanian involvement in trying to revive negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. The initiative has not changed in any material sense since it was initially approved by the Arab League in 2002. At the time it was received in Israel with considerable circumspection. But quite dramatic changes in the regional environment in the last five years have produced a more positive Israeli approach toward the Arab initiative.

Iran looms ever larger as a regional menace, filling the void in the Arab East left by the declining Arab states of the region. Post-Baathist Iraq is in a shambles but is now also a Shi'ite-dominated state, thus changing the historical balance of power between Sunnis and Shi'ites in the fertile crescent. It was also this Iranian-Shi'ite thrust that Israel met in Lebanon last summer in the Second Lebanon War. Israel and key Sunni Arab states such as Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states now have common cause to stave off this projection of Iranian influence. It thus makes sense for Israel to take a more positive stand on the Arab initiative for geopolitical reasons that have to do with the regional balance of power rather than with the textual specifics of the initiative itself, that leave a lot to be desired from Israel's point of view.

This is especially true of the paragraph on refugees that Israelis across the board would find unacceptable. Not only does it refer to the "right of return" on the basis of UN General Assembly Resolution 194, which Palestinians tend to interpret as an unqualified right of return to Israel proper, but it explicitly rules out all forms of refugee resettlement. If there is to be no refugee resettlement, it is hard to imagine how the initiative expects to arrive at a formula agreeable to Israel. For refugee return to be acceptable to Israel, any Arab initiative would have to specify that such return would be to the state of Palestine and not to Israel proper. For Israel, refugee return must be

subordinated to a two-state solution based on UN Security Council Resolution 242. Israel will not accept implementation of 242 as well as refugee return to Israel itself.

Jordanian nationalists are keen to see Palestinian refugees returning to Palestine. Israel, which today more than ever after the collapse of Iraq has a vested interest in Jordan's stability, has no reason to object provided that such return is part of the two-state solution and not an instrument to undermine it. In the meantime, the Arab initiative should serve as an umbrella for Israeli-Palestinian deliberations to stabilize the situation with at least a protracted ceasefire. If that holds, then one may consider further forms of diplomatic progress.

The Jordanians are also looking further down the road. Influential figures, such as former prime minister Abd al-Salam al-Majali, have revived the notion of a future Jordanian-Palestinian confederation. This seems to suggest a Jordanian realization that, if and when Israel withdraws from the West Bank, this landlocked territory, when disengaged from Israel, would necessarily become increasingly dependent on Jordan. Jordanians and Palestinians may have no choice but to consider some especially close relationship in the future.

This, however, does not imply that Jordan is readying itself to negotiate instead of the Palestinians. It is not.- Published 31/5/2007 © bitterlemons-international.org

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