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Palestine or Peace? A 1960 Jordanian Peace Initiative Reexamining History

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For years before Jordan signed its 1994 peace treaty with Israel, the conventional wisdom among diplomats and Middle East analysts had been that King Hussein would be the second Arab leader to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel.^[1] While some may argue that Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Yasir Arafat or Lebanese president Amin Gemayel should be given that credit, there is little dispute that King Hussein was his generation's most consistent Arab leader in pursuit of an informal, strategic peace with Israel.

Buried in the British and American archives is evidence that in 1960, just twelve years after Israel's creation and six years after he came to the throne, King Hussein sought to break the Palestinian deadlock. His initiative—albeit stillborn—has eluded the historiography of the Israeli-Arab peace process. From the archival material, King Hussein seems more forward-thinking than even his admirers realize.^[2]

An Early Attempt at Peace

Jordan's King Hussein long was the only Arab ruler willing to break Arab state consensus against compromise on the right of return and to take active steps to assimilate Palestinians into the fabric of the Jordanian state. While Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba had made earlier noises about roundtable negotiations between Israel and Arab states, he did not publicly call on Arab states to negotiate with Israel until 1965, and then only on terms of the original 1947 U.N. partition plan, a precondition that Israeli leaders could not accept.^[3] Hussein was ahead of his time in recognizing the explosive nature of the Palestinian refugee problem. How far ahead is only now clear.

The late 1950s and early 1960s were a time of great turbulence in Jordan. Leftist and Nasserite political factions polarized the kingdom. In April 1957, King Hussein ended a short-lived experiment in democracy when he outlawed all political parties and replaced a left-wing government headed by Sulaiman al-Nabulsi with a military government.

Jordan's status in the Arab world was precarious. Egypt, Syria and, in 1958, Iraq had each overthrown their monarchies and embraced Arab nationalism. The Iraqi king, executed in cold blood during the military putsch, was King Hussein's cousin. The threat of subversion was in the air. Only through a combination of luck and British military support did the Jordanian royal family escape a similar fate. British and U.S. support, however, was not assumed in Amman to last forever; the late 1950s and early 1960s were a period of erosion of Western support for the kingdom—or at least growing skepticism regarding the long-range prospects of the Hashemite regime. A

national security statement drafted by the Eisenhower administration in November 1958 recommended that the United States

bring about peaceful evolution of Jordan's political status [i.e. replacement of the monarchy with a nationalist regime] and reduce U.S. commitment in Jordan ... [and to] encourage such peaceful political adjustment by Jordan, including partition, absorption or internal political realignment as it appears desirable to the people of Jordan and as will permit improved relations with Jordan's Arab neighbors.[4]

While Arab monarchies had sought both to support Palestinian nationalism and constrain its passions, the Arab nationalist regimes felt that populist outpourings would only be to their own benefit. Abdul Karim Qassim, the new Iraqi leader, Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Haj Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem who led the 1936-39 Arab revolt in Palestine and then allied with Adolf Hitler, all revived the call for a "Palestinian entity" (*Kiyan Filastini*), a step officials in Amman saw as an attempt to delegitimize Jordanian control of the West Bank.[5]

Against this backdrop, the Jordanian leadership concluded that its kingdom carried the lion's share of the Arab burden in the Arab-Israeli conflict; the Damocles sword of war with Israel and the existence of a large refugee population constantly threatened the regime.

As a result, Jordanian officials began to test the waters for an initiative to settle the Palestinian problem. On January 19, 1960, King Hussein publicly expressed this urgency. In an interview with the Associated Press, he explained, "Since 1948, Arab leaders have approached the Palestine problem in an irresponsible manner. They have not looked into the future. They have no plan or approach. They have used the Palestinian people for selfish political purposes. This is ridiculous and, I could say, criminal." [6] Hussein suggested that the Arab League reactivate the Palestine Conciliation Commission [7] and base negotiations with Israel upon U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194, which suggested that refugees "wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours" should be permitted to do so. [8] The king charged Foreign Minister Nasser Musa with formulating a plan to present to a February 1960 Arab League session. King Hussein hoped that the Arab League would endorse principles of a settlement that could then serve as a basis for negotiations with Israel.

In a speech before parliament, Prime Minister Haza' al-Majali [9] outlined general principles for a more productive Arab approach to the Palestinian problem. He called for an end to exploitation of the "emotions of the Arabs in general and the Palestinian refugees in particular"; a "realistic assessment of the situation and plans"; collective Arab responsibility; recognition of the existing legal status of Jordan; and the unity of the East and West Bank. [10]

Two days later, what the Jordanians meant by a "realistic assessment" became clearer. The British and American embassies in both Amman and Cairo learned that the Jordanian government sought to negotiate a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Wasfi Bey, Jordan's director of broadcasting, leaked elements of the initiative to Slade-Baker, a *Sunday Times* journalist:

- Arab recognition of Israel as a "spiritual" ("Jewish Vatican") and demilitarized state.
- Modification of the armistice lines in favor of the Arabs with the Arab League and international community acting as guarantors of the new borders.
- Lifting of the Arab League economic boycott of Israel.
- Negotiations over such questions as compensation for refugees, diversion of the waters of the Jordan River, and Jordanian use of Israeli ports.
- Possible internationalization of Jerusalem.[11]

The British embassy in Amman approached the Jordanian government to confirm the plan. The Jordanians were serious although they cautioned that the king had not yet granted his final approval to the plan.[12] Senior Jordanian officials elaborated on their intentions to the British ambassador, telling him that the plan provided for general Arab recognition of Israel and "represent[ed] a serious effort to break the deadlock." While the Jordanian government would seek a moratorium on immigration to Israel during negotiations, after any settlement, Amman would have no objection to unlimited Jewish immigration to Israel.[13]

In a subsequent meeting with U.S. ambassador to Amman, Sheldon Mills, Majali further sketched out his thinking. He explained that the plan derived from an understanding that three things were impossible: to push Israel into the sea; to accept the 1949 armistice lines as permanent; and to leave the Palestinian problem unresolved.[14] The Jordanian government planned to present the initiative before the Arab League foreign ministers' conference in Cairo. While the Jordanian government hoped for the backing of other Arab states, even if the Arab League conference gave a thumbs-down to the plan, it might nevertheless push forward with its new strategy.

Is Peace Worth the Risk?

The Jordanian initiative caused consternation in the British Foreign Office. While the British ambassador in Amman, Sir Charles Johnston, saw negative consequences for Jordanian domestic stability, he still believed that the Jordanian initiative might be seen as "a courageous and imaginative attempt to break the Palestine deadlock" which could enhance Jordan's standing in both the U.N. and in the West. The fact that both Majali and Musa favored the plan indicated that they did not believe it would undercut the Hashemite Kingdom's stability. Johnston argued that "problems like that of Palestine cannot be settled without arduous negotiations, but such negotiations cannot even start without a starting position." [15]

Much as British diplomats spoke of their desire for a solution, they nevertheless frowned on the king's initiative. They perceived it as a hazardous adventure, entailing great risks for the domestic stability of the kingdom, if not the survival of the Hashemite monarchy. The Foreign Office in London was foreboding. Rather than see Hussein's plan as a starting position, it worried that the Arab idea of concessions would be too "extravagant" to bear for Israel. The foreign secretary, Selwyn Lord, could not conceive that the Jewish state would ever agree to a moratorium on immigration, nor would Jerusalem consider allowing for repatriation or border rectifications. Arab capitals would likely turn a deaf ear to any Israeli demand to lift the Arab boycott or enable free shipping. British Arabists warned that Palestinians—

both inside and outside refugee camps—would oppose any proposal to recognize Israel.

Johnston acknowledged such dangers. "It is always," Johnston warned, "dangerous for Arab leaders to become too statesmanlike and realistic." No good could come of challenging Nasser. The Egyptian president could either criticize the plan to stir up trouble in Jordan, or endorse it, binding Jordan to a more militant approach should the Israeli government not be able to accept it.[16]

But Realpolitik and a desire for stability ruled the day. "Whatever plan is put forward, our interests will be affected," the British embassy in Amman assessed. They feared being forced to provide assistance to King Hussein should his plan go awry. [17] The Foreign Office instructed the embassy to signal British misgivings.[18]

Johnston lost no time in conveying British reservations. In a February 1 meeting, Majali and Musa pushed back. Both expressed their belief that Jordan could put forward a plan recognizing the existence of the State of Israel without endangering domestic stability. Regarding British concerns, both felt that "nothing could be gained by further delay" and that their plan's benefits outweighed its dangers since the worst option could be the status quo.[19] In response, Johnston counseled against surprising the Arab League and suggested that Amman "sound out" Lebanon and the United Arab Republic—as the short-lived merger between Egypt and Syria was known. The states bordering Israel were, along with Iraq, the most Arab nationalist and rejectionist. Majali and Musa rejected such advice for fear that Cairo, Damascus, or Beirut might leak details to undercut the plan. Nor did the Jordanian government wish to approach pro-Western monarchies like Morocco, since the Egyptian government might interpret such a move as pro-Western Arab countries ganging up on Cairo[20]

Johnston also briefed Mills, who passed word to Foggy Bottom.[21] Mills understood his colleague's concerns but advised Foggy Bottom that if the Jordanians were "courageous enough to put forward such a plan, they should be permitted to do so in their own way, and U.S. and U.K. governments should not prejudice such an effort." [22] That did not mean that Washington was not concerned. Like their British counterparts, American diplomats worried that the Jordanian proposal might endanger the king and his advisors.

The British embassy in Washington discussed the Jordanian plan with the State Department. According to the British report of the meeting, the British and U.S. diplomats both agreed that the Arab League would be "the worst forum in which to float a proposal for a Palestine settlement." Both feared that Nasser "could make mincemeat" out of the Jordanians. Still, the British diplomats felt their U.S. counterparts to be too "open-minded." Some U.S. diplomats even argued that both the United States and United Kingdom put their weight behind the Jordanian proposal. According to Lewis Jones, the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, the United States government could not "go on record as having discouraged any Arab politician bold enough to advocate a settlement with Israel." [23] In this vein, Mills told Johnston that "sometime one of the Arab states must exhibit some initiative and courage if Palestinian question is ever to be solved." [24]

Johnston met with King Hussein on February 2 to dissuade the Jordanians. He warned that if the gamble to obtain Arab support for the plan failed, the king would be vulnerable to Nasserite subversion. Even if Cairo agreed to the idea, Jerusalem might not, again risking an anti-Western backlash. The king did not dispute the British assessment but reiterated his committed to present the plan at the Arab League. Hussein told Johnston, "Someone must make a start ... Someone must have the courage to take the lead in getting out of the entirely negative attitude which they had so far taken towards Palestine."^[25] The Arabs, the king noted, "long ago should have abandoned purely negative contention that Israel must be pushed into the sea."^[26]

At the last minute, though, the Jordanian government had second thoughts. The Jordanian cabinet debated the plan on February 3. Many parliamentarians remained worried about its risks given tension between Israel and Syria. The Jordanian government instructed Musa to feel his way at the Arab summit before tabling any proposal.^[27] Rather than raise their initiative formally when the Arab League convened in Cairo on February 8, 1960, Musa told journalists "off-the-record" that he had a plan for a general settlement in Palestine, which he would reveal upon final approval from Amman.^[28] Such approval did not come. Still, the Jordanian delegation did not abandon their battle for moderation. They spent the meeting working to thwart Egyptian and Iraqi attempts to declare a "Palestinian entity."^[29]

Conclusion

British diplomats may have been right to doubt that the initiative—even if presented by a young King Hussein to the Arab League—could have generated a true peace process given the polarization at the time. While the British position was based on an assessment of the political risk, it also reflected the political world-view put forth by Johnston in his annual report a few weeks before the Jordanian government floated their plan. Then he wrote that British policy towards Jordan "must be decided on a cold-blooded calculation of British interests ... Jordan has no inherent interest for us except through the accident that its disintegration would bring the Israelis to the Jordan River and would thus start an international crisis of unforeseeable dimensions."^[30]

Such a statement coming from the British ambassador—especially one who would later declare everlasting affinity with Jordan in his book *The Brink of Jordan*^[31]—was not mere diplomatic cynicism. It reflected the innate conservatism of the Foreign Office and an assumption that any drastic change would, by definition, be inimical to British interests. London considered stable hostility between Israel and the Arabs preferable to the risks inherent in pursuit of peace, especially against the backdrop of the concurrent Jordanian-Iraqi-Egyptian feud over the "Palestinian entity."

Cairo and Baghdad sought to declare a "Palestinian entity" around which Palestinians could rally, raise the banner of Palestinian liberation, and reject any resettlement plans. In 1964, this crystallized in the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Subsequent history is well known. The PLO launched a bloody terrorist campaign not only against Israel but also against moderate Arab states.

What is the significance of a Jordanian peace initiative that never became public? Amman's stance toward Palestinian refugees highlights the contrast between

Jordanian policy and that of other Arab League countries. The 1948 Arab invasion of the fledging Jewish state sparked a flight of Arab refugees. Only Jordan among Arab states accepted permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees within its territory. Most Palestinian refugees in Jordan receive formal civil status equal to that of the indigenous population. The Jordanian government transformed refugee camps within its borders into normal neighborhoods. While Arab governments had little inclination to settle Palestinian refugees, they could not ignore the refugees' frustration. Arab leaders argued that Palestinian refugees should have a "right of return" to Israel proper. Contemplation of even limited resettlement became political heresy.[32]

King Hussein's willingness to contemplate a bold initiative to break the Arab taboo on recognition of and a negotiated peace with Israel preceded its time. No Arab leader of a country bordering Israel had considered a similar move until two wars and seventeen years later when Egyptian president Anwar Sadat took his bold step to break the psychological barrier of peace with Israel.

Moreover, the recognition of the need for resettlement of the refugees—as a practical alternative to the dream of return—remains the sticking point of the peace process to this day. The reactions of the British and U.S. diplomats to the Jordanian overtures are instructive, especially as realists and idealists still battle over the nature, responsibility, and direction of diplomacy.

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[1] See Dan Shueftan, *Optzia Yardenit: Yisrael, Yarden ve-hapalestinim* (Tel Aviv: Hakibuts Hameuhad, 1986); Moshe Zak, *Hussein Oseh Shalom* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1996); Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), p. 166; William B. Quandt, *Camp David: Peacemaking and Politics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1986), pp. 271–9.

[2] The 1960 Jordanian initiative is not mentioned in any detail in studies of Jordanian history and Israeli-Jordanian relations. See, for example, Asher Susser, "Jordan, Case Study of a Pivotal State," Policy Papers, no. 3, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C. 2000; Uriel Dann, *King Hussein and the Challenge of Arab Radicalism, Jordan, 1955–1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Zak, *Hussein Oseh Shalom*.

[3] Michael M. Laskier, "Israel and the Maghreb at the Height of the Arab-Israeli Conflict: 1950s-1970s," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, June 2000.

[4] "U.S. Policy towards the Near East," National Security Council, Washington, D.C., Nov. 4, 1958, NSC 5820/1.

[5] Eliezer Beerli, *Hafalastinim Tahat Shilton Yarden* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978), p. 16.

[6] *Daily Star* (Beirut), Jan. 19, 1960.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] U.N. General Assembly Resolution 194 (III), Dec. 11, 1948.

[9] The Egyptian government helped engineer Majali's assassination eight months later because of his stance. Dann, *King Hussein and the Challenge of Arab*

Radicalism, pp. 110–1.

- [10] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 71, Jan. 20, 1960 (PRO VR1421/12), quoted in J. Priestland, ed., *Records of Jordan, 1917–1965*, vol. 12 (London: Archive Editions, 1996), pp. 238–9; U.S. Embassy in Amman to Secstate, Jan. 20, 1960, telegram 1235.
- [11] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 75, Jan. 21, 1960 (PRO VR1074/5); British Embassy in Tel Aviv, Jan. 28, 1960 (PRO VR 10720/60), reproduced in R. L. Jarman, ed., *Political Diaries of the Arab World, 1882-1965, Palestine and Jordan, 1920-1965*, vol. 7 (London: Archive Editions, 1998), p. 247. The details as such did not appear in the *Sunday Times*.
- [12] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 82, Jan. 23, 1960, quoted in Priestland, *Records of Jordan, 1917–1965*, pp. 33–4.
- [13] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 79, Jan. 22, 1960, quoted in Priestland, *Records of Jordan, 1917–1965*, pp. 240–3; U.S. Embassy in Amman to the Secstate, Jan. 22, 1960, telegram 1245.
- [14] U.S. Embassy in Amman to Secstate, Jan. 30, 1960, telegram 1282.
- [15] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 79, Jan. 22, 1960; see also U.S. Embassy in Amman to Secstate, Jan. 22, 1960, telegram 1245.
- [16] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 79, Jan. 22, 1960.
- [17] Minutes from FO, Jan. 22, 1960 (PRO VR 1074/10).
- [18] FO to British Embassy in Amman, telegram 142, Jan. 31, 1960 (PRO VR1076/6).
- [19] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 104, Feb. 1, 1960 (PRO VR 1074/10).
- [20] *Ibid.*
- [21] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 79, Jan. 22, 1960, quoted in Priestland, *Records of Jordan, 1917–1965*, pp. 240–3.
- [22] U.S. Embassy in Amman to Secstate, Jan. 22, 1960, telegram 1245.
- [23] British Embassy in Washington to FO, Jan. 29, 1960 (PRO VR 1074/11).
- [24] U.S. Embassy in Amman to Secstate, telegram 1303, Feb. 2, 1960.
- [25] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 112, Feb. 2, 1960 (PRO VR1074/12); see also the report of U.S. ambassador Mills on his conversation with Johnston regarding the meetings with the king and foreign minister, U.S. Embassy in Amman Secstate, telegram 1527, Feb. 5, 1960.
- [26] U.S. Embassy in Amman Secstate, telegram 1527, Feb. 5, 1960.
- [27] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 118, Feb. 4, 1960 (PRO VR1074/12).
- [28] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 170, Feb. 19, 1960 (PRO V1075/6).
- [29] British Embassy in Amman to FO, telegram 182, Feb. 23, 1960 (PRO V1075/6).
- [30] Jarman, *Political Diaries of the Arab World, 1882-1965*, pp. 843–54.
- [31] London: Hamilton, 1972.
- [32] See, for example, the final communiqué of the May 2004 Arab League Summit in Tunis.