

JORDAN AND THE ISRAELI SECURITY FENCE

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Jordan has taken a particularly forceful stand against the Israeli security fence. Indeed, the Jordanians appear to have taken the lead in the Arab publicity campaign in advance of the proceedings of the International Court of Justice in The Hague, which is to convene in February to discuss the Palestinian complaint against Israel on this matter. Jordan's role may come as a surprise to many, since the Jordanians have not normally been noted for vocally strident positions against Israel. But a closer look at the Jordanian position on the Palestinian question will show that the current Jordanian stand is not at all inconsistent with the way Jordanian thinking has evolved over the years.

Ever since they lost the West Bank to Israel in June 1967, the Jordanians have been concerned with the ramifications of their defeat for the stability of the remainder of the Kingdom on the East Bank, also heavily populated by Palestinians. At first, the Jordanians tried to retrieve the West Bank from Israel by negotiation, but to no avail. Moreover, the Jordanians gradually lost influence over the West Bank as the Palestinians there gravitated towards an ever increasing loyalty to the PLO as their sole legitimate representative.

In Israel, in the meantime, the Labor Party, which believed in an eventual territorial

compromise with Jordan over the Palestinian question, lost power in 1977 to the Likud. The Likud then still espoused the Greater Eretz Yisrael idea, while some of its leadership openly contended that since "Jordan is Palestine," the Palestinian question should be resolved in Jordan rather than in the West Bank. For the Jordanians, this notion of an "alternative homeland" (*al-watan al-badil*), as they called it, was an existential threat. Their fears were further exacerbated by Israel's incursion into Lebanon in 1982, which resulted in the expulsion of the PLO from its Lebanese stronghold and in the acceleration of Israeli settlement activity in the West Bank.

Since the early 1960s, it had been none other than King Husayn who used to argue that "Jordan is Palestine and Palestine is Jordan." Husayn's intention in those days was to secure, not to concede, Jordan's control of the Palestinian question, and this was his way of saying that the formation of the PLO to represent the Palestinians was unnecessary. After all, Jordan had rightfully inherited Palestine. Husayn still employed this slogan after 1967 in opposition to the idea of Palestinian statehood, which the Jordanians regarded as potentially threatening to themselves, considering their own very large Palestinian population. In the mid

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1980s, however, this policy underwent radical revision against the background of the challenge of the “alternative homeland.”

Husayn now argued that “Jordan is Jordan and Palestine is Palestine,” and Jordan actually developed a vested interest in the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. As problematic as that may have remained for Jordan, it was still a lot better than Jordan itself being replaced by Palestine. The creation of a Palestinian state was thus transformed from a cause for Jordanian concern into a Jordanian objective and security interest. Jordan’s fears of Israeli intentions and the “alternative homeland” idea also explained why Husayn shifted towards Iraq in the 1980s, seeing Iraq as Jordan’s strategic hinterland. When the first *intifada* broke out in December 1987, Jordanian anxieties mounted anew, driven by fear that Palestinians might leave the West Bank in droves under the pressure of Israeli counter-measures to quell the Palestinian uprising. In July 1988, Husayn consequently declared Jordan’s legal and administrative disengagement from the West Bank in an effort to convince all and sundry that Jordan was not Palestine and had no intention of becoming so in the future.

The Israeli-Jordanian Peace Treaty of October 1994 was therefore a relief for the Jordanians, who felt that they had at long last buried the “alternative homeland” idea by obtaining Israel’s formal recognition of the Kingdom and its borders. All they now needed was for the Israelis and the PLO to conclude the Oslo process with the establishment of a Palestinian state. There was nothing the Jordanians feared more than the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian negotiating track and the outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian hostilities, which would again raise the specter of Palestinian flight to the East Bank. The recent war between Israel and the Palestinians, which began in September 2000, was in effect the realization of Jordan’s

nightmare scenario. The Jordanians therefore did their best to encourage the Palestinians to desist from the war against Israel and to put their house in order.

The construction of the Israeli security fence is seen by the Jordanians entirely in this analytical context. Like other Arab commentators, they are united in their interpretation of the fence as a tool of annexation, deliberately designed to thwart the possibility of a two-state solution. Some have even gone further to suggest that the fence is also intended to make the lives of Palestinians so unbearable that many will eventually leave. There is no shortage of Israelis, from ministerial level down, who have recently made pronouncements in favor of the “alternative homeland” idea. This comes at a time when the Jordanians probably already feel more insecure. Their Iraqi strategic hinterland has disappeared and the Kingdom is no longer the pivotal buffer between a dangerous Iraq and Israel. The Jordanians are uncertain about their presently undefined place in the post-Saddam Middle Eastern order.

One of Jordan’s most widely read columnists, Fahd al-Fanek, reflected his country’s anxious mood when he wrote in mid December 2003 that the Palestinians had reached a dead end in their struggle with Israel but that it might very well be Jordan that would really pay the price. Of Israel’s various options, Fanek argued, some form of massive transfer of Palestinians, at Jordan’s expense, was the easiest solution for Israel’s demographic problem.

No matter how unrealistic this scenario may appear to others, the Jordanians are genuinely horrified by the thought of being inundated by Palestinian refugees. Herein lies the very real fear that has produced Jordan’s vociferous condemnation of the Israeli security fence. It is all part of the Kingdom’s efforts to shield itself from what it perceives as the potential fallout of the Israeli-Palestinian impasse.