

Is Jordan Palestine?

Daniel Pipes and Adam Garfinkle

KING HUSSEIN's recent declaration that "there should be the separation of the West Bank from the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan" presents all parties to the Arab-Israeli conflict with opportunities and dangers. The Palestine Liberation Organization must make the most of its opportunity or fall by the way. Syrians and other Arabs must revamp their strategies. So, too, Israelis and Americans seeking an end to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip must engage in some major rethinking; they cannot keep pretending that nothing has changed.

And what about those who want Israel to remain in the territories? Their opportunity is clear, for with Jordan temporarily out of the picture, they can convincingly argue that there is no Arab interlocutor with whom to discuss peace, and therefore no realistic alternative to a Greater Israel. Indeed, they can claim that Hussein's exit proves what they have been saying all along: that the West Bank is not part of Jordan, but part of Israel.

It has become very important to pay close attention to such views. The Likud bloc has either led or been a part of the Israeli government since 1977, and the evidence suggests that its position will grow even stronger over the next eleven years. The demographic threat and the Arab uprising have shifted Israeli opinion to the Right; more than ever, the "transference" of the Arab population from the territories has become intellectually respectable.

At the same time, however, Likud sympathizers have suffered a minor irritation, in that King Hussein has now also rejected the "Jordan is Palestine" slogan which underlies so much of their policy. The King put it as plainly as he could on the evening of July 31: "Jordan is not Palestine."

Those four words carry the baggage of a long and complex history that continues to weigh on events—so much so that the future balance among

Israelis, Jordanians, and Palestinians depends in good part on which of the two conflicting views of the Jordan-is-Palestine theory will prevail.

ALTHOUGH closely associated with Ariel Sharon, the *enfant terrible* of Israeli politics, the snappy argument that Jordan is Palestine has long underlain the policy of the Likud bloc as a whole. In the 1920's, its founding father Vladimir Jabotinsky asserted that Palestine is a territory whose "chief geographical feature" is that "the Jordan River does not delineate its frontiers but flows through its center." Then, as recently as 1982, Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir wrote that, "reduced to its true proportions, the problem is clearly not the lack of a homeland for the Palestinian Arabs. That homeland is Trans-Jordan or Eastern Palestine. . . . A second Palestinian state to the west of the river is a prescription for anarchy." Nor is this just the view of politicians; Mordechai Nisan, a scholar, explains that "nobody ever considered the two sides of the Jordan River anything but integral parts of a single land called Palestine."

A number of American supporters of Israel accept the Jordan-is-Palestine argument. Joan Peters premises her study, *From Time Immemorial*, on this notion. She routinely calls Israel a "corner of Palestine" and "Western Palestine," while "Eastern Palestine" is her term for Jordan. George F. Will states that "Jordan is Palestine—historically, geographically, ethnically." Two small but active organizations, the *Jordan Is Palestine* Committee of Hyde Park, New York, and the Washington-based CAMERA (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America) also make this argument with advertisements prominently placed in the national U.S. media.

Spelled out in more detail, the Jordan-is-Palestine slogan holds that Palestine includes the territory on the far side of the Jordan River and therefore that Jordan is the Palestinian state—even if it has a Hashemite rather than a Palestinian ruler. Instead of two peoples fighting for one land, the Jews and the Palestinian Arabs are portrayed as controlling different territories—Jews in the western portion of Palestine, now called Israel, and Arabs in the eastern part of Palestine, now called Jordan.

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This nomenclature serves a number of purposes. It undercuts any Arab claim to sovereignty over territory Israel now holds. It makes the Palestinians look greedy: they already have a whole loaf and they want another. It implies that while Palestinians should leave Israel alone, they should feel free to make changes in the Hashemite Kingdom. It suggests that, because Israel has at least as valid a claim to the East Bank as the Palestinians do to the West, the granting of the eastern part of Palestine to Arabs represents a form of Zionist generosity. Finally, it implies that the Israelis may be justified in expelling Arabs to Jordan, their true Palestinian patrimony.

In all these ways, the kindred notions of Jordan-is-Palestine and Greater Israel join the demographic and political issues facing Israel today to create the political agenda of a significant sector of the Israeli Right.

The Jordan-is-Palestine argument rests on four main premises: that Palestine historically included Jordan; that the British-governed Mandate of Palestine included the entire territory of today's Israel and Jordan; that the two regions are geographically and culturally indistinguishable; and that Palestinian and Jordanian leaders themselves believe Jordan and Palestine to be identical.

The trouble is, neither the historical record nor the map unambiguously supports any of these propositions. Rather, they are based on a selective interpretation of history and geography, a narrow and eccentric reading of the British Mandate, and a distortion of inter-Arab political dynamics.

Specious arguments tend to have mischievous effects, and the Jordan-is-Palestine tactic is no exception. In the end, it is likely to advance the cause of a Palestinian state not merely on the East Bank but on the West Bank as well, and to redound dangerously against Israeli interests.

FIRST, Jordan-is-Palestine advocates argue that the East Bank has always been considered part of Palestine. But a close look at the territory that is today Jordan shows that sometimes it was seen as part of Palestine, at other times not. Further, "Palestine" was for centuries a concept, not a fixed cartographic entity, so its political meaning was even more ambiguous than its borders.

Jewish history contains many boundaries for *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel. The first boundaries—promised, but not realized—were those of the Patriarchs, and they established the Jordan River as a frontier. Later books of the Bible (Deuteronomy, Joshua) describe a border extending to the eastern side, and Saul's kingdom of the 11th century B.C.E. included the non-desert parts of today's Jordan. So did King David's domains. In contrast, territory under Jewish control in the 12th century B.C.E. ended at the river, as it did during much of the Second Commonwealth.

Whatever the situation on the ground, Jewish tradition clearly distinguishes between areas of historical Jewish habitation and the land of the Covenant as defined in the Bible. Only the latter, more circumscribed, area is "the land of milk and honey," the subject of God's promise to Israel. The Torah (Numbers 34:1-12) makes it clear in its most exact specification of the boundaries of the land of the Covenant that the Jordan River is the eastern limit of *Eretz Yisrael*: "And the border shall go down and strike against the slope of the Sea of Kinneret eastward; and the border shall go down to the Jordan, and the goings out thereof shall be at the Salt Sea." This explains why Moses's death on Mount Nevo, in today's Jordan, was viewed as a punishment. It is also revealing that God imposed conditions on the two tribes (Reuben and Gad) that inherited land on the eastern side of the river. Each of these points implies a lesser status for the eastern side of the Jordan.

Outside the Jewish tradition, there is a broader political history to consider. Palestine was administered in a myriad of divisions under the Babylonians, Persians, Ptolemies, Seleucids, and Romans, sometimes combining the east and west sides of the Jordan River, sometimes not. To take Roman times as an example, the Jordan River initially formed a boundary; after 66 C.E. it did not. Conversely, the first Jewish revolt extended beyond the Jordan, the second ended at the river.

The Romans introduced the word Palestine as a way to expunge the name Judea from the map—a punishment for the Bar Kochba rebellion suppressed in 135 C.E. Naming the region after the Philistine residents of the coast, they called it Palaestina. But a new name did not slow down the constant redistricting. In 284 the southern part of the Roman province of Arabia was added to Palaestina; in 358, territory east and south of the Dead Sea was separated and called *Palaestina Salutaris*. Shortly thereafter, *Palaestina Prima* (capital: Caesarea) and *Palaestina Secunda* (capital: Scythopolis, the modern Beit Shean) came into being. *Palaestina Salutaris* was renamed *Palaestina Tertia* (capital: Petra). The Jordan River did not divide these regions.

When the Arabs conquered the area in 634, they inherited and kept the Roman divisions for over three centuries, so their provinces too straddled the river. During the Crusades, the Jordan River did for the most part divide Palestine from Muslim territory. In Mamluk times (1250-1516), the land's administrative boundaries changed again, with the river serving as a boundary in the north, but not in the south. The Ottomans (1516-1918) initially left the Mamluk divisions in place, but then made a series of changes that increased the role of the river as a boundary.

Not only did the border move back and forth during Roman and Muslim rule, but Palestine

never constituted a single political unit between the fall of the Second Jewish Commonwealth in 64 C.E. and the Balfour Declaration in 1917—with the exception of the Crusades. Therefore, it is nonsense to speak of “historic” Palestine as if it were a single longstanding polity. Palestine lived in the hearts of those who loved it, and that was in a realm without clearly defined boundaries. In medieval Europe, for example, “Palestine” referred to the territory occupied by the Hebrews before the Diaspora, but since this area had changed size many times, the definition implied no precise boundaries on a map.

In modern times, too, pious Christians and Jews continued to see Palestine in the light of biblical text and history, and paid little attention to actual divisions on the ground. They drew their maps to show Palestine as it had been assigned to the Tribes of Israel. The library is full of travelogues with titles like *Heth and Moab* or *The Land of Gilead*. Naturally, Palestine for them meant both sides of the Jordan, but especially the Promised Land.

Not surprisingly, early Zionists and their Christian supporters assumed that parts of the east bank would be incorporated into Jewish Palestine. This helps explain why Jewish soldiers fought on the east bank to wrest it from the Ottoman Turks. And why, in 1919, the Zionists proposed to the Versailles Peace Conference that their future state’s frontier extend deep into the east bank. And the resolution of the thirteenth Zionist Congress, in August 1923: “Recognizing that eastern and western Palestine are in reality and de facto one unit historically, geographically, and economically, the Congress expresses its expectation that the future of Transjordan shall be determined in accordance with the legitimate demands of the Jewish people.” And why the Jewish National Fund owned land on the east bank until the late 1940’s.

Notwithstanding these claims, the historical record shows that Palestine did not always include the east bank, and the Jordan River has often served as a military and political division.

THE second premise of the Jordan-is-Palestine argument refers to the fact that for a short time in 1920-21, the British government placed Jordan’s territory under the titular jurisdiction of the Palestine Mandate.

Along with the rest of the Middle East, the modern political history of Palestine and Jordan began with World War I. At the center of this transformation was the British attempt to build alliances for the war effort against Germany. London gave vaguely defined promises of Ottoman territory in the Levant to three different parties. In the Hussein-McMahon correspondence, ten letters exchanged between July 1915 and March 1916, the British promised portions of geographic Syria to

the Ottoman governor of Mecca, the Sharif al-Hussein ibn Ali, but exact boundaries were not specified. The secret Sykes-Picot agreement of May 1916 divided the same area (and more) between Britain and France. The Balfour Declaration of November 1917 endorsed “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people.”

Britain’s three alliances served its wartime purposes fairly well; in a two-year campaign that ended in October 1918, British forces took control of the area stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to Iran. But after the war, the apparent mutual exclusivity of these agreements caused considerable trouble. In an initial effort to balance commitments to Arabs, Frenchmen, and Zionists, the British divided the Levant into three military administrations in October 1918. London administered a zone roughly equivalent to what later became Israel and opened Jewish immigration to it. The French assumed control of the coastal region between Israel and Turkey. The Sharif’s son, Prince Faisal, received what became known as Transjordan, as well as everything away from the Mediterranean in today’s Lebanon and Syria. Damascus served as his capital.

In accord with the Sykes-Picot agreement, however, the French government aspired to control Damascus and the interior, so it expelled Faisal from his capital in July 1920. But the French did not claim the southern part of Faisal’s territory, which now fell under British jurisdiction.

Here we arrive at a critical point for Jordan-is-Palestinians: the British now for the first time called their whole territory in the Levant the “Mandate for Palestine.” In other words, starting in July 1920, Jordan formed part of Palestine, at least as far as the British were concerned.

But it did not remain so for long. In March 1921, Winston Churchill, the colonial secretary, found it “necessary immediately to occupy militarily Trans-Jordania.” Rather than use British troops to do this, he decided to control it indirectly. Toward this end, Churchill divided the Palestine Mandate into two parts along the Jordan River, creating the Emirate of Transjordan on the east bank and excluding Jewish immigration there. Churchill offered this territory to Faisal’s older brother Abdallah, who after some hesitation accepted. The Hashemite dynasty of Abdallah, his son Tallal, and his grandson Hussein has ruled Transjordan (or Jordan, as it was renamed in 1949) ever since. After March 1921, the east bank was no longer Palestine.*

* Nit-pickers can find legal grounds to argue that the British continued to treat Transjordan as part of Palestine for some years to come. In a White Paper of June 1922, Palestine refers to both parts of the British Mandate. Reports on Transjordan to the League of Nations were filed in the Palestine drawer. A visa for Palestine was valid for Transjordan too. But none of this obscures the division of the two banks.

The sum of this complex tale is that Jordan was part of the Palestine Mandate for a mere eight months, from July 1920 to March 1921. Even that is vitiated by two facts: the League of Nations formally bestowed the mandatory responsibility on Great Britain only in July 1922, making this eight-month period legally irrelevant; and the British disposed of almost no authority in Trans-Jordan during those months when they theoretically held it as part of Palestine. In fact, the east bank lacked any ruler: Paris stayed away, London did not seek direct control, and the Hashemites had other priorities. "At that moment," reported Herbert Samuel, the British High Commissioner of Palestine, "Trans-Jordan was left politically derelict."

A few months of rule that was neither *de facto* nor *de jure* is hardly reason, seventy years later, to call Jordan a part of Palestine. Besides, it is preposterous to base today's major decisions of war and peace on the transient interests of the British empire after World War I. That Jordan was briefly part of the Palestine Mandate does not establish a vital link; it merely recalls a historical curiosity. As L. Dean Brown observes, "Jordan is Palestine only in the sense that Nebraska, which was part of the Louisiana Purchase, is still Louisiana."

THE third premise holds that Jordan and Palestine constitute just one region because the division between them is geographically meaningless and Arab residents of the two banks share much in common. After all, what is the Jordan River but an overblown stream? To many observers, the idea that it ever formed a border seems silly. But the Jordan River historically divided the two banks much as would a major river; as Henry Van Dyke wrote in 1908, the Jordan "is a flowing, everlasting symbol of division, of separation." Further, the river is a part of a much larger geographic feature—the Rift Valley—which thoroughly impedes intercourse between the two sides. Accordingly, west and east banks have long been separate; Jordanians are not Palestinians, nor the reverse.

Diminutive as the Jordan River appears today, it was not always so. The flow of water has been much reduced due to heavy use in recent decades; seasonal rains used to make the river at times nearly impassable due to the velocity of the current. This is not surprising given that, with the one exception of the Sacramento River in California, the Jordan has the most precipitous drop of any river on earth.

Lieutenant W.F. Lynch, the commander of the U.S. Navy's 1848 expedition to the Jordan River, wrote an account of his trip. His detailed log includes such phrases as "foaming river," "foaming rapid," "tumultuous waters," "a desperate-looking cascade," "whirlpool," "a cauldron of

foam," "fierce rapids," "sweeping current," and "mad torrent." As if that were not enough, he describes its "breathless velocity," "ugly sheer," "very steep and tumultuous rapid," "ugly rapid," "fearful cataract," and "brawling rapid." One of Lynch's ships sank due to repeated strikes against rocks; others were constantly in danger.

It was not just the river's ferocity that made it difficult to pass; it lacked every feature that makes most rivers integrative. It meandered wildly, so that passage was painfully slow and navigation unrewarding, even over short distances. Its banks eroded rapidly, rendering impractical either buildings or bridges along the shores. This meant, Frank G. Carpenter observed in 1923, that the Jordan "has no wharves, no boats, and no cities or villages of any account. It has numerous fords but no bridges of any size."

The valley containing the river, especially its eastern side, was a wild, difficult place where plant, animal, and human life all impeded travel. John Franklin Swift painted a vivid scene from his 1867 trip:

The borders of the river below the banks are filled to the water's edge with a dense thicket of cane, mixed with oleanders and willows, so that at no place . . . can it be approached except by pushing through this almost impassable undergrowth. And here wild boars are said to abound in dangerous numbers.

Other animals included hyenas, jackals, lynx, and porcupine. Further from the river banks, the territory was either badlands or what Lynch called "a perfect desert, traversed by warlike tribes."

To make matters worse, the Jordan is but one element of a much larger obstacle, the Rift Valley, a unique geographic phenomenon stretching from Turkey to Mozambique. In Palestine it includes, quite beyond the river and its thickets, the very lowest spot on the face of the earth; extremely hot and dry temperatures; steep, forbidding inclines, and few passes—all of which makes for a major natural boundary between west and east banks. According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, "the Rift Valley was throughout history one of the main factors for the division of the region into two parts, very infrequently—and then only partially—united into a single state."

Border or not, the valley has always presented a formidable military boundary, and possession of the few places where the river could be forded on foot was a source of strategic strength. The small population on the eastern side also restricted exchanges between the two banks of the river. The east bank was never developed agriculturally as was the land on the west bank, in part because of inferior soil and lesser rainfall above the valley, in part because the valley was mostly a malarial swamp.

The river quite precisely delineated desert from sown, agricultural lands from pasturage. Already in biblical times, the east bank was a hinterland where the pursued could flee and disappear, as David did after Absalom's revolt. A paucity of contacts between the two banks caused abiding differences in identity. Two American travelers at the beginning of this century, William Libbey and Franklin E. Hoskins, went so far as to observe that the river made residents of the east and west banks "strangers, or enemies, to each other."

Over the next 150 years, the two banks increasingly developed along separate lines, with the western region benefiting from centralized rule, a much more advanced economy, and a cosmopolitan urban culture. The river and rift thus became a psychological divide, cutting insignificant Transjordan from world-important Palestine.

At the time of its delineation in 1921, Transjordan lacked water, wealth, and people. It had but one remote and underdeveloped port, a thin strip of fertile land, and a population of under 250,000, nearly half of whom were nomadic. No wonder that Ladislav Farago could write in 1936:

Now on the Palestinian [western] side of the Allenby bridge everything seemed to be orderly, but hardly had we gone three hundred yards on the other side of the bridge when modern Palestine suddenly ceased and—bump, bump—we were driving on a primitive road of nature.

More important, Transjordan contained no great cities or historic seats of power. In 1924, Mrs. Stewart Erskine still deemed Abdallah's capital city, Amman, a "straggling village," and by all accounts it was a dirty and squalid town.

The lack of cities meant no high civilization. Transjordan lacked mosques of significance and important Islamic associations; printing presses, libraries, and institutions of higher learning were absent, as were medical facilities. The country did not have its own postage stamps until 1927—but that hardly mattered because there were no postal services to speak of. There was no trade or industry. As James Morris wrote:

[Transjordan] produced nothing very much, made nothing at all, was economically unviable and geographically nonsensical. Its principal town was the one-horse Amman. Its most famous places (Jerash, Petra, Kerak) were all in ruins. Its forests had disappeared into the stores of the Hejaz Railway, for fuel or railway ties. It had hardly any roads, only one railway line, virtually no schools, no police, and no very logical *raison d'être*.

It boasted, rather, barren mountains in abundance and an unending desert.

Admittedly, the western side of the Jordan was hardly an international center of industry or military power at the outset of this century, either, but it was more advanced and it benefited from the

status of being *Eretz Yisrael* and *Terra Sancta*—that sliver of territory to which hundreds of millions of Jews and Christians looked as the geographic center of their spiritual worlds. Muslims, too, saw and see it as something special, for Jerusalem is one of the most holy places of their religion. These religious associations endowed the region with unique qualities.

Moreover, thanks to the Zionists, who brought European learning, institutions, and commerce, the western side came to differ from the eastern more than ever before. It became forested and productive as it had not been for centuries. It became connected to the culture of the West and the domestic policies of Great Britain and the United States. Man-for-man, the Jewish military force became one of the finest in the world.

Most important, the Zionists articulated a compelling vision of Palestine's future as the Jewish homeland. And when one party longs terribly for an object, it is not strange that others also come to value it more. The intensity of Jewish nationalism and changes on the ground inspired a response in kind on the Arab side—namely, the almost-overnight emergence of Palestinian nationalism. Ultimately, this sentiment originated in Zionism; had it not been for Jewish aspirations, the Arabs would no doubt have continued to view Palestine as a province of a larger entity, either Greater Syria or the Arab nation.

In short, even if east and west banks were indistinct in the distant past, this was no longer the case by the eve of World War I, and it is certainly not so today.

THE fourth premise has to do with assertions by *Arabs* that Palestine and Jordan are one region. These go back to 1921 and remain politically potent even today.

The Palestine Liberation Organization has often declared Jordan a part of Palestine, and occasionally lays formal claim to it. The eighth conference of the Palestine National Council (PNC), meeting in February-March 1971, resolved that "what links Jordan to Palestine is a national bond and a national unity formed, since time immemorial, by history and culture. The establishment of one political entity in Transjordan and another in Palestine is illegal." The draft program of the tenth PNC conference (in April 1972) was even more forthright: "The need for struggle to overthrow the agent regime in Jordan, which is a front line of defense for the Zionist state and organically linked to Israel, has become no less urgent than the need for struggle against Zionist occupation." That Palestinians make up an estimated 60 percent of the East Bank population and play a major role in all aspects of life there "implies that the two peoples be brought together into a Jordanian-Palestinian national liberation front."

Individual spokesmen have advanced even more specific claims. The PLO's first chief, Ahmad Shukeiry, argued that Jordan's 1950 annexation of the West Bank was actually an annexation of the East Bank to Palestine. For him, Palestine "stretched from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Syrian-Iraqi desert." In 1966, a PLO representative to Lebanon declared Jordan "an integral part of Palestine, exactly like Israel."

Jordanians have also stressed the connection between the two regions. Both of Jordan's two major rulers, the Hashemite Kings Abdallah (1921 to 1951) and Hussein (1953 to the present) have been outspoken on this issue. As early as 1926, Abdallah asserted that "Palestine is one unit. The division between Palestine and Transjordan is artificial and wasteful," a view he later repeated many times.

The establishment of Israel in 1948 hardly affected Hashemite claims to Palestine. The Jordanian prime minister declared in August 1959: "We here in Jordan, led by our great King [Hussein], are the government of Palestine, the army of Palestine, and we are the refugees." Hussein himself stated in 1956 that "the two peoples have integrated; Palestine has become Jordan, and Jordan Palestine." He also declared that "those organizations which seek to differentiate between Palestinians and Jordanians are traitors who help Zionism in its aim of splitting the Arab camp. . . . We have only one army, one political organization, and one popular recruiting system in this country."

Losing the West Bank in 1967 also made little difference for Jordanian claims. Prime Minister Zayd ar-Rifa'i told an interviewer in 1975:

Jordan is Palestine. They have never been ruled as two separate states except during the British Mandate. Before 1918 the two banks of the Jordan River were a single state. When they returned to being a single state after 1948, it was a matter of building on the earlier unity. Their families are one, as are their welfare, affiliation, and culture.

And King Hussein asserted again in 1981 that "Jordan is Palestine and Palestine is Jordan."

After a breakdown of diplomatic efforts between Jordan and the PLO in February 1986, the King announced that he speaks "as one who feels he is a Palestinian." Soon after, Akif al-Fayiz, president of the Jordanian parliament, declared that "Jordan does not distinguish between its people on the East and on the West Bank. Our people is one and our family is one. We look forward to the day when the one family will resume its historic role." Anwar al-Khatib, former Jordanian mayor of East Jerusalem, echoed these sentiments later in 1986: "Palestine, Jordan, and Syria constituted one family until the British and French occupation in 1918, which drove the wedge of boundaries among us. We do not differentiate between our people,

whether they live in Jordan, Syria, or Palestine." One could go on endlessly citing such language; it is as common as honeybees on clover.

For Israeli advocates of Jordan-is-Palestine, such claims suggest Arab agreement that Palestine and Jordan are identical. But this interpretation distorts the real character of these remarks, which are not disinterested analyses but propaganda ploys and declarations of hostile intent. Minimally, they establish diplomatic positions within the inter-Arab arena. Maximally, they assert rights to expand and rule other regions.

Thus, the periodic Palestinian claims to Hussein's kingdom reflect an intent to bring down the Hashemites as an aid to conquering Israel. Conversely, Hashemite statements have to be seen in the light of Hussein's efforts to integrate and manage East Bank Palestinians who comprise so large a proportion of the total population of Jordan. The King's dramatic but as yet partial cutting of ties with the West Bank in July suggests that he now worries less about internal stability than about the dangers created for him by the Palestinian uprising against the Israelis there.

Yet even if Jordan's disavowal of claims to sovereignty on the West Bank is a tactical twist, and even if (as many believe) Hussein hopes to divide and destroy the PLO and then return, the fact that Arab leaders have often said that Palestine equals Jordan does not make it so.

NEVERTHELESS, what if, following the logic of Jordan-is-Palestine, Israel were to facilitate a PLO overthrow of King Hussein and encourage Yasir Arafat to take power in Amman? This scenario is not pure fantasy, for a number of leading Israelis say they look favorably on such a development. When he was Minister of Interior, Ariel Sharon adopted policies with an eye to encouraging West Bank and Gaza Arabs to cross the river. (Indeed, following the 200,000 Arabs who fled in the havoc of the June 1967 war, at least another 350,000 have crossed since September 1967.) Sharon's ulterior aim was to tip the ethnographic balance on the East Bank and thereby bring down the Hashemites.

The Israelis who favor this policy do so for three reasons. Some say that because Palestinians make up so much of the Jordanian population, are much more dynamic, and will never be convinced to see themselves as Jordanians, they will eventually take over the country anyway. The forty-year-old Hashemite effort of Jordanization must fail; in effect, Jordan is already a Palestinian state.

In answer, one should note that this seriously misreads the skill, composition, and élan of the Jordanian military. A Palestinian takeover of Jordan is far from inevitable. Moreover, the record of several minoritarian governments in the Middle East (Syria and Iraq especially) suggests that the Hashemites can last a long time. And even if

Palestinian rule should be inevitable, why speed up the process? Why help remove a tolerable regime for one that will almost certainly be implacably hostile?

The second reason for the popularity in Israel of the Jordan-is-Palestine argument is that it subtly addresses Israel's most fundamental problem—the fact of a surging Arab population. Jewish Israelis are approaching an unpleasant choice: if Israel keeps the occupied territories, it can either preserve the Jewish character of the state by sacrificing its democracy, or the reverse. The Jordan-is-Palestine argument, by implying the permissibility of “transferring” the Arab population of “western” Palestine to the eastern part, has a potentially important role here, since it would seem to be the only way that a Greater Israel can remain both Jewish and democratic.

Yet the likely costs to Israel of such a course would be staggeringly high. In addition to the not insignificant moral price, this path might well undo the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, profoundly alienate the U.S. government, most of Diaspora Jewry, and many Israelis themselves, and end the Soviet-Israeli rapprochement (and with it the hope of extensive immigration of Soviet Jews).

Third, some think that Israeli security would benefit if the PLO were in Amman. They hold that the PLO, having replaced the Hashemites, would let Israel be; that Israel would find it easier to handle the PLO once Arafat were facing the trials of day-to-day administration; and that international pressure against Israel would lessen once the Palestinians took control of their own state, even one limited to the East Bank.

But these speculations are probably all wrong. Were the PLO to replace Hussein in Amman, several consequences would follow which are anything but happy from the Israeli point of view.

To begin with, the PLO will never accept Jordan as a substitute for Palestine. This conclusion is as close to certain as anything can be in human affairs. While Palestinian nationalists do think the East Bank belongs to them, their real interest is permanently focused west of the river, and nothing will change this. Were Palestinians to rule the East Bank, they would not rest content, but use it as a base from which to conquer Palestine proper, including the whole of Israel.

For experience shows that aggressive leaders are encouraged by success to reach for more and more—and given the Palestinians' long record of intransigence and maximalism, it is safe to assume that this rule would exactly apply to their leaders. From Amin al-Husseini to Ahmad Shukeiry to Yasir Arafat to the shadowy figures behind the West Bank riots of recent months, Palestinian nationalist leaders have on every critical occasion succumbed to the extremist temptation. Taking

over in Amman would only confirm the utility of the PLO's intransigence and boost its most vicious elements. With the Hashemites under their belt, PLO leaders would once again seriously entertain hopes that they really could destroy Israel.

Sovereign power would also allow the PLO for the first time ever to pose a serious military challenge to Israel. The days of a PLO leadership divided between Tunis and Baghdad would be over. Once the PLO shared a long and porous border with Israel, over too would be those pathetic Palestinian efforts to mount operations against Israel from the Sudan. Nor would the PLO any longer have to confront the formidable Israel Defense Forces with little more than small arms; Jordan's economy and society would almost surely be mobilized, Soviet-style, to support a vast military effort, including, we must assume these days, ballistic missiles capable of carrying chemical warheads. If Hafez al-Assad could turn the hapless soldiers of Syria into a powerful force, surely the PLO could do even better in Jordan. Such a development would make Israelis long for the bygone days of terrorism.

In addition to all this, Israel would lose the Arab government that for three generations has steadily done the most to accommodate its interests. The two major Jordanian monarchs, Abdallah and Hussein, consistently sought decent relations with the Zionists, and they worked over many years with Israel in endeavors of mutual interest.* In a manner symbolic of the two states' mutual needs, their leaders have met secretly with each other about twenty times since 1947. Surely it would be very foolish for the Israeli government to help replace a reasonable, well-behaved neighbor with a group that has been utterly consistent in its intransigence and extremism.

Israel and Jordan have important interests in common. Since radical Palestinian nationalism mortally threatens them both, the Hashemites, like Israel, gain from anything that reduces the intensity of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Thus, regardless of how much trouble the PLO challenge causes for Israel, the solution does not lie in the sacrifice of the Jordanian monarchy. King Hussein needs to be sheltered against his chief predator, not fed to it.

To be sure, it is particularly hard on Israel not to have a Jordan-is-Palestine option now—precisely when the alternative ways of dealing with

* The Jordanian government's behavior has, admittedly, not always been exemplary, but even in its two wars against Israel, in 1948 and 1967, it acted better than the other Arab regimes. Abdallah's goal in 1948 was less to eliminate the Zionist presence than to conquer territory; alone of the Arab leaders, he saw the benefits of ruling an economically dynamic and politically stable Jewish population. Hussein joined with Syria and Egypt in the June 1967 war, but he did so in good part because not to join this monumentally popular action might have destroyed his rule.

the West Bank and Gaza Strip have also faded away. The autonomy plan envisaged in Camp David has been rendered obsolete by the Arab uprising. The Jordanian option (whereby Jordan returns to the West Bank) appears dead, repudiated by none other than King Hussein himself.

With the disappearance of these happier solutions, Israel is apparently faced with just two stark alternatives—annexing the West Bank and Gaza or handing them over to the PLO. And each of these is even worse than it first appears, for annexation would lead either to a demographic crisis in Israel or forceful transfer of population; and empowering the PLO would mean enthroning a wildly hostile state hard on Israel's borders. The first spells disaster for Israel's internal life; the second poses a wholly new external threat. Understandably, the majority of Israelis deem both these routes unacceptable.

This leaves a deadlock which increasingly frustrates those—especially American Jews and diplomats—who feel that Israel must do something. But

must it? Action for its own sake does no good; the best thing under present conditions may well be to hold on and see what this volatile struggle brings next.

Further, standing still need not create a political vacuum. The moment now calls for a reaffirmation of first principles. The search for an Arab interlocutor that began over twenty years ago, when Moshe Dayan announced that he was waiting for a telephone call, must go on. Calls did eventually come from Egypt and Lebanon, even from Jordan, but never from the Palestinians or the Syrians. Until these parties do make that call, Israelis need to remain vigilant against those who would destroy their state. Further, they need to support the Jordanian monarchy's parallel efforts to fend off extremists.

People who yearn for a settlement should plead for a change of course from the Arabs, not the Israelis. Unless that happens, there is no prospect of major improvement over today's unhappy situation.