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President Arafat?

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Source: *The National Interest*, No. 21 (Fall 1990), pp. 97-99

Published by: Center for the National Interest

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42894699>

Accessed: 13-04-2017 13:23 UTC

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President Arafat?

—Daniel Pipes and Adam Garfinkle—

BOXED IN BY the *intifada* and the immobility of the peace process, increasing numbers of Israelis (and some Americans, too) are proposing a radically new approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Most Likud party leaders want “Jordan is Palestine” to become the official premise of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians. As Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir’s spokesman put it: “If the Palestinians speak of a Palestinian State, it should be established east of the river, where they already constitute a majority.” A Palestinian state is fine, in other words, as long as it is in what they insist is the “other part” of Palestine, nowadays called Jordan.

Two developments in recent months have made this viewpoint newly important. First, an unprecedentedly right-wing government was formed in Israel on June 12, 1990. Freed from its six-year union with the Labor party, Likud can now pursue Jordan-is-Palestine with fresh energy. Most of Likud’s partners in the ruling coalition are even more hardline. While Likud disavows any intent to expel large numbers of Arabs from the West Bank and Gaza, three of its allies (Tehiya, Tsomet, Moledet) to one degree or another explicitly favor mass expulsions (a process

they euphemistically call “transfer”). Further, survey polls show this option to be increasingly popular.

Second, the arrival in Israel of tens of thousands of Soviet Jews, and the prospect of many more to come over the next few years, has created new possibilities for an overwhelmingly Jewish “Western Palestine,” along with new pressures on the Arabs to leave. Shamir focused worldwide attention on this possibility when he asserted in January that the arrival of Soviet Jewry required a “big Israel.” And Ariel Sharon, the most prominent advocate of Jordan-is-Palestine, has become housing minister in the new government, which means that he gets to formulate policy on where newly-arrived Israelis live.

Jordan-is-Palestine holds obvious attractions for Israelis. Redefining the Arab-Israeli conflict so that it is no longer about two peoples fighting for one land ends the seeming intractability of the problem. Instead, Jews and Palestinian Arabs each get part of a whole—Jews get “Western Palestine,” now called Israel; Palestinian Arabs get “Eastern Palestine,” now called Jordan. The arrangement is fair and, according to Likud ideologues, requires both sides to make concessions. Palestinian Arabs give up their long-standing claims to the West Bank, and Zionists (of the Likud variety) give up their long-standing claims to parts of the East Bank.

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Jordan-is-Palestine proponents believe that replacing Hussein and the Hashemite monarchy with Arafat and his Palestine Liberation Organization would satisfy most Palestinians and relieve international pressure on Israel. And to the extent it does not, it would at least conventionalize the conflict militarily to Israel's advantage. Most importantly, it resolves the issue of the formerly Jordanian territories occupied in 1967. For many Israelis, such benefits justify sacrificing the Hashemite monarchy.

How convenient if all of this were true. But it isn't. Jordan-is-Palestine is based on a six-part argument that Jordan is part of Palestine, each element of which is faulty.

1. *Geographically*, Palestine and Jordan are indistinguishable.

Not so; in reality, the two sides are quite distinct. Until the mid-twentieth century, the Jordan River was a daunting obstacle to communication and commerce between the two banks and had none of the integrative functions usual to a river. It was not navigable, its banks were too erosive for bridges or buildings, its valley was malarial and plagued by bandits. In modern times, the Zionist undertaking caused the West Bank to develop its economy and culture in wholly new ways, leading to further differences between the two sides.

2. *Ethnically*, their respective Arab populations are identical.

Again an error: The East Bank developed its own identity over the centuries when it was isolated from the more cosmopolitan West Bank. The fact that Palestinians see themselves, and are seen by East Bankers, as a people apart confirms these differences.

3. *Demographically*, Jordan is already predominantly Palestinian.

This is a most ironic claim for Israelis to make—in part because it contradicts the second point, in part because it was the Arab-Israeli wars which made Palestinians so much of today's Jordan. More important though, to argue that just because Palestinians predominate demographically in Jordan means the country is already Palestinian in character

ignores the many long-lasting and powerful minoritarian regimes in the Middle East. It also underestimates the vitality of the Jordanian military and the East Bank tribes; the Hashemite Kingdom is not so weak as all that, nor does its East Bank character depend entirely on the king.

4. *Historically*, Palestine included today's Jordan.

But the historical record is ambiguous on this point. A succession of imperial powers sometimes administered the West and East Banks together, sometimes not. Jewish history is also ambiguous on this matter. While Jews in ancient times lived east of the river Jordan, the biblical land of the covenant (defined in Numbers 34) clearly excluded it. Had it not, Moses' death on Mount Nevo, east of Jordan, would not have been a punishment.

5. *Legally*, the British Mandate for Palestine included all of what is today Israel and Jordan.

True enough—but for a mere eight months—July 1920 to March 1921. Further, British rule during that time was nominal; London made no effort to control the East Bank. And even if one credits the stodgy reasoning that Transjordan was technically part of the Palestine Mandate until 1948, it does not follow that decisions taken by British imperial masters over seventy years ago should bind Israelis and Arabs today. For seven decades, the East and West Banks have been separate polities; no amount of legal pedantry can change this reality.

6. *Rhetorically*, Palestinian and Jordanian Arabs alike have often proclaimed their indivisibility.

True, but when Jordanians or Palestinians proclaim "Jordan is Palestine," they mean something entirely different from what Likud politicians mean. In effect, they are saying to each other: "You belong under my rule." And this oratory has diminished; King Hussein has now explicitly proclaimed that "Jordan is not Palestine" and so the Palestinians often make similar statements.

Jordan-is-Palestine has two major political implications, both of which are detrimental

tal to Israeli and American (as well as Palestinian) interests.

First, it justifies the notion of “transfer,” and anything that fosters large-scale expulsions (as opposed to voluntary movements of population) is disastrous. “Transfer” would disrupt normal life for as many as a million Arabs; entail unspeakable moral costs; destroy the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the bedrock of both Israeli and U.S. security policy in the area; and it would profoundly alienate diaspora Jewry and the U.S. government. Further, it would simultaneously accelerate Jewish emigration from Israel while probably ending the Soviet-Israeli rapprochement permitting large-scale immigration of Soviet Jews to Israel.

Second, Jordan-is-Palestine is designed to destroy the Jordanian monarchy and replace it with the PLO. Here too the implications are ominous for both Israel and the United States. Israel’s most devoted enemy would replace the government that for over three generations has most accommodated its security concerns. Then, and perhaps only then, would Israeli nightmares of a new, aggressive Arab eastern front come true. Even today, the fear of Jordan-is-Palestine (called with trepidation the “Jordanian Solution” in Amman) fuels King Hussein’s new rhetorical excess and his ever-closer bonds with Saddam Hussein of Iraq, presently the most vociferous anti-Israel and anti-American demagogue in the Middle East.

Further, the assumption that an East Bank state will satisfy Palestinian national aspirations could not be more dangerously mistaken. It is obtuse to think that Palestinians will accept Jordan as a substitute for the real Palestine. In poetry and verse, Palestinians have built up an intense romantic attach-

ment to the land west of the Jordan, rivaling the much older Jewish longing for *Eretz Yisrael*. Were the PLO to take over the East Bank, it would sooner or later use it as a base to launch war on the Jewish state, possibly in alliance with other Arab states.

And the PLO would have new assets in doing so. The normal life of more than one and a half million Palestinians in Jordan today would be destroyed as the country became mobilized for military action. A euphoric PLO, ruling from Amman, its recruits massively armed and flush with international support, would probably be unable to resist war even if it wanted to. Palestinian artillery barrages, ballistic missiles, and chemical warheads would make Israelis long for the days of PLO pin-prick terrorism. Israel would probably win this war, but the cost would be terrible.

The United States would also lose were the PLO to take power in Amman. An anti-American state would replace a pro-American one, with a variety of unpleasant consequences in addition to conflict with Israel: an increase in terrorism, new threats to such pro-American states as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and new turmoil in inter-Arab politics. These circumstances would probably imply a decline in U.S. support for Israel, as Washington would react with understandable umbrage to Israel’s destruction of one of its Arab allies and the undermining of its regional interests.

H.L. Mencken famously remarked that “there is always an easy solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.” Jordan-is-Palestine fits this bill. Indeed, the only thing worse for Israeli and U.S. security interests than a fully independent Palestinian state on the West Bank is one on the East Bank.