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The Unacknowledged Partnership

Daniel Pipes

CONTINUED HOPES of convening an international peace conference make it clear that although the era of Anwar Sadat, Menachem Begin, and Jimmy Carter has long passed, the legacy of their “peace process” remains powerful. Many high officials in the Israeli and U.S. governments see the task of bringing Arabs and Israelis into formal negotiations as their most important contribution to Middle East politics.

On the surface, this seems like an irreproachable idea; what person of goodwill can oppose efforts to get enemies to sit down together? But a closer look reveals that negotiation has become outdated. Blind pursuit of this objective may, paradoxically, work to unsettle Arab-Israeli relations.

Today, the peace process means just one thing: a formal and public agreement between Israel and Jordan (with Palestinians represented by Jordan). It cannot refer to anything else. Egypt, which used to be the focus of Middle East diplomacy, has dropped out of the picture since its 1979 treaty with Israel. Lebanon has no government and cannot participate in negotiations. Syria refuses any long-term accommodation of Israel. Of the direct participants, only

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Jordan and the Palestinians are left as Israel’s possible interlocutors.

But the record of Israel’s experience with Egypt suggests that the consequences of a formal agreement would not be entirely beneficial for itself, Jordan, or the Palestinians. To see why, one has to look at the striking contrast between Egypt’s poor relations with Israel and Jordan’s much better ties with it.

Since the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty was signed, Egypt has reduced contacts with Israel to a bare minimum. Almost no Egyptians visit Israel, negligible cultural interchange takes place, and trade amounts to little more than the oil that the peace treaty requires Egypt sell to Israel. The Egyptian government exploits disagreement—such as Israel’s raid on the PLO headquarters in Tunisia—as an excuse to reduce ties with Israel. The Cairo press engages in anti-Semitic outbursts calculated to provoke anger in Israel. The dispute over a tiny enclave called Taba has gone on for years, eroding good will on both sides. Relations have declined to the point where Egyptian authorities hardly bothered to investigate the October 1985 massacre of seven Israeli tourists—including four children—by a uniformed guard in the Sinai desert. Israelis have accurately dubbed relations with Egypt a cold peace.

Many Egyptians want to restrict relations even more. A majority of politicians,

administrators, journalists, and intellectuals oppose the peace with Israel. Though few advocate breaking the 1979 treaty, most second-echelon figures argue for a further reduction in the present level of cooperation.

IN CONTRAST, although Jordan maintains a formal state of war with Israel, the two countries have developed a thick network of practical relations. Trade has multiplied many times since the Israelis began a policy of "open bridges" right after the 1967 war. Tens of thousands of Arabs enter Israel for family visits, tourism, or medical purposes. In the other direction, foreigners and Arab Israelis (but no Jewish Israelis) enter Jordan from Israel.

The two governments cooperate closely in running the West Bank. Israeli authorities permit Jordan a wide variety of privileges, such as providing textbooks used in West Bank schools and sending official delegations to inspect crops. Agreements over the years have ranged, in the words of an Israeli official, "from anti-mosquito to anti-terrorism issues." In contrast to the years of argument with Egypt over Taba, Israel has twice adjusted the ceasefire line at Jordan's request. The two sides have arrangements to drill and distribute water, control air traffic, develop agriculture, regulate currency transactions, and avert military flareups. Israeli engineers have taught their Jordanian counterparts a new, inexpensive way to extract potassium from the Dead Sea area; to do this the Israelis reached Jordan via a special road by the Dead Sea. Senior Israeli and Jordanian officials meet and travel together in the West Bank. Recently, rumors have circulated about impending Israel-Jordan economic cooperation in the Arava region, Jordanian use of Haifa port, and even *de facto* Jordanian control of East Jerusalem.

Extensive negotiations recently preceded the opening of a branch of the Cairo-Amman Bank in the West Bank; at issue was oversight of the bank's activities. In the end, a creative compromise was reached: Israeli authorities oversee shekels deposited in the Bank of

Israel, Jordanian authorities oversee dinars deposited in the central bank in Amman. Financial cooperation extends to very practical levels: when Amman wishes to transfer money to the West Bank, a security company carries cash in a bullet-proof vehicle to the Jordan river; at the border, Jordanian and Israeli officials jointly count the cash, and then the Israelis take control of it. Israeli officials have gone out of their way to plead with Americans to fund King Hussein's plan to spend \$240 million a year on a development plan in the West Bank; they make no comparable efforts for aid to Egypt.

The two states tacitly cooperate against their mutual enemy, Yasir Arafat. To exclude PLO influence, they coordinate mayoral appointments on the West Bank, and Jordan is allowed a fairly free hand to choose lesser municipal officials. In December 1986, for example, local residents filled 100 positions in the West Bank's civil administration; all were reportedly friendly to the king. Israeli authorities recently deported a pro-PLO newspaper editor; his successor is expected to be friendlier to Jordan. There is talk now of Israeli permission for pro-Jordanian political parties and pro-Jordanian universities to begin operating on the West Bank. Reports from Israel indicate repeated Jordanian efforts to bring Israeli authorities together with Atallah Atallah (also known as Abu Za'im), the Palestinian leader Amman is promoting as a replacement for Yasir Arafat. In many ways, the Israeli authorities punish pro-PLO activities and reward pro-Jordanian ones.

In return, Jordanian authorities have signaled their acceptance of Jewish settlements on the West Bank. For example, they did not support efforts in Hebron to head off the construction of a new synagogue and they no longer try to stop the provision of electricity to Jewish settlements. An Israeli analyst, Pinhas Inbari, concludes that

Jordan is no longer aiming for a complete Israeli withdrawal from the territories; on the contrary, Amman is interested in an Israeli alliance against PLO influence, and as a logical conclu-

sion, Jordan is not inclined to enter formal negotiations with the Jewish state and is quite happy with behind-the-scenes arrangements.

Both governments see economic growth as the key to reducing PLO influence in the West Bank. Thus, Amman publicly hailed the Israeli decision in August to lift a ban on West Bank produce exports to Europe. It also permits West Bank doctors to train in Israel and even sanctions Israeli teachers in Ramallah hospital. The results have been impressive—Israeli figures show that the gross product of the West Bank grew by an average of 9 percent in 1985 and 1986.

To coordinate all these matters, Jerusalem and Amman have established direct political communications. Beginning in September 1963, King Hussein met Israeli leaders many times; the most recent occasion was in April 1987, when he spent seven hours with Shimon Peres in London. Hussein has visited various parts of Israel, even spending time in Tel Aviv on one occasion. He met with Golda Meir ten times. In recent years, Israeli leaders have found it easier to meet with the Jordanian king than with the Egyptian president. More than that, Israeli leaders openly praise the king. Thus, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres tells visitors that he “admires and respects” the king.

To assure deniability, in the past agreements between the two states were always verbal in nature. But, according to Israeli press reports, starting in 1987, most contacts now take the form of written messages. For example, negotiations concerning the East Jerusalem Electric Company were conducted through a series of memoranda. Intermediaries are not hard to find; United States diplomats or West Bank officials are usually happy to offer their services. Amman’s willingness to commit its position in writing indicates a new level of trust in Israeli officials.

Should current policies be maintained, joint Jordanian-Israeli rule over the West Bank appears to be a likely outcome. In this scenario, Amman would oversee West Bank Arabs’ daily life while Jerusalem would over-

see the Jews’ daily life and control the region militarily. Advocates of an independent Palestinian polity would be excluded from power.

NINE YEARS of the Egypt-Israel peace makes clear that public and formal relations between an Arab state and Israel create problems of their own. Several Arab leaders—Hafiz al-Assad of Syria especially—insist that the Arab state of war against Israel continue and that Arabs not acknowledge the existence of Israel. These leaders are willing to ignore ties that remain *sub rosa* but they cannot abide official relations. Thus, to protect itself after the peace treaty was signed, Cairo narrowed contacts with Israel.

There is every reason to expect that King Hussein would do the same following a formal peace. In fact, Jordanian authorities are already bending over backwards to cover their good relations with Israel. Attention to the two states’ friendly state of war provokes strident criticism from Amman. An Israeli specialist on Arab radio programming, Shaul Menashe, explained last year:

It may sound surprising, but right now the most venomous propaganda against Israel does not emanate from Damascus or even from Riyadh; it comes from Amman. The Jordanians want to demonstrate to the Palestinians in the territories that they do not fall short of Arafat or Syria, and they may also want to cover up secret contacts with Israel. That is why Jordan never says “the prime minister of Israel,” which even Syria says, but “the prime minister of the Zionist enemy,” or “the Zionist war minister.”

Were a formal peace to be signed, this sort of posturing would shut down many of the existing forms of tacit cooperation.

All signatories would suffer more harm than good from a formal Jordan-Israeli peace treaty. It would isolate King Hussein politically, endangering his throne and life. His present policies enjoy Saudi, Iraqi, and Syrian backing: were he to sign a document,

Saudi Arabia would cut off subsidies, Iraq would cool relations, and Syria would begin sabotage and terrorist activities. Why should Israel and the United States jeopardize a relatively stable and pro-American kingdom for a piece of paper? Formal peace would exact a price from Israel by threatening Jordan's security and reducing bilateral ties. The Palestinians would suffer from a breakdown of the Jordanian-Israeli cooperation, worsened conditions on the West Bank, and from a likely eruption of violence between Palestinian factions.

The informal, even clandestine, relations that Jordan maintains with Israel have the advantage of not provoking trouble. The key to Jordan's relations with Israel lies—paradoxically—in their not being codified by legal instruments; that they are unofficial means they can be denied. What Shimon Peres calls

a relationship “characterized by understanding more than by [formal] agreement,” should not be tampered with lightly. Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir publicly describes relations with Jordan as a “de facto peace.” Not surprisingly, he and many Israelis prefer this to a formal but cold peace.

This pessimistic conclusion does not imply that all peace treaties between Arab states and Israel are counter-productive, only that the costs must be carefully weighed against benefits. Overall, Egypt's treaty with Israel probably serves those two countries (and therefore the United States) better than any alternative. In the case of Jordan, however, the costs associated with a formal treaty appear to exceed the benefits.

A friendly state of war serves as well or better than a hostile state of peace. Washington should take heed.