

# **A Palestine-Jordan Confederation is becoming a very real possibility**



King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein (L) of Jordan meets with President of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas (R) at Presidency building in Ramallah, West Bank on 7 August, 2017 [Issam Rimawi/Anadolu Agency]

There has been more talk recently from the Palestinians, Israelis and Jordanians about the option of a confederation as an alternative to the two-state solution in light of the political impasse reached between Ramallah and Tel Aviv. So what are the true positions of the three governments on this option, the chances of this being achieved on the ground, the official reactions of these countries, and public opinion on the matter?

Palestinian-Israeli relations have reached an unprecedented political stalemate because of the stalled negotiations between them since 2014. This may have prompted Palestinians to think outside the box or refer back to old talk of a confederation with the Hashemite Kingdom.

Such a confederation aims to establish one state for two peoples after the Palestinian state is established on the territories occupied by Israel in 1967. This

single state will have two capitals — Jerusalem for the Palestinians and Amman for the Jordanians — as well as a central judicial authority and joint armed forces led by the Jordanian monarch. It will also include a central council of ministers and parliament elected by both nations, while both will be allowed to move freely between the two areas.

In recent months, the Palestinian and Israeli media have been busy talking about a confederation in an attempt to find alternatives that take Palestinians out of the political impasse. According to Israeli academic and political circles, a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation is suitable given the political circumstances, with US President Donald Trump trying to revive the proposal. Israel is also trying to strengthen this option by restoring Jordanian control of parts of the West Bank, which is favourable for the Zionist state.

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The current Israeli assessment is positive because the Palestinian Authority cannot stay in the West Bank without financial support from the US and Israeli security. The PA will not succeed in finding alternatives to the generous US aid, so it may be appropriate for Trump's aides to resume their efforts towards confederation.

The Israelis reject the two-state solution and believe that the Palestinian confederation with Jordan may be the best choice for themselves because it kills several birds with one stone. For a start, it spares Israel from the responsibility of managing the affairs of millions of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, with the PA's reduced financial resources. It also means that the two-state solution is no longer feasible, which reinforces the opinion of the Israeli right-wing that the "two states" route is dead and buried. The current US approach, remember, rarely addresses the two-state solution as it moves towards greater, but still limited, autonomy for the Palestinians.

What's more, Israel's talk of Egyptian guardianship over Gaza becomes more credible, perhaps by transferring Egypt's administrative and security responsibility for the territory, even if the parties themselves continue to reject it, at least in public.

Confederation also revives the old Israeli right-wing suggestion of the "alternative homeland" of Jordan, about which Amman has many reservations. There are

Israeli predictions which surface from time to time that King Abdullah II will be the last Jordanian monarch from the Hashemites.

Finally, a Palestine-Jordan confederation will preserve security in the West Bank given that the Jordanian security forces will maintain calm on the border with Israel that has lasted for decades. This is a win-win situation for Israel, as Jordan will be responsible for preventing resistance operations within the West Bank over issues of conflict, including settlements, the status of Jerusalem and borders.

This is not simply a subject of discussion within research and academic circles; the US administration has also proposed it to the Palestinians, according to PA President Mahmoud Abbas. The idea was presented as a single sovereign state — Jordan — that would be expanded to include an additional autonomous territory called the West Bank, although the Palestinians have reservations about this.

What it all means is that the idea of a confederation between Jordan and Palestine has returned to the agenda, so we could see the conflict resolved in a creative and innovative manner. This is despite the fact that concessions over the territories involved will be necessary if the proposal is to be viable.

The current Israeli election campaign is throwing up suggested programmes for alternatives to the current way of managing the occupied territories. One of these is to return at least part of the West Bank to Jordanian guardianship due to the failure of the Palestinians and Israelis to reach a solution. For a confederation to come into being, though, will require Israel to evacuate its troops and citizens from the Palestinian areas.

This Israeli proposal would mean that the Palestinians will become the demographic majority in the Hashemite Kingdom, which the Jordanians fear and are likely to reject out of hand. In any case, Amman will argue, the Palestinians have the legitimate right to establish their own independent state, although this does not mean that the Jordanians are open to any option which comes in a single package, under Washington's auspices.

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Moreover, the four-way Israel-Palestine-Jordan-US discussion about a confederation suggests that the two-state solution has been taken off the table altogether. Although none of the parties has agreed as yet, it could be a serious

alternative, and an important step for the future, even though the element of trust between the concerned parties is very weak. Israel believes that a Jordan-Palestine confederation can be implemented gradually by creating a network of cooperation across civil society which will be sufficient to create mutual trust and thus pressure on the Jordanians to be the Palestinians' elder sibling.

Washington is preparing to announce the details of the "deal of the century" in the coming weeks, and views the confederation option as an important one, despite the fact that Jordan is not exactly rushing to embrace it with open arms, not least because of the potential for the Kingdom to be de-stabilized. There are clearly many questions and not so many clear answers, causing some important circles within Jordan to fear for their national identity within a confederation. Such concern is understandable, perhaps, when we look at the demographics: Jordan currently hosts 2.2 million Palestinian refugees, out of its total population of 9.5 million, meaning that only 6.6 million are indigenous Jordanians. Add around 3 million Palestinians from the West Bank and Jerusalem, and the nature of the Kingdom as "Jordan" could start to change into a de facto "Palestinian State".

According to the latest opinion polls, the Palestinians welcome the idea of a confederation with Jordan and see it as an appropriate way out of their predicament. They have historical relations and family ties with the Jordanians, so a confederation may be an acceptable way to be rid of the Israeli occupation.

There is constant communication between the officials in Amman and Ramallah, with respected and prominent Palestinian figures going to the Jordanian capital to meet with senior officials. These individuals openly support the idea of confederation and show great loyalty to the Hashemites.

Nevertheless, there are legal difficulties. A confederation would require a referendum among Palestinians within Palestine and in the diaspora; this would be hard to conduct freely and fairly given the distribution of the Palestinians around the world. The institutions that would probably be expected to conduct the referendum, such as the PLO executive committee, are not constitutional because they were formed without being elected democratically by the Palestinians, so that is an obstacle. Furthermore, a confederation would bestow legitimacy on the Israeli settlements, while the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their land

will be off the agenda forever.

The resultant “Palestinian state” in the West Bank will be made up of demilitarized cantons lacking in contiguity; it will not be a fully-fledged sovereign state. Israel will thus evade the legal burdens of occupation and any possibility of it being called to account for its crimes against the Palestinians.

We are entitled to ask why there is growing Palestinian support for confederation with Jordan. It may be because the Palestinians have lost all hope of having an independent state and no longer have much trust in the PA after witnessing its successive political failures in its dealings with Israel. Jordan may also be seen as their gateway to the world, bypassing the tools of the occupation which have kept them behind the hated Apartheid Wall and endless military checkpoints. All things considered, a Palestine-Jordan Confederation is becoming a very real possibility.

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