

How Jordan Is Endangered By The Deal Of The Century - Analysis



Jerusalem at dusk.

The much-awaited “deal of the century,” a supposed peace deal between Israel and Palestine, has been delayed and disparaged as biased towards Israel to the detriment of Palestinians.

Though it’s true that leaks regarding various drafts of the deal involve softening but not ending the military occupation of the West Bank, the biggest loser from the deal may not be Palestine: it could very well be Jordan, which has a massive Palestinian population but has been sidelined from negotiations.

The government has been re-shuffled and purged, an ongoing political crackdown is underway, and protests against the deal fill the streets near the U.S. Embassy. Jordan’s government is hunkering down in anxious anticipation of the deal, and preparing for the worst.

For Jordan, the government’s legitimacy is on the line.

Built from a complicated socio-political arrangement between Jordan's tribes, Palestinians, ideational/religious symbolism and good relations with the international community, the government's mandate has taken decades to solidify into its current form.

The deal of the century threatens these aspects of its legitimacy, pitting Palestinians and tribes against one another, threatening to strip Jordan of its custodianship of Jerusalem's Old City and alienating Jordan in the international realm as its neighbors seem more concerned with building a partnership with the U.S. and Israel than securing the rights of Palestinians.

Even if the deal is rejected and cannot be implemented, the process itself has already thrown Jordan in political turmoil as its social contract quakes.

Unsettling the Jordanian/Palestinian Balance

The relationship between the kingdom's Palestinians and Jordanians is complex; layered by decades of shifts, new generations and refugee influxes. But one basic, defining factor outlines their different socio-political places: Palestinians dominate the private sphere, while Jordanians can almost exclusive access to the public sphere.

Official and accurate censuses on Jordan's population are hard to come by, but by most accounts, Palestinians make up a plurality or an outright majority of the country's population.

Despite this, it is the kingdom's Jordanian population that wields the most political power of any bloc in the country thanks to the tribes, which initially acquiesced to the monarchy after Jordan's independence in 1946. The Hashemite family, who currently rule Jordan but for centuries controlled vast territories (including Mecca and Medina, in what is today Saudi Arabia), have strived to maintain good relations with the country's tribes.

The Fayez and Bani Hasan tribes, for example, are two of the most powerful, with Fayez tribesmen leading several of Jordan's ministries and maintaining a strong presence in its Parliament while the Bani Hasan tribe is likely the country's largest. Both have recently shown their ability to exert direct pressure on the

King, bypassing official political means to do so.

More broadly, Jordanians, especially with ties to powerful tribes, can gain stable employment in the country's ministries and directorates or in the police or armed forces. Palestinians on the other hand, by and large, are not able to join the public sector, and thus find employment in private enterprises.

The government's careful political balance between the tribes and Palestinians is the result of decades of trial and error, teeter-tottering between both and struggling to pacify one while not giving the other disproportionate power so as to upset the other side.

The deal of the century threatens to break this fragile order.

Leaks from the deal show the Palestinian right of return will not be granted, dealing a huge blow to the decades-long struggle for Palestinians to return to their ancestral land.

"What we're seeing from the plan is that it will blow up the Palestinians," one Arab official explained to Reuters of the deal. "The plan doesn't give justice to the Palestinians."

"The Palestinian cause is being liquidated—no Jerusalem (as capital), no right of return for refugees, no sovereign state. That is why this American project is dangerous," another senior Palestinian leader said.

Jordan has resisted fully integrating Palestinians into the political system, holding out the hope that a future right of return and two-state solution would give them statehood. But without this hope, Palestinians in Jordan may understand that their only option for political representation and securing civil rights will be to pressure Jordan to integrate them as political equals to Jordanians.

This threatens the hold Jordan's tribes has on reins of power, and by extension, the careful set of tribal loyalties the monarchy has cultivated.

The King and the Custodianship

One of the most important positions the Hashemite family has internationally is its custodianship over Jerusalem's Old City, the heart of the Israeli/Palestinian

conflict.

The custodianship gives the Hashemite family an important place in the *umma*, the global Muslim community, and provides Jordan a practical role in Israeli/Palestinian peace negotiations including the deal of the century. By maintaining administrative power over the Old City and the holy sites therein, Jordan has a strong voice in determining the status of Jerusalem.

Jordan's current King Abdullah II called the custodianship his country's "red line" not to be crossed.

During a recent speech in Jordan's Zarqa Governorate, the King publicly acknowledged that outside forces are pressuring him to relinquish that custodianship in the context of the deal of the century; a pressure the King is so far rejecting.

"I will never change my position toward Jerusalem in my life," Abdullah said in his speech. "All my people are with me."

Israeli politicians and analysts have suggested that Saudi Arabia is quietly seeking to replace Jordan as the custodian of the Old City, effectively giving Saudi a monopoly over Islam's holiest cities: Mecca, Medina and the Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

With that custodianship, Saudi would be given an even more outsized role in talks with Israel, and Jordan would be sidelined.

Moreover, the Hashemite family which has used its custodianship to signify its care for the Palestinian cause, would have to answer to millions of disempowered Palestinians powerlessly observing their chance for recognition disappear.

Saudi Arabia would likely not champion the Palestinian cause as stringently as Jordan has. Saudi's crown prince even told Palestinians to accept the terms outlined in an eventual deal or "shut up."

Jordan's Lonely Place with Palestine

Jordan is one of the few Arab countries that can not afford to abide by the deal of the century and survive in-tact.

Unlike Saudi Arabia and Egypt, who both prioritize economic and security promises and have thus positioned themselves inside the Israeli/U.S. camp, Jordan is tied to the status of Palestine and Palestinians. Jordan has been forced to reject the trademark political project Trump has undertaken.

This has alienated Jordan from its two main allies: the U.S. and Saudi.

The pro-Israeli bias of the deal of the century is driving a wedge between Jordan and its allies, which may be forcing the kingdom to flirt with subtle re-alignments to protect itself.

This presents Russia with an opportunity to expand its regional influence in the Middle East and build a partnership with Jordan.

Russia appears to be quietly expanding its economic and political footprint inside Jordan, and Jordan has gladly accepted the solidarity Russia brings in denouncing Israel's expansion in the Golan Heights and violent activity in Gaza.

But even if Russia comes to Jordan's aid on the international stage, it cannot make up for the powerful roles Saudi and the U.S. have had in granting Jordan a place in the global community.

Currently, the deal of the century is facing indefinite delays, as the latest election in Israel failed to produce a government. But Jordan is already on the losing end of the deal, even if it is never unveiled.

Absent a deal, Saudi could still oust Jordan from its custodianship and the U.S. could still back Israel to annex portions of the West Bank much to Jordan's chagrin.

Jordan's economy is faltering and the King is reportedly purging elements of his government that were pushing for Jordan to accept the deal.

Jordan is on the edge.

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