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# WEIGHING UP THE JORDANIAN-PALESTINIAN CONFEDERATION

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## **Weighing up the Jordanian-Palestinian Confederation**

### **Introduction**

The idea of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation, which first emerged four decades ago, has resurfaced in recent months and is creating something of a controversy. The origins of the concept go back to 1972 when King Hussein of Jordan offered a plan to establish a federal united Arab kingdom to include Jordan, Gaza and the West Bank. The fundamental aim of this federation was to assert Arab sovereignty over all three territories.

In 1985, an agreement to seek Palestinian self-determination within such an alliance was reached between the two parties. However, during the first Intifada [Palestinian uprising] in 1988, King Hussein unexpectedly withdrew his plan and severed ties with the Palestinian territories. He asserted that it was time for Palestine to become self-dependent and negotiate with Israel without Jordanian interference. Since then, the focus has shifted to securing an independent Palestinian state and discussion of a confederation became taboo.

However, following a speech by Jordan's Prince Hassan in October 2012, the Palestinian President, Mahmoud Abbas, briefed his ministers to prepare for a new confederacy project with Jordan and compile a report on the diplomatic possibilities of the venture. This has led to widespread speculation that as a result of Abbas' new-found political currency in the wake of his successful bid for UN membership, an alliance with Jordan could be back on the table.

### **Why now?**

Several factors explain why the option of a Palestinian-Jordanian alliance has been revived at this point. These include the deadlock in peace negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis. Moreover, the issue of Israel's continued settlement expansion constitutes a major stumbling block to any breakthrough in negotiations.

Another factor is the very slim possibility for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in the foreseeable future. Although Palestine was recently recognized as a non-member observer state by the UN, this does not, in reality, grant independence to the Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

## **Points of view of the parties involved**

The mere mention of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation sparks animated reactions from the parties potentially involved in such an alliance. Needless to say, Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis all have different viewpoints. Moreover, the way ruling bodies view this option may differ substantially from the views of the public in all three countries.

### **Jordan**

Jordan is a good example of a country with such conflicting views. The proposal of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation is supported by the ruling elite, senior politicians and ministers who believe it will enhance peace and stability in the region. Their only condition, though, is an insistence that a confederation does not supplant the two- state solution and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

On the other hand, the Jordanian public is less enthusiastic about the idea. In their eyes, if the two-state solution is realised, Palestinians in Syria, Lebanon, and other countries would return to the new Palestinian state. This state would be under confederate rule making the Jordanians, i.e. the East Bankers, a minority and vulnerable. Moreover, they are extremely wary of Israeli plans to turn Jordan into an alternative Palestinian homeland, particularly given its high Palestinian population. Additionally, they have valid fears regarding the demographic threat, as well as the economic and political burden of having their future linked to the Palestinians.

### **Palestine**

Although Mahmoud Abbas has already instructed his team to prepare for a possible confederacy with Jordan, the broader Palestinian opinion on the proposal is that it is not a priority at present. Supporters of the project within the Palestinian Authority see it as a means of advancing toward the creation of a Palestinian state while sharing responsibilities with, and learning from, an experienced and internationally esteemed partner.

As for the Palestinian people, they have no interest in dealing with this matter until they have reached an agreement with Israel to end the occupation and establish an independent state. Moreover, they need a solution for the refugee problem based on UN resolution 194, which calls for the exercise of their right of return. Many Palestinians feel that until these are resolved, it is neither realistic nor appropriate to discuss a Palestinian-Jordanian confederation. In their opinion, any discussion before then would be premature and contrary to Palestinian interests; they would be the weaker side in any negotiations and be disadvantaged as a result of being occupied.



## **Israelis**

If a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation were to be formed, Israel would certainly benefit greatly. Given the fact that Jordan recognizes Israel, it follows by default that the confederation's government would also recognize Israel without the need for a public declaration of recognition from the Palestinians. Likewise, Israel would be able to avoid formally accepting Palestine as a state and simply welcome the confederation as a whole. In this way, it would avoid having to cooperate with Palestine directly, and instead only engage with it through Jordan.

Israel's political establishment has always advocated Jordan as the natural home of the Palestinians. By establishing a confederation, the objective of 'transferring' the Palestinians to Jordan will, in their view, be realized. Moreover, with a confederation, this objective would be achieved peaceably and without force. Amman would replace Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state, and the refugee problem could be solved there. For Israel, it is an attractive win-win option.

## **The West**

Although the West haven't really had a chance to weigh in on the proposal as it has not yet been presented formally, one could assume it will also gain from the establishment of a confederation. The United States, Europe, and Israel would encourage a confederation between Jordan and the West Bank because it would end the conflict in Palestine and relieve them of the burden of its management.

## **Will it work?**

Although some advantages would be accrued from the establishment of a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation, the fact remains that it is still too early to consider such an option. The formation of a confederation before a resolution of the final status issues such as the Right of Return and borders would leave in its wake a ticking time-bomb; the confederation itself would lack stability and legitimacy if it is not supported by the popular will. Therefore, any serious thought of a confederation must be preceded by an end of the Israeli occupation and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

If it were up to the Israelis, they would push the Palestinians into Jordan, make Amman the capital of the Palestinian state, and keep all their settlements in place. However, neither the Palestinians, nor the Jordanians will agree to this. Moreover, Palestinians in Jordan are aware of the negativity directed towards them by the Bedouins and so will claim their rights in Palestine, not in Jordan.

In the current circumstances, an asymmetric confederation will only take the Palestinians from beneath Israeli occupation and put them under Jordanian rule. In order for such a project to succeed, Palestinians must regain all their usurped rights. Given that this is currently near impossible, or at the very least, unlikely in the foreseeable future, talk of a confederation should be put on hold.