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FOR HUSSEIN, TIME TO GET OFF THE FENCE

INTRODUCTION

The imminent visit of King Hussein of Jordan is a crucial test for the Middle East peace plan unveiled by President Ronald Reagan on September 1. Hussein is allocated a special role under the Reagan Plan because he is the only choice potentially acceptable to both the Israelis and all of the Arabs who could negotiate on behalf of the Palestinians. Hussein has praised the principles of the American peace plan, calling it the "most courageous, realistic stand...taken by the United State since 1956".¹ However, he has yet to associate himself publicly with this realistic effort to negotiate an Arab-Israeli peace. His endorsement has fallen short of an agreement to participate in the peace talks and there are growing apprehensions that he may balk at joining the new American peace efforts just as he balked at joining the Camp David process.

If King Hussein refuses to enter into negotiations, the Reagan plan will be rendered moot. No Israeli government would be willing to negotiate with the PLO, even if the PLO should suddenly evince an interest in such negotiations. Without Hussein's encouragement, no legitimate West Bank Palestinian leaders would have the courage to defy PLO intimidation. Without Jordanian participation, the autonomy talks between Egypt and Israel would not be revived from their deep coma of recent months, because Egypt does not have the authority to negotiate on the Palestinians' behalf. Jordan is the key player whose cooperation is indispensable to the Reagan peace proposal.

¹ See interview in Wall Street Journal, November 11, 1982.

King Hussein is aware that his participation is a necessary but not a sufficient ingredient to guarantee the success of Reagan's peace effort. Israeli cooperation is also required. The Administration has sought to finesse the Begin government's current opposition to the Reagan proposal by stressing the galvanizing influence that a Jordanian peace overture would have on the Israeli public. It is presumed that no Israeli government could afford to leave King Hussein waiting at the peace table for long without being turned out of office.

While this presumption is probably correct, Hussein is not as worried about whether the Israelis will come to the bargaining table as he is about what they will do once they get there. The Begin government has proved to be a tough and wily negotiator in the Camp David and Beirut evacuation talks. It consistently has exploited ambiguities in agreements to the maximum and has sought to impose its own interpretation of treaty language on other parties to agreements.

Hussein is reluctant to commit himself to sitting down with the Israelis until he has received assurances that the Begin government accepts the heart of the Reagan proposals--mainly UN Resolution 242, which prescribes the return of territories occupied by Israel during the 1967 war in return for Arab acceptance of Israel's right to live in peace within secure and recognized borders. Hussein also seeks assurances that President Reagan will use American influence to roll back Israel's de facto sovereignty over the occupied territories and guarantee Jordan's security against potential Syrian, Israeli and Palestinian plots.

The White House can and should ease Hussein's anxieties by making such assurances. At the same time, however, it must convince him that the Reagan plan has a limited shelf life. Unless Hussein acts quickly to restore its momentum, it will fade away like so many earlier peace plans. Washington cannot offer what only Israel can give. The sooner Hussein sits down with the Israelis the sooner the Palestinians are likely to realize their right to self-government. The longer Hussein delays, the more Israeli settlers pour into the occupied territories and the harder it will be to negotiate a resolution of the Palestinian problem.

WHERE HUSSEIN STANDS

King Hussein, who was elevated to the Jordanian throne as a seventeen year old in 1952, is the leader with most tenure in the Arab world. His survival is due to the canny political balancing act that has enabled him to play off his rivals against each other in the domestic and international political arenas. At home he has balanced a large, predominantly urban Palestinian population against outlying traditional tribal groups. In foreign affairs he has sought to steer an independent course between stronger Arab power centers in Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

As ruler of the Arab world's longest border with Israel, he understandably has sought to avoid military confrontation with Israel--particularly since 1967, when his ill-advised entry into the June war prompted Israeli retaliation and occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Although he did not have enough confidence in the outcome of the Camp David talks to be drawn into the peacemaking process and was perhaps intimidated by the Arab rejectionist front, Hussein consistently has acted as a force for pro-Western moderation in the volatile Middle East.

Jordan historically has been a relatively weak state that has never been able to support itself without substantial foreign aid. In 1923, the British carved the kingdom of Transjordan out of the Palestinian mandate and entrusted it to the Hashemite dynasty in return for Hashemite cooperation against the Ottoman Empire during World War I. Renamed Jordan after the annexation of the West Bank in 1950, the Kingdom grew dependent on foreign subsidies, first from the British and then from the United States and Arab oil producers. Today over half of Jordan's budget comes from foreign sources, the bulk of it from the Arab Gulf states.

Hussein long has been a friend of the United States. He has dispatched Jordanian military advisors to help train the armed forces of westward-leaning governments in Oman, North Yemen and the Arab Gulf states to contain the spread of Soviet influence. He is a champion of Arab nationalism struggling against Khomeini's brand of Islamic radicalism in the 1980s, just as he was a firm opponent of Nasserist radicalism in the 1950s.

Although Jordan has fought and lost two wars against Israel in 1948 and 1967, it has developed a modus vivendi with the Israelis. In the 1973 war, for example, Jordan sent a lone division to the Golan Heights to assist the Syrians but no attacks were launched directly across the Jordan River. Hussein has met secretly with Israeli officials on several occasions in search of a peaceful settlement of outstanding issues. The Labor Party's fall from power in Israel's 1977 elections is believed to have put an end to these contacts. Unlike the Labor Party, which was willing to consider Jordan as a potential negotiating partner (the "Jordanian option") for a wide range of issues, including Israeli withdrawal from most of the occupied territories, Begin's Likud bloc is much less willing to negotiate away Israel's control of those territories. Begin's coalition, moreover, publicly hinted that Jordan itself is the only Palestinian homeland acceptable to Israel. While Labor governments had established Israeli settlements in the occupied territories for security reasons, the Begin government stepped up the pace of settlements and justified them on religious and ideological as well as on military grounds.

Because of these apprehensions about Israeli intentions, as well as fears of Arab reprisals and doubts about the ability of the U.S. to broker an acceptable peace settlement, Hussein resisted Carter Administration attempts to draw him into the Camp David peace process. Hussein did not have the domestic political

strength or the personal boldness of Sadat; nor did Jordan have the military, economic or cultural strength to withstand a prolonged period of isolation from the Arab world, as Egypt did. Hussein was content to watch from the sidelines and bide his time, waiting for a diplomatic opening that would not endanger his standing in the Arab world.

KING HUSSEIN AND THE REAGAN PLAN

Hussein is convinced that the diplomatic road to the resolution of the Palestinian problem leads through Amman. He has not yet chosen to travel this road with the Israelis because other Arabs--so far--have ruled it out. To act effectively he must have an Arab mandate and this he can obtain only with the acquiescence of the Palestinians, but not necessarily the PLO. In Hussein's view it is the Palestinian extremists who have exacerbated the plight of their people through a dangerously unrealistic reliance on the military option and terrorism. He seeks to strengthen politically and economically those Palestinians willing to cooperate with him and negotiate with the Israelis while isolating and undermining those who cling to their extremist pipedreams.

Hussein is known to accept the Reagan peace initiative in principle. It is similar to his own 1972 plans for a federation linking the West Bank with Jordan.² Nevertheless, Hussein's room to maneuver is severely constrained by the 1974 Arab summit at Rabat, Morocco, which anointed the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people." To get around this restriction and function as a transmission belt between the United States and the Palestinians, Hussein has recently taken pains to stage a reconciliation with the PLO, which he expelled from his country in a bloody civil war in 1970 after the Palestinians threatened to become a state within a state.

Hussein has granted amnesty to 700 Palestinians involved in the 1970 fighting and permitted those holding Jordanian passports to relocate in Jordan following their expulsion from Beirut in August. In early October, PLO chairman Yassir Arafat arrived in Amman for the first time in twelve years for four days of discussions with Hussein aimed at forging a common Jordanian-Palestinian position on the future of the occupied territories if Israel could be persuaded to withdraw. Arafat had gone on record as acknowledging "some positive elements" of the Reagan peace proposals but criticized Reagan for "neglecting" to endorse the creation of an independent Palestinian state under the rule of the PLO. As usual, Arafat talked out of both sides of his mouth, making conciliatory statements for the benefit of the Western press

² See FBIS Daily Report (Middle East and North Africa), March 17, 1982.

while taking a hardline stance to maintain his credentials with the radical Palestinian factions that opposed the Reagan Plan.³

During the talks with Arafat, Hussein reportedly argued that the time was ripe for the development of a joint Jordanian-Palestinian formula for negotiations with Israel. He told Arafat that the Reagan plan was the best offer the PLO would see for a long time.⁴ He urged the PLO to recognize Israel's right to exist and sought "powers of attorney," if not a clear public mandate, to renegotiate on behalf of the Palestinians.

Arafat refused to give Hussein such a mandate. Radical Palestinian groups and the Syrians would strongly, perhaps violently, oppose such a mandate. Syrian Dictator Hafez Assad is particularly anxious to block Palestinian negotiations for fear this will weaken his hold on some Palestinian groups and result in an agreement that leaves the Golan Heights in Israeli hands. While the Hussein-Arafat talks were underway, the Syrians bluntly warned the Palestinians not to get too close to the Jordanians. Syria disputed Arafat's authority to unilaterally make commitments for the Palestinian rank and file.

As a result of these pressures and his own reluctance to split the Palestinian movement, Arafat made it clear to Hussein that the PLO would do its negotiating within the framework of the Arab plan agreed to at Fez, Morocco, in September. This proposal was a warmed-over version of the August 1981 Fahd Plan which was made more palatable to Arab hardliners by omitting an oblique signal implying Arab recognition of Israel. The Arab position announced at Fez was a maximalist list of demands. It provided for peaceful coexistence with Israel in return for Israeli withdrawal from all occupied territories and the creation of a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip ruled by the PLO.

Hussein's only visible gain in his meetings with the PLO was Arafat's acknowledgement that a possibility existed for federation with Jordan. The two leaders agreed to continue discussions on possible negotiating postures through a fourteen-member joint commission. Although Arafat did not give Hussein the green light to explore the Reagan initiative it seems that this joint commission represents a weak yellow light that signals that the Palestinians have not yet officially closed the door on the American proposal. On December 14, the PLO and Jordan pledged to pursue "political moves together on all fronts," a significant action in view of Hussein's approaching trip to Washington. Prospects for PLO

³ There are the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestinian-General Command, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Palestine Liberation Front, and the Popular Struggle Front.

⁴ New York Times, December 2, 1982.

participation in the Reagan plan are dim, however, given the PLO's adamant refusal to accept anything less than an independent state.

No further evolution of the PLO position is expected until the next meeting of the Palestinian National Council, the amorphous body that is the nearest thing that the Palestinians have to a parliament. The next meeting has been postponed repeatedly due to bitter infighting over the site where it is to be held. The radical Palestinian groups want it in Damascus, where Syrian influence is likely to harden Palestinian attitudes about peace negotiations and undercut Arafat. Moderate Palestinians want Tunis or Algiers where they will be free of Syrian intimidation and obstructionism.

Regardless of the side chosen, the Palestinian National Council is not likely to meet before February--more than five months after the announcement of the Reagan peace initiative. If Hussein waits until then to make his move, it will be too late. The Reagan plan momentum quite possibly will have slowed and American Middle East policy will become increasingly influenced by the approaching 1984 presidential election campaign. If Hussein is to join the American peace effort then he must do so soon.

If Hussein is to take the lead in negotiations with Israel instead of passively taking a backseat to the PLO, he will require firm assurances that he will be shielded from Syrian pressures and that Israel will act in good faith to negotiate a solution to the future of the occupied territories acceptable to a majority of the Palestinians. While the first assurance would be relatively easy for Washington to give, the second is much more difficult.

To defend itself against the powerful Syrian airforce, Jordan requires high performance jet fighters and modern anti-aircraft missiles. In 1975 it purchased 14 batteries of improved Hawk anti-aircraft missiles from Washington but was chagrined when Congress forced the Ford Administration to deploy them in a non-mobile mode, to preserve the security of Israeli airspace. Unable to get what it wanted from the U.S., Amman turned to the Soviet Union and in 1981 signed an agreement to purchase Sam-6 anti-aircraft missile systems. This has led to Western fears that the Soviet military advisers who inevitably will accompany the new equipment will have an opportunity to subvert the Jordanian armed forces. To forestall this and ease Jordanian anxieties, the United States should offer Jordan mobile Improved Hawk missiles, but only on condition that Amman terminate its Soviet arms connection and agree to sit down to negotiate with the Israelis. Although these missiles will pose a marginal threat to Israeli security, this would be more than counter-balanced by a Jordanian commitment to begin peace negotiations. Hussein, an avid pilot, also desires to obtain F-16 fighter bombers from the United States. These should be denied him until Jordan has concluded a peace treaty with Israel. In the interim,

Jordanian needs and Israeli security would be better served by providing him with the somewhat less threatening F-20 Tigershark warplanes.

Assuring King Hussein that Israel will agree to an "acceptable" settlement is something that the United States can work toward, but cannot guarantee beforehand. Washington cannot and should not promise that which is not its to give. To do so would only raise false hopes among the Arabs that they could do all their negotiating with the United States instead of Israel. Moreover, making such a promise to Hussein would only strain relations with Israel needlessly, making an already difficult set of negotiations even more so.

If the Begin government is to be moved at all on the issue of Palestinian self-government, then it is more likely to be the result of conciliatory Jordanian actions than of blunt American economic pressures. Such pressures would allow Begin to rally public support by cloaking himself in Israeli nationalism.

It is a challenging to negotiate with the Begin government, given its previous history of outsmarting and outmaneuvering negotiating partners including the United States. But it is very risky for Hussein to stand by while the Begin government creates facts that Arab governments and future Israeli governments will find extremely difficult to undo in negotiations. There are already more than one hundred Israeli settlements and 20,000-30,000 Israeli settlers in the occupied territories. Settlement officials predict that within the next three months 24,000 more Israelis will migrate to the West Bank.⁵ Current government plans project 100,000 Israeli settlers by 1987. This influx is accompanied by an exodus of young, educated West Bank Palestinians in search of work in the Persian Gulf, Europe or the United States. If Hussein does not negotiate soon there may be nothing left to negotiate.

THE REAGAN PLAN

The Reagan plan is an attempt to break the Arab-Israeli deadlock by injecting new life into the Camp David peacemaking process. It was designed to reassert U.S. diplomatic leadership by shaking up the stalemated autonomy negotiations, shifting the emphasis away from Egyptian-Israeli negotiations and inducing Jordan and moderate Palestinians to enter the autonomy talks, as originally envisioned at Camp David. Washington realized that unless it could accelerate the glacial pace of autonomy negotiations, the Begin government would continue its slow-motion annexation of the West Bank, thereby vitiating prospects for a genuine resolution

⁵ Newsweek, December 20, 1982.

of the Palestinian problem. Progress could be made only if the U.S. spelled out what it meant by autonomy so that moderate Arabs were given an alternative to the narrow definition of autonomy crafted by the Begin government.

The American formulation occupies the middle ground between hard-line Arab and Israeli positions. It rejected the Arab view that an independent Palestinian state should be formed under PLO rule while also rejecting the Israeli view that Israel should have ultimate sovereignty over the occupied territories based on Biblical definitions of eretz Israel. By stressing the importance of Palestinian "self-government" it avoided the pitfalls of Palestinian "self-determination"--a code word in the Middle East for the formation of a Palestinian state.

There were no new ideas in the Reagan proposals, only a new determination to make old ideas work. The broad principles of the Camp David accords were reaffirmed--the trading of territory for peace as envisioned by U.N. Resolution 242, and the use of a transitional period to build confidence between the opposing camps and the peaceful and orderly transfer of authority from Israel to the Palestinians. The centerpiece of the plan was the establishment of a Palestinian entity associated with Jordan, a formulation that would reduce the threat of Palestinian irredentism to both the Israelis and the Jordanians. The status of Jerusalem and of Israeli settlements is to be determined through negotiations, although the United States recognizes that Jerusalem should remain undivided, that existing Israeli settlements need not be dismantled and that the West Bank and Gaza should not be isolated from Israel. The U.S. also put forward the view that the border to be negotiated between Israel and Jordan should be determined by the extent of the "true peace and normalization and the security arrangements offered in return."⁶

Israelis are concerned that the proposals could turn into a Trojan horse that would eventually help the PLO gain control of the occupied territories. They are also troubled by the future of Israeli settlements in an autonomous Palestinian homeland and by U.S. advocacy of giving Arab residents of East Jerusalem the right to vote in West Bank elections, for this implies the partition of political authority within the city. The Arabs are opposed to the maintenance of extra-territorial outposts in the proposed Palestinian entity, the expansion of Israel's borders beyond lines prior to the 1967 war and the status of Jerusalem. Both sides perceive substantial risks involved in the negotiations and neither is likely to be totally satisfied by any feasible negotiated settlement. The Reagan plan, however, is the best starting point yet proposed for the final resolution of the Palestinian problem.

⁶ For the text of President Reagan's September 1 speech see New York Times, September 2, 1982. For the text of the talking points presented to Israel and Arab governments, see New York Times, September 9, 1982. For an excellent analysis of the Reagan proposals, see The New Republic, October 4, 1982.

CONCLUSION

Since no Israeli government will negotiate with the PLO, and Jordan is the only state with which Israelis could negotiate over the occupied territories, some variation of the Jordanian option is the only realistic solution to the Palestinian problem. The Reagan peace initiative is based on the premise that a lasting peace is incompatible with the creation of an independent Palestinian state or continued Israeli control of the occupied territories. It is a conciliatory middle position that addresses both the basic requirements of Israeli security and Palestinian aspirations for self-government.

The Reagan plan needs King Hussein's participation. Prime Minister Begin need not sign on immediately for the initiative to succeed because there is always the chance that the Begin government will alter its course under pressure from the Israeli public or be replaced by a government more responsive to the desires of Israelis for a negotiated peace. The Begin government has heretofore enjoyed immunity from such domestic pressures because Hussein and the Palestinians have not made an authoritative, clear-cut statement of their willingness to sit down and negotiate. By making such a statement, Hussein could trigger a political debate within Israel that would greatly soften Israeli attitudes about retaining control of the occupied territories.

The future of the Reagan plan is in King Hussein's hands. If he delays sitting down at the bargaining table much longer, Reagan's initiative could be quickly forgotten and Begin's "creeping annexation" of the West Bank could pass beyond the point of no return. Time is working against the Arabs in the occupied territories. The longer they delay serious negotiations, the less there is to negotiate. Marking time on negotiations until the PLO faces reality is a risky business because the PLO has been shielded from reality for years by blind hate, Arab oil money, Soviet promises and the ambitions of its leaders and there is no reason to believe that this soon will change. Waiting for a flexible PLO negotiating stance is analogous to waiting for Godot. It is just not in the cards.

King Hussein should stop fence sitting and take his chances in negotiations while there is still a prospect of salvaging something acceptable to the Palestinians. The U.S. should encourage an active Jordanian peace diplomacy by supporting him against Syrian pressures. Washington should sell him the Improved Hawk anti-aircraft missile and F-20 warplanes if he comes to the peace table and F-16s if he signs a peace treaty. American economic aid will also be necessary, especially if Arab subsidies are suspended. The U.S. should do what it can to reduce the risks and uncertainties that King Hussein faces. But it cannot promise concessions that only Israel can deliver.

In the end King Hussein will have to weigh the risks of negotiations against the risks of continued inaction. American

officials should take pains to stress to him that his present opportunity to enter negotiations is likely to be the last, best hope both of the Palestinians and of the Jordanians.

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