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»The Deal of the Century and Jordan's Dilemma

By Suha Maayeh

Trump's "Deal of the Century" is supposed to end the decade long Israeli-Palestinian conflict by suggesting the final borders of Israel, Israeli-Palestinian political relations, the status of Jerusalem and the future of 5.4 million Palestinian refugees. Although the content of the deal has not yet been revealed, Palestinians fear that it would end their hope for an independent Palestinian state in the 1967 borders in the framework of a two-state-solution. While Saudi-Arabia and the United Arab Emirates seem to be supporting the deal, Jordan – a major US ally in the Middle East and the state with the longest Arab-Israeli border – feels it has been left out of consultations by the American side and it has voiced its disapproval of any deal that would not realize the two-state solution. With a Palestinian-majority population, Jordan, which is, however, a major recipient of US aid, will face a serious dilemma if the "Deal of the Century" will follow along the above mentioned lines.

Jordan is fretting about the U.S envisioned middle east peace plan, pitched as the deal of the century to end the seven- decade old Israeli Palestinian conflict.

Although the details of the plan have not been divulged yet, the leaks are

already making Amman apprehensive. Jordan, a key Middle East ally for the EU and the US, has reasons to worry. It fears the deal will resolve the conflict at its own expense and further tilt the delicate demographic balance in this country of 10 million in favor of the Palestinian majority.

Those concerns are prompted by rumors already feeding a perception that Jordan could turn into an alternative homeland for Palestinians, or that it would be asked to resettle Palestinian refugees or forge a confederation with the West Bank.

Jordan vehemently rejects such scenarios, yet at the same time it is facing immense pressure from allies to make painful concessions in return for financial assistance, at a time the country's economy is in the doldrums, and resentment is running high against the eroding living conditions, corruption and deteriorating political reforms.

Officially, Jordan continues to pay lip service to the two-state solution leading to an independent Palestinian state on 4 June 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as its capital. It considers it as the only path towards ending the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Such option is clearly challenged, and with the US shift from the two- state solution and Israel's continued expansion of settlements in the West Bank, it

remains unlikely that the Palestinians will have a sovereign state.

Buffeted by regional turmoil, Jordan has so far weathered the crises that rocked neighboring countries, but Trump's much anticipated peace plan could add fuel to the fire and risk Jordan's fragile security, which is key to Israel, the Gulf States, the EU and the US.

"Jordan is in a very difficult position, wedged between an Israeli government that doesn't support a Palestinian state, and its own allies -- the US, Saudi Arabia, UAE -- who each seem to be leaning toward a 'solution' that is [in Jordan's view] actually no solution at all" said Curtis Ryan, a professor of political science at Appalachian State University in North Carolina. "Jordan may be forced to choose between its own domestic population and its major regional and global allies, or at least the US and some Gulf States, although EU states are not likely to sign on for this 'deal' either. This is why it is an impossible situation— Jordan can't say yes, but it may have a hard time saying no. And then much depends on just how supportive or vengeful its US and Gulf allies choose to be," he added¹.

Jordan has been left out of the discussions involving the deal, but it has high stakes in the outcome, more than any other Arab country. Palestinians make up more than 50 percent of the country's population. It is also home to 2.2 million registered Palestinian refugees with United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) or 42 per cent of refugees, the largest in the diaspora.

Poverty is also rampant at the Palestinian camps, but those who came from the Gaza strip, which was ruled by Egypt, who do not have citizenship rights, are three times more likely than other Palestinians in Jordan to be among the destitute poor, living on less

than 1.25 USD a day, according to a FAFO study².

Palestinians in Jordan still hold on to the right of return which is enshrined in the 194 UN resolution. There are concerns that the deal of the century would strip them of their right and dismantle the UNRWA, which provides services to five million Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank and Gaza- and lead to unrest in the region.

UNRWA runs the largest school systems in the Middle East, with nearly 700 schools, and has been the main provider of primary education to refugee children since 1950³. Jordan has already felt the pinch last year, when the US, the largest contributor to UNRWA, suspended its contribution. There are 121,386 students studying in 171 UNRWA-run schools in Jordan and without aid, the students risk being left out of school.

"Revoking the right of return means that the UNRWA will be dismantled and this will deprive the majority of the 2.2 million registered Palestinians who live below the poverty line, from the basics to survive. UNRWA employees will also lose their jobs and this will increase unemployment and poverty. When all hope is gone, the refugees may take to the streets and this could lead to political upheaval," said Nadia Saad el Deen, a researcher and an expert on Palestinian issues⁴.

Besides, Jordan remains wary that the peace plan would alter its status in Jerusalem as the custodian of the holy sites, a Hashemite legacy since 1924, administered by consecutive kings. The Hashemites trace their direct lineage to the Prophet Mohammad, a source of religious legitimacy to enhance their rule.

²https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/insights_into_the_socio-economic_conditions_of_palestinian_refugees_in_jordan.pdf

³

<https://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/2012112174018.pdf>

⁴ Interview with Nadia Saad Eldeen, an expert on Palestinian issues, May 30, 2019.

¹ Email interview with Curtis Ryan, professor of political science at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, June 2, 2019.

King Abdullah has been anxious about the deal, which he sees as an existential threat to his country. He repeatedly affirmed his consistent position known as the three No's: 'No alternative homeland, no settlement and no meddling with the Hashemite Custodianship over Jerusalem'⁵.

In a recent meeting with Trump's son-in-law and senior advisor, Jared Kushner, he also stressed his firm stance in support of the two-state solution⁶.

The talk about the plan comes at a combustible time in Jordan, a key US ally and the second country after Egypt that has a peace treaty with Israel since 1994.

Jordan is struggling with a debt that makes up more than 96 per cent of its GDP, double digit poverty and unemployment. Resentment is also running high over the price hikes and the introduction of new taxes, part of IMF-led austerity measures, which is making it difficult for ordinary Jordanians to put food on the table. The country is also grappling with the influx of Syrian refugees that has further strained the country's scant resources.

Promises of Gulf economic aid without a political solution to the Israeli - Palestinian conflict would seem like a sellout to the Palestinian cause, something both components of society; the Jordanians and Palestinians reject.

The majority of Palestinian refugees are Jordanian nationals and enjoy citizenship rights including access to services and the labor market. But East Bank Jordanians are favored in the public sector, army and other security jobs. Thanks to the gerrymandering of the electoral districts, East Bank Jordanians are a majority in parliament. And if those without citizenship are resettled or Jordan turns into an alternative homeland, analysts argue, this will stoke identity based tensions, sometimes evident in football matches between supporters of Al-Wahdat

football team, mostly of Palestinian origin, and Al-Faisaly fans, generally of Jordanian origin.

"The Palestinians are not prepared to give up their right of return, and if they are resettled in Jordan, they would want more rights and wider political representation. Solving the conflict by forcing Jordan to shoulder the burden will stoke tensions and create an identity crisis between Jordanians of Palestinian origin and east bankers," said Oraib al Rintawi, director of al Quds Center for Political Studies." This will undermine the stability of the country and also transform the conflict from being Palestinian-Israeli conflict to a Palestinian- Jordanian conflict⁷."

Calls for Jordan to boycott the upcoming Manama economic workshop, where Kushner is expected to disclose part of the peace plan, have mounted in recent weeks. So far the government has not decided whether it would take part in the upcoming workshop, which will be seen as a stamp of approval for the deal.

"It is a catch-22, said Jawad Anani, a former deputy prime minister. "We are in a tough position, having to choose between pragmatism and the economic pressures. But this also raises questions on what will happen to Jordan ten years from now if the deal passes? What will happen to rights of Jordanians who feel that they are a marginal population? Will the political system survive?⁸"

The dilemma in the country is growing, caught between its own interest to preserve the Jordanian identity and the badly needed gulf aid, which comes with strings attached.

At the same time, Jordan cannot risk its ties with the US, the single largest donor of assistance to Jordan. Last year, the US signed an MOU with Jordan committed to providing not less than \$1.275 billion per year in U.S.

⁵ <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/king-says-jerusalem-red-line-no-alternative-homeland>

⁷ Interview with Oraib AL Rantawi - Director General - Al Quds Center for Political Studies, May 29, 2019.

⁸ Interview with Jawad Anani, a former deputy prime minister, June 3, 2019

bilateral foreign assistance for five years⁹.

Yet, the promises of economic prosperity are met with skepticism. Some cite the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty as an example when the so-called fruits of peace - economic prosperity and stability in the region - have not materialized. Projects that Israelis and Jordanians envisaged, which include a joint airport in the port city of Aqaba in southern Jordan, for example, have not been built.

"When Jordan signed the Wadi Araba agreement, we were promised milk and honey which we haven't seen. Jordan is still paying the price of its political decisions and for its alignment with the US" said Murad Adaileh, the secretary general of the Islamic Action Front, the political arm of the Muslim brotherhood. "We are suffering economically, politically and socially"¹⁰.

"Jordan can say no to the deal. It can face pressures and we did that before in 1991 during the gulf war. At the same time it has to shift its attention domestically and to introduce genuine political reforms in order to withstand the pressures."

However, Jordan paid a heavy price in the aftermath of the gulf war when it sided with Saddam Hussein after the invasion of Kuwait. Thousands of Jordanians of Palestinian origin were expelled from Kuwait. The Saudi and Kuwaiti ties with Jordan soured, while the international sanctions against Iraq dealt a blow to the country's economy and Jordan lost the Iraqi market, its main trading partner.

However, only a few voices spoke in favor of Jordan accepting the deal.

"The deal of the century is to safeguard the country and we have to support the King," said Fawwaz al Zoubi, a member of parliament during an Iftar¹¹.

"We have to be logical and accept what is realistic". His statements triggered a wave of anger and criticism on social media, but it remains unclear how people would react to the deal if it passes. Already, the protests against Trump's measures when he moved the US embassy to Jerusalem, recognized Israel as the capital of Israel and later asserted its sovereignty over the Golan Heights were not that significant. Yet authorities have already taken precautionary steps.

A recent government reshuffle brought back Salameh Hammad, a hardliner and a controversial figure back as an interior minister, suggesting that Jordan is not going to be tolerant with protesters taking to the streets.



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⁹ <https://jo.usembassy.gov/new-u-s-jordan-memorandum-understanding-bilateral-foreign-assistance-jordan-2/> . Both countries also cooperate in the war against terrorism.

¹⁰ Interview with Murad Adaileh, secretary general of the Islamic Action Front, June 3, 2019

¹¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-u_UfqDfbw