

POTENT ROADBLOCK TO A PALESTINIAN STATE

After visits to Egypt, Jordan and the West Bank, Mark Bruzonsky writes of the complex inter-Arab struggle which makes creation of a fully-sovereign Palestinian state unlikely at this time. Before there can be such a state, he concludes, the Jordanians must decide to take the risk of real Palestinian self-determination and the PLO must renew its search for full international legitimacy.

It is widely believed, especially in the West, that only Israel is preventing the creation of a West Bank-Gaza Strip Palestinian state, yet Palestinian aspirations for a fully sovereign homeland, as articulated by Hisham Sharabi in *The Middle East's* August Forum interview, are actually blocked by an inter-Arab struggle considerably more complex, far more subtle and much less understood.

Even before King Hussain's decision in 1970 to expel from Jordan's East Bank the Palestinian forces which had come to be a "state within a state", the Palestinians and the Hashemites had well understood the competing nature of their authorities.

It is this competition for legitimacy and political power — in addition to Israel's veto — that severely hampers Palestinian national aspirations. Though Jordan repeatedly endorses "Palestinian self-determination", the King's real policy for the West Bank involves considerable reluctance to allow a Palestinian state. Likewise, both Egypt and Saudi Arabia remain less than enthusiastic about creating a fully sovereign Palestinian state likely to be dominated by the Palestinian Liberation Organisation.

This hesitation by the Arabs themselves to put determined political muscle behind the Palestinian state proposition has had two important results during the past year:

- To cause the Carter Administration to back off last September, practically at the last moment, from entering a relationship with the PLO.

- To shift the Palestinian state notion into the indeterminate future — only ambiguous principles are being sought at this stage and they are to be followed by a multi-year process, allowing time for political evolution which all parties are hoping will be in their favour.

Historical perspective

When King Abdulla, Hussain's grandfather, achieved independence for Trans-Jordan from the British in 1946, he ruled over only 400,000 subjects. Twenty-three years earlier, faced with Abdulla's threats to upset the British-French mandate arrangement, the British had created the Amirate of Trans-Jordan for him, under

their tutelage. They simply drew a new boundary at the River Jordan and allocated the East Bank, which they ruled as part of the Palestine mandate, to their long-time ally.

By 1950, after Trans-Jordan's transformation into Jordan through capture of the West Bank, the kingdom's population grew to one million. A new constitutional arrangement, approved by West Bank notables at the time, legitimised this unity. But it was both a fragile and unexpected achievement. For the UN had foreseen the creation of both a Jewish and a Palestinian state (linked into a single economic unit) west of the Jordan, and so the seeds of Palestinian nationalism had already been sown in Nablus, Ramallah and other West Bank communities.

Thus events had brought a Palestinian majority under Abdulla's rule and grafted some 2,000 square miles of relatively rich land in Trans-Jordan's west on to the kingdom's 35,000 square miles, of which 80 per cent is desert.

By the time of the Six Day War, a three per cent annual birthrate had increased the kingdom's population to just over two million. About a third were Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA. Jordan's population today is about 2.9 million, of whom 760,000 are "Palestinians" living in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and about half of the remainder are of Palestinian origin but living in the East Bank. Amman, Jordan's capital, has a big Palestinian majority.

Jordanian plans

Jordan, under King Hussain, has become one of the most sophisticated players in Middle East diplomacy. Hussain returned from the 1974 Rabat-held Arab summit conference — which recognised the PLO as the sole representative of the Palestinians — aware that Israel's occupation in the West Bank had deepened the sense of Palestinian nationalism and brought about a more outspoken acceptance of the PLO. Though he had hardly resigned himself to a PLO-dominated state, which would inevitably challenge his own legitimacy, he had no reason to cause further Jordanian-PLO tension as long as Israel and the United



Hussain is waiting for something substantial to be offered (Gamma)

States remained unalterably opposed to any Palestinian sovereignty.

Hussain's 1972 plan for a two-region, Jordanian-Palestinian federation under Hashemite authority remained the basic goal. But he could pursue it only through a greater stress on Palestinian self-determination, while continuing to strengthen West Bank ties in the hope of maintaining the Jordanian-Palestinian connection, and this has remained Jordan's policy.

Today, as Israeli scholar Avi Plascov, who is working on the Palestinian problem at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, writes: "The King is waiting for something substantial to be offered him and for the Arab states to encourage him by a new resolution offsetting Rabat. He also wants the Palestinians to understand that only he can deal with the Israelis. After all... it is difficult to see Jordan being pressurised into the act of negotiating with Israel only to regain the area in order to transfer it to the PLO."

With the present Arab-Israeli impasse, it is difficult to contemplate Hussain negotiating with Israel at all. Though there have probably been private meetings between the King and Israeli officials over the years, Amman remains extremely sensitive to these contacts. When Israeli Premier Menahem Begin recently chastised opposition leader Shimon Peres about a secret upcoming meeting with Hussain in Europe, foreign newspapers were quietly kept from Amman the following day. And Jordanian officials still go to considerable lengths to discredit the very notion of Jordanian-Israeli contacts.

Actually, Jordan is quite comfortable with the Begin Government's policies in the sense that Jordan need make no crucial decisions. Inside the Jordanian Government there are those who place greater or less importance on the West Bank's eventual reunion with the kingdom. But as long as Israel pursues a policy of "creating facts" while only deferring annexation, Jordan has little to worry about.

Meanwhile, economic and cultural ties are being carefully maintained in what is actually an Israeli-Jordanian condominium arrangement over the West Bank. Plascov

continues: "The King is in a strong position because Israel, more than ever before, needs Hussain in order to undermine any PLO representation in negotiations." Plascov adds: "After 1948 the Israelis let Jordan occupy the West Bank so as to prevent Haj Amin al-Hussaini from setting up a Palestinian state. Today it's Yasser Arafat."

Hussain is well aware that there are two requirements for an eventual return of the West Bank to Jordanian political hegemony, no matter what the constitutional form:

1. Israeli willingness not only for territorial return of the area, but also to allow the Jordanian Army and secret police to function there — for without both, controlling the area would be impossible.

2. Some process of Palestinian self-determination, at least among the West Bank residents, in order to legitimise the concept of a single Palestinian-Jordanian unity and de-legitimise Palestinian nationalists seeking to sever all bonds.

Today Jordan pursues a tactful and thoughtful diplomacy. The King is widely respected and liked. He has gained the loyalty of many Palestinians as well as Lebanese who have found themselves Jordanian subjects. Jordan awaits the serious diplomacy which will begin only if the US decides to pursue a set course or if Israel decides to attempt something more than a separate Egyptian-Israeli arrangement.

Palestinian anxieties

The Palestinians, as in the past, remain the outsiders in Middle East diplomacy. Arab conservatives fear Palestinian radicalism and seek a means of control. Whether a Palestinian state — sandwiched between Jordan and Israel and supported by petrodollars — could provide the mechanism of control is a central question among those on the Arab right who hesitatingly lean toward some kind of Palestinian state eventually. Meanwhile, those on the Arab left remain uneasy over the path of

possible reconciliation chosen by Fatah under Arafat's leadership. The Palestinian cause is such a potent weapon of destabilisation that there is much fear of letting the issue be resolved.

The PLO does appreciate that only international legitimacy can bring Palestinian nationalists an eventual place in Middle East negotiations, putting them in a position to grasp the reins of a Palestinian entity and outmanoeuvre Jordan in a bid for West Bank authority.

With this awareness, shortly after the October war of 1973 the PLO embarked on a major campaign of legitimisation which culminated in Arafat's appearance at the United Nations. This was followed in late 1976 and early 1977 by the "American initiative" which floundered within sight of the goal of a US-PLO public dialogue.

Events in Lebanon, diplomatic setbacks, radicalising tendencies within the Palestinian camp, and the situation created by President Sadat's initiative have all acted to push the PLO to the sidelines for the moment. But Palestinian nationalism has become far too potent a force to be quashed. Yet a PLO return to diplomacy first may still achieve for it the position in political reality it has already achieved in diplomatic resolutions.

Meanwhile, in the West Bank, Begin's scheme of "local autonomy" has only strengthened national aspirations. The following are representative comments from Palestinian students at Bir Zeit University in early August:

"We were part of Jordan without our decision. And now we want an independent Palestinian state."

"We could co-exist with Jordan, as most of Jordan is Palestinian. But the regime in Jordan would have to change. We cannot have co-existence with the monarch."

"We are willing to accept being federated with Jordan, but only as an interim solution and provided Israel in this interim

period doesn't interfere. The interim, of course, is to establish an independent state."

"In the past the Jews didn't accept being under others. Jews refused under the mandate all solutions other than a state, and so will we."

"We have no objection to being part of Jordan, provided the present regime will change to a democracy and this will be looked at as a stage in Arab unity."

"Our feeling here is that there is no objection to our state being confederated with Jordan or with Syria or Lebanon. Our feeling is that we are one people and ultimately we want to be unified. But to impose on us being part of Jordan would not be accepted. The question is nationhood and self-determination. What we want here is an independent Palestinian state. If there is to be a link with Jordan it must be by a process of choice."

Few people in Palestinian circles or in Amman contemplate a PLO-Jordanian rapprochement in the near future. It is not just a matter of past experiences or personalities, but rather that the basic interests and aspirations of both parties are in opposition.

As an American study by Washington's influential *Congressional Quarterly* notes: "The longer range problem is whether the Palestinians might come to overpower the Hashemites and Bedouins, who are the ruling elite of Jordan". This is probably King Hussain's greatest fear and it is a vision the PLO has not yet buried, along with that of a democratic secular state uniting Jews and Arabs in all Palestine.

Until the Arabs themselves decide what they really want for the Palestinians, it is unlikely that any really comprehensive settlement will result from either Arab-Israeli negotiations or a settlement imposed from outside. But if all parties were to become truly united behind a single formula Israel's veto could not be maintained for an indefinite period. □

The October 1970 agreement. Few contemplate a PLO-Jordanian rapprochement in the near future (AP)

