MIDDLE EAST/NORTH AFRICA 08.06.2020 | Tim Petschulat

Jordan's catch-22

Israel's latest annexation plans present an impossible choice for Jordan, the Middle East's anchor of stability

Read this article in German.

Jordan has built up a reputation as an anchor of stability in the Middle East. Despite being in close proximity to Syria, Iraq, Israel and Palestine, the country has weathered an astonishing number of crises unscathed over the past 50 years. In Amman, regional conflicts are never triggered, but rather managed or discussed in a calm atmosphere. The royal family, which is widely regarded as liberal, maintains channels of communication with all relevant actors. Stability is at the heart of the country's brand.

However, the annexation of roughly one third of the West Bank including the Jordan Valley, which Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's new government is planning in violation of international law, creates a serious dilemma for Jordan's King Abdullah II. No matter what he does, the consequences do not bode well for the development of his country.

Most Jordanians expect the king to do everything in his power to prevent annexation. After all, not only would annexation bury the two-state solution once and for all, but it also violates the spirit and letter of the peace agreement between Israel and Jordan. The spirit, because the prospect of a viable Palestinian state was a prerequisite to Jordan signing the treaty; the letter, because Israel is unilaterally changing the borders marked in the agreement. There are prominent voices in Jordan who see the planned annexation as an unspoken declaration of war on Jordan. The country therefore would have no choice but to terminate the peace agreement with Israel.

The king must act – but how?

To understand the pressure on the king, it is worth looking at the demographics. At least 60 per cent of the Jordanian people have family roots in Palestine: they are worried and angry about the worsening situation west of the Jordan. Some of the so-called Transjordanians are

also looking west with concern. They fear the arrival of new Palestinian refugees in the event of annexation. Without the prospect of a viable Palestinian state, they believe that gradually thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank will 'visit' relatives in Jordan and then not return.

The idea of a Palestinian state east of the Jordan, rehashed again and again by Netanyahu's Likud party, is beginning to threaten social harmony in Jordan. In any case, the sensitive demographic balance in the country would change again, leading to future unrest, especially among the partly armed Jordanian tribes.

It's clear that the king must act. Symbolically on the one hand, to demonstrate that the Hashemite dynasty represents the interests of all Jordanians; and with the specific goal of preventing or at least limiting annexation on the other hand, because it severely affects Jordan security interests and indirectly threatens the existing social contract.

If the western Jordan Valley was actually annexed, King Abdullah might just announce the end of the peace treaty with Israel. This would increase his popularity among Jordanians, ensure the support of relevant influence groups in the country and avoid tainting his legacy. If Jordan directly threatened the end of the peace treaty, it would surely make an impression in Israel – at least in the ranks of Netanyahu's coalition partner: Benny Gantz's Blue and White. The same goes for the decision-makers in the security sector. For them, a good relationship with Jordan gives strategic depth vis-à-vis Iran. This could lead to a new debate in Israel about the risks of annexation, or at least its scope.

The threat to Jordanian democracy

One side effect would presumably be a negative reaction from Washington. Donald Trump is obviously pursuing his so-called 'Deal of the Century' for purpose of re-election. Specifically, this applies to attracting the support of evangelical voters, who make up an estimated one quarter of his electorate. Therefore, he would probably not be amused if King Abdullah were to openly thwart his Middle East plan and the associated land grab. And he does have some leverage: The United States are Jordan's largest bilateral donor with a minimum of USD 1.25bn a year. In contrast to other donors, half of these funds are granted directly in the form of budget support. For its public finances, Jordan is urgently dependent on the money and the security it provides, especially during the corona crisis. Jordan can hardly afford to lose the US as a partner and financier.

However, if the king chooses a softer approach, he risks massively loosing

authority in his own country. He could safely handle this in the short term, especially since the right of defence currently applies in Jordan because of the coronavirus, including a ban on demonstrations and limited freedom of the press. It would be dangerous, however, to create the impression of abandoning the Palestinians' cause, because that would provide all future opponents of the dynasty with an effective narrative. It would only take one campaign on social media claiming that King Abdullah II had the historic opportunity in early summer 2020 to prevent annexation, but did not use it. Such a story, spiced up with affirmative statements by Blue and White politicians from Israel, would have explosive power.

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If the king's reaction were perceived as too weak, the first domestic consequence would be a regression in the democratic development of Jordan. The foreseeable price for the loss of the king's authority and power of integration would be a significant shift in the sensitive balance between security and freedom in the direction of security, discourse control and repression. King Abdullah wants a democratic monarchy. His priority, however, is to keep the dynasty in power. The politically motivated regicide of the Iraqi branch of the family in 1958 has not been forgotten. Compared to the rest of the region, so far Jordan has had a very lively civil society, a reliable judiciary, a comparatively good human rights situation and regular, properly conducted parliamentary elections.

If Israel actually annexes the Jordan Valley, all of that is in danger. If the king withdraws from the peace agreement, state bankruptcy looms. If he does not do so, long-term open resistance to Hashemite rule might ferment, along with the short-term dismantling of civil liberties. Moreover, old resentments between Jordanians of Palestinian and those of Transjordanian decent might return. The situation would be less dramatic if the Israeli land grab were smaller than currently planned. Annexing large settlement blocks such as Gush Etzion and Ma'ale Adumin without the Jordan Valley would violate international law just the same. But Jordan's security interests and border issues would be less affected. In such a case, the king would be under less domestic pressure if he refused to renounce the peace agreement.

Germany's role

Depending on the extent of annexation, there's a number of possible reponses, ranging from the withdrawal of the Jordanian ambassador from Tel Aviv along with the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador from Amman, to the suspension of the security cooperation with Israel and less strict border controls. Domestically, however, all of this would be perceived as insufficient. To avoid a loss of authority, the king would at least have to terminate the very unpopular gas deal with Israel.

Apart from Egypt and Jordan, Israel has no customers for its offshore gas and produces more than it needs. Contrary to what is often claimed, the agreement is currently more important for Israel than for Jordan. From a Jordanian perspective, Israeli gas is not only politically problematic, but also currently much more expensive than, for example, liquefied gas from Qatar. The gas deal forces Jordan currently to import more gas then it actually needs for local consumption. Since it cannot be stored, to much electricity is being produced, which already caused an abrupt halt in the development of renewable energies, as the grid cannot absorb any more electricity. Cancelling the gas deal would therefore kill several birds with one stone despite the impending contractual penalty.

The harshest possible reaction would be the formal abrogation of the peace agreement. Jordan and Israel have so far mutually benefited from the Wadi Araba Treaty. In many areas (cooperation of services against IS, flyover rights, border controls, etc.), they would probably reach an agreement behind closed doors even without the treaty. The termination would not mean war between the two countries. In addition to the lack of Israeli water supplies, the worrisome reaction of the Trump administration would be more dramatic than the chill in official relations. There is also a high risk of unrest in East Jerusalem if Israel declares that the current guardian role of the Hashemites on the Temple Mount, as laid down in the peace treaty and in force since 1924, has ended.

In order to avoid this extreme step, the monarchy is currently making active diplomatic efforts. The country is well connected in Washington on both sides of the aisle and making use of its contacts on Capitol Hill. The minimum goal is presumably to reduce the annexation efforts in territorial terms and to exclude the western Jordan Valley. The king's interview in *Der Spiegel* on 15 May must also be seen in this context. It is no coincidence that the Jordanian king's first hidden threat to Israel of a 'massive conflict' and examining 'all options' was made in the German press.

Because the decision on annexation decision is scheduled for July. At the beginning of the month, Germany will not only take over the EU Council Presidency, but also the presidency of the UN Security Council. Germany will then have a heavy responsibility to protect Israel and the United States from a grave error and to demonstrate that its commitment to the two-state solution and international law is serious.



Tim Petschulat
Amman

Tim Petschulat has been working for the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung since 2007, serving in East Jerusalem, Berlin, Amman and Sana'a. From 2013 to 2017 he was the General Secretary of the SPD Hamburg. Since the beginning of 2018, he heads the FES office in Amman with responsibility for Jordan and Iraq.