

# The King's Speech

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**I**N THE MIDDLE of the '80s, a German diplomat conveyed to me a surprising message. A member of the Jordanian Royal family would like to speak with me in Amman. At the time, Jordan was still officially at war with us.

Somehow I obtained official permission from the Israeli government. The Germans generously provided me with a passport that was not strictly accurate, and so, with much turning of blind eyes, I arrived in Amman and was lodged in the best hotel.

The news of my presence spread quickly, and after some days it became an embarrassment to the Jordanian government. So I was politely asked to leave, and very quickly, please.

But before that, a high-ranking official invited me to dinner in a very elegant restaurant. He was a well educated, very cultured person, who spoke beautiful English. To my utter amazement, he told me that he was a Bedouin, a member of an important tribe. All my ideas about Bedouins were shattered in that moment.

This dinner stuck in my memory because, in (literally) ten minutes, I learned more about Jordan than in decades of reading. My host took a paper napkin and drew a rough map of Jordan. "Look at our neighbors," he explained. "Here is Syria, a radical secular Ba'athist dictatorship. Then there is Iraq, with another Ba'athist regime that hates Syria. Next there is Saudi Arabia, a very conservative, orthodox country. Next is Egypt, with a pro-Western military dictator. Then there is Zionist Israel. In the occupied Palestinian territories, radical, revolutionary elements are in the ascent. And almost touching us, there is fragmented, unpredictable Lebanon."

"From all these countries," he continued, "refugees, agents and ideological influences stream into Jordan. We have to absorb all of them. We have to perform a very delicate balancing act. If we come too close to Israel, the next day we must appease Syria. If one day we embrace Saudi Arabia, we must kiss Iraq the next. We must not ally ourselves with anyone."

Another impression I took with me - the Palestinians in Jordan (excluding the refugees, whom I did not meet) are perfectly content with the status quo, dominating the economy, getting rich and praying for the stability of the regime.

I WISH that all influential Israelis had received such an eye-opening lesson, because in Israel, the most grotesque ideas about Jordan were - and still are - in vogue.

The general picture is that of a ridiculous little country, ruled by fierce and primitive Bedouin tribes, while the majority consists of Palestinians who are continually plotting to overthrow the monarchy and assume power.<sup>1</sup>

Until the Oslo agreement, the entire Israeli elite subscribed

<sup>1</sup>Which reminds me of another conversation - this time in Cairo with the - then - acting Foreign Minister, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, a Copt and one of the most intelligent persons I've ever met. "Israeli experts in Arab affairs are among the best in the world," he told me, "they have read everything, they know everything, and they understand nothing. That's because they have never lived in an Arab country."

<sup>2</sup>The very term "West Bank" is Jordanian, to distinguish it from the East Bank, the original Transjordanian territory of the kingdom.

to the "Jordanian Option". The idea was that only King Hussein was able and ready to make peace with us and that he would give us East Jerusalem and parts of the West Bank as a present. Hiding behind this misconception was the traditional Zionist resolve to ignore the existence of the Palestinian people and to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state at all costs.

Another version of this idea rests on the slogan "Jordan is Palestine". It was explained to me by Ariel Sharon, nine months before Lebanon War I. "We shall throw the Palestinians out of Lebanon into Syria. The Syrians will push them South into Jordan. There they shall overthrow the king and turn Jordan into Palestine. The Palestinian problem will disappear, and the remaining conflict will become a normal disagreement between two sovereign states, Israel and Palestine."

"But what about the West Bank?" I queried.

"We shall achieve a compromise with Jordan," he answered, "perhaps joint rule, perhaps some kind of functional division."

This idea pops up time and again. This week one of the hyperactive and mentally handicapped right wing parliamentary thugs submitted another of those bills. It is called "Jordan - the Nation-State of the Palestinian People".

Apart from the curiosity of one country enacting a law to define the character of another country, it was politically embarrassing. Yet instead of just throwing it out, it was transferred to a sub-committee where the deliberations, such as they are, are secret.

HIS MAJESTY, king Abdullah II, is worried. He has good reasons to be.

There is the democratic Arab Spring, which may spill over into his autocratic kingdom. There is the uprising in neighboring Syria, which may push refugees southwards. There is the growing influence of Shiite Iran, which does not look good for his stoutly Sunni monarchy.

But all this is nothing compared to the growing threat from radical, rightist Israel.

The most immediate danger, from his point of view, is the growing Israeli oppression and colonization of the West Bank. One of these days, it may push masses of Palestinian refugees to cross the Jordan into his kingdom, upsetting the strained demographic balance between locals and Palestinians in his country.

It was this fear that caused his father, King Hussein, during the first intifada, to cut all connections with the West Bank, which had been annexed by his grandfather after the 1948 war.<sup>2</sup>

If "Jordan is Palestine", then there is no reason for Israel not to annex the West Bank, expropriate Palestinian lands, enlarge

the existing settlements and create new ones, and in general “convince” Palestinians to find a better life east of the river.

With this in mind, the king voiced his anxiety in a much-publicized interview this week. In it, he raised the possibility of a federation between Jordan and the (still occupied) State of Palestine in the West Bank, obviously to forestall Israeli designs. Perhaps he also wants to convince the Palestinians that such a move would help them to terminate the occupation, facilitate their application for UN membership and prevent a US veto. (I don’t believe this offer will find many Palestinian takers.)

THE INITIATORS of the Israeli bill make it clear that their main purpose is Hasbarah (“explaining”), the Hebrew euphemism for propaganda. Their idea, they believe, will put an end to the isolation and delegitimization of Israel. The world will accept that the State of Palestine already exists, beyond the Jordan, so that there is no need for a second one in the West Bank.

If His Majesty suspects that there is a much more sinister dimension to the propaganda ploy, he is quite right. Obviously he is thinking about much more profound long-term possibilities.

This goes back to the basic dilemma of the Israeli right, a dilemma that seems well-nigh insoluble.

The Israeli Right has never really given up the idea of a Greater Israel (which in Hebrew is called “the whole of Eretz-Israel”). This means the total rejection of the Two-State solution in all its forms and the creation of a Jewish state from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River.

However, in such a state there would be living, as of today, some 6 million Israeli Jews and about 5.5 million Arab Palestinians (2.5 in the West Bank, 1.5 in the Gaza Strip, 1.5 in Israel proper.) Some demographers believe that the number is even larger.

According to all demographic forecasts, the Palestinians will quite soon constitute the majority in this geographic entity. What then?

Some idealists believe (or delude themselves) that, faced with stern international disapproval, Israel will have to grant citizenship to all the inhabitants, turning the entity into a bi-national or multi-national or non-national state. Without taking a survey one can say with certainty that 99.999% of Jewish Israelis would oppose this idea with all their strength. It is the total negation of everything Zionism stands for.

The other possibility would be that this entity would become an apartheid state, not only partly, not only in practice,

but entirely and officially. The great majority of Jewish Israelis would not like that at all. This, too, is a negation of basic Zionist values.

There is no solution to this dilemma. Or is there?

THE KING seems to think that there is. It is, actually, implicit in the dream of a Greater Israel.

That solution is a repeat of 1948: a naqba of vastly larger dimensions, which Israelis euphemistically call “transfer”.

This means that at some time, when international conditions are opportune – some huge international disaster that rivets attention to some other part of the world, a big war, or such – the government will drive out the non-Jewish population. Where to? Geography dictates the answer: to Jordan. Or, rather, to the future State of Palestine in what was once Jordan.

I would suggest that almost every Israeli who supports the Greater Israel idea has this – at least unconsciously – in mind. Perhaps not as a plan for action in the near future, but certainly as the only solution in the long term.

MORE THAN 80 years ago, Vladimir (Ze’ev) Jabotinsky, the founder of Revisionist Zionism and the spiritual forefather of Benjamin Netanyahu, wrote some verses that were sung by the Irgun (to which I belonged when I was very young.)

It is a nice song with a nice melody. The refrain goes like this:

“The Jordan has two banks / The one belongs to us,  
the other one, too.”

Jabotinsky, an ardent admirer of the Italian 19<sup>th</sup> century risorgimento, was an ultra-nationalist and a sincere liberal. One verse of the poem says:

“The son of Arabia, the son of Nazareth and  
my own son / Will find there happiness and plenty /  
Because my flag, a flag of purity and honesty / Will  
cleanse both sides of the Jordan.”

The official emblem of the Irgun consisted of a map that included Transjordan, with a rifle superimposed. This emblem was inherited by Menachem Begin’s Herut (“Freedom”) Party, the mother of the Likud.

This party has long since given up the ideal of the three sons, purity and honesty. The slogan “Jordan is Palestine” means that it has also given up the claim to the East bank of the Jordan.

Or has it?