

## Jordan-Israel Tensions Threaten to Derail Water-Sharing Project

by Hussam Hussein

Relations between Jordanian and Israeli governments have deteriorated over the past months, reaching their lowest point since the 1994 peace treaty was signed. Ambassadors have been recalled, accusations exchanged and mutually beneficial trade, water and investment projects put on hold in the latest worrying signal of a breakdown in regional diplomacy in an increasingly conflictual Middle East.

Tensions boiled over due to the killing of two Jordanians in Amman and the broken promise by the Israeli government to prosecute the Israeli embassy guard accused of the killings after he was allowed to leave Jordan and return to Israel. The incident occurred against the backdrop of protests in Jerusalem following the decision by the Israeli government to install metal detectors at the entrances to the old city's holy esplanade (Temple Mount/Haram Al-Sharif) where the

Al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock are situated and where just days before, on 14 July, two Israeli border guards were shot dead by Palestinian attackers.<sup>1</sup> Eight days later, on 23 July, the shooting incident occurred at the Israeli embassy in Amman.

As the legal custodian of the holy Mosques in Jerusalem's old city, Jordan's king Abdullah II is directly affected by developments in the city. When violence breaks out in Jerusalem, as also occurred in 2015, Jordan scrambles to restore calm, as sustained protests in the city hold significant spill overs in Jordan as well. The killing of two Jordanian citizens, Mohammad Jawawdeh, a 17-year-old delivery man and Bashar Hamarneh, an orthopaedic surgeon, by an Israeli embassy guard in

<sup>1</sup> Osama Al Sharif, "Jordan, Israel Trade Barbs as Tension over Al-Aqsa Continues", in *Al-Monitor*, 20 July 2017, <http://almon.co/2w73>.

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Amman, Ziv Moyal, brought tensions to a boiling point.<sup>2</sup>

Jordanian officials were not allowed to interrogate the Israeli guard directly, only permitted to meet embassy diplomats and receive their report about the guard's version of the story. According to the Israeli guard, Mohammed Jawawdeh attacked him with a screwdriver prompting the guard to shoot and kill him as well as Bashar Hamarneh, also at the scene. After an intervention by US President Donald Trump, King Abdullah allowed the Israeli Ambassador to Jordan, Einat Schlein, to leave Amman and return to Tel Aviv together with all Israeli diplomats in Amman and the Israeli guard.<sup>3</sup>

Jordan accepted to let the Israeli guard go back to Tel Aviv on the condition that he would face a criminal trial in Israel. Just hours after the guards return to Tel Aviv, Israel announced its decision to remove the metal detectors in Jerusalem, signalling an important victory for Palestinian protesters in the city. Donald Trump thanked King Abdullah for allowing Ziv Moyal to return to Israel. Subsequently, however, Netanyahu released pictures of him and the Israeli Ambassador to Jordan meeting and praising the Israeli guard in the prime minister's office before an investigation by either country was concluded. Netanyahu said that the guard acted "calmly" and that he was

happy "things ended the way they did".<sup>4</sup>

The Jordanian government reacted by announcing that the Israeli ambassador would not be welcome back to Amman and that all Jordanian diplomats would be withdrawn from Israel. As explained by the Jordanian Minister of Media Affairs, Mohammad Momani: "We are committed to international law, and we expect Israel to abide by international law and bring the murderer to trial. This is what we demanded – the ambassador will not be allowed to return and the embassy will not be opened until this is done."<sup>5</sup>

One consequence of the current diplomatic crisis has been the suspension of a regional water-sharing project known as the Red Sea-Dead Sea Canal (RSDSC). In early November, the Israeli government informed Jordan that the regional project would not move forward until Ambassador Schlein and her staff were allowed to return. The Israeli position is that "we cannot have a situation where on the one hand the Jordanians do not allow us to reopen the embassy and on the other hand we continue to advance projects that are important to them as if nothing had happened."<sup>6</sup> At the end of November, Israel considered replacing their envoy to Amman with another ambassador, but Jordan refused to budge.

<sup>4</sup> "Israel's Amman Embassy Won't Reopen until Guard Brought to Trial – Jordan", in *The Times of Israel*, 1 November 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/?p=1722609>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Israel Reportedly Threatens to Shelve Jordan Water Deal until Embassy Reopened", in *The Times of Israel*, 13 November 2017, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/?p=1729369>.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Beaumont, "Two Killed in Shooting at Israeli Embassy in Jordan", in *The Guardian*, 24 July 2017, <https://gu.com/p/6qafd>.

<sup>3</sup> Ori Lewis and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "Israeli Embassy Staff in Jordan Returned to Israel", in *Reuters*, 24 July 2017, <http://reut.rs/2gVNzqM>.

Advanced agreements tied to the implementation of the RSDSC project were signed in 2015 by Jordan, Israel and Palestine. The RSDSC project has been seen since the 1994 Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty as an opportunity to foster regional cooperation and the interdependency between the three actors. The 2015 agreement was seen as a “win-win solution”, especially for Jordanians and Israelis, as it would provide water to northern Jordan – where the water demand is highest – and to southern Israel – among the most water scarce areas in Israel – through a water swap agreement that would see water coming from Israel serving northern Jordan and Jordanian water serving southern Israel.

The Jordanian government sees the RSDSC project as a national priority, as it would help resolve Jordan’s water scarcity problem. For the government, some implications of not proceeding with the RSDSC would include a sustained decrease in Dead Sea water levels and enhanced water scarcity in large areas of Jordan, particularly in the north, with obvious repercussions on state-society relations, economic outlook and stability. For these reasons, the Jordanian government is considering alternative solutions, including a RSDSC Canal without Israel and/or joint-desalination projects on the Red Sea in partnership with Saudi Arabia.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Hussam Hussein, *An Analysis of the Discourse of Water Scarcity and Hydropolitical Dynamics in the Case of Jordan*, Doctoral dissertation, University of East Anglia, 2016, <https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/63066>.

Neither of these options are particularly appealing for the Jordanian government, however. The RSDSC Canal without Israel would encounter financial problems, particularly as the regional dimension of the project is key to its economic viability, given that international donors attach high importance to this dimension. Other issues are more technical and relate in particular to the means by which Jordan will be able to pump water northwards from Aqaba to Amman. The option of a partnership with Saudi Arabia – building a joint desalination plant on the shores of the Red Sea – could also include an energy element that would allow Jordan to benefit from Saudi energy to pump water northwards. Setting aside the implementation times for such a project, one may wonder whether the new Saudi leadership – and the Trump administration – will be interested in supporting such a project, particularly given its potential to strain Israeli-Jordanian relations.

It is therefore likely that Amman will try to keep the RSDSC project as a regional project with Israel and Palestine. In fact, the Jordanian government has been at the forefront of pushing for this project since the 1990s. Furthermore, over the past two decades, other episodes have momentarily frozen the project, but such tensions were overcome and the Jordanian government has never lost interest in its implementation in a regional form.<sup>8</sup> In addition, recent media reports have provided uncorroborated reports that Jordan-

<sup>8</sup> Hussam Hussein, “Politics of the Dead Sea Canal: A Historical Review of the Evolving Discourses, Interests, and Plans”, in *Water International*, Vol. 42, No. 5 (2017), p. 527-542.

Israel negotiations have resumed in early 2018 in secret. Further reports have signalled that Jordan has allocated an initial sum of 2 million dollars for the joint project with Israel.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, the most likely option for the Jordanian government today is to try to resolve the diplomatic crisis with the Israeli government, and proceed with the regional RSDSC project. To do so effectively, Jordan will have to balance domestic politics – with increased anti-Israel feelings in Jordanian society – and the economic, energy and geopolitical interests of the country. The recent declaration by President Trump on moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem needs also to be considered. How will this declaration impact Jordanian-US and Jordanian-Israeli relations?

Jordan's king strongly condemned Trump's decision, expressed full solidarity with the Palestinian leadership and supported efforts in the UN and the Organization of Islamic Countries to condemn the US move. Seen in this light, will the US's announcement change Jordan's calculus? Will the decision lead to further tensions between Amman and Tel Aviv, thereby also complicating the objective of advancing the RSDSC as a regional project? Is there any potential for this crisis in Israel-Jordan relations

to also become a Jordanian-US crisis?<sup>10</sup>

The ultimate fate of the RSDSC project is likely to be decided over the next months. The recent spate of political tensions between Israel and Jordan, combined with an increasingly erratic and unpredictable US administration, makes it hard to give accurate predictions. Certainly, bilateral cooperation on water issues between the Jordanian and Israeli governments have faced worst crises. Yet, both countries have also been cooperating on such issues for many decades, even before the formal 1994 peace treaty was signed. Such trends would seem to point to a likely resolution of the crisis in the near future, yet, while in the past the US has played a central role in pushing the two countries bridge their differences, the Trump administration appears no longer be able (or willing) to play such a role, adding a considerable aura of uncertainty over this, and many other, developments in the contemporary Middle East.

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<sup>9</sup> "Israel and Jordan Secretly Resume Negotiations on Dead Sea Canal Project", in *Middle East Monitor*, 29 December 2017, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/?p=271751>; "Jordan Allocates Initial \$2 Million for Joint Pipeline Project with Israel", in *Middle East Monitor*, 2 January 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/?p=272200>.

<sup>10</sup> Osama Al Sharif, "Jordan-Israel Ties Languish in Wake of Trump's Jerusalem Move", in *Al-Monitor*, 22 December 2017, <http://almon.co/2z13>.

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