

## The Jordanian option for solving the Iraq case

by Ghassan Atiyyah

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It has often been noted that Jordan's lot is to be sandwiched between two unenviable neighbors, Iraq to the east and Israel/Palestine to the

west. Despite this, Jordan has been able to coexist with both and even

prosper in a very difficult atmosphere.

Jordan has to some extent benefited from the mistakes of its neighbors,

something that could not have been achieved without the astuteness of its Hashemite leadership, which was able to make itself the common denominator between the various sectors of the Jordanian people including

those of Palestinian origin. The Hashemite leadership rode out the Nasserite approach and later the Palestinian revolution, which it was even

able to absorb to the point where Jordan became a political refuge for

some of those involved. The leadership also understood how to incorporate

the Islamic trend in Jordan--the Islamic forces entered the Jordanian parliament long ago, in contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

The Hashemite leadership was also able to make itself vital to the West

as a buffer and a bridge between the West (the United States in particular) and the Arab region. Amman was the meeting point, due to its status as a trade route linking the West to Iraq, during the rule of Saddam Hussein, especially during the years of economic sanctions. At the same time, Amman was also an intelligence headquarters for the West in confronting Saddam Hussein. The latter's need for Amman as an economic outlet forced it to accept this other face of Amman.

The November 9 bombings brought the spotlight onto the relationship between Jordan and Iraq. With the exception of Black September, violence was never used in Jordan either by the ruling party or the opposition to push a political agenda. This offered Jordan's political opposition an enviable margin of maneuver compared to other opposition movements in neighboring Arab countries.

The November 9 bombings and the previous bombings in Aqaba on April 12 thus represent a new development for Jordan. The fact that the perpetrators were non-Jordanian does not rule out the possibility of cooperation from Jordanian parties. Al-Qaeda in Iraq's claim of responsibility for both bombings raises the question of the motives behind these bombings, especially since the position of the Jordanian leadership has been

sympathetic with the Iraqi Sunnis to the point that it warned them and

others of the dangers of a "Shi'ite crescent". Amman has also become a

shelter both for elements of the former regime and for a number of residents of the western areas of Iraq, areas subjected to American military strikes.

What makes this question even more urgent is that the victims of the hotel bombings were almost all residents of Jordan and mostly

Palestinian. While the Aqaba bombings targeted US battleships, the hotel bombings

cost al-Qaeda leader Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi a lot of sympathy in those Jordanian circles that had previously viewed his operations in Iraq as

legitimate resistance to the US occupation.

Zarqawi's motives may lie in his fear of a Jordanian role, particularly

that of the Hashemites, in appealing to Iraqi Sunnis, whom he considers

his social and political base in Iraq. Zarqawi has been striking at Shi'ite civilians in Iraq with the apparent aim of provoking them into

attacking Sunnis, widening the gap between the two communities, and, he

seems to believe, making Sunnis gravitate toward him.

The reality of Iraq is that Sunnis have been made the weaker party in the Iraqi political equation. Their traditional leadership role is

associated with the former regime. In addition, their taking up arms has

made them an enemy to the Americans and the focus of US military efforts.

Their introduction into the political process in the absence of any regional or international support will only reinforce this weakness and

cement the reality of their status as a minority. Hence, the Sunni community offers fertile ground for those wishing to recruit for violent, even terrorist operations.

Here lies the importance of the Jordanian role. If Jordan assumes a support role for Iraqi Sunnis akin to that enjoyed by the Shi'ite community from Iran or the Kurds from their many years of US-supported de facto

independence, it would enable them to better participate in the political process. Any success Jordan has in attracting Iraqi Sunnis will

weaken the platform for extremists and empower moderates to carry out a

role in the political process.

But the Iraqi reality reflects a dark picture of sectarian and ethnic division. If the parliamentary elections fail in creating common ground

for a political settlement, it will be difficult for the parties in the

struggle to come to a peaceful understanding without help or outside pressure. At the regional and international level, the United States and

Iran are the two major players and if they fail to reach an understanding on a mutual formula, Iraq will be turned into a battlefield, making its "Balkanization" a likely and even acceptable possibility. If this happens, then where are the Sunnis?

Will it be acceptable to the United States or even Iran if an Arab, Iraqi Sunni district is established under the control of an extremist Islamic Jihad force? If Iraq is divided, the Jordanian role becomes imperative, since the west of Iraq could be annexed to Jordan.

Such a development would restructure Jordan in terms of the demographic

balance between its Palestinian majority and Jordanian minority and reinforce Hashemite rule as the security valve for all communities. It

could be America's face-saving way out of Iraq.

It is also what the extremist Jihad forces, represented by al-Qaeda in

Iraq, fear the most. Hence, striking at Jordanian civilian targets is an extension of their strikes at civilian targets in Iraq, and is also

aimed at terrorizing and weakening the state and its institutions.

The appropriate response to this strategy should not be through tightening security. On the contrary, a successful response lies in the

Hashemite regime's ability to reinforce national unity through greater

openness and more reform. This is especially true because the popular response to the bombings showed widespread national support for the monarchy,

the guarantee of Jordanian stability and national unity.

There are Jordanian parties who will fiercely oppose such a role, considering it a risk to Jordan's stability. However, the reality is that

there is no choice. The alternative is civil war in Iraq, the ramifications of which Jordan cannot escape.- Published 15/12/2005  
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