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**"Jordanian Diplomat Asserts That Peace with Israel is a Strategic Objective"**

**By Kenneth W. Stein**

Arab state reaction to Israel since the outbreak of the Palestinian-Israeli violence three months ago would have you believe that no Arab state will make and retain a long-term accommodation with Israel.

However, Jordan's Ambassador to the United States, Dr. Marwan Muasher, fervently believes that "for Jordan, peace with Israel is a strategic policy, not a tactic." What weighs in favor of Muasher's assertions was the October 24 signing of Jordan's Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the U.S.

Since the outbreak of Palestinian-Israeli violence, Arab states (including Jordan) have cooled or frozen their relationship with Israel. In early October, Jordan decided not to send its new ambassador to Israel; Israel's ambassador to Amman was wounded there recently; and Egypt recalled its ambassador but did not break diplomatic relations with Israel. Then Jordan reaffirmed that it would not dispatch its ambassador designate to Tel Aviv without cessation of "Israel's aggression." Other Arab state closed commercial and diplomatic offices with Israel.

Wishful Thinking?

If you are guided by an emotional response from current events rather than long-term strategic thinking, you can take Muasher's assertion as propaganda "or wishful thinking from Jewish liberals who want the Arab world to love Israel." Still, Muasher argued his point in pre-Thanksgiving presentations at Emory University and at a Community Relations Council breakfast at the Jewish Federation of Greater Atlanta. Urbane and in his mid-40s, the Perdue-educated Ph.D. in computer engineering offered the persuasive argument: Jordan needs a peaceful working relationship with Israel.

Jordan wants to be Jordan; Jordan does not want to be Palestine. Asserted Muasher, "It is in Jordan's national interest to see the establishment of a Palestinian state (west of the Jordan River) because it will reduce tension between Palestinians and Jordanians" inside and

outside Jordan.

Jordan's character is defined by its size, location, resources, and population. It is small, with a population of 4.5 million; it is surrounded by powerful neighbors-- Israel, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia; it has few known resources, except for phosphates, little water, and meager amounts of cultivable land all situated along the border with Israel.

### Putting Economic Needs Above All

A tense border with Israel along the Jordan River-Dead Sea-Aqaba border is not in Jordan's national interest. Jordan wants to break away from aid dependency and position its population to benefit from global economy.

Eighty-five percent of Jordanians are literate, but one-third of the population is underemployed or unemployed, one-third below the poverty line, and one-third under the age of 15. Said Muasher, "For many countries, development is moving away from resources to knowledge."

With demographic numbers like Jordan's and an enlightened King Abdullah putting economic needs above all other priorities, one understands why the FTA is so important to Jordan's future.

Only four countries -- Mexico, Canada, Israel, and now Jordan-- have FTAs with the U.S. In 1999, Jordan sold a mere \$13 million in goods to the U.S.; its growth rate has been stuck at 1-2 percent per year. Already engaged in structural reform, the FTA is a key means to generate U.S. investment in Jordan and will allow Jordan to eliminate virtually all tariffs on goods the countries exchange. Jordan has agreed to provide for intellectual property protection, while sustaining the highest labor and environmental standards.

### Absorbing Jordanian-Palestinians into Society

Any significant Jordanian trade increase to the U.S. will only benefit the Jordanian economy, reduce unemployment, increase per capita incomes, including, of course, many Palestinians still residing as refugees in Jordan. Muasher acknowledged that after a Palestinian-Israeli agreement is signed, Jordan's major focus will be absorbing properly and equally Jordanians of Palestinian background into Jordanian society. In a sense, the FTA with Jordan is a U.S. major foreign assistance program, but driven by laissez-faire.

Muasher spent the last eighteen months lobbying Congress for support of the FTA; the agreement is expected to be signed in the

summer of 2001. Every country that has signed an FTA with the United States has seen its economy catapult forwards. It is in Jordan's strategic interest to keep its domestic political climate stable. Said John Chambers, the President of Cisco, after it invested in Jordan's economic potential, "The FTA King Abdullah signed with the U.S. is a positive step for his country and his country's neighbors as well."

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