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## A sensitive issue

### an interview with Hisham Ahmed

**BI:** Do you see Jordan following the example of Egypt in Gaza vis-a-vis the West Bank?

**Ahmed:** I think there is particular sensitivity regarding any potential Jordanian role in the West Bank. For one thing, at least the Israeli Likud Party has held the view for quite some time that a Palestinian state could be created but primarily on Jordanian territory. Their argument has been centered on the premise that since more than 60 percent of the population of Jordan is Palestinian that would make that territory, east of the Jordan River, the natural territory for a Palestinian state.

Because of this, if Jordan were to play a noticeable role in the West Bank, security-related or otherwise, that might arouse Palestinian suspicions. Palestinians are determined to practice their right to self-determination here, and they will recall various Israeli schemes including what used to be known as the "Jordan option" in the early 1970s, the "United Kingdom" plan, the Alon plan, etc.

**BI:** Egypt is playing a very specific role in Gaza, and in spite of that country's history there, it seems to be acceptable to Palestinians that Egypt plays this role. Could Jordan play a similar specific role in the West Bank?

**Ahmed:** Egypt has traditionally been viewed as the leading Arab country. Because of its centrality, and because it is the largest Arab country, perhaps Egypt's involvement in the Gaza Strip is more accepted by Palestinians. A similar involvement by Jordan, if it takes into consideration the sensitivities I alluded to, might be acceptable as well. But if it doesn't, I think such an involvement could be problematic for Jordan as well as for Palestinians.

Let's also remember that Egypt, unlike Jordan, has no significant Palestinian population. Any side effects of Jordanian involvement in the West Bank could have some far-reaching effects internally in Jordan. Neither Jordan nor Palestine would be comfortable with such side effects.

**BI:** But there are also joint interests between Jordan and the Palestinians. There is the border, there is a matter of trade and there is a security angle. All these issues need close cooperation, so how should such cooperation proceed?

**Ahmed:** These sensitivities do not preclude Palestinian-Jordanian relations from being strengthened. It is a reality, for example, that Jordan represents the main "lung" for Palestinians. It is their entry point to the outside world, especially for Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem. Many Palestinians live in Jordan, and there are close relationship ties and family ties between Palestinians here and there. Also, the historic relations between Jordan and Palestine are unique.

While Jordan should perhaps view with sensitivity any involvement in the West Bank, that does not mean there should be no efforts made to strengthen Jordanian-Palestinian relations on all fronts, whether security, political or economic.

**BI:** With Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon now threatening to set his own borders, what role can Jordan play?

**Ahmed:** It is in Jordan's interest to see an independent Palestinian state created in the

Gaza Strip and the West Bank including Jerusalem. The creation of such a state would put an end, from Jordan's point of view, to the Israeli claim, or at least the Likud's claim, that such a state should be established east of the Jordan River.

Jordan also has a strong presence in the international community, and it has good relations with the US, and therefore any intervention by Jordan on behalf of the Palestinians in this regard would be very welcome. It would also make sense from a Jordanian perspective, since such an intervention would serve Jordan's domestic interests because it would promote greater internal stability in the kingdom.- *Published 10/11/2005 © bitterlemons-international.org*

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