

BOOK REVIEW

Our Last Best Chance: The Pursuit of Peace in a Time of Peril

King Abdullah II of Jordan, (New York: Viking,
February 2011), 346 p.

Zeynep SÜTALAN*

The book by King Abdullah II of Jordan is an autobiography which can be regarded as a follow-up of a family tradition in reference to the King Hussein's autobiography named *Uneasy Lies The Head*¹. Like his father, King Abdullah has written the book in the tenth year of his reign. The book as an autobiography provides the reader with an insight into the King's life, including his childhood and adolescence, his marriage with Queen Rania, and his ascendance to throne after the death of King Hussein. At the very same time, the book is a political history since the King well portrays the national and regional dynamics as a background. In addition, despite his personal account, King Abdullah II devotes a significant portion of his book to his experience and thoughts about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Although the book was published just before the Arab Spring, and the King neither includes nor predicts the revolutionary changes of the Arab Spring, he gives a strong message about the urgent need to solve the Palestinian-Israeli question. This message could be no better timed than ever and is still relevant for the region which has changed considerably with the winds of the Arab Spring. In special reference to the King's reflections on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the book is worth reading in understanding the Middle East peace process and foreseeing its possible future.

The King attributes high importance to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that he underlines as a "political conflict over land and rights" rather than a religious struggle (p.xiii). According to the King, Palestinian-Israeli question lies at the heart of the Arab-Israeli conflict, but its impact is not limited to that. In contradiction to the Western approach that conceives the challenges in the Middle East like "Iranian expansionism, radical terrorism, sectarian tensions in Iraq and Lebanon and a long-festering conflict between Israel and the Palestinians" as separate issues, King Abdullah II views them as in-

1 King Hussein, *Uneasy Lies The Head: The Autobiography By His Majesty King Hussein of Jordan*, (Bernard Geis Associates, 1962).

* PhD Candidate, Department of International Relations, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.

terconnected through the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (p.xii). Besides, the King asserts that the persistence of the conflict is playing into the hands of the extremists, radicals and the terrorists. They manipulate the conflict for their own interests and try to justify their illegal acts in the eyes of the people by adopting the rhetoric of liberating Palestine, Jerusalem from the Israeli occupation and defending Islam. Therefore, he underlines that resolving the conflict with a just and lasting peace will deprive the extremists and terrorists from a tool for mobilization. It may not resolve every kind of extremism, but at least “transform the playing field”. Hence, the King says that establishing peace between Palestinians and Israelis should not only be an Arab, but also an American priority (p.xiv). Furthermore, for King Abdullah II, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, is not merely a regional issue, but is a global concern since it “resonates among all the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims” (p.xiii).

In addition to the significance of the Palestinian-Israeli question for the Middle Eastern regional context and dynamics, the conflict is an influential factor in the domestic and foreign policy of Jordan. According to the data of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine refugees, there are around 1.9 million registered refugees in Jordan.² However, this number does not include all Jordanians of Palestinian origin. Although King Abdullah II, in his book, states that the Palestinian population constitutes the 43 % of the Jordanian population, different research points out different numbers ranging from one half of the population to two third.³ Whatever the reality about the demographics may be, the Palestinian population in Jordan has been viewed as a challenge to the *raison d’etat* of the Hashemite Kingdom by the Jordanians of East Bank origin and the regime. Such perception has fuelled by the argument advocated by the rightist Israeli politicians as ‘Jordan is Palestine’. The Hashemite regime has strongly opposed the argument. Nevertheless, Jordanian nationalists have started opposing the policies of providing the Palestinians in Jordan with citizenship and political rights. In order to appease the Jordanian nationalists in fear, the Hashemite regime promoted ‘Jordan First’ policy in 2002 which called for unity among the Jordanians for supporting

2 UNRWA, In Figures, as of 1 January 2013, available at http://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/2012_0317152850.pdf

3 For the discussion, see Mudar Zahran, “Jordan is Palestinian”, *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2012, pp. 3-12.

the regime in its policies.⁴ Additionally, by signing the peace treaty with Israel in 1994, Jordan wanted to ensure its recognition as a sovereign state in the eyes of Israel and put an end to the claims of 'Jordan is Palestine'. After the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) entered into direct talks with Israel in 1993 with the Oslo process, and Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, Jordan is no more a party to the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. However, the Hashemite Kingdom has vested interests in the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state and the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Therefore, it is fair to say that the development about the Palestinian-Israeli peace process has direct effects on the Jordanian public opinion and survival of the Hashemite regime.

When it comes to the failures in the peace process, King Abdullah II criticizes the past peace efforts by claiming that postponing the most difficult and problematic issues to a later date such as Jerusalem, refugees, borders and security, have not brought any benefits. Although this criticism has a right in it, it should be noted that the 'gradual approach to peace' has become the predominant paradigm that is applied to the entire Arab-Israeli conflict so far. The gradual approach, in its basic premises, means the breaking up of the Arab-Israeli conflict into 'negotiable pieces' on a step-by-step basis to peacemaking. When the complexity of the Arab-Israeli conflict is considered, adopting a gradual approach seems to be the most appropriate way of dealing with the conflict. However, the opponents of the gradual approach assert that it is buying time for Israel to continue settlements in the occupied territories as long as it delayed and in the end postponed the final-status talks in the Palestinian-Israeli track. Within this framework, the Jewish settlements issue turns out to be the biggest impediment in the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Since freezing the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories as a precondition to start negotiations has not been achieved, the road to progress for the resolution of the conflict has been blocked. In this respect, the King accuses Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for not keeping up with his commitments on peace and being excessively preoccupied with Iran rather than making peace with the Palestinians. For him, whereas Netanyahu is not a man of peace, Ariel Sharon was no better (p.196, 206).

⁴ Beverly Milton-Edwards and Peter Hinchcliffe, *Jordan: A Hashemite Legacy*, Second Edition, (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp.130-132.

Recognizing the United States as the only country in the world that can put pressure on Israel, the King believes in the role of America as an honest broker in the peace process. In the book, King Abdullah II gives account of his interactions with the three presidents, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Whereas he gives credit to the Clinton administration for trying to make peace, he is critical of the Bush administration. After the Palestinian-Israeli peace process is stuck without reaching an agreement on the final status issues at Camp David in 2000 and the process deteriorated with the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, it has not gone any further. The King does not explicitly accuse the Bush administration for not showing any interest in revitalizing the peace process, but he tries to explain how the Bush administration did not get his calls that a peace between Palestinians and Israelis is in the interest of the United States. What is more, he also underlines that even though he insisted that the invasion of Iraq would be a big mistake, President Bush turned a deaf ear to his warnings. Therefore, the invasion of Iraq in 2003 has not only unleashed the extremist forces in the region, but also changed the priorities of the United States for almost a decade and resulted in the suspension of the peace negotiations. Besides the Iraqi issue, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the Bush administration has become obsessed with the global war on terrorism, and has viewed any issue from that perspective. Then, the United States prioritized the security of Israel and refrained from seeing the Palestinian Authority under the leadership of Yasser Arafat as a viable partner for peace. Accordingly, the King narrates the opinion of the President Bush about Arafat as follows:

He (President Bush) insisted that Arafat had to do a better job in controlling extremists; otherwise the United States would not spend political capital trying to resolve the conflict. "We can't be hypocrites on terror", he said, and then made it clear that he felt Arafat was siding with terrorist organizations. As I feared, he began to elide his own struggle to tackle Al Qaeda with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. (p.201).

After the frustration with the Bush administration for not having taken any decisive steps about the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, King Abdullah II seems to pin his hopes on President Obama. Regarding him as a man who is speaking the language of peace, the King expects Obama to lead America to take its decisive leadership in the peace process. However, during his first

term, Obama's efforts to bring the parties to the negotiation table remained inconclusive. Even the efforts for direct negotiations in the absence of total freeze of Jewish settlements, which was a precondition by the Palestinian side, did not lead to progress since Netanyahu "insisted that any security arrangement must ensure a continued Israeli presence on future Palestinian eastern and western borders to guard against potential threats" (p.322). Mahmud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian National Authority, said that he could concur with the presence of international forces, but could not accept Israeli presence on Palestinian land. In this respect, hopes for a positive breakthrough in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations seem to be left for the second term of the Obama administration.

Against this background, King Abdullah II is afraid that the failure to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict today will inevitably lead to a war in the region with catastrophic results in the future. He believes in the two-state solution as the only viable option to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and advocates the establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. With Oslo Peace Process as already dead, he thinks that the Arab Peace Initiative is 'the last best chance for peace' in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Endorsed on 28 March 2002 by the Arab League, the initiative envisages the Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, meaning turning back to the pre-1967 War borders, the establishment of the sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, the resolution of the Palestinian refugee question on a just and mutually agreed basis, and the recognition of the East Jerusalem as the capital of the sovereign Palestinian state. In return, 22 Arab League states will recognize the state of Israel and establish peaceful normal relations (p.204-205). When the initiative was also endorsed in the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of the Islamic Countries (OIC), the solution is enlarged to include the 57 members of the OIC. Even though Israel has not shown any interest in the Initiative since it was proposed, King Abdullah II sees it as the only framework to consider and work on, but emphasizes that the initiative is living on borrowed time.

When the current situation in the Middle East is considered with regard to the Arab Spring, the immediate focus of the states in the region has turned to the calls for reform by the people. A second concern for regional states has become the overwhelmed regional

balance of power. Furthermore, the prolonged crisis in Syria, which has already been regarded as a civil war, has become the highest priority on the global and regional agenda. How much attention Obama administration as well as the regional actors that can have a mediating role like Egypt, Saudi Arabia and even Jordan can draw on the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is highly questionable. Despite the dynamics brought by the Arab Spring, the case of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has become more complicated with the developments in past few years. The division of the Palestinian leadership between Hamas in the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian National Authority in the West Bank makes it highly difficult to achieve a possible breakthrough in the peace negotiations. Hamas is considered to be out of the equation since it refuses to negotiate with Israel and the Palestinian National Authority seems to be the only viable partner for peace not only in the eyes of Israel, but also the international Western community. However, what kind of a peace can come out of negotiations without Hamas is a matter of great concern. Without doubt, these facts should not jeopardize the necessity to resolve the conflict and turn a blind eye to the urgent need to revitalize the peace process.

As a consequence, it is fair to say that the main objective of the book by King Abdullah II of Jordan is to call for action in terms of the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. No matter how uncertain the political climate in the Middle East has become so far, such call necessitates attention more than ever with the time passing to the detriment of the peace in the region.