

Palestinians face peril and opportunity

by Scott Thompson

Sources close to King Hussein of Jordan report that the king's decision on July 31 to abdicate Jordanian sovereignty over the West Bank had been agreed upon at the emergency Arab Summit meeting held in May in Algiers. The Palestinian uprising on the West Bank accelerated the timetable for this decision by the king. On Aug. 4, Jordan announced that it would stop paying the salaries of virtually all its employees on the West Bank, thus cutting off the cash flow into the Israeli-occupied territory.

By thus severing Jordan's administrative and financial connections to the occupied territory, King Hussein, with the backing of other moderate Arab regimes, has created an opportunity for the Palestinians to assert their own efforts for self-rule. With statesmanship on all sides now, a viable solution could perhaps be found; but if radical factions among the Palestinians and Israelis carry the day, then the region will once again be plunged into a maelstrom of violence and chaos.

Hussein's cutoff of funds to the West Bank throws the ball into Israel's court, on the eve of Israeli elections. With West Bank administration in the hands of the Palestinians, will Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir allow funds to continue to flow into the territory?

One of the crucial questions is how the Palestine Liberation Organization will act to fill the void left by Jordan, and there is already talk within the Palestine National Congress of forming a government-in-exile, which might lead to a splintering of the PLO. It is reported that PLO chairman Yasser Arafat may not only boycott the PNC meeting to be held in Baghdad in mid-August, but that he would not be chosen the titular head of a government-in-exile. While King Hussein consulted with the United States at least two weeks in advance of his move, his step reportedly took the PLO by surprise.

King Hussein's decision was based upon a number of factors. First, he has become increasingly disgruntled with the U.S. inability to conduct a foreign policy independently of Israel. Any number of joint U.S.-Arab projects, such as a Rapid Deployment Force for the Gulf with bases in Jordan, have been scrapped. Hussein therefore pulled the rug out from under Secretary of State George Shultz's "peace initiative," by renouncing sovereignty over the occupied territories. Shultz's "Jordan option" would have created a political and economic burden for King Hussein, without any real commitment on the part of the United States.

There are other strategic factors shaping the situation, including the roles of Britain and the Soviet Union. Sources report that King Hussein was advised in his move by Britain, which originally created the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan. A British faction associated with the Bank of England and the Royal Household is interested in reasserting British hegemony in the Middle East, for the purpose of gaining greater control over Gulf oil supplies. The Soviet Union has encouraged this British ploy, from the standpoint of welcoming any development that supplants U.S. influence in the region.

Another factor that influenced the King was the fact that the uprising in the occupied territories had taken on a decidedly anti-Jordan, pro-PLO bias. Since the 1974 Algiers Summit, the other Arab states have supported the role of the PLO as the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. The Arab heads of state never approved the claims of King Hussein's grandfather Abdula over the West Bank, a claim made in 1949 without consent of the Palestinians. However, King Hussein has already once before renounced his claims to the West Bank (at the 1974 Algiers Summit) and some believe that he may only be making a tactical move.

There is a serious question as to how far King Hussein will take his decision. Over the last 20 years of Israeli occupation, the economy of the occupied territories has become fully integrated with Jordan, which received special grants from the other Arab states for this purpose. Among the linkages are: 1) all outside trade of the West Bank passes over open bridges to Jordan; 2) most commercial banking for the West Bank takes place in Jordan; 3) Jordan maintains on its payroll 17-20,000 civil servants in the occupied territories, who have acted by-and-large as a buffer against chaos; and, 4) Jordan maintains sizable pension and retirement funds for West Bank residents. If the King decides to cut any or all of these ties—including the Jordanian passports he has issued West Bank residents—then it will be a "bittersweet victory" for the uprising, according to one source, who adds that the Gross National Product of the West Bank has already fallen 20% since the start of the uprising.

Decisions for Israel

King Hussein's move also creates a crisis for Israel, as it has overturned the "Jordan option" pursued by Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who was willing to turn the West Bank over to Jordan in a "land-for-peace" exchange. Already the radical Tehiya Party has demanded that Israel annex the territories, and the faction behind Israeli strongman Ariel Sharon continues to mobilize for mass expulsions of the Palestinians from the territories. Israel is overextended with the occupation, and King Hussein's decision may make that worse. The Israeli Defense Forces have had to curtail training exercises and the procurement of new weapons systems, because of their role in the occupation.