

# Israel Strains Its “Cold Peace” with Jordan

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**Israel’s far-right government is undermining a longstanding treaty that many Jordanians already oppose.**

A recent wave of Israeli police violence at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound is putting strain on Israel’s already fraught relationship with Jordan, which is the official custodian of Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem. For two consecutive nights, on April 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup>, Israeli police descended on the mosque in the Old City of Jerusalem, brutally beating Palestinians. During Ramadan, many practice itikaf, which involves staying inside the mosque for days at a time, often praying late into the night. The attacks by police emptied the holy site of worshippers.

In the preceding days, Israeli settlers had invaded the compound accompanied by heavily armed Israeli special forces. In a statement that did not mention the settlers, Israeli police [claimed](#) that they entered the mosque in pursuit of “hundreds of rioters and mosque desecrators” who had “barricaded” themselves inside. [Footage circulating](#) on social media shows police using batons, teargas, stun grenades, and rubber bullets on Palestinians who had come to observe Islam’s holy month. At least 450 Palestinians have been arrested since last Wednesday, and at least 31 [have been injured](#).

The crackdown at the mosque sparked rocket fire from the Gaza Strip and southern Lebanon and retaliation from Israel, which carried out [air raids](#) on what it claimed were Hamas-controlled targets in both Gaza and Lebanon on Thursday night and Friday morning. The violence against worshippers also drew [swift condemnation](#) from Arab states, and even a muted rebuke from the US, which [called](#) for “restraint and de-escalation to allow peaceful worship and to protect the sanctity of the holy sites.” And Jordan, which officially normalized diplomatic relations with Israel in 1994, issued a [statement](#) on Saturday assigning the Israeli government full “responsibility for the escalation in Jerusalem and in all the occupied Palestinian territories” and warning of “catastrophic consequences” if Israel does not cease “its terrorization of worshippers in these blessed days.”

This increase in tensions comes as the actions of Israel’s new right-wing governing coalition are already putting pressure on relations with Jordan. On March 20<sup>th</sup>, in Paris, Israel’s far-right finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, delivered a speech in which he claimed that “there is no such thing as the Palestinian people,” from a podium draped in a map of Israel that included the occupied West Bank, Gaza, and most of Jordan—a vision of the country known as “Greater Israel” among Israel’s territorial-maximalist right. Jordanians associate this map with the Irgun, a Zionist paramilitary organization that expelled Palestinians to pave the way for the foundation of the Israeli state, according to Mouin Rabbani, co-editor of *Jadaliyya*, an independent online magazine focusing on the Middle East. “[The Irgun’s] anthem was, ‘The [River] Jordan has two banks, one is ours and so is the other,’” Rabbani said. Jordan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded by [summoning](#) the Israeli ambassador to account for his government’s actions—a symbol of extreme displeasure intended to exert diplomatic pressure—and the Jordanian parliament later voted in favor of a resolution recommending the ambassador’s expulsion.

The incident also sent shockwaves through Jordanian civil society, where Jordan's working relationship with Israel is already deeply unpopular. [According to a 2021 poll](#), 80% of respondents in Jordan said the issue of Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories was of critical importance to them. Palestinians compose 60% of the population in Jordan, having been driven across the Jordan River in the 1948 and 1967 wars. After the attacks on Al-Aqsa, [hundreds of demonstrators gathered](#) in Amman outside a mosque near the Israeli embassy, urging the Jordanian government to expel the Israeli ambassador. Others called on authorities to allow Jordanians to cross into the West Bank to aid their Palestinian brethren. Both appeals suggest that some Jordanians believe their government's response to Israel's actions has been too muted, and highlight growing tensions, not only between Jordan and Israel, but between Jordan's government and civil society on the question of cooperation with its neighbor. The demonstrations come at a time when Jordanians are already expressing displeasure with their officials; recent polls have shown that levels of public trust in the Jordanian government—particularly the ministerial cabinet—have declined significantly since the 2011 Arab Spring. According to data from the nonpartisan research network [Arab Barometer](#), only 43.3% of Jordanians expressed trust in their government in 2020, down from 71.5% in 2011.

“Jordan's peace with Israel is often framed as a ‘cold peace’ because it has been limited to the government as well as the security establishment; it has not included civil society or the people,” said Merissa Khurma, director of the Middle East program at the Wilson Center, a policy forum on global affairs. Now, the actions of Israel's right-wing government are becoming fodder for longstanding opposition to the normalization of diplomatic relations. “The latest actions in Al-Aqsa and Smotrich's map have enraged many Jordanians and Palestinians in Jordan,” Khurma said. So far, the uproar seems highly unlikely to upend a relationship with Israel that the Jordanian government views as necessary to its security, and which enables its close alliance with the US. But as Israel's right-wing government continues to violate the terms of its peace with Jordan, Amman's position becomes less and less tenable.

Jordan's 1994 peace treaty with Israel was signed during the “Oslo era,” when the peace process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was ongoing, and headway toward a two-state solution seemed possible. In addition to ending the state of war between the two countries, the treaty established cooperation on matters of trade and tourism, and settled disputes over natural resources; perhaps most importantly from the Jordanian perspective, it enabled Jordan to [buy much-needed water](#) from Israel. The treaty also opened the floodgates of US economic and military assistance to Jordan. However, the peace agreement “came as a surprise to the Jordanian population and elites,” as researcher Joshua Krasna [has written](#). Popular hostility was present from the start, in part due to an anti-normalization campaign led by Muslim Brotherhood-dominated professional associations.

Decades later, though the foundations of the agreement remain intact, the peace has deteriorated into an icy cold detente. As the Israeli Overton window has shifted rightward under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu, Jordan's political response has been limited by its close relationship with the US. While Jordan's parliament serves as an important release valve for the expression of public sentiment, it is not able to implement any concrete policy regarding Israel. Meanwhile, public opposition to the peace treaty has remained or even grown; it is widely detested across Jordan's socioeconomic spectrum. Last year, [a poll showed](#) that 94% of Jordanians opposed diplomatic recognition of Israel by their country.

Opposition to the treaty is fed in part by fears that Israel may someday pursue what many [of its officials](#)—including so-called [moderates](#)—refer to as the “Jordanian option.” Under this proposal—which has been raised periodically since Israel began its illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories in 1967, most recently by US President Donald Trump's [peace negotiations team](#) in 2018—Israel would support a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation rather than an

independent Palestinian state; Jordan would absorb some of the West Bank's land and all of its Palestinian residents.

The proposal—which Israel technically renounced under the 1994 peace agreement, which included a demarcation of borders—is widely opposed in Jordan: Palestinians living in Jordan remain committed to securing the right of return to their native lands, while Jordanians fear opening the door to more refugee resettlement. A 2018 poll [showed](#) that about two-thirds of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza also reject the idea, hoping to have a state of their own.

Smotrich's provocation suggested that Jordanians might have even more to fear than the unpopular "Jordanian option." "He went beyond the traditional Israeli position, officially renounced in 1994 but persisting in various ways since, that Jordan should function as an alternative homeland for the Palestinians," said Rabbani, and "claimed Jordan in its entirety for Israel—with total impunity and no consequences from the government he officially represents." The affront was all the more glaring given that it came only weeks after Jordan hosted a summit between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the city of Aqaba—and only hours after Jordanian officials attended a summit in the Egyptian city of Sharm el-Sheikh, alongside representatives from the US, Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinian Authority, to discuss measures to de-escalate violence in the occupied West Bank ahead of Ramadan and Passover.

In the wake of Smotrich's speech, Jordan's foreign ministry condemned the Israeli minister's "racist and extremist inciting statements" about Palestinians [in state-affiliated media](#). Jordan's MPs quickly logged their own [complaints](#). The Jordanian parliament also [hung](#) a map of Jordan and Historic Palestine bearing the flags of the two countries as a rejoinder to Smotrich's map. But Jordan's civil society has clamored for a stronger response to the increasingly flagrant violations of the peace treaty. Expressing a popular sentiment [in Ammon News](#), an independent media outlet that describes itself as the voice of Jordan's "silent majority," writer and political analyst Monther Al-Hawarat argued that, in response to Smotrich, Jordan must "penalize the Israeli government in several ways, first of all by appealing to the UN Security Council and other international organizations, and secondly, by severing or threatening to sever diplomatic relations with Israel." Political analyst Khaled Shneikat also called for stronger measures. "Jordan can . . . reduce the extent of its diplomatic relations with Israel," he wrote.

Tuqa Nusairat, a director at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center & Middle East Programs, similarly stressed that Smotrich's comments had crossed a new line for the Jordanian public. "When you're touching Jordan's integrity and sovereignty and borders, you're crossing a different line than when you're touching the Palestinian issue," she said "If it wasn't clear to people what it means to have such a right-wing government in Israel, if anyone was under any pretense that this is the government that is willing to maintain their peace agreements, that [map incident] was a very clear sign."

While the Smotrich incident hit one nerve in Jordan, the recent violence against worshipers at Al-Aqsa hit another. Israel's repeated violations of the fragile status quo that governs Jerusalem's holy sites is a longtime point of tension. The 1994 peace treaty [officially recognized](#) the Jordanian royal family's custodianship of Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, codifying an arrangement that was established during the British Mandate in 1924. Jordan has sought to uphold [rules dating back even farther](#), to the Ottoman era, that grant anyone the ability to visit the Al-Aqsa compound—a holy site in both Islam and Judaism, known to Jews as the Temple Mount—but specify that only Muslims can pray there. In the 29 years since the peace treaty was signed, however, Israel has increasingly [settled](#) its citizens [around](#) these holy sites in contravention of international law, and has continually heightened [security](#) and [surveillance](#) at the Al-Aqsa compound and its holiest sanctuary, al-Haram al-Sharif.

In recent years, ultranationalist religious Jews—many of them [associated with the extremist Temple Movement](#), which preaches the destruction of Al-Aqsa and the establishment of a new Jewish temple on the site—have increasingly made mass ascents to the compound to pray, in open violation of the status quo. Last spring, such an incursion during the overlapping holidays of Ramadan and Passover [led to police brutality](#) against Palestinians who were said to have tried to prevent Jews from entering. This January, Israel’s far-right minister of national security, Itamar Ben-Gvir, [visited the site](#) for the first time since taking office, setting off a [cascade of condemnations](#) across the Arab world. Jordan summoned the Israeli ambassador to Amman then as well to [express its ire](#). (In total, Jordan has summoned the Israeli ambassador three times since the formation of Israel’s new government.)

As Passover approached this spring, Jewish extremists called for an animal sacrifice—long an obsolete practice in Judaism—to be performed at Al-Aqsa in observance of the Jewish holiday. Though the sacrifice was prevented by Israeli police, and one of the ultranationalist activists was [detained](#) before the holiday, other Jewish worshipers did visit the site on Passover. *Reuters* [reported](#) that anxieties about the safety of Jewish visitors were among the motivations for the police crackdown on Muslim worshipers.

Still, the Israel-Jordan treaty remains stubbornly durable. “Jordan’s relations with the Israeli authorities have to address the bigger picture,” Nusairat said. “The Jordanian government won’t necessarily make things get in the way of being able to negotiate issues related to the security dynamic.” As Israel’s right-wing government edges the region toward what seems at risk of becoming another all-out war on Gaza, however, some Jordanians think their country may have a rare opportunity to make their case that the US should exert pressure on Israel. “You would hope that the Jordanian government would take advantage of this to push more aggressively on the issues related to their custodianship of Al-Aqsa,” Nusairat said. “In the past they’ve probably communicated a lot of this to the US government but it hasn’t necessarily fallen on listening ears.” Now, she said, “If the US administration wants to avoid another potential conflict with Gaza, they should listen to what the Jordanians are telling them, which is probably, ‘You need to step in. You need to do something.’”

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