

# Negotiating Identity: Prospects for Jordanian and Syrian Peace with Israel in the 1990s

Alexa Hoyne

*The College of William and Mary, Class of 2010*

*Alexa Hoyne graduated from the College of William and Mary with a BA in Middle Eastern Studies. She now works for the Department of Defense and hopes to eventually work for the White House in the area of security policy.*

---

## Introduction

Transcending the geographic demarcations between countries in the Middle East, the Arab-Israeli conflict lies at the heart of many of the region's complex issues and policies. Indeed, the Palestine question possesses far-reaching symbolic implications, as many states have felt personally subjected to Western encroachment. Israel is representative of this omnipresent threat to Arab sovereignty—an “enemy” on whom all of the region can collectively direct its anger and emotions. Despite this pan-Arab framework in which the issue is so typically placed, there still exists enormous variation in the ways in which each Arab state approaches its relationship (or lack thereof) with Israel and the associated prospects for peace. This inconsistency suggests that other variables besides merely resentment from colonialism or ideology are at play.

Jordan and Syria have had particularly divergent paths concerning their relations with Israel, illustrated substantively through Jordan's 1994 peace treaty and Syria's abandoned negotiations during the same time period. Though Syria entered into a number of other failed attempts at peace throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, this paper will focus exclusively on the stagnated 1996 discussions. I concede that this narrow scope of analysis may be slightly inequitable in that it omits Syria's later attempts at dialogue and may project the expectation that Syria and Jordan would achieve peace in the same time-span. The arguments presented in this paper are not intended to promote any such belief or bias and should not be interpreted as such. The first Syrian-Israeli stalled negotiations were selected merely for comparative purposes with the concurrent Jordanian-Israeli talks.

With only a perfunctory analysis of the situation, one might expect Jordan and Syria to have behaved similarly toward Israel, especially when considered through the lens of neorealist thought. Stephen Walt's assessment of aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions as factors influencing level of threat leave Jordan and Syria in relatively equal standing with regard to Israel. Nevertheless, their respective policies toward Israel differed quite dramatically. The following paper attempts to ascertain the determinants of these incongruous Jordanian and Syrian outcomes with Israel in the 1990s. Although there exist a number of potentially influential factors, I argue that the preeminent variables influencing Jordan's 1994 treaty and Syria's 1996 suspension of negotiations are each country's respective level of trust and communication and degree of territorial agreement with Israel. Grounded in constructivist theory, these elements suggest that Jordan and Syria's actions in the years leading up to the 1990s were instrumental in cultivating a normalized conception of identity in relation to Israel. As such, the resulting cooperative or competitive interpersonal relationships paved the way for Jordanian and Syrian interactions with Israel that ultimately led to compromise or stagnation.

In the remainder of the paper, I discuss a variety of alternative independent variables that could also be useful in explaining the divergent Jordanian and Syrian paths. First, I consider a set of factors that are one-sided in their influence—that is, applicable to either Jordan or Syria, but not both. Using support from Laurie Brand's theory of budget

security, I show that the economy is a constructive variable in the case of Jordan, but not that of Syria. Then, in opposition, I utilize public opinion theory to demonstrate domestic legitimacy as a variable relevant for *Syria*, but not for Jordan. To conclude the paper, I provide more theoretical and practical details to support my earlier discussion of the irrelevance of external threat to the Jordanian and Syrian incongruity with Israel.

### **Level of Trust and Communication**

One of the foremost factors at play in explaining Jordan and Syria's relative success or failure at formulating peace with Israel in the mid-1990s is each state's degree of trust and historical record of communication with Israel. Framed within the theoretical field of constructivism which argues that identities are shaped through repetitive actions, the differing natures of Jordan and Syria's past interactions with Israel suggest a correlation between the specifics of each country's interpersonal relationship with Israel and its corresponding situation regarding peace. Wendt argues that there is a direct relationship between a country's tangible actions and its ultimate identity.<sup>1</sup> Along these lines, the synthesis of past discussions and rhetoric, associated levels of trust or hostility, and the potential overlap of each nation's understanding of peace reveals patterns of interaction that are instrumental in helping to explain Jordan and Syria's differing outcomes with Israel.

#### *Theoretical Construct: Constructivism*

In contrast to a neorealist construction which conceives of an anarchic international sphere whose structure essentially inhibits or determines states' behaviors, constructivism depicts a system in which identity is more or less shaped by action. Relationships between states are developed based on "social acts" and the assumptions that each actor makes regarding the other. When two countries interact for the first time, their specific behaviors are observed and then interpreted, resulting in "expectations on both sides about each other's future behavior."<sup>2</sup> These expectations are clearly cursory and rather subjective, but they are still internalized as considerations for a proper reciprocal response. Over time, repeated manners of interaction crystallize into relatively concrete "concepts of self and other," which then provide the basis for a relationship that is either cooperative or competitive.<sup>3</sup>

According to constructivist thought, a state's identity does not necessarily remain the same in all of its interactions; the essence of its interests and character is derived from and specific to each set of social acts. In this regard, the identities of each unit of the international system are not stagnant, but are instead part of a "process [of] constructing and reconstructing self and social relationships."<sup>4</sup> As actions themselves fluctuate, so, too, do interpersonal relationships between states and consequent identity conceptions. Indeed, the possibility for new constructions of identity and subsequent "systemic change" is a key element of the constructivist theoretical model.<sup>5</sup> Despite these prospects for transformation or change, however, Wendt still emphasizes that repeated interactions tend to produce normative or institutionalized relationships and identities—ones that can consequently be quite difficult to reconstitute.<sup>6</sup> Using this theoretical framework as a guide, I argue that Jordan's long history of repeated communication and discussion with Israel allowed for the construction of a cooperative relationship that extended into the negotiations leading to the 1994 peace treaty. In contrast, Syria's continual anti-Zionist rhetoric, accusations, and lack of experience with face-to-face contact created a competitive relationship that ultimately precluded compromise.

#### *The Jordanian Case*

The 1994 Jordanian-Israeli peace negotiations were by no means the first set of communications occurring between the two countries. Discussions took place as early as the 1940s, helping to build a relationship of trust backed by

---

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46 (1992): 424.

<sup>2</sup> Wendt 405.

<sup>3</sup> Wendt 406.

<sup>4</sup> Wendt 407.

<sup>5</sup> Wendt 411.

<sup>6</sup> Wendt 423.

a “wealth of experience.”<sup>7</sup> As exemplified in constructivist thought, repeated instances of direct cooperative interaction between Jordan and Israel helped foster a collective identity built on amicability, reliance, and the willingness to compromise. Even though most of their historical agreements and conversations occurred beneath the public radar, these talks occurred without intermediaries; both King Abdullah and King Hussein directly participated in discussions involving high-ranking Israeli officials, thereby conveying a sense of intimacy that became normalized after repeated interaction.<sup>8</sup> It was this standardized relationship of healthy and cooperative communication and trust that helped pave the way for peace and restoration of diplomatic Jordanian-Israeli ties in 1994.

The frequency of interaction and negotiation between Jordan and Israel was such that discussions are sometimes characterized as “the worst-kept secret dialogue in the Middle East,” beginning even prior to Jordan’s establishment as an independent nation.<sup>9</sup> When Jordan was still Transjordan under the British mandate, Abdullah did not automatically interpret the actions of the adjacent Zionist population as a threat and instead saw the potential for a friendly relationship. So as not to anger staunch “Transjordanian nationalists” within his territory, Abdullah kept his contact with the *Yeshuv* clandestine. There is even evidence that these secret discussions resulted in the formulation of an accord calling for the partition of Palestine into two separate states. Although these talks were meant to be secret, the rest of the Arab world became suspicious of Abdullah’s seemingly accommodating relationship with the Zionists and put pressure on him to join forces against Israel in the 1948 war.<sup>10</sup> This incongruity fits well with Wendt’s theory. King Abdullah, it seems, was torn between two identities constructed from its differing interactions with Israel and the rest of the Arab world.

Still, even a war could not completely destroy the sense of trust that Abdullah had instilled upon the Jordanian-Israeli relationship. After Abdullah’s death, King Hussein continued the trend his predecessor had started, participating in a number of covert deliberations. In fact, between the years of 1964 and 1994, King Hussein and Israeli officials spent over seven hundred hours face-to-face and came to thirty-nine understandings.<sup>11</sup> These agreements dealt with a multifaceted range of issues ranging from shared intelligence to transport of goods across the Jordan River—not merely non-belligerence.<sup>12</sup> Having spent so much time fostering feelings of assurance, flexibility, and openness to discussion, Jordan and Israel essentially engaged in “discreetly building the infrastructure for a peace treaty [for thirty years].”<sup>13</sup> Thus, when the time came for public peace negotiations, the two nations built on their history with one another in order to reach a compromise. Their experience and formerly-established cooperative identity allowed them to “prior[ize] Jordanian and Israeli interests, identif[y] where they overlapped...and reach a mutually accommodating agreement” that spanned a “broad spectrum of issues” beyond just non-aggression.<sup>14</sup> As Wendt puts forth, identities are constructed through an actor’s actions and how they are perceived during social interactions. The repetition of contact left both parties with a sense of continuity and co-dependence that made the securing of peace almost inevitable, even amidst a climate of Arab-Israeli rivalries. Moreover, once discussions were underway in 1994, Jordan and Israel’s collective cooperative identity enabled them to formulate a mutual understanding of peace that each felt accommodated its interests.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Syrian Case*

Unlike the prior case study, Syria’s history of interaction with Israel has not cultivated a cooperative or mutually beneficial relationship by any stretch of the imagination. From the outset, Syrian-Israeli interactions were characterized by high levels of suspicion and hostility. Syria interpreted Israel’s establishment as an attempt to procure hegemony over the Arab world. Israel was seen as a direct threat—its military prowess and close Western alliances enough to create a palpable fear of Israel and its intentions.<sup>16</sup> Just as Jordan’s less virulent interpretations of Israeli behavior led to a cooperative collective identity, so, too, did Syria’s hostile reading of the situation foretell a repetition of competitive and

<sup>7</sup> Laura Zittrain Eisenberg and Neil Caplan, *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: Patterns, Problems, Possibilities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 91.

<sup>8</sup> Moshe Zak, “Thirty Years of Clandestine Meetings: The Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty,” *Middle East Quarterly* 2.1 (1995).

<sup>9</sup> Eisenberg 90.

<sup>10</sup> Tareq Y. Ismael, *Middle East Politics Today: Government and Civil Society*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 300.

<sup>11</sup> Zak.

<sup>12</sup> Zak.

<sup>13</sup> Zak.

<sup>14</sup> Eisenberg 97; Ismael 300.

<sup>15</sup> Ismael 300.

<sup>16</sup> Moshe Ma’oz, *Syria and Israel: From War to Peacemaking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 42.

inhospitable interactions. Syrian distaste for Israel came to new heights in the years leading up to the Ba'th's 1963 seizure of power, as political instability (repeated coups) and internal radicalization nurtured enhanced criticisms of Israel as "illegitimate," "imperialist," and "expansionist."<sup>17</sup> With the rise of the Ba'th party came the institution of the most vocal and "extreme anti-Israel ideology" to exist to date in the region.<sup>18</sup> Building on the preexisting feelings of hate and fear toward Israel, the Ba'th party—and Hafez al-Asad in particular—engaged in a repetition of avoidance or minimized contact with Israel that stabilized into a collective identity ground in ill will.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, after the 1967 war and Syria's loss of the Golan Heights, Asad proclaimed publicly, "We will never agree to direct talks with Israel now or at any other time."<sup>20</sup> Compromise, it seems, was not part of the Israeli-Syrian identity.

Even when a disengagement agreement was reached in 1974, it was sparsely worded and straight to the point, dealing with no other issue beyond a state of war.<sup>21</sup> The agreement was not negotiated through direct contact and was instead "signed by an Egyptian general on Syria's behalf"—a clear sign of Syria's desire for as minimal contact with Israel as possible.<sup>22</sup> Political or economic relations between the two countries were not the focal point for Asad; he "consistently sought to minimize relations, preferring instead to comply with only the fewest constraint measures necessary to prevent another war."<sup>23</sup> A champion of the pan-Arabist cause, Asad believed wholeheartedly in collective Arab solidarity against Israel and criticized any nation that broke from the mold and formulated an independent peace treaty. Thus, Syria deprived itself of the interactive and communicative experience necessary for constructing a trusting Syrian-Israeli relationship by sticking to its staunch convictions and avoiding separate contact with Israel. Its repetitive aversion to discussion, concession, or any sort of normalized interaction led to an identity rooted in mutual hostility, obstinacy, and a complete and utter lack of experience. Syria's participation in the Madrid Peace Process in the mid-1990s marked its first direct meeting with Israel in over forty years.<sup>24</sup>

The antagonism that existed between Syria and Israel from a strictly rhetorical or military standpoint is reflected in the lack of agreement on what a peace treaty would entail. Unlike the accommodating Jordanian-Israeli relationship which mutually sought non-aggression *and* restoration of ties, Syria possessed no desire "for friendship" and was merely in search of a strictly political or territorial agreement.<sup>25</sup> Israel, on the other hand, wished to ensure its protection from a "surprise attack" and believed the only means toward such an understanding would be through complete normalization with Syria.<sup>26</sup> The Syrian-Israeli relationship was filled with mistrust and Syria was not willing to even remotely *consider* normalized relations until Israel committed to a full withdrawal from the Golan and Palestinian territories.<sup>27</sup> Peace, in Syria's understanding, merely constituted a cessation of the "state of war"—not a shift in the formerly-constructed competitive identity between the countries.<sup>28</sup> Though their less-than-amicable collective identity is by no means set in stone, the transformative process—as Wendt projects—is not an easy one and certainly not one Syria was likely to alter throughout these first discussions after decades of mistrust and anger.

### Territorial Agreement

Another preeminent factor explaining the nature of Jordanian-Israeli and Syrian-Israeli peace is the level of agreement regarding territory and water. Analyzed within Lynch's constructivist framework of public sphere theory, Jordan and Syria's geographical conceptions of themselves and the permutations therein help explain the incongruity of outcomes in negotiations with Israel in the 1990s. Drawing on Wendt's ideas for support, Lynch argues that a state's interests or demands derive from the nature of said state's identity. This identity, in turn, comes from specific political

<sup>17</sup> Ma'oz 42, 261.

<sup>18</sup> Ma'oz 88.

<sup>19</sup> Itamar Rabinovich, *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiation*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>20</sup> Ma'oz 102.

<sup>21</sup> Brian S. Mandell, "Getting to Peacekeeping in Principal Rivalries: Anticipating a Israeli-Syrian Peace Treaty," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40 (1996): 251.

<sup>22</sup> Rabinovich 28.

<sup>23</sup> Mandell 251.

<sup>24</sup> Rabinovich 42.

<sup>25</sup> Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Ma'oz 145.

<sup>26</sup> Mandell 242.

<sup>27</sup> Mandell 242.

<sup>28</sup> Mandell 242.

interactions which are guided by one or multiple public spheres.<sup>29</sup> While Jordan was willing to reconstitute its identity based on geography and formulate a conception of itself on the basis of new physical boundaries, Syria insisted—and still insists—on reclaiming its territories lying under Israeli control. Jordan’s assertion of a strictly Jordanian identity outside of the Arabic or Palestinian public sphere allowed it to portray a sense of flexibility that ultimately permitted compromise in 1994. Syria, however, did not alter its identity conception and remains adamantly committed to its pre-1967 boundaries; for Assad, the return of territory is absolutely non-negotiable and peace will not occur without return of land.

### *Theoretical Construct: Constructivist Public Sphere Theory*

Wendt’s constructivist model provides the groundwork for Lynch’s public sphere theory. Lynch, too, feels that identities are defined through interaction as opposed to the nature of the international system. A state’s interests—its motivations—stem from these socially-constructed identities.<sup>30</sup> It is on this point that Lynch takes Wendt’s ideas a step further. While actions themselves construct identity, a state’s interests are not the automatic result of any specific action but, rather, the product of deliberation in a public sphere. Lynch defines this somewhat elusive public sphere as the “site of interaction in which actors routinely reach understandings about norms, identities, and interests through public exchange of discourse.”<sup>31</sup> Not to be confused with public opinion which too often acts as an “external constraint,” the public sphere is constitutive—a place where the underlying meanings of identity are deliberated and translated into interests through consensus.<sup>32</sup> When a state’s identity and its associated interests are threatened, the actor is placed at a crossroads where it can either hold onto its former conception of itself or work to “addre[ss] the identity-based security threat” by “present[ing] a more convincing identity claim.”<sup>33</sup> Lynch argues that any such shift in identity is tied to a shift in public sphere—the primary “site of contestation.”<sup>34</sup> Along these lines, I argue that Jordan’s 1988 relinquishment of claims to the West Bank was the result of a shift in public sphere that allowed for a strictly Jordanian identity ground in newly-defined geographical boundaries. This identity fluctuation necessarily included a change in Jordanian interests as well, making Jordan more amenable to territorial compromise with Israel in 1994. When confronted with a similar “identity-based security threat,” Syria conversely underwent no such shift; Israeli withdrawal from Arab territories remains a precursor to peace.

### *The Jordanian Case*

For years after Jordan’s annexation of the West Bank in 1950 and the subsequent Israeli occupation of the territory after 1967, much of Jordan’s identity became exclusively wrapped up in its pre-1967 geographical boundaries. In so doing, Jordanian state identity was confounded by the identities associated with other public spheres whose interests were highly tied to the land in question: “Any definition of Jordanian interests necessarily rests on a definition of Jordanian identity in relation to the Arab order and in relation to Palestinian nationalism.”<sup>35</sup> As such, although Jordan did engage in secretive communications with Israel, its public relations remained distant. The “West Bank had been assumed to be an integral, fundamental, and primary component of Jordanian state interests,” one which Jordan remained connected to for as long as it catered to the broader Arabist public sphere and the token cry equating Jordan with Palestine.<sup>36</sup> Using the constructivist model that allows for a state to alter its identity and interests through a change in action, any shift in Jordan’s stance on the West Bank issue would inevitably coincide with a newly-defined Jordanian identity as well. This self-awareness, Lynch postulates, comes from a shift in public sphere debate whose origins can be traced back to the 1970 Black September incident.<sup>37</sup> The use of the Jordanian military against the Palestinian population was deemed a significant act of disloyalty within the broader transnational public sphere; it marked the “decisive turning

<sup>29</sup> Marc Lynch, *State Interests and Public Spheres: The International Politics of Jordan’s Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 10.

<sup>30</sup> Lynch 10.

<sup>31</sup> Lynch 11.

<sup>32</sup> Lynch 11-12.

<sup>33</sup> Lynch 92.

<sup>34</sup> Lynch 92.

<sup>35</sup> Lynch 22.

<sup>36</sup> Lynch 1.

<sup>37</sup> Lynch 26.

point” at which state interests began to subsume those of Palestinian or Arabist public spheres.<sup>38</sup> This identity shift was only exacerbated when Jordan renounced its claims to the West Bank in 1988.<sup>39</sup> For one of the first times, Jordan embarked upon a “serious public discussion of Jordanian identity”—one which occurred in the strictly “Jordanian public sphere” and culminated in a reformulated catchphrase proclaiming, “Jordan is Jordan and Palestine is Palestine.”<sup>40</sup> Disengaged from the demands and interests of those spheres transcending Jordan’s borders, the state-centered debate redefined Jordan’s geographical identity in terms of solely the East Bank.<sup>41</sup> The prelude to peace had begun.

This shift in public sphere allowed for the foremost promulgation of Jordanian national interests. With the West Bank issue thrust aside, any public negotiations with Israel were substantiated on the grounds of *Jordanian* concerns. Moreover, the reconstitution of geographical identity allowed Jordan to come to the table with different territorial interests in mind—namely, the East Bank and water resources.<sup>42</sup> Jordan no longer demanded a return of *all* Israel-occupied land or *all* water rights. King Hussein was even quoted as ordering the “water negotiator” to solely focus on resources associated with the “share of the East Bank that had become territories of the Kingdom” in the aftermath of the 1988 agreement. “Palestine,” Hussein declared, “has its own men and they are capable of defending their own rights.”<sup>43</sup> The narrower interests constituted through debate in the Jordanian public sphere were much more amenable to a compromise, and helped allow Jordan and Israel to come to a territorial understanding as part of the 1994 peace treaty.

### *The Syrian Case*

Unlike Jordan’s renewed geographical identity, Syria’s conception of itself underwent no such shift. The Golan Heights and the rights to the associated Sea of Galilee and Lake Tiberias were and still remain a nonnegotiable component of Syrian identity—a component that Syria insists must be returned before any sort of a Syrian-Israeli agreement is made.<sup>44</sup> Situating himself at the forefront of debate within the Arab public sphere, Hafez al-Asad promulgated an image of himself as champion of the pan-Arabist cause—a status that he clung to even as many Arab nations broke from the mold and pursued independent treaties with Israel. As such, Syria maintained the argument that Israel’s occupation of Golan and Galilee is an encroachment on rightfully-*Arab* territory that must be stopped. Asad did not assume that diplomatic measures were enough, and subsequently made no secret of his belief that “peace was only one of many options;” military force would not be ruled out.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, al-Asad was not at all prepared to use Syria’s participation in the Madrid Peace Process as a mechanism toward formulating a new sort of physical national identity. Syria was set in its conception of itself and wanted its identity acknowledged and adhered to at all costs. This reluctance to compromise on territorial issues was mirrored on the Israeli side, leaving the Golan Heights and water issues unresolved and peace negotiations suspended.<sup>46</sup>

### **Alternative Explanation: The Economy**

In keeping with Laurie Brand’s theory of budget security as a crucial motivating factor in foreign relations, one should also consider economic variables in addition to levels of communication and territorial agreements. The conditions of Syria and Jordan’s economies in the early 1990s should have warranted behavior that would best ensure economic solidity and the associated protection of regime security as well. While Syria’s economy was by no means irreparable, its status at the time was such that an agreement with Israel could have easily been in al-Asad’s best economic interests. Syria’s failure to solidify a peace treaty in the mid-1990s suggests that its economic situation was not a primary motivating factor. Jordan, however, behaved in a manner that fits well with Brand’s theoretical framework, reacting to its economic downward spiral through an alliance shift that would result in immense international aid and debt forgiveness.

---

<sup>38</sup> Lynch 26.

<sup>39</sup> Munther J. Haddadin, “Water in the Middle East Peace Process,” *The Geographical Journal* 168 (2002): 333.

<sup>40</sup> Lynch 74.

<sup>41</sup> Lynch 101.

<sup>42</sup> Lynch 52.

<sup>43</sup> Haddadin 333.

<sup>44</sup> Mandell 242.

<sup>45</sup> Ma’oz 185; Zisser 114.

<sup>46</sup> Monte Palmer, *The Politics of the Middle East* (Belmont: Thomson Learning, 2002), 193.

### *Theoretical Construct: Budget Security*

In contrast to theories which give precedence to external or military threats, Brand's theory of budget security suggests that the most palatable threat to a developing country lies within the domestic sphere and challenges the continuity of the regime itself.<sup>47</sup> The crux of Brand's theory indicates that "the survival of an entity depends upon its ability to sustain or provide for itself" financially.<sup>48</sup> In the crudest of terms, this signifies that financial stability is imperative to governance. Without proper funds, a leader cannot enact policies and subsequently risks popular dissatisfaction or revolt in the face of mounting economic strife.<sup>49</sup> Any sort of debt crisis or extreme financial setback requiring an increase in taxes, diminished spending, or devaluation of currency "constitutes the most serious security threat deriving from the budget challenge."<sup>50</sup> Rather than risk the political instabilities that so often result from internal restructuring measures, rulers typically seek out economic assistance through foreign policy choices as a "quick-fix" solution.<sup>51</sup> It is in this way that international alignments come to be decided upon with economic underpinnings, utilized as a mechanism "serv[ing] a more immediate purpose of forestalling or addressing a crisis with severe budgetary implications, enhancing economic security, or insulating against economic challenges."<sup>52</sup> Preference is given to those alliances or foreign policy moves that result in the greatest likelihood of a "high-level exchange" such as debt forgiveness or international grants.<sup>53</sup> While such behavioral trends do not equate with Syria's failure to secure a peace treaty with Israel in the mid-1990s, Jordan's decision to secure peace in 1994 is a vivid illustration of the practical application of Brand's theory.

### *The Syrian Case (or Lack Thereof)*

Although Syria reaped financial benefits from its participation in the anti-Iraq coalition during the First Gulf War, its economy in the mid-1990s was by no means entirely stable. The Syrian government, having spent years frantically engaged in immense amounts of defense spending in an effort to reach "strategic parity" with Israel, had not devoted enough of its resources to "economic development."<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, the end of the Cold War put an abrupt halt to any incoming revenues from the USSR. With the dissolution of the bipolar international system, the United States emerged as the nation most likely to offer financial benefits. Recognizing this shift, Syria did "[seek] rapprochement with the US" and entered into the Madrid Peace Process in 1991. Having witnessed the immense economic stimuli awarded to Egypt and Jordan after establishing peace with Israel, an Israeli-Syrian agreement would certainly—according to Brand's theory—be deemed the appropriate action to preserve economic and thereby leadership security for the 'Alawi regime.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, economic motivations were clearly not enough in Syria's case as negotiations came to a standstill in 1996. Budget security was likely not at the forefront of Syrian actions for or against peace.

### *The Jordanian Case*

In Jordan's case, however, Brand's budget security theory goes a long way in elucidating reasons behind the 1994 peace treaty with Israel. As a small state without much to show for itself in terms of natural resources, Jordan's economy has always been heavily reliant on external economic aid.<sup>56</sup> This "aid addiction," to use Brand's clever terminology, was such that the Jordanian regime "had to make...the collection of funds... a primary, conscious focus of its foreign policy" so as to protect itself politically.<sup>57</sup> Throughout the 1980s, the Jordanian economy suffered immense setbacks as a result of military spending (over 43% of the budget) and mounting debt. This debt, which was only exaggerated after Jordan's

<sup>47</sup> Laurie A. Brand, *Jordan's Inter-Arab Relations: The Political Economy of Alliance-Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 23.

<sup>48</sup> Brand 25.

<sup>49</sup> Brand 23-26.

<sup>50</sup> Brand 27.

<sup>51</sup> Brand 37.

<sup>52</sup> Brand 34.

<sup>53</sup> Brand 35.

<sup>54</sup> Palmer 215.

<sup>55</sup> Ma'oz 147.

<sup>56</sup> Markus Bouillon, "Walking the Tightrope: Jordanian Foreign Policy from the Gulf Crisis to the Peace Process and Beyond," In *Jordan in Transition: 1999-2000*. Ed. George H. Joffe. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 19.

<sup>57</sup> Brand 295; Bouillon 17.

alliance with Iraq during the first Gulf War, cost the country an immense amount in international aid from the Gulf and Western powers, with a diminution of over \$1.5 billion in 1990 alone.<sup>58</sup> Statistics cite Jordan's overall debt at this time as having risen to "221% of its Gross National Product."<sup>59</sup> Without a doubt, Jordan's economy was in dire need of assistance, lest the population be incited to revolt and challenge the leadership's stability.<sup>60</sup> In accordance with Brand's theory, Jordan's likely action when faced with such a situation would be to alter its foreign policy or alignment so as to ensure the stability of existing internal institutions and rapidly stimulate economic development.<sup>61</sup> Amidst promises of "development aid," funds for enhanced military technology, and – perhaps most importantly – over \$900 million in debt forgiveness from the United States, the 1994 peace treaty with Israel offered Jordan just that opportunity.<sup>62</sup>

### **Alternative Explanation: Retention of Domestic Legitimacy and Public Opinion**

Though public opinion is often disregarded within the context of authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes, Shibley Telhami's theory argues instead that it "has a discernible impact on the foreign policies of Arab states."<sup>63</sup> Since their domestic political systems generally lack a mechanism for "electoral legitimacy," Arab leaders frequently rely on the co-option of "transnational symbols" as a means of justifying their rule both internally and in the broader regional community.<sup>64</sup> Telhami's suppositions suggest that public opinion could have some explanatory power in analyzing Jordan and Syria's respective stances toward peace with Israel. Nevertheless, Jordan's decision to establish fully normalized relations with Israel in 1994 contradicted the widely-ingrained opinions regarding Palestine and relations with the West. This incongruity between action and public attitudes suggests that public opinion possesses little relevance in the Jordanian case. When considered in tandem with Syria's halted negotiations, however, public opinion becomes much more revealing. In this context, I argue that Asad's retention of power and domestic legitimacy was dependent on his adherence to anti-Israeli public opinions. Peace with Israel would thereby constitute a direct erosion of Alawite legitimacy.

#### *Theoretical Construct: Popular Opinion Theory*

Authoritarian regimes may not need to be popularly reelected to stay in power, but this truism does not mean that the survival of these governments does not depend at least somewhat on the maintenance of legitimacy. Telhami's public opinion theory essentially states that Arab rulers, fearing the possibility of internal instability and overthrow, strive to act in ways that coincide with public opinion. Given the potent transnational connections and identities within the Arab world, a leader's internal legitimacy is often correlated with his ability to effectively harness symbolic regional issues and frame his policy choices within this broader context.<sup>65</sup> The most fundamental and arousing transnational issues are, to use Telhami's generalization, those concerning Palestine and anticolonialism, both of which "remain at the core" of many preeminent regional and international matters.<sup>66</sup> Telhami's theory characterizes these symbols as "providing the lens through which Arabs view the world."<sup>67</sup> As such, leaders are expected to filter their decisions through this publicly-solidified lens in order to safeguard their regional and domestic standing.<sup>68</sup> Although the public opinion variable does not appear to have influenced Jordan's 1994 treaty with Israel, it displays causal power in explaining the absence of a formal Syrian-Israeli peace agreement.

#### *The Jordanian Case (or Lack Thereof)*

---

<sup>58</sup> Ismael 299; Bouillon 10.

<sup>59</sup> Allison Astorino-Courtois, "Transforming International Agreements into National Realities: Marketing Arab-Israeli Peace in Jordan," *The Journal of Politics* 58 (1996): 1037.

<sup>60</sup> Astorino-Courtois 1037.

<sup>61</sup> Brand 302.

<sup>62</sup> Brand 295; Bouillon 11.

<sup>63</sup> Shibley Telhami, "Arab Public Opinion and the Gulf War," *Political Science Quarterly* 103 (1993): 437.

<sup>64</sup> Telhami 439.

<sup>65</sup> Telhami 439.

<sup>66</sup> Telhami 441.

<sup>67</sup> Telhami 441.

<sup>68</sup> Telhami 440.

The Jordanian regime's decision regarding peace does not correlate with Telhami's characterization of the relationship between Arab leadership and public opinion. For Telhami's theory to have proven relevant, King Hussein would have had to cater his actions to popular opinions regarding the question of Palestine and relations with Western "colonialist" powers. Realities show that quite the opposite occurred. Jordanian non-aggression and normalization with Israel marked a dramatic deviation from public attitudes regarding both Israel and its close association with the United States. Not only did the peace treaty risk inciting public anger on the question of Arab solidarity, but it was a precarious move considering nearly 60% of Jordan's population was Palestinian.<sup>69</sup> Jordan's actions in 1994, boldly stated, reflect a nearly complete disregard for public opinion and impact on domestic legitimacy.

### *The Syrian Case*

When the Jordanian regime turned away from the broader Arab public interests, it was still left with its own objectives on which to act. However, within Syria—a country that spent so long nurturing and promoting the image of itself as the champion of the transnational Arab cause—"Israel forms the critical 'other' against which Syrians define themselves, the out-group whose existence promotes their own solidarity."<sup>70</sup> Indeed, Hafez al-Asad ascended to power under the auspices of Arab unity against Israel and projected himself as one of the foremost supporters of the Arabist cause: "I have repeatedly stressed the importance of Arab military coordination... regardless of the differences and the contradictions in their political positions... the defensive capability of the Syrian front is closely tied with capability of the other Arab fronts."<sup>71</sup> Syrian policies vis-à-vis Israel were substantiated in the name of the broader Arab interest, one which served as a "transnational symbol of legitimacy" for Hafez both within Syria and the region. As an Alawite, Asad was only representative of a mere 12% of Syrian population, thereby "possess[ing] the most tenuous public legitimacy in modern Syrian history."<sup>72</sup> Despite his apparent heavy-handed rule over Syria, Asad's use of regional symbols was still a crucial element for his domestic legitimacy and was consistently utilized as a tool of justification to quell potential public antagonism toward his regime.

Throughout his time in power, Hafez al-Asad continually demonstrated his desire to "preserve his status as a pioneer in the Arab struggle against history and as guardian of Arab walls."<sup>73</sup> His rhetoric projected a virulent image of Israel as a "racist" and "illegitimate" state and was frequently employed as a means of reinforcing public opposition against Israel and preparing the masses for the possibility of war.<sup>74</sup> In one of his most dramatic statements, Asad declared that the struggle against Israel was "a fatal confrontation, of life or death, of existence."<sup>75</sup> The leader publicly castigated other Arab nations such as Egypt and Jordan who broke from the mold of Arab solidarity and entered into peace agreements with Israel, fearing that the resulting "fragmentation in the Arab world [would] legitimize Israel's penetration and takeover" and thereby diminish Asad's own internal legitimacy as a pan-Arabist at home.<sup>76</sup> Immediately following the Egyptian-Israeli treaty in 1979, Hafez al-Asad increased his financial and military support for Palestinian guerilla fighters and entered into an enhanced "war of attrition along the new ceasefire line" in an effort to maintain his public reputation.<sup>77</sup>

Aside from being seen as a betrayal to the Arab struggle against Israel, a peace treaty could also be publicly interpreted as a defiance of the transnational anticolonialist cause. As illustrated through the immense influx of Western aid in the cases of Egypt and Jordan, an agreement with Israel was often directly connected to improved relations with the United States as well.<sup>78</sup> Even when Syria eventually felt the need to seek some sort of "rapprochement with the United States" after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it still continued its vituperative "propaganda campaign" against Israel and

<sup>69</sup> Eisenberg 99; Chris Hedges, "As P.L.O. Replaces Israelis, Jordan Remains on Sideline," *The New York Times* (May 29, 1994).

<sup>70</sup> Telhami 149.

<sup>71</sup> Ma'oz 118.

<sup>72</sup> Ma'oz 88-89.

<sup>73</sup> Zisser 117.

<sup>74</sup> Ma'oz 116, 120.

<sup>75</sup> Ma'oz 121.

<sup>76</sup> Zisser 132.

<sup>77</sup> Ma'oz 132.

<sup>78</sup> Zisser 118.

showed no signs of slowing down its arms race with Israel.<sup>79</sup> Nearly all of Asad's foreign policy initiatives reflected his desire to achieve "strategic parity" with Israel so that Syria could serve at the helm of the broader Arab struggle. The internal volatility that may have resulted from any sort of a peaceful reconciliation could have been enough to threaten not only Hafez al-Asad's personal rule, but also that of his successor, Bashar al-Asad, who entered office riding on the coattails of his father's preceding legacy.<sup>80</sup> As such, the argument can be made that peace with Israel would have been counterproductive to Asad's ability to maintain power within his own country: "Denying recognition and avoiding or at least minimizing direct contact were traditional tools of Arab nationalist resistance to Israel and [Hafiz] was determined to demonstrate that he remained the champion of that resistance."<sup>81</sup> A public so immured in the regional Arab cause could not possibly be expected to lash out against a government whose policies were heavily slanted toward the protection of these core Arab values (namely pro-Palestine and anti-West).

### **Alternative Explanation: External Threat**

Ground in Walt's neorealist theory concerning the relationship between alliance formation and threat perception, the final alternative explanation of external threat is one that I found to possess no explanatory power in the Jordanian and Syrian case studies. All else constant, both Jordan and Syria should have been expected to behave identically in their alliance formations by virtue of Walt's analysis of the factors influencing degree of external threat. As history demonstrates, however, Jordan secured peace with Israel in 1994 and Syria did not—despite both countries being faced with a similar level of threat from Israel and thereby theoretically-similar motivations. As such, the influence of external threat appears to be irrelevant to the discrepancy in Jordanian and Syrian outcomes regarding Israel.

#### *Theoretical Construct: Balance of Threat*

S.M. Walt, a neorealist, postulates that states are motivated into alliances on the grounds of external threat, at which point they either join forces with "others against the prevailing threat" or "alig[n] with the source of danger."<sup>82</sup> These tendencies to balance or bandwagon are, Walt believes, based primarily on the perceived level of threat on the grounds of aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions.<sup>83</sup> When analyzed alongside a specific state and its potential challenger, these four factors have the capacity to help explain a country's alliance choices. A state that is deemed particularly threatening is more likely to provoke balancing or bandwagoning behavior. Considered separately, each of Walt's proposed factors affects threat perception differently. For instance, a nation with seemingly-enhanced aggregate power is likely to be more of a threat than one whose relative size, number of resources, and economic and military strength are substandard.<sup>84</sup> A similar threat level exists when a country possesses "the ability to threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of another state," is assumed to be particularly belligerent, or lies in "close geographic proximity."<sup>85</sup> While some nations may attempt to balance against a state with a high level of threat, others simply do not possess the strength or stability to do so and find themselves in a position where bandwagoning offers the best chance of security.<sup>86</sup>

#### *The Jordan and Syrian Cases (or Lack Thereof)*

An application of Walt's theory of external threat to the case studies at hand reveals a situation in which perceptions of Israeli threat should have been relatively equal. Israel's aggregate and offensive power in the 1990s in terms of military strength and preparedness and economic stability was dramatically greater than that of either Jordan or Syria. Jordan's economy, as previously explained, was reeling from diminished international aid in the aftermath of the Gulf War, while Syria was suffering from a disproportionate amount of military spending (50% of budget) with limited

---

<sup>79</sup> Ma'oz 202.

<sup>80</sup> Zisser 118.

<sup>81</sup> Rabinovich 28.

<sup>82</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 17.

<sup>83</sup> Walt 22.

<sup>84</sup> Walt 22.

<sup>85</sup> Walt 24-26.

<sup>86</sup> Walt 29.

focus on its internal financial stability.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, both Jordan and Syria suffered dramatic territorial losses at the behest of the Israeli army, proving the formers' vast inferiority in terms of military strength. Prior to the official normalization of relations, Israel already militarily "interceded on Jordan's behalf in 1970" in order to protect against a Syrian attack in the wake of mounting PLO resistance.<sup>88</sup> Jordan's insistence that its treaty with Israel include provisions for joint security arrangements such as Israeli protections against "Palestinian nationalist energies in the East Bank" suggests the realization of Israel's military supremacy.<sup>89</sup> Even with Syria's proclaimed arms race with Israel and the procurement of resources "roughly equivalent to that of Israel in terms of tanks, armored personnel carriers, aircraft, artillery, and warships," its "technical capacity" could in no way measure up to the offensive superiority of the Israeli armed forces.<sup>90</sup>

Moreover, both Jordan and Syria share a portion of their western borders with Israel; geographic proximity is certainly roughly the same. This close physical contact and mutual disparity with Israel in terms of power and military strength translate into a high threat perception from both the Jordanian and Syrian perspectives. This perception is only heightened by fears that Israel will act again on the aggressive intentions it demonstrated during the wars in 1948, 1967, 1973, and 1982—all of which resulted in Arab territorial losses and Israeli control of land and resources.<sup>91</sup> By all accounts, then, Israel posed a similar if not identical external threat to Jordan and Syria. Considered in tandem with Walt's theoretical construct, this comparable level of threat should have resulted in parallel alliance formation tactics. Nevertheless, Jordan and Syria did not make the same choices in terms of their foreign policy decisions despite these shared elements—an incongruity which suggests that external threat could not have been a widely influential variable in explaining Jordan's peace with Israel and Syria's continued stalemate.

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the impertinence of external threat to these case studies, Jordan and Syria's divergent outcomes with respect to Israel are elucidated primarily through an analysis of respective levels of trust and communication and the nature of territorial agreement. These factors indicate the applicability of a constructivist theoretical construct, through which one can discern that Jordan and Syria's years of either cooperative or competitive interactions with Israel resulted in entrenched collective identities. These identities laid the groundwork for the nature of each country's discussions with Israel; Jordan's success was largely derived from the trust and continuity built up through years of secret interactions with Israel and ability to compromise on territory, while Syria's suspended negotiations stemmed from a relationship ground in suspicion, hostility, and a mutual refusal to budge on issues concerning land and water. In addition to these primary elements of explanation, the economy and need for domestic legitimacy are two other alternative independent variables whose influence should not be ignored. Though not particularly helpful in the case of Syria, the economy—specifically the dire need for external economic assistance in the aftermath of the Gulf War and a nearly decade-long debt crisis—is a motivational factor for Jordan's peace treaty with Israel. The treaty resulted in significant economic benefits in the form of debt forgiveness and international aid, all of which were imperative to protect the stability of the Jordanian regime. On the Syrian side, public opinion and the need to ensure domestic legitimacy are factors inhibiting any Syrian-Israeli reconciliation. Asad built up his reputation and support on the grounds of the pan-Arab cause, thereby continually possessing a need to justify his behavior on the grounds of Arab solidarity against Israel. Normalized relations in the form of a treaty would threaten Asad's reputation and, accordingly, his internal stability as ruler. Although there have been successive attempts at peace under Asad's successor, Bashar al-Asad, these, too, have yet to result in any agreement.<sup>92</sup> The importance of trust, positive communication, and compromise in the Jordanian case may provide somewhat of a prescriptive formula for successful negotiation with Israel – one which Syria might benefit from should it reinstate discussions in the future. The process of reconstructing a cooperative relationship from one ground in years of distrust and obstinacy will not be immediate or straightforward, but—as Wendt projects—identities are by no means immutable and the prospect for change is always present.

---

<sup>87</sup> Ismael 254.

<sup>88</sup> Yehuda Lukacs, *Israel, Jordan and the Peace Process* (Ithaca: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>89</sup> Susser, "What was in it for Jordan?" *The Jerusalem Report* v. 14 (1994).

<sup>90</sup> Palmer 192.

<sup>91</sup> Telhami 149.

<sup>92</sup> Jerome Slater, "Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Israel and Syria, 1948-2001," *International Security* 27 (2002): 99-101.

### Works Cited

- Astorino-Courtois, Allison. 1996. "Transforming International Agreements into National Realities: Marketing Arab-Israeli Peace in Jordan." *The Journal of Politics* 58: 1035-1054.
- Bouillon, Markus. 2002. "Walking the Tightrope: Jordanian Foreign Policy from the Gulf Crisis to the Peace Process and Beyond." In *Jordan in Transition: 1990-2000*, ed. George H. Joffé. New York: Palgrave.
- Brand, Laurie A. 1994. *Jordan's Inter-Arab Relations: The Political Economy of Alliance-Making*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Eisenberg, Laura Zittrain and Neil Caplan. 1998. *Negotiating Arab-Israeli Peace: Patterns, Problems, Possibilities*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Haddadin, Munther J. 2002. "Water in the Middle East Peace Process." *The Geographical Journal* 168: 324-340.
- Hedges, Chris. 1994. "As P.L.O. Replaces Israelis, Jordan Remains on Sideline." *The New York Times*. May 29.
- Ismael, Tareq Y. 2001. *Middle East Politics Today: Government and Civil Society*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.
- Lukacs, Yehuda. 1997. *Israel, Jordan and the Peace Process*. Ithaca: Syracuse University Press.
- Lynch, Marc. 1999. *State Interests and Public Spheres: The International Politics of Jordan's Identity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Mandell, Brian S. 1996. "Getting to Peacekeeping in Principal Rivalries: Anticipating a Israel-Syrian Peace Treaty." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40: 238-271.
- Ma'oz, Moshe. 1995. *Syria and Israel: From War to Peacemaking*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Palmer, Monte. 2002. *The Politics of the Middle East*. Belmont: Thomson Learning.
- Rabinovich, Itamar. 1998. *The Brink of Peace: The Israeli-Syrian Negotiations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Slater, Jerome. 2002. "Lost Opportunities for Peace in the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Israel and Syria, 1948-2001." *International Security* 27:79-106.
- Susser. 1994. "What was in it for Jordan?" *The Jerusalem Report* V.14.

- Telhami, Shibley. 1993. "Arab Public Opinion and the Gulf War." *Political Science Quarterly* 103: 437-452.
- Telhami, Shibley and Michael Barnett. 2002. *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Walt, Stephen M. 1987. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Wendt, Alexander. 1992. "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46: 391-425.
- Zak, Moshe. 1995. "Thirty Years of Clandestine Meetings: The Jordan-Israel Peace Treaty." *Middle East Quarterly* 2.1.
- Zisser, Eyal. 2001. *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition*. New York: New York University Press.