

## **Book Review: Dancing with Saddam: The Strategic Tango of Jordanian-Iraqi Relations**

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Schenker, David. *Dancing With Saddam: The Strategic Tango of Jordanian-Iraqi Relations*. London, Boulder, New York, Oxford: Lexington Books, 2003. Co-published with The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 128pp. \$50.00 (cloth).

Seldom does a book become obsolete shortly after (or even before) appearing in print. This dubious notoriety seems to befall the book under review as its publication happened to coincide with the United States invasion of Iraq in Spring 2003 and the subsequent toppling of the Saddam Hussein regime. It is after all difficult to tango with an interlocker who is confined to a prison cell, awaiting trial. It is very tempting therefore to dismiss *Dancing with Saddam* as irrelevant, an example of the rapidly changing “new Middle East,” where yesterday’s realities may quickly turn into tomorrow’s anachronism. However, passing so harsh a judgment may be premature in this case. In spite of its apparent weaknesses, a closer scrutiny of this volume may prove useful to our understanding of the post-Iraq War regional realities, particularly insofar as the future of the Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan is concerned.

David Schenker is a Middle East policy advisor in the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense and former research fellow of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. This study is the product of research he conducted between 1999 and 2001 under the auspice of that institute. It is based in part on confidential conversations with “dozens of Jordanian politicians, businessmen, intellectuals, and royals” (p. vii) as well as printed media sources and a litany of statistical data gathered during the author’s stay in Amman. It can therefore be regarded as a valid representation of Jordanian public opinion towards bilateral relations with Iraq during a crucial period in the history of Jordan: the transmission of power from the late King Hussein to his son Abdullah.

The interest in deciphering Jordanian attitudes towards Iraq in the 1980s and 1990s derives from an apparent shift in the kingdom’s foreign policy during the crisis that had led to the Gulf War of 1991 and its aftermath. A loyal and consistent American (previously British) ally for most of his four and a half decades on the throne, King Hussein surprised many in the summer of 1990 when he assumed a position of friendly neutrality towards Iraq after it had oc-

cupied Kuwait. The ambivalent Jordanian stance towards the future of Iraq continued throughout most of the 1990s and into the early reign of Abdullah and the 2003 war.

Schenker’s thesis is plain and well articulated. Over the course of the past two decades or so, Iraq has become Jordan’s main economic partner. Jordan serves “as Iraq’s principal entrepôt” and it “has become economically dependent on Iraq” (p. 1). However, the ties between these two nations go well beyond economics alone. They share “very strong feelings of amity” (p. 6). Indeed, “Iraq is one of the few subjects on which most all Jordanians—East Bankers and Palestinians alike—agree” (ibid).

The book is divided into four chapters. The first, entitled “History and Common Identity” attempts to trace the historical ties between the two countries from the Arab Revolt of World War I to the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s and beyond. This is clearly the weakest part of the book since Schenker’s command of the two countries’ history is very limited. It is dotted with hollow and occasionally inaccurate statements, such as the characterization of “[t]he peoples of what would later become Jordan and Iraq” as “comrades in arms” against the Ottoman Empire (p. 7). Otherwise the reference to the relations between the two countries prior to the 1990s is scant. It is interesting to note that the short-lived union between the two countries, forged in early 1958 and terminated after the Iraqi coup that ended Hashimite rule over the country, is mentioned only once, in a coincidental manner, as Schenker cites an unidentified former Jordanian minister who “opined that Iraqis harbor a deep guilt about the slaughter of the Iraqi royals in 1958” (p. 23).

The second chapter, entitled “Economics,” is much better researched and its conclusions should be of interest to readers of current Middle Eastern politics. Schenker identifies correctly the structural weaknesses of Jordan’s economy and the manner in which its symbiotic relationship with its Iraqi counterpart helps alleviate some of them. Iraq’s supply of cheap oil to its neighbor to the west has been “the lubricant” of this bilateral economic relationship and it has formed “Jordan’s greatest source of foreign aid” during the 1980s and 1990s (p. 31). Meanwhile, during the long years of its war with Iran and international isolation following the war of 1991, Iraq relied on Jordanian supply of imported goods, allowing the Hashimite Kingdom to develop an “impressive transport industry” (p. 46). How-

ever, the declining traffic of such goods during the second half of the 1990s threatened to have a detrimental effect on Jordan's sole port city of Aqaba.

Iraq's superior economic position allowed Saddam Hussein to use bilateral trade as a tool with which to manipulate the Jordanian political system. Schenker's main contribution perhaps could be found in the third chapter of the book, entitled "Pro-Iraq Elements in Jordan," in which he identifies various groups and individuals that promoted closer ties with Baghdad and attempted to influence their country's policy in that direction. Saddam, it seems, was very successful in acquiring such good will with a blend of lavish spending, propaganda, and intimidation. The Iraq lobby in Amman included a variety of professional associations (most notably representatives of the printed and audio-visual media), economic interests (such as the Amman Chamber of Commerce), student unions (by the 1980s, about 5,000 Jordanians were enrolled in Iraqi universities, "comprising about 10 percent of Jordan's total higher education enrollment" [p. 73]), and Islamist advocacy groups.

The last chapter deals with "The Abdullah Era" and the manner in which he has attempted to follow his father's footsteps in maintaining the delicate balance between Iraq

and the USA (not to mention Jordan's other neighbors, Syria, Israel, and Saudi Arabia) in a manner that would most benefit the kingdom and assure the stability of his regime. Writing his study "as U.S.-Iraq war clouds begin to gather," Schenker assessed Abdullah's approach as "trying to improve ties with both simultaneously" (p. 92). Assessing in his concluding remarks the young monarch's likely conduct in the eventuality of a war, Schenker predicted, correctly, that unlike his late father, who had been "compelled to toe a 'neutral' line during the Gulf War, it is almost inconceivable that King Abdullah would not (quietly) align himself with the West" (p. 108).

In the aftermath of the war in Iraq, as the U.S.-led coalition continues in its efforts to suppress the indigenous insurgency and usher in a functioning, stable, democratically elected government, regional states like Jordan may and do play an important role in the process. Therefore, even though much of the data gathered for *Dancing with Saddam* may seem outdated, it could serve as the basis for assessing current and future Jordanian policies towards post-Saddam Iraq. Schenker ought to be encouraged to undertake follow-up research in that direction, assuming he has not become engaged in it already.