

Jordan:

Extended Crisis, Heightened Threat

by [Barry Rubin \(/experts/barry-rubin\)](/experts/barry-rubin)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Barry Rubin \(/experts/barry-rubin\)](/experts/barry-rubin)

Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.



Brief Analysis

The threat to Jordan's stability is the hidden crisis within the current Gulf conflict. King Hussein's regime is likely to survive, but its fall would bring dire consequences to the region. Jordan's role as a buffer amid powerful, quarreling neighbors has made it a keystone of regional stability. But the deteriorating economy, election of an Islamic fundamentalist speaker of parliament, and growing attacks on Israel by Jordanian soldiers suggest Jordan's traditional role is in jeopardy.

Jordan is at a crossroads. The king is trying to play both sides of the Gulf crisis simultaneously: with Iraq, to avoid antagonizing his fearsome neighbor and its supporters in Jordan; with the international alliance, to gain economic aid from Saudi Arabia and strategic backing from the United States.

Jordan's elite understands Iraq's hegemonic designs and does not want to be its next target. In the long run, an Iraqi victory in Kuwait threatens the existence of the Jordanian regime and state. Yet Amman also realizes that a break with Iraq may be fatal in the short run.

Thus, Jordan's situation requires it to play a double game. But, as the crisis drags on, this becomes harder. For example, the kingdom has two exceptions to sanctions: the humanitarian sale of food -- Jordan's main export to Iraq -- and, lacking an alternative supplier, the purchase of oil -- Jordan's largest import from Iraq.

The Impact of the Gulf Crisis

Three factors make the king's crown rest uneasily on his head:

- **Iraqi power:** Whether or not Saddam Hussein succeeds in keeping Kuwait, he is likely to remain in power. If King Hussein antagonizes the Iraqi dictator, Saddam will surely seek revenge in the future. Aside from Iraq's military arsenal, Saddam's popularity within Jordan and his ability to engage in subversion (terrorism, assassination, subsidizing the opposition) also give him considerable leverage.
- **Jordan's economic weakness:** Jordan's past economic well-being depended on a Persian Gulf oil boom that was already fading before the current crisis. The 1989 riots among King Hussein's usually loyal East Bank subjects was a severe danger signal.

The Kuwait crisis has made things worse: Jordan is seeking \$2.3 billion in damages. Its debt rescheduling plan has been shattered (although Amman unilaterally wrote off the money it owed Kuwait). The international embargo against Iraq has cut revenues from the port of Aqaba and overland transport. Unemployment is at severe levels. Jordanian citizens who worked in the Gulf, including Palestinians of West Bank origin, have been fired for political reasons, returning to Jordan by the tens of thousands.

The United States is urging Saudi Arabia to provide large-scale economic aid. But the Saudis, playing by Middle East rules, want to punish King Hussein for his treachery and seem preoccupied by conspiracy theories about Jordan's secret collaboration with Saddam and lust for Saudi territory. Economists project an extremely dangerous economic climate for Jordan by early next year.

- The radical upsurge: Jordan is the only country where there is genuine enthusiasm for Saddam Hussein. Palestinians there naively think he will destroy Israel for them; Islamic fundamentalists cynically want to use him to combat Western influence and presence. King Hussein is literally riding a tiger, playing a populist role that is making him sound more like a Syrian or Iraqi ruler than the man who until recently was President Bush's favorite Middle East leader. It is not clear how long this strange bit of miscasting can be sustained.

The Fundamentalist Challenge

The most worrisome development for Jordan's political elite has been the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. The election of Abd al-Latif Arabiyat, a Muslim Brother, as parliament speaker is troubling. True, Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood has a long history of good relations with the monarchy, the election was close, and Arabiyat needed leftist votes to win. Still, 34 of the 80 legislators are fundamentalists. The assembly may only be beginning to defy the king's government.

What makes the fundamentalist issue a special concern is that it erodes the traditionally solid support for the regime among East Bank Jordanians. A large segment of Palestinians have always been ambivalent, if not hostile, toward the king. The potential for a fundamentalist-Palestinian anti-government alliance could pose a more difficult challenge to the regime than the defeated Arab nationalist wave of the mid-1950s and PLO threat of 1970.

Jordan has little to fear from Israel but a great deal to lose from an intensified Arab-Israeli conflict. The radicals want to promote a confrontation and recent desertions by Jordanian soldiers -- and their crossing the river to attack Israeli targets -- hints at dangerous discontent in the army. Without a stable and participating Jordan there can be no progress on any Arab-Israeli peace process.

King Hussein is no stranger to managing difficult problems. Yet there can be no doubt that Jordan is the Arab state most likely to be destabilized by an Iraqi victory or to face internal upheaval in the event of a protracted crisis or U.S.-Iraq war.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute study *Inside the PLO: Officials, Notables, Revolutionaries* (Policy Focus #12, 1989), *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics* (St. Martin's Press, 1990) and the forthcoming *Revolution until Victory: The Politics and History of the PLO*. ❖

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