

Securitization of the Coronavirus Crisis in Jordan: Successes and Limitations

by [Saud Al-Sharafat \(/experts/saud-al-sharafat\)](#)

May 11, 2020

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/amnt-azmt-fyrws-kwrwna-fy-alardn-alnjahat-walqywd\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Saud Al-Sharafat \(/experts/saud-al-sharafat\)](#)

Dr. Saud Al-Sharafat is a former Brig. Gen in the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate, as well as founder and chairman of the Shorufat Center for the Study of Globalization and Terrorism. His writings mainly focus on issues pertinent to globalization and international terrorism.



Brief Analysis

As the Coronavirus pandemic is globalized, many states are facing similar challenges and choices in how to respond, with three major options: surrender and death, struggle and life, and prioritization of the economy in lieu of public health. These difficult choices are playing out in each state and the outcomes of each choice are now more relevant than ever to the globalized system.

Jordan has chosen to sharply prioritize public health

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Jordan-response-COVID19-pandemic-Middle-East>) of people's lives at the expense of the economy, despite Jordan's difficult economic conditions reflected by its high unemployment rates, huge debts, low economic growth, and economic stagnation. Due to an early shutdown and one of the strongest reactions in the region, the number of cases and deaths in Jordan is still small, with (562) cases registered and 9 deaths as of May 11. The state has gone on to address the economic consequences of this decision and take care of the Jordanian people, especially those who are economically disadvantaged, such as day laborers and self-employed workers.

The state has accomplished these measures through the process of securitization

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/turkeys-securitization-of-the-kurdish-issue-a-dangerous-strategy>). In the general theoretical framework of securitization, according to the security-focused

"Copenhagen School" of international relations theory and its best-known theorists like Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, this is the process whereby political actors reclassify a subject as a security issue, then use speech to convince the public of the issue's importance and the need to dedicate asymmetric resources to it. If a subject is successfully securitized, then it is possible to legitimize extraordinary means to solve a perceived problem. Such a process could then include declaring a state of emergency or martial law, as well as mobilizing the military.

Securitization theorists argue that a variety of issues, such as terrorism or immigration, will receive disproportionate attention and resources when securitized in comparison with subjects that have not been securitized, even when these other subjects could cause more harm.

The issues are not simply self-evident; they must be articulated as problems by securitizing actors. Political rhetoric

identifying terrorism as a 'threat to national security,' for instance, shifts terrorism from a low priority political concern to a high priority issue that requires action, such as securing borders.

Jordan's actions in response to the pandemic have demonstrated how securitizing this threat can galvanize the public. In addition to implementing public health measures such as quarantines, tests, lockdowns, and other economic and social measures, Jordanians—as political actors—have no choice but to wage unconventional war on coronavirus, by framing it as a security threat, where every individual in Jordan is a "soldier" in this war.

In his March 23 address to the nation, King Abdullah II applied language in this vein during his remarks (<https://kingabdullah.jo/en/speeches/video-message-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii>): "My brothers and sisters, my family, my people, and my source of fortitude each and every one of you is a soldier of this nation, each in your own post."

In consequence, Jordan introduced and implemented some of the toughest anti-coronavirus measures in the world. These measures included an indefinite curfew, a one-year prison sentence to those who violated it, and the closing of all businesses in the Kingdom. All of these measures are implemented by the force of the minister of interior in cooperation with the Jordan Armed Forces, further emphasizing the securitization of the threat.

For Jordanians, the sight of armed forces along with police deployment in the streets—including check-points in all thirteen Jordanian provinces—has solidified this image of coronavirus as a military threat. Military supervision of social distancing in the streets and of commercial movement has included in-person and drone monitoring of citizens' compliance with defense laws and ensure there are no violations of the curfew. Sirens call for a full curfew every day at 6 p.m.

These clear securitization manifestations are notably unprecedented for many younger Jordanians. The appearance of army patrols as they roam the streets, on checkpoints, along with the isolation of Amman from the rest of the provinces and the closing of other provinces has not occurred since the 1970s. These previous measures were last implemented during the events of September 1970 and in the aftermath of the expulsion of Palestinian guerillas from Jordan. The sirens are reminiscent of the Second Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein fired Scud missiles against Israel in early 1991. As such, the current measures against coronavirus resemble the state's response to major security events in Jordanian history, further solidifying a sense of securitization.

Even so, the state is also enacting other measures to counter the secondary effects of the lockdown, focusing particularly on its economic implications. Special fundraising efforts have solicited funds from institutions and individuals alike, establishing three specialized funds to support the Ministry of Health and affected sectors.

The Central Bank of Jordan is also creating a package of precautionary measures in order to contain the negative repercussions of the pandemic on the performance of the local economy. Banks are now allowed to restructure the loans of individuals and companies, especially small and medium-sized loans, which have been affected by the repercussions of this virus. The Central Bank has also decided to inject additional liquidity to the national economy of 500 million dinars through reducing mandatory cash reserves, reducing the cost of financing, and increasing the time limits for existing and future facilities for economic sectors. This is all in addition to support for the Jordanian Loan Guarantee Company's procedures by reducing the commissions of the company's programs and raising the percentage of insurance coverage for the local sales guarantee program.

Notably, the process of securitization and concurrent economic efforts are being met with public approval; the state's response to the crisis has increased the popularity of King Abdullah II. A number of popular heroes within the state have also emerged, including the Minister of Health and Minister of State for Media Affairs and Government.

There have also been positive social changes as the country has sought to respond to the crisis. Increasing social solidarity and cooperation between neighbors and citizens, especially in relation to Jordan's distinct Arab

communities such as Iraqis and Egyptians, is all visible in the wake of the crisis. Moreover, there has been a strong adherence to Jordanian regulations and laws, along with many going above and beyond by donating to Jordanian sovereign funds. These trends have the potential of remaining even after the end of the crisis if they are cultivated and encouraged.

Limits to Securitization

The coronavirus in Jordan has gone beyond identifying the disease a "critical public health crisis" due to concerns that a medical emergency would not provide the speed and agility necessary for dealing with the virus and to prevent its spread. Jordan's "securitization model" has in many ways proven itself as an effective, quick, and strict way to mobilize all needed resources available in the face of the pandemic to preserve lives and property before the disease was able to infect a large proportion of the population.

There are many signs that Jordan's securitization strategy has been a relative success in the face of a major threat. However, the state's decision to approach the challenge through a securitized lens should not be interpreted as the response of a strong state able to quickly mobilize its army and security forces, impose lockdowns, and maintain domestic stability in the face of a global crisis. Rather, a quick and decisive response to the crisis was seen as a necessity to prevent a mass outbreak because of the government's awareness of the lack of the necessary resources to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.

Similarly, as Jordan looks to maintain its successes, it will be faced with a new challenge of how and when to reopen to the outside world. The pandemic is global, and no one state can eliminate the threat without a concerted and international effort. This may explain the call in a [joint article in the Financial Times by King Abdullah II](https://www.ft.com/content/c0178836-7274-11ea-90ce-5fb6c07a27f2) (<https://www.ft.com/content/c0178836-7274-11ea-90ce-5fb6c07a27f2>) and leaders of four other countries, led by Germany, for a new global alliance to accelerate scientific research and enhance its funding to access the new coronavirus vaccines.

Moreover, the lasting effects of this crisis are still in the process of emerging. Like most countries, Jordan's political, economic, social, and security will certainly suffer from the crisis. There will be significant challenges in all sectors, from bankruptcies to high unemployment rates, disruption of the tourism sector Jordan has worked so hard to build, and reduced remittances from workers abroad.

There are also drawbacks specific to securitization. Securitization runs the risk of stunting human development, democratic transformations, and the evolution of political, parliamentary and civil society institutions, especially when emergency laws are extended. In the medium term, a sense of decreased freedoms may lead to the emergence of serious societal challenges, such as high crime, robbery, theft, widespread drug use, increased mental illness, and possibly suicide.

Social unrest in the midst of a crisis can become a self-fulfilling cycle. Domestic unrest is likely to increase the burden of the various security agencies, making them more vulnerable to threats from different terrorist groups. Political activists, opposition movements, and many intellectuals in Jordan are wary of the political consequences of securitization, as the extraordinary means employed to deal with the security threat could lead to an erosion of democratic norms. There is a particular fear that the continuation of these measures will lead to a tightening of public freedoms, freedom of the press, and hinder the difficult democratic process in the country. Although it is not clear how Jordanian intellectuals abroad view the "securitization model," there is certainly a wealth of information being shared between those abroad and those who remain at home, and scenes in Jordan are featured on social media.

Yet despite what may be valid concerns, available polling suggests that a large majority of Jordanians (77.9 percent) are satisfied with the government's performance during the crisis. This suggests that most Jordanians, at least for

now, see the trade-offs as warranted and a variation of the difficult calculations most countries have made. Whether this support will last if these restrictions continue remains to be seen.

In the meantime, Jordan can build on its successes from short-term securitization by ensuring that this securitization does not become a continuous state of affairs. The government can continue to reassure the public through two strategies. The state must first gradually remove all military manifestations from public streets—especially within cities, communities, workplaces, and shopping places. This move must be communicated publicly through press briefings by the National Center for Security and Crisis Management, the Minister of State for Media Affairs and Government, and the Minister of Health—which has been conducted daily since the beginning of the crisis. The second key factor is the resumption of an official political process. Jordan’s general election for parliamentarians is scheduled for September and King Abdullah II confirmed in late February that these elections will take place. Now, Jordan must ensure that the political process continues with the implementation of appropriate safety standards.

On-time elections will send an important political message that Jordan is a strong country that is capable of dealing with a pandemic while continuing its standard political process. Both a withdrawal of the military and elections will further confirm that Jordan’s securitization strategy was applied only when necessary and will not permanently hinder the country’s societal freedoms in the long term. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)