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Redefining Security in Jordan-U.S. Relations

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Brief Analysis

The United States and Jordan need to broaden the scope of their security relationship and prepare for a more diverse array of security concerns.

In his most [recent address](#) to the World Economic Forum's Davos Agenda, His Majesty King Abdullah II opened with in the line: "We begin a new year with many of the challenges that marked the last one still rippling into just about every sector." Indeed, the Covid-19 crisis has put Jordan through a real "stress test" that has exposed, and will continue to expose, the structural vulnerabilities and imbalances inherent within the country. Going forward, this will require reassessing not only the Jordanian system's efficiency but also its effectiveness in addressing the crises of these times. The current crisis has proven that Jordan is only as strong and resilient as the weakest and most vulnerable individuals and institutions in the country.

In essence, the King's remarks called for the rethinking and reinvention of our policy tools; placing empathy, dignity, and innovation at the heart of how Jordanians and people of the world shall 'heal together.' The United States—Jordan's [single largest provider of bilateral aid](#)—has a key role to play in cementing said call for challenging the acceptance of business as usual in the country. And while both countries are undergoing transformations, Jordan must begin to carve out a place for itself within the changing regional and global context as the new U.S. administration settles into the White House.

Yet, as the saying goes, it takes two to tango. That is, both countries have a shared responsibility in crafting a new

paradigm that sees Jordan's stability through a lens of development and prosperity that extends beyond the traditional paradigm of physical security. In elucidating this, the focus on physical security in the traditional sense seems to have come at the expense of broader human security issues, [addressing immediate security threats such as radicalization and violent extremism](#) without sufficiently addressing their [structural drivers](#), such as weak governance, social injustice and marginalization. The strategy [employs economic, legislative and security policies](#) to deal with the resulting violence without paying equal heed to [pre-and-post violence](#) issues. Combined, such exclusive physical security policies do not bode well for Jordan's long-term stability.

The implications of Covid-19 have clearly further reinforced the need to rethink the meaning of security in this context and broaden its umbrella to include food, water, energy, health, and individual security. As such, Jordan's policy toolbox must expand to include new tactics and strategies attuned not only to circumventing and minimizing the potential consequences of Covid-19, but also enhancing the country's self-reliance, flexibility, and resilience in the face of unforeseeable crises beyond the current pandemic. The region is changing, and so should Jordan—with bold and calculated measures.

A new administration in the White House offers new opportunities on these fronts. A [recent Washington Institute poll](#) taken on the cusp of the election revealed a sharp rise in how many Jordanians value good relations with the United States. It is no secret that a lack of importance placed on U.S. relations in the past was the result of the previous administration's regional policies, which had a direct economic and political impact on Jordan. Two cases in point are the [Trump Peace Plan](#) and [the economic targeting of Jordan](#) due to its political stances on regional matters. Jordan expects greater understanding and support on economic empowerment from the new administration.

Jordan's change of discourse provides yet another opportunity in this direction. Notably, the King's aforementioned address did not cite the typical challenges of poverty or unemployment, but spoke instead of financial inclusion, reducing the digital divide, moving SMEs into the formal economy and exploring water and Agri-Tech solutions. The address even cited climate change as 'a greater pandemic' than Covid-19. This shift in discourse signals a new 'call for action' for Jordanians, as it introduces emerging needs that require transforming the way the country identifies its challenges and priorities.

However, what remains tricky in achieving such transformative changes will be the degree of Jordan's ability to shrewdly handle its reform agenda, striking a balance between economic and political reform. Jordan will have to decide how adamantly it will move towards enhancing citizenship as a social, political and economic practice, promoting good governance and expanding freedoms in both expression and thought while de-securitizing the civic space. Political reform is important in tandem with the economic reforms efforts given [three distinct characteristics](#) of Jordan's political environment over the last decade: overpowering the state authority, lack of trust in political institutions, and weak accountability measures. In his [recent interview](#) with Jordan News Agency, Petra, the King has renewed the call for political reform, directing the review of political reform bills such as the electoral, political parties, and local administration laws.

Likewise, the move forward requires the demonstration of goodwill that capitalizes on the solid ties with the new U.S. administration, beginning with the application of a more comprehensive human security lens to aid and programmatic interventions in Jordan. Such a lens demands a shift in thinking that synthesizes and achieves both the security of the Jordanian state and the Jordanian citizen secured through military deterrence and civic prevention.

While acknowledging that reducing or redirecting U.S. support to the Jordanian military could open vulnerabilities, the two countries must work together to redefine security to more accurately reflect the challenges Jordan is likely to face in the future. This entails going beyond the focus on Jordan's military capacities, for instance,

to strengthen competence and capabilities through solidifying co-accountability processes. Such processes should be grounded in a shared vision driven by an understanding of needs rather than “wants” in Amman and/or Washington. An approach centered on capacity-building operates in the transactional realm, thus delineating accountability to predesigned outputs contributing mainly to short-term political capital “expensed” in the form of “access”. But if we truly believe in the value of the strategic relationship between the two countries, then aid must be taken one step further to complete the cycle of resilience by ensuring resources are fairly channeled to where issues and needs are pressing.

Equally important, it is imperative to recognize that Jordan has long been trapped in crisis management mode, constantly mending fences and managing the spillover from regional instabilities. This consistent stress has left little room to think strategically and as the country's history seems to feature constant challenges. Jordanians, on their side, have nonetheless persevered through crises and remained optimistic about the future of their country; in a [recent KAS regional survey](#), 65 percent of Jordanians said they believe that the country's economic future will be better in twelve months.

Jordanians were also [among the first in the world](#) in providing free Covid-19 vaccinations for refugees. Jordan has likewise been a key actor to fighting terrorism and countering violent extremism at home and abroad; the [Aqaba Process](#) offers a solid Jordanian model that can be utilized as the United States deals with its own homegrown radicalization and extremism.

As such, a redefinition of security between the two countries that builds on Jordan's successes in promoting traditional security is very much in order. It is only wise to support structural reforms as a topline priority for Jordan—once these are underway, Jordan will again prove itself a comfortable and reliable long-term investment for current and future partners. ❖



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