

The Particular Importance of King Abdullah's Visit to Washington

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Brief Analysis

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Jordanian King Abdullah II's upcoming visit to Washington—the first visit by an Arab leader with U.S. President Joe Biden—reflects Amman's political importance and geographic centrality to some of the most intricate problems in the Middle East, from Iraq to Syria to Palestine to Israel. Throughout its history, Jordan's political position towards the region's simmering issues has reflected a combination of its understanding of the U.S. position and its own security, economic, and political interests, which has made it a strong U.S. ally.

However, one underlying issue should be of particular concern during this trip: the ongoing Syrian crisis and the humanitarian and security burdens shouldered by Jordan, as well as the heavy toll it places on the government and economy as a result.

Since the Syrian uprising broke out in 2011, Jordan has received more than one million Syrian refugees, who now make up nearly 13% of the total population of Jordan. At both a governmental and popular level, Jordan has tackled their plight with a great deal of humanity, especially in terms of sharing already scant resources.

A survey conducted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) showed that 83% of Syrian refugees described the way they were treated in Jordan as positive, and that they saw Jordan as doing more than what is needed to support refugees. The same poll showed that 63% of Jordanians believed that the government should focus on helping Jordanians as well as refugees.

These polling results reflect Jordan's concerning economic reality, made even worse due to the coronavirus pandemic. According to official statistics, Jordan's poverty rate reached 15.7% in the fall of 2020. In the same year, unemployment rose to 23%, and the country's public debt to GDP ratio now surpasses 102%. And when it comes to continuing to support the country's refugee population, Jordanian Minister of Planning and International

Cooperation Nasser Shraideh said that his country needs \$2.4 billion from international donors this year to meet the needs of the Syrian refugees living on the kingdom's soil.

A solution to these issues was proposed back in 2017, when the United States and Russia reached an agreement on the status of southern Syria. Washington hoped that Moscow would honor its obligations to push back Iran-backed militias from southern Syria, enact an effective ceasefire, and push for compromises between the Syrian regime and local residents to allow the Syrian refugees return to their regions—at least in the southern region. It was likewise expected that there would be a resumption of trade and transit from Syria and Lebanon to the Gulf states via Jordan. In addition, Russian forces were expected to serve as guarantor for the protection of civilians and release political prisoners. Aside from the effects on Syria itself, all of these U.S. hopes were also aimed at helping Jordan economically, along with supporting its stability and securing its northern border.

Today, four years after those 2017 understandings, it's clear that the Russian side cannot implement any of them. Rather, the exact opposite is unfolding. Iran and its aligned militias now control many positions in southern Syria. Syrian refugees remain unable to return to their homeland safely. And when it comes to economics, the Syrian regime hiked custom tariffs on trucks and transit in such a way that prevents Jordan from making any economic gains.

Moreover, the Syrian regime and Russian-aligned forces' ongoing siege of the southern Syrian city of Daraa over the past two weeks could spark a new wave of displaced Syrians fleeing to Jordan. Also deeply concerning, the regions controlled by the Assad regime—in collaboration with Hezbollah—have become hotbeds for the production and export of drugs to neighboring countries, including Jordan, and drug producers use Jordan as a transit for smuggling to the Gulf states. In response, Saudi Arabia has banned trucks coming from Syria and Lebanon to Saudi Arabia via Jordan—a huge economic loss for Jordan.

While Jordan attempts to navigate these economic disasters, Russia is looking to draw international support away from Jordan and towards Damascus. The Russian Reconciliation Center for Syria recently released statistics suggesting that 121,252 Syrian refugees returned from Jordan via the Jaber-Nassib border crossing. This number is ten times greater than the official UN tally, which estimated that 12,373 Syrian refugees returned to their homeland from Jordan from the middle of last October to February 20, 2021.

However, by claiming a major shift in Syrian migration from Jordan back to Syria, the Russian announcement aims to reduce the international aid provided to Jordan and redirect it to Damascus at the Arab and international level. Damascus has also sought direct cooperation with Jordan; the latter had been invited to the Astana meetings as an observer. After that, Jordanian government delegations' visits were organized to Damascus to discuss mechanisms of cooperation on economy and services between the two countries, although the Syrian regime—which lacks water, electricity, oil, investment, or safe rehabilitation of refugees—has nothing to give Jordan.

Nevertheless, the exchange of visits is a serious indication of the harsh economic situation in Jordan and the few regional options at hand. The situation has even recently sparked unconfirmed rumors that Iraq has agreed to supply Jordan with oil and in return, Iran is ready to renovate religious sites, but called on Jordan to repeal laws related to preventing the entry of Iranian religious tourism.

Given these circumstances, the Jordanian king's next visit to Washington should present a real opportunity for the United States to substantially and effectively help Jordan at this particularly sensitive juncture. There are several policy avenues available:

- The United States can put additional pressure on Russia to make good on its pledges made in 2017, especially those relating to ceasing the military operations carried out by the Syrian regime and creating a safe environment for the return of displaced persons in the south.

- There is also the urgent need to find a resolution to current situation at Rukban Camp, the demilitarized zone in the Syrian desert near the Jordanian border **under siege from regime and Russian forces** (<https://www.syriahr.com/en/219160/>). Perhaps the recent communication between the United States and Russia at the UN Security Council regarding the aid issue may provide a ground for helping both Syrians and Jordan on this serious issue.
- Separately, the United States should lead in supporting an increase in the international support to Jordan to prevent its economic collapse and to help it address the crisis of Syrian refugees and others.
- The United States can also help by bolstering U.S.-Jordanian cooperation in combating drug trafficking and providing Jordan with what it needs to protect its border.
- Further U.S. and Arab direct investments in the Jordanian economy can also help protect Jordan from being exploited due to its fragile economic state.

In conclusion, Jordan is an important historical ally of the United States, and suffers from numerous problems due to its geographical location and its acceptance of over 2 million refugees in total. It is vital for Washington to understand Jordanian concerns, especially as the Iranian axis exerts pressures on the Kingdom as it seeks to expand further. Otherwise, it will be able to take advantage of Jordan's circumstances.

As wealthy regional countries appear to be abandoning political and economic support for Jordan and the refugees residing there, Washington's primary role should be in supporting Jordan and sending a message to all those involved that it supports its historical allies. ❖

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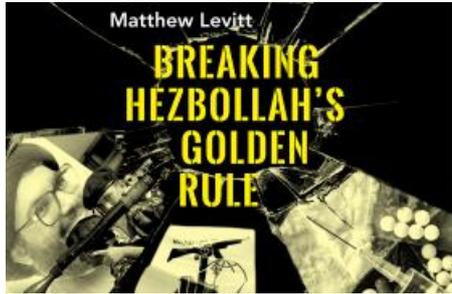
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