

# King Abdullah Must Show Trump Practical Arab Ideas for Gaza

by [Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](/experts/ghaith-al-omari)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](/experts/ghaith-al-omari)

Ghaith al-Omari is the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute's Irwin Levy Family Program on the U.S.-Israel Strategic Relationship.



Brief Analysis

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**Although the president should avoid cornering such an important ally on an issue as risky as Palestinian relocation, the king will need to present his own concrete ideas about postwar Gaza in order to avoid a confrontation with Washington.**

**W**hen King Abdullah II arrives at the White House tomorrow, it will mark the fourth time in a row he has been the first Arab leader invited to visit a new American president. Normally this would be a point of pride for Jordan, an affirmation of the relationship's depth, and a golden opportunity to discuss the full array of issues affecting Jordan's stability and ties with the United States. Yet this week's visit carries an unmistakable sense of foreboding as well. Being the first visitor means he will also be the first to confront the president's controversial proposal to depopulate the Gaza Strip, a topic that will undoubtedly dominate the meeting.

In addressing this delicate matter, the king will have to balance Jordan's national security interests and restive domestic politics with the need to safeguard crucial relations with Washington. Yet striking this balance will likely prove impossible if he does not present Trump with new, proactive, and practical ideas for addressing the Gaza situation in tandem with other Arab states.

## Strategic Cooperation Has Weathered Past Tensions

**F**or decades, U.S.-Jordan ties have defined the kingdom's strategic orientation and stood as a pillar of its stability and security in a very unsettled neighborhood. The relationship has deterred the various regional adversaries who have had designs on Jordan at one point or another. The kingdom is also one of the world's largest recipients of U.S. economic and military assistance, most recently enshrined by a seven-year memorandum of understanding in 2022. Last year, the kingdom received \$1.65 billion in economic assistance (including \$845 million in direct budget

support, around 6 percent of its budget) and \$425 million in Foreign Military Financing.

The relationship has benefited U.S. interests as well, giving Washington a capable and reliable military ally in the Levant along with basing access for U.S. troops and air assets. Moreover, the [Jordan-Israel peace treaty \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/partnership-worth-preserving\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/partnership-worth-preserving) has been an important component (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/30-years-israel-jordan-relations>) of the regional security architecture.

Yet the relationship has had its ups and downs, including a tepid phase during Trump's first term. Although the king was the first Arab leader invited to meet with the president in 2017, Trump's approach to Israel-Palestinian issues eventually led to bilateral friction. When the administration's 2020 "deal of the century" peace plan was announced, Amman did not explicitly oppose it but made clear that its proposals for large-scale annexations in the West Bank were not welcome. Amman was also unenthusiastic about the Abraham Accords. Nevertheless, U.S. assistance and military relations continued uninterrupted.

## A Full Jordanian Agenda...

The kingdom is accustomed to crises and has proven remarkably resilient, often defying predictions of its imminent demise by friends and foes alike. Yet today's challenges have brought Jordan to one of the most sensitive moments in its history.

Despite an economic reform plan and responsible financial management, the economic situation [remains dire \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jordans-election-positive-sign-amid-gaza-war-tensions\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jordans-election-positive-sign-amid-gaza-war-tensions). Politically, the Gaza war spurred the resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood, who mirrored Hamas's talking points and leveraged the public outcry over Israel's military operations to their benefit. Amman bears part of the blame for this trend. Jordanian officials have harshly criticized Israel during the war, arguing that this approach was needed to contain public anger. Yet by riding the wave of popular discontent, they also fed that wave, reinforcing the Brotherhood's message. Amman's rhetoric has also chipped away at its bipartisan support in Washington, where some lawmakers are unmistakably frustrated about the kingdom's wartime messaging. Notably, Jordan was not exempted from the administration's recent [pause on foreign assistance \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trumps-foreign-assistance-review-prioritizes-funding-over-policy\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/trumps-foreign-assistance-review-prioritizes-funding-over-policy).

Amman's neighborhood security picture remains daunting as well. When the Gaza war broke out, Iran stepped up its efforts to destabilize the kingdom by smuggling more drugs and weapons into Jordan, the West Bank, and Israel. Last year's severe blows to Tehran's regional power and proxies have reduced this pressure somewhat, but the new reality in Syria has Amman worried about the stability of its northern neighbor and the Islamist ideology of those now in power. Indications that the Trump administration may withdraw U.S. troops from Syria are adding to the alarm. In the West Bank, [growing instability \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pa-reform-key-west-bank-stability-and-possible-rule-gaza\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pa-reform-key-west-bank-stability-and-possible-rule-gaza) could eventually spill over into Jordan—a threat that is further complicated by Amman's very tense political relations with Israel. Security relations between the two neighbors remain strong, but severe tensions between King Abdullah and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu have limited their ability to contain and manage disagreements. Meanwhile, the prospect of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—a cornerstone of Jordanian diplomacy—is further away than ever.

## ...That May Get Overshadowed by Gaza

Unfortunately, all of these important bilateral concerns might be put on the back burner if the president's meeting agenda focuses on his Gaza proposal as expected. The king would then face a dilemma. On one hand, Jordan cannot afford to get into a head-on confrontation with the United States on this matter, since the implications could

deeply affect its security and economy.

On the other hand, Amman cannot agree to the ideas Trump announced last week, which run counter to positions long held by Jordan and the king himself. The Jordanian public's vociferous rejection of these ideas has further narrowed the king's political room for maneuver and could heighten calls to dissolve the peace treaty with Israel if acted on. Even more important, Trump's proposal poses genuine threats to the kingdom's national security. Demographic balance remains one of the most sensitive issues inside Jordan, and accepting refugees from Gaza would anger all constituencies. Conservatives fear that Jordan's already large Palestinian population would come to dominate domestic affairs, while others fear that depopulating Gaza would spell the end of Palestinian national aspirations. One thing is clear: transferring Gazans to Jordan would inevitably help Hamas reestablish a foothold in the kingdom, which authorities have been diligently combating since expelling the terrorist group's leaders in 1999. Despite its risks and controversies, however, the president's proposal has usefully highlighted the wider Arab failure to come up with realistic solutions to the practical problems raised by managing Gaza's postwar governance and reconstruction. With the exception of the United Arab Emirates—which has engaged in detailed, practical discussions about Gaza—Arab governments have simply reiterated old declarations about the need for a Palestinian state and called for the Palestinian Authority to assume a role in Gaza. These positions are reasonable in normal circumstances but do not address the immediacy, enormity, and complexity of the Gaza challenge today. Moreover, they make no attempt to provide specific answers to crucial questions: How will the parties ensure that Hamas does not regain power? How can the PA be reformed, rehabilitated, and empowered quickly enough to play a real role in Gaza? And how should the international community approach the complex reconstruction and security challenges that will come to the fore once the war ends?

President Trump cannot expect Jordan to come up with all these solutions on its own. It does not border Gaza, nor does it have the necessary resources. Moreover, given the political sensitivity of the Palestinian issue and the tensions that often characterize relations between Arab states, no single country can afford to stake an outlier position on this matter. What is needed is a detailed, practical, coordinated approach by like-minded Arab governments, and Trump's proposal has put the ball squarely in their court to come up with alternatives.

What the king can—and should—do is present practical ideas for what he is willing to do in Gaza, consistent with Jordan's modest capabilities. Trump's assessment that rebuilding the Strip will take more than a decade is reasonable, so the king will need to spell out how this lengthy reconstruction process can be carried out without displacing the population or depriving them of a dignified life. The king would be well-advised to get specific on the following issues in particular:

- **Increasing Jordan's footprint in Gaza, where the kingdom already maintains field hospitals.**
- **Contributing to postwar Gaza's civilian and security spheres in a manner that enables reconstruction without relocating Palestinians.**
- **Advancing Palestinian reform, which entails concrete suggestions for clarifying PA succession, countering corruption, building the capabilities of the PA security forces, and other matters. Jordan has unmatched leverage over the PA and should demonstrate its willingness to exert it.**
- **Bolstering Jordanian cooperation with Israel and the United States to counter weapons smuggling.**
- **Coordinating with other Arab leaders to signal the president that [a more comprehensive, integrated Arab approach](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-trump-arab-leaders-and-israel-can-close-gaps-gaza) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-trump-arab-leaders-and-israel-can-close-gaps-gaza>) is forthcoming on key tasks such as defeating Hamas, reforming the PA, and managing reconstruction. Particular attention should be paid to engaging Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, who is tentatively scheduled to visit Washington next week.**

All of these tasks are difficult and entail political risk. Yet if Jordan does not demonstrate its willingness to be proactive, it is unlikely to influence President Trump's approach to Gaza.

For its part, the administration should be sensitive to Jordan's challenges, exerting pressure where needed but without pushing the kingdom to its breaking point. Jordan is too valuable of an ally to put its stability or its peace treaty with Israel at risk. The mutual benefits of U.S.-Jordan relations need to be preserved.

*Ghaith al-Omari is the Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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