

Jordan Navigates Border Trade, Pressures from Syria

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Brief Analysis

Of all the bilateral ties between Arab states, the Jordanian-Syrian relationship has been among the most intense. Various gradations of reciprocal unfriendliness and even open animosity have characterized the two countries' ties since the 1970s, reflecting the rise of the Ba'ath party and Hafez al-Assad. However, recent economic instabilities pushed Jordan to approach the Syrian war in an unexpectedly neutral manner, and these same economic concerns may push the Hashemite Kingdom closer to the Assad regime in the near future.

A thaw in the "Cold War" between Amman and Damascus has materialized, ostensibly neutralizing many years of conflict. The apparent recent successes of Bashar al-Assad's regime in recapturing much of Southwest Syria raises the question of what lies in the future for the Jordanian-Syrian relationship, especially given probable intimations that Damascus is unhappy with where the relationship currently stands.

Throughout the conflict, Jordan was unsurprisingly more anxious about safeguarding its own domestic resilience than the persistence or collapse of the Syrian regime. The Kingdom has repeatedly pursued regional and international political settlement attempts to end the Syrian conflict, as Amman foresaw the potentially subverting influence of a protracted war on its borders.

The outbreak of the Syrian revolution on March 15, 2011 coincided with a period of instability in Jordanian politics, shaping Amman's early handlings of the Syrian crisis. Institutional caution reflects Jordan's own containment policy throughout the Arab Spring, as well as the differences in opinion between Jordan's political and security institutions on Assad's chance of staying in power during that period. Amman cautiously limited its role to receiving refugees and dissident soldiers, along with limited political statements to Western media criticizing the Assad regime.

Yet in terms of action, Jordan did comparatively little to exert pressure on the Syrian regime, unlike other Arab nations. In 2011, Amman asked the Arab League to exempt it from severing ties with and establishing economic sanctions against Syria, as the country was Jordan's largest Arab trading partner. At the time, bilateral trade between the two states was estimated at \$600 million.

Jordanian officials also saw the need to keep diplomatic channels open between security and military officials due to terrorism concerns. Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, Jordan has feared that any conflict in Syria would assist armed militants and jihadists on the Jordanian borders to expand their battles to northern Jordanian

territories. A secondary fear of retaliation and spillover of violence after any outcome of the conflict—retreat of the opposition or the demise of the regime—further encouraged neutrality despite regional and international pressures to act against Assad.

In September 2015, leaked information revealed that Jordan had requested Russian mediation to open channels of communication and further security coordination with Syria. This culminated with several visits of Syrian security delegations to Jordan. In 2018, security coordination between Jordan and Syria paved the way for prospects of economic openness after the visit of a delegation representing the Jordanian Chamber of Industry to Damascus. However, it is looking increasingly likely that renewing Jordan's economic ties with Syria will cost the country in diplomatic capital.

Damascus Messages Amman

At the end of this June, rumors broke out amongst Jordanian political circles close to the Syrian government that once the Syrian army had recovered the Nasib-Jaber crossing point with Jordan, the Syrian regime would not reopen borders and return them to their pre-war operations unless a comprehensive strategic understanding with Jordan was reached.

Damascus has given Russia the green light to move ahead with understandings between all parties, including Jordan and Israel. However, the mechanism and timing of reopening the crossing with Jordan has not yet been discussed, despite the current Jordanian preference to reopen and operate the junction in order to boost the Jordanian economy.

The remarks of Assad and his interviews with foreign TV channels demonstrate that Damascus is less interested in opening the border with Jordan than in a comprehensive security, political, military, and economic pact that will pave the way for a reconciliation between the two governments. Damascus appears to be looking for a full package vis-à-vis bilateral ties with Jordan, including the return of refugees and implementing a reconstruction process. Moreover, the country seeks to force Jordan to accept the return of ambassadors and the opening of a new chapter for bilateral relations, which deteriorated during the Syrian war. Such a move would require Jordan to acknowledge Assad as the legitimate president of Syria.

Despite Jordan's official statements that Amman's ties with Damascus have never stopped at either the military or political level, these calls for deepening relations can hardly be in Jordan's diplomatic interests. Yet Amman has discerned that a "Syrian Marshall Plan" has begun to develop through funding from allies Russia, China, and Iran. Damascus can use its international support to leverage financial benefits against Jordan, which is suffering from economic pressures that have only been partially mediated by Gulf and international loans.

Syrian interests in linking the resumption of economic and trade exchange to a comprehensive strategic agreement between both countries hinge on this sense of economic security, despite the country's many years of conflict. Thus, the Jordanian diplomatic task in managing the reopening of the Nasib-Jaber crossing will be extremely challenging, as Jordan has attempted to balance its relationships with all involved parties throughout the Syrian conflict. For a triumphant Assad, this neutralism may not be enough.

While open negotiations with Damascus may be the price Amman has to pay in order to resume bilateral trade, this is not a relationship that Jordanians will enter into lightly. Nevertheless, Jordanian politicians believe that the people have reached a point of despair regarding the outcome of the Syrian war. Many Jordanians and even some Syrians have come to the conclusion that after a death toll of more than 420,000 people, an end to the eight-year war is preferable to its continuation, even if that arrangement includes Assad.

In short, Damascus is demanding political legitimation for economic trade. Whether or not Amman will accept that bargain remains unclear, yet the status of the crossing point between Jordan and Syria will remain a thermometer of

their bilateral relationship into the future. The challenge that remains is to bridge the political gap with Damascus while maintaining relations with current strategic partners, a strategy that will require great flexibility and diplomacy from the Jordanian government. ❖

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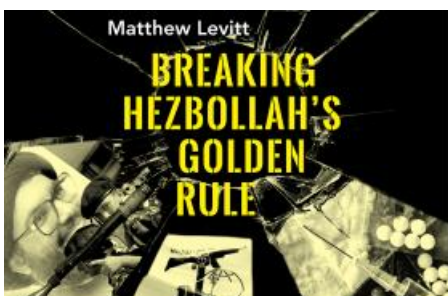
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