

# How the United States Should Help Protect Jordan from the Chaos Next Door

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](#)

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Articles & Testimony

**A comprehensive look at the concrete steps the Trump administration can take to secure a vital ally that has shown signs of struggling under the weight of refugees and numerous other challenges.**

**T**o read the full version of the report excerpted below, download the PDF here or [visit the Lawfare website \(https://lawfareblog.com/how-united-states-should-help-protect-jordan-chaos-next-door\)](#), which originally published the paper in cooperation with the Brookings Institution.

## RECOMMENDATIONS ON SECURITY

**C**ontinued Close Security Cooperation: Jordan today is Washington's most reliable Arab security partner. In particular, the kingdom plays an increasingly important role in the U.S.-led coalition campaign against IS. While intelligence sharing and security cooperation between Washington and Amman is already exceptionally strong, some incremental tweaks can be made to strengthen the relationship and improve Jordan's capabilities. In 2016, Washington provided the kingdom with over \$800 million in security assistance and counterterrorism funding. No additional U.S. aid is required, but to improve Jordan's intelligence-gathering capabilities over southern Syria, the Trump administration should provide the kingdom with an advanced armed- and surveillance-drone capability. This would help Jordan better defend its border and protect the de facto humanitarian zone it is working to preserve along the frontier in southwestern Syria.

Manage Hazards of U.S. Military Presence: Regrettably, the recent phenomenon of green-on-blue killings in the kingdom is likely to continue and could become an irritant in the bilateral relationship. While little can be done to prevent these tragedies, the Trump administration should negotiate permission for U.S. forces to carry loaded weapons for personal protection while on bases in Jordan. Likewise, because the U.S. military presence is unpopular in Jordan -- which has consequences for both Washington and King Abdullah -- the administration should endeavor to downsize the footprint if conditions allow. Given the challenges posed by the Islamic State, the Assad regime, Russia, and Iran in Syria, U.S. forces may be in the kingdom for some time. Absent a drawdown, the administration should work to ensure the deployment is as inconspicuous as possible.

Countering Jihadist Ideology: According to the State Department, in addition to foreign military financing (FMF), Washington

provides Jordan with significant Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF) assistance, as well as specific assistance for border security operations. In fact, Jordan is the largest recipient of CTPF funding. While this aid is helpful, it does not sufficiently address Jordan's biggest terrorist threat, which is local radicalization. In recent months, the palace has launched its first real initiative to counter radical Islamist ideology in the hope of limiting this long-term threat. If requested, the Trump administration should offer the kingdom technical and financial assistance through existing State Department authorities to help ensure that this effort succeeds.

**Enhance Border Security:** Over the past decade, the United States has provided the kingdom with hundreds of millions of dollars to establish an integrated border security system. A year ago, Jordan basically closed its border with Syria and is now providing humanitarian assistance to internally-displaced communities on the Syrian side of the frontier in the west. In the east -- near Rukban, where some 75,000 displaced persons are now gathered on the Syrian side of the berm and Islamic State forces pose a direct threat -- Jordan is doing much less. These vulnerable Syrians need more dependable protection and humanitarian support. With or without Russian assent, the Trump administration should work with its partners in the anti-Islamic State coalition to support Jordan's humanitarian buffer zones in Syria, providing food and shelter to civilians and protecting them from the Islamic State and the Assad regime. These zones not only help internally-displaced Syrians and limit the refugee flow, they enhance the kingdom's security.

**Encourage More Jordanian-Israeli Cooperation:** One good news story of 2016 was the signing of a \$10-billion, 15-year deal for Israel to provide Jordan with natural gas. Less publicized, but more important, has been the excellent ongoing strategic cooperation between Jordan and Israel. King Abdullah and the government of Israel are committed to military cooperation and intelligence sharing, which greatly benefit both states and Washington. Given the strong bilateral coordination, Washington's assistance may not be required. Nevertheless, the Trump administration could direct the Defense Department to explore ways of enhancing the already deep relationship, including -- but not limited to -- permitting and encouraging more transfers of Israeli excess defense articles (EDA) to Jordan.

**Political Backing:** King Abdullah is a frequent visitor to Washington, and support for Jordan is a rare bipartisan issue on Capitol Hill. The Trump administration will undoubtedly continue this tradition. While materiel U.S. assistance to the kingdom is important, the symbolism of enduring U.S. support for the Jordanian monarchy -- which frequently comes under fire abroad for its relations with Israel -- should also be cultivated. To emphasize this commitment, President Trump should consider an early visit to Amman.

## **EMPLOYMENT**

**Put Jordanians to Work:** Amman understands the imperative of finding more employment opportunities for its citizens.

Indeed, in 2009, the kingdom published "[Jordan's National Employment Strategy 2011-2020](http://inform.gov.jo/Portals/0/Report%20PDFs/2.%20Human%20&%20Social%20Development/iv.%20Employment/2011-2020%20National%20Employment%20Strategy.pdf)" (<http://inform.gov.jo/Portals/0/Report%20PDFs/2.%20Human%20&%20Social%20Development/iv.%20Employment/2011-2020%20National%20Employment%20Strategy.pdf>), a thoughtful and comprehensive plan to create jobs and build a modern competitive economy. But the strategy -- which depends on training, expatriate replacement, international assistance, and heavy foreign direct investment -- will take years to implement. More problematic, the plan was crafted prior to the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Syrian laborers.

Jordan's plan need not be scrapped, but the kingdom could use some U.S. assistance. While the Trump administration is focused on job creation at home, the stability of this key U.S. ally should spur Washington to also encourage some U.S. companies to invest in the kingdom -- perhaps through tax incentives. If Jordan requests it, Washington should also sign another loan guarantee. The United States has already guaranteed three loans to the kingdom valued at \$3.75 billion. Given the regional uncertainty, these loans are an excellent investment.

Finally, in its representations to Saudi Arabia, the Trump administration should prevail on its Gulf ally to follow through on its May 2016 commitment to establish the [Saudi-Jordanian Coordination Council](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/promised-saudi-support-to-jordan-at-what-price) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/promised-saudi-support-to-jordan-at-what-price>), a vehicle Jordanian officials have said would "unblock billions of dollars." Significant Saudi investment could stimulate Jordan's stagnant economy, creating thousands of additional employment opportunities.

**Encouraging Women's Participation:** Around eight out of every 10 women in Jordan do not hold jobs. The staggering

underrepresentation of women in the labor force constitutes a permanent drag on the kingdom's economy. To be sure, Jordan is a very conservative society, so this problem will be difficult to overcome. Nevertheless, the Trump administration can provide some marginal assistance. Already, the United States has a \$250-million program in Jordan run by the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) guaranteeing loans from banks to small-business enterprises, but only \$87 million has been disbursed. Some 16 percent of these loans have gone to women-owned enterprises, which is good, but more can be done. The program should pursue a more aggressive outreach campaign to publicize and market its assistance to women. In Jordan -- where women's participation is an Achilles heel of the labor market -- microenterprise loans to women and women-owned enterprises can have a small but nonetheless significant impact.

## REFUGEES

**I**mprove Conditions for Refugees: Large numbers of Syrian refugees could remain in Jordan for "at least 17 years," according to King Abdullah, and even after the war ends, many may never return home. Despite Amman's misgivings, the economic and social integration of these refugees is critical to the success of the kingdom's efforts to prevent radicalization. It is also important to discourage refugees from moving to third countries. While jobs are scarce in Jordan, Syrians are known for being highly entrepreneurial, so more Syrian participation in Jordan's workforce may actually help grow the state's anemic economy. Nearly 40,000 Syrians have already been issued permits to work in Jordan. The United States should encourage Jordan to issue significantly more permits so these Syrians can work legally, taking the place of other expatriate laborers.

**Prioritize Financial Support for Refugees:** Since 2012, Washington has provided nearly \$800 million to support Syrian refugees in Jordan. While this assistance is substantial, it remains insufficient. Lebanon -- which admittedly has more refugees than the kingdom, but is strategically less important to Washington -- receives one-third more assistance. Absent additional U.S. or international funding for Jordan, the Trump administration should consider reprioritizing its scarce aid dollars. Washington should also press European and Arab allies (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait) to temporarily add an annual budget support component of \$1 billion to existing infrastructure investment projects in the kingdom. This support would help Jordan reduce its recurrent budget deficit caused in large part by these refugees.

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