

Increasing Jordanian Involvement: The Benefits and Risks of a Modern "Greater Jordan"

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Brief Analysis

Proponents of such a view are driven by an utter lack of alternatives amid intractable regional conflict.

In both Arab and Western political circles, discussions of "redrawing the map" of the Middle East have begun to crop up, prompted by the collapse of Syria and Iraq's shaky stability. Many officials have begun to suspect that it is no longer possible to maintain the unity of either country, and that the current realities necessitate new proposals to either create regional balance or find a way out of the stalemate. One proposal that is hesitantly reemerging is the suggestion of "Greater Jordan," a Jordan-West Bank "confederation" that incorporates elements of Iraq and Syria. Once shunned as a failed vision of the Sykes-Picot treaty, increased Jordanian involvement of some sort has become increasingly appealing to regional actors in the face of continuing instability in the Levant, the ongoing Palestinian divide, and the growing possibility of the Palestinian Authority's collapse.

Jordan's official stance is that it harbors no intentions whatsoever to expand geographically into neighboring countries. Moreover, any such expansion would saddle the country with a series of complex technical problems involved to politically, socially, and economically integrate the disparate areas under Hashemite leadership. Nevertheless, greater integration, if not outright assimilation, has enough rationales to make the potential worth discussing, especially given the lack of viable alternatives.

Support for the Greater Jordan scenario builds on the general regional feeling that the nation-state model has failed and that the disintegration of national identity in Iraq and Syria will drag the entire region into prolonged chaos. Syria's continuing civil war speaks for itself. The experience of Iraq has proven that the model of unity through ethnic and religious quotas no longer provides a functional basis for multiethnic states. Palestine fares little better -- the division between the PLO and Hamas continues to drag on despite repeated "unity agreements." With a series of crises undercutting President Mahmoud Abbas's authority, it is no exaggeration to say that the PA's imminent collapse is likely, if not guaranteed.

In contrast, there is a prevailing impression that some Arab countries -- especially those in the Gulf -- the United States, and Israel would welcome an expanding Jordanian role in the region. The Israeli government views Jordanian efforts in the West Bank as a crucial avenue to ensure Israel's sustained security. Moreover, the Greater Jordan scheme would present a more appropriate substitute to the "alternative homeland" plan that certain circles in Israel embrace, which charges Jordan with accepting all resettlement responsibilities for the Palestinian Diaspora within its borders.

On the American side, the next U.S. administration may look for a reconfiguration of the Middle East as a way out of the country's current regional entanglement. Nor would this scenario likely be protested by Russia, since greater Jordanian involvement aligns with Russia's security obligations to Israel but doesn't conflict with Russia's strategic interests.

Many Arab countries see a strong Jordanian presence in the Levant as a way to help contain Iranian encroachment. Some measure of stability in Anbar and Daraa would prevent Iranian headway in both areas. Arab countries fear the status quo, where regions of southern Syria and western Iraq seem likely to become incubators of a variety of regional security threats that will eventually seep into Jordan proper and ultimately into the Arabian Peninsula.

It is no wonder that Jordan is an attractive model; its administrative success and government staying power have allowed the country to succeed in spite of major challenges to its stability. Moreover, the country's broad definition of identity, governmental pragmatism and moderation, the country's shifting geography, and a Hashemite heritage that links the royal family to "Greater Syria" and Iraq all make Jordanian governance an exemplar for the Levant's failing countries.

Jordan is also in a strong position to gain the cooperation of southern Syria and western Iraq, both of which share similar tribal makeup with the areas of Jordan that they border. In southern Syria, Jordanian administration has so far done an impressive job ensuring that all sides have remained respectful of Jordan's redlines. Jordan has also isolated and blockaded radical forces more successfully than Turkey's and Qatar's attempts in the north.

In western Iraq, the military is directly connected to the tribal council, an organization with good coordination and political relations with Jordan. Although Jordan's presence is subject to complex challenges, its efforts to achieve political and security goals exist side by side with attempts to provide a level of protection and care for the local population.

On the other hand, Jordan's stability is not guaranteed, and a number of regional analysts have warned of the difficulty of preserving Jordan's stability within its current borders. The country's current access to natural resources is ultimately unsustainable, and demands new, unorthodox approaches to Jordan's economy and infrastructure.

Jordanians are also anxious about their country's security; the country's borders with Syria and Iraq are putting Jordan's own stability at risk. There are doubts over the ability of the Jordanian economy to shoulder the increasing burdens of Jordan's hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees. In spite of the decline in international support for Jordan, the country continues to keep its borders open for refugees, which has raised questions from both inside and outside of the country. By expanding its security coordination in Syria, Jordan has tried within its limited capabilities to provide safe options for Syrians in their own country by coordinating with local forces, a better solution than the current security checks that have left thousands of refugees stranded in the Syrian desert.

These are all important points to consider. But balanced against these justifications, a Greater Jordan scenario or even greater integration also involves many risks and dangers and will be rejected by influential regional powers such as Iran and Turkey. This scenario also embodies the risk of a direct confrontation with political regimes in Iraq and Syria. Practically speaking, this kind of proposal requires a level of risk incommensurate with the pragmatism of

Jordanian foreign policy and conflicts with the king's desire to block Jordan's involvement in neighboring countries' issues. Moreover, any overextension of the Jordanian government would help expose the current fragility of Jordan's domestic situation, with its society reeling from a stifling economic crisis. More generally, any changes in the regional dynamics provide another opening for various interest groups to manipulate the scenario for its own interests.

Consequently, in contrast to regional analysts the Jordanian political elite and the government itself have demonstrated little interest in expansion. They fear any geographic extension exposes the country to existential threats by allowing chaos to spill over into Jordan's currently well-maintained borders. Moreover, regional powers would have the perfect opening to criticize the Hashemite kingdom if they so chose.

Many Jordanian elites also voice concerns about identity and fears that Jordan would melt into a nebulous demographic mixture with any greater integration of surrounding populations. Although the people of southern Syria and western Iraq are socially and culturally tied to their Jordanian counterparts, a large portion remain connected to the respective economic systems of Syria and Iraq. Moreover, it is impossible to predict the on-the-ground reaction of these groups to greater Jordanian involvement, despite the currently friendly ties.

It is clear that the renewed regional interest in a Greater Jordan scenario is driven by the utter lack of alternatives in the intractable regional conflict. With the exception of some Kurdish brigades declaring a federalized system in Northern Syria, no local groups in either Syria or Iraq have made any public statements announcing new political entities, even with the collective realization that a continuation of the current situation is untenable. Without a regional power stepping up, southern Syria, Northern Iraq, and less likely Palestine could devolve into perpetually lawless lands, a reality most threatening to the surrounded Jordan.

It is clear that Jordan, despite the difficulties, will need to continue to spread its strong political, economic, and security influence within the region to avert this prospect. Jordan is one of the few entities that can fill the regional vacuum of power until solutions that satisfy all sides of the region's various conflicts crystallize, a distant prospect.

Jordan can help position itself for this role while mitigating its current economic crisis by intertwining its economic interests with the Gulf by facilitating movement across the Jordanian border, the Port of Aqaba, and Jordanian airports into Gulf countries. At the same time, governments in the region and the world should encourage Jordan to play a larger role in challenging security threats and terrorist organizations in these areas and be sure to continue and expand support for this country.

In the event that regional and international decision-makers ultimately do come to the conclusion that Greater Jordan is the best of bad options, it is a regional responsibility to facilitate the creation of appropriate structures and conditions to ensure the success of this option. At the same time, the region should consider other options to face terrorism and regional chaos, because the success of such a drastic border shift would demand a long and complex phase of maturation and preparation that can adapt to the Middle East's quickly shifting landscape. ❖

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