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Growing Stress on Jordan

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Although U.S. and Gulf assistance has been vital thus far, Jordan's expenses related to hosting refugees and securing the border outstrip what it is receiving.

In 2013, the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) Contingency Planning Memorandum "[Political Instability in Jordan](#)" warned that the biggest threat to the stability of the Hashemite Kingdom stemmed from local grievances eroding the regime's core tribal base of support. Although economic privation, the slow pace of reform, and a widespread perception of corruption remain significant sources of popular frustration in Jordan, the palace has since vitiated its most potent tribal and Islamist domestic political opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood. But as the risk of domestic unrest has diminished, the potential for spillover from the Syrian conflict has grown, posing an increasing threat to Jordan.

NEW CONCERNS

Jordan has a long tradition of providing sanctuary for refugees, but the kingdom has reached the saturation point. Syrian refugees in Jordan -- currently around 1.4 million -- constitute a significant source of instability in the

kingdom. Only half are registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and less than 10 percent live in formal refugee camps; the majority are spread throughout the country.

The refugees -- 13 percent of Jordan's population -- are a major burden on Jordan's weak economy. In 2015, the costs of hosting refugees were equivalent to 17.5 percent of the country's budget and a significant contributor to Jordan's \$2 billion deficit. Moreover, Jordan's economy has little room to accommodate the refugees. Its unemployment rate is 12 percent, and its youth joblessness is 30 percent. Refugees competing for scarce jobs could fuel further social tension.

Security in Jordan is also a growing concern. Although the military is effective in preventing infiltrations and policing the frontier, including periodic skirmishes with Syrian militants and smugglers, there are signs that some refugees are influenced by the ideology of the self-proclaimed Islamic State or Salafi Islam. An estimated three thousand Jordanians are reported to be fighting in Syria. Terrorist-related incidents, alleged Islamic State sleeper cells, and arrests also appear to be on the rise.

Toward the end of 2015, Amman shifted policy to stem the flow of refugees, stranding more than fifteen thousand Syrians along the border. The government has also been working to establish a "safe zone" on the Syrian side of the frontier, providing humanitarian and security assistance to local militias with an eye toward establishing an area where refugees can live in relative safety from both Bashar al-Assad's regime and the Islamic State. However, an expanded Russian or regime campaign in southern Syria could spark a mass migration toward Jordan's border that would be difficult to stave off.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Jordan's stability is a high priority for the United States. It is a main partner in fighting the Islamic State, in confronting Iranian expansionism, and in supporting a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Jordan's quiet cooperation with its treaty partner, Israel, is a plus for U.S. regional interests. Domestic instability in Jordan -- especially turmoil that threatens the leadership status quo -- would endanger these important U.S. interests. Mounting pressures on Jordan's meager resources from refugees -- as well as corresponding austerity measures -- could feed destabilizing anti-regime sentiment. Although Islamic State-inspired terrorist attacks in the kingdom would likely produce a rally-around-the-flag effect, security incidents could further damage an already strained economy. Any further flow of refugees could tip the scales, triggering a crisis -- potentially from malcontents among the refugee population and/or from disaffected Jordanians.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since 2011, the United States has provided almost \$700 million in humanitarian support for refugees in Jordan. Washington has also increased its security and economic commitments to Amman, signing a Memorandum of Understanding in February 2015 to increase baseline annual assistance from \$660 million to \$1 billion per year from 2015 to 2017, including funds to cover the financing cost of additional loan guarantees. Jordan has received billions in budgetary support for infrastructure projects from Gulf states and hundreds of millions from the United Nations to support refugees. Although U.S. military and economic assistance is vital, Jordan's expenses related to hosting refugees and securing the border outstrip what it is receiving. Likewise, U.S.-supported loan guarantees may alleviate Jordan's immediate cash crush, but will do little to create permanent jobs or mitigate ongoing economic and security challenges posed by the refugees, many of whom may not return home for many years, if ever. Washington should take the following proactive steps to help insulate Jordan from the potentially destabilizing impact of spillover from Syria:

- *Increase humanitarian assistance.* If a net increase of several hundred million dollars in refugee support funds is not politically feasible, Washington could consider a more rational and equitable allocation of its \$533 million in refugee

support allocated to Syrian refugees in other Middle Eastern countries. Washington should press European and Arab allies (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait) to add an annual budget support component of \$1 billion to its existing infrastructure investment projects in the kingdom.

- *Support employment for Syrian refugees.* High unemployment, insufficient job creation, and controlled immigration appear to be driving the migration of Syrian men to Europe. To entice Syrians to remain in the region, if not in Syria itself, it will be necessary to provide a degree of economic opportunity. Washington should encourage European states -- in particular, Germany -- to invest in job creation initiatives in Jordan, once Jordan provides a larger number of Syrian refugees with work permits. Local refugee employment was identified as a European priority during the February 2016 Syria donor conference in London.
- *Increase defense and intelligence cooperation.* Intelligence sharing and security cooperation between Washington and Amman is already exceptionally strong. To further strengthen the relationship and improve Jordan's intelligence-gathering capabilities over southern Syria, the Barack Obama administration should provide the kingdom with an advanced armed- and surveillance-drone capability.
- *Establish a real safe zone.* Although Jordan has implemented some under-the-radar efforts to support communities on the Syrian side of the border, those efforts lack the imprimatur and staying power of a fully supported humanitarian safe zone, where U.S.-led coalition forces provide security for the shelter and feeding of internally displaced Syrians. Establishing such a zone with partners in the counter-Islamic State coalition would serve both U.S. strategic interests in safeguarding Jordan and humanitarian concerns by protecting civilians.

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