

# Jerusalem and Refugees: Persistent Challenges for Jordan

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Brief Analysis

## Violence in the Holy City has unnerved the king, but the prospect of additional Syrian refugees constitutes a much greater threat to the kingdom's stability.

In recent weeks, all eyes have been focused on Russia and its ferocious targeting of Homs and Idlib in northern Syria. Less attention has been paid to the south, where Russian military involvement has potentially serious implications for Jordan. With the kingdom already hosting more than a million Syrian refugees and dealing with the political fallout from Israeli-Palestinian violence in Jerusalem, Russia's deployment is likely to produce intense pressure on the kingdom, especially should the fight move south. To be sure, developments in Jerusalem are a nuisance for the palace, but they are second-tier concerns compared to a likely worsening refugee crisis. While an important legislative initiative in the U.S. Congress may help mitigate immediate security risks to the kingdom, this initiative will neither diminish the refugee flow nor insulate Jordan from future threats caused by the Russian deployment.

## Jerusalem Background

The 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty explicitly recognizes the "special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Muslim holy shrines in Jerusalem," a role reflected in the continuing administration of al-Aqsa Mosque and al-Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary, or Temple Mount) by the Jordanian Waqf Ministry, which oversees religious endowments in the kingdom. During periods of tension -- such as in November 2014, when the killing of an Israeli and a Palestinian led to the Temple Mount's closure to worshippers -- Jordanian and Israeli officials typically work together to deescalate. To this end, last November, King Abdullah and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu met in Amman and, according to reports, the prime minister agreed to prevent Jews from ascending the Mount.

## Current Crisis

**T**he respite lasted almost a year. Then, on September 13, Israeli minister of housing and construction Uri Ariel -- who in 2013 controversially called for the removal of the plateau's Islamic holy sites and the building of a Third Jewish Temple -- visited the Temple Mount. Ariel's visit sparked violent Palestinian protests, which in turn saw dozens of Palestinians wounded by Israeli police and a spate of lethal attacks against Israelis. It also heralded a series of recriminations between Israel and Jordan, with the Israelis blaming the Waqf for providing inadequate security on the Temple Mount and the Jordanians condemning Netanyahu for violating his 2014 promise to the king. The Jordanians also accused "the special forces of the Israeli Army of Occupation of storming the courtyards of al-Aqsa Mosque" and attempting to "change the status quo" in Jerusalem. Still other Jordanian officials maintain that the *murabitun*, the fighters causing the problems, are actually Israeli Arabs -- not West Bank Palestinians -- and that therefore Israel is responsible for preventing them from ascending the Temple Mount.

Since then, Jordan has floated a UN Security Council resolution denouncing Israel, and the king reportedly is refusing to accept phone calls from the prime minister. Earlier this week, 45 representatives in Jordan's 130-member parliament called for the government to withdraw the Jordanian ambassador from Tel Aviv, expel the Israeli ambassador from Amman, and review the Wadi Araba peace treaty.

## Refugee Challenges Continue

**W**hile Jerusalem is a headache for the palace, Syrian refugees constitute a potential source of instability in the kingdom. At present, Amman says it is hosting 1.4 million Syrians, including some 700,000 registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). While the actual number of unregistered refugees is debated, life for these refugees is undisputedly difficult. Fewer than 120,000 of these Syrians reside in the kingdom's refugee camps, and according to UNHCR, 86 percent of the refugees living outside the camps fall below the poverty line. Worse still, international financial support for refugees in Jordan -- and other host states -- is insufficient. In 2014, the United Nations appealed for \$4.5 billion in donations to provide critical food and other aid to vulnerable Syrian refugees throughout the region. The UN met just 37 percent of its funding goal, however, leaving Jordan with a \$724 million shortfall, according to UNHCR. Because of this deficit, this year the World Food Programme cut the already meager \$7 monthly food subsidies to thousands of Syrian recipients in the kingdom.

In recent weeks, this desperate situation appears to have triggered a daily exodus of about 150 Syrians -- or 3,000 per month -- refugees who are choosing to return to their war-torn country rather than remain in the kingdom. While this outflow is no doubt a welcome trend for Amman -- according to recent press reports, Jordan is resisting U.S. pressure and denying entry to thousands of Syrian refugees from al-Suwayda, purportedly due to security-related concerns -- the numbers are unlikely to be sustained. Because most Syrian refugees have been fleeing the Assad regime, Russia's robust and seemingly indiscriminate military operations in support of the regime will almost certainly exacerbate the problem. Of particular concern to Amman is the possibility that a Russian campaign in the south would spark a mass migration toward the Jordanian border.

## Congressional Action on Jordan

**A**mid the focus on refugees and Jerusalem, Congress has in recent weeks acted to help Jordan better weather the storm. House Resolution 907, known as the "United States-Jordan Defense Cooperation Act of 2015," was passed by the House in September. Because Jordan has rare bipartisan support on Capitol Hill, the bill, which upgrades Jordan's status in the Arms Export Control Act to that of NATO, Australia, Japan, South Korea, Israel, and New Zealand, is likely to be easily passed by the Senate. When it becomes law, among other things, it will streamline the arms procurement process, open new avenues of bilateral defense cooperation, and reduce U.S. Department of Defense bureaucratic and reporting requirements related to training with Jordan.

In tandem with this U.S. legislative initiative, Amman is requesting from Congress and the administration additional

military assistance for fiscal year 2016/17, to include Black Hawk helicopters -- Jordan has only eight in service -- advanced night-vision goggles, and perhaps armed drones. Such provisions would help the kingdom contend with emerging border security and terrorism threats. Should the administration approve this request, it would supplement the current baseline of more than \$1 billion per year in economic and military assistance and loan guarantees that Washington is providing the kingdom. At \$17 million each, Black Hawks are not cheap, but given the threat from Syria, Congress and the Administration are unlikely to oppose the request. The bigger challenge for short-term delivery may be availability.

## Conclusion

**W**hile a less proximate threat, bloodshed in Jerusalem is an increasingly unsettling public relations problem for the palace. The Jerusalem violence, now an embarrassment for the king, risks ultimately fomenting popular discontent with a treaty that otherwise underpins a highly productive defense and intelligence-sharing relationship with Israel. It also touches a historical nerve for the Hashemites, who until 1925 also administered Islamic holy sites in Mecca and Medina. In this regard, the September 17 phone conversation between King Salman of Saudi Arabia and President Obama discussing the "Israeli escalation" in Jerusalem was no doubt greeted with disdain in Amman.

These dynamics aside, Jerusalem is a relatively tangential issue for Jordan compared with the Syrian refugees. And in light of Russia's military involvement, the crush of refugees at Jordan's border promises to get worse. New Jordanian legislation before parliament overhauling the kingdom's byzantine electoral system suggests the palace is now comfortable that the Muslim Brotherhood -- traditionally constituting the most potent domestic political opposition to the king -- has been neutered. But the threat posed by ISIS ideology from across the border -- if not from the jihadists themselves -- remains a significant concern, especially given the economic challenges posed by the refugees.

While the Obama administration's policy of "strategic patience" -- allowing the Russians and Iranians to sink into the Syrian quagmire -- may be the most expedient option, it will do little to safeguard Jordan should the situation further deteriorate. In addition to passing the U.S.-Jordan Defense Cooperation Act and providing supplemental military equipment, Washington would be well advised to increase its humanitarian support to the kingdom to help mitigate its long-term refugee problem. More important, in advance of Russia's expected drive south, Washington should overcome its reluctance, start building a coalition, and publicly commit to establishing and supporting a safe zone to harbor the refugees in southern Syria. Washington can bolster Jordan's stability by assisting the kingdom's current refugees and by helping reduce the chances of another massive wave of immigrants. Security assistance alone, while valuable, may not be enough to preserve Washington's most reliable Arab partner.

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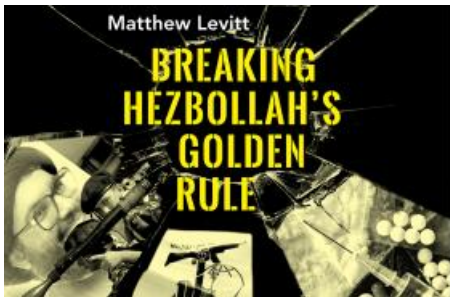
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