Jordan's King Abdullah Comes to Washington

by David Schenker **(/experts/david-schenker)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Friday's meeting offers an opportunity to discuss the kingdom's domestic challenges, the proposed no-fly zone in northern Syria, and the potential ramifications of ramped-up training of Syrian opposition forces on Jordanian territory.

From Jerusalem to Iraq to Syria, Jordan's King Abdullah and President Obama will have much to discuss when they meet in the Oval Office tomorrow. No doubt, the U.S.-led air campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) will top the leaders' agenda: the moderate kingdom has emerged as Washington's key Arab ally in the fight against ISIS, which is also known as the Islamic State (IS). But the kingdom's domestic challenges should also be a topic of discussion, as Jordan is increasingly feeling pressures at home as a result of spillover from the war in Syria. In particular, in recent months, Jordan has arrested dozens of Islamic militants, and in November, overwhelmed by Syrian refugees, the kingdom finally closed its borders.

Refugee Backlash

According to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to date approximately 620,000 Syrians have registered as refugees in Jordan. Meanwhile, Jordanian officials, including King Abdullah, say the kingdom is currently hosting 1.4 million Syrians. To be sure, these figures differ dramatically -- perhaps in part due to the economic benefits associated with higher estimates -- but regardless of which is more accurate, the Syrian refugee presence is palpable and having a real social and economic impact on the kingdom.

Worse, the refugees appear to be generating some resentment among their legendarily gracious Jordanian hosts. During a recent visit to Jordan, a story circulated of two Jordanians driving in Irbid who were oddly rebuffed after asking for directions. The explanation from the Irbid local, who eventually provided the directions, was that he detected Syrian accents. This is just one example of a phenomenon likely to grow as the war drags on.

Surprisingly, very few incidents of violence between Syrians and Jordanians have been reported thus far. The best known of these occurred in September in the tribal governorate of Tafilah, when a Syrian criminal attacked and killed a male member of the Sawalqah tribe. In the assault's aftermath, Tafilah residents rioted and subsequently expelled seven hundred Syrian refugees from the town. With no prospect that the masses of Syrian refugees will return home any time soon, these kinds of confrontations are likely to increase.

Opposition to the Coalition

Jordanians are not particularly enamored of ISIS and the Syria-based al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), but because these groups are seen to be defending Sunnis against the nominally Shiite Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad, Jordanians view them with some ambivalence. Indeed, according to a September poll published by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, only 62 percent of Jordanians consider ISIS -- and just 31 percent consider JN -- a terrorist organization. In line with these sentiments, many Jordanians oppose their military's participation in the campaign targeting ISIS and JN.

As one would expect, opposition to Jordan's participation is strongest among the Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood says that participation in the coalition violates Jordan's constitution; other local Islamist, and Salafi-jihadist, scholars describe the airstrikes as a "campaign against Islam." Figures outside the Islamist camp have been critical as well. In September, twenty-one members of parliament signed a letter to the speaker rejecting Jordan's military involvement in the fight against ISIS, saying, "This war is not our war." More recently, the mayor of the restive town of Maan, Majid al-Sharrari -- perhaps best known for the Israeli-flag doormat at his home -- complained that Jordan didn't "have an interest in the war against Daash [the Arabic acronym for ISIS]." The war, he said, "was in the service of Israel."

Liberal Jordanians -- like Basel al-Okour, editor of the online daily JO24.net-- make a more rational, if not compelling, argument against coalition membership. "We aren't interfering in [the] Gaza and al-Aqsa [crises], and these are more important to us," he said in November. More worrisome to Okour is the prospect that the kingdom will eventually contribute ground forces to the endeavor. "What would happen if we deployed and ten tribesmen were killed?" he asked. "There would be huge protests," threatening stability in the kingdom.

Regardless of Jordanians' political orientation, the generally held view in the kingdom is that ISIS would not target Jordan if the regime weren't participating in the campaign. Putting aside the bizarre notion that Jordan will somehow be ignored in ISIS's quest to establish a caliphate stretching from Iraq to Morocco, should the kingdom eventually be hit by ISIS terrorism, many Jordanians will undoubtedly blame the palace for provoking the attacks.

Arrest Campaign

With an estimated 2,500 Jordanian foreign fighters in Syria and indications of growing support for the Salafi-jihadist trend at home, the Jordanian parliament passed a new counterterrorism law in June affording the government wide legal latitude to imprison citizens who lend ideological and recruitment support to terrorist organizations. According to Jordanian press reports, in recent months Amman has employed this law to arrest between 200 and 300 alleged Islamist militants, many of whom have been referred to the State Security Court for trial for their online activities. Moreover, Jordan's Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs reported last month it had prevented twenty-five preachers who broke the law by promoting radical ideas from the *minbar* from giving sermons.

With a few exceptions, Jordanians appear to support the rather draconian new counterterrorism legal procedures. The Islamists, not surprisingly, are not pleased. A longtime lawyer to the Salafists, Mousa Abdulilat, calls the arrests "political" and claims Jordan was compelled to take these measures by virtue of its membership in the anti-ISIS coalition. And earlier this week -- responding to the incarceration of nearly two dozen Jordanians -- twenty-five

members of parliament signed a petition demanding "the end of a series of political arrests in Jordan." Atop the petition's list was Muslim Brotherhood deputy secretary-general Zaki Bani Irsheid, who was recently detained for criticizing the United Arab Emirates for designating the Brotherhood a terrorist organization.

Jerusalem Safety Valve

The relentless stream of domestic pressures in Jordan was joined in October and November by the Israeli-Palestinian al-Aqsa/Temple Mount crisis, which spurred dozens of anti-Israel demonstrations in the kingdom. Already since September, Jordan had seen low-intensity demonstrations protesting the $15 billion deal to purchase natural gas from Israel. And just last week, in a move intended to embarrass the palace, parliament member Hind al-Fayez hoisted a sign on the floor of the legislature bemoaning the deal's financing of "occupation." The most recent al-Aqsa protests -- coinciding with the twentieth anniversary of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty -- proved an unwelcome if useful distraction for Amman, allowing the monarchy to reassert its patrimony in Jerusalem and its pro-Palestinian bona fides.

Several senior Jordanian officials made tough statements during the al-Aqsa crisis, most prominently Walid Obeidat, Amman's ambassador to Israel, who marked the October 26 commemoration of the Wadi Araba peace treaty by warning that Israeli actions in Jerusalem, "if allowed to continue, will ultimately imperil the treaty." Obeidat was recalled to Amman after the speech and has yet to return to his post. Just days earlier, King Abdullah himself weighed in on developments in Jerusalem during a meeting with Jordanian legislators, condemning both jihadist extremism and "Zionist extremism." Notwithstanding these remarks, in mid-November the king met with Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu in Amman, playing a critical role in resolving the crisis, along the way improving the regime's standing at home and further demonstrating its import to Washington.

Conclusion

Four years into the war in Syria, Jordan continues to prove resilient in the face of significant pressures. Recognizing the growing threat of ISIS and the importance of continued stability in the kingdom, in 2014 Washington provided more than $1 billion in financial and military assistance to Jordan. And this considerable sum is likely to increase in 2015. It's unclear what, if anything, King Abdullah intends to request from the administration during his upcoming visit. Given the bipartisan support for the kingdom, though, there is little in terms of financial or materiel support -- save Jordan's controversial initiative to build two nuclear power plants -- that the administration or Congress would deny.

Beyond these important but transactional details, Friday's meeting is an opportunity to discuss the impact on the kingdom of the proposed no-fly zone in northern Syria, and the potential ramifications of ramped-up training of Syrian opposition forces on Jordanian territory. Both of these initiatives could provoke retribution by Syria's Assad regime, including -- in the worst-case scenario -- an offensive in the south intended to drive hundreds of thousands of additional refugees into the beleaguered kingdom. At a minimum, a no-fly zone in the north will raise expectations of regime opponents, and perhaps change the dynamic in the south, along the Jordanian border.

Given the developments in Jerusalem, Iraq, and Syria, Jordan today remains surprisingly stable. But the kingdom is not impervious to threats. As the war in Syria wears on, Jordan's domestic challenges will only intensify.

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