

Jordan Not Out of the Woods Yet

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Brief Analysis

President Obama's reaffirmed pledges of assistance to Jordan are helpful, but they may not be enough to safeguard the country if the situation in Syria continues to fester.

On February 14, President Obama met with Jordan's King Abdullah II in Rancho Mirage, California. In the year since their previous summit, tens of thousands of Syrians have been killed and over 400,000 have registered as refugees in Jordan, bringing the total number of exiles from across the northern border to nearly 1 million. Despite the deterioration next door and the 16 percent increase in the kingdom's population, Jordan is paradoxically more stable today than when the two leaders met in March 2013. Yet the refugees still constitute a threat that will likely increase, especially given President Obama's assessment that "we don't expect to solve [the Syria crisis] anytime in the short term."

WHAT A DIFFERENCE A YEAR MAKES

A year ago, the situation in Jordan looked bleak. The kingdom was running a 30 percent budget deficit, slashing food and energy subsidies to meet International Monetary Fund loan requirements, and limiting Internet freedoms. Worse, a coalition of Islamists and tribal-origin opposition factions was forming around protests targeting alleged palace corruption and economic privation.

The emergence of al-Hirak -- an opposition movement from the tribes, long the kingdom's leading monarchists -- was a new and potentially game-changing development. At the same time, Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, emboldened by the success of its parent organization in Egypt, was increasingly crossing traditional redlines in challenging the palace.

Yet the political opposition has also suffered a series of setbacks over the past year. After failing to pressure the king into changing a disadvantageous electoral law, the Brotherhood boycotted the January 2013 parliamentary

elections, along with the municipal elections later that year. Absent Brotherhood participation, Wasat -- an alternate Islamist party believed to be supported by Jordanian intelligence -- secured the largest parliamentary bloc.

In July, President Muhammad Morsi, head of the Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, was removed from office by the military. The coup reverberated in Jordan, chastening the Brotherhood and accentuating extant divisions within the organization.

Meanwhile, protest fatigue, intelligence infiltration, and a series of lengthy incarcerations of tribal opposition leaders took a toll on the HIRAK. In early 2013, the movement's demonstrations attracted hundreds of angry Bedouin, but the situation changed drastically within months. In November, for example, a HIRAK march following Friday prayers in Tafilah, a center of tribal foment in the kingdom, attracted barely fifty participants.

As the political opposition has atrophied, the economy has marginally improved, at least on the macro level. A \$2 billion International Monetary Fund loan and a \$1.25 billion U.S. loan guarantee have helped. While inflation, subsidy cuts, unemployment, and corruption remain serious problems, a December IMF press release noted that "Jordan's economic recovery is gaining traction." The government has also taken steps to at least give the impression that it is fighting graft, with Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour announcing a new national anticorruption strategy last June. These developments -- in addition to widespread fears of instability à la Syria and Egypt -- have convinced the Jordanian street to acquiesce for now, enabling Amman to dodge the bullet of its own "Arab Spring."

ONGOING CHALLENGES

While the kingdom is more secure than last year, it is not out of the woods yet. Jordanians continue to complain bitterly about endemic corruption, and it could once again become a locus of protest. Last month, fifteen members of parliament demanded that the legislature convene to discuss why Transparency International had downgraded Jordan from 58th to 66th out of 177 countries in its 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Yet the ongoing spillover from the war in Syria remains a more serious threat to the kingdom's stability. One consequence of the fighting is a dramatic increase in Jordanian Salafism. Local press reports indicate that several hundred Jordanian jihadists have crossed the border to fight the Assad regime, and that dozens have been killed in action. Many of the survivors will ultimately return home as hardened fighters, posing a security risk to the moderate, pro-Western government.

Potentially more problematic, though, is the long-term strategic impact of the refugee flow. The nearly one million Syrians in Jordan have been straining the state's modest infrastructure, particularly the scarce water supply. Exacerbating matters, the vast majority of these migrants live in Jordanian cities, competing for housing and jobs in a tight labor market while driving up rents, unemployment, and food costs.

The kingdom and its residents have been exceedingly generous in hosting displaced Syrians, but there are signs of resentment. Some locals are beginning to lament the enormous financial burden placed on cash-strapped Jordan, while others are grumbling that UN assistance to the refugees surpasses the meager social safety net that Amman provides to Jordanian citizens. As one tribal-origin Jordanian told the author in November, "They are taking the food out of our mouths!"

The northern town of Mafraq is an unfortunate case in point. In 2011, it was home to 80,000 people, but today it has 200,000 residents, a rising crime rate, and, according to the mayor, no additional state funding. Ominously, the nearby Zaatari camp -- which accommodates an additional 100,000 refugees -- is built atop Mafraq's aquifer and is plagued with an inadequate sewage system, threatening to foul the underground water supply.

CONCLUSION

Jordan might be able to cope with these challenges for another year or two. But with no end in sight to the crisis next door and an estimated 30 percent of Syrian housing destroyed, the refugees seem destined to remain in Jordan for a decade or more. If these Syrians plant roots in the kingdom, they will undoubtedly aggravate latent tensions in a society already divided between tribal-origin Jordanians and the Palestinian refugees who constitute some 60 percent of the population. Further complicating matters, historical precedent and already-visible donor fatigue indicate that Jordan will receive progressively less international financial support going forward.

After last week's summit, President Obama announced that he would seek an additional \$1 billion in loan guarantees to help the kingdom weather the refugee storm. He also said he would push to renew the U.S. commitment to provide over \$600 million a year in economic and military support. Adding up this earmark, traditional annual supplemental funding, and the cost of the loan guarantees, total U.S. funding to the kingdom in 2013-2014 will reach nearly \$2 billion, or roughly \$300 for every Jordanian -- a 3 percent boost in per capita gross domestic product per year. Put another way, the \$1 billion provided annually by Washington amounts to more than 10 percent of the kingdom's 2013 budget.

Such assistance is considerable, and commensurate with the country's increasing strategic importance in a region wracked with turmoil. Still, it may not be sufficient to insulate Jordan from the social and economic impact of spillover from Syria. Given the kingdom's longstanding experience with refugees and its tradition of hospitality, destabilizing backlash against Syrian migrants may take some time to emerge. But make no mistake -- it is just a matter of time. If the war in Syria is not ended soon, Jordan's respite from the instability that has swept the Middle East since 2011 may prove only temporary.

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