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Jordan's Shifting Interests with Syria and the Uneasy Road Ahead

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This article discusses Jordan's move to re-engage with the Assad regime, despite international sanctions. After 11 years of war and with the Assad regime still in power, Jordan began adopting a more pragmatic foreign policy towards Syria, driven by its own strategic interests; hoping to shore up its ailing economy and to limit the presence of pro-Iranian militias near its borders. However, the road ahead remains riddled with challenges.

Introduction

In the past few months, Jordan has accelerated the process of rapprochement with the Syrian regime, marking a significant shift in the country's ambiguous foreign policy towards Damascus, driven by pragmatism, economic interests and security concerns.

Jordan's efforts to rebuild ties with Damascus are consistent with similar moves taken by the UAE, Egypt and other Arab countries seeking to reintegrate Syria in the Arab league and end the Assad regime's isolation after more than a decade of war that has led to the biggest displacement crisis since the Second World War. Amman's move, however, remains complicated by US and EU sanctions and the heavy Iranian presence in the war-torn country.

More recently, the Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, stressed that the US would not support normalizing efforts with the Syrian regime: "What we have not done and what we do not intend to do is to express any support for efforts to normalize relations or rehabilitate Mr. Assad or lift a single sanction on Syria or change our position to oppose the reconstruction of Syria, until there is irreversible progress towards a political solution, which we believe is necessary and vital".¹

¹<https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-israeli-alternate-prime-minister-and-foreign-minister-yair-lapid-and-united-arab-emirates-foreign-minister-sheikh-abdullah-bin-zayed-al-nahyan-at-a-joint-press-availab/>

The highest level of public engagement between Jordan and Syria took place in October, 2021, when Assad called King Abdullah supposedly for the first time since the revolution broke out in March 2011. One month earlier, the main border crossing between both countries fully reopened. Amman also hosted several meetings of energy ministers from Syria, Lebanon and Egypt to discuss a project about the transportation of Egyptian natural gas to Lebanon via Jordan and Syria through a 1,200 km trans-regional gas pipeline.² Egypt is expecting to supply Lebanon with gas by early 2022.³

Jordan's Expectations

Jordan is home to 1.3 million Syrians, more than half of whom are registered with the UNHCR as refugees. Their influx has burdened the country's scant resources but the country has also received considerable aid for hosting them. As ties with Syria are strengthened, Jordan is aiming for the eventual withdrawal of pro-Iranian militias near its border, a current concern it shares with Israel. Jordan presumes it will also pave the way for the voluntary return of Syrian refugees to their country.

"Jordan is hoping that the Assad regime will adopt reciprocal gestures and distance itself from Iran and its proxies who are dangerously close to the border," said Osama Sharif, a columnist and political analyst. "This is an interest shared by all Syria's neighbors including Israel".⁴

Jordan, which shares a 362 km border with Syria, also wants to boost its border security to stem the flow of drugs from its northern neighbor which has turned into the region's preeminent Captagon supplier, according to a report published last June by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.⁵

Restoring ties with Syria is expected to revive the trade flow through the Nassib-Jaber border crossing, which was a transit route for hundreds of trucks a day transporting goods between

²<https://www.hydrocarbons-technology.com/projects/arab-gas-pipeline-agp/>

³<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/supplies-egyptian-gas-expected-lebanon-by-early-2022-minister-2021-11-16/>

⁴ Interview with Osama Al Sharif, analyst and political commentator, November 2, 2021

⁵<https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/greek-captagon-bust-leads-to-a-criminal-gang-and-the-port-at-the-heart-of-syrias-booming-new-drug-trade>

Europe, Turkey and the Gulf.⁶ Before the crisis, the volume of trade between Jordan and Syria stood at \$634 million.⁷ The escalating violence in Syria has prompted the Jordanian authorities to close the border more than once, which has significantly reduced bilateral trade. Last year, the volume of trade stood at \$94 million, down from \$118 million in 2019. In the first six months of this year, it stood at \$66 million.⁸

Despite the bleak outlook for rebuilding Syria due to international sanctions and security threats, Jordan is still looking to profit from Damascus' potential reconstruction. This is to shore up its moribund economy and placate the growing resentment against rising poverty and unemployment. Unemployment is currently standing at 25%, with youth unemployment rates reaching an unprecedented 48%.⁹

Shifting Interests

Relations between Jordan and Syria were strained as Amman-backed Syrian rebels as part of a covert CIA program. This program provided them with arms and salaries in their fight against the Islamic State and the Assad regime.

Still, Jordan seems to have read the signs early on. They knew the Syrian regime would remain, particularly after Russia's intervention in Syria in 2015, which was a game changer and turned the tide of war in favour of Assad. Curtis Ryan, a professor of political science at Appalachian State University in North Carolina and an expert on Jordan, observed that the rapprochement between Jordan and Syria has been slowly growing for years.

Ryan noted the possibility of regime change in Syria was dashed in 2013. In August 2012, former president Barack Obama was asked about what could lead him to use military force in Syria. He stated that, "the red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus."¹⁰ When Assad indeed used chemical weapons against his people, the US did not intervene. "When the US redline passed in 2013 and Russia intervened militarily in 2015 that changed the entire

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/29/jordan-fully-reopens-main-crossing-with-syria>

⁷ <https://rb.gy/araat5>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jordan/overview#1>

¹⁰ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/06/inside-the-white-house-during-the-syrian-red-line-crisis/561887/>

strategic equation," said Ryan. "After that, Jordan concluded that Assad was staying and relations would have to change. And they have. Both Jordan and Syria need every economic life line they can get. Normalizing relations at least offers hope for improvements in a host of sectors -- agriculture, energy, trade."¹¹

But Ryan expressed skepticism about Jordan's influence on the Assad regime, which many believe is greatly impacted by both Russia and Iran. "Even with Syria desperately needing this opening with Jordan, it remains unclear how much leverage Jordan really has to influence Syrian behavior, so moderating the Assad regime seems very unlikely. This rapprochement strikes me as practical and strategic, as both share a very long border, and border security and trade would help both".¹²

The change of policy towards Syria gained momentum after the presidential elections in Syria in May 2021. This further consolidated Assad's grip on power amidst Washington's decreased appetite to pursue military engagement in the wider Middle East. It became more evident in the wake of its hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan. The United States, which backs the Kurdish forces in the northeastern parts of Syria in their fight against terrorist groups, also does not seem to have a clear Syria Policy. It is currently preoccupied with its rivalry with China.

The Caesar Act, a United States legislation that imposed sanctions on the Syrian government in 2019 to punish the Assad regime for war crimes, has done little so far to curb the Iranian influence in Syria. The US seems to be leaving its Middle Eastern allies to deter Iran's influence in the region. More recently, the US approved a deal financed by the World Bank to supply Lebanon with Egyptian gas to help resolve its energy crisis. The deal, according to diplomats, is intended to prevent Lebanon's situation from further escalating, as it is on the brink of collapse and becoming a failed state.

Amman's push to reintegrate Syria in the region was even more evident after King Abdullah's visit to the US, in June 2020 and later to Moscow. According to Asharq Al-Awsat, King Abdullah proposed a new initiative in dealing with the Assad regime based on a step-by-step approach. This approach would result in a gradual change in the behavior of the regime

¹¹ Interview with Curtis Ryan, a professor of political science at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, November 3, 2021

¹² *ibid*

leading up to the withdrawal of foreign forces from Syria in return for normalizing ties with Damascus.¹³

The dark side of rapprochement began to appear recently. Authorities in Jordan began cracking down on Syrian activists and journalists opposed to the Assad regime.¹⁴ Several activists and journalists have been either sent to Azraq camp with the threat of deportation, while others have fled the country, seeking political asylum in Europe after receiving calls from the authorities to stop their activism or rhetoric against the Syrian regime.

Proponents, Critics and Mismatched Expectations

In Jordan, proponents of normalisation with Syria argue that embracing the country into the Arab fold is more of a “carrot approach”, which in turn might prod the regime to make concessions. Critics of rapprochement argue the problem lies with Amman’s mismatched expectations. A Syrian researcher and analyst explained that Jordan's expectation that normalisation will change the regime's behaviour is not realistic because Iran’s militias are deeply embedded in Syria.

“The Assad regime has been emboldened by its victories and therefore is unwilling to make any concessions. But by taking the lead in reintegrating the Assad regime regionally, Jordan -- with help from Russia -- is keen to gain favorable treatment concerning the reconstruction projects,” explained the Syrian analyst.¹⁵ He said Jordan wants to be a regional hub and wants to create hope for Jordanians that the resumption of trade ties will improve the economy to placate the growing public dissatisfaction with the dire economic conditions.

Others argue Jordan is being pragmatic and accepting the facts on the ground. “Bashar al Assad is still in power and will likely remain for years,” said Oraib Al-Rintawi, director and founder of Al Quds Centre for Studies. “The key players in Syria are not serious about changing the regime...Washington itself began talking about changing the regime's behavior and not about overthrowing it or replacing it.”¹⁶

¹³ <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3300336/secret-document-normalization-ties-damascus-includes-exit-foreign-forces>

¹⁴ <https://sn4hr.org/blog/2021/11/21/57065/>

¹⁵ Interview with a Syrian analyst and researcher, November 2, 2021

¹⁶ Oraib Rintawi’s paper during a conference on “Jordan in a Changing Regional and International Environment organized by KAS and Al-Quds Centre for Political Studies, November 6-7, 2021

Despite the eagerness by Arab nations to re-engage with Assad, the EU refuses to release any funds towards rebuilding Syria that would lend legitimacy to a regime which has violently repressed its people. According to Alan George, a former Senior Associate Member at Saint Antony's College, Oxford University, any major Jordanian commercial opening to Syria could unsettle the kingdom's relations with the EU.

"The problem is that the Syrian economy is a patronage system that largely benefits individuals and entities close to the Assad regime. The EU's sanctions are carefully targeted against those same individuals and entities," George elaborated, "For Europe, the Assad regime lies in the outer darkness: a regime that has destroyed Syria, killed tens of thousands and tortured tens of thousands more; a regime that has routinely used poison gas against civilians. I think it's unlikely that the EU would just close its eyes if Jordanian and other Arab companies started trading with Syria in a way that weakened the EU's sanctions."¹⁷ George said it was difficult to see how Jordan and other Arab countries could develop wide-ranging commercial relations with Syria without dealing with the EU sanctions.

With the rise of autocratic regimes and practices in the Middle East and elsewhere across the world, many have succumbed to the idea that Assad is here to remain. The US' retreat from the region and Iran and Russia's willingness to stay and support the Assad regime, has also pushed Jordan to look out for its own strategic interests. This is mainly to counter Iran and resume cross border trade. Whether Jordan's lead and loud support for the Assad regime to enter the fray will be as beneficial as it presumes, remains to be seen.

Suha Ma'ayeh is a freelance journalist and researcher based in Amman. She has written extensively on domestic politics, Arab spring protests, foreign affairs, terrorism, elections, and corruption, including the crisis in southern Syria and the influx of refugees. Her work has been published in *The National*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Affairs*, and the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

¹⁷ Interview with Dr. Alan George, former Senior Associate Member, Saint Antony's College, Oxford University on November 7, 2021 on the sideline of the conference on "Jordan in a Changing Regional and International Environment", organized by KAS and Al-Quds Centre for Political Studies, November 6-7, 2021