

Jordan's Struggle to Reclaim Regional Role

Suha Ma'ayeh and Rana F. Sweis

This report examines how Jordan is struggling to assert its traditional vital role in the region after being sidelined under the Trump administration. Despite the recent royal tensions in the country that made headlines across the world and raised anxiety among the country's western and Arab allies, Jordan's geopolitical location, in the heart of a turbulent region, remains consequential. For the West, its stability is also vital, even if it's at the expense of political, social and economic reforms.

Executive Summary

Jordan's strategic location, wedged between Syria, Iraq, the West Bank, Israel and Saudi Arabia, has long served as a stable buffer. The kingdom is the second Arab country after Egypt to sign a peace treaty with Israel in 1994 and for decades it played a key role in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Israel's border with Jordan is the longest of those it shares with its Arab neighbors. Jordan also hosts the largest Palestinian refugee population drawn from the diaspora, with 2.2 million registered with UNRWA¹. In addition, it is home to 1.3 million Syrians, with 670,000 registered with the UN Refugee Agency².

Jordan's role in the region became even more crucial after the wars in Syria and Iraq, which boosted its position as an important logistical military hub for western powers, especially in the military campaign against the Islamic State. The country's hosting of Syrian refugees resulted in massive humanitarian aid entering the country and has prevented an unwanted wave of migration to Europe.

However, Jordan's regional standing has been diminished in recent years by the Trump Administration and the influence of former senior advisor Jared Kushner, who preferred closer ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, which eventually forged direct relations with Israel. The normalization process, known as the Abraham Accords³, offered Israel full diplomatic ties with the UAE and Bahrain in 2020, thus eclipsing Jordan's role as an interlocutor in Middle East peace talks. "Jordan's diplomacy was no longer needed after the UAE and Israel became close," confirmed Taher Masri⁴. The accords sidelined both Jordanians and Palestinians but also marked an end to the Arab Peace Initiative devised by Saudi Arabia in 2002, in which Arab normalization would be offered in exchange for Palestinian statehood on land occupied in 1967.

Still, recent events in Jordan both internally and externally indicate how the country is trying to assume a more active role in the region. An allegedly foreign-backed plot⁵ against King Abdullah pushed Western and regional leaders to show their strong support for the King.

¹UNRWA: <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/jordan>

²UNHCR Data: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36>

³Abraham Accords Declaration: <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>

⁴Interview with Taher Masri, former prime minister, May 18, 2021.

⁵BBC, Jordan accuses Prince Hamzah of plot to destabilise kingdom, April 4, 2021: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56633266>

This support, along with President Biden's victory in the White House and the crisis of May 2021 in Jerusalem and Gaza, contributed to the perception of Jordan as a stable ally for the West and a regime that can be depended on. "Jordan has a role now again and diplomacy flourished quite a bit after the recent developments in the occupied territories," explained Taher Masri, but columnist Osama Al Sharif warns that urgent internal challenges remain. "The leadership has a rare opportunity to launch a reform initiative," he said. "Nobody has an interest in seeing the country destabilized, but Jordan is on life support."⁶

A recent poll conducted by the Centre for Strategic Studies indicates an alarming level of internal discontent, driven by unemployment rates, economic austerity measures, a perception of widespread corruption⁷, and deteriorating health and education services. The poll reveals 94 percent of those surveyed believe financial and administrative corruption are widespread and 82 percent believe the government is not serious about combating corruption. More than half of those surveyed said they have no confidence in the current government⁸.

Shrinking state finances and lack of funds are making it increasingly difficult for the government to provide services effectively and address citizens' grievances, particularly in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has exacerbated existing structural weaknesses⁹.

Despite the sense of disgruntlement with the economic malaise and the erosion of freedoms, the protest movement in Jordan remains weak and is unable to evolve into a critical mass that might effect change. Some Jordanians also prioritize stability and worry that any change would lead to unrest in a region already beset by turmoil. For now, any protests calling for reforms will likely be kept under control by the security services.

Trump and Biden

The United States has become the largest single contributor of bilateral aid to Jordan, providing over the past seven decades a total of more than \$20 billion¹⁰. Washington has also designated Jordan as a major non-NATO ally and the two countries signed a free trade agreement in 2001. Moreover, the kingdom shared intelligence and provided bases for the air campaign in the counter terrorism offensive against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. It also hosts over 3,000 U.S. military personnel¹¹.

Joe Biden's election as president came as a relief to Jordan. Under the Trump Administration, ties between Washington and Amman were strained, as a result of Trump's policies towards the Middle East, particularly his support of a peace plan that favored Israel's position and undermined the two-state solution which Jordan advocates. Tensions have risen also in the past few years between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and King Abdullah, resulting in a delay in Israel's agreed annual water supplies to Jordan. Security disagreements between the two countries also prevented the Crown Prince of Jordan, Prince Hussein, from visiting Al Aqsa mosque in March this year.¹² In retaliation, Jordan refused to allow Netanyahu to fly over its airspace for what was intended to be his first visit to the United Arab Emirates.¹³

⁶Interview with Osama Al Sharif, analyst and commentator, May 16, 2021

⁷Centre for Strategic Studies National Poll, May 2021: <http://icss.org/ShowNewsAr.aspx?NewsId=914>

⁸Centre for Strategic Studies National Poll, May 2021: <http://icss.org/ShowNewsAr.aspx?NewsId=914>

⁹The World Bank in Jordan: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jordan/overview>

¹⁰Al Monitor, April 1, 2021, Critics React to US-Jordan Defense Agreement:

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/critics-react-us-jordan-defense-agreement>

¹¹The Washington Post, January 5, 2020, *Where U.S. troops are in the Middle East and Afghanistan, visualized*: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/where-us-troops-are-in-the-middle-east-and-could-now-be-a-target-visualized/2020/01/04/1a6233ee-2f3c-11ea-9b60-817cc18cf173_story.html

¹²Reuters, *Jordan says crown prince canceled visit to Jerusalem's al Aqsa mosque over security row with Israel*, March 11, 2021:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-jordan-israel-crown-prince-idUSKBN2B321V>

¹³BBC, *Israel PM delays UAE visit after Jordan overflight 'difficulties'*, March 11, 2021: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56354164>

With Biden in the White House, Jordan's status was elevated. In April, Biden phoned King Abdullah after Jordanian officials announced they had foiled a plot that sought to destabilize the kingdom. Biden expressed strong U.S. support for Jordan and underscored the importance of the King's leadership to the United States and the region. He also affirmed his support for the two-state solution.

Previously, Jordan had regarded Trump's policies - which included moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, cutting aid to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), and attempts to annex the Jordan Valley - as being against Amman's vital interests and a threat to the region's peace. Biden, however, rescinded the UNRWA decision and aid has resumed.

Despite the tensions under the Trump administration, the flow of US aid to Jordan continued. The United States provided more than \$1.5 billion in 2020, including \$1.082 billion appropriated by the U.S. Congress to Jordan through USAID in the 2020 fiscal year budget, and \$425 million in State Department Foreign Military Financing funds¹⁴. The United States has also provided nearly \$1.7 billion in humanitarian assistance to support Syrian refugees in Jordan since the start of the Syria crisis. In 2018, the U.S. and Jordan signed a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to provide \$6.375 billion in bilateral foreign assistance to Jordan over a five-year period, pending the availability of funds.¹⁵

Moreover, a controversial defense agreement¹⁶ was signed between the two countries, allowing US forces to possess weapons on Jordanian territory while exercising their duties. The agreement also states that US forces and personnel, as well as their aircraft and ships, are authorized to freely enter and exit Jordanian territory. Many Jordanians, including members of parliament, opposed the defense agreement on the grounds that it violated the country's sovereignty and constitution because it bypassed parliament. This agreement shows the extent to which the US has leverage over Jordan and considers the kingdom an important base in the region. However, Saleh Armouti, a member of parliament, spoke out against the defense agreement: "Is this a security agreement or a corporate agreement? Or is it a new colonialist movement in the region? I see nothing written in the agreement that is in the interest of Jordan."¹⁷

Jordan's Enduring Relationship with the EU and Germany

Jordan's stability is significant for the EU and Germany, the latter being the second largest bilateral donor after the US¹⁸. Jordan also cooperates with the EU on counterterrorism and plays an important role as a bulwark against extremists from Syria and Iraq.

In 2017, Germany moved more than 400 troops from Incirlik Air Base in Turkey to Al-Azraq Air Base in Jordan after Turkey refused to allow members of the German parliament to visit the base¹⁹. Since March 2020, Germany has reduced the number of its troops in Jordan because it wanted to support its mission in the Kurdish areas of Iraq.

¹⁴The State Department, US Relations with Jordan: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-jordan/>

¹⁵The State Department, US Relations with Jordan: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-jordan/>

¹⁶The State Department, US security Cooperation with Jordan: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-jordan/>

¹⁷Albosla news website (Arabic), العرموطي: اتفاقية التعاون مع أمريكا تتعارض مع الدستور، March 21, 2021: <http://albosala.com/?p=116402>

¹⁸Relief Web International, Germany reinforces its support to vulnerable populations in Jordan, December 17, 2020: <https://reliefweb.int/report/jordan/germany-reinforces-its-support-vulnerable-populations-jordan>

¹⁹DW, Germany starts to withdraw troops from Turkish Incirlik base, January 10, 2017: <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-starts-to-withdraw-troops-from-turkish-incirlik-base/a-39619732>

German troops work alongside the U.S. -led coalition, with German aircraft providing air-to-air refueling for French and American forces. While the German military presence is not significant, Jordan serves as a military logistical hub for air operations in Iraq. According to a European military diplomat, "it is a safe haven for our troops in order to operate in the airspace of Iraq. This is possible here mostly because Jordan is a stable country and because it is an excellent military host."²⁰

The country's geographical location is also key when it comes to rebuilding Syria in the future. "Many countries may have an interest in rebuilding Syria. This could be a political strategy for the West, particularly for the EU and Germany. Therefore, supporting Jordan militarily and economically will allow it to take a leading role as an Arab neighbor which will also contribute to solving the refugee problem. Nobody understands Syria's problems like Jordan."²¹

Crisis in Jerusalem and Gaza

The crisis between Hamas and Israel in May 2021 was seen by Jordan as an opportunity for it to reclaim its role as a key player in the region. In the midst of the conflict, the U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, held a joint press conference in Washington, DC with Jordan's foreign minister, Ayman Safadi:

*"Jordan knows that President Biden is a long and strong friend of Jordan, and Jordan has been a long and strong friend of the United States – the closest of partners in dealing with the many challenges that we face together in the region, a very valued and trusted advisor as we confront these issues, as well as some of the real opportunities that are out there."*²²

Moreover, Blinken visited Jordan on the last leg of a Middle East tour for a meeting with King Abdullah to solidify the cease-fire agreement between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Blinken told reporters: "As you know, Egypt played a critical role in helping to broker the cease-fire, and Jordan has long been a voice for peace and stability in the region."²³

Meanwhile, thousands of Jordanians took to the streets to protest the attacks on Palestinians and violations against Al Aqsa mosque. The protests were allowed to take place, despite a defense law issued in response to the coronavirus which banned people from attending or taking part in gatherings.²⁴ Plastered across Jordan's lamp posts and buildings were pictures of Al Aqsa mosque, and the words: *Jerusalem is for Arabs and the Hashemites are the custodians.*

Royal Tensions and Saudi Arabia

Royal tensions inside Jordan's ruling family came to the fore on April 3, 2021, when Prince Hamzeh, King Abdullah's half-brother and the former crown prince, was placed under house arrest. Meanwhile, 18 people close to the prince were arrested in connection with what the government claimed as a plot to destabilize the country. Among those detained was Bassem Awadallah, a former head of the Royal Court who had also been a minister of planning and finance. He was also the King's special envoy to Saudi Arabia. Another detainee is Sharif Hussein, a member of the royal family.

²⁰Interview with a military diplomat, May 10, 2021

²¹Ibid

²²The State Department, Blinken and Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi Before Their Meeting: <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-jordanian-foreign-minister-ayman-safadi-before-their-meeting>

²³Voice of America, Blinken in Jordan to Solidify Mideast Cease-fire Truce, May 26, 2021: <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/blinken-jordan-solidify-mideast-cease-fire-truce>

²⁴The Jordan Times, Defence Order No. 22 stiffens penalties for holding gatherings, November 15, 2020: <http://jordantimes.com/news/local/defence-order-no-22-stiffens-penalties-holding-gatherings>

Prince Hamzeh leaked a video in which he criticized the country's leadership for corruption and incompetence. He also denied claims about his involvement in any plot.²⁵ Meanwhile, the government said "foreign entities" were involved but did not name any countries. There was speculation in government circles about Saudi involvement in the royal tensions. A former government official who had been briefed on the investigation alleged in an interview the involvement of "a regional country".²⁶

Many of the detainees' hail from prominent tribes and were accused of playing a role in the plot, 16 were released from custody pending further investigation. However, Bassem Awadallah and Sharif Hussein's cases have been referred to the state security court, a special body that has jurisdiction over Jordan's internal and external threats.²⁷

"When you look at those who are still detained today, a prominent one holds Saudi citizenship and is close to the Saudi monarch and decision-makers," said Oreib Rantawi, a political analyst during an interview with Al Mamlaka TV.²⁸

Still, the claim of Saudi involvement raised questions regarding what, if any, benefit might accrue to Saudi Arabia from destabilizing a Sunni monarchy. Many Jordanians do not believe there was a Saudi connection, and questioned their government's narrative about foreign intervention. It also remains unclear what role Bassem Awadallah had in the plot and his relationship with Prince Hamzeh, since information about the case remains unattainable. But ties between Jordan and Saudi Arabia have deteriorated in the past few years, particularly during the Trump Administration, which was responsible for promoting a peace plan - opposed by Jordan - to end the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"Jordan's geopolitical influence was diminished after Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States became close to Israel," said Osama Al Sharif. "Jordan lost its vital role as a gateway in the region to bring the conflicting parties together. It was running out of diplomatic options."²⁹

The tensions with Saudi Arabia also partly stem from rivalry over the Muslim holy places in Jerusalem. Jordan faced pressures from Saudi Arabia, which controls Mecca and Medina, the two holiest cities in Islam, to give up its custodianship of the holy sites in Jerusalem, a Hashemite legacy since 1924.

Moreover, when Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries severed their ties with Qatar in 2017, they expected that Amman would follow suit. Instead, Jordan only downgraded its diplomatic representation with Qatar. The two countries restored formal diplomatic ties in 2019.

Although Jordan initially participated in the Saudi-led military offensive against the Iranian-backed Houthi militias in Yemen, it later distanced itself.³⁰ It also did not follow in the footsteps of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries in labelling the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group in 2014.³¹ Instead, it considered the movement illegal and in 2016 shut down its headquarters.

Last year, the Court of Cassation, Jordan's top court, dissolved the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, citing the group's failure to rectify its legal status.³²

²⁵BBC, Jordan accuses Prince Hamzah of plot to destabilise kingdom, April 4, 2021:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56633266>

²⁶Interview with a government official, April 8, 2021.

²⁷The National, Bassem Awadallah referred to security court in Jordan over 'sedition', June 2, 2021:

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/jordan/bassem-awadallah-referred-to-security-court-in-jordan-over-sedition-1.1233972>

²⁸Al Mamalka TV, صوت المملكة | التسامح الملكي والإفراج عن الموقوفين، April 23, 2021: <https://youtu.be/KPaKCKVPiis>

²⁹Interview with Osama Al Sharif, analyst and commentator, May 16, 2021

³⁰Carnegie Middle East Center, Five Years of Yemen Conflict Yield Muddled Picture for Saudi Coalition, March 31, 2020:

<https://carnegie-mec.org/2020/03/31/five-years-of-yemen-conflict-yield-muddled-picture-for-saudi-coalition-pub-81406>

³¹<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uae-politics-brotherhood-idUSKCN0IZOOM20141115>

Jordan's economic reliance on Saudi Arabia also took a back seat. Jordan, which is struggling with soaring debt levels that have reached 85.6 percent of its GDP³³, became frustrated that bilateral assistance from Saudi Arabia, one of the country's top donors, had diminished since 2014. Following a new wave of protests in Jordan in 2018, Kuwait, the UAE and Saudi Arabia put together a Gulf package of \$2.5bn, but this was mostly made up of loan guarantees and deposits in the Central Bank of Jordan, with little if any direct budget support.³⁴

Tensions in the Jordanian royal family also highlighted profound social tensions in the country at large. These included strains within the tribal structures on which the Jordanian social contract was founded. Jordanian tribes are traditionally the backbone of support for the Hashemite monarchy. Their sons fill the ranks of the army, the security and the police. They remain key to the country's stability. However, ties between the regime and the tribes have been put to the test after the arrest of the 16 Jordanians, most of whom are members of prominent tribes. "The tribal backing and support for the Hashemites has been untested before, but after the arrests of members of tribes, it added to the tensions," said Osama Al Sharif.³⁵

In the south, where tribal leaders are powerful, complaints are growing about marginalization, poverty and rising unemployment. But most importantly, the country is witnessing the collapse of a social contract that governed the relationship between the tribes and the Hashemites since the emirate of Transjordan was founded in 1921. In return for the loyalty of the tribes (who have little say in the decision-making process), the rulers have provided them with jobs and influence in the state, in addition to health and education services. The breakup of the social contract was underscored when Prince Hamzeh intensified his visits to the disgruntled tribes and was perceived as giving a voice to their grievances. "Prince Hamzeh didn't create these grievances," said Khaled Ramadan, a former lawmaker. "He tapped into them."³⁶

In fact, general Yousef Huneiti, head of the army, warned the prince against visiting the tribes and said that he had crossed a red line. The unwritten social contract changed considerably after Jordan embarked on a privatization drive in the late 1990s. The state struggled to create jobs, while the quality of services deteriorated. The shift put the tribes at a disadvantage as they saw their economic benefits eroding and their areas marginalized. "The mutual interests between the regime and the tribes no longer exist," said Atef Majali, the tribal Sheikh of the Majali tribe in Karak, in the south of Jordan. "The state assets were privatized, the potash and phosphate companies have been sold, but we have not seen economic benefits. Our areas are marginalized and the local community did not benefit from the privatization of the state's assets. In fact, Jordan's economy deteriorated."³⁷

Despite economic hardships, the tribal discontent is unlikely to lead to instability. The tribes are not coherent structures. As a result of urbanization, many members of tribes moved to urban areas, and cities like Amman.

"The authorities have also pursued policies that pitted tribal leaders against each other for patronage," said a former security official. "The tribes are used as a scarecrow but they have been weakened."³⁸ Even if the monarchy were to lose the loyalty of the tribes - a key pillar of its support - it still has control over the security apparatus and the structures of power, as well as the backing of the West.

³²<https://www.france24.com/en/20200716-jordan-top-court-dissolves-country-s-muslim-brotherhood>

³³Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jordan, النشرات المالية, April 2021:

https://www.mof.gov.jo/AR/List/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AA_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9

³⁴Carnegie Middle East Center, *Jordan: Fallout From the End of an Oil Era*, June, 9, 2021:

<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/06/09/jordan-fallout-from-end-of-oil-era-pub-82008>

³⁵Interview with Osama Al Sharif, analyst and commentator, May 16, 2021

³⁶The New York Times, *Royal Rivalry Bares Social Tensions Behind Jordan's Stable Veneer*, April 10, 2021:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/10/world/middleeast/jordan-king-crown-prince.html>

³⁷Interview with Atef Majali, the tribal Sheik of the Majali tribe in Kerak, May 20, 2021

³⁸Interview with a former security official, May 17, 2021

The Path Ahead

With the triumph of Biden in the White House and the loss of Benjamin Netanyahu's leadership in Israel, Jordan's traditional role as a stable mediator in a turbulent region is expected to make a comeback. The Trump Administration and new regional alliances and agreements once posed a threat to Jordan's strategic importance. "Jordan's strategy lies with maintaining a leading and peace-making role that has enabled it to limit instability," wrote Zaid Eyadat, director of the Centre for Strategic Studies (CSS).³⁹ The country's role will continue to be shaped by regional politics but also, increasingly by its domestic affairs. Although there is no powerful opposition in Jordan and tribal members remain split, it would be wise for Jordan to solidify internal reforms. On June 10, 2021, a royal appointed 92-member committee was tasked with drafting political parties and election laws, examine constitutional and parliamentary work and provide recommendations on actively engaging youth and women in public life. The announcement of the committee comes amidst major public discontent and lack of confidence in the government, which is at an all-time high, according to the latest CSS poll. If Jordan is to remain a pillar of stability in a turbulent region, it cannot ignore its internal strife and hardships.⁴⁰

³⁹Centre for Strategic Studies, Jordan's Path in 2021: Trends and Scenarios, March 2021: <http://jcss.org/Photos/637549566689375718.pdf>

⁴⁰Centre for Strategic Studies National Poll, May 2021: <http://jcss.org/ShowNewsAr.aspx?NewsId=914>

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