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# The Strained Position of Neutrality

## Jordan and the Russia-Ukraine War

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*Traditionally an important American ally in the Middle East, Jordan has also developed some ties with Russia and has to take into account the strong Russian position in Syria. However, it will be difficult to remain neutral during the global confrontation around the war in Ukraine.*

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### Introduction

The Russian war on Ukraine, with its global ramifications, has further intensified and maintained the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The world started to feel the domino effect on commodity and supply chain issues due to the Russian invasion similar to that at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic two years ago. This recent instability is creating new realities for many countries relevant to social, economic and security issues including basic needs, such as food supply, that will have to be tackled.

Further, the invasion of Ukraine is effecting global politics. While the United States and its allies in the EU and NATO adopted clear positions, some usually “pro-American” countries did not embrace the US line. This is particularly evident with the Gulf countries, e.g. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who are looking for opportunities to renegotiate their positions with the Biden administration

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### Jordan's Political Relations with Russia and Ukraine

Jordan has enjoyed stable relations with Russia and Ukraine. Jordan, under the late King Hussein had witnessed historical relations with the Soviet Union, on personal and national levels, with some military cooperation particular during the reign of Nikita

Sergeyevish Khrushchev (1958-1964). However, during most of the Cold War, Jordan adopted an anti-Soviet position that was marked by an absence of ideological rapprochement on the official level. At the same time, many Jordanians received higher education at USSR universities due to various reasons, such as the free tuition and the strong presence to Communist and Socialist parties in the Hashemite Kingdom, linked ideologically to Moscow.

In the current epoch of King Abdullah II, relations with Putin's Russia witnessed more frequent visits and cooperation, even on the military level. Some notable examples include the joint production of the Russian RPG-32 Barkas bearing the name "Hashem" and the purchase of two Ilyushin Il-76MF military transport planes. Moreover, the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) and its Russian counterpart signed a memorandum of military technical cooperation in Moscow in September 2019. Last but not least, there was an attempt to launch a joint nuclear project, but it was suspended without any clear reason.

With the eruption of war in Syria and the strong Russian military presence there, Jordan inaugurated a new phase of cooperation with Russia. In 2017 and with US presence, Russia and Jordan established a hub in Amman to monitor a southwest Syria ceasefire agreement. In addition, on the invitation of Russia, Jordan participated as an 'observer' in a technical meeting during the 17th round of talks in the Astana peace process to discuss a ceasefire agreement in Syria.

The strong diplomatic ties in recent years are also evident through the number of meetings between diplomatic representatives of both countries. According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, Jordan's Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi and his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, have had more than 52 interactions, either through in-person meetings or through phone calls.

Further, Russian-Jordanian relations prospered through cooperation in religious issues. For instance, The Russian Orthodox Church was provided a piece of land in the Jesus Christ Baptism Site reserve for the construction of a pilgrimage center, strengthening Jordan as a destination for Russian pilgrimage.

On the political level and in comparison to Russia, Jordanian-Ukrainian relations are quite modest. The two countries exchanged diplomatic missions on the consulate level in

1992 during King Hussein's reign. Subsequently, the Ukrainian consulate was upgraded to an embassy in Amman, whereas a Jordanian embassy was never opened in Kiev.

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### **Jordan's Economic Cooperation and Interests with Russia and Ukraine**

Jordanian-Russian commercial ties are quite modest whereby Jordanian imports from Russia are much larger than its exports to Russia. In 2016, Jordan's imports from Russia amounted to \$237 million, while its exports to Russia were valued at \$4.4 million only. In 2021, Jordan's import from Russia further increased up to \$255 million while its exports decreased down to \$2.5 million. According to the records of the Amman Chamber of Commerce, the most important Jordanian imports from Russia are base metals of iron and copper, hard wheat, and chemical industry products. While Jordan exports mainly fertilizers and agricultural products.

It is also important to highlight that in February 2020, the sixth session of the Jordanian-Russian Joint Committee for Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation took place and was headed by Jordan's Minister of Industry, Trade and Supply and the Russian Minister of Agriculture. The committee discussed the mechanisms for enhancing bilateral cooperation in many fields and setting a comprehensive plan to expand cooperation between the two countries for the years 2022-2025.

As with regard to Ukraine, trade and economic cooperation with Jordan are not much developed. According to the records of the Amman Chamber of Commerce, in 2016, Jordanian imports from Ukraine amounted to \$128 million, exports to around \$4 million. Five years later, in 2021, Jordan's imports reached \$122 million and its exports reached the value of \$3.5 million. The most important Jordanian imports from Ukraine are cereals, sugar, base metals, animal and vegetable fats and oils, live animals, and mineral products. Jordan's exports to Ukraine include pharmaceutical products and dried dates.

Thus, Jordan's economic ties with both Russia and Ukraine are very moderate compared to the ones with the US and EU. The European Union is Jordan's biggest trading partner (\$3.6 billion in total trade in 2020). If you add-up Jordan's exports to the US (\$2.1 billion in 2020) the EU (\$430 Million) and the United Kingdom (\$67 Million) the amount equals more than 30 times the amount of Jordanian exports to Russia.

In fact, a country like Jordan is mainly dependent on imports, and any absence of basic goods will definitely create problems. However, the size and the value of the trade with Russia and Ukraine does indicate that Jordan might be affected adversely from any shortage in trade with these two countries. But the country will definitely suffer from an increase in prices and subsequent inflation resulting from the rising prices in the world markets and the disrupted global supply chains.

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### **Popular Perception of the War**

Jordanians have reacted to the news of the Russian-Ukrainian war actively through different social media platforms with divided, if not polar perceptions. Solidarity with Ukraine under attack went hand in hand with pro-Russian attitudes and an empathy for the Kremlin's perspective. Similar divisions were seen in Jordan over the Syrian crisis. Jordanians, at the time, were either pro-Syrian regime (and by default Russia) or against the Syrian regime accusing Russia, a main backer of the Assad regime, to be against the revolution and the will of the people. So, for many people the Ukrainian crisis was completely seen from the perspective of the Arab Spring, mainly the Syrian Crisis, while others are driven by the anti- US sentiment more than a Russia position

That being said, there were only few activities on the ground. On February 25, a pro-Ukrainian solidarity demonstration was organized in front of the Ukrainian Embassy in Amman where many Jordanians and Ukrainian residents in Jordan participated. In parallel, some initiatives by Jordanians supporting Russia evolved. A group of Jordanians announced the establishment of the Jordanian People's Committee for Solidarity with Russia. The declared aim is to foster friendship between the two peoples contribute to the formation of public pressure for Jordan gradually withdrawing from its Western Alliances.

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### **Jordan's Political Position Towards the Conflict**

Jordan's official statement regarding the war on Ukraine was neutral. It reflected concerns for the current developments in Ukraine calling on the international community and the parties to the conflict to exert maximum efforts for restraint and de-escalation.

Jordan's position somehow does thus not fully correspond to the position of Jordan's major allies and main donors (e.g. US, Germany and EU), and of the position of Jordan as a key partner and reliable ally of NATO. While Jordan, together with the Arab Gulf countries, has voted in favor of the two UN General Assembly resolutions which condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine. But it has abstained from the assembly vote suspending Russia from the UN Human Rights Council. Although other Arab allies of the US, such as the Gulf countries, are adopting a similar approach to Jordan's, the repercussions of such an approach in Jordan could differ, as the country is mostly dependent on US and EU aid. Jordan must therefore show greater understanding of the sensitivity of this issue for its allies.

Jordan did partake actively in the Arab delegation of foreign ministers comprising Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Algeria and Sudan. At the beginning of April, they visited Moscow and met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, delivering a clear message of their wish of not closing the channels of communication with Russia.

From a political point of view, this position might secure Jordan the status of neutrality, but at the same time it might negatively impact Jordan's attempt to improve its relations with its historic allies.

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### **The Security Repercussions of the War on Jordan**

Developments in the war zone in Ukraine are indirectly affecting the security environment in the Middle East, especially in Jordan, Syria and Iraq. In particular, the most significant impact on Jordan on the short and medium term will be in the field of transit of drugs -as this is one of the most efficient tools that could be used to threaten the national security of a US and NATO ally country like, in this case, Jordan.

Despite its geographic far location, Russia is not a remote country for Jordan with the Russian military presence in Syria, a country neighboring Jordan. Therefore, Jordan is keen to avoid the consequences of any escalation given Jordan is one of US's strategic locations. And with Russia witnessing increasing ongoing troubles in its strategic neighborhood, the possibility increases for Russia to escalate the situation elsewhere to achieve a form of balance.

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## Conclusion

Recent shifts in global political dynamics will have its impact on all countries. In a post-ideology period with a distinct lack of a common doctrine, building alliances should also be based on mutual benefits, interests and economic gains. Otherwise, it will be hard to maintain a strong alliance over time, as economic pragmatism and self-interest will take precedence over stable relationships.

The Ukrainian-Russian conflict occurring in sequence to COVID-19 pandemic suggests that crises persist. Hence, it becomes imperative to take a new approach that guarantees internal stability and limits the negative impacts of global changes, foremost on energy, food production and on local industries.

Jordan is facing multi-dimensional challenges that might magnify in the coming phase. The negative economic repercussions of current global crises detected across the Jordanian economy might well trigger popular anger. This popular anger might well produce a fertile ground for demonstrations and social protests which will inevitably be deployed by criminal and terrorist elements. The delicate current situation necessitates a serious revision of the domestic policies and of the role of the state.

In the light of the above mentioned, it's a must for Jordan to strengthen its alliance with its historic allies, capitalizing more on the privileged status that the country enjoys with US, NATO, Germany and EU. From a pragmatic point of view, Jordan should adopt clear positions that guarantee its leverage with its allies, even if this would mean adopting a tougher stance on Russia, as it is hard to compare the level of interests and benefits that Jordan shares with US, NATO and EU to Russia.

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