

# Jordan: Resilience against All Odds

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Amid myriad threats and regional security dilemmas currently affecting the socio-economic and political situation in Jordan, the monarchy has successfully managed to maintain its stability throughout 2014. While the entire region has been mired in crises and conflicts – with Syria torn apart by a deadly civil war, with the Islamic State slowly encroaching on Iraq and Syria and with Gaza being almost completely decimated – the Jordanians have shown a remarkable resilience, proving yet again the strategic significance of Jordan to its Western allies.

### Syrian Inferno

The war in Syria has continued to exacerbate the already quite delicate economic and security environment in Jordan. The intensification of military activity on the ground, along with the deteriorating humanitarian situation and the massive influx of civilian refugees into Jordan, has been a major headache for policymakers in Amman. The current circumstances in particular pose both a direct military threat to the Kingdom and the potential exhaustion of the Jordanian socio-economic system as a result of the dangers arising from the uncertain future of the Syrian regime. Last year (2014) witnessed frequent border clashes between the Jordanian army and armed rebel groups from Syria attempting to enter the country. Nevertheless, the monarchy maintained its open-border policy, which resulted in the arrival of an additional 50,000 Syrian refugees, bringing their total number in Jordan

to over 620,000 (equal to roughly 10% of the Jordanian population). Some of these refugees took shelter in the newly established Azraq camp (opened in April 2014) located in the heart of the Eastern Desert. However, there were also numerous cases of forced returns at the border and deportations from Jordan, thus extending the long list of instances of *refoulement* practices carried out by the authorities.

The government's increasingly hard line on refugees falls in line with the growing discontent of Jordanians themselves. In late 2014, 79% of Jordanians opposed the open-border policy and further influx of the refugee population, a steady increase from 64% in September 2011. Jordanians are frustrated by the fact that the Syrian crisis is currently constraining the State's resources (water and energy in particular), infrastructure and job market, too often at the expense of the host communities. Such curtailments cannot pass unnoticed and thus generate many social tensions.

Meanwhile, Jordan is forced to continue its balanced and cautious policy towards Syria. Despite alleged support for moderate Syrian rebels and the expulsion of the Syrian envoy in May 2014, the Hashemite Kingdom maintains diplomatic relations with Damascus. In other words, it keeps all options open. Ideally, one might think that a quick end to the civil war in Syria would bring a solution to Jordanian security dilemmas. With recent developments on the ground, however, there is no scenario that could possibly work in Jordan's interests.

### ISIS – The Challenge of Radicalism

Whereas the Syrian problem has been looming over Jordan for quite some time now, the new threat posed by the appearance of the so-called

Islamic State (ISIS, or 'Da'esh' in Arabic) on Jordan's doorstep came as a surprise to many. Far from being a pleasant surprise, the appearance of ISIS has created a security threat that no one in Amman is able to ignore. Having been previously involved in quashing the Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda under the leadership of Jordanian national Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian monarchy has quickly turned into a primary regional enemy for the militias led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The Hashemite family itself has become an object of relentless calumnies and threats, the central theme being their political and military cooperation with Israel and the West.

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Even more concerning to the Jordanian regime than the border clashes with jihadists and the territorial expansion of ISIS (the latter being especially exaggerated), was the alarming rise in support for extremist Islamism within the Kingdom itself. Sympathy for radical Islam has been most prevalent in the southern city of Ma'an, a locus of frequent anti-government riots in the 1990s and 2000s and, at the same time, a traditional support base of the monarchy. Being far away from cosmopolitan Amman, feeling neglected by consecutive governments and possessing an awareness of socio-economic disparities, the Ma'anis have resorted to trafficking drugs and weapons between the war zones in Iraq. Simultaneously, conservative-minded youth, largely unemployed and with poor economic prospects, have fallen into the trap of polished and well-orchestrated ISIS propaganda. The anti-Israeli and anti-Western slogans have been a particularly successful recruiting device here, as the two entities have often been blamed for Jordan's recent liberal economic reforms that

have deprived the local populace of their hitherto share in state resources.

In these circumstances of rising radicalism and distrust towards public authorities, several large-scale demonstrations erupted in Ma'an in 2014, the biggest of which took place in late June. When security forces raided the city in search of criminal gangs, their alleged excessive use of force triggered anger and led to violent clashes. This time, however, next to traditional anti-government slogans, signs of support for the jihadists were also publicly raised, including flags of the Caliphate and banners with the controversial words "Ma'an the Fallujah of Jordan." The June protest coincided with ISIS advancements in Iraq and was understandably not well received by the Hashemite regime. In response, the authorities launched a crackdown on supporters of the Islamic State by arresting a few hundred citizens (the majority of them Salafis) and referring them to the State Security Court on suspicion of intent to support terrorism. Such a legal possibility was facilitated by the amended anti-terrorism law (changed at the beginning of June 2014), which also controversially broadened the definition of "terrorism" to include such acts as "disturbing [Jordan's] relations with a foreign state." The crackdown was widely seen as a move against freedom of speech.

In order to counter the expansion of the Islamic State, Jordan joined the international coalition, both as an operational base and an active member. Since September 2014, the Jordanian Air Force has conducted numerous strikes against the positions of ISIS militants in Syria. Moreover, the monarchy became actively engaged in mobilising Muslim countries against the radical ideology of the Caliphate. The campaign has failed, however, to quell public disapproval of Jordan's military involvement in the anti-ISIS coalition, which only intensified following the capture and murder of Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh after his plane crashed in Syria on 24 December. The video showing his immolation – released only in the first days of February 2015 – infuriated Jordanians and eventually united them against the extremist enemy. However, this new-found anti-ISIS consensus does not mean that the problem of native jihadists in Jordan has already been solved.

## All Quiet on the Domestic Front?

Three years into the uprisings of the Arab Spring, which King Abdullah II notoriously described more as an “opportunity” than a threat, the essence of the Jordanian socio-political system has remained intact. The regime’s discourse of democratisation as being more about procedures and capacity-building rather than the redistribution of power has succeeded to capture the minds of both Jordanian society and the international community. It was in this vein that the procedural reforms, deprived of depth and breadth, continued to take place in 2014. At the same time, freedom of expression and freedom of the media in Jordan both experienced a serious setback. As a result of controversial 2013 regulations, many independent electronic media outlets were shut down, several journalists were arrested and many other imposed self-censorship. In the 2014 Freedom House Freedom of Press Index Jordan ranked 155th out of 197 countries, a significant drop of 10 spots in comparison with 2013 and the worst result in Jordan’s history. The situation was worsened further by the revision of counter-terrorism laws in June 2014.

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In August 2014, the Jordanians saw their constitution amended for the second time since the beginning of the Arab Spring, with the almost unanimous support of the Parliament. The amendment to Article 67 – welcomed by all stakeholders – expanded the jurisdiction of the Independent Election Commission to organise and supervise, not only parliamentary, but also local and municipal elections. Far more startling, however, was the amendment to Article 127, which granted the King sole authority to appoint key security positions in Jordan, namely the Director of the General Intelligence Department and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. While

it may be true that the King has been nominating these positions for many years, he has done so in practice only and not by law, which technically left this prerogative to the Prime Minister. Nonetheless, the government presented the measure as a move towards professional, independent and apolitical military and intelligence services, whereas for reform activists it was a clear sign of concentrating more power in the hands of the monarch vis-à-vis a weakened parliament (which previously oversaw the nomination process). The lack of public debate on the issue and the surprisingly quick legislative procedure – finalised within a few weeks – have only confirmed these concerns.

Before the end of the year, the regime once again surprised the Jordanian public, and perhaps the international community even more, – by lifting the *de facto* moratorium on the death penalty, which had been in place since 2006. In the aftermath of this decision, eleven people were executed by hanging, having been sitting on death row for over eight years. This development undoubtedly jeopardised international efforts to eradicate the death penalty from the Jordanian penal code, but also opened the way for the executions of jihadists Sajida al-Rishawi and Ziad al-Karbouli in February 2015.

## Western Friends Are Never Enough

The security concerns of a volatile neighbourhood have pushed Jordan to bid for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council, after the unprecedented resignation of Saudi Arabia in late 2013. Its two-year term, which began in January 2014, is helping the Hashemite monarchy strengthen its position worldwide, as well as push its own agenda at the UN, entirely aimed at securing the international assistance necessary to manage Jordan’s safe transit through regional crises. Above all, the monarchy presents itself as a moderate and rational partner of the international community, ready to facilitate support in a number of significant issues, such as the Middle East peace process or global response to the ISIS threat. This rhetoric works well enough with the traditional allies of the Hashemites, the United States and the European Union, both of which have their own stake in the regime’s stability, which is possibly higher now than ever. The latter offered Jordan generous support

in both humanitarian and development fields, and established a Mobility Partnership in October 2014 (meant as a platform of cooperation in the area of migration and mobility). Advanced preparatory work was also done towards the negotiations on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) between the EU and Jordan. The US, on the other hand, has focused on military and intelligence cooperation, e.g. by sending 1,700 US soldiers to Jordan. It also offered a total of \$1 billion of financial and military assistance to the Kingdom in 2014. In both cases, support is meant to mitigate the negative impact of regional turmoil and ensure Jordan's security.

### The Way Forward

Against all odds, in the midst of a plethora of security threats from both inside and out, the Hashemite monarchy continues to thrive, which only boosts its strategic significance in the eyes of the international community. This does not mean, however, that the decision-makers in Amman can forever distance themselves from regional and domestic problems. While the challenges of the Syrian war and the Islamic State are of global interest, meaning Jordan does not have to deal with them alone, the pressing need to address socio-economic grievances of Jordanian society, especially those communities residing outside of Amman, cannot be ignored. For the

time being, however, a convenient distraction from such pressing domestic issues in the form of external threats continues to monopolise the agenda to the detriment of ordinary Jordanians.

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