

---

DAVID SCHENKER

## JORDAN: RESILIENCE & STABILITY AMID PERSISTENT CHALLENGES

FEW BELIEVED THE HASHEMITE KINGDOM of Transjordan would survive when it was established in 1946. At the time of its founding, there were just 250,000 mostly Bedouin residents in the realm, with few natural resources to speak of. Shortly afterward, in 1948, the kingdom was embroiled in war with the nascent state of Israel, provided sanctuary to some 650,000 Palestinian refugees, and acquired an additional 5,600 square kilometers of territory west of the Jordan River. Then, less than three years later, an assassin's bullet felled the king, leaving the fledgling desert kingdom with a seventeen-year-old sovereign at the helm to navigate as coups rocked two neighboring states.

And this was just the first five years. Over the next decades, the litany of economic, political, and military challenges continued unabated. In 1958, for example, the palace called in British military support to buttress the kingdom from Nasserist threats. During the 1967 war with Israel, an additional 250,000 Palestinian refugees entered Jordan, and in 1970–71, the Jordanian military fought and defeated thousands of locally based Palestinian guerrillas who tried to wrest control of the state. Then there were the Iraqi refugees, who arrived by the hundreds of thousands in 1991 and 2003, and some 400,000 Palestinians, who were expelled by Kuwait in 1991, many of whom found their way to the kingdom.

Despite long odds, the kingdom persevered. King Hussein, Jordan's youthful monarch, developed into a widely respected regional

statesman and peacemaker, an ambassador who raised the international profile of his small, impoverished desert state, eventually attracting large amounts of cash assistance. Most important, Hussein was able to bridge over time many of the profound ethnic differences of his Palestinian and tribal-origin subjects. Hussein's son, Abdullah II, who ascended the throne in 2000, continued along this trajectory, eventually helping move Jordan out of Iraq's orbit and firmly into the pro-West camp.

Over the past decade and a half, Jordan has even more closely aligned itself politically and militarily with the West and the United States in particular, opening the door to increased strategic cooperation and financial assistance from Washington. While the close ties with Washington did not insulate the kingdom from regional challenges, they helped Jordan withstand some of the more difficult crises and political storms threatening its domestic stability.

## EFFECTIVE APPROACHES TO PROBLEMS

Aligning with the West was but one of a series of regionally novel approaches to challenges that helped ensure the kingdom's survival. Other productive approaches that have helped the palace overcome adversity include:

- ▣ **A FOCUS ON RELIGIOUS LEGITIMACY.** King Hussein would frequently refer to the lineage of the Hashemites—direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammed—to try to unite a disparate population and reinforce the legitimacy of his rule, which had essentially been transplanted from the Hejaz, on the Arabian Peninsula.
- ▣ **RELATIVELY BETTER GOVERNANCE.** According to Freedom House, Jordan is “not free.” By regional standards, however, Jordan employs comparatively mild repression. Its monarchs do not employ torture to the same degree as other regional states.
- ▣ **LESS KILLING.** Smart crowd control is a hallmark of Jordanian policing. When demonstrations do occur, the police and gendarme, known as the *derak*, do not fire on crowds, even when this means officers sustain casualties.

- ▣ **MEDIATION OF SOCIETAL CONFLICT.** Over the years, the palace has served as the traditional arbiter between the estimated 40 percent tribal-origin and 60 percent Palestinian-origin population. Much resentment prevails on both sides—social, economic, and political—but the regime has found a formula to defuse tensions and reduce violence. An intermarriage rate of about 30 percent, which includes the king himself, is likely helping matters.
- ▣ **SMART HANDLING OF ISLAMISTS.** The palace has been judicious in its dealings with the kingdom's Islamists. Through a combination of cajoling, cooptation, and, periodically, intimidation and repression, Jordanian authorities have adeptly managed what could have been a significant threat to the regime and the kingdom's pro-West orientation.
- ▣ **TOP-NOTCH FUNDRAISING.** Jordan has been a debtor state since 1946 but has obtained funding from the Gulf, Saddam's Iraq, the United States, Europe, and Japan. The palace has elevated fundraising to an art, leveraging its strategic location and its moderation to extract consistently high rents from the United States, which is now contributing nearly 10 percent of Jordan's budget annually.
- ▣ **ACCEPTING REFUGEES.** Jordan has allowed more refugees per capita to enter than perhaps any other country. These refugees have been a real strain on the kingdom, both economically and socially. But the refugees have also been a consistent profit center, bringing revenues, financial assistance, and at times new capital into the kingdom.
- ▣ **LUCK.** Toward the end of 2012, the kingdom was facing a difficult challenge from the tribal opposition known as al-Hirak, which was moving closer to the Muslim Brotherhood, based on a shared focus on palace corruption. Paradoxically, the war in Syria, the instability in Egypt, chaos in Libya, and the collapse of Yemen served as a disincentive to Jordanians to protest. Instead of demonstrating, Jordanians stayed home, displaying a preference for life in a stable, relatively tolerant Jordan.

## KEY CHALLENGES

While Jordan's moderate, nonideological, and revolution-averse political culture is a strong mitigating factor, the risk of domestic instability is greater today than at any time since the country's bloody 1970–1971 period. In large part, the threat is related to spillover from the war in Syria. To date, approximately 1.4 million Syrian refugees have crossed into Jordan. These refugees, who constitute about 13 percent of Jordan's population, pose a unique challenge for the palace.

Fewer than 120,000 of these Syrians live in the kingdom's two available refugee camps, whereas the vast majority are dispersed throughout the state and stretching Jordan's perennially anemic economy, in which job creation is a significant problem. Indeed, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 86 percent of the refugees living outside the camps fall below the poverty line. Officially, unemployment is about 15 percent, a number much worse when one considers the low rate of workforce participation, which is 36 percent. Among young people, unemployment has reached a reported 40 percent. Not surprisingly, the addition of hundreds of thousands of Syrians to the job market is further increasing unemployment among Jordanians as businesses replace locals with cheaper Syrian labor. According to the International Labor Organization, in areas with high concentrations of Syrian refugees, unemployment among Jordanians has risen to 22 percent.

These refugees are stressing the kingdom's infrastructure, including its water, electric, and education sectors, and driving up housing prices. In 2015, the costs of hosting refugees were equivalent to 17.5 percent of the country's budget and a significant contributor to Jordan's \$2 billion deficit. These factors recently led King Abdullah to say the situation had "gotten to a boiling point...Sooner or later, I think the dam is going to burst." Toward the end of 2015, Jordan began limiting entry from Syria solely to those in urgent need of medical attention.

While the economic and social impact of the Syrian refugees is significant, security is an even more urgent concern. An estimated 2,500 Jordanians are currently reported to be fighting in Syria. The Jordanian armed forces are effectively preventing infiltrations and

fighting armed Syrian militants and smugglers along the border, but increasingly there are signs that some refugees—and Jordanian nationals—are being influenced by the ideology of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) or Salafi Islam.

To wit, before IS burned to death a Jordanian pilot downed over Syria in January 2015, only 62 percent of Jordanians said they considered IS—and a mere 31 percent the Syria-based al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra—a terrorist organization. According to that same September 2014 survey conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, just 44 percent of Jordanians surveyed said al-Qaeda was a terrorist group.

No doubt, the killing of the Jordanian pilot has tempered some of these views. Still, terrorist-related incidents and arrests in the kingdom are on the rise. In early March, Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate reported that eight members of an IS cell plotting to attack both civilian and military targets in the state were killed during a shootout in Irbid. In June, an intelligence headquarters was attacked twenty miles north of Amman, and an IS car bomb exploded at the eastern Jordanian border post in Rukban, killing seven soldiers.

## WHAT SHOULD THE UNITED STATES DO TO HELP?

Washington has an important role to play in helping Jordan weather the current regional storm. In March 2016, this author, along with Washington Institute executive director Robert Satloff, published a paper for the Council on Foreign Relations titled “Growing Stress on Jordan,” urging the United States to take the following steps to help mitigate pressures on the kingdom:

- ▣ **INCREASE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE.** In 2016, the United States will provide Jordan with more than \$1.6 billion in military and economic assistance. In 2015, Washington also gave the kingdom \$180 million in additional funding for refugee relief, or about half of what the United States gave to Lebanon. Given Jordan's strategic import, Washington should do more. In 2015, Washington donated \$533 million in support to Syrian refugees

in other Middle East countries. Some of this funding could be reallocated to Jordan. Washington should also press European and Arab allies (e.g., Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait) to add an annual budget support component of \$1 billion to its existing infrastructure investment projects, committed in 2013, in the Jordanian kingdom.

- ▣ **SUPPORT EMPLOYMENT FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES.** High unemployment, insufficient job creation, and controlled immigration appear to be driving the migration of Syrian men to Europe. To entice Syrians to remain in the region, if not in Syria itself, will require providing a degree of economic opportunity. Washington should encourage European states to invest in job-creation initiatives in Jordan once the kingdom provides more Syrian refugees with work permits. Local refugee employment was identified as a European priority during the February 2016 Syria donor conference in London. In exchange for World Bank loans and European grants, Jordan committed in mid-2016 to allow Syrians to work in the kingdom. It is important that Amman follow through on this commitment.
- ▣ **INCREASE DEFENSE AND INTELLIGENCE COOPERATION.** Intelligence sharing and security cooperation between Washington and Amman are already exceptionally strong. To further strengthen the relationship and improve Jordan's intelligence-gathering capabilities over southern Syria, the Obama administration should provide the kingdom with an advanced armed- and surveillance-drone capability.
- ▣ **ESTABLISH A GENUINE SAFE ZONE.** Although Jordan has implemented some under-the-radar efforts to support communities on the Syrian side of the border, those efforts lack the imprimatur and staying power of a fully supported humanitarian safe zone, where U.S.-led coalition forces provide security for the sheltering and feeding of internally displaced Syrians. Establishing such a zone with partners in the counter-IS coalition would serve both U.S. strategic interests in safeguarding Jordan and humanitarian concerns by protecting civilians.

## U.S. ASSISTANCE WITH GOVERNANCE, TERRITORIAL CONTROL, AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

While Jordan, relative to other regional states, has a more tolerant and pluralistic system of government, in recent years, according to Freedom House, in terms of political rights and civil liberties, the kingdom is “not free.” Prior to the 2011 uprisings, political reform had been an important component of the U.S. agenda with Jordan. Perhaps not surprisingly, given regional developments, reform has become a lower priority—for both Washington and the Jordanians. Nevertheless, the United States is currently helping underwrite a substantial decentralization project in the kingdom, which, if successful, will advance political reform. At the same time, in 2015, Jordan rolled out a new electoral law that appears to encourage political party development, a key element of the kind of political reform advocated by the West.

Human development is likewise critical to enhancing the kingdom’s long-term stability. As with many regional states, however, this has until now proved a significant challenge for Jordan. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank are optimistic about Jordan’s economic prospects, yet according to polling conducted by the Amman-based Phenix (sic) Center for Economics and Informatics Studies last summer, 57 percent of Jordanians see the economy as “bad” or “very bad.” Job creation is a big reason, especially given the large number of Jordanian university graduates who have little prospect of appropriate employment. Amman has announced plans to help create 180,000 new jobs by 2025. While such a number would be a good start, it may not be sufficient. In 2013, the IMF estimated that 400,000 new jobs would be needed by 2020. Washington has plowed millions in development assistance into Jordan to address this issue, but it has had little impact.

Fortunately, security, relatively speaking, remains a core competency of the Jordanian government. Both the army and the General Intelligence Directorate continue to perform to a regionally high standard. While IS and other militant groups are plotting attacks in the kingdom—and will likely eventually strike government, civilian,

or tourist targets—Amman is proactive in its border security and domestic defense. The real problem, however, is that ideology traverses borders. The longer the war in Syria continues, the bigger the threat of terrorism is to the kingdom. For Washington, that means the key to long-term stability in Jordan is helping bring the quickest possible end to the fighting next door.