

## SECURITY CHALLENGES AND AUTHORITARIAN RESILIENCE IN THE LEVANT IN A REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE – THE CASE OF JORDAN

**Peter Seeberg**, Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, University of Southern Denmark

### **Jordanian Foreign and Security Policies and the Security-Stability Nexus**

Over recent decades the political relations between Jordan and the West in general have been good. Jordan has pursued a policy of moderation, and has kept a strategically balanced position with the major regional and international powers (Shlaim, 2008: 546). Very much as a result of regional conflicts, large groups of Palestinian, Iraqi and Syrian refugees have played an important role in defining Jordanian foreign and security policy. As part of the historical background for this overview the question of the Palestinians in Jordan constitutes a significant issue in regional politics, as well as in the cooperation between Jordan and the EU. With 2,242,579 Palestinian refugees registered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), Jordan is by far the largest host in the Middle East, and the EU is a major donor to the UNRWA.

In the years after the US-led invasion in Iraq in March 2003, Jordan took care of perhaps as many as 700-800,000 Iraqi refugees. Today the majority of them are back in Iraq and, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Iraqis in Jordan now number 67,276. The Iraqis do not cause much public debate, but this was not always the case (interviews by the author: Jordanian ministries, organizations/NGOs and media). Of the 657,445 UNHCR-registered Syrian refugees in Jordan, 123,073 are living in camps (UNHCR, 2019: October). In principle Jordan, in contrast for instance to Lebanon, pursues a policy of encampment, but the realities on the ground are different. The presence of the Syrian refugees in Jordan is in general accepted by the population, but not without problems, as indicated in interviews by the author.

The Jordanian authorities fear that Jordan could be invaded by smugglers, traffickers and other problematic groups entering Jordan “disguised” as refugees. They also worry that similar processes have resulted in increasing numbers of radical Jihadists from outside being present and

active in Jordan. A terror attack in Karak in late 2016, which reportedly was carried out by Islamic State (IS), killed 17 people and left 34 injured, emphasizing that Jordan might not be an “island of stability”. Smaller attacks took place, such as an IS operative entering a General Intelligence Directorate (GID) complex in a refugee camp north of Amman and killing five officers, followed, two weeks later, by a car bomb killing six soldiers. For the Syrian refugees the incidents have had negative indirect consequences – and practices of occasional deportations and sometimes refoulement have taken place at the border between Jordan and Syria.

A tendency to radicalization of Jordanian youths is a recurrent theme in the Jordanian debate about the spill-over effects of the Syrian crisis. Several thousand Jordanians are said to have joined Jihadist movements in Syria, and the Jordanian authorities know of groups of radicalized young Jordanians who from time to time attempt to organize cells in different areas of Jordan. Regarding counterterrorism activities the GID is said to be relatively efficient, but there have been instances where the Jordanian security apparatus has failed.

The work by the Jordanian authorities among Jordanian youths in order to prevent radicalization has in general not been successful. The main reasons for that is probably low real wages, lack of opportunities in education, a weak labour market, and the presence of radical Islamist discourse in Jordan – and obviously living conditions as well as job and education opportunities would look different if the Mashreq had not been exposed to the crisis in Syria.

Counter-insurgency activities in Syria have been an important aspect of Jordan's cooperation with its partners in the international coalition against IS. This has been important for the relations between Jordan and the EU in the sense that security and stability constitute significant fields of common interests. Supporting the Jordanian interventions in Syria, the EU has accepted policies that might transcend international political agreements (interviews by the author with EEAS staff in Brussels). At the same time, the Jordanian authorities have utilized their activities regarding security and stability in Jordan, as well as actions in Syria, in their migration diplomacy vis-à-vis the EU.

### **Jordanian Resilience and the Labour Market**

In his remarks introducing ‘Jordan 2025. A National Vision and Strategy’, King Abdullah II states that the Jordanian economy faces a set of difficult challenges, not least the “ramifications of the Syrian crisis, particularly the influx of Syrian refugees, as Jordan currently hosts 1,300,000 of our brethren Syrians, which is depleting our limited resources and creating enormous pressures on our infrastructure and national economy” (Government, 2014). Jordan appreciates the EU's financial support but emphasizes that Jordan itself is still the main donor, and that there is an urgent need for the international donors to increase aid to much higher levels (interviews by the author in Jordanian ministries).

Over the following years, Jordan Response Plans (JRP) have been produced, underlining the unexpected and dramatic character of the spill-over effects of the Syrian crisis on Jordan and the activities given the highest priority from the side of the government and municipalities. Parallel with the 2016–18 JRP, a comprehensive agreement between Jordan and the EU, the so-called Jordan Compact, was launched to foster job opportunities for Syrian refugees in the Jordanian labour market. In accordance with the 2016-18 JRP, the Compact spoke in favour of a gradual shift from humanitarian to development-oriented aid (Grant, 2019: 30).

The Compact was supposed to form the basis for offering job opportunities to Syrian refugees, who while in Jordan could contribute to the Jordanian economy. The idea was furthermore based on relaxing the EU rules of origin in order to stimulate investment in Jordan, exports to the EU, and job creation for Syrian refugees and Jordanian citizens. By April 2019, according to the Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, more than 140,000 work permits had been issued (MOPIC, 2019a), yet only half of them were active (interviews in Jordanian ministries). The labour market has been a negotiation theme between Jordan and the EU for years, and a keyword has been and still is the notion of stability. An important priority for the Jordanian state is to ensure that Jordanians do not feel that the refugees are treated better than themselves, as this could cause public protests.

Conferences in Brussels on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region', have functioned as meetings where conditions and frames for the financial aid have been discussed and concluded – and then have been followed by negotiations between the donors and the specific receiving states before actual local implementation. The Brussels I Conference took place on 4-5 April 2017, pledging a total of €5.6 billion in financial aid for 2017, with an additional €3.5 billion for 2018-2020 and up to €27.9 billion in loans (EU-Council, 2017). In the section concerning Jordan it was mentioned that the government had taken steps to facilitate job opportunities for Syrian refugees in an attempt to make the relaxed rules of origin practices impact on Jordan's export to Europe. Pursuing this goal, Jordan, in cooperation with donors and international organizations, had established employment centres both within and outside the refugee camps. The results, however, have been limited, also regarding the export effect.

The Brussels II Conference (24-25 April 2018) pledged a total of €3.9 billion for 2018, €3.2 billion for 2019-2020 and €17.2 billion in loans for 2018-2020 (EU-Council, 2018). One year later, the Brussels III Conference took place (12-14 March 2019) and witnessed a renewed willingness to pledge financial aid for the support of Syria and the region: €6.16 billion in funding for 2019, €2.09 billion in funding for 2020 and beyond, and €18.47 billion in loans for 2019 and beyond (EU-Council, 2019a). The Brussels III Conference commended Jordan for its efforts as host for large numbers of Syrian refugees and for providing them with employment opportunities. Recognizing that the situation in Syria was far from stable, it was stressed in the

conference press release “that Syria remains a protection crisis with multiple protection challenges affecting the lives of millions of Syrians on a daily basis” (EU-Council, 2019b). In the Jordanian follow-up to Brussels III, the 2019 JRP, it was mentioned that the total number of registered Syrian refugees in Jordan is expected to decrease in 2019 (MOPIC, 2019). The most recent statistics from the UNHCR confirm this, but the decrease is so far very limited (UNHCR, 2019). Therefore, as stated in an assessment report, “substantial numbers of Syrian refugees will continue to live in Jordan for many years to come and there will be a need to continue to finance essential services for these communities” (Grant, 2019: 30).

The measures presented in the JRPs should contribute to reducing the possible negative consequences of letting Syrian refugees enter the Jordanian labour market, increase production in the export sectors as a result of the relaxed rules of origin agreements and increase economic growth. Overall this has not worked very well. The success rate regarding job creation has been low for both Syrians and Jordanians and in particular the labour market participation rates for women have been very low (Krafft et al., 2019: 189). The living conditions for many of the Syrian refugees are substandard, and well-paid stable employment is still a distant hope for the majority of the Syrians in Jordan (Tiltne et al., 2019: 135). The future for the Syrian refugees seems in many ways to be problematic, not least as a result of the unsecure realities concerning the reconstruction of Syria in a post-war scenario. The cooperation with the EU on the relaxed rules of origin agreement has only resulted in low levels of Jordanian exports and has only marginally contributed to economic growth. In addition, Jordan faces severe difficulties beyond the challenges related to the Syrian refugees and security issues as discussed above, primarily as a result of a problematic economic situation for the Hashemite kingdom in general.

## References

EU-COUNCIL: *Brussels I, II and III Conference. Supporting the future of Syria and the region*, 4-5 April 2017, 24-25 April 2018 and 12-14 March 2019. Brussels: European Council.

EU-COUNCIL. *Press Release. Brussels III Conference on 'Supporting the future of Syria and the region: co-chairs declaration'*. Brussels: European Council, 2019b.

GOVERNMENT. *Jordan 2025. A National Vision and Strategy*. Amman: Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 2014.

GRANT, P. E. A. *Independent Monitor's Assessment Report Jordan Compact and Brussels Meetings*. Amman: Agulhas Applied Knowledge, Report Number 1, 7 March 2019.

KRAFFT, C., RAZZAZ, S., KEO, C. & ASSAAD, R. "The Number and Characteristics of Syrians in Jordan". In Krafft, C. & Assaad, R. (eds.) *The Jordanian Labor Market. Between Fragility and Resilience*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.

MOPIC. *Jordan Response Plan for the Syrian Crisis 2019*. Amman: Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, 2019.

SHLAIM, A. *Lion of Jordan: the Life of King Hussein in War and Peace*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

TILTNES, Å. A., ZHANG, H. & PEDERSEN, J. *The living conditions of Syrian refugees in Jordan. Results from the 2017-2018 survey of Syrian refugees inside and outside camps*. Amman: Fafo & Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, 2019.

UNHCR. *Syria Regional Refugee Response. Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal*. New York: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2019.

Published jointly with Aula Mediterrània.