

10 INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS UNDER ABDULLAH

Iraq Crisis, Syria Crisis

There are few things like a new ruler in post to excite the politics of a semi-authoritarian country. Jordan after King Hussein in February 1999 was no exception, except for the fact that Abdullah II's accession coincided with those of the leaders of three other countries: King Hamad of Bahrain in March 1999; King Muhammad VI of Morocco (locally referred to as M6) in July 1999, and Bashar al-Asad of Syria in July 2000. It was not therefore the case that Abdullah II was the only focus of febrile speculation about inexperience, or that the King of Jordan would be the least adept at managing such pressures. As with personality and policy at home, King Abdullah felt isolated and ill-equipped for the tasks abroad – apart from the operational and the tactical, in relation to which he felt altogether more confident. There was a foreign-policy cadre of sorts in Jordan, but it tended to be quiet and deferential, and was heavily beholden to its domestic counterpart. King Hussein had tended to act as his own foreign minister, suggesting that there were few ample dossiers of genuine insight in the palace secretariat.

King Abdullah's first foreign policy was arguably the prioritisation of everything. This reflected his *naïveté*. He thought that if he could just establish good working relations with all of his problematic neighbours then foreign ties could be managed rather than requiring actual intervention. In spite of the inexperience of Abdullah and his team, he actually made a tolerably good start. Premier Rawabdah represented a Jordanian foreign policy, eschewing either a Hashemite policy or a pan-

Arabist approach. Prominent too was the pursuit of a range of economic goals, primarily aimed at promoting social harmony. In country terms, King Hussein had presided over a decline in relations with the Gulf states and Syria, with the latter perennially the most dangerous.

But the situation on the ground, in which there was real concern over the imminent Syrian succession, meant that the focal point was different. King Abdullah had amassed a portfolio of material wealth in the course of the previous six months. These had primarily come from the Gulf states, with the comparable generation profile of its young royals quite responsive.¹ With it having been assumed that King Hussein's financial fortune was negligible and that any resources that might have existed were to be found in the possession of Queen Noor, the establishment of independent funds became a practical goal of monarchical foreign policy.

Of even greater importance at this time was the situation in Syria, where an ailing Hafez al-Asad was afflicted by terminally failing health. Indeed, Asad senior had actually attended the funeral of King Hussein in Amman in February 1999 in order to judge who might accede and when, and how the fortunes of his own chosen son, Bashar, would fit in. Apparently convinced that a deal between the Asads and the Hashemites would be mutually beneficial, the two families set about building on the resilience of their relationship, rather than seeking to undermine one another, for fear that such competition would favour enemies of both.

Asad's focus was not only concerned with the succession issue in Syria. This was also a vital period as far as leadership in Damascus was concerned, with the USA too coming into play. Notably, there was an extended meeting in Geneva between Asad senior and American President Bill Clinton to explore whether the possibility of a breakthrough in the Arab–Israeli peace process would be possible. In spite of such efforts the diplomatic manoeuvre was disappointing, as Clinton was unprepared for the occasion and unwilling to make meaningful concessions, even if this was the last tenable moment to seize the moment in Israeli–Syrian peacemaking. Asad thought that he had been misled. Still, the victory of Ehud Barak's Labour Party in the Israeli elections raised expectations fleetingly because of the emphasis he had placed on a 'Syria First' peace track, as opposed to peace with the Palestinians as the priority.

The improvement in atmospherics did generate some momentum as far as Jordanian–Syrian relations were concerned. Amman too

had identified this as a propitious time during which to explore the creative possibilities of generational change. For example, King Abdullah was a visitor to Damascus at this time, where he sauntered up and down the stunning Suq al-Hamidiyyah, eating ice cream, bantering with the small shopkeepers and having his picture taken in some of the cute little sweet shops so beloved of Syrian confectioners. This initiative was at first facilitated by the ever-active Kabariti. At this time he was still the head of the royal court. Moreover, his mother-in-law was Syrian, thereby giving him a privileged, insider's vantage point on the human dimension of political affairs. These were the short, halcyon days of Jordanian–Syrian rapprochement, rarely witnessed in the bilateral relations of the two countries.

There were also more material innovations to bring into play. Kabariti used his existing relationships to try to build a more complementary set of relations in the Levant, bringing together Jordanian–Lebanese–Syrian economic ground.² Indeed, the improved relationship between the two sides went further than pure symbolism. Syria desisted from ‘terror’ incursions, a bugbear of Jordanian foreign relations since the 1980s.³ In summer 1999 President Asad arranged for potable water to be transported to Jordan at a time when the Israelis, in spite of their bilateral peace that was just five years old, were being unhelpful and denying such transfers themselves. At the end of the day, however, Jordanian and Syrian foreign policies were incompatible, especially with regard to the Arab–Israeli peace process. Jordan, with its historic 1994 bilateral Wadi Araba peace treaty, was a structural normaliser of ties with Israel; it is also a perennial appeaser of relations with the USA stretching back to the late 1950s.

With Abdullah being a couple of years older than his newly installed counterpart, President Bashar al-Asad, and with a wave of political successions, it appeared, at least momentarily, that he might emerge as the dean of the new wave of Arab leaders – or at least that was the presumed hope of his flatterers. Any such hope in this direction would disappear once the regional political context had been transformed and the USA had invaded Iraq on 21 March 2003.

The US-Led Invasion of Iraq

When George W. Bush became American President in January 2001 it was clear that he was spoiling for a fight. Most importantly,

he wanted to bring about regime change in Iraq. The reason for this was probably twofold. He wished to pay back Saddam Hussein's attempt to assassinate his father, during an earlier visit he had paid to Kuwait, which had been arranged by the Kuwaitis to thank the Americans for engineering their liberation from Iraqi occupation in February 1991. Bush, dominated by neo-conservative policy makers such as Vice President Dick Cheney and the dominant figures at the Department of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz, also wished to implement a fanciful strategy whereby Iraq would be transformed into a beacon on a hill representing democracy and good government. The ‘neo-cons’ rebutted those more sceptical of the benefits of ‘a new Middle East’ by accusing them of anti-Arab racism in rejecting the notion that Arab countries could be democratic.

The US administration did not launch an immediate invasion of Iraq, opting instead, in the wake of the 9/11 terror outrages, to wait until the time was more propitious. This enabled US priority to be assigned to the threat from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda, via Afghanistan. There were other advantages to a delay, notably more time for assembling a ‘coalition of the willing’. The USA was also persuaded to try a diplomatic channel, at least nominally, via the UN – the adoption of a talismanic ‘second resolution’. This helped to settle domestic constituencies sceptical about being tied to a pro-war coalition. Jordan very much fitted into this latter category.

Once the Taliban regime, led by Mullah Omar, had been ousted in Afghanistan, the USA was able to concentrate on political change in the more strategic prize of Iraq. Jordan too was extremely concerned at the imminent deployment of military force. Amman had sufficient experience of wars in the Middle East to imagine its consequences and to foresee the level of suffering and human displacement that was almost certain to occur.

Initially, Jordan was greatly perplexed by the prospective problems on the ground. King Abdullah began his second-phase foreign policy by urging the USA to desist from any visible signs of organised military activity. The King repeatedly warned of ‘catastrophic’ consequences if they were to take place. Jordan was a small country, whose long interaction with the USA and its presidents had given it some ability to influence its decision makers, but little impact upon the policy itself. Moreover, as an ally, albeit a modestly proportioned one, Jordan was supposed to fall into line rather than contemplate playing the role of spoiler.

King Abdullah time and again predicted large-scale refugee outflows, with significant numbers headed for Jordan, across its contiguous borders;⁴ large-scale loss of life, notably among civilians; the prospect of internecine fighting between Shia and Sunni; and profound implications for regional political ructions resulting from war. For the kingdom, there was the very real risk of US attacks on Iraqi civilians (that had been indirectly facilitated by Jordan) precipitating instability inside the country. Jordan also felt threatened as far as its strategic commodities were placed, Iraq being its only source of oil and 100,000 barrels being its daily requirement. The oil deal was worth \$500 million a year.

Amman's reaction to the threat of war was to try its best to reduce the chances of it occurring. But by September 2002 the American policy compass was clearly set. In that month the US armed forces set up an operations room in the GID of Jordan, in anticipation of an American military campaign in Iraq, the clearest possible sign that a US war against Iraq was inevitable. The Jordanian government followed up by stating that the kingdom was going to look after its own interests, and that it had 'no plans to commit suicide'.⁵

With the USA by this time implacably set on a war footing, that overall approach had run out of steam. In such a situation, all that the Jordanian side could do was to try to minimise the negative impact of war on their country. With the conflict set to focus on the Syrian desert, the USA quickly put together a shopping list of benefits to Jordanians that would facilitate such an approach. Importantly, basing troops in Jordan (and with other potential partners, such as the Iraqi Kurds) was the best way of realising support for the US war effort, and this was something that the Americans generally recognised.

There were two ways in which US and Jordanian interests served one another during the Iraq war and its aftermath. On the US side, Jordan provided them with a conduit for the movement of attack and support vehicles. The size and the nature of the desert conditions allowed the Americans to move freely around with a 'plausible deniability' about the nature and capacity of their armaments. So, for example, Jordanian and US troops underwent three weeks of joint military exercises in the desert in order to facilitate their practical cooperation. Still, Jordanian sources insisted that the government would not allow US troops to launch a war from its territories. In return, the US side recognised that Jordan could only contribute

marginally to the war effort itself. However, what the Jordanians did need was the creation of a political economy of cooperation, which would give Amman the budgetary support necessary in order to ensure that a tight fiscal regime was not exacerbated by uneasiness or even opposition from political sceptics domestically. In June 2002 Washington helped the kingdom to reschedule its \$7 billion debt under the Paris Club of multilateral lenders.

Jordan and Hamas

One of the more challenging decisions that King Abdullah had to make was how he was going to manage the presence of Hamas, the Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. In his time, King Hussein had experienced a mercurial relationship with the PLO, which he tended to regard as the primary threat to the Hashemites' ambitions in the Palestinian territories. Now, the equivalent for King Abdullah was with Hamas. Where King Hussein had been less of a risk-taker as far as the Palestinian movement was concerned, Abdullah had fewer inhibitions. He had less of a Hashemite mission than his father. This meant that he could more easily make decisions about the Palestinians in their own right.

Under King Hussein, Hamas maintained an information office in Amman for six years. Furthermore, it had the luxury of five representative offices in Jordan, staffed by nineteen full-time activists, and headed by Khalid Mish'al, and its chief spokesmen, Ibrahim Ghoshah, both Jordanians of Palestinian origin. The former went on to be the leader of Hamas for most of the following twenty years. Mish'al had been the target of an assassination attempt by Israeli agents in Amman. Only swift and purposeful intervention by King Hussein had saved his life (see pp. 205–6).

The relationship broke down only around eight months into Abdullah's reign. The senior Hamas figures were expelled to Qatar, a political regime increasingly close to the Muslim Brotherhood and hence of deep distaste to the new King. A basket of explanations were offered in order to justify the expulsions. The Jordanian authorities accused Hamas of breaking an agreement over military training and the amassing of weapons. Meanwhile, there were growing misgivings at the closeness between Hamas and revolutionary bodies in Iran. Indeed, the two men were actually arrested while getting on a plane to Tehran,

which rather added grist to the mill. Finally, the expulsions came at a time when there was real optimism about the future prospects of the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. The adoption of the ‘Clinton parameters’, framework for final status talks, would come just three months after the expulsions, as the Clinton/Albright-led peace talks would run out of time. It was therefore convenient to silence Hamas in Jordan as a device through which to muzzle the opponents of the US-led peacemaking.

The Hamas expulsions would divide Jordan domestically along hard-line or milder sympathies. They would help cement Prime Minister Rawabdah’s tough stance against the Palestinians, a position shared by the head of the Intelligence, Samih Batikhi. In the more flexible camp was that of the Royal Court Chief, Kabariti, who called for restraint, fearing a polarisation of the two communities in Jordan. They would exacerbate another, cross-cutting cleavage in evidence at the time. A major development was the outbreak of the second Palestinian uprising (*intifada*) in the Occupied Territories in September 2000, in response to Ariel Sharon’s provocative visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

The stance that he took enabled King Abdullah to argue that he was not soft on radical figures or their groupings. It also made for a less complicated political life for the King, who was able to give fuller, less equivocal support to Fatah, the more mainstream faction of the PLO, and it would be more than another decade before Hamas representation would be restored in Jordan. With the PLO’s stand-out leader, Yasser Arafat, dead in Ramallah in 2004, to be succeeded by the more prosaic and less effective Mahmoud Abbas, a greater level of political ballast, as represented by the expulsions, was probably, in the end, no bad thing for Abdullah.

Islamist ‘Terrorism’

Initially, it was the assumption of the USA and its allies that it had won the war for regime change in Iraq. The Iraqi military did not put up the desperate rearguard urban resistance that had been expected, at least not during the early stages of the war. America’s favourite political émigrés, notably the various Kurdish factions and the Hakim clan, returned to the country and dominated domestic politics, for the first couple of years. The Iraqi tyrant Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Arab,

was captured in the north of the country and executed in December 2006. The administration of the country during its first year of liberation/occupation was left to a brash US official, Paul ‘Jerry’ Bremer, thereby giving every impression that Iraq would turn out to be a vassal state. Such a view proved to be little more than an illusion. Though the USA and its supporters had won the state-to-state confrontation, the same was far from being true as far as the state-to-non-state conflict was concerned. It was in this more specific arena that Jordan was again to become more closely involved.

While it appeared that the US military, the pro-Iranian Shia militias and the Kurds from the north were the victors in the conflict, the situation on the ground was very different. An eclectic coalition of Sunni tribal Arabs, together with Sunni Islamist militias, had a grip on key areas of the country. The ‘victorious’ Shia and Kurdish militias came to control only the remaining peripheral areas. On two occasions this eclectic minority Sunni coalition took on the effective control of the country, but the fear of violence was a feature of this uneasy peace between Sunni and Shia. For Jordan, the fear of violence spilling over the border was a security vulnerability, and counter-insurgent Jordanian Sunni Islamist groups sprang up to monitor the threat.

Chief among this growing Islamist resistance movement, and operating mainly in Iraq, was the group led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – assuming, that is, that it was not a figment of the collective imagination of the CIA and MI6. As his name would suggest, he came from the second-largest city in Jordan, Zarqa, a predominantly poor Palestinian urban space with a strong Islamist identity. Zarqawi reportedly built up a following, based on the extreme nature of the violence that was his *modus operandi* and that of his supporters. Interestingly, under his command they appeared to confine their violent attacks to Iraqi territory, presumably because of the tinder-box balance between the various factions involved. Only on the odd occasion did the political tension of the day create so-called jihadist overspill, from Iraqi onto Jordanian soil.

Nevertheless, the greatest horror perpetrated on Jordanian territory came when fifty-seven people were killed in indiscriminate bombings at three upmarket hotels in Amman in November 2005, the brunt of the attack being taken by a wedding party. Sundry other, less sensational or successful attacks included a failed attempt to damage a US naval ship in the port of Aqaba and a planned attack on Abdoun, a

wealthy suburb of west Amman. Zarqawi himself was killed in a missile strike on 8 June 2006 as the nature of the confrontations ratcheted up in Iraq. Zarqawi still enjoyed widespread, posthumous, support in Jordanian circles as late as April 2013, in spite of his bloodthirsty methods, with 2014 marking the emergence of the so-called Islamic State Group.

Though Zarqawi was dead, his tactics were all too familiar in the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and the organisation of Islamic State Group in Iraq.⁶ Baghdadi's approach, like Zarqawi's, was to mobilise mass violence, often in the form of car bombs and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), with civilian targets inevitably the softest. These continuing attacks, together with their ferocity, helped to cement closer Jordanian-US ties.

An illustration of this was the capture of a twenty-seven-year old Jordanian strike pilot, Moaz al-Kasasbeh, in the jihadi-occupied town of Raqqa in Syria. It is disputed as to whether his plane was shot down or crashed owing to a system failure. True to its *modus operandi*, Islamic State Group decided that it wanted to make an example of the young pilot in order to deter other Jordanians from the temptation of fighting against them. He was subjected to a terrible death – locked in a cage and doused with fuel before being set alight. The DVD of his suffering was then circulated widely in Jordan and beyond. For some Jordanians it worked. According to professional pollsters, only around 7 per cent of Jordanian adults were sympathetic towards acts of jihadi violence,⁷ though an estimated 6–7,000 had joined Islamic State Group. By 2017, if truth be told, there was no watertight way of confirming this.

The King immediately came under intense political pressure, not least from street demonstrations by East Bank tribes, who dominate Jordan's specialist military. Even Queen Rania joined the dissenting crowds in an attempt to generate empathy between the palace and the tribes. King Abdullah's response was a serious one. First, he insisted that Jordanian air attacks on Islamic State Group targets would continue, as there could be no perception that the intimidation had succeeded. Second, he took the decision to execute those violent Islamists guilty of the Jordan hotel attacks, including an Iraqi woman, Sajida al-Rishawi. Third, by carrying out the executions Jordan delivered a rebuff to the liberal states, notably in Europe, in a statement that Jordan would act according to its national interest, a reflection of the prevailing value system in the Middle East. Jordan rushed to join the US-led, sixty-member coalition, sending warplanes and Special Forces.

A second cause célèbre concerned the outspoken political thinker Nahed Hattar, a nominal Christian who delighted in being controversial, whether politically – campaigning for East Bank over Palestinian rights in Jordan – or culturally – periodically denying the existence of God and the Prophet Muhammad. He was murdered on 22 September 2016 by a three-man jihadi hit squad outside the Ministry of Justice, even as he was trying to back-peddle on his position.⁸ His assailant was subsequently executed for the murder.

Jordan and the Diplomacy of the Arab Spring

The wholesale change in much of the internal politics of the Arab world could not but have a profound effect upon diplomacy as well. If Jordan coped tolerably well in the face of concerns about unrest domestically, there were quandaries to be faced as far as the politics of the region was concerned more widely. While ructions in Ben Ali's Tunisia in December 2010 did not have direct and profound consequences for Jordanian diplomacy as such, there were few participants in Arab politics that were left unaffected.

Once the spectre of mass killing had attached itself to Syria, there was no way that King Abdullah could maintain his northern policy. Indeed, by the autumn of 2011 President Bashar al-Asad had established himself as a formidable if bloodthirsty figure, ready to deploy extremes of repression in the name of defeating 'terror'. That was something that King Abdullah, with Jordan's growing reputation as a peaceful, inclusive polity, could not be seen to be participating in.

More positive in content was the two-year flirtation with the 'GCC six' on the part of Jordan and its fellow regional monarchy, Morocco. At first, this seemed like a clever plan to marry the capital-wealthy states of the six (Bahrain excepted) with the labour-intensive countries of Jordan and Morocco. Jordanian supporters of the politics of convergence, such as veteran renowned former minister and public servant Jawad Anani, argued that the bedrock of such complementarities were already in place: 'Jordan is already a member of the GCC in terms of its economic, financial, strategic, security and cultural relations with the council.'⁹

A number of meetings were certainly held. For example, a working group was convened to study procedures for Jordan's possible accession. Proponents of the proposed integration even got as far as

making a formal application in May 2011, though Morocco was always far less enthusiastic than its Levantine cousin. This reflected the substantive nature of the engagement. The respective Foreign Ministers met to discuss the creation of a five-year economic plan in September 2011. In the end the idea fizzled out. This was partly because of intuitive, practical differences, such as the physical distance between Morocco and the Gulf, together with the disparity between the wealth of the major oil producers, and the fact that those who make budgetary transfers to the less wealthy would prefer to maximise their own patronage. There were other factors too. These included the steady decline in relations among some of the GCC states, notably those of the increasingly assertive Saudi Arabia with Qatar and Oman,¹⁰ which would expose the overall organisation as more brittle within the course of the next five years.

Whose Foreign Policy is it Anyway?

As the Arab Spring and its ramifications deepened, so Jordan was again torn out of its comfort zone. Against such a backdrop it became less and less tenable for it simply to keep its head down and invoke bland platitudes about peace and the eradication of violence in order to play for time. Increasingly, there was considerable debate about three things. First, what exactly was the orientation of Jordan's foreign policy during the main period of conflict in Syria? Second, to what extent was foreign policy internally consistent? Third, what were the deciding factors in crafting and driving forward the emergence of policy?

This first question came to the surface in late 2011 with an official attempt to brand Jordanian policy as being one of 'positive neutrality', especially in Amman's dealing with the deepening Syrian crisis. This was primarily based on an assumption that the fall of Asad, which was deemed inevitable, would greatly weaken Jordan, and that this would be to the advantage of what Asad himself persistently called 'the terrorists'. To meet such a challenge Jordan would have to deploy ever more repressive measures at home in order to face down an assumed challenge to its stability.

Around six months later, in mid-April 2012, Jordan was still subject to similar countervailing pressures, except that by then the King was perceived as taking up vague and uncertain positions. So, for

instance, Jordanian foreign policy was described as existing in a 'grey zone' as far as the Syrian crisis was concerned. More and more the kingdom was being seen as sitting on the fence, and with the need to get off it. By January 2013 King Abdullah felt sufficiently confident to predict that President Asad would survive for an additional six months of fighting. Such a prediction seemed to reflect the Jordanian King's state of mind about his future political prospects. The King celebrated by taking off on one of his apparently endless visits to the USA. It is claimed that Abdullah is estimated to spend in the vicinity of 50 per cent of his time in America,¹¹ though it is likely that he makes such trips in part for diplomatic purposes.

There were still acrimonious exchanges between the Jordanian and the Syrian regime, especially in 2014. The two sides expelled each other's ambassadors in May 2014, when the Syrian war was still at its most intense. The decision to expel the Syrian Ambassador, Bahjat Suleiman, came after 'repeated insults', notably from the Ambassador himself. The confrontation came after the former Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh hosted a meeting of the Friends of Syria in the kingdom, for which he was roundly condemned.¹²

The crucial factor in deciding the direction, or lack thereof, in Jordanian foreign policy was the cleavage between what has been called the deep state¹³ and standards of more open government. The deep state, primarily in the form of the GID, supported by crack military units, has been working in a low-key way with the major clans from within the tribes straddling Jordan's international boundary. The aim has been to create a 70-kilometre buffer zone out of the total border of 375 kilometres, protecting an area at particular threat from such jihadi movements as the Islamic State Group and the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Fatah al-Sham. As part of this strategy the Jordanian deep state has also been working with rebel units of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Jordan is alleged to be targeting both radical Islamists and arms dumps, and has used aircraft and drones to establish an advantage.

The Jordanian deep state has also been concerned at the more recent activity of the Shia militia in Lebanon, Hizbollah, especially since November 2015, when the activities of pro-Iranian paramilitaries were mobilised in order to ensure that the Asad regime did not collapse at a time of great vulnerability. Though concerns mainly focused on the future of Syria, for Jordan a push southwards by Iranian proxies threatened to bring Iran and Jordan into proximate enmity. Jordan

withdrew its Ambassador to Tehran in April 2016, in the face of the growing security threat posed by Hizbollah. It is assumed that the King was anxious lest the 'Shia Crescent' that he had worried about was coming to fruition.

Other examples of the Jordanian deep state in action include Special Forces operations in support of the Kurds of Kobane against the Islamic State Group; Jordanian Special Operations forces assisting their US counterpart to try to free an American hostage, James Foley, in August 2014. They also included Jordanian Special Forces action in the western Iraqi city of Fallujah during October 2014.

By February 2013 Jordan could declare that the war in Syria had been 'expensive but not destabilizing'. It would take a couple more years for a resurgence of an existential threat, in this case in the form of a near collapse by the Asad regime.¹⁴

Syrian Overspill

Initially, Jordanians, as with many of Syria's neighbours, waited to see what would happen in the Syrian conflict. They had every expectation that the Damascus regime would collapse, partly because the USA was so vocal in playing up the inevitability of such an outcome, and partly because of the preponderance of the forces lined up against President Asad and his embattled supporters both at home and abroad. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was especially voluble in holding that regime change was inevitable and would come sooner rather than later.

Table 10.1 Jordanian foreign policy and the Syrian crisis: perceptions and ambiguities, 2011–2015

Policy Conceptions	Time span
Positive Neutrality	March 2011–April 2012
The Grey Zone: Sitting on the Fence	April 2012–April 2013
Dual Ambiguity	April 2013–continuing
'Cross Words' Policy; Nsour's Indecision	June 2011–September 2013
(Strategic) Dithering	2011–22 April 2013
'Going in the Right Direction': Jordan and Syria ¹⁵	Sept 2015–continuing

Source: Author's own interpretation

The key questions were therefore how and when rather than whether. By autumn 2011 the inevitability of such an outcome was far less clear-cut. By this stage the conflict landscape was much more complex and uncertain.

From the perspective of human tragedy, Jordan dealt with this early stage of the conflict in an ad hoc, humanitarian way. There were already many Jordanian families of Syrian origin based in the kingdom. Many of these stretched back to the early part of the twentieth century, when Syrian traders and merchants established trading ventures on a predominantly vertical axis, with trade with the Ottoman Empire and then the British-backed Jordanian state in mind. Together with the Palestinian-origin merchants of the day they went on to dominate the issuing of trade licences in the 1920s and 1930s, and held senior office in newly established institutions such as the Amman Chamber of Trade. In keeping with local cultural values of hospitality, alms-giving and kin solidarity, Jordanian people, especially those with family in Syria, were able to absorb the growing fallout to the north.

This piecemeal approach was largely sustainable until the Asad regime began to use people as a strategic asset through which to undermine the political opposition. Prominent in this approach was the use of refugees as an instrument of state, which began in earnest from March 2013. These refugees came predominantly from Deraa in the south, close to the Jordanian border, which explains why there was such acute and continuing anxiety on the part of Jordanian security. This was where the main outbreak of the anti-Asad movement first took place. The influx of refugees was so overwhelming that it quickly undermined the tenability of Jordan's low-key responses and called for a serious strategy in addressing the country's predicament.

At the heart of this strategy was the creation of the Zaatari refugee camp in July 2012, although it is important to note that only about 20 per cent of Syrian refugees in Jordan actually live in camps. Three years later¹⁶ a second camp was built at Azraq.¹⁷ This enabled Jordan to house very significant numbers of refugees, wholly disproportionate to the size of the country and its population. As a result of Jordan's efficient organisation and its refugee aid from outside, the country was able to absorb more than a million refugees and to sustain their presence over the following four years. When Jordan notched up 600,000 refugees this made Zaatari the fourth largest 'city' in the kingdom and the second-largest of the world's refugee camps, after

Dadaab in Kenya. By 2017 the number of Syrian refugees in Jordan was somewhere between 650,000 and 1.4 million.

Unsurprisingly, the large movement of people from Syria into Jordan imposed a heavy burden on existing social groups in the kingdom. This impact was acutely felt in the economic and social spheres. The economic impact was mainly related to wages and salaries, where incomes were undercut by the large injection of labour supply into the provincial economy, with the border governorates of Azraq, Irbid and Mafraq the most vulnerable. With the Zaatari refugee camp located just 6.2 kilometres from Mafraq, the negative pressure on the local economy has been significant. Sectors such as semi-skilled trades, notably in the building and services trades, are certainly affected. Also affected were the social provisions made to the periphery of the country, with education and health provision already under pressure. The growth in class sizes proved to be a particularly controversial area, provoking the Jordanian Bani Hasan tribe into protesting against the erosion of their services. With the Bani Hasan being well organised and some 300,000 strong locally, the fear of clashes between them and Syrian refugees added another security headache for the state to cope with.

The original concerns of some commentators that there might be political fallout from Syrian refugees rubbing up against the border tribes have not been borne out. The big surge in Syrian refugees to Jordan is not the first time that the kingdom has become a repository for refugees. Jordan has experienced successive waves of Palestinian refugees, notably as a result of regional conflict in 1948/9 and 1967. More recently, large numbers of Iraqi refugees came to Jordan following the aftermath of the 1990/1 conflict. Other Arabs have set up home, whether permanently or semi-permanently, at various times. In many of these cases Jordan welcomed such migrants, either because they brought with them substantial flows of capital or just that the ideas and culture of Arab solidarity made such arrivals less controversial and perhaps even desirable. The Syrian refugee flows in the 2010s therefore have an honourable tradition. Having said that, the Arab world has become more of a collection of territorial states than was the case in some of these other migratory waves, while even in the 1950s Palestinian and Jordanian workers were ethnically divided and competed with one another in order to gain an economic advantage on that basis.

Superpower Relations: The USA

Even as King Abdullah has often floundered in his management of domestic political dynamics, sceptical voices about his reign admit that he has learnt well how to conduct himself effectively as a diplomat abroad. According to one senior member of the foreign diplomatic corps, King Abdullah has called all of the major decisions right in the course of his reign.

The cynic might of course say that he ought to do so, as he spends enough time out of his country to be capable of absorbing cosmopolitan values by osmosis. The best country case study where the evidence is marshalled for such a contention is undoubtedly the King's handling of the relationship with the USA. Both Abdullah and Rania like America, and Abdullah spent a lot of his schooling at various small institutions there. He finds the country congenial and unthreatening. Rania finds the USA in step with her avowed but mild liberal values, and her enjoyment of lavish wealth and what it can buy.

The relationship between the King and the USA goes beyond that of the strictly material. King Abdullah is one of the few world leaders who has enjoyed cordial relations with both Congress and the presidency. Senator John McCain, a leading senator dedicated to the security brief, was one of the King's closest allies in Congress. John Kerry, Barack Obama's second Secretary of State, enjoyed a close relationship with Abdullah, especially on the practical side when the King was trying to build connections for Jordan in the private sector.

The enduring importance of the peace treaty with Israel has probably been the single most important explanation for the high esteem in which King Abdullah is held. Though Abdullah has expressed periodic frustration with the three presidencies with which he has had direct dealings – Clinton, Bush junior and Obama – the Jordanian foreign-policy establishment knows that it has little choice but to

Table 10.2 Recent US foreign assistance to Jordan, financial years 2014–2017 (\$million)

FY 2014	FY 2015	FY 2016 est.	FY 2017 est.
1,010,200	1,462,692	1,647,563	1,364,650

Source: US State and Defense Budgets, abbreviated from Jeremy M. Sharp, 'Jordan: Background and US Relations', Congressional Research Service Paper, 14 November 2017

develop a good working relationship with such figures of global authority. So it was no secret that King Abdullah and Barack Obama enjoyed little personal warmth in their relationship, the latter perhaps being a little too cerebral for Abdullah's man-of-action persona.

Since the November 2016 presidential election much attention has focused on whether the King will be able to achieve the much more ambitious project of developing good relations with President Donald Trump. At first, King Abdullah's frequent visits to the USA worked in his favour, as he visited the country on at least two occasions between Trump's election and their first formal meeting. The two men spoke together by phone after the election. President-elect Trump even tweeted of his 'great respect' for King Abdullah. Whether the King's early knowledge of Donald Trump will be an asset to him, or whether, like British Prime Minister Theresa May, he will end up with the limited and ultimately excruciating mission of interpreting the Trump message to the region and hence spending too long within his orbit, is anyone's guess.

The other level of engagement that exists between Jordan and the USA is that of public opinion. According to Jordanian political scientist and well-known pollster Fares Braizat (working with the Pew Research Centre), the popular relationship has passed through two main phases since the onset of the millennium. In the earlier phase of popular interaction the relationship was uneven at best and susceptible to low bilateral scores. So, for example, of the thirty-seven countries subject to vox popular analysis, Jordanians interviewed were reported to have the highest unfavourable views of the USA, with a score of 82 per cent. Such poor scores seemed to be in part driven by regional conflagration, most notably the onset of and early days of the Iraq war and the poisonous nature of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Yet, when the exercise was repeated a decade later, the survey data were less hostile towards the USA. By 2017 it seemed as though the Jordanians studied understood the need to maintain a positive engagement with the USA as far as possible.

The USA has attempted to bolster the morale of the Jordanians by providing a range of military assistance including training, leadership and hardware. There have been around 1,000 US forces posted in Jordan at any one time since September 2013. Of this resource, some 700 are responsible for the management of the Jordanian F-16s and 200 personnel to train in the event of the deployment of chemical weapons.¹⁸

In addition, a further 2,850 US military personnel had been transferred in order to combat Islamic State Group activities. The number of US military personnel grew by nearly 75 per cent between 2010 and 2016.

Superpower Relations: Russia

In the run-up to the change in US-Jordanian relations it became apparent that a Syria end game was likely already in place. This would include the Asad regime and Iran, but with the Russian Federation as *primus inter pares*. Ever sensitised to regional dynamics and their changes, and with President Putin increasingly assertive in the Middle East, this chiefly amounted to accepting Putin's invitation to attend the Astana process for defusing the crisis (which had by this stage subverted the main Geneva process), and to exchange weaponry in some sort of contractual form in order to confirm their respective security statements. For Jordan, the price was to enlist a rejuvenated Russia in its own outlook. Key to this was ensuring that no militia would deploy south of Damascus, a red line for Amman and the essence of what has become known as Jordan's pivot to Russia.

For those steeped in the politics of the Cold War such a situation would have seemed alien. It was only in the late 1950s that the Eisenhower Doctrine was delivering US strategic support to the Jordanian state, with Russia and its vassal, Syria, in mind. Formal, bilateral relations were only established on 21 August 1963, Jordan managing to expand its diplomatic resources in a region where radical states prevailed. During a visit to Moscow in June 1976, King Hussein had undergone a change of ideological clothing, intentionally presenting himself as a non-aligned leader, and using the trip as a device to improve his image in Russian eyes. This framing was also a defensive play, as Jordan sought to ward off unwanted attacks. Since then, relations have further improved, notably at a personal level, Putin and Abdullah coming to power within months of one another in 1999. The two leaders met for the first time in August 2001. King Abdullah visited Moscow ten times over the period between 2001 and 2008, even before the onset of the Arab Spring.¹⁹

Jordan and Russia agreed to coordinate military action in Syria as part of a 'special working mechanism' set up in Amman. Existing coordination between the USA and Russia opened the door to Jordan's actions. This development came as part of a broader process of

consultation and coordination. The agenda was already a long one. In addition to the situation in Syria, efforts to combat terrorism and extremism, the situation in Jerusalem, and a list of crisis areas, notably Iraq, Libya and Yemen, had already presented themselves. Moscow commended what it saw as the kingdom's pivotal role in tackling regional problems and expediting the establishment of durable peace and security. In doing so, Jordan ensured that broader global issues would not be allowed to veto what have been called 'axis wars' in Syria, in a reference to the ideological sparring of the Cold War.

The presence of a significant and influential group of Jordanians of Circassian and Chechen origin, dating back some 150 years, has proved to be of growing importance, notably since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the re-emergence of a Russian state. Such figures are undoubtedly of disproportionate importance in Jordanian society, being found in the palace and civil bureaucracy, and in the military.

The rhetoric was clear and emphatic, but that did not mean that the relationship was consistent. In July 2016 Russian aircraft struck back following the downing of two Russian pilots by Islamic State Group operatives in eastern Syria. The killings came in the wake of heavy bombing attacks from southern Russia. The attacks followed Syrian air activity against one of the smaller, more partisan Syrian camps at Hadalat on the Jordanian-Syrian border. It was the first such attack since September 2015 when Putin's Russia went on the offensive in order to defend the embattled regime of Bashar al-Asad. Jordan feared that contracting control over Syria's periphery might leave neighbouring states, such as Jordan, vulnerable to jihadi attack.

In order to reduce the vulnerability of the northern border Russia, the USA and Jordan established a ceasefire in the provinces of Deraa (where the uprising originated), Quneitra and Suweida on 9 July 2017. Two months later the ceasefire was generally regarded as having held. Buoyed by this success, senior envoys from the three aimed to set up a de-escalation zone in south-eastern Syria. This plan very much favoured the vision by Russia of the creation of four de-escalation zones, which would greatly limit attacks from the south. Ironically, Jordan, the epitome of the 'buffer state' stretching back to its inception in the early 1920s, had now acquired its own buffer entity, thereby inserting its own level of intensity.

In the past, on the few occasions when the two countries have explored bilateral cooperation, Jordan and Russia have attempted to

consolidate their relationship, notably through the sale of military technologies. This has been of symbolic importance, though little else, as the Jordanian military is overwhelmingly reliant on military kit manufactured in and by the USA. Jordan and Russia have signed an inter-governmental programme for scientific and cultural cooperation, which is hoped will persevere beyond its initial period of 2010-12. Russia is to provide Ilyshin Il-76 MF military transport planes; Kamov Ka-226 helicopters; and RPG-23 Hashim multi-calibre grenade launchers. The choppers and the grenade launchers will be assembled under licence.²⁰

Of more or less comparable importance, Amman and Moscow have concluded a deal on the supply of medium-range civilian nuclear energy which will be used to generate electricity in the kingdom. The proposal is particularly eye-catching because of the deleterious impact of energy squeezes elsewhere, notably in Iraq. The value of the investment is around \$10 billion. The new plant will cover approximately 12-15 per cent of the total energy needs, with the Russian partner Rosatom, with the ownership split 51/49 per cent in favour of the Jordanian side. The plant is predicted to be finished by 2025.²¹

Russia has also been attempting to 'thicken' the bilateral relationship with Jordan. So much so that in April 2011 there were 600 Jordanian students studying in Russia.²² But there has been a bill to pay. One of Jordan's most well-connected NGOs, the Jordanian Council on Foreign Relations, attacked Western provocations in the Ukraine, while congratulating Moscow on the return of Crimea 'to the Motherland'.

Israel: Whose Side are you On?

It was some seven decades ago that senior figures of the emerging Israeli and Jordanian states famously 'colluded' across the River Jordan to parcel up the disputed territories of the day. It is the best part of forty years since the Israeli military intervened to deter Syrian forces from driving southwards to Amman and hence threatening not only national feeling but perhaps the very survival of the kingdom, to ensure the continuation of the monarchy. Finally, in 1994 King Hussein signed a peace treaty with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Through history, through deterrence and through formal peacemaking Israel and Jordan seemed to have harnessed their fortunes to one other.

However, it is indisputable that the relationship has not amounted to the sum of its constituent parts. Consider the outcomes, or lack thereof: the Jordanian peace has not generated momentum in the direction of imitation elsewhere among the Arab states; Israelis and Jordanians have been unable to navigate towards a more benign diplomacy to the benefit of all genuine peacemakers; Israeli ministers are happy to refer to their 'strategic alliance' with Jordan.²³ More alarming still, a number of incidents have taken place that have placed even the treaty itself in jeopardy. The blithe attempt in 1997 by the Israeli secret service to assassinate the head of Hamas, Khalid Mish'al, was as bizarre as it was dangerous. Since then there have been a handful of major incidents which came close to triggering a similarly broad crisis.

On 14 July 2017, in response to mounting violence and several deaths on both sides, Israel closed the Temple Mount for several days and installed metal detectors at the entrance after three armed Israeli Arabs emerged from the Temple to attack and kill Israeli Border Police. There were heated protests about the closure and the metal detectors in Amman in the following days, and heightened diplomatic exchanges between the governments about the issue. Then, on 23 July 2017, the deputy director of security at the Israeli embassy in Amman shot dead a young Jordanian carpenter delivering furniture to his apartment, and also, by accident, the Jordanian landlord, a local doctor. Jordanian forces surrounded the Israeli compound, preventing the Israeli perpetrator from leaving for Israel. In the end, after a diplomatic showdown, providence won the day, as Israel removed the metal detectors from the Temple Mount in exchange for the repatriation of the Israeli embassy personnel. A triumphant Netanyahu ostentatiously welcomed home the Israeli official responsible for the deaths. These two incidents showed how cavalierly the Israelis dealt with Jordanian sensitivities, and the incident saw the 1994 treaty at potential breaking point.

Another consequence of the unnecessarily poor relations between Israel and Jordan was the decision by Jordan not to renew Israel's lease of Baqoura and Ghumar, which were twenty-five-year leases on tracts of land along Israel's border with Jordan which end on 10 November 2019. Israel had rights to these tracts under the 1994 peace treaty, and the loss of the leases is another potential crisis point.

The situation on the ground is packed with greater danger because of the historic sense of mission shared by the Hashemite family

and its custodianship of both religious and national sites in Arab and Muslim lands. King Hussein was acutely conscious of his Hashemite past and his responsibilities; his grandfather was assassinated on the steps of the holy sites in Jerusalem. Jordan continues to pay the salaries of the Jordanian nationals working in the service of Jerusalem, with 700–800 people in the West Bank still on the payroll. There is some speculation that King Abdullah, however, takes his Hashemite responsibilities with a lighter touch. Whatever the truth of it, any lightness of feeling is more than counterbalanced by both Jewish and Palestinian nationalist sentiment, which is both intense and enduring.

CONCLUSION: JORDAN: STILL A POLITELY RUN AUTHORITARIAN STATE¹

It has been nigh on two decades since King Abdullah II acceded to the throne of Jordan, upon the death of his widely respected father, King Hussein. During this time the population of the kingdom has risen from 4 million to around 10 million, making it almost feel like a real country. To provide some perspective, Jordan's current population corresponds to that of Greece.

For Jordan, of course, having Greece as a source of emulation is setting the barrier extremely high, to say the least. Jordan continues to suffer from recurrent bouts of unrealistic existential challenges in a way that even cash-strapped Greece does not. Meanwhile, the wishful thinking goes on, as ever. As one member of the Jordanian elite remarked to me plaintively in 2017 in the course of a conversation for this edition, 'We are not asking for all that much, we just want to be "like Finland"'!²

There have of course been moments of hope, even over the gruesome period of the last twenty years, when the kingdom might have expected better outcomes. The rebuilding of Iraq or the false starts of the Arab–Israeli peace process, both of which might have given the country a hopeful upturn, did not in fact produce any tangible benefit. And yet, during this time, Jordan managed not to become embroiled in a major inter-state conflict – a colossal achievement for any political entity at the heart of the Middle East these days. Moreover, the country was not overwhelmed by disorder and violence internally, though on occasion events have wavered in the latter's direction.



Figure 21 Graffiti, once banned in the kingdom, now proliferates in many of the public spaces in Amman; this one has the cultural images of the flag, the coffee pot and *argileh* (for hospitality), a *keffiyeh* headdress, and words of welcome in many different languages (H. Robins, private collection, 2017)

King Abdullah II has expedited this outcome by emulating his father's strategy, especially in avoiding conflict with its dealings with the Spartan state of the region, namely Israel. This has allowed the kingdom to help create conditions which, given the greater pacification of the region, might have resulted in enhanced trade, inward and private remittance investment and other opportunities. In other words, Jordan might have been able to alleviate lower income levels, which have been the chief source of spasmodic instability at home.

Instead of Jordan having to wait for just a little longer before Iraq is rebuilt upon its plentiful oil reservoirs, or for a historic Israeli–Jordanian–Palestinian peace breakthrough, no realistic timetable has been feasible in either domain, as once seemed possible in the 1990s or the 2000s. This may well end up being replicated as far as the devastating and ongoing Syrian crisis is concerned. The domestic conflict of Jordan's northern neighbour could end up being another negative harbinger for Jordan over the next two decades, especially as far as Jordanian–Syrian economic relations are concerned: a massive,

promised post-war reconstruction effort that Jordan again just fails to turn to its benefit.

What then of the next two decades of governance in the kingdom? Like his father towards the end of his life, King Abdullah II gives all the impression of being a jaded figure (though there is no hint of serious premature illness, as was the case with King Hussein). His only relief appears to be found in his fondness for relaxation in the USA and the lifestyle of an 'A List' celebrity. He still faces the carping of the Jordanian intelligentsia, such as it is, who are quick to criticise but slow to act, other than when clearly acting in their own narrow interests. He lacks the fortitude to show tangible leadership, especially with respect to constituencies where he has some potential comparative advantage, whether in relationship to the Hashemites' Sunni credentials or towards constructive elements on both Jordanian and Palestinian sides. In short, the future of Jordan does not lie easily, let alone securely, with King Abdullah.



Figure 22 Five Hashemite rulers, from left to right: King Abdullah I, King Hussein, King Abdullah II, King Talal, Sharif Hussein of Mecca. The image is used in Jordan to reinforce the continuity and legitimacy of the Hashemite dynasty (H. Robins, private collection, 2017)

For sure, at fifty-six, King Abdullah could certainly last for another two or three more decades on the throne. The considered view that Abdullah II is 'the best that Hashemite Jordan can do for itself' is only valid if Crown Prince Hussein, at twenty-four, does not (yet) have the stomach or maturity for the job. Having excelled at Sandhurst, embraced the social media phenomenon,³ and reflecting in his own age the national demographic, Hussein 'mark two' may soon be old enough to come into his own as far as the succession is concerned.

Of course, rulers tend not to welcome their own demise. But there is a regional template for such an outcome, namely Qatar. Here, the increasingly fallible Shaikh Hamad bin Khalifa exercised a strategic judgement. In doing so, he ensured that he did not make the mistakes of either of his predecessors, as palace coups loomed. On this most recent occasion, Sheikh Hamad gave way voluntarily in June 2013 to his favoured (though not eldest) son, Tamim bin Hamad, and a potentially messy succession was avoided.

In the Jordanian case there is still much for Abdullah to play for, though even he may recognise his own limitations domestically, as well as his own disinclination to be a full-time, hands-on monarch. Hence potential scenarios will proliferate in the Amman rumour-mill. A favourite is that Abdullah II will continue to muddle through, on the basis of protecting his son and heir, of whom Queen Rania, his consort, is unsurprisingly a leading supporter. He will allow his son, Crown Prince Hussein, to take part in a sort of 'team monarchy', a division of labour with the incumbent, a de facto diplomatic bridge between Amman and Washington and his son managing the domestic tensions and patronage at home. King Abdullah II could even enjoy a meaningful if limited conversion to the values of political institutionalisation, with which he has briefly flirted, though notably only when he was under substantive political pressure, mainly in the 2011-13 period.

It would then fall to the Crown Prince and future King, Hussein bin Abdullah, to oversee the reform of Jordanian governance in the name of Jordan's youthful population, with greater popularity and a lighter touch.