

The End of the Syrian Civil War

How Jordan Can Cope

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The Syrian civil war produced one of the largest, longest, and most complex humanitarian crises of the twenty-first century. More than twelve million people have fled to Arab and Western countries since June 2011, including over 1.4 million to Jordan, equivalent to 14 percent of the Jordanian population.

This influx has created massive socioeconomic problems for the Hashemite Kingdom, including increased poverty, unemployment, budget deficits, and pressure on health and education infrastructures. This migration has had far-reaching political and security effects, notably erosion of Jordanian national identity, curtailment of the country's democratization process, and progressive unravelling of its social fabric due to increased violence, extremism, and corruption.

How have the Jordanian authorities addressed this formidable challenge, and is there light at the end of the tunnel now that the Syrian civil war seems to be drawing to a close?



More than 1.4 million Syrians have fled to Jordan as a result of the civil war. Here, a Syrian girl walks in the mud between tents at Zaatari refugee camp, Jordan, January 2013. The camp has been the site of riots, in part in response to harsh desert and weather conditions.

Historical Refugee Issues

Located in the heart of the Middle East, Jordan remains vulnerable to migration during regional conflicts and has a long experience dealing with refugees. As early as the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, the territory that was to become Jordan received waves of immigrants from Chechnya and Circassia, fleeing the Russian occupation of the Caucasus.¹ After the destruction of the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of the French mandate on Syria, Jordan experienced the first wave of Syrian immigrants, including a large number of politicians such as Ali Reza Alrekabi, who later became Jordan's prime minister, and members of the Syrian Independence Party, who occupied important political positions.²

During the Palestinian Arab violence of 1936-39, Jordan was a safe haven for many guerillas fleeing the British mandatory authorities. In 1948, following the outbreak of the first Arab-Israeli war, some 600,000 Palestinians emigrated, and Jordan received the lion's share.³ In 1967, Jordan was surprised by a new wave of Palestinian refugees following Israel's occupation of the West Bank.⁴

In the late 1970s, the country hosted Lebanese refugees fleeing the civil war there,

and the following decade it hosted Iraqi refugees of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). With the expulsion of some 400,000 Palestinians from Kuwait after the emirate's liberation from Iraq's brutal occupation (August 1990-February 1991), Jordan witnessed a third wave of Palestinian refugees that placed considerable strain on its infrastructure, demographic composition, and national identity.⁵

With the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Jordan became the largest host of Iraqi refugees, with the one-million-plus arrivals amounting to some 20 percent of the kingdom's population.⁶ At the start of the so-called Arab Spring, Jordan accepted thousands of Egyptian, Libyan, and Yemeni refugees.

Finally, with the eruption of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Jordan was at the forefront of countries that opened their doors to refugees fleeing the horrors of the war. The number of Syrians has now reached over 1.4 million, approximately 650,000 of whom are officially registered.⁷

Curtailing Reform and Democratization

During the Arab uprisings, the Jordanian political regime was able to maintain its status quo and avoided making meaningful

¹ For more information, see [Jordanian Chechen Site](#).

² Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1987), pp. 220-7.

³ Efraim Karsh, "How Many Palestinian Arab Refugees Were There?" *Israel Affairs*, Apr. 2011, pp. 224-46.

⁴ Adnan Abu-Odeh, *Jordanians, Palestinians and the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace Press, 1999), pp. 133-6.

⁵ Mohammed Bani Salameh and Khalid Edwan, "[The identity crisis in Jordan](#): Historical pathways and contemporary debates," *Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, Oct. 2016 .

⁶ Ahmed al-Shiyab, "The Legal, Economic and Social Conditions of Iraqi Residents," Refugees, Displaced and Forced Migration Research Center, Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jor., 2009, p. 8.

⁷ "Syria: Regional Refugee Response—Jordan," UNHCR (U.N. Refugee Agency), 2017.

concessions.⁸ It exploited the Syrian crisis and the influx of refugees to remind local protesters and reformers of the possible adverse consequences. This curbed the Jordanian population's appetite for deep political change. Protests diminished and then nearly ceased for a time; the process of reform and democratization retreated, and despotism and absolute rule became institutionalized under a regime of parliamentary and partisan pluralism.⁹

Zaatri camp, established in 2012 to host Syrian refugees, saw a dramatic increase in population to become the world's second largest refugee camp behind Dadaab in eastern Kenya. At one point, it hosted some 150,000 refugees.¹⁰ Movement out of the camp is loosely restricted, and many refugees have fled, though it is unknown to where and for what purpose. Even without intentions to do harm, these escapees pose a threat to Jordanian society.¹¹ The camp has seen increasing crime, including prostitution and



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drug dealing, and numerous riots have erupted as a result of harsh desert and weather conditions. The camp has also become an incubator for diseases that had been eliminated in Jordan including tuberculosis and hepatitis.¹²

With the influx of Syrian refugees, freedoms have been curtailed and the security services have expanded their control over public life to ensure quiet and stability.¹³ Thus, for example, the regime adopted a policy of restricting political parties and civil society organizations, similar to that practiced vis-à-vis the unified Jordanian Front Party and the Islamic Action Front Party, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, over the past few years. This could have serious long-term

⁸ Mohammed Bani Salameh, "[Political Reform in Jordan: Reality and Aspirations](#)," *World Affairs Journal*, May 2018.

⁹ Mohammed Bani Salameh and Azzam Elananzah, "[Constitutional reforms in Jordan: A critical analysis](#)," *Digest of Middle East Studies*, Fall 2015.

¹⁰ *BBC News* (London), [Apr. 6, 2014](#).

¹¹ Andrew E. Szparga, "[The Effects of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on Jordan's Internal Security](#)," Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection, SIT Study Abroad, Fall 2014.

¹² *Asharq al-Awsat* (London), [May 19, 2013](#).

¹³ Hasan Barari, "[Reform and the Dynamics of Instability in Jordan](#) during the Arab uprisings," *Perceptions*, Center for Strategic Research of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, Winter 2015, p. 73.

implications for Jordanian politics and civil society.

The refugee crisis also increased demonstrations and protests, with Jordan undergoing some ten changes and reshuffling of governments. In 2018 alone, the country witnessed unprecedented changes in government leadership and policy in response to widespread public demonstrations against proposed economic reforms and increasingly vociferous demands for more transparency and better government services. Public administration declined, government effectiveness weakened, and corruption increased. International bodies such as the World Bank, the World Economic Forum, Freedom House, and others have confirmed the decline in political stability in Jordan during the Syrian civil war.¹⁴

Increasing Militarization

The Syrian crisis also led to declines in security. Syrian missiles and artillery shells landed several times in Jordanian cities and towns while Jordanian border posts were attacked by terrorist organizations resulting in Jordanian deaths and injuries. Increased smuggling and infiltration of weapons and contraband intensified the burden on the security services.¹⁵ This in turn raised the state of alert regarding dormant terror cells as well as increased tension within Jordanian society.

To address the security issues, militarization of Jordan has increased as the ruling elites concluded that maintaining security and stability could only be achieved by the

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military and that other social institutions could be dispensed with. The ineffectiveness and corruption of the civil state apparatus has been highlighted, including in

the education and health sectors. These sectors were subject to a campaign of doubt, leaving only the military as an institution with a good reputation. The results include an increase in military spending: Jordan now ranks fourth in the Arab world and eighth at the international level in military spending relative to national income,¹⁶ with military expenditure accounting for 20 percent of government spending.

Deepening Jordan's Dependency

Jordan relies heavily on foreign aid, especially from the United States, the European Union, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. This has been a constraint on its foreign policy, which has often adapted to those of donor states.¹⁷

As a result of the Syrian refugee crisis, Jordan has become even more dependent on the foreign aid necessary for economic development and for coping with the burdens of the Syrian refugee crisis. Pressure by the Gulf states for Jordan to intervene in the Syrian civil war and to take an anti-regime position has been particularly strong.¹⁸ This has placed Amman in a tight situation. On the one hand, it does not want to anger the

¹⁴ "[Jordan: Political Stability](#)," The Global Economy.com, 2019.

¹⁵ Al-Jazeera TV (Doha), [June 21, 2016](#).

¹⁶ "[Jordan: Military Expenditures](#)," Index Mundi, Charlotte, N.C.

¹⁷ Laurie Brand, *Jordan's Inter-Arab Relations: The Political Economy of Alliance Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 38.

¹⁸ Mahmoud Khalid Waleed, "[Where does Jordan stand on the Syrian crisis?](#)" *Middle East Monitor*, Jan. 24, 2014.

Gulf states, but on the other, it has its own concerns about the Syrian rebellion, the opposition, and the transformations in the Arab world. Cautiously treading the tight rope in its increasingly volatile neighborhood, Amman had to accommodate a complex set of interconnected, and often contradictory, interests of allies and regional influences. Finding the right balance between those calling for the overthrow of the Assad regime and those supporting it—internally, regionally, and internationally—has proved a particularly demanding task.

Jordan's external relations have also been stalemated with such pivotal countries as Turkey and Iran. Syria is Jordan's only land crossing to Turkey and Europe. Even worse was the closure of the Iraqi border for several years, nearly isolating Jordan for a time. The country's dependence is also illustrated in its policies toward Islamists. The Gulf states have placed the Muslim Brotherhood on their lists of terrorist groups, increasing the pressure on Jordan to do likewise. As a result, the Hashemite regime has been unable to maintain its traditional relationship with the Brotherhood, which it regards as being under control, while balancing its interests with the Gulf states, especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Amman thus sought to Jordanize the local Brotherhood by demanding that it be separated from the Cairo-based Global Guidance Bureau, the Brotherhood's highest decision-making body. The regime also called for a separation from Hamas, with the group's Jordanian headquarters closed on the pretext



A soldier with the Multi-National Force looks toward the border between Iraq and Jordan at the Trebil port of entry. The closure of the border for several years furthered Jordan's isolation, and relations with other countries were also adversely effected by the war.

of being unlicensed and its political and social activities placed under siege.¹⁹

Threats to National Identity

National identity is one of the most sensitive and complex issues in Jordan. Since its creation in 1921 until recently, Jordan adopted a pan-Arab orientation at both state and society levels,²⁰ but the Syrian crisis saw a surge of distinct Jordanian nationalist sentiments. Jordanians expressed dissatisfaction with the Syrian migration wave, which adversely affected their lives on many levels and which underscored the weakness of national, religious and social links between them and their Syrian "brothers."

¹⁹ Jacob Amis, "[The Jordanian Brotherhood](#) in the Arab Spring," The Hudson Institute, Washington, D.C., Dec. 27, 2012.

²⁰ Betty S. Anderson, *Nationalist Voices in Jordan: The Street and the State* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), pp. 70-7.

The crisis thus heralded the end of Jordan's pan-Arab orientation. Having hosted revolutionaries from Syria and Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, the kingdom retreated to its narrow tribal and local affiliations. Despair has spread among Jordanians as they stopped believing in the idea of "Arab nationalism."²¹

The rapid influx of Syrian refugees has also increased Jordanians' fear of becoming a minority in their own country. From 1948 to date, including the recent Syrian arrivals, the number of immigrants has exceeded that of indigenous people. According to U.S. ambassador to Amman Alice Wells, as a result of successive waves of immigration, the indigenous proportion of the total population is as low as 27 percent. This caused a stir in Jordanian society, but at the same time raised the question of national identity to new heights. Jordanians are becoming paranoid because they feel outnumbered. Furthermore, since tribal identity is an essential driver of Jordanian society, Jordanians are less receptive to outsiders and subcultural identities.²²

A number of Syrian refugees in Jordan have no desire to return home. Settling these refugees in Jordan will intensify as a result of international pressures, but such settlement will exacerbate the crisis of Jordanian national identity, which has maintained its Transjordanian distinctiveness despite the regime's efforts to develop a hybrid identity

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encompassing both the indigenous tribes and the Palestinian population that has settled in the kingdom after the 1948 and 1967 wars. Pre-

servicing Jordanian national identity will require reconsidering the policy of open borders. But the inability of the state to control its borders marginalizes the role of civil society in the face of successive refugee waves.²³

Increased Levels of Extremism and Terrorism

Jordan experienced extremism and terrorism before the Syrian revolution, notably the Amman hotel bombings in 2005. The Jordanian state sought to combat the threat by targeting youth at risk for multiple reasons such as poverty, unemployment, the failure of development projects, the absence of social justice, and the spread of corruption.²⁴

During the Syrian revolution, terrorist organizations managed to spread extremist ideology. The Islamic State (ISIS), through its media apparatus, mobilized hundreds of Jordanians to its ranks. The number of Jordanians in a variety of extremist groups in both Iraq and Syria is estimated at three thousand,²⁵ and the security forces are pursuing dozens of people accused of joining or sympathizing with such organizations.

²¹ Curtis R. Ryan, "[Jordanian Foreign Policy](#) and the Arab Spring," *Middle East Policy Council*, Spring 2014.

²² W. Haynes, "[Jordanian society's responses to Syrian refugees](#)," *Military Review*, Jan.-Feb. 2016.

²³ Salameh and Edwan, "[The identity crisis in Jordan](#)."

²⁴ *The Jordan Times* (Amman), [May 17, 2016](#).

²⁵ "[From Jordan to Jihad](#): The Lure of Syria's Violent Extremist Groups," *Policy Brief*, Mercy Corps, Portland, Ore.



Mourners attend the funeral of a victim of a terror attack, Salt, Jordan. Terrorist organizations including ISIS spread extremist ideology and mobilized thousands of Jordanians to their ranks. Following a terror attack on Jordanian security forces, killing six and wounding fourteen, Jordan temporarily sealed its entry points for Syrian refugees.

It was long believed that the majority of these recruits were uneducated, marginalized, and poor, mainly from hardline and non-Jordanian families. But the intensification of the Syrian civil war has radicalized young people from different backgrounds—from the middle class or the bourgeoisie; from groups that historically have been bastions of regime support, and from different regions of the country. Through the spread of jihadism in mosques, schools, and universities, extremist groups have become attractive to different groups and classes of society. Some have embraced jihadist ideology and have been trained and used in combat in Syria and Iraq.²⁶

²⁶ Mohammed Abu Roman, "[Riwayat Daesh al-Jurduniya](#)," Academia.edu.

High Rates of Corruption

Corruption is one of the foremost challenges facing Jordan, with a highly negative impact on reform policies, development, and stability. Combating corruption is a top priority for King Abdullah II, but the regime has had little success to date.²⁷

The Syrian crisis has led to an unprecedented spike in the scope of corruption, penetrating all aspects of political, economic, and administrative life.²⁸ Perhaps one of the most prominent effects is the weakened prestige of the state as a result of individual corruption, especially by civil servants and among those in high official circles, what is known as "grand corruption."²⁹

Corruption has also been made more prevalent by the blatant state's favoritism of a small and cohesive ruling elite and its failure to carry out the necessary socioeconomic reforms to widen the national

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²⁷ "[Jordan](#)," Corruption Perception Index, Transparency International, Berlin.

²⁸ *The Jordan Times*, [Jan. 26, 2017](#).

²⁹ Robert Satloff and David Schenker, "[Political Instability in Jordan](#)," Contingency Planning Memorandum, no.19, Council on Foreign Relations, New York, May 2013.

distribution of resources.³⁰

The government's ability to provide the basic requirements of life for citizens, such as food, water, housing, health care, education, and legal services, has declined, while poverty, unemployment, marginalization, injustice, corruption, lack of oversight and accountability, have become widespread. Access to public services has become the main concern for citizens, but the ruling elite believes that relative privation prevents citizens from raising the level of demands. This sterile thinking has made the situation a ticking time bomb, with spreading poverty, unemployment, economic crises, low wages, and high prices creating an environment conducive to corruption.

Finally, with the decline of the democratization process, the political will to combat corruption has weakened, and the ability of government officials to act with little accountability has increased. Corruption is practiced by the influential in broad daylight, and efforts to combat it have evaporated. This is confirmed by the reports on world corruption indicators.³¹

Conclusion

Whatever the economic and social costs of the Syrian refugee crisis, they are secondary to its adverse political effects on the Jordanian state and society: The kingdom's hesitant drive toward reform and democracy has been curtailed and its national

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identity has been eroded. Fighting violence and extremism has become an all-consuming preoccupation with corruption skyrocketing to unprec-

edented heights. These are exorbitant and far-reaching consequences, which will reverberate throughout Jordan way beyond the end of the Syrian civil war and which cannot be reckoned with quickly or impulsively.

No less importantly, the refugee crisis has exposed the fundamental flaws and distortions of Jordanian society and the political system, notably the fragility of the democratic experiment, weakness of national identity, and lack of trust in the state and its institutions due to their longstanding marginalization of large segments of society and their exclusion from the national decision-making process.³²

Nor does Jordan, for all its historical experience with refugees and asylum seekers, have an effective national strategy to deal with the Syrian refugee problem. Most of the policies have been reactive, leading to decreasing public confidence in the state and prompting widespread demand for ending the country's open door policy.

What is needed, therefore, is a new comprehensive approach that

- Brings Jordanian politicians, intellectuals, academics and decision-makers to the discussion regarding a refugee policy.

³⁰ Curtis R. Ryan, "Political Opposition and Reform Coalitions in Jordan," *British Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2011, no. 3.

³¹ *The Jordan Times*, [Jan. 26, 2017](#).

³² Mohammed T. Bani Salameh and Sadam Darawsheh, "[Human Rights in the Jordanian Constitution](#): Between Theoretical Texts and Practical Application," *International Journal of Human Rights and Constitutional Studies*, May 2018.

- Encourages the media to address the problem in an open manner and with no fear of retribution.
- Demands that the international community recognize Jordan's critical role in alleviating the Syrian refugee problem (with the attendant financial and material assistance), while stressing the need for a postwar repatriation of the refugees.
- Reconsiders the national strategy to combat extremism, terrorism and corruption, including the incorporation of clerics into this effort.
- Promotes greater democratization and political reform in Jordan by

advancing participation, transparency, and accountability, and by combating corruption and renouncing violence and extremism.

This may well be a tall order for the Jordanian polity. But failure to make a sharp break from past practices is an assured recipe for disaster.

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