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Jordan-Saudi Relations, in Context of the Arab League Summit

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For both Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the recent Arab League summit (Amman, March 23-29, 2017) was an important event. For Jordan, this meeting was an opportunity to demonstrate its stability and the involvement of King Abdullah II in Middle East events, particularly on the Syrian and Palestinian fronts. The series of attacks in Jordan by Islamic State supporters, demonstrations by opponents of the reforms that the government seeks to introduce, and news items, some coming from Israel, about the government's shaky foundations, have harmed its image of stability, and it was hoped that the summit meeting in Amman would compensate for this perceived weakness. For the Saudi royal family, the summit was an opportunity to prove that its status in the regional arena remains intact, in spite of a chain of failures attributed to it in recent years, above all the nuclear treaty with Iran, which Saudi Arabia sought to prevent by working behind the scenes; the inability to defeat the Houthis in Yemen after two years of fighting; a considerable loss of influence over the balance of forces among the hostile parties in Syria and Iraq; and the failure to control the price of oil in the global market. All these have left an impression of Saudi Arabia as a regional actor that has fallen from previous heights. Therefore, both countries sought to use the summit to reinforce their regional status, as well as to regulate their bilateral relations: the summit was exploited as a demonstration of inter-Arab solidarity, in particular between Jordan and the member states, which would resonate in a way that a simple meeting between heads of state could not accomplish.

While Jordan publicly expressed support for the nuclear treaty reached with Iran in July 2015, as did the Gulf states, economic pressures led it to align with Saudi Arabia, which opposed it. In April 2016, during a visit to Aqaba by Saudi Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman, the two states issued a joint statement, claiming that they "reject Iranian involvement in regional matters, which is stirring up ethnic tensions and inciting terror." This was the first time for many years that Jordan chose to take such a clear position by adopting the tough Saudi line on Iran. To back up the declaration, a few days later Jordan recalled its ambassador to Iran for consultations due to "Iran's involvement in internal Arab affairs," after Saudi Arabia summoned its ambassador in Iran home after the embassy in Tehran was set on fire (following the execution in Saudi Arabia of a Shiite cleric). Jordan also decided to take part in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, who are supported by Iran. Indeed, in late February a Jordanian F-16 taking part in the fighting in Yemen crashed.

Jordanian diplomatic and military support for Saudi foreign policy objectives reflects an expectation of Saudi financial help. Apart from the international aid that Jordan receives, particularly from the United States (mainly loans on convenient terms) Jordan needs the help of oil-producing Arab states. Although the latest report of the International Monetary Fund on the Jordanian economy does not reveal any significant changes, it does indicate an increase in unemployment (expected to reach 15.3 percent in 2017, and double that rate among young unemployed job seekers), and a deficit of 9.5 percent of GDP. While the IMF welcomed the fiscal reforms in Jordan, demonstrations against the government in Jordan prompted by those reforms show that the regime will be forced to maneuver between the need to meet the demands of international economic institutions, which provide Jordan with a safety net of loans on convenient terms, the difficulty of realizing the promises of aid from Arab countries, and the Jordanian "street," which is openly protesting against the negative effects caused by the wave of refugees from Syria.

In April 2016, on a visit by King Abdullah to Saudi Arabia, a new bilateral council was set up – the Saudi-Jordanian Council, led by Mohammed bin Salman and Jordanian Prime Minister Hani al-Mulki. The Council's purpose is to deepen the strategic relations between the countries and reinforce cooperation between them in a range of areas, among them military and civilian nuclear development (including mining uranium). Statements were also issued regarding the establishment of a new joint investment fund, and renewal of the five-year grant of \$5 billion to Jordan from the Gulf Cooperation Council, which expired in late 2016. At the first meeting of the Council, the Jordanian Prime Minister announced that the security of Saudi Arabia was closely tied to the security of Jordan, while his Saudi colleague said that Jordan was a strong shield for the Saudi kingdom, for Gulf states, and for the Arab world. However, so far the Gulf grant has not been renewed, aid has not been transferred, and Jordan is still waiting for the rhetoric to translate into significant financial aid. The delay is linked in part to the financial situation in Saudi Arabia, which has deteriorated with the drop in oil prices, and the difficulty of stabilizing the oil market at a significantly higher level than the prices before the cuts in production by OPEC members and other oil producing countries.

Already in 2004 the King of Jordan warned against the dangers of the emergence of a Shiite crescent in the region, and he was the first to call on Bashar al-Assad to step down once the civil war began in Syria. However, the meeting between the King of Jordan and the King of Saudi Arabia at the summit occurred against a background of Saudi concerns about changes in the Jordanian position toward the Assad regime and its retreat from the steadfast opposition, led by Riyadh, to Bashar's continued rule. Indeed, there were recent signs of a possible shift in Jordan's position over events in Syria, in view of the advances made by forces loyal to Assad and the possibility that the United States and Russia may reach an agreement that will enable him to remain in power. In addition, Jordan's refusal to allow Arab troops led by the Saudis to participate in the Syrian fighting from Jordanian territory has aroused Saudi concern. To be sure,

at the summit meeting 15 economic cooperation treaties and memorandums of understanding were signed between the Saudi and Jordanian kings, including agreement regarding a joint investment fund of \$3 billion for Jordan. The question is whether King Salman will manage to bring Jordan back into "alignment" with the Saudi line, while accepting some Jordanian freedom to maneuver on the subject of Syria, as well as how much money he is actually willing to grant Jordan.

Israel has an obvious interest in maintaining Jordanian stability. Apart from the security assistance transferred to Jordan, agreements signed last year will increase the amount of water that Israel supplies Jordan and will replace the Egyptian source of natural gas with an Israeli pipeline. For a long time Israel has restrained itself in the face of unbridled criticism by the Jordanian regime of its policy on the Palestinian issue, due to an understanding of the regime's internal troubles. Moreover, the Israeli government supports the idea of a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute within a broad regional framework, where Jordan will play a key role. Recent disclosures regarding contacts between the leaders of Jordan, Egypt, and Israel and then-US Secretary of State John Kerry illustrate the potential of this option. News coming out from Washington in recent days indicates interest by the Trump administration in a regional approach toward a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore, renewed dialogue and coordination between Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and particularly financial aid to Jordan, is clearly in Israel's interest. However, realizing the potential for cooperation with Israel in a regional framework depends to a considerable extent on Israel's willingness to move forward in the political process with the Palestinians, which in the eyes of Riyadh and Amman means a positive response by Israel to the Arab Peace Initiative, which Arab League members see as a precondition.

