



Jordanian flags. Photo: Wikimedia Commons (CC BY 2.0)

# Five Domestic and Regional Security Challenges for Jordan in 2021

Michael Sharnoff

Jordan, a close ally of the United States and Israel, has a particular set of security concerns, challenges, and threats. Since its founding as the Emirate of Transjordan in 1921, many predicted that a kingdom with artificial borders, a tiny population, and lack of natural resources was an unlikely viable state. However, Jordan's pragmatic policies and wise leadership, cordial ties with Arab states, and commitment to a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has helped Jordan navigate many difficult challenges. The kingdom proved more resilient than its neighbors during the Arab Spring uprisings, but it is not immune from conflict. As 2021 continues to unfold, Jordan has five major security challenges, some new and some lingering from the Cold War of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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Since the Emirate of Transjordan was founded in 1921 and subsequently gained independence from the British in 1946, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has emerged as a central player in the Middle East. Jordan has close ties with the West and is a major non-NATO ally; it signed a peace treaty with Israel and enjoys cordial relations with the Palestinians and Arab states. Therefore, Jordan's unique geostrategic position has made it an indispensable actor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Syrian civil war, and the global fight against ISIS and other violent extremist organizations.

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Today, Jordan is one of the most stable Arab countries in the Middle East. The kingdom has not succumbed to the horrific brutality that plagued Syria or Yemen, or to the chaos and instability characteristic of Libya, Lebanon, and Iraq. However, while Jordan has proven more resilient than its neighbors, it is not immune from conflict. In 2021, Jordan must contend with several security challenges that affect domestic and regional politics and security.

## Jerusalem

Jerusalem is a sacred cause for Jordan. The kingdom views Jerusalem as part of its responsibility to defend and protect Muslim and Christian holy places, especially the al-Aqsa Mosque, the third holiest site in Islam, and the Dome of the Rock, a shrine where Muslims believe the Prophet Muhammad ascended to heaven. Jordanians claim their influence in Jerusalem dates back to 1924 when Palestinian Arabs pledged allegiance to Sharif Hussein bin Ali of Mecca, leader of the Great

Arab Revolt, to protect and preserve Islamic holy places in Jerusalem.

Historically, Hashemite custodianship of Jerusalem has helped stabilize the regime, legitimize Jordanian rule of Eastern Jerusalem and the West Bank, and endow the kingdom with religious authority to represent Arab and Islamic interests. This privileged right has been recognized by [Jordanians](#) and [Palestinians](#), who view the Jordanian monarch as the Hashemite custodian of Islamic and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem. For its part, Israel acknowledges Jordan's special role in Jerusalem, an admission formally endorsed in the [1994 Peace Treaty](#), which "respects the present special role of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in Muslim Holy shrines in Jerusalem."

The continuity of Hashemite custodianship connects the kingdom profoundly to Israelis and Palestinians and serves as a moderating role in regional stability. Accordingly, Jordanians expect to have a major say in any final status agreement between both parties. Although Jordan supports a two-state solution and shared Jerusalem capital between Israelis and Palestinians, [King Abdullah](#) rejects any changes to Hashemite custodianship over its holy places, and repudiates efforts to replace or undermine Hashemite influence in the city.

The Abraham Accords between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan have [heightened Jordanian suspicions](#) that Israel and the United States may offer Saudi Arabia a role in Jerusalem in exchange for recognition and normalized relations. Jordanian fears may be exaggerated, but they are not totally unfounded. In exchange for recognizing Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan have all gained major concessions from the United States. Undermining Jordan's position would deny the Hashemites a major pillar of their religious legitimacy and reduce their capacity to mediate between Israelis and Palestinians. Even rumors about a Saudi role in Jerusalem fuel anti-Israel and anti-American hostility inside the kingdom, and place unnecessary stress on the regime.

## The West Bank

Jordan acknowledged and annexed the West Bank, also known as Judea and Samaria, as an integral part of the Hashemite Kingdom from 1950 until 1967. After Israel conquered the area during the Six Day War in 1967, Jordan continued to assert claims to sovereignty on the West Bank until King Hussein's disengagement decision in 1988. Jordanians hoped that its peace treaty with Israel would reinforce its detachment from the West Bank, dispel the notion that Jordan is Palestine, and prevent the possibility of Jordan becoming a substitute homeland for the Palestinian people.

However, after more than a quarter of a century since the signing of the Oslo Accords, the Palestinians have failed to establish an independent state in the West Bank. Some Jordanian Palestinians, who are the majority of Jordan's population, view [Benjamin Netanyahu's pledge](#) to annex the West Bank and President Trump's Peace to Prosperity Plan as an attempt to truncate plans for Palestinian statehood. Increasing frustration with the unsolved Palestinian issue on the West Bank could create serious and destabilizing friction between the Hashemites, Transjordanians, and Jordanian Palestinians.

Indeed, [Jordanians perceive](#) these proposals as part of a broader Israeli and American scheme to eventually annex the West Bank and prevent the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Such a scenario, the Jordanians fear, could facilitate another Palestinian exodus and flight to the East Bank. The influx of additional refugees would create new economic, humanitarian, and political challenges for the kingdom, which is already coping with the influx of a massive Syrian refugee community. An increased number of Palestinians in Jordan would also exacerbate tensions between Transjordanian nationalists and the Jordanian Palestinian majority, who could pose new challenges to the regime by virtue of their numerical superiority to mobilize for greater democracy and insist on greater representation in the public sector.

To prevent attempts to transform Jordan into an alternative Palestinian homeland, some Palestinian-Jordanian politicians and intellectuals have called on a [renewed Jordanian role in the West Bank](#). They argue that Jordan's national security interests would be better protected through rescinding the 1988 disengagement decision, reasserting sovereignty claims on the West Bank, and restoring the land under the Hashemite crown. These views do not reflect official Hashemite policy, and Jordan is unlikely to change its policies toward the West Bank. Yet as long as these Jordanian perceptions exist, they will challenge sensitive domestic issues on national identity and create additional pressure on Abdullah, and this could undermine the long-term stability of the Hashemite Kingdom.

## Refugees

Syrian refugees comprise more than [10 percent of Jordan's population](#), with around 650,000 registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Fifty percent of these refugees are children, and Syrian refugees are in constant need of funds for amenities and transportation. One survey claims that 4 percent of Syrian refugees under the age of five in Jordan suffer from malnutrition. The [Zaatari refugee camp](#) in Jordan is the second largest refugee camp in the world, and has become the kingdom's fourth largest "city." At the Zaatari camp, there is one toilet for every 50 Syrians.

With refugees comprising one-fifth of the population, Jordan has one of the world's largest refugee populations per capita and shoulders a disproportionate burden. In turn, the major humanitarian and economic challenges associated with aiding refugees place tremendous pressure on a country with already limited resources.

Providing clean water, proper nutrition, and sanitary conditions in the camps remains an ongoing concern. Providing quality education is another challenge, and it is not uncommon to have several dozen students in one refugee

class. A lingering challenge for Jordan will be to assist the refugees properly, determine when it is safe for them to be returned to their country of origin, and prevent disgruntled and poverty-stricken refugees from embracing radical and extremist ideology.

Jordan receives international support, but it is insufficient to sustain a massive refugee population. As a small population lacking oil or natural gas, Jordan cannot continue to shelter hundreds of thousands of refugees indefinitely. To meet expectations of caring for these refugees over the next three years, Jordan has turned to the international community to provide [\\$6.6 billion](#), although it is unclear if this appeal will be met.

## The Economy

Most Jordanians would probably argue that improving the economy is a leading priority, particularly as the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated longstanding economic challenges. The Jordanian economy traditionally relies on financial assistance from wealthier Arab states and the West, as well as [tourism](#), which contributes up to 15 percent of GDP, employs 60,000 people, and is known as “the petrol of Jordan.”

COVID-19 has also heightened other economic challenges inside the kingdom. According to the Jordanian Women Solidarity Institute ([SIGI](#)), also known as Tadamon, over 1 million Jordanians live on less than \$100 a month. Women are more likely to be affected by poverty than men, and only [10 percent](#) of women older than 15 are employed.

The picture is not all bleak, however. Jordan has a highly educated population with tech savvy youth hungry for innovation and new opportunities. Similar to Saudi Arabia’s 2030 vision, [Jordan 2025](#) is an ambitious initiative proposed to diversify its economy and create new job opportunities to meet the needs and demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With a skilled youth population, there is great potential for

the kingdom to capitalize on its human capital and contribute to the economy.

## Countering ISIS and other Violent Extremist Organizations

Jordan is considered one of the safer and more stable countries in the Middle East, yet its location makes it vulnerable to violent extremism and subversion. An economy ravaged by the pandemic and a large, restless, refugee population also makes Jordan susceptible to radical ideology. In recent years, violent extremist organizations have conducted significant terrorist attacks against Jordan. In 2005, the Amman bombings claimed by Abu Musab Zarqawi’s al-Qaeda in Iraq terrorist network killed 57 people, most of them Jordanians. For several days after the bombings, Jordanians took to the streets to participate in large demonstrations, shouting, “Burn in hell, al-Zarqawi.”

The 2003 war in Iraq led to the Islamic State in Iraq, and the 2011 Syrian civil war helped create the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). According to various official estimates, some 3,000 Jordanians have fought under the banner of ISIS, making Jordan home to [one of the highest number of ISIS fighters per capita in the world](#). As ISIS has decreased in size, Jordan will be responsible for how it manages those fighters returning from the battlefield. Will they be tried in court? Will they be jailed? Can they be rehabilitated? These are serious questions with long-term implications for regional stability.

While Jordanians have left the kingdom to join ISIS, the terrorist organization has also attacked Jordanians. ISIS savagely executed pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, prompting a [swift Jordanian response](#). After the 2016 attack in Karak, Jordanians banded together to drive ISIS out, and some even assisted Jordanian security services in doing so. Jordan’s professional and efficient [military intelligence services and security establishment](#) have played a critical role in curbing violent extremist organizations. In addition, [Jordanian demographics and politics](#)

may work to the state's advantage. Typically, ISIS looks to subvert and exploit heterogeneous and weak states like Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. They have had a difficult time getting a foothold in more religiously homogenous and stable monarchies like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco.

Jordan has participated in international anti-ISIS coalitions and remains committed to share intelligence with allies and partners to defeat the extremist organization. While the military campaign has been successful, the ideological battle to deter participation in groups such as ISIS remains a long-term challenge. For its part, Jordan has initiated programs like the [Amman Message](#) (2004) to win the hearts and minds while emphasizing toleration, pluralism, and moderation. It also instituted a [strategy to counter violent extremism](#) in 2014 with mixed results. However, Jordan is by no means alone in this long-term battle. The [Hedayah Center](#), headquartered in Abu Dhabi, is another significant initiative to counter violent extremism through dialogue, capability building, and research.

## Recommendations

If the United States and Israel view Jordan as a strategic partner, they must recognize Jordan's security concerns. Washington and Jerusalem should explore new ways to enhance trust and strengthen security cooperation to achieve regional peace and stability. This will not be easy, and there are no guarantees that progress can come quickly. Indeed, the stances of King

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Abdullah's domestic constituencies influence Jordan's position on close security cooperation with Israel and the United States.

What is clear, however, is that it will be difficult to strengthen relations and reestablish trust without deference to the kingdom's sovereignty and interests, and movement on the Palestinian question. The Biden administration may welcome a larger diplomatic role for Jordan in the Arab-Israeli dispute, which could reduce concerns inside the kingdom. Public reassurances by Benjamin Netanyahu of respecting Jordan's special role in Jerusalem may also help lower the heat. Jordanian suspicions will probably linger, but these gestures could help restore confidence and create new possibilities for regional security cooperation.

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