

# The Syrian Refugees: A Political and Economic Challenge to Jordan

Oded Eran

## Waves of Immigration since 1948

The waves of immigration to Jordan since 1948 have not changed the country's official name or identity, "the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan." According to the constitution, the King of Jordan has broad governing authority, and the Hashemites – the Bedouin tribes that emigrated from the Saudi Arabian Peninsula – retain seniority in government institutions, even though since the mid-20th century they have not represented the majority of the population.

### *The First Wave*

Of the 750,000 Palestinian refugees who fled Palestine in 1948-1949, Jordan took in about one third. In practice, it took in more refugees, because Jordan annexed the West Bank in 1950, including the refugees who remained there after it was conquered by the Arab Legion (then the name of the Jordanian army). This immigrant wave had a more lasting impact on Jordan than any subsequent immigration, but did not change the nature of the regime or the Hashemite control east of the Jordan. While the 1948 refugees acquired citizenship and became the majority, the Hashemite regime used various recourses in the country's election system to ensure that this majority would not be reflected in the Jordanian parliament. The only Palestinian attempt to change this reality through the use of force – in September 1970 – ended in failure. Since then, no group has tried to change the Jordanian regime in any fundamental way.

Dr. Oded Eran, Israel's former ambassador to Jordan, is a senior research fellow at INSS.

*The Second Wave*

About 300,000 Palestinians reached the east side of the Jordan River because of the war in 1967 – some from refugee camps in the West Bank, and others from the Gaza Strip. Their situation remains complicated: unlike former Palestinian refugees, they were not granted Jordanian citizenship en masse.<sup>1</sup>

*The Third Wave*

King Hussein and Yasir Arafat supported Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, each for different reasons. When it ended in early 1991, some 400,000 Palestinians were deported from Kuwait and other Gulf nations. The vast majority were Jordanian citizens, but in practice they simply went to other Gulf states in search of jobs. Among those repatriated to Jordan were several thousand Iraqis who used the war in their country to flee to the neighboring state.

*The Fourth Wave*

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the subsequent insecurity there triggered the emigration of some 450,000 Iraqis to Jordan. Unlike previous waves, this was not a wave of Palestinian immigrants. While most were Sunnis, only 17 percent were Shiites, mostly from Baghdad, and some had financial resources that eased their resettlement in Jordan. Compared to previous immigrant waves, a large number of them had higher education, a factor that further helped their integration. The Iraqi refugees were not granted citizenship, even though most have been living there since 2003.

*The Fifth Wave*

Since the start of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, some 1.4 million Syrian refugees have found refuge in Jordan. Turkey has taken in double that number, and Lebanon has taken in roughly as many as Jordan. Within Syria there is a vast number of internally displaced people who fled their homes; the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) puts their number at 6 million. Presumably if and when initial reconstruction efforts begin, they will aim at those who stayed rather than at those who found refuge in neighboring countries.

Reconstruction in Syria that allows Syrian refugees who fled the country to begin a comprehensive process of return will require political and economic conditions that currently seem unattainable and at the very least will take many years. Cautious assessments have put the cost at \$250

billion – a challenge that the global financial system will be hard pressed to meet. Assad’s regime, if left in place, will prefer to help the refugees who stayed in Syria and will be very selective in granting requests to return, so as to prevent those who escaped – some because they opposed the regime – from coming back. If this scenario does in fact come to pass, the nations that took in the lion’s share of Syrian refugees – Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon – will have to prepare for the refugees’ long term stay in their lands. There is no precedent in the Middle East for the return of large refugee populations to their native countries.

## **Jordan and the Syrian Refugees**

### ***Refugee Registration, Legal Problems, Political Ramifications***

Of the 1.4 million Syrian refugees in Jordan, approximately only half – 752,000 – have registered with UNHCR. Registration is important, because it grants those registered the right to healthcare and education provided in part by various UN agencies. In addition to this registration, every refugee is supposed to register with the Jordanian Interior Ministry; failing to do so is grounds for deportation. Refugees must also register for new births, enrollment of children in Jordanian schools, and marriage. Some 16 percent of refugee children under the age of 5 have no birth certificates, which creates legal and bureaucratic problems whether they stay in Jordan or join their parents upon their return to Syria.<sup>2</sup> Because the Jordanian authorities have no updated registration information for one million Syrian refugees, the Jordanian government decided in March 2018 to formalize the presence of all Syrian refugees by the end of the year.<sup>3</sup> It is doubtful if this effort will yield complete, accurate lists, whether because it is not clear that those who are not registered and/or do not have current identification will hear of the registration drive or because many refugees will prefer to melt into the crowd and not be subjected to any effort to return them to Syria.

Marriages between Jordanians and non-Jordanians create further complications, because Jordanian law recognizes the children of “mixed” couples as Jordanian citizens only if the married man is Jordanian. The thousands of children of mixed couples in which the woman is Jordanian and the husband Syrian (or a citizen of any other country) are not entitled to Jordanian citizenship. This policy touches on the root of the conundrum facing the Jordanian regime, i.e., the implications of every decision on the status of the Syrian refugees in Jordan for the legal, and especially, political status of Jordan’s Palestinians. Any willingness to recognize the full rights

of the children of a Jordanian woman and a non-Jordanian man could encourage Palestinian men who are not Jordanian citizens – e.g., living in the area controlled by the Palestinian Authority – to marry Jordanian women, thereby expanding Jordan’s Palestinian population.<sup>4</sup> The start of a process naturalizing Syrian (and Iraqi) refugees would free the countries of origin from the burden of repatriation and from the political and security challenge inherent in the return of a people, some of whom fled because they were opposed to the regime, which is back in control. Thus, Jordan would be helping the regime in Damascus in its effort to obliterate evidence of the refugees’ Syrian citizenship and property rights.

A Jordanian decision to begin a process of naturalizing Syrian and other refugees will have ramifications for the delicate Hashemite-Palestinian balance. Ostensibly the current situation of a Palestinian numerical majority and Jordanian citizens’ acceptance of a constitution that leaves effective control in the hands of a Hashemite king does not obligate the Hashemite regime to make any radical changes. On the other hand, any change such as naturalizing refugees, which would reduce the political clout of Jordan’s Palestinian population, could follow the formation of an independent Palestinian state or an autonomous entity in a federal or confederal arrangement with Jordan. One may assume that under regional conditions emerging from a political resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Jordanian regime will want to avoid constitutional and other changes stemming from demographic causes, as such changes would mean giving the Palestinians full political representation.

Moreover, if and when the Jordanian regime must decide on naturalizing non-Palestinian refugees, it will have to consider not only the internal ramifications, such as the response of Jordan’s Palestinian population, but also the response of Arab and non-Arab foreign nations. Most will only act as passive observers, but others – such as Israel – will take an active interest in such a move and its consequences. For many reasons, especially on the broad strategic level, Israel would prefer that Jordan’s Palestinian population have a large say in the economic sphere without necessarily holding a majority in parliament or questioning the regime’s legitimacy in any way. A greater share of the population in Jordan that sees the Assad regime as hostile will also influence Israel’s attitude to demographic changes in Jordan and Lebanon.

*Refugee Absorption and Economic Problems*

The burden of hosting refugee populations is heavy even for economies stronger than Jordan's. In early 2018, the Jordanian government estimated that since 2011, the direct cost of taking in refugees had come to \$10.3 billion.<sup>5</sup> Jordan's 2018 budget totals \$12 billion. In 2017, international aid to Jordan reached \$1.7 billion, only two-thirds of the financing needed.<sup>6</sup> In other words, that year Jordan spent more than half a billion dollars on refugees.

Since it was founded, the kingdom has staggered from one economic crisis to the next; the regime is constantly raising funds from donor nations and juggling loans from various international institutions. The most recent political crisis in Jordan erupted in May-June 2018, when trade unions protested and many members of parliament called for the ouster of Prime Minister Hani al-Malki because of the fiscal reforms and austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund in an attempt to reduce the public debt (by the end of 2017, this had hit more than 95 percent of the GDP) as a condition for another loan.<sup>7</sup> King Abdullah managed to contain the demonstrations and the angry debates in parliament. He also replaced the prime minister, and a dialogue with all parties concerned was substituted for the implementation of the reforms. However, by late October 2018, the regime failed to reach any compromise with the factions opposed to the reforms.

On their own, the numbers do not reflect the socioeconomic impact of an added 1.4 million people to an economy in which unemployment already stands at 20 percent; in certain segments, such as women and the younger generation, it is higher and even double. The numbers also do not reflect the toll this immigrant wave takes on infrastructures. Jordan suffers from an acute water shortage, and the added population obviously exacerbates this shortage. The Jordanian government's assessment is that by 2025 the demand on water will outstrip Jordan's supply by 26 percent.<sup>8</sup>

The Jordanian water problem has two possible solutions, both of which require cooperation with regional partners. One is desalination of Mediterranean waters on Israel's shores and piping them to Jordan (and the PA); the other depends on Turkey's willingness to allow greater water flow to Syria via the Tigris River, which would increase the amount of water in the Yarmouk River. The political feasibility of the latter is low, as for years, Turkey has refused all calls to allow more water into the Tigris. Also, both solutions require international financing, which in part would

have to take the form of a grant because the Jordanian government will not be able to cover the expense.

The labor market reflects the intensity of Jordan's economic woes and the regime's (in)ability to resolve them. The workforce comprises three population sectors: Jordanians, foreign workers, and Syrian refugees. In 2016, the number of working Jordanians reached 1.5 million, the same number as foreign workers (Egyptian, Iraqi, Syrian, and others), and presumably since then, the number of working Syrians has increased, compared to other foreigners and Jordanians.<sup>9</sup> The Syrian refugees' preference for Jordan's urban centers over the refugee camps stems in part from the issue of employment. Jordanian law limits the employment of non-citizens and requires foreigners to acquire annual work permits costing several hundreds of dinars (\$1 = 0.71 dinar). Only 17 percent of non-Jordanian workers have registered and received work permits. Thus, there are some 1.2 million non-Jordanian people working without permits, leading to a black economy in which it is impossible to supervise wage and employment conditions and in which the government loses revenue. Some international aid has been conditioned on employing a certain number of Syrian refugees, but the lack of orderly registration harms Jordan's ability to receive this aid.

On the issue of employment, the Jordanian government faces a tough dilemma, because its efforts to improve the living and employment conditions of the Syrian refugees conflict with the need to reduce unemployment among Jordanians and the wish to reduce the number of refugees living in Jordan. In the long term, Syrian workers may displace the other foreign workers by acquiring skills and accepting lower salaries than those of Jordanians and other foreign workers. However, unlike other foreign workers, Syrians did not come to Jordan to look for jobs; their presence there is the result of the civil war in Syria. Unlike many other foreign workers, the Syrians, many with families, came to – and remain in – Jordan ostensibly until the sociopolitical conditions in their homeland allow them to return. These differences put pressure on Jordan's economy and make it difficult for the government to formulate a policy to regulate the number of non-Syrian foreign workers by extending residency and work permits. However, Jordan cannot expel the Syrian refugees, because of international censure that would result from an attempt to tighten restrictions or to deport them without first ensuring a safe reception in Syria or a third country.

Healthcare is another distressing problem. In early 2018, the Jordanian government decided to cancel its subsidy for hospital care for Syrian

refugees living outside the refugee camps, both because of budgetary constraints and as an effort to return some of the refugees to the camps. For the Syrian refugee population in Jordan, 80 percent of whom live below the poverty line (less than \$3 per day per capita), this means giving up on a critical service.<sup>10</sup> In fact, a UNICEF report states that 45 percent of Syrian refugee children have no access to reasonable healthcare service, including basic inoculations.<sup>11</sup>

These are only some of the economic troubles Jordan faces. But education is the heaviest budgetary burden by far, and stands out in Jordan's financing request of the donor nations group, which met in April 2018 in Brussels.<sup>12</sup> The Jordanian government and the international aid organizations assessed the three-year (2018-2020) budget request for a per capita aid package at \$7.3 billion, of which \$1.5 billion is earmarked for education, \$600 million for food security, \$510 for healthcare, and \$650 million for water. Based on past experience on the ratio between needy nations' aid requests and donor nations' commitments and actual donations, Jordan will have to make do with aid totaling less than two-thirds of this amount. In previous years, the aid Jordan received for hosting Syrian refugees was divided between grants and attractive loans (low interest rates and late payback dates). In other words, no matter what, some of the financial burden will have to be borne by Jordan.

These problems, other chronic troubles, and issues that have worsened because of the Syrian refugee wave, as well as the absence of a comprehensive solution to these problems all have the potential for disaster liable to undermine the stability of the kingdom and regime.

### **The Arab Spring, the Syrian Refugees, and Jordan's Security**

In the more than seven years since the start of the Arab Spring, the Jordanian regime has not had to face severe domestic or foreign security challenges. In the first two years of the regional unrest, there were demands for regime reforms, but King Abdullah managed to mitigate them with modest changes to the constitution and election laws. While the change to the election method resulted in the parliament occasionally refusing to be a rubber stamp to the king's decisions, it has not challenged the institution of the royal household, its status, or its authority.

On the other hand, ISIS's early successes and its territorial control of parts of Syria and Iraq rang a warning bell in Amman. The long borders with those two neighbors – 560 kilometers in all – are porous. Lacking any significant

natural barriers, they are relatively easy to cross illegally. For 30 years, Jordan's security services have tried to battle crime (smuggling, especially of drugs and weapons), refugee crossings, and the exit of Jordanians leaving to enlist in jihadist Salafist organizations. The precise number of the latter is unknown; estimates speak of 2,000 in the years when the Islamic State was at the peak of its powers. The ideological and organizational split between the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra and the murder of the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, whose plane was downed in late 2014 near Raqqa, the Islamic State capital in northern Syria, have reduced young Jordanians' support and enlistment in the organization.

The number of terrorist attacks in Jordan since 2011 is low, especially considering the fact that many Jordanians support radical Muslim movements, and given the economic problems that are usually a hothouse for cultivating support of these movements, as well as the geographical proximity to the independent Islamic State entity in Syria and Iraq. The most prominent attack claimed by the Islamic State occurred in December 2016 in the city of al-Karak, 140 kilometers south of Amman. The well-planned strike, in which six terrorists used sophisticated methods, killed 13 Jordanians, 11 of whom were members of the security forces, including men serving in Battalion 71 of the Special Forces, and five of the perpetrators. The action made 47 of the 130 members of parliament demand the dismissal of the internal minister, in charge of the gendarmerie (which engaged with the terrorists until the arrival of the Special Forces soldiers). In January 2017, several ministers were replaced, including the interior minister.

At least three terrorist attacks were carried out in 2016 and early 2017 in the Iraqi-Syrian-Jordanian border triangle, where several Bedouin tribes live. These tribes have found the borders, ID papers, and the sparse presence of the three nations' security forces to be no obstacle to crossing the borders at will and smuggling both drugs and – since 2011 – Syrian refugees. While most crossing into Jordan in the al-Ramtha/Irbid region in northern Jordan came from the Dara'a, Damascus, and Homs areas, most crossing in eastern Jordan came from Raqqa. In their flight through eastern Syria, they traversed areas controlled by the Islamic State, and Jordan feared that Islamic State sleeper cells would enter with them. Consequently, the Jordanian authorities treated these refugees much more harshly than those who crossed the western Syria-Jordan border. In practice, almost 80,000 of them are concentrated in closed camps in al-Rukban, a no-man's-land between Syria and Jordan. The worst terrorist attack was perpetrated in



June 2016 when a bomb-rigged car drove out of the camp and reached a nearby Jordanian army outpost. The ensuing explosion killed six Jordanian soldiers.<sup>13</sup> The Islamic State assumed responsibility for the attack.

As a result of the al-Rukban bombing, Jordan closed its border with Syria and, despite international pressure, especially in the summer of 2018 (when the Syrian army seized control of most of southern Syria), refused to allow entrance to more Syrian refugees. One may assume that Jordan's border policy will not change, even though the Islamic State was militarily defeated and lost most of the area it controlled. The August 11, 2018 terrorist attacks in northwest Amman (carried out by Jordanian adherents of the Islamic State), which killed four Jordanian members of the security forces, surely served only to strengthen the authorities' resolve not to permit additional refugees to enter.

In the next few months, Jordan will face a dilemma created by the Assad regime's re-occupation of southern Syria: who decides when the refugees can return to Syria and in what order (i.e., first from Jordan, or Turkey, or Lebanon)? What will happen to the refugees who refuse to go back? Since Syrian refugees began to flee to Jordan in their thousands, Jordan has found itself at odds with human rights organizations. Human Rights Watch, for example, has accused Jordan of expelling 400 Syrian refugees a month since early 2017 and has repatriated another "300 [in] unorganized returns of registered refugees per month that appeared to be voluntary."<sup>14</sup> Jordan will presumably initially want to dismantle the two camps in the country's northeast and return the residents to Syria, but it may run into Syrian foot-dragging for the same reasons that Jordan wants to send them back.

## Israeli Aid

The demographic changes in Jordan and the region in general, the region's instability, and the appearance of Iran and Turkey in the arena adjacent to Israel are all a challenge to Israel's strategic interest in the Hashemite kingdom and the regime's stability. Jordan-Israel relations depend on two main factors: the Israel-Palestinian issue and Israel's ability to significantly help Jordan with its security and economic challenges. The brunt of security assistance to Jordan is borne by the United States, but Israel plays a role in terms of equipment and intelligence.

It is possible to expand economic ties in a mutually beneficial way. Israel can increase its spending in Jordan, especially if the government of

Jordan can prevent the boycott of Israel by the private sector. Israel can buy solar energy from Jordan, where production is being stepped up, as well as large quantities of sand and stone it needs for construction. If it becomes economically feasible to build a railway line for freight trains from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea, cooperation between Jordan and Israel could yield important results for both (should Israel agree to use the Aqaba port). In terms of trade, Israel could further the flexibility it has shown in economic agreements with the Palestinians and Jordan, increase the import of goods manufactured in Jordan, and allow the PA to import more goods from Jordan at reduced tariffs.

Regardless of the population distribution on both sides of the Jordan River, natural growth means the need for regional development of water sources and water transport. In fact, even now the only water sources are desalinated sea water and recycled water. The governments of Israel and Jordan as well as the PA are acting irresponsibly in postponing discussion and decisions on long term solutions to water scarcity. Solutions are possible only if there is regional cooperation. Without it, no international aid will be forthcoming.

## Conclusion

Since the start of the Arab Spring, Jordan has shown its ability to cope with demographic, economic, and security challenges, and despite the upheavals in neighboring countries, it has remained stable. On the other hand, it is impossible to ignore issues that in the near future are liable to upset the kingdom, especially if most of the Syrian and Iraqi refugees remain in Jordan and if there is no fundamental change in Jordan's economic and financial data. The government's ability to deal with the refugee diaspora depends on massive financial aid from international economic and humanitarian organizations and donor nations, which may lose interest and/or the ability to continue to help, especially if reconstruction in Syria actually begins.<sup>15</sup> Even if the aid continues to flow, it will serve most of the Syrian refugees but not all. Some refugee groups not benefitting from the aid are becoming serious social and economic problems liable to turn explosive in the future. Although this essay does not deal with the Palestinian refugees in Jordan, it is important to remember that the US decision to stop financing UNRWA – providing education, healthcare, food distribution, and employment in the Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan – is cause for a great deal of

concern there; King Abdullah has raised the topic in talks with senior US administration figures.

Jordan's neighbors – Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, Israel, and the PA – greatly affect Jordan's security and economy and thus also its stability. Although the situation in Syria and Iraq has stabilized, it is still doubtful that these nations can recover from the recent violence, and their instability has implications for Jordan. Leadership changes in Saudi Arabia and uncertainty about its economic resilience could hurt Jordan and its ability to raise money. In the 24 years since the signing of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, the bilateral relations have had their ups and downs; both sides are disappointed that their expectations were fulfilled only very partially. Israel has a strategic interest in supporting the Hashemite regime and its ability to meet the challenges posed by prolonged Middle East crises. This interest would seem to demand a joint articulation of comprehensive and long term solutions to the Jordanian problems that affect Israel.

The Arab Spring created the Syrian refugee problem, a problem far greater than that of the Palestinians. It places a dangerous socioeconomic burden on Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, whose economy is much more robust than that of the other two. By contrast, the addition of non-Palestinian populations to Jordan and non-Shiite populations to Lebanon could have internal political implications and strengthen the current regimes in those nations.

## Notes

- 1 The legal status of many Palestinians residing in Jordan and the West Bank was complicated further by Jordanian decisions following its 1988 declaration officially ceding any claim to the West Bank.
- 2 "UNICEF Assessment Shows 85 per cent of Syrian Refugee Children in Host Communities Live in Poverty," ReliefWeb, February 25, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2ygxH8q>.
- 3 Camille Dupire, "Syrian Refugees will Greatly Benefit from Regularising Situation," *Jordan Times*, March 5, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2oN0ywt>.
- 4 Abdullah Nassour, then the Jordanian prime minister, gave a more "elegant" explanation saying, "We don't want to empty out Palestine and thereby enable the occupiers to realize their objectives," *al-Jazeera*, December 20, 2014.
- 5 *Jordan Response Plan for the Syrian Crisis 2018-2020*, [www.jrpsc.org](http://www.jrpsc.org).
- 6 At a conference on Syria in Brussels on April 24-25, 2018, Jordan, the EU and the UN submitted a joint document. See "Supporting the Future of Syria

- and the Region" at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34144/jordan-partnership-paper.pdf>.
- 7 International Monetary Fund Press Release 17/291, "Key Questions on Jordan 18," July 24, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2ynVR0L>.
- 8 Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Ministry of Water and Irrigation, "National Water Strategy 2016-2025," p. 10.
- 9 Susan Razzaz, "A Challenging Market Becomes More Challenging: Jordanian Workers, Migrant Workers and Refugees in the Jordanian Labour Market," International Labour Organization, 2017. This comprehensive report deals with the gamut of problems the Syrian refugee diaspora in Jordan poses to the country. For employment numbers, see p. 23.
- 10 Camille Dupire, "Regularisation Campaign for Syrian Refugees Raises Healthcare Access Concerns," *Jordan Times*, April 2, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2v7K3Rp>.
- 11 "UNICEF Assessment Shows 85 per cent of Syrian Refugee Children in Host Communities Live in Poverty."
- 12 The Jordanian document "Jordan Response Plan for the Syria Crisis 2018-2020" was prepared by the Ministry of International Planning and Cooperation and international organizations and agencies helping the nations hosting Syrian refugees. The debates and resolutions of the Brussels conference may be found in Council of the European Union, "Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region – Co-Chairs Declaration," at [www.consilium.europa.eu](http://www.consilium.europa.eu).
- 13 The attack in al-Rukban was one of a series of incidents and mishaps involving the Jordanian security services, and led to the dismissal of the Jordanian defense minister and several high-ranking officers. See David Schenker, "The Growing Islamic State Threat in Jordan," Washington Institute, *PolicyWatch* 2747, January 10, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-growing-islamic-state-threat-in-jordan>.
- 14 "I have No Idea Why They Sent Us Back," Human Rights Watch, October 2, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2zsipPs>.
- 15 In September 2018, UNICEF announced it was cutting back its educational activities for Syrian refugee children in Jordan because of budgetary constraints. See "Funding Gap Means Cuts to Education for Syrian Refugees in Jordan," September 20, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2DgqiuE>.