

## A Pivotal Player: Jordan and the New Syria

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**The overthrow of the regime in Syria presents Jordan with an array of challenges and opportunities. On one hand, the Hashemite Kingdom is worried about instability on its northern border, the possibility that Iranian influence will be replaced by a Turkish one, and the export of Islamist revolutionary fervor from Syria to Jordan. On the other hand, it recognizes an opportunity to block the drug and arms smuggling routes between Syria and Jordan, return the Syrian refugees in Jordan to their homeland, and promote economic cooperation with its neighbor. Thus, Jordan is seeking to become a key player in shaping the character of the new Syria while leveraging its geostrategic advantages. Israel and Jordan share a range of common interests on the Syrian front, which require both countries to increase coordination. If the new regime in Syria stabilizes, Jordan could be a vital diplomatic bridge between Damascus and Israel. In contrast, if Syria continues to suffer from instability and if threats from Syrian soil against Israel and Jordan intensify, Jerusalem and Amman would do well to tighten cooperation on intelligence and security issues.**

As soon as the regime in Syria was overthrown, a series of meetings were [held](#) in Israel to discuss which country would be the next in line to fall. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was mentioned in some of these discussions. The heads of the Shin Bet and Military Intelligence visited Jordan, and anonymous political sources in Jerusalem also [sent out](#) messages asserting that “Israel plans to use force if the rebels or Iranian-backed militias try to undermine the stability of the Hashemite Kingdom.” The concern was that the success of the revolution in Syria would motivate radical elements in Jordan to rise up against the ruling minority coalition, which many had prematurely written off during the 104 years of its monarchy. However, an analysis of the political discourse in Jordan shows a different picture: While Jordan may be on high alert due to events in Syria, it also sees them as a potentially positive development.

In fact, Jordan did not shed any tears over the ouster of Bashar al-Assad. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011, relations between Syria and Jordan have experienced highs and lows—but mainly lows. During the civil war that ravaged its neighbor to the north, Jordan took in over one million Syrian refugees, who have become a massive burden on the already depleted national coffers; it also faced the constant threat of attacks by Salafi and jihadi terror groups along the 378-

kilometer border between the two countries. Even in recent years, as the situation in Syria seemed to calm down somewhat, new threats emerged along the Jordan–Syria border, undermining the security and sovereignty of the kingdom: a veritable superhighway for [drug](#) smugglers crossing through Jordanian territory on their way to the Gulf States, and arms smuggling to the West Bank, under the protection of the Syrian regime and its Iranian and Hezbollah patrons.

In 2023, Jordan—in cooperation with other Arab countries—launched a process of normalization with Syria, which culminated in Syria being readmitted to the Arab League, from which it had been suspended in 2011. Jordan [hoped](#)—in vain—that the process would encourage the Assad regime to cooperate in the war against the drug industry, allow Syrian refugees to return home, and eventually lead to the lifting of international sanctions imposed on Syria as well as the strengthening of commercial and economic ties between the countries. In practice, smuggling over the Jordanian border did not stop and has actually increased since the outbreak of Operation Swords of Iron. Mutual trade between the countries, which stood at \$617 million in 2010, had [shrunk](#) to just \$147 million by 2022.

On October 20, 2024, just weeks before the overthrow of the Assad regime, Jordan's Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi visited Damascus to relay a verbal message from King Abdullah. According to [Jordanian analysts](#), the purpose of the visit was to reexamine the possibility of bringing Assad back into the fold of the pragmatic Arab axis, given the instability of his country's relations with Iran and Russia, the erosion of the Iranian-led “axis of resistance” throughout the course of its war against Israel, and the desire of Damascus to prevent direct military friction with Israel. Like others, Jordan also sensed that the Syrian regime was weak and tried to use this to its own advantage—but it did not foresee the regime's rapid demise.

### **Between Concerns and Hopes**

On December 8, when Assad fled from Damascus, King Abdullah was the first Arab leader to publicly address the historic moment. He [declared](#) that “Jordan stands beside its Syrian brothers and respects their will and choices.” He also emphasized, however, the importance of ensuring stability in Syria and avoiding chaos and conflict in the country. His comments reflected the ambivalence that exists in Jordan regarding the developments in Syria—a combination of euphoria over the fall of the previous regime, deep concern over the character of the new regime taking shape, as well as some hope for improved neighborly relations.

An analysis of the commentary published by pro-regime media outlets in Jordan shows that three potential threat scenarios are at the top of Amman's concerns:

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1. Ongoing instability in Syria: Jordan is [worried about](#) security anarchy, including the potential rekindling of the Syrian civil war. This could lead to a new wave of Syrian refugees entering the country, increased threats from drug smuggling and jihadi terror along the Syria-Jordan border, and a possible need for Jordan to intervene militarily in Syria due to the absence of strong and reliable leadership on the Syrian side of the border. Likewise, the Jordanians are [skeptical](#) about the ability of the armed Syrian militias to become a unified national army, subject to one central command, with which they can coordinate over border security.
2. Imposing non-Arab hegemony in Syria: Jordan is also [concerned](#) that Syria's upheaval will open the door for the involvement of external forces in the country—both international and regional—especially Turkey, Israel, and Iran. The disintegration of Syria within its recognized borders, due to ethnic, tribal, and religious chasms—following similar processes that have occurred since 2011 in countries like Iraq, Yemen, and Libya—is viewed in the Hashemite Kingdom as a threat to the “Arab nation-state” model and as an opportunity for external forces to promote their own interests. The main concern is that Iranian dominance in Syria will be replaced by Turkish-Qatari dominance, which would allow actors with an Islamist ideology to strengthen their grip on the country and turn Syria into part of a regional system that would challenge and undermine the pragmatic axis of which Jordan is a part.
3. The export of revolutionary fervor from Syria to Jordan: Jordan is concerned that, in seizing control of Syria, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) could provide a tailwind for the Islamist opposition within the kingdom, which has already experienced a boost since Hamas's attack on October 7. In September 2024, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan secured impressive results in the parliamentary election, with the Islamic Action Front, the Muslim Brotherhood's political wing, tripling its representation in parliament. Although the Muslim Brotherhood is a legitimate part of the political fabric of Jordan and does not challenge the Hashemite rule, events in Syria are [viewed](#) in Jordan as a test of the group's loyalty to the kingdom. Indeed, in an official statement, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan [issued](#) nothing more than a vague message of congratulations to the Syrian people on the overthrow of the Assad regime and did not include anything that could be interpreted as a call for a similar uprising in Jordan.

Alongside these concerns, Jordan also recognizes in the Syrian revolution several opportunities in the fields of security, society, and the economy—given that the new Syria becomes a stable nation with a friendly regime:

1. Improving security along the shared border: Jordan [hopes](#) that the downfall of the Assad regime, coupled with the weakening of the pro-Iranian forces operating in Syria under Assad's protection, will help prevent—or, at the very least, reduce—the smuggling of drugs and arms from Syria into Jordanian territory. The success of the battle against the smugglers depends on closer coordination with the Syrian side (with official security forces and, in their potential absence, with local Syrian forces) and the withdrawal of the Shiite Crescent, which King Abdullah began warning about already some 20 years ago. The editor of the Jordanian newspaper al-Ghad, Makram al-Tarawneh, [wrote](#) that if “the new [Syrian] regime exercises all its authority and locks the gates of hell that have been opened up in recent years, it will save Jordan from wasting many resources that have been used up monitoring the long border and will spare us and other countries in the region from losing a [young] generation due to the distribution of drugs.”
2. Returning Syrian refugees to their homeland: Jordan is currently home to around 1.3 million Syrian refugees, approximately half of whom are registered, and it very much [hopes](#) that they will return to their homeland, thereby easing the economic burden and the pressure on resources and social services in the kingdom. Since the fall of the Assad regime, a trickle of Syrian refugees has voluntarily [returned](#) home, but a massive and organized relocation would [require](#) conditions to be ripe—primarily more clarity on the political future of Syria, stabilization of the security situation in the country, economic recovery, and the availability of housing and infrastructure. For the time being, living conditions in Jordan are more comfortable than in Syria, especially given that many of the Syrian refugees are now fully integrated into Jordanian society and the country's workforce and educational system.
3. Economic and commercial cooperation: Jordan hopes to be an integral part of efforts to rebuild and develop Syria and to leverage them to improve its own economic situation and bolster its geostrategic standing. Jordanian economists [believe](#) that if the situation in Syria stabilizes, international sanctions will be lifted and Jordan will have a wide range of opportunities, including the reopening of land and maritime trade routes from the Persian

Gulf and Jordan, via Syria and Lebanon, all the way to Turkey and Europe; using the port of Aqaba as a logistical center for southern Syria's needs; exporting surplus electricity and natural gas from Jordan to Syria and Lebanon; the participation of Jordanian companies in reconstruction projects in Syria; the selling of Jordanian basic goods, agricultural produce, and construction materials to the Syrians; and Jordanian assistance in helping to rebuild the education and healthcare systems in Syria.

### **Proactive Approach to Shape Syria's Future**

In light of the country's hopes and concerns, since the fall of the Assad regime, Jordan has been working to position itself as a pivotal player in fulfilling key roles in shaping the future of Syria while capitalizing on its relative advantages: its geostrategic position; its trusted relations with various Syrian, regional, and international players; and the availability of the relevant logistical infrastructure. This policy is designed, first and foremost, to serve the security and economic interests of Jordan. As Amman sees it, stabilizing Syria as a sovereign, secure, and friendly state—with which the Hashemite Kingdom can build good neighborly relations, cooperation in a wide variety of areas, and agreed-upon mechanisms for the return of the refugees—would also contribute to Jordan's stability.

The first diplomatic move by Jordan was, on December 14, to [host](#) a meeting in Aqaba of top diplomats, including the foreign ministers of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Turkey, and the United States, as well as the secretary-general of the Arab League, the European Union's foreign policy coordinator, and the United Nations special envoy to Syria. Jordanian analysts [explain](#) that the gathering was designed to forge regional and international agreements over the future of Syria and to bridge the gaps between Turkey and the Arab states, which oppose any interference from Ankara in Syrian affairs and are concerned about the Islamist character that the new regime in Damascus appears to be taking on. In their official statement, the Arab foreign ministers [called](#) for the human rights of all Syrians to be respected, irrespective of race, religion, or ethnic affiliation. They also called for measures to ensure that Syria does not descend into chaos, that the institutions of the state are protected, that the new regime strengthens its war on terror, and that Syria's territorial integrity, sovereignty, independence, and stability are safeguarded.

Jordanian commentators have suggested that there were additional reasons for hosting the summit in Aqaba. Maher Abu Tair [points out](#) that the need to decide whether to recognize the new regime in Syria or to isolate it is not exclusively a Jordanian question; rather, he says, it also depends on broader Arab, regional, and

international considerations. Former government minister Mohammad Abu Rumman, who is now a senior researcher and advisor to the Jordanian Politics and Society Institute, [believes](#) that the lifting of international sanctions from Syria and support for the new regime will depend on the country's new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, ability to translate his moderate rhetoric thus far into actions that demonstrate his true intentions. Journalist Rana Sabbagh [expressed](#) the hope that Syria would adopt a new constitution that would grant equal representation to minorities and women and place limitations on the authority of the president. She also voiced optimism that the new Syria would respect the borders of its neighbors, including Jordan and Israel.

Jordan's diplomatic activism continued on December 23, when Safadi became the first Arab foreign minister to visit Syria after the fall of Assad, granting the new regime its first sign of legitimacy. In the meeting with al-Sharaa, which Safadi described as "positive," the two leaders discussed how to prevent arms and drug smuggling from Syria to Jordan, the joint fight against the threat of terrorist attacks, and the issue of Syrian refugees in Jordan. The Jordanian foreign minister [expressed](#) his country's willingness to help Syria heal its wounds and rebuild. A few days later, the foreign ministers of both countries [agreed](#) that a multidisciplinary ministerial delegation from Syria would visit Amman to discuss with their Jordanian counterparts issues such as borders, security, energy, transportation, water, and commercial ties.

Despite the recent exchange of friendly messages, it is evident that the barriers of mutual suspicion have yet to be removed: just days after Safadi's visit, the President of the Jordanian Senate, Faisal al-Fayez, [expressed](#) his disappointment at the lack of diversity in the transitional government in Syria, adding that he hoped it would display a more diverse character once a new resolution has been drafted and elections held.

### **Recommendations for Israel**

When it comes to the Syrian front, Jordan and Israel share a range of common interests: ensuring security and stability in the triangle where the three countries' borders meet; thwarting terrorist activity on Syrian soil; halting the smuggling of drugs, which are exhausting the Jordanian military and distracting it from its routine security operations, including along the border with Israel; stopping arms smuggling from Syria to Jordan, and from there to Jordanian and Palestinian terrorist organizations; preventing Turkey and Iran from imposing their hegemony in Syria; forging a new political order in Syria that would be more friendly toward its neighbors, more tolerant of minority groups in its territory, especially the

Kurdish and Druze communities, and not dominated by Islamists; and promoting connectedness and regional integration in the fields of economy, transportation, and energy.

Jordan's desire to become a pivotal country on the Syrian front aligns with Israeli interests, as both countries share many identical goals. In the scenario where the new regime in Syria becomes stable, Jordan could be an effective mediator between Jerusalem and Damascus on issues such as preventing arms smuggling, keeping terrorist organizations far from Israel's borders, and reimplementing the armistice agreement on the Golan Heights. Israel, for its part, could encourage the administration of US President-elect Donald Trump to recognize the central role of Jordan in shaping Syria's future and to support its involvement in the development, reconstruction, and rehabilitation of Syria and its subsequent inclusion in the integration processes that the United States is spearheading in the region.

Nurturing the dialogue between the two countries is also vital in other scenarios. If, for example, the new regime in Damascus fails to establish control over all parts of the country, or, in an even worse-case scenario, presents a common threat to Israel and Jordan, the two countries can discreetly coordinate a strategy for dealing with it. This could include security cooperation on the border, exchanging intelligence information, setting up shared zones of influence in southern Syria, providing humanitarian aid, and, in extreme cases, offering each other military support both offensively and defensively. Similarly, Israel and Jordan may consider forming a moderate regional axis, with other allies and the support of the United States, to increase their influence on the Syrian front.

Finally, Israel and Jordan should work to narrow the gaps between the public and clandestine elements of their relations. Officially, Jordan [condemned](#) Israeli actions in the aftermath of the fall of the Assad regime when Israel took up position in the buffer zone of the Syrian Golan Heights and attacked Assad's army arsenal—even though these actions also served Jordanian interests. Moreover, the Jordanian media was [inundated](#) with conspiracy theories suggesting that Israel intends to take control of the source of the Yarmouk River in Syria, which flows into Jordan. The more that the two governments advance a discourse that emphasizes their shared interests, rather than spreading false accusations, the greater the chances that the Syrian mutual challenge will become an opportunity to improve bilateral relations between Jerusalem and Amman.

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