



# Tough times in Amman

Over one million Syrian refugees are imposing severe stress on the always vulnerable Jordanian economy

**ON MARCH 2**, the Jordanian authorities announced that one of its biggest security operations in years had foiled a plot by Islamic State (ISIS) sleeper cells to blow up civilian and military targets. Seven militants, who were in possession of suicide belts, explosives, automatic weapons and munitions, were killed in clashes with Jordanian security forces who had tracked them to a house in the northern city of Irbid; one Jordanian policeman was also killed, and 13 militants were arrested.

Up until now, Jordan has sidestepped the destructive upheavals that have roiled the region over the last five years. However, the incident served as a reminder that the country is not immune to the ideology of violent jihadi Islam, particularly as ISIS and other radical Islamist groups continue to dominate wide swaths of neighboring Syria and Iraq. Moreover, Syria's collapse has resulted in an influx of an estimated 1.2-1.4 million refugees, placing severe stress on the always vulnerable Jordanian economy.

Speaking to the BBC recently, King Abdullah expressed fear that "the dam was about to burst," warning that Jordan's economy, services and infrastructure could no longer cope with the demands being placed upon it. Jordan's border with Syria is now effectively sealed, and approximately 15,000 Syrian refugees encamped along the border have been stuck in limbo there for months.

Jordan has long presented a paradox. Emerging after the post-World War I division of the region into separate entities, it was a sparsely populated, entirely artificial entity with scant resources. Yet, unlike neighboring Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, it has succeeded in establishing a coherent and viable state headed by a monarchy, which possesses a substantial degree of legitimacy among large sectors of the population, including those of Palestinian origin.

Geopolitically, Jordan has benefited from its position as a buffer state between regional rivals, resulting in sustained support from its Western patrons, Britain and the US, and various regional actors, including Israel.

The Hashemite Kingdom's success in weathering the various Middle East storms of the last 60 years was again put on display in 2011-12. While protesters across the region called for the removal of their authoritarian regimes (*isqat al-nizam*), nonviolent Jordanian opposition protests called only for the reform of the regime (*islah al-nizam*). Their demands for greater accountability, an end to corruption, and more power to parliament were genuine; the long-promised reforms, however, were only cosmetic, and the organized protests have faded away.

As has been true elsewhere in the region, Jordan's large youth population (55 percent of the country's seven million citizens are under the age of 24, with the median age being 22) has been particularly frustrated by the country's high rates of unemployment and limited horizons. It is this group which is especially vulnerable to the sectarian appeal of radical Islamists: many hundreds have made their way to Syria to participate in



Syrian refugee children in the Al Zaatari refugee camp in Mafraq, Jordan, near the border with Syria, February 1

what they view as a jihad against the brutal and sectarian Assad regime that is engaged in the wholesale slaughtering of their fellow Sunni Arab Muslims.

In the aftermath of the discovery of ISIS cells in Irbid, the prominent Jordanian columnist Urayb ar-Rintawi called on all sectors of Jordanian society to fully mobilize to combat the threat of homegrown extremism. "Terrorism is not a diabolical plant; it is the bitter fruit of a soil that has been fertilized by extremist and fanatical ideas. Unless that environment is dried up and the sources and springs of terrorism are blocked... the terrorist threat will remain hanging over Jordanian necks."

Since the onset of the Arab Spring protests, Jordan has received billions of dollars in assistance from the oil-producing Gulf states seeking to shore up the conservative club of Arab monarchies. The US has provided \$700 million in humanitarian aid, and last year increased its security and economic commitments to Jordan to the level of \$1 billion annually between 2015-2017.

A high profile international conference in London, in February, gathered pledges for \$11 billion in aid for Syrian refugees and \$40 billion in loans to stimulate the economies of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Scholars and think tanks in the US and Israel are of one mind regarding the need to further strengthen Jordan's capacities to cope with the interlocking security, economic and ideological challenges it now confronts, and are reasonably confident that if the requisite support is forthcoming, it will continue to somehow muddle through. ■

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