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Jordan: With Relations with Washington and Jerusalem Back in Order, a Flurry of Diplomatic Activity

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Jordanian diplomacy has been invigorated in recent months, with Jordan taking a major and sometimes leading role in significant regional developments. The renewed intensity and prominence are associated with marked improvement in relations with the United States and Israel, following the leadership changes in both countries. King ‘Abdullah II seems to have received a fresh mandate from the Biden Administration to help promote regional changes aimed at reducing the influence of Iran and its allies, in an era of declining direct American engagement in the region.

Playing in the Big Leagues: The U.S. and Russia

Both the Trump Administration and former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saw ‘Abdullah as hindering the “paradigm-breaking” regional processes they were trying to promote. In contrast, the King was the first Arab leader to meet with President Biden in Washington in July 2021 (after being the first Middle East leader he called in November 2020). ‘Abdullah spoke of having “lost a couple of years,”¹ while the White House stated before the visit that it would be an opportunity to “showcase Jordan's leadership role in promoting peace and stability in the region.”² The Biden administration seems to have “reset” its view Jordan as an indispensable ally, perhaps due to its reluctance to rely on Trump's preferred Arab interlocutors, Saudi Arabia and U.A.E., as well as Biden's longstanding acquaintance with the King.

¹ [“His Majesty King Abdullah II's interview with Fareed Zakaria on CNN,”](#) The Royal Hashemite Court, July 25, 2021.

² [“Biden Hosting Talks with Jordanian King,”](#) VOA News, July 19, 2021.

Jordan has returned to centrality in U.S. military contingency planning for the Middle East, at a time when the U.S. is rationalizing its presence in the region and shifting its focus to the Indo-Pacific. In January 2021, the Jordanian government signed a domestically controversial agreement that allows the United States to post armed troops, aircraft, and vehicles in Jordan. In July, the U.S. closed four installations based in Qatar, and shifted them to Jordan.³

Amman has not neglected Russia, the other Great Power currently influential in the region: The King met with President Vladimir Putin in Moscow on August 23. The two countries have had good relations for many years – this was the King’s twentieth visit since ascending the throne in 1999 – which have become even more important for Jordan since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. The two countries cooperate and deconflict in southern Syria, most recently regarding the Russian-brokered departure of opposition forces from Deraa in September. The King has repeatedly expressed support for the “strong presence of Russia” in Middle East affairs and its “stabilizing role” in Syria.⁴

Apart from the two visits’ marking the King’s re-emergence as a major international player, they also served Jordan’s renewed efforts to strengthen support for the Palestinian Authority, and to promote international reengagement with Syria. In his meetings with Biden and Putin, the King promoted his idea of an international “task force,” comprising the United States, Russia, Israel, Jordan and other states. These actors would agree on a “road map” – to be presented to Damascus by Russia – for restoring the Syrian regime’s territorial sovereignty and international ties, while addressing key regional and international concerns (including Iranian involvement in Syria).⁵

Partial “Re-normalization” with Israel

Israel’s new government has led to significantly improved atmospherics in this crucial bilateral relationship. Ties were fraught under Netanyahu, especially when he adopted harder-line positions on annexing West Bank settlements and the Jordan River Valley in the last two years of electioneering. Upon assuming office, Prime Minister Bennett agreed (July 1) to sell water from Israel’s treaty-based share of the Jordan River Basin to ameliorate water shortages in Jordan, which Netanyahu had

³ “[The Reason for the transfer of American bases from Qatar to Jordan](#) [Arabic],” *Khaberni*, July 7, 2021.

⁴ Shehab Al Makahleh, “[Jordan’s King Abdullah goes to Russia](#),” *al-Bawaba*, August 23, 2021; “King holds talks with Russian president, visits military expo,” *Jordan Times*, August 23, 2021.

⁵ David Ignatius, “[Opinion: Jordan’s King Abdullah II has become Washington’s favorite Arab leader again](#),” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2021; James Jeffrey, “[King Abdullah’s Syria Initiative Could Boost Washington’s Flagging Credibility](#),” *Woodrow Wilson Center*, September 9, 2021.

refused to do; the two countries later (October 12) signed a formal agreement doubling the annual amount of water Israel will provide.⁶ There have been many reports of meetings and calls by senior Israeli officials – Foreign Minister, Defense Minister, Prime Minister and President – with King ‘Abdullah. ‘Abdullah said he was “very encouraged” by his meetings with Bennett and Defense Minister Gantz.⁷ Thus, a positive rather than negative dynamic seems to now exist in the triangle Washington-Amman-Jerusalem.

However, while the tenor of relations has improved, Amman seems to recognize that the new Israeli government is not able, and Bennett not willing, to progress significantly in the Palestinian peace process. Almost all contacts by senior Israeli figures with ‘Abdullah are leaked as “secret,” and not publicized by the Jordanians. This is due to the continued unpopularity of relations with Israel among the Jordanian population. There is continuous official Jordanian condemnation, led by Foreign Minister Ayman al-Safady, of Israeli activity in the Territories and what is termed provocations and “intrusions” on the Temple Mount. ‘Abdullah has also doubled down on taking the role of chief interlocutor on behalf of Palestinian Authority; as noted, he raised the issue with both Biden and Putin. Mahmoud Abbas visited Amman several times in recent months, and he, ‘Abdullah, and Egyptian President ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi met in Cairo for a “trilateral summit” (September 2).⁸

Continued Strengthening of the “New Levant” Axis

Recent months have also seen a deepening of the multifaceted political, infrastructure and economic cooperation between Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq (which Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has called a “new Levant”). In June 2021, there was another leaders’ summit – the fourth since March 2019 – in Baghdad, attended by ‘Abdullah and Sisi (the first visit to Iraq by an Egyptian president since 1990). Ministerial visits among the three states are a commonplace occurrence, and many bilateral and trilateral agreements have been signed among them in the past two

⁶ “[Israel signs deal to double water supply to Jordan](#),” *AFP*, October 12, 2021.

⁷ “[Amman seeks warmer ties with Israel but within limits](#),” *Arab Weekly*, September 27, 2021; Jacob Magid, [Twitter Post](#), 7:44, September 28, 2021.

⁸ Another aspect of Jordan’s role in the Palestinian issue is a possible thawing in its relationship with Hamas. The Jordanian government allowed Hamas leaders Isma‘il Haniyeh and Khaled Masha‘l to attend the funeral (August 27) of former Hamas spokesman Ibrahim Ghoshah. The two figures also reportedly held meetings with Muslim Brotherhood activists and visited a hospital in Amman where Gazan children injured in May are hospitalized. Hamas is reportedly renewing its attempts to get Jordan to agree to allow it to reopen its offices in Amman, after a 22-year hiatus. (“[Haniyeh and Masha‘l arrive in Amman for the first time after many years](#)” [Arabic], *Arab48.com*, August 26, 2021; Yoni ben Menachem, “[Hamas is courting Jordan](#)” [Hebrew], *News1*, August 31, 2021).

years.⁹ On the political-strategic level, this alignment is aimed at multiplying the weight of the three states to enable them to reclaim their former stature in the regional and international arena. Jordan and Egypt also hope that their ties with Iraq will help reduce its dependence on Iran; ‘Abdullah, during his visit to Washington, urged Biden to back al-Kadhimi’s efforts to steer Iraq away from Tehran (al-Kadhimi visited Washington shortly after ‘Abdullah).¹⁰ The trilateral efforts received a significant boost from the well-publicized Baghdad Conference for Cooperation and Partnership (August 28), which ‘Abdullah and Sisi attended. The summit was viewed as emblematic of Iraq’s renewed regional position, as well as of the economic attractiveness of its large-scale reconstruction and infrastructure projects.¹¹

Rapprochement with Syria, through Lebanon

Another major area of recent Jordanian diplomacy is the international and regional rehabilitation of the Assad regime. While Jordan strongly supported the opposition at the beginning of the Syrian civil war, this changed after the rise of the Islamic State, the Russian intervention, and the decline in the probability of the regime’s fall. Jordan has strategically re-calibrated and taken the lead in re-engaging with Damascus and trying to promote its re-integration into the Arab political community. Some Jordanian analysts even see an intention in bringing Syria into the Egypt-Jordan-Iraq axis in the future.¹²

This stems not from fondness for the regime, but recognition that it has survived and that re-engagement serves key Jordanian interests:

- Ties with Syria are important for the Jordanian economy: prior to 2011, close to 17 percent of Jordanian exports went by land to or through Syria.

⁹ Noteworthy are the setting up of ground transport links; the opening of the Iraqi market to Jordanian and Egyptian firms and workers; and plans to connect the gas transmission networks of Iraq and Egypt through Jordan, to interconnect the three countries’ electric infrastructures, and to export Iraqi oil through Jordan (via a pipeline from Basra to Aqaba) and thence, Egypt.

¹⁰ For more detail, see Joshua Krasna, [Egypt-Jordan-Iraq: Another Middle East Axis in the Making?](#), Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), September 22, 2020. Interestingly, closer relations between Jordan and Iraq have caused concern on the Israeli Right (including former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu), about Jordan’s moving closer to the Iranian camp, with the planned Basra-Aqaba pipeline ostensibly enabling Iran to export oil to Egypt and the world (<https://news.walla.co.il/item/3447736>; see also e.g. Mordechai Keidar, “[Why is Jordan joining the Iranian axis?](#)” [Hebrew], *Makor Rishon*, September 29, 2021).

¹¹ Akeel Abbas, “[Baghdad Conference showcases Iraq's new role as mediator in region](#),” *al-Monitor*, August 27, 2021.

¹² See, for example: Osama Al-Sharif, “[Why Washington has provided King Abdullah with political cover to engage the Assad regime](#),” *Middle East Institute*, October 5, 2021.

Bilateral trade went from 615 million dollars in 2010 to 67 million in 2020.¹³

- Jordan is home to approximately one million Syrian refugees, who are a drag on the struggling economy and whose presence has led to social tensions. Over the longer term, it would like them to return (as did many Iraqi refugees over the past two decades), which would require a functioning Syrian state.
- Jordan hopes to expand its region-wide exports of energy and electricity, as well as position itself on “the inside lane” in the competition for Syrian economic and infrastructure reconstruction projects, especially in southern Syria. It also hopes to renew talks with Syria on supplying additional waters from the Yarmouk River.¹⁴
- Jordan faces significant security challenges from terrorist groups and criminal organizations (especially arms and drug smugglers) in Syria, and hopes that improving relations and restoring Syrian military control to the border area, will pacify it.
- Renewal of relations and broader improvement of Syria’s regional ties, including through its re-admission to the Arab League, would (as with Iraq) provide Syria with the option of Arab alternatives to complete dependence on Iran.

This context is key context for the recent Jordanian-Egyptian initiatives to provide needed energy resources to Lebanon’s disintegrating economy and society. On August 21, Jordan announced, after Syrian ministerial visits, that it will supply Lebanon with electricity, through the Syrian grid, to ease critical shortages. A meeting of the Petroleum and Energy Ministers of Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Lebanon convened in Amman on September 8 (the first time since 2011 a Syrian minister was invited to a high-level regional meeting). The ministers reached agreement on the shipment of Egyptian gas through Jordan and Syria, using the refurbished 1,200-kilometer Arab

¹³ “[Syria, Jordan Agree On Opening Borders to Trade, People’s Movement](#)” [Arabic], *aSharq al-Awsat*, July 28, 2021; Mohammed Al-Arsan, “[Jordan and Syria: Will the economy fix what politics has spoiled?](#)” [Arabic], Amman.net, September 18, 2021; Osama Al-Sharif, “[Why Jordan is pushing to normalise ties with the Syrian regime](#),” *The New Arab*, August 5, 2021.

¹⁴ “[Zawati talks to Roya about the details of the tripartite agreement to supply Lebanon with electricity](#)” [Arabic], *Roya News*, October 4, 2021; Osama Al-Sharif, “[Why Jordan is pushing to normalise ties with the Syrian regime](#),” *The New Arab*, August 5, 2021.

Gas Pipeline (which was last used in 2010), to fuel the Deir Ammar power plant in north Lebanon.¹⁵ The U.S. Administration is backing the two projects, to be financed with monies earmarked for Lebanon by the World Bank.¹⁶ It is reportedly willing to provide the two countries with a waiver from [Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019](#), which sanctions those having economic ties with the Syrian government.¹⁷ U.S. backing is aimed at counterbalancing recent sea-borne Iranian gasoil shipments under the auspices of Hizballah.

The current functionality of the pipeline, especially in Syria and Lebanon, is unclear; some experts argue that it will take six months to a year for Jordan and Egypt to supply Lebanon with electricity and gas through Syria. In addition, Egypt, while having great potential as a gas producer, also has significant domestic demand (it was a net importer of gas until 2019), and may not have enough gas available to provide a steady supply (though it announced suspension of exports of liquified natural gas, prioritizing piping to Lebanon). In addition, both Egypt and Jordan import gas from Israel, with Jordan using the Arab Gas Pipeline for transmission within Jordan; Syria and Lebanon may have issues with being part of a larger regional gas infrastructure which includes Israeli gas, and to import gas which has “ties to Israel.”¹⁸

In any case, the gas and electricity deals, especially with American assent, would be (another) significant breach in Syria’s international and regional isolation, and a significant step in the legitimization of the Asad regime. On the bilateral level with Jordan, things have already begun moving quickly. Most significantly: the Syrian Defense Minister visited Jordan (September 19) to discuss border security and the situation in Deraa with Jordan’s Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and to assure

¹⁵ Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “[Lebanon's electricity crisis takes on geopolitical significance](#),” *The National*, September 8, 2021; Joseph Haboush, “[U.S. urged to allow Egypt, Jordan gas deal with Lebanon via Arab Gas Pipeline](#),” *al-Arabiya*, July 16, 2021; Osama Habib, “[Syria's pipeline capable of resuming gas shipment to Lebanon: source](#),” *Daily Star*, September 7, 2021.

¹⁶ This plant can produce 450 megawatts of power, thus providing Lebanon with some four hours of additional electricity per day. Osama Habib, “[Lebanese delegation to visit Syria, Jordan and Egypt to discuss electricity and gas supply](#),” *Daily Star*, August 27, 2021.

¹⁷ Mohammed Khair al-Rawashdeh, “[Jordan to Host Quartet Meeting to Discuss Gas Supplies to Lebanon](#) [Arabic],” *aSharq al-Awsat*, September 6, 2021; Osama Al-Sharif, “[Is Jordan's energy diplomacy a step towards normalizing Syria's regime?](#),” *The New Arab*, September 13, 2021; Maha El Dahan, “[Lebanon in free fall, must not become 'horror story', U.S. senator warns](#),” *Reuters*, September 1, 2021.

¹⁸ Pat Davis Szymczak, “[Egypt Snubs LNG, Plans To Send Gas to Lebanon Via the Arab Gas Pipeline](#),” *Journal of Petroleum Technology*, September 23, 2021; Peter Stevenson, “Egypt-Lebanon Gas Deal: A Big Win For Syria’s Assad,” *Middle East Economic Survey*, September 4, 2021; Rami Kharis, “[Electricity, gas, and normalization: arrangements for establishing a regional energy system and their constraints](#)” [Arabic], *7iber*, September 9, 2021; Lebanese News and Updates, [Twitter Post](#), 9:01pm, October 9, 2021.

him of Syria's ability to secure the Arab Gas Pipeline in its territory;¹⁹ Jordan announced (September 28) the renewal of direct flights by Royal Jordanian to Damascus;²⁰ and Jordan re-opened (September 29) the Jaber border crossing, which was closed by the Jordanian side in mid-2015, after it was seized by Syrian opposition factions, reopened in October 2018 when Syrian regime forces retook it, and closed again due to the coronavirus pandemic in September 2020.

On October 3rd, there was a telephone conversation between Assad and King Abdullah (reportedly mediated by Iraqi President Barham Salih), the first overt communication between the two in a decade.²¹ Jordanian commentators raise the possibility of a visit by Jordanian officials to Syria in the near future, and expect the regime to crackdown the Syrian opposition (it seems to have already begun to do so).²²

In an extremely rare on-the-record meeting with a group of journalists (October 4), Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate director Ahmad Husni said that Jordan now enjoys a good relationship with Syria, and that "closer cooperation with Syria seeks to serve the top national interests." He stated that "we need to coordinate with the Syrians to help create a better environment that would allow for the return of refugees to their homes and to help support Lebanon ... we need to open channels of communication with the Syrian regime to achieve calm in the southern parts of Syria and clear the area." He pointed to the inevitability of dealing with the "Syrian state," in light of the two countries' need to reopen cooperation, particularly in the security (especially noting the problem of drug smuggling) and economic fields.²³

Jordan's flurry of diplomacy is a function of regional developments, and skillful seizing of opportunities.²⁴ However, it should be seen on the background of continued

¹⁹ Daoud Kuttub, "[Syrian Defense Chief's Visit to Jordan Gets a Low Profile](#)," *Medialine*, September 21, 2021.

²⁰ "[Jordan carrier resuming flights to Syria in new sign of thaw](#)," *AP*, September 28, 2021.

²¹ Abbas Aslani, [Twitter Post](#), 5:09pm, October 4, 2021.

²² See e.g. Maher abu Tayr, "[Amman and Damascus: What Next?](#)" [Arabic], *al-Ghad*, September 29, 2021; Faez al-Faez, "[What comes after the call between the King and President Assad?](#)" [Arabic], *al-Rai*, October 3, 2021; and, Scott Lucas, "[Cozying Up to Assad, Jordan Targets Journalists of Syria Direct](#)," *EA Worldview*, October 8, 2021.

²³ "[GID fully supports Royal Committee's recommendations — intelligence chief](#)," *Jordan Times*, October 4, 2021; Mohammed Khair al-Rawashdeh, "[Director of Jordanian Intelligence: New Vision for Restoring Ties with Syria](#)" [Arabic], *aSharq al-Awsat*, October 5, 2021.

²⁴ Apart from the key areas discussed above, it has also encompassed continued improving relations with Qatar, where the King visited on October 12, and with which relations were good throughout the period of the Saudi-led embargo; Turkey, with which an economic agreement was signed (August 17), which still falls short of the free trade agreement the two countries had in the years

economic and political difficulties domestically, with a COVID-induced intensification of existing economic and social distress; and criticism of neoliberal policies, corruption, and repression boosted by the Hamza affair (and prospectively, the recent Pandora reports regarding the King's personal holdings). The long-term effects on the domestic arena of Jordan's moves –especially reopening of cross-border trade, possible amelioration of the refugee problem, and investment and employment in major infrastructure and reconstruction projects –could be significant. In addition, and perhaps more important, the King, has always felt more comfortable in the rarified sphere of high policy, which provides an opportunity to burnish his image at home as a statesman and leader, and enhance the willingness of international actors to provide assistance.

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2011-2019; as well as Greece and Cyprus, fellow members of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, with whose presidents the King had a summit in Athens (July 28).