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Jordan and the Current Unrest in Syria

Summary

- The Government of Jordan is deeply concerned about the turmoil in Syria, fearing the spillover effect and knowing Syria's historic capacity to undermine Jordanian internal stability.
- Initial official Jordanian reaction has been cautious, to avoid antagonizing Syria and provoking retaliation.
- There is great anxiety over what may follow the collapse of the Assad regime.
- Jordan is under increased pressure from both internal elements and external powers to toughen its public posture toward Damascus.
- Ultimately, Amman will react carefully to events in Syria, taking actions that best ensure the security of the state and the survival of the monarchy.

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Syria’s internal crisis is an issue of deep concern for Jordan. The country is worried about border security and potential Syrian military or intelligence moves against it if Syria perceives there is Jordanian support for Syrian dissidents. The core concern, however, is the uncertain impact events in Syria could have on Jordan. Consequently, the Jordanian government has been cautious in public comments—almost silent until recently—to avoid antagonizing Damascus.

That may be changing. As Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have taken a more critical approach to the Assad regime, Jordan is challenged to reconcile its posture toward Damascus and the GCC. While it remains wary of its northern neighbor, it cannot afford to be at cross purposes with Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners, especially as it negotiates a closer relationship with the GCC. Meanwhile, domestic Islamic groups and others attack the government of Jordan for its timid position toward the Syrian regime’s brutality against its people.

Jordan Has Reasons to Fear Syrian Retribution

Jordan has often found itself caught up in regional crises not of its own making but undermining its stability and threatening its survival. The current situation in Syria is but the latest such crisis. Publicly, all is well. “We feel that Syria and Jordan are more than just brotherly countries and there are mutual interests. . .,” declared Jordanian Senate President, Taher al-Masri, while visiting Damascus in April.

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King Abdullah II's ascendance to the throne coincided with Bashar al-Assad's inauguration as President of Syria, offering a ripe opportunity for reconciliation between the two countries. The King often spoke of a new generation of Arab leaders, most notably including Assad,¹ which would change the region. As events played out, he became increasingly disillusioned with Assad. He made repeated attempts to build a closer relationship, but differences on multiple issues thwarted those initiatives. Differing perspectives on the Arab-Israeli peace process, post-2003 Iraq, and ongoing Syrian support for terrorist groups complicated the relationship.

Even in the early years after Assad became President, cross border infiltration into Jordan continued. The Jordanians apprehended persons they identified as Syrian intelligence agents carrying arms and cash. Exchanges of gunfire resulting in deaths and injuries, though never admitted publicly, were all too common. The assassins of a U.S. diplomat in 2002 came from Syria, and Jordanian-born al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his group were known to have contacts with Syrian intelligence.

Sensitivities along the Border

The Jordanian monarchy is exceedingly concerned about the Syrian regime's efforts to destabilize Jordan's domestic political environment. Growing unrest resulting from the Syrian regime's repressive activities, especially its ruthless crackdown in Dara'a, could produce potentially destabilizing reverberations in the Hashemite Kingdom. The populations that live along the Syrian-Jordanian border are interrelated and have historic ties. Jordanians along the border would naturally aid their neighbors to the north. Any such support could well provoke Syrian retribution.

The Syrians have already accused Jordan of such cross border support. The Jordanian newspaper, *Al-Sabil*, reported Aug. 12, that the King had sent a secret envoy to meet with Assad due to "concern about the accelerating events in Syria and their potential impact on the Kingdom of Jordan." The article said Assad "responded... with a sudden attack on Amman accusing Jordanian quarters of supporting revolution and the smuggling of arms and criminal elements across the border." The envoy reportedly responded that "Jordan only wants to see stability prevail in Syria and that "Jordan has no interest in the continuation of the current chaos in Syria."

While difficult to document, there are certainly troubles along the border. A Sept. 18 Associated Press (AP) report, quoting "a Syrian asylum seeker," states that Jordanian security forces have transferred 60 Syrian army and police defectors from a compound near the border with Syria to a safer place.

Describing "a vicious attack on Jordan by official Syrian television," *Al Sabil* reported that for weeks state-run television has alleged the existence of terrorist cells in Irbil and Ramtha that are smuggling weapons and telecommunication devices to demonstrators. (Western newspapers reported that citizens residing in the border area could communicate using Jordanian cell phones).

A Cautious Jordanian Public Position

Initial Jordanian public statements were cautious. *Al-Sabil* described the government's response to Syrian accusations as "shy." Clearly, the government did not want to provoke Damascus. Senior officials, therefore, spoke in support of Bashar's call for reforms and urged the peaceful resolution of resistance demands. In April, Taher al-Masri "affirmed Jordan's support for the reform steps undertaken by Syria" under Bashar.

Concern over Successor Regime in Damascus

Despite Jordan's reticent public posture, it is profoundly concerned with what may follow the collapse of the Bashar regime. If religious extremists become dominant, as the Jordanian

government fears, the new regime could well take hard-line positions on such issues as the peace process—harkening back to the days when Syria was known for its “resistance” position. In short, while Jordan has its troubles with the current regime, its successor might be far more hostile than the Bashar regime on issues critical to Jordan.

Impact on Domestic Politics

The Jordanian establishment is acutely concerned over the potential impact of changes in Syria on Jordan’s internal situation. Multiple groups in Jordan are demanding political reform. Calls for revising the election law resulting in a significant increase in political power of Palestinian-Jordanians exacerbate internal demographic tensions. Additionally, calls for the election of prime ministers by Parliament rather than appointment by the King and demands for a constitutional monarchy threaten to seriously erode the monarchy’s political hegemony.

The successful overthrow of the current Syrian regime and establishment of a more democratic state will inevitably embolden democratic and reformist elements in Jordan. Several voices in Jordan are already criticizing the government for what they see as a “timid” response to events in Syria. A spokesman for the Jordanian Committee for Supporting the Syrian People, quoted as recently as Aug. 12, described the official Jordanian position as “hesitant and vague.” Some critics and advocates of reform are quick to attack the government on yet another front, hoping to convert public sympathy for the plight of Syrians resisting regime brutality into public support for renewed political pressure against the Jordanian monarchy.

The Islamic Action Front (IAF) is among the most outspoken groups pressuring the government. *Al-Sabil* quoted Islamic leader Ali Abu-al-Sukkar in August as calling on the Jordanian government “to adopt a clear position on the ongoing bloodshed [in Syria].” He accused the government of being “silent about Al-Assad’s massacre” and called for the expulsion of the Syrian Ambassador. Jordanians who are concerned about the IAF’s influence in Jordan describe the IAF’s position as opportunistic. They may be correct; but the IAF calculates that the emergence of a Sunni dominated group in Syria will significantly enhance their position in Jordan. Naturally, the Jordanian establishment fears and deeply opposes IAF’s empowerment.

A More Assertive Public Position

By mid-August the Jordanian government seems to have adopted a more critical and condemnatory posture toward the Syrian Government. In a sharp break from previous statements, Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit, speaking with his Syrian counterpart on Aug. 15, called for the immediate halt of military operations, speedy implementation of reforms, and exhorted the regime to “spare . . . the blood of the Syrian people.” According to Petra News Agency, al-Bakhit called for a “dialogue to guarantee the safety of the Syrian people and the security, stability and territorial integrity of Syria.” He noted “the mounting anger of people and governments across the world and their rejection of continued violence in Syria.”

Even so, the IAF continued its attacks on the Jordanian government. IAF Secretary General Hamzah Mansour sent a letter to the prime minister on August 20, noting that the ongoing “daily massacres” by the Syrian regime against civilians “will cause a regional crisis that would affect Jordan.” He called on the government to recall its ambassador in Damascus and “issue an official objection to what is taking place in Syria.”

On Sept. 12, Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh reiterated “a call for an immediate end to the bloodshed in Syria and the need to begin political reform that meets the public’s demands,” signaling an apparent shift in the official Jordanian position toward Assad’s brutality.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This brief is part of a series examining the regional dimensions of Syria's popular uprising. The Institute invited leading experts from the U.S. and the Middle East to identify key vectors of influence that Syria's neighbors are bringing to bear on the conflict, to forecast how the situation there will affect the regional balance of power and to examine how the opposition and the Syrian regime are responding to these regional dynamics. Through its work, the Institute aims to provide analysis and tools for on-the-ground conflict management in support of political transitions across the Arab world. The series was edited by USIP's Steven Heydemann, senior adviser for Middle East Initiatives, and Scott Lasensky, a senior program officer. Edward Gnehm is the Kuwait Professor of Gulf and Arabian Affairs at the George Washington University.



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The GCC Factor

What accounts for this shift in public remarks? Certainly, the Jordanian government perceives a growing international consensus against the Syrian government's use of violence against its citizens. The monarchy also seeks to prevent its domestic critics from seizing the issue as a form of political leverage.

External considerations also factor into the monarchy's calculus. The king is ever sensitive to U.S. policy on unfolding events, as in Syria today. While concerns for domestic affairs remain paramount, Jordan is likely to be more vocal in its criticism of the Bashar regime as the U.S. public posture toughens. Saudi Arabia's increased criticism of the Syrian regime and the dramatic action of three of the GCC states in recalling their ambassadors from Damascus heightens pressure on Jordan to take a more hard-line stance against the al-Assad regime.

The GCC recently announced that Jordan and Morocco would be invited to join the GCC. Jordan has long coveted membership in this organization and certainly anticipates badly needed financial support and employment opportunities for its citizens. It is also counting on significant GCC political support in a region where Jordan has often been isolated. In particular, Jordan's ambivalent stance toward Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait created serious tension with Saudi Arabia and the GCC states. The King adamantly asserts that Jordan will never be in that situation again. As Jordanian rhetoric becomes more critical of the Syrian government, it reinforces the commonality of interests with the GCC.

In conclusion, Jordan has very little influence on events in Syria, but enormous stakes in its outcome. The King, as he considers Jordan's response to the situation in Syria, will keep the survival of the state and the monarchy foremost in mind. Jordan will seek, to the maximum extent possible, to avoid antagonizing the Syrian regime and provoking retribution. The King will continue to monitor the positions of the U.S. and regional states, especially Saudi Arabia, in order to maintain the relationships that he has worked so hard to cultivate during the past decade. In the final analysis, however, he will take actions that best enable him to control his domestic environment.

Endnotes

1. All references to Assad or the Assad regime refer to that of Bashar al-Assad.