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Jordan Facing Up to the ISIS Challenge: A Net Assessment

Asher Susser

Ever since its foundation in 1921, Jordan's geopolitical centrality has been both a liability and an asset. On the one hand, though it is a relatively small and resource-poor state, sandwiched between Iraq and Israel-Palestine and between Syria and Saudi Arabia, it has always been vulnerable to the impact of regional political developments and ideological trends over which it has had very little, if any, control. At present Jordan is grappling both with the regional fallout of the "Arab Spring" and with the new phenomenon of ISIS as it erodes the state order in the kingdom's immediate neighborhood.

At the same time, Jordan has always pulled through its various crises, and two critical factors have made this possible. One has been consistent external support: Jordan has enjoyed regional and international support for its stability precisely *because* of its geopolitical centrality—and the consequent fear of the regional chaos that could ensue from its destabilization or collapse. But more important has been the evolution of Jordanian stateness. Stateness is usually defined as the extent to which states possess the twin attributes of: a) effective central government, buttressed by a monopoly on the use of force within an internationally and domestically recognized sovereign territory, and b) basic agreement amongst the citizenry on the rules of governance and political participation and on who legitimately belongs to the people, and the nation.

This Brief provides an assessment of Jordan's response to the ISIS challenge. Jordan does have serious internal weaknesses as it deals with the ISIS threat:

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It must contend with the radicalization of its Islamist opposition against the background of a struggling economy, which has been further overburdened by the massive influx of refugees from Syria. But Jordan also has some important strengths. The country's ruling elite and defense establishment have generally demonstrated an impressive cohesion and determination, even in the face of occasional tensions and expressions of dissatisfaction within the elite itself. There is a genuine popular sense of 'Jordanianness'; the kingdom has an effective central government, and the state has a monopoly over the forces of coercion. In short, Jordan has acquired a level of stateness that far exceeds that of its Arab neighbors. Though regional contexts are forever changing, these characteristics have, thus far, remained the solid foundation of Jordan's stability.

ISIS and the Domestic Jordanian Situation

Recent trends of Islamic radicalization in various parts of the region have had their effect on Jordan's domestic politics. The last few years have seen the decline of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan as the main opposition and its replacement by more militant jihadi Salafis, who are the natural allies of the likes of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. Since the 1980s, the Muslim Brotherhood and its political party, the Islamic Action Front, had been the largest and best organized political opposition to the regime in Jordan. In the early phases of the "Arab Spring," it was the Brotherhood that played a key role in the mobilization of public protest against the monarchy. Its stature seemed to be on the rise as its fellow Brotherhoods were doing well in Egypt and Tunisia and in the initial stages of the Syrian revolution. But as the performance of the Muslim Brotherhood in power in Egypt and Tunisia faltered and the revolution in Syria turned into a bloody civil war, the Brotherhood's popular appeal in Jordan eroded commensurately, and more radical Salafis made inroads at the Brotherhood's expense.

As the Brotherhood lost ground in Jordan, deep dissension began to plague the organization, and observers drew attention to the most serious internal crisis the Brotherhood had ever faced in Jordan since its founding in 1945. For years there had been internal friction within the Brotherhood between "hawks," mostly Palestinian, and "doves," mostly Jordanian, with respect to their attitude toward the regime: Palestinian "hawks" have generally been more aggressive than their more dovish Jordanian counterparts in their demands for reforms that would significantly curtail the power of the monarchy. The Palestinians also tended to take a more hawkish position on Palestine, as expressed by the Brotherhood's firm support for Hamas.

In late 2012, a moderate faction of mainly Jordanian "doves," known as the "Zamzam" initiative,¹ emerged from within the Brotherhood, urging the organization to adopt a generally more conciliatory position on Islamic ideological matters as well as toward the regime. Seen as an effort to "Jordanize" the organization and apparently encouraged by the government, the initiative split the Brotherhood. In early 2015, the "Zamzam" leaders and some fifty other members were suspended by the leadership of the Jordanian Brotherhood. The suspension was soon followed by the formation of an alternative Brotherhood organization within Jordan led by its own Supreme Guide, Abd al-Majid Dhunaybat, a former Supreme Guide of the original Jordanian Brotherhood and one of those suspended for their association with the "Zamzam" initiative.

Dhunaybat condemned the official leadership of the Brotherhood as “illegitimate,” as the organization descended into one of the low points of its history in Jordan.²

As the Brotherhood in Jordan was consumed by its own internal squabbles and by its insistent preoccupation with Palestine and Hamas, Salafism became ever more attractive to original Jordanians in general, especially amongst the ranks of unemployed young men. This is not to suggest, of course, that Salafism did not appeal to many Palestinians as well. Some of the key figures in the leadership of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria were Jordanians of Palestinian origin.³

But in the deep Jordanian south, jihadi Salafis were surpassing the Brotherhood’s support in the economically depressed town of Ma’an, a flashpoint of resentment and hostility to the regime in Amman since the late 1980s. In June 2014, dozens of men openly demonstrated in Ma’an in support of ISIS, as ISIS took Mosul in Iraq and hurtled forward toward the Jordanian frontier, threatening to attack Jordan and assassinate King Abdullah. “The underserved, economically depressed and restive regions” such as Rusayfa and Zarqa, just north of the capital, and Ma’an in the south, provided “the lion’s share” of Jordanian jihadists who had volunteered to fight in Syria.⁴

As of the early months of the Syrian revolution in the spring of 2011, thousands of Jordanian Salafis (figures vary from two to five thousand) had joined the fight of their coreligionist Sunnis against the Shi’ite (Hezbollah- and Iran-) supported Alawi regime in Syria. Salafism was spreading ominously. According to one source, there were six to seven thousand Salafists in Jordan with two thousand more sympathizers,⁵ while according to other sources there were some fifteen thousand core followers, along with tens of thousands of other supporters.⁶

In the ISIS scheme of things, the Islamic State in parts of Syria and Iraq was the *diyar al-tamkin* (the zone or home of enablement) for the conquest of the rest of *Bilad al-Sham* or Greater Syria, which would obviously include Jordan as well. But the real threat to Jordan was not so much from conquest (which the Jordanian military was well equipped to resist effectively), but rather from subversion directed from ISIS bases in Iraq or from Jabhat al-Nusra bases in Syria, in collaboration with Salafi sympathizers in Jordan.

The monarchy was especially concerned about extremist groups in Syria taking their fight to Jordanian territory through Jordanian jihadists returning home. In April 2014, in an effort to deter young men from joining the jihadists, new anti-terrorism legislation was passed by the Jordanian parliament.

The new law criminalized joining or attempting to join any armed group or terrorist organization, or recruiting or attempting to recruit people to join such groups or training people for this purpose, whether inside or outside the kingdom. Hundreds of alleged Islamic militants or sympathizers were arrested by the authorities in the wake of the new legislation, and any known jihadists returning from Syria were immediately apprehended. The law also prescribed the death penalty for any act of terrorism that resulted in the death of innocents.

Whether such legislation will prove an effective deterrent remains to be seen. In the meantime, Jordan’s struggling economy leaves a lot to be desired from the perspective of Jordan’s younger (and widely unemployed) generation, who are still easily tempted by the adventurous, profitable, and seemingly virtuous pursuit of jihad. Economic hardship has certainly been a major factor, along with Sunni sectarian identification, in the flocking of young Jordanian men to jihadism.

Refugees and Jordan’s Underlying Economic Vulnerability

Regional crises have also hurt Jordan’s struggling economy. With the economy in one of its perennial periods of distress, nearly one million refugees⁷ have fled to Jordan in the last few years since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Some five hundred thousand Iraqis had taken refuge in the kingdom in the previous decade, and about thirty thousand of them were registered as still residing in Jordan.⁸ Given Jordan’s population of barely seven million, the burden on the country’s economy, infrastructure, and water resources was hardly manageable. Most of the Syrian refugees, some 80 percent, lived in Jordan’s cities outside the camps that had been set up for them, competing with Jordanians for housing and jobs in an economy that had been struggling for decades. Overwhelmed by the influx of refugees, Jordan finally closed its border with Syria in late 2014.

King Abdullah, who has focused on economic reform since he came to power in 1999, has continued to see the economy as Jordan’s most serious challenge. As the King observed in August 2014, the fallout from the ongoing regional turmoil, in terms of refugees and other economic losses, has continued to impose unprecedented hardship on the Jordanian people, the private sector, and the government.⁹

Unemployment in Jordan is high, especially among the youth, where it averages 31 percent. Low growth, unemployment, imbalances in the current account, and a persistent fiscal deficit pose a serious threat to the

kingdom's stability.¹⁰ Jordan's annual GDP growth fell from almost 8 percent between 2005 and 2008 to only 2.5 percent between 2010 and 2013. The global financial crisis of 2007-08 affected Jordan as well, and foreign direct investment fell from a high of 23.5 percent of GDP in 2006 to just 4.8 percent in 2012, largely owing to conflict in neighboring countries, and the consequent unwillingness of investors to invest in Jordan, out of fear of eventual instability there too.¹¹ The Syrian turmoil has also taken its toll on Jordan's trade balance, as major export routes through Syria have been affected by the civil war. During the first eleven months of 2013, Jordan's combined exports to Lebanon, Turkey, and Europe fell by 30 percent as compared with the same period in 2012.¹²

The overall effect of this decline has been limited thanks to large financial transfers from abroad in the form of remittances from Jordanian workers and assistance from foreign governments. In 2014, the United States provided Jordan with more than \$1 billion in financial and military aid, a sum that is expected to increase in 2015. Jordan also received generous aid from other countries in the EU, from Canada and Japan, from Saudi Arabia and other countries of the GCC, and from the IMF and the World Bank. Jordan was second only to the West Bank and Gaza among Arab recipients of foreign aid in terms of U.S. dollars per capita. In total foreign aid Jordan received three times more than Syria and ten times more than Egypt per capita.¹³

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, Jordan has secured some \$12 billion in loan guarantees, development assistance, and military aid, with promises of more to come.¹⁴ There is no reason to assume that aid to Jordan will be reduced any time soon. Infusions of aid have kept Jordan on an even keel, but there is always the question of how long that will last. How long can Jordan put off the politically difficult decisions it needs to make to ensure much-needed structural economic and political reform, before it reaches a tipping point from which there will be no return?

Questions on the Loyalty of the Elite

Jordan has thus been at the epicenter of an unprecedented regional breakdown at a time when some cracks had begun to appear in the traditional support system of the regime. Neighboring states were falling apart, Jordan was being inundated with refugees, and radical forces with apocalyptic mindsets, like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, were filling the void created by the failing states of Syria and Iraq. Sunni sectarian identification as well as domestic economic distress were creating a receptiveness for Salafism in the kingdom. The Salafis, it should be noted,

are more radical than the Muslim Brotherhood, and totally devoid of the historical restraint that has characterized the Brotherhood in its relationship with the monarchy.

What made matters worse was that these new challenges have come at a time of certain rumblings of disapproval of the King from within the inner sanctums of the historically loyalist East Banker elite. Jordan's economic woes had led to certain reforms and austerity measures that tended to hurt the loyalist East Bankers far more than their Palestinian compatriots.

As the backbone of the regime, the East Bankers are particularly dependent on government largesse, which has declined steadily owing to essential cutbacks in government spending. East Bankers have felt that their unwritten social and political contract with the regime, based on loyalty in exchange for protection of their material well-being, was being eroded, and complaints were quick to surface. East Bankers have become a major obstacle to more meaningful political and economic reform, lest their position of privilege be irreparably undermined in the process.

A recent addition to Jordan's domestic strain is the fact that many if not most Jordanians are not supporters of the kingdom's role in the fight against ISIS. Jordan has been a key player in the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, deploying its air force and providing logistical support and training facilities for the so-called moderate Syrian opposition. Jordan's state interest certainly requires the defeat of ISIS, both to contain domestic Salafist appeal and to overpower the external threat to the kingdom that ISIS represents. Yet a large component of the Jordanian body politic—especially amongst the Islamists, whether the Brotherhood or the Salafis, but well represented in other circles too—feel that this is not Jordan's war. There is said to be a “dangerous lack of trust between the state and the street” that had been exacerbated by the war against ISIS.¹⁵

While many in Jordan fully understand the need to combat ISIS, for at least as many other Jordanians, this is America's war, which is being directed against their own Sunni coreligionists. In their minds, ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and their like are not terrorists, but men fighting for a just cause against their Shi'ite-historical rivals. Jordan, they complain, will do whatever it takes to obtain essential aid from the United States. The country is “fully subservient to Washington,” they charge, as if it did “not have any independent political will.”¹⁶

The Other Side of the Coin

Domestic economic and political troubles notwithstanding, Jordan has developed a more solid stateness and cohesive identity than all of its neighbors in the Fertile Crescent, whether it be Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, or Palestine. Following the February 3, 2015, release of the video showing the brutal execution of a Jordanian pilot (he was believed to have been executed a month before), the popular mood in Jordan regarding the war against ISIS changed dramatically. Trapped in a cage by his captors, Lt. Muadh al-Kasasba, who had been taken prisoner by ISIS after his plane was downed over Syria on December 24, 2014, was burnt alive. The entire Jordanian public, both original Jordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin, rallied behind the monarchy in their revulsion at the barbarity of the execution, in their demand for revenge, and in unwavering support for prosecution of the war against ISIS.

This extraordinary demonstration of national solidarity, and the mass rallying around the flag and the monarchy, revealed an important facet of Jordanian domestic strength, cohesion, and communal identity, often overshadowed by more divisive elements within the Jordanian collective. Jordanians and Palestinians in Jordan have had an often tense and competitive relationship, and tribal rivalries and conflicts amongst East Bankers are a regular phenomenon. But at the same time, for decades since the 1970s, Jordanians of Palestinian origin have sought greater integration within and participation in the Jordanian state, often more than original Jordanians were actually willing to accept. And as for those original Jordanians, for generations the tribes have been the standard-bearers of Jordanianism, which was founded on the historical alliance between the Bedouin tribes and the Hashemite monarchy. Cracks in the edifice of tribal loyalty notwithstanding, Jordan was their patrimony, and in many ways tribalism had morphed into Jordanianism, coupled with a deeply felt identification with the Jordanian kingdom. Lt. Kasasba was from the prominent Bararisha tribe in the densely tribal southern region of Karak. Irrespective of their specific tribal affiliations, tribesmen throughout the country were united in their fury and in their demand for revenge for the gruesome execution of one of their own, both a tribesman and a Jordanian.

Contrary to the views of countless pundits who for decades have predicted otherwise, Jordan has actually proved more stable than its Arab neighbors. In some ways the country did seem more artificial than its neighbors when it was created as Trans-Jordan in 1921. The small, barely populated desert principality had no urban centers

remotely comparable to the great historical capitals of Damascus in Syria, Baghdad in Iraq, or Beirut in Lebanon. Trans-Jordan seemed to have been created out of nothing, and only to serve British imperial interests.

Jordan was indeed not a typical nation-state; rather, Jordanians had come to constitute a 'state-nation,' which had come into being not prior to the formation of the state but rather as its by-product. Jordanianism was cultivated top-down by the Hashemite monarchy, but it was equally a bottom-up creation emerging from the genuine East Banker tribal identification with the Jordanian state. Compare the artificial imposition of a "Babylonian" Iraqiness by the Saddam Hussein regime, or the similar effort by the Assads to create a genuine sense of shared Syrianness, in their deeply divided sectarian societies. In contrast, Jordan is an almost entirely homogeneous society of Sunni Muslim Arabs, with only a tiny Christian Arab (mostly Greek Orthodox) minority.

Much is said about tensions between Jordanians and Palestinians, and rightly so. Both Jordanianism and Palestinianism are real, and they do compete. But not enough attention is paid to the fact that almost all Jordanians and Palestinians are Sunnis. Their common, centuries-old sectarian identity is probably more important in this day and age of religious revivalism and conflict than their newly acquired nationalist identities, which are very recent creations of the second half of the twentieth century. What Jordanians and Sunnis elsewhere found particularly abhorrent in the young pilot's barbaric execution was that he was not a Western foreigner but one of theirs: not only a Jordanian and a tribesman, but a Sunni Muslim Arab, brutally executed by other Sunni Muslim Arabs, ostensibly in the name of their shared religion.

Jordan vs. ISIS?

The outburst of Jordanian patriotism and support for the fight against ISIS was unquestionably genuine. But against the background of Jordan's structural economic problems and lingering sectarian questions about the proper response to ISIS, it was also doubtful whether this very genuine expression of patriotic sentiment would permanently override the acute religious-ideological, political, and economic issues that preoccupied Jordanian society. Hardly a week had gone by after the release of the video of Kasasba's execution before the debate on the pros and cons of the war against ISIS was on again.

Jordan's combative response to the pilot's execution gave rise to speculation about Jordan's possible engagement in the ground war against ISIS.¹⁷ But it soon became clear

that, as determined as the Jordanians were to defend themselves against ISIS, they were quick to make the point that this did not include their own participation in any ground war in Iraq or Syria. A ground war was essential, they said, but that was for the Syrian and Iraqi armies to wage themselves.¹⁸ As King Abdullah put it in an interview on CNN: “[I]t has to be the Syrians dealing with their issues and the Iraqis dealing with theirs. That doesn’t mean that they can’t be aided by air, possibly special forces type of operations in the future. But those are things that are being looked at.”¹⁹

Jordan’s impressive show of national solidarity was indicative of Jordanian determination to stand up and fight to defend their country against ISIS—and all comers, if need be. But that did not include sending their soldiers far and wide across the country’s borders to fight ISIS on behalf of others: certainly not for the Shiites of Iraq or for the Iranians, but not for allies like the United States, either.

Jordan and Israel

As Jordan grappled with the fallout from regional chaos in general, and with the ISIS threat on its borders in particular, Jordan’s relations with Israel were the only reliable component in the kingdom’s regional strategic environment. As the region fell apart around them, Jordan and Israel were equally dependent on the well-being and stability of the other. For Israel, a stable Jordan was an essential buffer to the east. For Jordan, Israel was the strategic ally of last resort.

Jordan’s relationship with Israel has vacillated between strategic cooperation in matters related to defense and natural resources, on the one hand, and frustration in Jordan with Israeli policies on Palestine, on the other. Israel and Jordan have engaged in close security and intelligence cooperation in countering jihadist groups in Syria, extending to Israel’s deploying drones on the Jordanian-Syrian border to provide intelligence to the Jordanians. Generally speaking, the ISIS threat has moved Jordan and Israel closer together on security matters—and Israel has made it clear that it would not hesitate to act if ISIS entered Jordan.²⁰

In February 2014, a private U.S.-Israeli consortium signed an agreement to sell at least \$500 million worth of gas to two Jordanian companies from the Israeli Tamar gas field. This was followed in September by a much more significant letter of intent signed between the partners of the Israeli Leviathan gas field and the Jordanian National Electric Power Company. The deal was for a \$15 billion supply of gas over fifteen years. This was potentially the

largest collaboration ever between the two countries and would make Israel Jordan’s chief gas supplier. The Jordanians had turned to Israel after their gas supplies from Egypt had been disrupted by the chronic instability in the Sinai peninsula.

The agreement still required the formal approval of the two governments, however, and fierce domestic opposition to the deal in Jordan was an obstacle. Still, “Jordan imports 95 percent of its energy needs, at a cost of about one-fifth of its GDP,”²¹ and cheaper sources of energy, like gas, are of crucial importance for Jordan’s struggling economy. Jordanian government officials have publicly defended the deal, and it is likely that the letter of intent will eventually be ratified, domestic opposition notwithstanding.²²

The domestic Jordanian opposition to the gas deal did not stop Jordan and Israel from signing a “historic” water cooperation agreement in February 2015. According to the deal, a 200-kilometer-long pipeline would divert 100 million cubic meters of water from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea. A desalination plant would be constructed just north of Aqaba, and the high-salt-content water left over from the desalination process would be streamed into the Dead Sea, thereby restoring the sea after decades of steady contraction.²³

Jordan’s relations with Israel have never been popular with the Jordanian street, and the huge Leviathan gas deal met with an angry local response. Critics argued that Jordan would become beholden to Israel in a deal that would be pumping billions of dollars into Israel’s coffers—and that that, in turn, would serve Israel’s suppression of the Palestinians.²⁴

As in the more distant past, calls to sever relations with Israel or to expel the Israeli ambassador issued from various sources in the Jordanian body politic, from parliamentarians to political activists of different political stripes, Islamist and otherwise. This was especially so during Israel’s military campaign in Gaza in the summer of 2014. King Abdullah held Israel entirely responsible for the fighting, and for the heavy civilian casualties in Gaza.²⁵ But no action was taken against Israel, even though thousands of protesters took to the streets of the capital Amman and some provincial towns during the campaign, demanding that the government “end all relations with the Zionist enemy.”²⁶

In October-November, tensions peaked in Jerusalem, including serious clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police, as some right-wing Israelis, including a few parliamentarians, campaigned to alter the status quo on the Temple Mount (*al-Haram al-Sharif*, the Noble

Sanctuary). The arrangement that had been in place since 1967 did not allow Jews to pray on the Mount in consideration of Muslim sensibilities, and was designed to keep the peace in the city.

The Jordanian reaction was more strident than in response to the Gaza war. *Al-Haram al-Sharif* was clearly a more sensitive red line for the Jordanian monarchy, the official custodian of Muslim holy places in Jerusalem, than an Israeli assault on Hamas. It was the Temple Mount controversy that provoked Jordan's decision to withdraw its ambassador from Israel in November 2014. After matters cooled down in Jerusalem, the ambassador was returned to his post in February 2015.

It would be mistaken to conclude, however, that official expressions of Jordanian disappointment and displeasure with Israel on the Palestinian issue were driven only by the popular mood and constituted no more than lip service paid to the street. They were a reflection of very real Jordanian anxieties and nightmare scenarios that stemmed from the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. The continuation of Israel's occupation has potentially existential ramifications for the Hashemite Kingdom.

If Israel and the Palestinians do not solve their dispute, the Jordanians fear, it will be only a matter of time before the situation explodes in large-scale violence that would culminate in the further inundation of the kingdom with Palestinian refugees. Such "demographic aggression" would upset the delicate balance between original Jordanians and Palestinians and create unbearable political and socioeconomic havoc in the kingdom. As ISIS looms to the East and Palestine festers to the West, Israel remains both an irreplaceable strategic asset and a real existential threat for the Hashemite Kingdom.

Conclusion

Jordan has domestic political and economic troubles that are interrelated, and that contribute to the attraction of Salafism and jihadism to the younger generation. Many in the ranks of unemployed young men see few prospects ahead of them in terms of the empowerment, prestige, and prosperity that they seek for themselves and for their families and communities.

Nevertheless, Jordan has coped fairly well, thus far, with the fallout of the "Arab Spring" and the ISIS threat, thanks to its relatively well-developed stateness and domestic cohesion, the resilience of its elite, and the goodwill and strategic interests of its allies.

It is difficult to imagine practical solutions in the foreseeable future for all of Jordan's problems, whether in regard to ISIS and the Salafi challenge, the economy, or the Palestine question. In all likelihood, Jordanians will continue to muddle through, as they have been doing for decades. But that will require increasingly precarious balancing acts and ever more generous assistance from Jordan's friends in the U.S. and elsewhere. Such assistance, however, might not suffice. And it might not be available indefinitely, either.

Endnotes

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- 8 Sultan Barakat and Andrew Leber, *Fortress Jordan: Putting the Money to Work* (Brookings Doha Center, Policy Briefing, February 2015), p. 4.*
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