



Jordan's King Abdallah in Washington: ISIL and Jerusalem

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In what was described as a working visit, Jordan's King Abdullah II arrived on January 30, 2017, and became the first Arab leader to come to Washington since the inauguration of President Donald Trump. Two crucial regional issues he raised could potentially impact Jordan's domestic stability: the flow of extremists across his country's border and the repercussions of moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Working visits are primarily functional and non-ceremonial. After two stops in London and Moscow, the Jordanian monarch came to the United States to understand what impact Trump might have on US foreign policy in the Middle East as well as on US assistance to Jordan. He met with Vice President Mike Pence, Defense Secretary James Mattis, and Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly in addition to several lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Trump's own encounter with Abdullah might be limited to attending the National Prayer Breakfast together on February 2nd.

Infiltration of Extremists on Jordan's Border

As pressure further increases in Iraq and Syria on the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Jordan fears those extremists will begin to cross into the country at an increasing pace. Since 2016, Jordanian nationals who joined the ranks of ISIL have been returning home, a trend that raised alarm bells among Jordanian security forces who are already facing the challenge of criminal smuggling activities.

The rise of ISIL and the influx of Syrian refugees re-emphasized the trend of gradually turning Jordan's military focus away from conventional weaponry toward counterinsurgency. The border challenges are daunting: Syria on the northern border with land boundaries of 233 miles (375 kilometers) and Iraq to the northeast with 112 miles (181 kilometers). Border governorates like Mafraq and Irbid are becoming potential hideouts for extremists.

After the Jordanian pilot Mu'ath Al-Kasasbeh was captured and infamously killed by ISIL, King Abdullah visited Washington in February 2015 to urge expediting the delivery of US military equipment and ammunitions to his country. After delivering UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters to strengthen rapid response in border security, the United States still has pending requests from Amman for drones to detect ISIL targets across the border.

The United States and Jordan signed a non-binding Memorandum of Understanding in February 2015 which increased overall annual US assistance to Jordan—from \$600 million to \$1 billion. In fact, the total assistance reached \$1.6 billion in 2016. Jordan also receives US funding associated with providing logistics and security assistance for the coalition partners’ operations against ISIL. With the focus of the Trump Administration on ISIL, the US assistance program is expected to continue at a time when supporting Jordan has become a high priority on Capitol Hill, notably with the “Congressional Friends of Jordan Caucus” of US lawmakers. Jordanian officials were [relieved](#) that the Trump Administration is focused on combating terrorism and security, in contrast to President Barack Obama’s approach of linking assistance to political reforms.

Addressing Terrorism at Home

Jordan’s approach to dealing with extremists at home has been a delicate issue in the past few years. A few months after the emergence of ISIL in the summer of 2014, the Jordanian government engaged “old guard” Salafist leaders known to be sympathetic to al-Qaeda but who had become critical of ISIL. The prominent clerics Abu Qatada and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi were released by Jordanian authorities to help win the public opinion war against a new generation of Jordanian extremists drawn to the narrative of ISIL.

For a while, Jordan managed to stay away from ISIL’s radar. However, ISIL-inspired Jordanian nationals recently began to shift tactics by staying home instead of traveling to Syria. Indeed, an 11-hour confrontation occurred in March 2016 in Irbid, close to the Syrian border, with security forces [targeting](#) an ISIL “sleeper cell” with links to drug trafficking. Last June, seven Jordanian border guards died in a suicide attack at the Rukban crossing point on the border with Syria. And most recently, in December 2016, seven security officers and three civilians were [killed](#) in the city of Karak, after gunmen fired shots at police officers before forcing an hours-long siege in an ancient touristic castle.

The ongoing intelligence and military confrontation between security forces and extremists is a result of this changing trend, as ISIL attempts to establish a presence inside Jordan. Brigadier General Sami Kafawin, commander of Jordan’s border forces, [expressed](#) concerns in January 2017 that ISIL extremists crossing into Jordan might become a tangible threat with “possible car bombs and suicide attacks.” He noted that half of Jordan’s military personnel and resources are currently dedicated to securing the border.

Beyond security cooperation, other concerns also top the agenda of the bilateral relations. The regional security spillover has meant a shutdown of trade routes with Iraq and Syria, which is slowing down Jordan’s economic activity. The national economy is plagued by scarce energy and water resources and a high public debt. From a US homeland security perspective, the Trump Administration is concerned about the visa process for Syrian refugees in Jordan. In a subtle criticism of the Trump Administration’s executive order on banning immigration and visits to the US from seven Muslim-majority countries, King Abdullah [noted](#) during his visit that “Muslims

are number one victims” of terrorists “who pose a global problem and do not represent any faith or nationality and target all of us who do not subscribe to their ideology of hate.”

Jerusalem as a Jordanian Domestic Issue

Moving the US embassy to Jerusalem risks destabilizing Jordan’s delicate demographic balance. Since Amman disengaged from the West Bank in 1988, it has retained Jordanian sponsorship of the Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem. Amman’s long-standing policy has been to support a two-state solution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a matter of national security. King Abdullah has long warned that his country cannot be “an alternative homeland to the Palestinians.”

With the flow of Syrian refugees across the border putting strains on the ailing economy, the Jordanian leadership is more comfortable to keep focus on the Syrian challenge. For instance, the latest [national census](#) released by Jordanian authorities in January 2016 noted that Jordanians make up 6.6 million of the total population of 9.5 million. Of the non-Jordanian population, 636,720 are Palestinians (6.7 percent) and 1.265 million are Syrians (13.3 percent). Other available data show that the actual number of Palestinians residing in Jordan is significantly higher; however, disclosing those statistics could potentially undermine the country’s national identity. The census of the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics [estimated](#) in 2016 that Palestinian refugees in Jordan number about 2.2 million, based on data by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Jordanian diplomacy has been on alert since last month about this potential move by the Trump Administration. King Abdullah met on January 22 with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to coordinate a policy reaction. The Jordanian government [warned](#) on January 5, 2017 that moving the US embassy to Jerusalem is a “red line” and a “gift to extremists.” The king himself reiterated this message and [told](#) US lawmakers that moving the US embassy “will impact regional stability.” While the White House’s [readout](#) of the meeting between Abdullah and Pence noted that the two discussed “the King’s views on potential changes involving the US embassy in Israel,” the statement had no reference to Jerusalem or to what measures the White House might take in that regard.

Moving the US embassy might test the Jordanian government’s rapprochement with the Salafists, which is now a safety net for the security forces’ fight against ISIL. For Jordan, a US move of the embassy will not only shift resources from securing the border and fighting ISIL to dealing with growing protests, but it will also turn public anger against ISIL to the US administration, and potentially the Jordanian government.

What’s Next for the US Administration and Jordan?

The relationship between the two countries spans nearly seven decades and one should not expect significant changes on the bilateral level. However, the timing of King Abdullah's low-key visit cannot be more important for Jordan's ability to weather regional storms at home.

The greatest concern for Jordan is Trump's evolving Middle East policy, especially if refugees from Iraq and Syria mass at the border because of growing violence, or massive protests begin in Jordan demanding a retaliation to moving the US embassy to Jerusalem. An aggressive US deterrence of Iran's regional activities will obviously have an impact on Iraq and Syria, hence it will have deep repercussions on Jordan's security.

The kingdom has proven its ability to have its own policy when survival is at risk; releasing al-Qaeda-inspired leaders despite western objection and cultivating close relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin are just two examples. Jordan has also maintained a neutral foreign policy on Iraq and Syria while maximizing the circle of friends that have influence in the Middle East. King Abdullah [said](#) from Moscow on January 25 that "without Russia, we will not be able to find solutions to not only the Syrian problem but other regional problems in the Middle East." If Trump and Putin agree on the way forward in the Middle East, Jordan will manage to maintain its neutral stance in the Syrian war; otherwise, it will remain focused on securing the border.

For now, the Jordanian focus is on how the Trump Administration will continue the fight against ISIL. Pressure on extremists in Mosul and Raqqa, as expected in the coming months, will require simultaneous assistance to Jordan to secure its border from potential infiltration. Furthermore, Jordan's \$12.6 billion 2017 budget shows the vulnerability of its economy. The kingdom estimated that it needs an additional \$8 billion until 2018 to deal with the impact of the Syrian war. If US policy goes wrong in the Middle East, Jordan can potentially pay the heavier price.