

# Jordan and the War in Gaza

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# SPECIAL REPORT

## Jordan and the War in Gaza

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### Abstract

The war in Gaza poses difficult challenges to the Hashemite Kingdom, and this happens after a year in which Jordan faced internal crises and external threats (an intra-family crisis and severe economic and social pressures). King Abdullah II knows that his policy regarding the war in Gaza will have an impact on the internal situation in Jordan and the stability of his regime.

The Hashemite Kingdom fears a spillover of the violence and radicalization from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank into the Jordan-cause Palestinian unrest in the Kingdom.

Jordan is largely taking a wait-and-see approach, given that success in any intervention into the situation seems very remote. This is due in part to the Jordanian government's tense relations with Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and their sponsor – Iran.

In conclusion, the existence of the Hashemite Kingdom is a strategic interest of Israel, the US, and moderate Arab countries. The Israeli government should nurture strategic relations with Jordan. This requires a dialogue between the countries and much closer attention to the needs of the Kingdom.

Keywords: Hamas; Palestinian Islamic Jihad; Swords of Iron; Jordan

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Hamas launched an unprecedented attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, under the name "Al-Aqsa Flood". Hamas fired a rocket barrage of at least 3,000 rockets into Israel and Hamas forces crossed the border with Israel. Upon arrival, they murdered hundreds of Israeli civilians and soldiers. Around 1400 Israelis were killed and at least 150 were taken hostage. Following the violent attack by Hamas, Israel launched operation "Iron Swords" and declared a state of war. Israel told civilians to evacuate the north of the Gaza Strip as it may launch a ground offensive in a bid to eradicate Hamas and free hostages.<sup>1</sup>

The war in Gaza poses difficult challenges to the Hashemite Kingdom and this happens

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<sup>1</sup> How the Israel-Hamas war will test Egypt's balancing, the new Arab, October 11, 2023. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-hamas-caught-israel-surprise-and-risked-its-future>

after a year in which Jordan faced internal crises and external threats (an intra-family crisis and severe economic and social pressures). King Abdullah II knows that his policy regarding the war in Gaza will have an impact on the internal situation in Jordan and the stability of his regime.

### **Jordan and the Peace Treaty with Israel**

The peace treaty between Jordan and Israel is a strategic asset for both countries but almost 30 years later there is, alas, a souring sense of bitterness and disappointment. The great potential strategic relationship has been realized only in small part. Beyond some (significant) economic aspects, little was left of the great potential except for some intelligence and security cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Relations with Israel have never been popular with the Jordanian public, and the King has always strived to give them a low profile.

Jordan suffers from a number of fundamental problems:

### **Demographic and Economic Problems**

Jordan has absorbed about one and a half million refugees from Syria and Iraq, a heavy burden both on the economy and a potential threat to internal security. With an already large population of Palestinian refugees, Jordan must cope with water and energy shortages, poor infrastructure and a faltering economy. COVID exacerbated this situation. The damage to tourism, one of Jordan's main economic revenues, compounded the Kingdom's economic problems.

### **The Water Crisis**

The chronic lack of water in Jordan is still an acute and strategic crisis. Jordan is heavily dependent on Israel for water: the previous Israeli government agreed to double the supply of water provided to Jordan each year. In November 2021 a letter of intent for a three-way deal was signed between Israel, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates; the three sides a year later signed a memorandum of understanding on the project, called the "Green and Blue Prosperity Agreement." The project is to include Jordan's building 600 megawatts of solar power capacity in remote desert areas, which would be exported to Israel. In return, Israel would provide Jordan with 200 million cubic meters of desalinated water, which would double the amount it receives today. The Emirati Masdar sovereign wealth fund will provide financing.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Ruth Yaron, The Israel-Jordan Relationship: Jordan's Strategic Anxiety Requires More Israeli Attention, the Jerusalem strategic tribune October 2023. <https://jstribune.com/yaron-the-israel-jordan-relationship/>

3 Joshua Krasna, Jordan: Another Peak in a Multi-Year Crisis, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 28, 2023. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/jordan-another-peak-in-a-multi-year-cycle-of-domestic-and-external-challenges/>

## Energy

Jordan became linked to Israel in a more strategic, long-term way via a growing energy relationship. The two countries signed a fifteen-year deal for the supply of Israeli gas signed in 2016; the gas began to flow in January 2020, and Israel is now the most important source of energy for Jordan. Israeli gas is much cheaper today for Jordan than imported liquefied natural gas, and shortages and high prices for fuel in the winter have been a cause for domestic turbulence in the past.<sup>4</sup>

## Status of Al Aksa

The peace treaty formally anchored Jordan's special role in the Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem and enshrined Hashemite authority over the Waqf [Islamic foundation] on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount. This point is particularly important for Jordan – a strategic foothold giving Jordan a say in any future agreements regarding Jerusalem. Following the Abraham Accords, the Jordanian feared that Israel would “trade” Jordan's special status on the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount and potentially give it to Saudi Arabia, in exchange for an Israeli-Saudi rapprochement.<sup>5</sup>

On January 24, 2023, Prime Minister Netanyahu made a surprise visit to Jordan. During Netanyahu's visit, he promised that there would be no change in Israeli policy regarding the Haram al -Sharif, and that the status quo would be strictly maintained. As reported, the Netanyahu visit included discussions of economic issues.<sup>6</sup>

## Palestinians

The future of the Palestinians is certainly one of the most contentious issues for the Hashemite kingdom. It is an internal issue, with Palestinians constituting a significant portion of the citizenry of Jordan, with direct bearing on the national identity of the state and potentially threatening to the Hashemite's survival.

The two-state paradigm as a possible solution to the Palestinian issue, with security and demilitarization arrangements which take into account the needs of Jordan and Israel, used to be seen as a reassuring answer to the Jordanians' concerns.<sup>7</sup>

Prime Minister Netanyahu's ongoing policy, for over a decade, to set aside the “two states

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4 Joshua Krasna, Jordan: Another Peak in a Multi-Year Crisis, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 28, 2023. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/jordan-another-peak-in-a-multi-year-cycle-of-domestic-and-external-challenges/>

5 Ruth Yaron, The Israel-Jordan Relationship: Jordan's Strategic Anxiety Requires More Israeli Attention, the Jerusalem strategic tribune October 2023. <https://jstribune.com/yaron-the-israel-jordan-relationship/>

6 Joshua Krasna, Jordan: Another Peak in a Multi-Year Crisis, Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 28, 2023. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/jordan-another-peak-in-a-multi-year-cycle-of-domestic-and-external-challenges/>

7 Ibid.

solution” paradigm has fed Jordanian suspicions. If Palestinian national aspirations are to be totally disregarded, Jordan’s internal security and order are likely to be threatened – particularly when some Israelis revive the “Jordan is Palestine” paradigm.<sup>8</sup>

With a significant percentage of Jordan’s population made up of Palestinians, Jordan’s peace treaty with Israel is widely unpopular among many citizens who see normalization as a sellout of the rights of their Palestinian brethren.<sup>9</sup>

King Abdullah II has, since the start of the latest conflict, been engaged in a flurry of diplomatic efforts with Western and regional leaders urging swift action to de-escalate the situation. Jordan’s King Abdullah warned against trying to push Palestinian refugees into Egypt or Jordan, adding that the humanitarian situation must be dealt with inside Gaza and the West Bank.

“That is a red line because I think that is the plan by certain of the usual suspects to try and create de facto issues on the ground. No refugees in Jordan, no refugees in Egypt.” He also warned of a dire situation in the Middle East if the conflict between Israel and Hamas is allowed to spread to other countries. “The whole region is on the brink of falling into the abyss. All our efforts are needed to make sure we don’t get there,” he said.<sup>10</sup>

### **The “Gaza hospital” Crisis**

On October 17, 2023, the Hamas-run health ministry claimed that explosion and resultant fire caused the death 500 people in Al-Ahli Arab Baptist Hospital in northern Gaza. Hamas blamed the explosion on an Israeli airstrike.<sup>11</sup>

Shortly after the unverified report that Israel attacked a Gaza hospital, Jordan the PA and other Arab countries hurried to blame Israel for the bombing and Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said that the four-way summit between US president Joe Biden and the leaders of Jordan, Egypt and Palestine had been canceled.<sup>12</sup>

Dozens of protesters attempted to storm the Israeli embassy compound in Amman after the explosion a hospital in the Gaza Strip. The angry protesters got through a security forces barrier and advanced toward the embassy, but security forces fired tear gas to

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8 Ibid.

9 Reuters, October 17, 2023. <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-768757>

10 Jordan’s King Abdullah warns pushing Gaza refugees to Egypt or Jordan is ‘red line’, Arab news, October 17, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/17/Jordan-s-King-Abdullah-warns-pushing-Gaza-refugees-to-Egypt-or-Jordan-is-red-line->

11 Israel-Hamas war latest: Cause of Gaza hospital ‘attack’ disputed as Biden appears to back Netanyahu, The independent, October 18, 2023. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-palestine-gaza-hospital-attack-hamas-b2431540.html>

12 Jordan cancels Biden’s trip to Amman after Gaza hospital attack: FM, Al Arabiya, October 18, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/18/No-changes-yet-for-Biden-s-Israel-visit-despite-Gaza-hospital-attack>

disperse them.<sup>13</sup>

The White House said Biden consulted with King Abdullah II of Jordan and decided to postpone his trip “in light of the days of mourning announced by President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority.” Biden sent his deepest condolences for the innocent lives lost in the “hospital explosion” in Gaza, and wished a speedy recovery to the wounded.<sup>14</sup>

Israel said the fire was caused by a failed rocket launched from within the Gaza Strip by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Israel military produces images it says shows hospital blast caused by failed rocket launch and not airstrike. The Israel Defense Forces produced a 30-second video it says shows the deadly hospital blast in Gaza City could not have been the result of an Israeli airstrike.

Speaking with Israeli Prime Minister in Tel Aviv on October 18, 2023, President Biden said he was “deeply outraged” by the incident but that “it appears as though it was done by the other team, not [Israel].”<sup>15</sup>

Jordan does not have good relations with Hamas but public sentiment in Jordan strongly favors the Hamas operation against Israel.<sup>16</sup> The anger against Israel fueled a large rally on October 16, 2023, in downtown Amman, where several thousand protesters chanted slogans in support of Hamas and demanded the government close the Israeli embassy in Amman and scrap the peace treaty.<sup>17</sup>

Jordanian security forces were worried about the repeated calls to join the resistance in Palestine. In response to the calls, security forces erected checkpoints on the way from Amman to the Jordan Valley and attempted to stop many who were heading towards Karameh to gather in front of the Monument of the Unknown Soldier in an expression of support for the resistance in Gaza.

## **Summary**

This is not the first time, and will not be the last time, that Jordan faces domestic pressures and external challenges but the regime has shown remarkable resilience over the past decades.

The Hashemite Kingdom fears of a spillover of the violence and a radicalization from

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13 Protesters attempt to storm Israeli embassy in Amman, Al Arabiya, October 17, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/17/Protesters-storm-Israeli-embassy-in-Amman>

14 Jordan cancels Biden's trip to Amman after Gaza hospital attack: FM, Al Arabiya, October 18, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/18/No-changes-yet-for-Biden-s-Israel-visit-despite-Gaza-hospital-attack>

15 Israel-Hamas war latest: Cause of Gaza hospital 'attack' disputed as Biden appears to back Netanyahu, The independent, October 18, 2023. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/israel-palestine-gaza-hospital-attack-hamas-b2431540.html>

16 King Abdullah on Gaza: 'No refugees in Jordan, no refugees in Egypt' Reuters, October 17, 2023. <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-768757>

17 Reuters, October 17, 2023. <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/article-768757>

Gaza Strip and the West Bank into the Jordan-cause Palestinian unrest in the Kingdom.

Jordan is largely taking a wait-and-see approach, given that success in any intervention into the situation seems very remote. This is due in part to the Jordanian government tense relations with Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and their sponsor – Iran.

In conclusion, the existence of Hashemite kingdom is a strategic interest of Israel, the US and Arab moderate countries. The Israeli government should nurture the strategic relations with Jordan. This requires a dialogue between the countries and much closer attention to the needs of the Kingdom.