

Jordan in crucible of Middle East peace deal and Syrian refugee crisis



Getty Images

Al-Buwayda is a quiet, dusty town on the road from Irbid in northern Jordan to Mafraq. It was here that the wave of Syrian refugees who fled fighting crested in 2015. The population of the area doubled from 95,000 to 200,000. Today, many of the 1 million Syrians who came to Jordan are setting down roots and raising families. Amman now must face the challenge of integrating them while it awaits the U.S. peace plan expected to be rolled out in June, after Ramadan.

Washington must tread carefully in the next few months, and recognize that the aftermath of the Syrian conflict and war against ISIS are deeply linked, through Jordan, to a peace push in Jerusalem. If the Trump administration wants to bolster its allies, including Israel and Jordan, it should remember that Amman is key to stability and security.

Jordan is at the center of the three pivotal flashpoints in the Middle East. As host of Syrian refugees, it plays a crucial role in preventing instability in Syria and Iraq from spreading; it helped to broker a ceasefire in southern Syria that lasted until summer 2018. Jordan is a link for U.S. forces in Tanf, in southern Syria, and was supportive of U.S. and western efforts to support the Syrian rebels until Washington ended that support in July 2017.

In a March 29 speech, King Abdullah II underlined Jordan's "ongoing efforts for a lasting resolution of the region's core conflict, the Palestinian-Israeli crisis." Jordan supports a two-state solution, with a viable, independent, sovereign Palestinian state on the 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as its capital, according to the king. It also supports a secure Israel, "fully part of its own region, recognized by Arab and Muslims states around the world."

Jordan quietly has sounded the alarm since December 2016, prodding the United States against recognition of Jerusalem and tempering Oman's recent outreach to Israel with a push for a Palestinian state. It is a stark choice for the kingdom. King Abdullah I was assassinated in Jerusalem by a Palestinian in 1951, and King Hussein had to face down a Palestinian uprising in 1970. Any crises with the Palestinians could directly impact Amman.

Lastly, Jordan has been closely involved in the war against ISIS, and sees the fight against terror as essential to regional stability. A Royal Jordanian Air Force pilot was burned alive by ISIS in January 2015. Recently, 13 suspects went on trial in Jordan for involvement in a terror cell. In Irbid, near Al-Buwayda, Jordanian security forces have detained and sentenced to death suspected ISIS members. Though ISIS was defeated in the past year, concerns remain about its threat in the region.

In separate meetings, Jordan hosted Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister Khalid bin Mohammed Al Attiyah and Saudi Arabia's Minister of State for African Affairs Ahmed Abdul Aziz Kattan on April 17. Unique in the region, Jordan has warm relations with both sides of the Gulf crisis and recently hosted Arab leaders at Dead Sea conferences in January and in April.

Jordan requires support. It received commitments as part of the Jordan Compact in 2016 and London Initiative this March, but hosting 1 million Syrians, more than half of whom are under age 18, is a growing challenge. Washington is committed to providing \$1.27 billion annually in assistance, including \$350 million in foreign military financing to the kingdom.

The Trump administration's peace plan comes at a complex time, just as Jordan is trying to emerge from years of economic crises and to play a role in regional security. In discussions with Syrian refugees in Jordan, none of them said they were willing to return to Syria. Many families have raised children in the kingdom in the past eight years and consider themselves part of a new Syrian-Jordanian population. They fear Bashar al-Assad's forcible conscription even after Syria reopened the border with Jordan in October 2018, and won't risk their sons being detained.

Jordan wants to achieve stability by continuing to host the Syrians, but it will have difficulty doing that and facing a major Palestinian-Israeli crisis at the same time.

“Any future arrangements without [the king’s] approval will not be done well,” a Palestinian security officer told me in early April. Unlike Egypt, Jordan has little space to maneuver, he said. As custodian of Christian and Muslim holy sites, the king sees Jerusalem as a key issue — something made clear by posters throughout Jordan showing the king next to images of Al-Aqsa mosque and the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

The Trump administration has sought to call bluffs in the past about violence resulting from the U.S. recognition of Jerusalem and its withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal. It would do well to look closely at developments in Jordan, to see how the Syrian conflict and the end of the ISIS war make Amman central to what happens next in Jerusalem.

Seth J. Frantzman spent three years in Iraq and other countries in the region researching the war on terror and Islamic State. He is executive director of the Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis. A former assistant professor of American Studies at Al-Quds University, he covers the Middle East for The Jerusalem Post and is a writing fellow at the Middle East Forum. Follow him on Twitter @sfrantzman.

Source:

<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/440460-jordan-in-crucible-of-middle-east-peace-deal-and-syrian-refugee-crisis>

[Disclaimer]