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Jordan Edges Toward Syria

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INTRODUCTION

In August 2021, Jordan cracked open Syria's wall of political and economic isolation by reengaging with its regime at the highest levels. This was a turning point not only in terms of the Syrian conflict, but also with regard to relations between Syria and Jordan, which have seen repeated ups and downs since the modern countries' founding a century ago. The Syrian-Jordanian reconciliation has not turned into full normalization, but could constitute a step on the way to such an outcome. What is markedly different from earlier episodes of rapprochement, however, is that war-torn Syria's governing structures are greatly weakened, its economy has suffered immensely, foreign intervention in its affairs persists, and the country continues to face sanctions and internal conflict.

The reasons that motivated Jordan to reengage with Syria range from security and demographic considerations to potential economic gains. Noticeably, the Jordanian move came in the context of a relatively more flexible U.S. policy toward Syria and indications

that Washington was losing some of its appetite for engagement with the Middle East. Jordan's decision sparked a debate among Syria observers as to whether the country stood to benefit from opening up to a beleaguered regime that remains shunned by much of the world. That debate will continue for some time, as it is not clear how matters will develop. What is certain, however, and what top Jordanian officials have repeatedly made clear, is that the former status quo did not benefit Jordan.

One of the key drivers that pushed Jordan to reengage with Syria was the economy. For nearly a century following the formation of the two countries in the aftermath of the First World War, Syria was important for the economy of Jordan. A commonly used [analogy](#) to describe the relationship between the two was that "Syria is Jordan's lungs." While this had some truth to it in the 2000s, it is unclear whether it can revert to being the case. Syria is a country ravaged by war, bereft of a once-solid industrial sector, and no longer offers cheap and safe passage to the Mediterranean or even to Jordan itself. "Made in Syria," a label that was previously



associated throughout the region with low prices and relatively good quality fruits, vegetables, garments, and shoes, is nowadays more associated with the production and export of Captagon and other illegal drugs.

THE LEAST DISTASTEFUL OF OPTIONS

From Amman's perspective, Jordan had many compelling reasons to effect a careful, albeit partial, rapprochement with Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Chief among these reasons was the feeling that the country had nothing to gain by remaining part of Western-led efforts to isolate its northern neighbor. While there are no illusions among the Jordanians that repairing relations with Syria will solve all of their country's myriad issues, a conviction has taken hold among many in the political establishment that engagement will have a largely positive outcome, not least in the economic sphere.

Jordan joined the anti-Assad camp reluctantly, and not without trepidation regarding the consequences of such a move, as evidenced by the fact that Amman never went so far as to cut off relations with Damascus. In the summer of 2011, the [monarchy found itself](#) called upon to adopt a more resolute position vis-à-vis the Assad regime. This pressure came both from within the kingdom and from outside. In Jordan, a segment of the political opposition was pushing for a change in policy in response to the Syrian regime's violent clampdown on protesters. Externally, the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council, both of which had become very critical of Assad, were doing the same. In November of that year, Jordan's King Abdullah II [told](#) the BBC that, if Assad cared for his country, "he would step down." The king's statement may have pleased some of his allies and domestic critics, but it did not make his choices regarding Syria any easier.

In 2014, by which time Syria had descended into civil war, Jordan saw [several possible outcomes, all problematic to varying degrees](#). Two stood out as especially threatening: a hostile regime in Damascus that could harm Jordan; and an unstable post-Assad Syria ruled by Islamist forces, which had come to dominate the armed opposition the previous year. In this context, 2014 was, as one observer put it, a "game-changing year for Jordanian security policy."¹ Indeed, that year witnessed the rise of the so-called Islamic State in Syria. Confronting and corralling the group became one of Jordan's priorities, and pushed regime change far down the list. Thus, in 2014—if not earlier—the survival of the Syrian regime began to seem like one of the least bad options for Jordan.

Russia's intervention toward the end of 2015 soon made the regime's survival appear increasingly likely. Moscow put its military weight behind Assad, whose forces captured one opposition stronghold after another in 2016–2018, including rebel-held Daraa, which lies along Syria's border with Jordan and hosts the main crossing between the two countries. By 2018, the prospect of Assad remaining in power had become a near-certainty. Yet Amman found itself neighboring not only an embittered regime, but also the latter's allies—Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah—and had to grapple with all the challenges brought about by such a development.

Faced with this new reality, Jordan evinced a desire for better relations with its northern neighbor while at the same time taking care not to upset its key allies, particularly the United States, which remained staunchly anti-Assad. Perhaps the most significant sign by Jordan that it wanted to improve ties with Syria was [its opening of the Daraa border crossing](#) after the regime recaptured it from rebels in August 2018. Beginning late that year, Jordan's border areas witnessed a flurry of economic activity. Yet this did not last, for a number of reasons. Jordanian authorities became less tolerant

of petty trade, which included an informal aspect. Also, the United States, which had placed Syria under sanctions through the Caesar Act, pressured Amman to refrain from engaging economically with Damascus. Washington was adamant that its allies—especially those such as Jordan, to which it provided significant economic aid—adhere to the sanctions regime. Amman complied, yet saw a chance for maneuverability shortly thereafter, when Joe Biden was elected U.S. president.

In [remarks](#) made in March 2021, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken underlined that his country’s top foreign policy priority was China, and mentioned the Middle East only twice: once in the context of U.S. plans to revitalize ties with allies and partners in the region, and a second time to highlight the hard lessons learned from “prolonged U.S. military interventions abroad” and “the limits of force to build a durable peace.” Moreover, the new U.S. administration showed more flexibility when it came to the Syria file, [striking a deal](#) with Russia on the issue of humanitarian access to Syria, cutting back on sanctions due to their “[chilling effects](#)” on ordinary Syrians, and giving its [blessing](#) to a deal to transport Egyptian gas and Jordanian electricity to Lebanon via Syria. The United States remained committed to sanctions, though its relative disengagement from the Middle East and more flexible policies on Syria opened up new opportunities for the likes of Jordan.

Amman was quick to capitalize on these changes. In July 2021, when King Abdullah became the first Arab leader to visit Washington following Biden’s assumption of the presidency, Syria was high on his agenda. It is not fully clear what was agreed, but after the meeting, the media leaked details of what became known as a “[Syria non-paper](#)” that diagnosed the state of affairs in Syria, underlined previous failures, and suggested a path forward. Abdullah reportedly received support for the Syria non-paper from Russia during his [visit](#) to Moscow the following month. Subsequent developments suggest that the United States gave Abdullah the go-ahead to build closer ties with the Syrian regime.

Jordan’s policy shift was accompanied by a media blitz meant to explain the monarchy’s reasoning. Top officials argued that Assad was there to [stay](#) and that all approaches thus far to resolving the Syrian conflict had [failed](#). This made maintaining the status quo untenable, especially for Jordan and others in the region. Unlike those countries spearheading Assad’s isolation, all of which were at a remove from Syria (the United States, Germany, and France in the West, Qatar in the Arab world), Jordan was, as its foreign minister put it, “[in the range of fire](#).”

Jordan [framed its new policy](#) as an attempt to find new ways to solve the Syrian crisis based on UN Security Council resolutions, a U.S.-Russia agreement, and a bigger role in Syrian affairs for Arab countries. But in many ways, Jordan’s move was an attempt to tackle its top concerns through direct engagement with Syria, rather than continuing to pursue the wait-and-see approach that had clearly failed to serve Amman’s interests. These concerns included preventing drug smuggling, reviving economies ties, maintaining security and economic stability in southern Syria, actualizing a return (even if partial) of Syrian refugees in Jordan, and addressing the presence of Iranian and pro-Iranian forces in the Jordanian-Syrian border area.

On the ground, the new policy translated into [communication](#) between Assad and Abdullah, and between their [foreign ministers](#) and other senior officials, in meetings devoted to the discussion of issues such as [border security and drug smuggling](#), cooperation on [energy](#) and [water](#) supply, and the [facilitation of trade](#) through the Daraa border crossing. There were observers who doubted that such an approach would prove effective. Some [mocked](#) Jordan’s decision to [discuss](#) drug smuggling with Syria’s defense minister, given that the Syrian regime was widely accused of being [behind](#) the phenomenon. Another example is Jordan’s reopening of the border to improve trade. Critics suggested that after a decade of war, Syria had little [to offer](#) Jordan.



It is still early to provide a comprehensive assessment of whether reengaging with Syria has met Jordan's policy objectives on the security and political levels. But more than six months into Amman's about-face, there are some indications that it is bearing fruit on the economic level. This is significant because revitalizing its stagnant economy was high on Jordan's agenda. Moreover, progress on the economic front may well serve as a sign of things to come.

NOT QUITE AN ECONOMIC BONANZA, BUT PERHAPS A START

The most noticeable changes in the past six months have taken place in the economic domain, especially in trade and transit. Before the war, Syria was a crucial trading partner for Jordan, with petty trade that primarily benefited Jordan's border areas and both large-scale and transit trade (which is reliant on trucking) that leveraged Jordan's land link to the Gulf's lucrative markets. Qualitative and quantitative data suggest improvement on all three fronts in the past six months. Moreover, as the historical rhythm of Syria-Jordan relations suggests, closer economic ties open the door to political and security cooperation.

Ramtha, a Jordanian border city and traditional hub for Syrian goods imported both formally and informally, provides an instructive case study. In the pre-2011 period, Ramtha boasted the country's biggest bazaar for cheap and relatively high-quality Syrian goods, which made their way to all other Jordanian cities. Indeed, cross-border petty trade was the city's economic backbone: on the one hand it generated jobs, and on the other it kept the cost of basic foodstuffs and certain consumer goods low due to price differences between Jordan and Syria.

A decade of war in Syria changed all that. The near-collapse of Syria's economy, an extended period of closed borders, and disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic all led to a significant economic decline in

Ramtha, along with poverty and joblessness. Thanks to the reopening of the border with Syria toward the end of 2018, the city's economy witnessed a revival—but the boom was quickly cut short. The Jordanian government had become much tougher on informal trade in order to stem the flow of illegal drugs, weapons, and cigarettes from Syria. Additionally, the United States exerted pressure on Jordan to refrain from engaging in economic activity with Syria (in compliance with Washington's policy to isolate the country). Finally, there was the COVID-19 crisis.

However, in September 2021, the full reopening of the border once again revived the economy of Ramtha and other border areas. The border town of Jaber and the city of Mafraq on the Damascus-Amman highway also experienced an uptick in travelers and commercial trucks. A veteran Jordanian petty trader (*bahhar*) explained the change in simple terms: business was not as good as before 2011, but it was still better than when the border was closed or cross-border movement severely restricted.² His observations reflected the changes at the border. Before 2011, petty traders would frequent Syria every day, sometimes even twice, which enabled them to make profits much higher than the average in Jordan (before the uprising in Syria, ten to twelve trips per month could earn one income roughly equivalent to Jordan's minimum wage). Currently, the situation is very different. Drivers cross into Syria only once every few days, owing to tougher security checks, the obligation to comply with COVID-19 regulations, and decreased tolerance of informal trade by the Jordanian authorities. All of this has diminished their margin of profit, though the situation is still better than when the border was closed.³

On the level of transit trade, the difference is less marked, precisely because such trade, which resumed in September 2018 when the border first reopened between Jordan and Syria, was able to continue. Figures from the Jordanian government's Department of Statistics show that in the last three months of 2018, imports from Syria doubled in comparison to the

previous year. The figures declined in 2019 and 2020, owing to disagreements between Syria and Jordan as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, only to increase once again after the recent reopening. In October 2021, for instance, imports from Syria increased by 40 percent, exports by 20 percent, and reexports by 55 percent, [in comparison to the same month in 2020](#). The head of the Syndicate of Owners of Clearance and Cargo Transport Companies in Jordan [said](#) that in November, 100–120 trucks entered Syria per day, as opposed to 15–20 before the recent border opening. Consider, also, Syrian exports to Saudi Arabia—traditionally a prime destination for Syrian goods transiting through Jordan. According to Saudi official data, the value of Syrian exports to the kingdom increased from [346 million Saudi riyals](#), or \$92 million, in 2017 (their all-time low), to [1,200 million Saudi riyals](#), or \$320 million, in 2021.

The war altered some of the historical features of trade between Syria and Jordan. For example, the trade balance now tilts slightly in Jordan's favor. In the first decade of the century, when trade grew significantly, the balance was in Syria's favor, with 2006 being the exception. Between 2014 and 2021, that balance changed. During those years, the value of goods exported or reexported to Syria was about 587 million Jordanian dinars, while the value of imports constituted 464 million dinars.

Yet another trend that could become more dominant over the coming years is the connecting of international markets to Syria through Jordan. Although there is a lack of detailed statistics, the head of Jordan's Syndicate of Owners of Clearance and Cargo Transport Companies [suggests](#) that transit trade with Syria through Aqaba port and the Jaber/Nassib border crossing could increase by some 1,000 percent in the foreseeable future, owing to competitive fees. In other words, the changes in policy that Jordan has recently made toward Syria have enabled the former to position itself as a transit zone for Syrian importers.

Reengaging with Syria on the economic level also has an important political dimension, both in terms of bilateral relations and internal politics. Internally, a [poll](#) conducted by Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies in October suggests wide popular support for the kingdom's decision to reengage with Syria. About 78 percent of the 1,208 participants thought that the most severe damage done to Jordan as a result of the war in Syria was economic in nature. Jordan's two policies of opening up to Syria and reopening the Jaber/Nassib border crossing were supported by 80 and 84 percent of the participants, respectively. These figures, along with this writer's field observations and conversations in Amman, Irbid, and Ramtha, suggest that most Jordanians agree with their country's new approach to Syria and expect to reap economic benefits.

In the context of Syrian-Jordanian relations, which have fluctuated between hostility and alignment since the 1950s, an improvement on the economic front has generally facilitated closer political and security cooperation. For example, in the mid-1970s, following a period of intense hostility, Jordan and Syria took to mending their economic ties. Indeed, during King Hussein's visit to then president Hafez al-Assad in Damascus in 1975, the economy was high on the agenda. Yet it was apparent that Jordan had an additional incentive for the summit. The Jordanian side wanted the economic dimensions of the Jordanian-Syria alignment "developed beyond short-term gains to create more solid political relations through a foundation of increasingly irrevocable economic ties."⁴

The alignment was short-lived, however. It was followed by about two decades of renewed hostility. The demise of old rulers and the ascent to power of President Bashar al-Assad and King Abdullah created new opportunities. Once again, Syria and Jordan opened up to each other. In the first few years of warming relations, the agreements signed between the sides were mostly economic in nature.⁵ But over time, the cooperation

widened to include matters revolving around water, finance, security, the expulsion of Syrian Muslim Brotherhood members from Jordan, and opposition to U.S. pressure on Syria in the early 2000s.⁶

CONCLUSION

Syrian-Jordanian relations are not heading inexorably toward full alignment. Much still depends on the Syrian regime's behavior vis-à-vis Jordan, as well as regional and international policies toward Syria. Indeed, even if this is a new era in Syria-Jordan relations, it has only just begun, and its future trajectory is not predetermined. Yet by most indications, Jordan's economy has already benefited, albeit modestly, from closer ties with Syria. Moreover, Jordan is attempting to create a new economic model for itself. In this model, Jordan would no longer simply be a market for Syrian goods and a transit point for them on their way to Gulf markets, but an exporter to Syria as well as a link that connects Syria with international markets. Finally, while the solidification of Syrian-Jordanian economic ties is an achievement, it may also serve to midwife cooperation on other matters—water issues, border security, and ultimately regional politics.

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NOTES

- 1 Curtis R. Ryan, "Jordan: Between IS and the Syrian Civil War," *Orient* IV (2017): 40.
- 2 Author interview with Jordanian *babbar* on the Ramtha-Irbid road, Jordan, February 7, 2022.
- 3 Author interviews with multiple locals in the Ramtha area, Jordan, February 5–7, 2022.
- 4 Curtis R. Ryan, "The Odd Couple: Ending The Jordanian-Syrian Cold War," *Middle East Journal* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 42–43.
- 5 Ibid, 50.
- 6 Ibid, 53.

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