

What Does the War in Gaza Mean for Jordan's National Security?

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Brief Analysis

Amman worries that the war in Gaza will increase Hamas's domestic popularity and embolden the group's supporters—especially with Jordan's upcoming parliamentary elections in August 2024.

As the war between Israel and Hamas continues, focus is turned towards the Gaza Strip and Israel proper. Although the ongoing hostilities will eventually die down or cease altogether, the lasting impacts of the war on the broader region are still unknown. Nowhere is this truer than in neighboring Jordan. When Hamas launched its attack on October 7, it had an immediate impact on the Jordanian street and the country's national security. Despite the chaotic and passionate outpouring of emotion among the public, bilateral cooperation between Jordan and the United States can contribute to assisting the conflicting parties in ultimately achieving peace and security.

Conflict Exacerbates Jordan's Extant Challenges

Jordan was hit especially hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, with strict measures taken to stall the spread of the virus. The country's economy is still struggling to recover from this era, and these challenges compound with other economic, social, and security crises that have plagued Jordan for decades. On an economic level, Jordan faces an unemployment rate of 21.9% and a public debt of \$56 billion, reaching 115% of the GDP by May 2023, according to the Jordanian Department of Statistics. The porous borders with failed states like Syria and Iraq facilitate drug and weapon smuggling from Syria, orchestrated by terrorist groups directly linked to Iran and the Syrian regime. Adding to its challenges is the significant refugee population—2 million across ten camps. Just as Jordan was recovering from the COVID crisis, the war in Ukraine disrupted supply chains and increased prices of essential goods.

The most recent shock to Jordan's economy and society came on the morning of October 7, when Hamas militants launched a violent attack on Israel. This condensed snapshot of Jordan's extant challenges can help paint a larger

picture of what motivates Jordanian official and popular reactions in response to October 7. While Jordan is often lauded as a relatively calm outlier in a politically volatile region, the country is in fact grappling with a number of serious challenges that threaten its stability.

Official Reactions Align with Popular Response

At the time of writing, the political atmosphere in Jordan is extremely tense, charged with sadness, anger, a desire for revenge, and intense emotions in response to the war in Gaza, now well into its third month. Beyond geographical proximity, Jordan and Palestine are connected by demographic and cultural relationships, with a significant portion of Jordan's population having Palestinian roots. Moreover, political relations with Israel have deteriorated significantly under successive Netanyahu governments.

In a rare moment of agreement not seen in three decades, the official position of the state has largely been in line with popular sentiment in opposition to Israel's military operations. Since the beginning of the war, thousands of Jordanians have taken to the streets—especially after Friday prayers—in the capital Amman and across the country in marches supporting the Palestinians. These demonstrations have been organized by opposition parties to protest against the Israeli bombing campaign and ground incursion in Gaza.

Some young protesters initially went further, attempting to storm the Israeli embassy in Amman or urging the Jordanian authorities to open the borders so they could participate in the fighting in Palestine. In response, the security authorities arrested many young people in Amman and the Jordan Valley, releasing them soon after. Government elements feared security breakdowns after several incidents of burning tires, vandalism, property damage, and clashes with security forces in Amman, Irbid, and Al-Baqaa camp.

Although protestors have repeatedly come to blows with security forces, the state's official reaction to the war has echoed the anger felt by many in the Jordanian street. Aside from the breakdown of communication between Jordan and Israel, the King—in addition to the Foreign Minister—has issued repeated and public condemnations of Israel's conduct, intensifying in tone until his recent article in *The Washington Post* on November 14, 2023. The essence of these reactions focuses on one crucial point: that the two-state solution is the only way to achieve peace between Palestinians and Israelis, and that Jordan is very concerned about the issue of forced displacement of Palestinians into Jordan.

Popular sentiment, coupled with the state's vocal criticisms, has had tangible repercussions for the Jordan-Israel relationship. On November 17, the same day protestors called for a rejection of the 1994 peace treaty with Israel, the Jordanian Foreign Minister confirmed that talks on the energy-for-water agreement with Israel—mediated by the UAE—had stopped, despite its intended finalization before the 2023 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28). The Foreign Minister added that the current circumstances "will not allow any kind of interaction with the Israelis," so the peace agreement between the two countries will become a "document collecting dust." If the rift between Amman and Jerusalem widens further, the major plan supported by the United States to build the multimodal economic corridor between India, the Middle East, and Europe (IMEC)—which will pass through Jordan and aims to compete with the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative—may also be at risk.

This sense of great alignment and harmony between the official and popular stance currently felt on the streets of Jordan is unprecedented in modern Jordanian history, except perhaps for during the 1991 Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein's regime launched missiles into Israel. Although the state may reap short-term benefits from the widespread anti-Israel sentiments, the Gulf War should serve as a sobering reminder not to fully embrace the outpouring of emotion in the Jordanian street. In 1991, fervent support for Saddam Hussein's attacks against Israel

quickly changed to despair after Iraq's military defeat.

Jordanian Fears of Future Ramifications

The Jordanian government fears that the war in Gaza will ultimately increase Hamas's popularity in the region and embolden the group's supporters, especially those of Palestinian origin. There is also concern about Hamas leaders inciting Jordanian tribes to join the conflict against Israel. Additionally, the popularity of the Islamic Action Front and other Islamic parties, particularly with the upcoming parliamentary elections in August 2024, is a source of worry. If the war continues, and the elections proceed as scheduled, it is expected that Islamists will dominate and control the Parliament through the new election law and political reforms that have been strongly supported by King Abdullah II over the past year. Some voices now suggest that the state might consider postponing the elections if the war persists.

In addition, the results of surveys conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan in Amman in 2022 and 2023, on behalf of the current Jordanian government headed by Dr. Bisher Al-Khasawneh, were shocking and frightening in terms of the decline in citizens' trust in the government, political parties, parliament, economic conditions, living standards, and health services. For instance, less than half of Jordanians (46%) are satisfied with the level of healthcare services provided to them. Only 39% are satisfied with their current living standards, and the majority of Jordanians (60%) are not optimistic about the Jordanian economy in the next two years.

Of particular concern is the decline in the "social capital" represented by the lack of mutual trust among citizens. A survey in May 2023 confirmed the decline in social trust, indicating that the vast majority of Jordanians do not trust most people, with 78% believing that the majority of people cannot be trusted. It is noteworthy that distrust in their fellow Jordanians increased by nine points compared to the survey in October 2022. This fragmented sense of social solidarity is the backdrop from which official concerns must be understood.

There are now influential voices from opposition parties—particularly the Muslim Brotherhood—as well as some journalists, writers, and academics, openly calling for a reconsideration of the state's relationship with Hamas. They emphasize the importance of rapprochement to protect Jordan's national security against ongoing Israeli threats. Some argue that the government previously erred in distancing itself from Hamas after their expulsion from Amman in 1999. They believe that the deteriorating relations between Jordan and Hamas must change in the new reality shaped by the recent war, as Hamas has become a major player in the Palestinian cause.

Hamas itself has likewise tried to capitalize on the moment in Jordan. At the moment, they have a major upswing in support; according to TWI polling conducted in November and December, 85% of Jordanians expressed a "positive" view of Hamas, a major jump compared to the 44% who said the same when last polled in 2020. Khaled Meshaal, the head of Hamas, attempted to manipulate Jordanian tribes and incite them against the government, disregarding instructions from the authorities and jeopardizing stability. Meshaal issued a call on October 11, 2023 urging all Arabs and Muslims to mobilize for Palestine coinciding with the war in Gaza. Notably, he dedicated part of his speech to Jordanian tribes, saying, "O tribes of Jordan, O sons of Jordan, my brothers and sisters in Jordan, the land of mobilization and steadfastness, facing this conspiracy aimed at erasing it, and the people of Palestine, with their resilience, protect Jordan, rise to support the people of Palestine, as the borders are near you."

Hamas has likewise lambasted the United States' involvement in the conflict, accusing U.S. President Biden of giving Israel the green light to continue the war and target civilians in Gaza. These messages carry an implicit threat to both

United States and by extension Jordan, one of its key allies. Moreover, the statements coming from Hamas' political bureau make the United States and its interests in Jordan, especially the military bases in southern Jordan, potential targets for Hamas operations or the movement's sympathizers, be they Jordanian citizens, Hezbollah and the Revolutionary Guard in southern Syria, or the Houthis in Yemen.

If Hamas continues along this vein, it may prove a deadly combination with the continuation of weekly protests in the kingdom's provinces and daily incitement campaigns against Israel and the United States in the streets and in Jordanian media, including official outlets such as Jordanian television. For example, the former deputy from Balqa Governorate, Dr. Lawyer Mustafa Yaghi, made a shocking statement on Jordanian official television on Friday, November 17, 2023, in the program "Gaza in Confrontation" presented by the journalist Omar Kilab. He issued a fiery speech saying, "That he is an extremist, and with the return of fidayeen work in all its forms and forms, and striking all American and Israeli interests... and that it is necessary to hijack planes, explode embassies, and kill Israeli leaders...". He also claimed that there are extremist voices in the Jordanian government as a response to extremists in Israel.

Affirming Coordination between Jordan and the United States

Wars, conflicts, and crises are the best gauges to measure the depth and strength of relationships between allies. And despite all of the aforementioned concerns, the war in Gaza is an opportunity to test the strength of relations between the United States and Jordan.

Since 1951, the United States has become the largest single provider of bilateral aid to Jordan, providing over \$20 billion in aid over the past seven decades. Washington has classified Jordan as a major non-NATO ally, and the countries have signed a free trade agreement. Jordan is also a member of the global military coalition led by the United States against Al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their regional branches.

Certainly at the official level, Jordan feels relief and a sense of reassurance regarding national security, especially after activating the military agreement signed between the United States and Jordan in February 2021. This agreement provides important military facilities to U.S. forces in Jordan for 15 years, including 12 air and naval bases in Jordan, and four bases used for training and various purposes, jointly used by the U.S. and Jordanian armies. However, the signing of this agreement and the presence of these bases faced opposition in Jordan, and the country's close relationship with the United States has its drawbacks, risks, and security costs, as Jordan could become a new battleground as regional attacks on U.S. targets continues.

Given the tense climate and clear security risks facing Jordan, it is crucial that the United States provide its longtime ally with the necessary missile defense systems, such as the Patriot system recently requested by Jordan, in addition to anti-drone systems. Iranian militias in Syria have already made use of drones in smuggling drugs, explosives, or reconnaissance on Jordan's northern borders, and the threat of a wider regional conflict further highlights the need to combat this growing threat.

Now is the time for the United States to reassure Jordan by publicly or privately declaring guarantees to assist and ensure its stability now and for years to come. Additionally, working with Jordan to ensure its role in post-war arrangements is crucial, as there are concerns and suspicions that these arrangements will be exploited by wealthy Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar. These countries are capable of providing financial generosity for reconstruction and investment, with which Jordan unfortunately cannot compete. Jordan's location and cultural connection to the Palestinian cause make it an invaluable partner in determining Gaza's future, a voice that needs to be respected in the "day after." ❖

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