

## **Jordan Between Complexity and Resilience: Syrian Refugee Crisis and Beyond**

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Jordan is a western Asian state, and its location in the heart of the Middle East makes it more exposed to the repercussions of ongoing regional instability. It's an undeniable fact that over the last century the region has witnessed a series of international and civil wars, up to the Syrian civil war of today. As a result of these bloody conflicts in neighboring states, Jordan has a large refugee population, including Palestinian, Iraqi, Yemini and Syrian refugees. Since the Syrian conflict started roughly ten years ago, Jordan has received around 1.2 million Syrians, 84% of whom are living outside camps and congregating in northern and central regions of the kingdom. Still, Jordan has hosted the largest Syrian refugee camps in the world (UNHCR, 2019).

Due to the increased competition over very limited resources, infrastructure and the labor market, the sudden and massive influx of Syrian refugees has shaped a great population pressure, requiring government intervention to address their needs and find a formula balancing the refugee and fragile host communities. During the crisis, the Jordanian government implemented various policies to deal with these realities as well as the political outcome of the Syrian civil war and the chaotic conditions in Iraq and Syria, especially after the manifestation of ISIS in the region.

Politically speaking, at the peak of the crisis and the instigation of open border policies to facilitate access of Syrian refugees—and upon waiving of the visa requirement for Syrians fleeing their home in search of safety and security—the relationship between the Assad regime

and the Jordanian government witnessed great tension. This tension abated, however, with the Jordanian government's support of voluntary repatriation of Syrians and with welcoming of peace-building and the end of the conflict in Syria. The conflict in Syria and the spread of radicalism required the Jordanian government to militarize interstate disputes to deal with security challenges while providing humanitarian assistance to Syrians. Jordanians held multiple waves of demonstrations protesting price increases, lack of job opportunities, and shifting of social equity program funds that coincided with the reception of Syrian refugees—a phenomenon that made analysts predict possible spillover effects. The government has absorbed this stiffness with leniency, the formulation of long-term economic reforms, policy to prevent the penetration of radicals into Jordan and containment of local jihadists through co-optation mechanisms (Nesser and Graturd, 2019).

From an economic perspective, the composition of the Jordanian economy makes it more susceptible to political and humanitarian crises, such as the intricacies arising from the Syrian crisis. The massive influx of Syrian refugees has increased the demand on public services such as public education, healthcare and other social programs, which has required increases in public spending paired with mounting public debt in a state with scant resources. To illustrate, the ballooning public debt reached 94.4% of estimated GDP during the Syrian crisis. Moreover, Jordan's trade balance was negatively impacted by the closing of its Syrian border after a deadly bombing that killed Jordanian soldiers and a civil defense officer in June 2016 at the Alrkuban border (Sweis, 2016). The annual percentage change in exportation and importation with Syria demonstrated that both declined to a noticeable degree, and external trade with Europe and Turkey was broken due to the closure of the main trade routes, which increased transportation

costs and necessitated alternative trade routes until the government reopened the Nassib border in October 2018.

The steep influx of Syrian refugees applied a pressure on job opportunities in Jordan, a country that already had high unemployment; accordingly, an unemployment rate that was 12.2% in 2012 reached 19.2 % in 2019. Furthermore, the Jordanian government signed the Jordan Compact at the high-level London Conference in 2016, in an effort to better manage the Syrian crisis, to provide sufficient assistance to Syrian refugees and vulnerable host communities and to transform its economic fragility into an opportunity for economic growth, international investment and job creation (Barbelet et al., 2018). According to the Jordanian government, the compact was aimed at ensuring multi-year grants and long-term loans, pledging \$700 million in grants and \$1.9 billion in long-term loans. Regarding formal access to the labor market, Jordan was obligated to issue 200,000 work permits to Syrian refugees in specific sectors (Government of Jordan, 2016). It's worth mentioning that before the Jordan Compact, Syrian refugees were joining the Jordanian labor market as labor migrants with expensive fees for work permission or were working in informal sectors. The issuance of the Compact had to improve Syrian refugees' participation and working conditions in the labor market without negatively impacting Jordanians' opportunities through the creation of new job opportunities.

With regard to socioeconomic situations, Jordan agonizes over high poverty and social inequality: the country's Gini index was 40% in 2018, compared to 33.7 % in 2010, and high income taxes and ongoing price increases have of course exacerbated this. In addition to the continuing budget deficit and strict IMF program combined with conditional reforms to spur growth and development. Since 2017, the United States of America has cut back on assistance programs as well, including the Economic Aid Program to other nations.

Again, Jordan is limited in its natural resources, with 75% of its area being desert and not suitable for agriculture. Besides that weakness, Jordan is the second-poorest country in water resources, and so the increased water demand throughout the refugee crisis reduced the amount and frequency of its water supply. The population pressure resulting from the influx of Syrian refugees has increased the pressure on consumer energy, 97% of which is imported. As reported by the Jordanian Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, the population pressure increased electricity consumption, land degradation and dumping of medical wastes.

In fact, the complex repercussions of the Syrian crisis and the prolonged required response have demanded international support to bear this aggravated situation. The Jordanian government identified several partners in addressing refugees and host communities' needs, such as the United States, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and the European Union. It is worth highlighting that the role of the European Union's resilience-building efforts has been explained through European civil protection and humanitarian aid operations in Jordan. In essence, the European Union supported Jordan with around €2.7 billion for humanitarian, developmental, and financial assistance; the humanitarian aid reached €375 million including cash assistance, food, healthcare, sanitation, education, and psychosocial support. The European Union's humanitarian support covers Syrian refugees outside camps, as well as in the Zaatari camp, Azraq camp, Rukban border camp, and fragile host communities. The European Union initiated several programs to address women's and children's needs, special needs refugees, and education to ensure high-quality education and to encourage Syrian children to return to school. Moreover, the EU collaborated with the UNHCR to legalize the existence of Syrian refugees who were without their official papers and legalize their status as refugees and asylum seekers. In the same vein, the European Union is committed to London Conference 2016 obligations and the Brussels

conference to deal with the Syrian crisis. The London Conference 2016 outcomes aim to strengthen the cooperative relations between the EU and Jordan and to improve the livelihoods of vulnerable Syrian refugees and Jordanians in areas of social inclusion, stimulating investment and justice and political reform. Thus, the financial obligations of the European Union hit €747 million.

The geopolitics involving Jordan put immense ongoing pressure on the Jordanian government, the latest of which was the declaration of Trump's Peace Plan to resolve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The Trump Peace Plan yields greater benefits to the Israelis and few concessions, while imposing more restrictions and more detriment to the Palestinians. Therefore, Jordan renounced Trump's plan and expressed its fixed position in pledging to the two-state solution and having East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. The kingdom's position results from the potential threat to Jordan's national security, the permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees in receiving states, and admitting of the sovereignty of Israel over 30% of the West Bank, including Jordan Valley. The Jordanian–Israeli tension due to Trump's plan will negatively impact the relationship with the United States due to Jordanian opposition to the annex settlement and aborting the right of the Palestinians to return and create their state. The Jordanian government has already predicted the possible outrage that may happen due to the annexation and clearly expressed these proposals, including hypothetical settlement of refugees in Jordan and transforming Jordan into an alternative state for Palestinians, as well as finally annexing the West Bank and Jordan Valley

The current state of affairs exposes Jordan and the world to Covid-19, a biological hazard that has demanded unprecedented measures to maintain people's lives. Since the first confirmed

case of Covid-19, Jordan has announced a series of defense ordinance and called for a full lockdown. These full curfew procedures will slow economic growth and negatively impact vulnerable and marginalized groups. According to IMF forecasting, on April 14, 2020, GDP growth is expected to fall to -3.7 %.

Concerning the Syrian refugees' situation in Jordan with Covid-19, King Abdullah II in an interview with CBS News asserted that Syrians and Jordanians are being equally protected against Covid-19. Syrians and Jordanians are subjected to testing outside and inside camps given that refugee camps are relatively crowded and continuous testing ensures better containment of the virus. His Majesty confirmed that the large number of refugees in Jordan poses an additional challenge to the government, but also that the protection of people is being prioritized and top priority now is global collaboration responding to the potential relapse of the virus.

All things considered, the turbulences of the Middle East region, provision of humanitarian assistance to refugees and creation of better living conditions for both refugee and host communities have applied great pressure on the sustainability of Jordanian government resources. The latest outbreak of Covid-19 has obstructed government reforms, formed a burden and crisis of unprecedented nature to manage and raised uncertainty surrounding the recovery phase after the pandemic comes to pass, especially as economists argue that a great recession looms on the horizon and Jordanian allies—such as the United States and European Union—who are most impacted by the pandemic will reduce their grants. To put it simply, Jordan is a small state with scarce resources and slow economic growth, and its geopolitical position contributes to its economic fragility as well as obstructs its development agenda at several intervals. However, Jordan has demonstrated resilience and robustness in tackling its responsibilities and converting

challenges to opportunities, addressing the ultimatum of its internal environment and convolutions of neighboring states' repercussions.

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