



# JORDAN RESTORES RELATIONS WITH THE ASSAD REGIME: STEPS, CAUSES AND CHALLENGES

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## INTRODUCTION

**O**n the 3rd of this September, the Jordanian Royal Court announced that King Abdullah II had received a phone call from Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, his first call since 2011.<sup>1</sup> According to a statement by the Royal Court, King

Abdullah and Assad talked about relations between the two countries and ways to strengthen them, in addition to the King assuring the Syrian President of Jordan's keenness to support Syria's territorial integrity and stability. This contact came after several steps of rapprochement between both

<sup>1</sup> Al-Jazeera, Jordan's king receives first call from Syria's al-Assad in decade, October 3, 2021

Jordan aims to regain its regional political role by restoring ties with the Assad regime through its plan for a solution to the Syrian crisis.

countries in recent months, prompted by a Jordanian plan to change the way to deal with the Syrian crisis, which receives American and Arab support.

Historically, the relationship between Syria and Jordan has been in turmoil since the Baath Party came to power in Syria and following its attempts to interfere in Jordan's internal affairs. This interference reached its peak with the Syrian support for the Palestine Liberation Organization in its conflict with the Jordanian government in September 1970. The relationship remained turbulent even after Jordan signed the peace agreement with Israel, also known as the Wadi Araba Peace Treaty. This situation continued until a gradual improvement of relations occurred at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which resulted in the signing of many bilateral agreements to facilitate movement between the two countries and cooperation agreements in the field of trade, energy and water.

After the outbreak of the uprising in Syria in March 2011, Jordan joined the efforts of the Arab League to find a solution to the Syrian crisis, which, however, did not lead to any con-

crete result. Later in the conflict, Jordan joined other Arab and foreign countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the USA and the EU, within the Group of Friends of Syria Conference and later hosted the Armed Opposition Support Room, known as the MOC operation Room, which included, besides Jordan, the United States and the UK. The Jordanian position on Syria further escalated when King Abdullah said in an interview, that if he were in Bashar al-Assad's place, he would choose to leave his position for the sake of his own country.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, Jordan, along with Israel and the United States, reached an agreement with Russia to reduce the escalation in southern Syria, which allowed the regime forces to retake control over the southern region in exchange for the removal of Iranian-backed forces from the border.<sup>3</sup> After the reconciliation agreement in May 2018, Jordan announced the reopening of the Nassib-Jaber crossing with Syria and allowed for the passage of commercial trucks for the first time since its closure in 2015, following the capture of the area by Syrian opposition forces.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Chulov, Assad should quit, says King Abdullah as pressure mounts on Syrian regime, *The Guardian*, November 14, 2021

<sup>3</sup> Suleiman al-Khalidi, Russia, Jordan agree to speed de-escalation zone in south Syria, *Reuters*, September 11, 2017

After the reopening the crossing with Syria and in conjunction with the reopening of the Emirati and Bahraini embassies in Syria at the end of 2018, Jordan appointed a charge d'affaires in Damascus for the first time since the Jordanian ambassador was withdrawn in 2012. In June 2021, the Syrian Ministers of Electricity and Oil, Bassam Tohme and Ghassan Al-Zamel, met with the Jordanian Minister of Energy, Hala Zawati, in Amman and discussed issues related to the electrical power grid, the infrastructure of the Arab Gas Pipeline, and potential cooperation in the energy field, according to official statements.<sup>4</sup> On the ninth of September, the energy ministers from Egypt, Lebanon and Syria met in Jordan to discuss the plan to transport Egyptian gas to Lebanon via Jordan and Syria, a plan mentioned by the US Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea which aimed at improving the electrical supply situation in Lebanon previously presented by former Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi when Hariri was Prime Minister-designate.<sup>5</sup>

On the eighteenth of September, the Syrian Defense Minister, General Ali Ayoub, visited Amman and met with the Chief of Staff of the Jordanian Army, Major General Yousef Al-Huneiti, and they discussed border security, combating terrorism and drug smuggling, according to an official statement.<sup>6</sup> Several days after this meeting, a Syrian delegation comprising the ministers of economy, electricity, agriculture and water

resources visited Amman and met the Jordanian Prime Minister. This meeting resulted in Jordan removing all exceptions regarding the movement of commercial trucks and individuals, with the exception of measures related to COVID19, in addition to cancelling the security approval requirement for Jordanian citizens to enter Syria. Within this context, Jordan Airlines also announced its intent to resume flights to Syria.<sup>7</sup>

## THE ECONOMIC MOTIVES BEHIND RESTORING RELATIONS WITH THE ASSAD REGIME

The economic aspect is considered one of the most important factors for the recent changes in political relations in the region, and the recent Jordanian actions are an example of this situation.

The Jordanian economy has been facing increasing challenges in recent years, especially following the spread of the COVID19 pandemic, which has led to an increase in popular anger against the government following the negative impact of the lockdown on living and social conditions. Jordan, a country that is poor in natural resources unlike other countries in the Middle East, depends directly on financial aid from Western countries, most notably the United States, which annually provides about \$1.5 billion.<sup>8</sup> Jordan has been greatly affected by the turmoil in Syria and Iraq, where the Jordanian economy lost transit opportunities with Syria due to the closure of the borders, while the

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<sup>4</sup> Riham Ali, Jordan and the Syrian regime discuss strengthening cooperation in the field of energy, Anadolu Agency, June 23, 2021

<sup>5</sup> Riham Ali, Jordan the start of a meeting of 4 Arab energy ministers to supply Lebanon with electricity, Anadolu Agency, September 8, 2021

<sup>6</sup> Arabi 21, Syrian regime's Defence Minister meeting his Jordanian counterpart in Amman, September 19, 2021

<sup>7</sup> Russia Today, A Syrian delegation visits Jordan to discuss energy, water and border crossings files, September 27, 2021

<sup>8</sup> US State Department, US relations with Jordan, December 30, 2020



Jordanian King Abdullah II is welcomed by Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi at Baghdad Airport in Baghdad, Iraq on August 28, 2021.

emergence of ISIS in Iraq also contributed to weakening the transportation movement between the two countries.<sup>9</sup> In addition to this, the refugee crisis from Syria also directly affected the economic situation in Syria, with the number of Syrian refugees in Jordan reaching about 1.4 million. Figures for the Jordanian economy show a contraction of 1.8 percent in 2020, with domestic production declining to about \$43 billion.<sup>10</sup> The unemployment rate, according to government data, also rose to 22% at the end of 2020 and reached 25% in mid-2021, with youth unemployment reaching 50%.<sup>11</sup> The productive sectors also took a hit due to COVID19 lockdowns in 2020, and the revenues of the tourism sector, one of the most important sectors of the Jordanian economy, declined by about 76%, down from \$ 5.7 billion in 2019 to \$ 1.4 billion in 2020.<sup>12</sup> Besides that, Jordan's

water crisis, amid a general shortage of water and drought in the region, poses a threat to the livelihood of the population.<sup>13</sup> And the restoration of ties with Syria will help in improving the water resources. One of the first steps in restoring ties was agreeing to re-activate the 1987 Agreement between Syria and Jordan on the Yarmouk River.<sup>14</sup>

Within this situation, the border city of Ramtha constitutes a clear example of how Jordan's economy and living conditions have been negatively impacted by the Syrian conflict. Before 2011, Ramtha was famous for its active trade with Syria, where a large number of the city's residents worked as so-called *sailors*, taxi drivers who travelled to Syria to buy food products, clothes, and cigarettes at cheap prices and re-sell them in Jordan.<sup>15</sup> This trade, which was a source of

<sup>9</sup> CNN Arabic, PM Bishr Al-Khasawneh to CNN: Jordan's economy has been affected by the turmoil of neighboring countries, and growth has declined due to Covid-19, September 30, 2021

<sup>10</sup> Riham Ali, Jordan's economy shrinks 1.8 percent in 2020, Anadolu Agency, March 31, 2021

<sup>11</sup> Department of Statistics, 25.0% unemployment rate during the first quarter of 2021, July 22, 2021

<sup>12</sup> The World Bank: Jordan, July 2021

<sup>13</sup> Josie Grathwaite, Stanford study reveals a deepening water crisis in Jordan – and a way forward, Stanford News, March 29, 2021

<sup>14</sup> Ammon News, Jordan and Syria agree to reactivate the 1987 Water Agreement, September 28, 2021

<sup>15</sup> Armenak Tokmajyan, Thwarting Jordan's Bahhara Trade With Syria Risks Social Unrest in Ramtha, Carnegie Middle East Center, April 19, 2021

income for the majority of the city's residents, was greatly affected by the deterioration of the security situation in Syria and stopped with the closure of the Nassib crossing. Despite the reopening of the crossing, several government decisions continued to affect the local population, whose hopes were high after the re-opening of the borders. In August 2019, the Jordanian Customs decided to reduce the number of cigarettes allowed to be imported by the *sailors* and decided to tighten cross-border smuggling operations, citing losses amounting to \$110 million in the first six months. This decision was followed by angry demonstrations in the city of Ramtha, which included clashes with security forces and road blockages that ended after promises to solve the citizens' problems.<sup>16</sup> But the *sailors'* anger at the tightening of customs did not end, and they accused, in a statement shared by the Ramtha Sailors Syndicate,<sup>17</sup> the government's double standards. According to the statement, the citizens accused Jordan of overlooking the activities of one of the

biggest smugglers, the Syrian citizen Rakan Al-Khudair, a former leader of the Jaysh al-Ashaer faction, a MOC-backed opposition faction in southern Syria, who obtained Jordanian citizenship and has close relationships with Jordanian officials in the Royal Court.<sup>18</sup> However, by restoring relations with the regime, Jordan aims to restore trade with Ramtha city and its *sailors*, but these hopes remain weak due to several circumstances, including the deterioration of the industrial and production sectors in Syria due to the war and economic conditions, and the decline in Syrian products and the high cost of buying and transporting goods due to the regime forces' checkpoints which impose fees on cars passing through the crossing. Besides that, Syrian traders are unable to import cigarettes or food products to local markets as well as sell them to Jordanian traders.

Jordan also aims to attract Syrian merchants and companies by activating transit from the port of Aqaba and the Saudi border to Syria. By facilitating the provision of customs

The Iranian-backed forces pose a threat to Jordan's plan in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, and the plan is not fully comprehensive.

<sup>16</sup> CNN Arabic, Calmness in the border city of Ramtha in Jordan after two nights of clashes, August 25, 2021

<sup>17</sup> Khaberni, Al-Ramtha Sailors Syndicate statement: stop the smuggling leaders, August 23, 2019

<sup>18</sup> Al-Arabi al-Jdeed, Who's Rakan al-Khedier whose been attacked by the sailors?, August 24, 2019

The USA approval of Jordan's restoring ties with the regime doesn't exempt the Jordanian companies and banks from being sanctioned for dealing with sanctioned Syrian businessmen and entities.

and legal facilities, Jordan can replace Lebanon as the main hub for Syrian foreign trade, especially since Syrian exports now consist mostly of vegetables and food products destined for the Gulf States and Iraq. This new economic endeavour has already shown its potential, as the head of the Jordanian Transport Association, Daifallah Abu Aqoula, stated that there has been a 600% increase in the volume of work with goods coming from Aqaba port to Syria compared to 2020.<sup>19</sup>

### **POLITICAL MOTIVES FOR RESTORING TIES**

The economic factors pushing Jordan to re-approach the Syrian regime are also directly related to domestic political dynamics, as the King hopes that the return of trade and transit with Syria will contribute to improving the economic situation and thus improving the general mood in Jordan. Opinion polls showed a decline in the Jordan population's confidence in the government, as about half of the population considered the economy and unemployment to be the most important chal-

lenges that negatively affect the population.<sup>20</sup> As well as the demonstrations, the coup attempt, or what the government called a conspiracy against the kingdom, carried an unprecedented threat to the Jordanian king due to the alleged involvement of his brother Prince Hamzah and figures with ties to the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The details about the dissatisfaction of security agencies with Prince Hamzah's criticism of government policies during his meeting with tribal sheikhs and local dignitaries, which were revealed in a leaked audio recording<sup>21</sup>, reflect the increased anger towards the government that may threaten the relationship between the tribes and the king.<sup>22</sup> In light of this situation, the King sees the improvement of the economic situation through trade with Syria, especially in the northern region, as a tool to mend the relationship with the tribal leaders.

On the other hand, King Abdullah hopes to restore Jordan's position in the region through restoring relations with Syria, especially after the decline of Jordan's regional role on behalf of other coun-

<sup>19</sup> Khaberni, an increase of imports to Syria from al-Aqaba Port, September 28, 2021

<sup>20</sup> Center for Strategic Studies, The Jordanian people's opinions before the end of the Teachers' Strike, October 6, 2019

<sup>21</sup> Middle East Eye, Jordan's Prince Hamzah in new recording: 'I will not obey', April 4, 2021

<sup>22</sup> Albert B. Wolf, A Hashemite Family Reunion Can't Hide Jordan's Woes, Foreign Policy, April 14, 2021



Border officers check documents of travelers at the Jaber crossing after a two-month closure due to military escalations in the southwestern Daraa province in Mafrq, Jordan on September 29, 2021. Dozens of vehicles and people crossed the terminal in both directions.

tries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, especially with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Arab-Arab relations. This new Jordanian role also carries American support through Biden's selection of King Abdullah to be the first Arab leader to meet with him after his election, in addition to the joint defence agreement that will result in making Jordan one of the most important hosts of the American military presence in the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> Jordan has repeatedly expressed its rejection of the Deal of the Century sponsored by Trump and Netanyahu in cooperation with Arab countries such as the UAE, which is considered as a threat to the king's control of Islamic ho-

ly sites in Jerusalem on the one hand and pushes towards the settlement of Palestinian refugees, which may contribute to an internal crisis in Jordan.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the half-hearted relations between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt with the Democrats, specifically Biden, push the White House to choose another regional ally that can help US policy in the region, through behind-the-scenes support, rather than by being active directly in the region. Within this context, it is worth noting that the King of Jordan was one of the first Arab leaders to warn the US of Iranian role in the region, so he wants to implement a more dynamic policy when it comes to the Iranian influence. By trying to engage

<sup>23</sup> Saud al-Sharafat, Critics react to US-Jordan defense agreement, Al-Monitor, April 1, 2021

<sup>24</sup> Osama Sharif, Why Jordan was so quick to reject Trump's peace plan, Middle East Institute, February 3, 2020

Regarding Iranian-backed forces, Russia proved unable to adhere to its promises to Jordan and Israel in 2017, and these forces still pose a threat to both countries.

with local parties in countries under Iranian influence, such as Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, but not a direct hostility to Iran like the US policy during the Trump era that the Biden administration wants to change.

King Abdullah's meeting with Putin, which occurred a few weeks after his meeting with Biden, fits within this new role for Jordan in the region. While the return of the Assad regime to the Arab League and its participation in the upcoming Algeria Summit remains one of the Russian goals to achieve the re-recognition of the regime, which is approved by the majority of Arab countries, it may clash with the rejection of Qatar in the near future. This meeting gives an idea that Jordan may play a pivotal role in breaking the stalemate in the Syrian crisis through its extensive relations with countries active in the Syrian issue. This was also directly alluded to by King Abdullah in an interview with CNN about the need to find a new approach to deal with Syria and the Assad regime.

### **THE CHALLENGES OF RESTORING TIES WITH THE REGIME**

There is no doubt that the decision to restore relations with the Assad regime, in ad-

dition to supplying Lebanon with Egyptian gas, required the King of Jordan to draw up a comprehensive plan to be discussed with the allies, the United States in particular, and with Russia. But this step faces many challenges represented by Iran and its regional parties, opposed to Jordan's plan of reducing the Iranian influence over Syria, Iraq and Lebanon through economic agreements aimed at benefiting these countries' dire economic conditions. What this may look like in reality is not possible to foresee yet, but Iran already has enough cards in its pocket to sabotage upcoming plans by Jordan. In Lebanon, Hezbollah and Amal are represented within the Lebanese government ranks with ministers with the power to block any future agreement on the gas and electricity sectors or economic agreements with Jordan. In Iraq, a new Iraqi government could be capable of setting up obstacles in the way of implementing agreements with Jordan. In Syria, the Iranian-backed militias present in southern Syria and Damascus countryside may pose a security threat to Jordan's attempts to engage commercially with the regime through attacks and kidnappings targeting Jordanian companies and individuals.



Syrians who fled from attacks by the Assad regime and its supporters and took shelter in a camp, visit a livestock market to buy sacrificial animals ahead of Eid al-Adha in Idlib, Syria on July 16, 2021.

On the other hand, the Jordanian plan seems to be enjoying Biden's full support that can lead into Biden's exempting Jordan from potential Caesar Act penalties that it would have incurred within the Arab Gas Pipeline project. However, this backing may not be fully guaranteed or stable due to the changing positions of the American administration or the Congress. Any plan to resolve the crisis in Syria will be the subject of contention and conflict in the United States between the Republican and Democratic parties, and it may even be linked to internal political issues that will require compromises between parties.

It is worth noting that exempting Jordan from the Caesar Sanctions in relation to the transfer of gas to Lebanon through Syria does not exempt Jordanian companies and banks from sanctions if they are involved in

dealing with Syrian businessmen who are listed within the Caesar Act framework. Indeed, given the strong link between the regime and the sanctioned businessmen who control the Syrian economy, any possible economic deal with Syria would be tantamount to walking in a minefield for Jordanian companies that will be subject to scrutiny, investigation and even being listed on the sanctions list, which the US administration cannot condone if it is being demanded by members of Congress to investigate it. On the other hand, Jordanian companies and banks may find themselves subjected to judicial investigations in European countries if they are involved in acts that may consist of aiding and abetting human rights violations committed by Syrian actors, with the Lafarge case being one of the main examples.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the potential of the Syrian economy is no longer the same as it was before

<sup>25</sup> France 24, French firm Lafarge loses bid to dismiss 'crimes against humanity' case in Syria, September 7, 2021

2011, as the contributions of industry and trade to the GDP have decreased in the past 10 years, and exports have become highly dependent on unstable agricultural products due to local consumption and drought. In addition, one of the factors contributing to the instability of this plan is the lack of clarity in the Russian position regarding Iran.

Previously, Russia pledged to remove Iranian-backed forces away from the Jordanian and Israeli borders, but did not abide by its promises due to its inability to force Iran to withdraw and Russia's unwillingness to abandon its strategic ally in Syria, especially that these forces have become permeated within the Syrian army.

## CONCLUSION

King Abdullah's plan constitutes an important change for Jordan's policy towards the Assad regime in the past ten years after several normalization steps had already been taken by other Arab countries such as the UAE, Bahrain, Oman and Sudan. This recent change in policy seems to be mainly driven by unstable economic and political motives. Within this context, restoring ties with the Syrian regime functions as a temporary band-aid over domestic economic and political challenges, rather than serving as a clear and solid plan to ultimately resolve the Syrian crisis.

After ten years of conflict, the Syrian economy, which is fraught with the looming figure of sanctions and burdened by low production, scarcity of resources, currency collapse and corruption, does not and cannot represent a real source of economic opportunity for Jordan, and other Arab countries, to be exploited to improve their internal economy. Moreover, it is worth noting that recent history, from the 2005 assassination of Rafic Hariri to the ongoing Iran-Syria alli-

ance in Syria after the break of the uprising in 2011, shows us that the Assad regime cannot be trusted when it comes to changing its actions or pushing it away from Iran.

The only foreseeable outcome for the restoration of ties between Syria and Jordan is a symbolic trade exchange and transit movement between the two countries, the transformation of the port of Aqaba as the first destination for imports into Syria, rather than the port of Beirut; and the transformation of Amman International Airport into a preferred travel destination for Syrians rather than the Beirut airport, but without any significant economic impact. This is in addition to the plan to transfer gas to Lebanon, which will take a period of three to six months due to the repairs needed to the Lebanese power grid and stations, in addition to reaching an agreement with Egypt and the World Bank to finance the deal. Any next Jordanian step will be based on the regime's response and seriousness in dealing with the Kingdom, and the desire of the United States to expand the scope of communication with the regime.

## About the Author

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Suhail al-Ghazi holds a Bachelor of History degree from Damascus University. He is a research assistant at ORSAM and a former non-resident fellow at the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. He's specialized in security, the economy, and governance in regime-held areas.



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