

COMMENTARY

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Jordan Reluctantly Takes Sides in Syria

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The attention of those concerned with the fallout of the Syrian crisis on neighbouring countries has focused recently on Tripoli, the capital of northern Lebanon, where 14 people were killed and some 90 wounded in renewed fighting between rival militias in predominantly Sunni and Alawi Muslim neighbourhoods. The flare-up was partly a consequence of the political and security vacuum resulting from the continuing inability of the “8 March” and “14 March” camps to agree on a formula for forming a national unity government, now seven months overdue. But it also reflected tensions generated by the battle brewing on the other side of the border with Syria, where army and opposition forces are building up in the Qalamoun area in anticipation of a regime offensive to block rebel supply lines from Lebanon.

Of greater strategic importance in the coming period, however, is the evolving impact of the Syrian crisis on Jordan. The kingdom enjoys far higher levels of security and stability than Lebanon, but faces tough times ahead. The centre of gravity of military operations in Syria is coming closer as opposition rebels strive to extend their grip of the southern border region with Jordan, while regime forces fight to eliminate rebel strongholds south of Damascus so as to provide a defence in depth of the capital against any likely rebel advance from the Daraa area. An escalation in fighting will prompt increased flows across the Syrian-Jordanian border—of opposition fighters and weapons in one direction, and of refugees in the other—posing an immediate challenge to a government straining to deal with the 1.3 million Syrians already in the country.

Until recently, Jordan sought to mitigate fallout from the Syrian crisis by adopting a policy of neutrality broadly similar to that Lebanon’s “disassociation.” This has alternated with episodes of “positive engagement” in which Jordan’s King Abdullah II or the prime minister of the day

offered to mediate between President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian opposition, for which they received no thanks from either. But in the past two months Jordan has realigned its foreign policy closely with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, entering into what domestic supporters of the shift regard as an unambiguous “alliance,” rather than an informal “axis.” Assad’s downfall is inevitable, they reason, and Jordan stands to gain by joining the side that is committing its resources to attaining that outcome.

Others in Jordan are far less sanguine about the wisdom of open realignment, and about the likely outcome of the ongoing conflict in Syria. Key figures in the Jordanian intelligence and military establishments, which are key actors in managing the Syrian file, regard the rise of rebel groups in Syria affiliated to al-Qaeda as the greater threat should the Assad regime fall, or even should it survive. The appearance of Jabhat al-Nusra at some points on the long common border appears to confirm this concern. For this camp, Saudi plans to “level the field” between the Syrian opposition and the regime, as former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal confirmed on 22 October, pose an additional threat to Jordan since they necessarily entail using Jordan as a training ground, staging base, and conduit for weapons supply for a new “national” rebel army.

Privately, officials in the Jordanian royal court, which is the other main actor involved in managing the Syrian file, regard the plan as unrealistic. Besides, playing a role on this scale would be tantamount to undertaking direct military intervention in Syria. This seems unlikely when the “core group” of the Friends of Syria, of which Jordan is a member, has just reaffirmed its commitment to the Geneva-II framework for a political solution in Syria. But the presence of senior intelligence and military officials at the meeting between King Abdullah II, Saudi King Abdullah and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who doubles as Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the U.A.E. armed forces, in Jeddah on 21 October suggests that Jordan is already a partner in concrete planning for some form of active involvement in Syria.

Jordan’s immediate motives are clear enough. The kingdom survives on aid from external sources: Saudi Arabia provided grants worth US\$ 1.4 billion in budgetary assistance and crude oil at discounted prices in 2011 and pledged US\$ 1.25 billion in development loans over a five-year period starting in 2012, while the Saudi Development Fund transferred an US\$ 250 million for spending on development projects in 2013. The UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar pledged an additional US\$ 3.75 billion for Jordanian development over the same five-year period.

But the wide and very public rift that has opened up between Saudi Arabia and the United States over policy towards Syria pulls Jordan in opposite directions. For now at least, Jordan is aligning with Saudi Arabia, but U.S. commitment to the Geneva-II framework makes this uncomfortable for the Hashemite Kingdom. A successful peace conference will relieve the Jordanian dilemma,

but prospects for this are dimming. The Assad regime, Syrian National Coalition, and rebels inside Syria have all hardened their positions, and the Friends of Syria are currently divided over whether or not to accept Iranian participation at the conference. If diplomacy fails and U.S.-Saudi divergence over their respective Syria policies endures, Jordan will lose political shelter.

The last time Jordan faced a similar dilemma was in 1990, when Iraqi invaded Kuwait. Although the late King Hussein condemned the invasion, the Jordanian parliament reflected public opinion by supporting Iraq, and the Gulf Cooperation Council punished Jordan by cutting off all aid. Jordan cannot afford to repeat this outcome, but the alternative of becoming an intervening party in the Syrian crisis presents risks that are even harder to predict. Some Jordanian officials believe the kingdom will have to act anyway if al-Qaeda affiliates grow in strength on the other side of the border, possibly sending in the army to clear a buffer zone inside Syria. But this would place Jordan in direct confrontation with both al-Qaeda and the Assad regime, and set the stage for a long and messy military involvement in a complex conflict.

Jordan's national interest is best served by a political solution in Syria, but it will have to struggle hard to ensure that the tripartite alliance of which it is a member works towards that specific outcome. Otherwise resistance within key state institutions and core social constituencies may prevent Jordan from staying an interventionist course. And by proving an unreliable alliance partner, it risks triggering the very penalties it seeks to avoid.

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