



Is Jordan's stability indispensable?

SINCE ISRAEL'S founding, the stability of Jordan has been a linchpin of Israeli security interests.

According to Joshua Krasna, the Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security's (JISS) strategic expert on the Arab world, "a stable Jordan prevents the establishment of a hostile regime or the spread of chaos on Israel's longest border, and serves as a trustworthy 'doorkeeper' to the West Bank. The relationship between Jordan and Israel is a strategic one, and its closeness is expressed mainly in the national security realm." But do Israel and the United States take that stability for granted?

How secure is the Jordanian monarchy? This question needs to be asked every day by Israeli and American political, military, security and intelligence officials. Economically poor, Jordan lies at a crossroads of Iranian expansionism and Sunni jihadism, with millions of idle Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan just waiting to be radicalized.

But what if Jordan falls? What does that mean for American and Israeli security assessments that presume a Hashemite monarchy remaining in power for the foreseeable future? Jordan survived the Arab Winter, but that is no guarantee of its future. A former high-ranking Israeli military intelligence official told me that Jordan is fragile and could implode at some point in the near future.

There is a reason King Abdullah's security detail is comprised of Circassians, who migrated to the Levant during the time of the Ottoman Empire, rather than Palestinian Arab citizens of Jordan, who represent the majority of the population, and tend to consider the monarchy and its agreements with Israel to be illegitimate. Surely, the king remembers that his great-grandfather was assassinated by a Palestinian Arab.

In January 2020, the Jordanian Parliament expressed its disdain for any cooperation with Israel by unanimously passing a law to ban any Israeli gas imports. The king knows there are sharp knives surrounding him on all sides. Where once the monarchy seemed protected from internal turmoil, today protests are aimed at the monarch himself.

Jordan is an economic basket case with few natural resources. According to *The Economist*, "youth unemployment is 41% and public

debt is 95% of GDP. Over a million Jordanians are officially poor and demonstrations are increasingly frequent protesting the hardships."

Abdullah II is between a rock and a hard place. Like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather before him, he heads a non-indigenous monarchy that was imposed by the British over 100 years ago, in the era when great powers could just draw lines on a piece of paper and create nations. That is what the French and British did at the end of World War I when they promised the same lands to different Arab tribes. In the Arab world, tribes and religion, not nation-states, were and still are the prime sources of allegiance.

The Saudis were given the Arabian Peninsula, which was originally promised to the Hashemites, the family of today's King Abdullah of Jordan. In compensation, the Brits gave the landlocked resource-barren area of Transjordan and today's Iraq to the Hashemites. The Hashemite King Faisal II of Iraq, brother of Abdullah I, was overthrown and executed in 1958, but the family of Jordanian King Abdullah I, his grandson King Hussein, and today's King Abdullah II have continued to rule Jordan for the past century.

Abdullah rules over a Palestinian Arab majority that is hostile to his reign. They control the economy, but he controls the security apparatus and army. If this were a country in the middle of Africa no one would care. But because it borders on Iraq, Syria, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the disputed territories of the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), it is in one of the most important geostrategic areas in the world.

There are more than two million Palestinian citizens of Jordan who are still considered refugees by the UN, and millions of other naturalized Palestinian Arabs who came between 1947 and 1967. Jordan's great fear is that one day Israel will cut a deal with the Palestinian Arabs of the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) solving Israel's demographic dilemma, which would then threaten the existence of the Hashemite kingdom and the Bedouin minority's control of the country. The Bedouin are a pillar of King Abdullah's constituency, who want the Palestinian majority on the East Bank to return to a Palestinian state on the West Bank. I heard this firsthand at the Jordanian Parliament. The Bedouin fear losing their preferential status.

On January 14, 2020, King Abdullah spoke to the European Parliament asking, "What if the world gives up on the two-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian state? A stable Middle East is not possible without peace between the Israelis and Palestinians."

Although the King talks about a two-state solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he is likely not really hoping for that, as a Palestinian state next to Jordan would be a major threat to his monarchy. Without Israeli security control of the West Bank, it will likely become a Hamastan, whose goal would soon be to overthrow him and then have an Iranian satrapy nine miles from Tel Aviv.

Jordan is the very definition that proves territorial strategic depth is essential, even in the age of missiles. Jordan is a barrier between Israel and Iraq, which is increasingly under the thumb of the Iranians.

US and Israeli security and defense officials have told me that if Jordan appears to be teetering on collapse, both nations would supply boots on the ground to prop up the Hashemite Kingdom and prevent it from becoming Salafist or under Iranian control. Without US troops in Iraq, that will be a much tougher task to accomplish, leaving it up to the Israelis who once before in the 1970s prevented a Syrian invasion of Jordan from the north.

So what are Jordan's challenges? The list is long and most have no solutions.

1. The Syrian civil war has been devastating for the Jordanians. Jordan has one of the largest refugee populations in the world in relation to its indigenous population. There are more than 500,000 Iraqi and more than 700,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan, since the Iraq War of 2003 and the Syrian civil war of 2011, respectively. I have visited the largest Syrian refugee camp and whether the refugees remain there or move to Jordanian cities, they are poor, idle and ripe for radicalization.

2. The Jordanian economy is a disaster, with unemployment and government corruption great sources of anger. The country has been in an "economic correction phase" implemented by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) since 1989, "for its moribund economy that has relied more on loans than being able to become self-sufficient."

3. Iran has eyes on Jordan, threatening Jordan

from its north in Syria and Lebanon, to its east from Iraq, and would like to destabilize it from its west when it can control the West Bank. The king knows this but doesn't dare say it publicly. What the King also cannot say is that he wants Israel to control the Jordan Valley for the foreseeable future for his survival.

Jordan has one reliable neighbor, Israel, that won't threaten it from the west. It knows its 300-mile border with Israel must be in Israeli hands, as a Palestinian state either under the control of the PA or Hamas would sooner or later allow weapons and terrorists to destabilize the kingdom. Jordan cannot publicly acknowledge this, as opposition to Israel is the rallying cry for most Jordanians, including its intellectuals and its Islamists.

4. Sunni Salafists, whether in the guise of al-Qaeda or ISIS, threaten Jordan, especially in its peripheral regions where they recruit and spread radicalization to a vulnerable population. Perhaps more dangerous are the more pragmatic Muslim Brotherhood Islamists, who take a more patient and less confrontational approach but are no less dangerous as they are in the Jordanian Parliament, and lead the opposition to the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty.

What is the state of relations between Israel and Jordan? Frosty.

There was no acknowledgment of the 25th anniversary of the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty and Jordan refused to renew the lease to Israel on land known as the Isle of Peace, as the king was under extraordinary pressure to placate his populace who think the peace accord is illegitimate. This area is a microcosm of the challenges and deterioration of the diplomatic relationship between Israel and Jordan over the last two decades.

The area was leased by Jordan to Israeli farmers who farmed the land for decades, but as a goodwill gesture Israel transferred the territory to Jordanian sovereignty as part of the 1994 treaty and the Jordanians reciprocated by leasing it back to the Israeli farmers. Tragedy struck when a Jordanian soldier massacred Israeli schoolgirls there in 1997, but in a reflection of better times, King Hussein, Abdullah's father, visited the grieving Israeli families in a gesture of sympathy. That would never happen today, not that King Abdullah would not want to, but any people-to-people connection could ignite Jordanian anger and test the Kingdom's viability.

A primary reason for the cold relationship is the Temple Mount. According to JISS's Krasna, "Abdullah has taken a much more active and public role in the past five-six years as 'De-



BENOIT TESSIER/REUTERS

French President Emmanuel Macron welcomes the King of Jordan Abdullah II at the Elysée Palace on January 15

fender of the Holy Places in Jerusalem,' largely in order to cement his... Islamic bona fides as a descendant of the Prophet. This is especially important in view of efforts by the Palestinian Authority, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Hamas to make inroads on the Temple Mount... basing his public legitimacy largely on this role, [he] is compelled to take ownership and responsibility for developments over which he has limited control... This leads to an escalation trap regarding Jerusalem." Jordan fell into this trap when it chose to inflame the situation by appointing PLO and Turkish-supported Israeli-Arab Islamists onto the *Waqf* Islamic religious trust that controls Islamic interests in this tinderbox.

Going forward, one can be cautiously optimistic that the King can continue to manage the difficult hand he has been dealt. For more than 20 years he has survived the second intifada, the wars in Syria and Iraq, the Arab Winter, ISIS and economic problems that would challenge the most adept head of state.

As long as his intelligence and security services continue to work with Israel, much like the Palestinian Authority and General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt do, he will have a fighting chance of preserving his ever-precarious situation. There is no guarantee he can continue to balance this situation, but American economic help is an essential ingredient, which should be increased if the US is serious that Jordan's stability is essential to American interests. The Red Sea to the Dead Sea water plan may not make sense economically, but Israel for geopolitical stability might need to proceed with this project.

The release of US President Donald Trump's peace plan could also be a match to ignite

the already heightened tensions in the region, leaving the king with limited options. For political survival, the king may have to strongly denounce whatever the plan recommends, no matter how much it could benefit Jordan. The king fears the Trump plan could consider the Jordan option, Jordan as the Palestinian homeland, which he might consider a direct threat to his reign.

It would be wise for Israel and the US to plan for the day that a Jordanian uprising destabilizes the kingdom with civil war and anarchy, similar to the Syrian civil war. Would the king choose exile or become an authoritarian ruler like Sisi, stamping out all dissent? Would the US support him or would it do to him what it did to the Shah of Iran and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, which gave the world the Islamic Republic of Iran and the takeover of Egypt by the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists before Sisi's coup.

President Barack Obama might be forgiven for believing the political Islamism of the Muslim Brotherhood had a benign side compared to Salafist radicalism, but no American president going forward can claim ignorance to the dangers of a Muslim Brotherhood takeover in any Middle Eastern country; just look at Egypt in 2013 and Turkey today. The outcome in Jordan would profoundly undermine Israeli and American security interests.

There are no easy choices, but it would be negligent not to plan for the contingencies. ■

Dr. Eric R. Mandel is the Director of the Middle East Political Information Network (MEPIN) and regularly briefs members of the Senate, House and their foreign policy advisers, as well as White House advisers