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Tough and Demanding Times:

How the Syrian crisis affects Jordan

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The Syrian war has been affecting Jordan directly and indirectly for the past few years. The refugee crisis and the rise of jihadism in the region has challenged both its political system and its social cohesion. The inability to cope with the constantly growing needs of the refugee population, along with the simmering political unrest, is threatening the social cohesion of the country, while the rise of Salafism poses a threat to the stability of the regime. The way with which the state reacts to these challenges will shape Jordan's future for the next years to come.

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With the Syrian war raging for the past four years, and practically every state in the region taking a part in it, directly or indirectly, the fact that Jordan has managed to remain on the sidelines of this conflict for so long, with no direct involvement until early 2015, has been a rather impressive achievement. The immolation of Lt. Moaz al-Kasasbeh by the Islamic State (IS) in February changed that. His brutal execution and its uploading on the internet for all to see, caused a wave of protest and condemnation across Jordan. King Abdullah II seized the opportunity and promised that IS will face “relentless retaliation”. In February, for the first time, the Jordanian Air Force began launching airstrikes against IS targets in Syria. Moreover, the Jordanian government, one day after the death of Lt. al-Kasasbeh, summarily executed infamous suicide bomber Sajida Rishawi.¹

While Jordan tried to keep the war out of its land, it has been forced to deal with its repercussions. The refugee crisis has affected the country greatly. As of June 2015, more than 620.000 Syrian refugees have been registered with the country’s United Nations Refugee Agency.² However, rough estimates of the real number of refugees taking shelter exceeds one million, thus creating a situation where more than 10% of the overall country’s population consists of Syrian refugees.³ The ever growing crisis has placed an important burden on Jordan regarding the economy, policy making and its resources. The need for food, shelter and education for the vast numbers of refugees that entered the country has stressed the existing infrastructures to the limit. While Jordan has traditionally been an immigrant and refugee host country (it took in hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in 1948), this situation is extremely difficult to cope with. Moreover, the international aid for the Syrian refugees is lacking considerably. The Syrian regional refugee response plan of the UN requires 1,3bn dollars, and of that sum, only 35% has been made available as of yet.⁴ The support of the international community to countries that host Syrian refugees such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey has been quite underwhelming, and they have been left practically to their own devices to deal with the crisis.

Under these circumstances, the Jordanian government has begun to take measures to prevent further influx of refugees in the country, by limiting the number of refugees the country allows to enter, by closing border crossings with Syria, and by confining even more people in refugee camps.⁵ At the same time, the government has implemented a cut in food stamps for the refugees, which, as a result, forces the majority of Syrians in the camps to live on less than 50 cents per day,⁶ i.e. in conditions of extreme poverty. The lack of humanitarian assistance and in basic services, such as food and health care, has pushed some refugees to return to Syria. In August only, 4,000 refugees have returned to their home country, despite the ongoing war. With living conditions deteriorating even further, this could become a growing trend among refugees.

Adding to the Jordanian government’s hesitancy to accommodate more refugees is the overall public sentiment towards them, which is at best a negative one. According to a survey conducted by the International Labour Organization in April 2015, 85% of Jordanian workers believe that Syrian refugees should not enter the country freely, while 65% believe that they should all be restricted to the refugee camps.⁷ This is a dilemma for the Jordanian administration. On the one hand, the country has always benefited by the influx of foreign workers, and the presence of Syrian workers is actually benefiting Jordanian economy to a certain extent. On the other hand, the country’s lack of infrastructure able to provide basic services (health care, education, jobs) to the refugees, is affecting the Jordanian citizens as well, who see their livelihood deteriorating as a result. Despite its efforts to stop the surge of refugees in the country, the government has been unable to reduce it effectively. This combination creates conditions that could ultimately lead to social unrest, akin to the one that led to the demonstrations of the Arab Spring.

As a result of the protests of 2011, the government at the time relaxed certain restrictions on freedom of speech, to the point where criticism of the government became almost common practice. This way, the administration managed to quell the demands for actual radical reforms, or any thought of regime change. The ensuing war in Syria in 2012 and the overall instability in the region gave the government the pretext to backtrack on those, up to that point unheard of, liberties. It passed anti-terror

laws that gave an extremely vague definition of terrorism, as to make it easier for the security services to prosecute any dissident voice.⁸ These laws have been used in the past years to suppress both radical jihadi groups, and secular voices calling for freedom and justice. With living standards worsening and the refugee crisis continuously deepening, a possible social upheaval may not be so easy to suppress if it occurs again.

Still, the refugee crisis, and the social unrest it produces, is only one aspect of the changing dynamics in Jordan, due to the Syrian war. The rise of political Islam in the country has come to be a potential threat for the stability of the state. The Jordanian government has managed to effectively neutralize one major Islamic group in recent years, the Muslim Brotherhood, by endorsing an off-shoot group of the movement and declaring the original organization illegal.⁹ Nonetheless, it hasn't been so successful in curbing the influence of the Salafis. Salafism is not entirely cohesive as a movement. It consists of two major currents, the Quietists and the Jihadists. The first current does not object to the current status quo in the country, and is using peaceful means to propagate faith. Therefore, it has never been a major security concern for the administration. The Salafi Jihadis, on the other hand, are openly struggling for the imposition of Islamic law in Jordan and support jihad as a means of imposing it. The vast majority of Salafis in Jordan are Quietists, and only a small minority belongs to the jihadist current, but the latter is gaining support every day, especially among the Salafi youth.

Salafi jihadism has seen its strength increase significantly, especially after the 2011 Arab Spring protests in the country, when it reemerged from the obscurity it had sunk into since 2006. The suppression of the protest movement in Syria and the rise of armed insurgency there, gave an incentive to Jihadis in Jordan to become more active in demanding the enforcement of sharia law in the country. When Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN) - the al-Qaeda affiliate organization in Syria - was founded in Syria in 2013, the Salafi jihadis in Jordan seized the opportunity, and began crossing the borders to fight alongside them in the civil war. Simultaneously, Jordanian Jihadi leaders became more vocal in their call for jihad in Syria. When the Islamic State declared its establishment in 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra refused to join ranks, and a major split between the jihadi organizations occurred. The Salafi leaders of Jordan, almost in their entirety, sided with JAN, and began to openly criticize the Islamic State's tactics. Abu Qatadda, one of the leading figures of the salafi jihadi movement has repeatedly attacked IS leaders for being "ignorant" and for lacking knowledge "on basic matters of Islam".¹⁰ At one instance, he accused the Islamic State of using "un-Islamic" methods, in regards to the beheadings of journalists.¹¹ Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, the leader of the movement in Jordan, and a perceived theoretician of global Jihadism, never misses an opportunity to criticize IS, as in the case of the burning of Moaz Kasasbeh, which he strongly condemned.

Since 2014, along with its increase in strength and influence, an apparent transformation of the internal dynamics of the jihadi movement in Jordan has been evident. Firstly, the demographics of the movement seem to be shifting. While at first, Palestinians formed the main body of jihadis in Jordan, now, an increasing number of Jordanians are joining the organization. Moreover, while tribal linkages among Jihadis are important within the politics of the movement, its spread to urban areas of Jordan, like Rusaifa and Zarqa, seems to have weakened these bonds. The extreme poverty experienced in these cities is incentive enough for the movement to grow and flourish there. Even more, the economic depression Jordan faces has pushed the once thriving middle class of the country to be more susceptible to the Jihadi movement than in previous years. Another significant change in the organization – one noticeable in recent months - is the shift in allegiance from al-Nusra to the Islamic State among members of the organization. Although there are more than 2,000 Jordanians fighting in Syria with al-Nusra, and many have climbed to positions of prominence among the jihadist movement there, there are signs that many among the rank-and-file, have joined the Islamic State. According to some analysts, 85% of the jihadi community at the moment, supports the Islamic State and not al-Nusra.¹² This happens, despite the vehement rhetoric of Salafi leaders against IS, which in turn implies that the hold of the salafi leadership on the grassroots of the movement may be faltering.

The Jordanian government has been aware of the rise of popularity of Salafi jihadism, and has been working to crackdown on the organization. Its main strategy so far, has been twofold. It is trying to suppress the movement, and also to keep under strict control its power and influence. The Islamic State has repeatedly targeted Jordan, and threatened with invading the country and “slaughtering King Abdullah II”.¹³ In face of the growing threat IS is posing for Jordan, the government has opted to using the animosity between IS and al-Nusra in its favor, by choosing to side, so to speak, with the lesser of two evils. The Jordanian government has chosen to release Salafi jihadist leaders from prison, such as al-Maqdisi and Abu Qattada. The latter has spent five years in jail before his release on charges of terrorism, while al-Maqdsi has been in and out of prison, for several years. The government chose to co-opt these leaders and their willingness to condemn IS, as a means of alienating it from the Jordanian Salafi jihadi movement. As both leaders are loyal to al-Nusra, it is preferable for the government to have Salafi leaders opposing IS freely, than to have them imprisoned and hence, a constant source of disaffection to the Salafi movement. Moreover, Jordan prefers to have to deal with al-Nusra, than IS, as in the government’s view, it does not pose a serious threat to the integrity and security of the state. Even more, Abu Sayyaf, a prominent Salafi leader to the north of the country has insisted in various occasions that “there should be no jihad in Jordan”.¹⁴ At the same time that the government chose to play a game of divide and rule with the jihadi movement in Syria and Jordan, it began a round of apprehension and prosecution of suspects, mainly from cities that are strongholds of Salafi jihadists, such as Rusaifa and Zarqa. In 2014, several hundred jihadis had been arrested, many of them returnees from the war in Syria, where they fought with Jabhat al-Nusra.

The refugee crisis is weighing down on the Jordanian government, along with the political turmoil, that might have subsided for now, but still simmers underneath. In addition, the jihadi movement has been steadily on the rise and is gaining momentum in Syria. This new generation of Jordanian Jihadis fighting in Syria is bound to return home at some point. The outcome of their endeavor there will surely shape their minds and their ambitions in regards to the role they want to assume in Jordan. Potential success will surely encourage them to assume a more active role in Jordan. Whether they will use violence or peaceful means to further their ends remains to be seen. What is most probable though, is that their movement’s fate will depend on the stance that the Jordanian government will hold against them.

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