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Jordan and the Gaza war

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The ongoing war in Gaza has intensified regional tensions, drawing strong reactions from neighboring Jordan. The country is home to a large Palestinian population and has always been a proponent of Palestinian rights, while -at the same time- holding a peace treaty with Israel since 1994. The war's impact on Jordan may lead to a significant risk of destabilization, as the country is striving to balance between its support of the Palestinians and its national security interests.

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TInitially, it is crucial to take a closer look at the current conditions of Palestinians in Gaza because it provides the necessary context for understanding Jordan's domestic turmoil. The daily reality for the population involves extreme hardships, with high civilian casualties, displacement, and a severe lack of access to vital resources such as food, water, and medical supplies. One year into the war, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) released a report estimating that between September 2024 and August 2025, approximately 60,000 cases of acute malnutrition are anticipated among children aged 6 to 59 months, including 12,000 cases of severe acute malnutrition. Moreover, around 1.84 million people in the Gaza Strip are experiencing acute food insecurity at IPC Phase 3 or higher (Crisis or worse) between September and October 2024, with nearly 133,000 individuals facing catastrophic levels of food insecurity.[1] This also aligns with the ICC's recent decision to indict Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former Minister of Defense Yoav Gallant for war crimes, including the use of starvation as a method of warfare along with crimes against humanity. As of October 23, 2024, Gaza's Ministry of Health reports that over 42,700 Palestinians have lost their lives due to Israeli attacks, with countless others buried under the rubble or at imminent risk of illness. The latest casualty figures indicate that nearly 16,765 children have been killed, more than 100,412 individuals have been injured, and over 10,000 remain missing.[2] After a year of war, approximately two-thirds of the buildings in Gaza have been damaged or completely destroyed, leaving behind 42 million tons of rubble and, thus, making the area largely uninhabitable.[3]

In response to the events in Gaza, protests have erupted across Jordan, with protesters gathering outside the Israeli embassy in Amman to voice their outrage, as well as in other cities like Karak and Irbid.[4] The anger of Jordanians quickly shifted towards the government, fueled by the fact that it continues to cooperate with Israel, particularly in security and energy sectors—a collaboration that many protesters could perceive as a betrayal of the Palestinians. By the same token, Jordan's alliance with the United States has fueled widespread discontent, as the latter is widely seen as complicit in the war due to its unwavering support for Israel. Surveys show that 81 percent of Jordanians view the U.S. as the main defender of Israeli rights. Protesters have also expressed anger over the presence of U.S. military forces in the country. The dissatisfaction is further reflected in boycott campaigns targeting Israeli and American goods, with growing calls for a shift in policy.[5] Also, the growing support for Hamas among a large part of the Jordanian protesters worries the regime because it could embolden the group's supporters. The government fears this could destabilize domestic security, and potentially incite further unrest. Additionally, it raises concerns about increased alignment with Iran and the risk of Hamas inciting Jordanian tribes to join the war.[6] As the protests grew larger and demanded more significant changes in state policies, the Jordanian government took measures to restrict demonstrations. Security forces were deployed to monitor and disperse crowds, while roadblocks were imposed in key areas to prevent large gatherings, particularly in Amman and other major cities. The government also heightened surveillance of social media platforms in order to track and disrupt organizing efforts. The security forces have stepped up arrests and intimidation efforts on activists who called for more aggressive action against Israel. This resulted in clashes near the Israeli embassy and the Baqaa refugee camp, leading to arrests that prompted criticism from human rights groups and further inflamed the anger of demonstrators. Indicatively, by April 2024, the Jordanian authorities had arrested at least 1,500 individuals, including approximately 500 who have been detained since March 2024.[7]

Apart from domestic unrest, the Jordanian government seems concerned about the actions of regional and international actors that could potentially destabilize the country, such as the Biden administration's announcement last January for a pause in the funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Based on Israeli accusations regarding the participation of the agency's employees in the October 7 Hamas attack, UNRWA's weakening could generate a new influx of refugees into Jordan, primarily from the West Bank. The several European donors' decision to follow suit exacerbated Jordanian fears about managing the humanitarian and social outcome of a weakened UNRWA. UNRWA operates in 10 camps, 169 schools

educating more than 119,000 students, and 25 medical clinics, which are essential for alleviating pressure on Jordan's overstretched economy and infrastructure.[8] Hence, without continued international support for UNRWA, Jordan fears it cannot absorb the added burden on healthcare, education, and food aid, in case of such an influx.[9] Jordanian officials urgently called for the restoration of UNRWA funding, stressing that the Israeli accusations involved only 12 out of 13,000 staff members, and highlighting the agency's crucial role in aiding over 2 million Palestinian refugees, emphasizing that continued support is vital for both Palestinian refugees and Jordan's stability.[10] While the crisis may have been averted at the time, Israel's recent decision to ban UNRWA throughout its territory does not leave Jordan unaffected.

By January 2024, the conflict began impacting Jordan more directly in terms of national security. Regarding external threats, on January 28, 2024, Iranian-affiliated militias from Iraq, attacked Tower 22, a U.S. base in Jordan, causing the deaths of three American soldiers. Essentially, the attacks were a direct retaliation to the U.S. support of the Israeli war on Gaza, highlighted Jordan's precarious position as a key U.S. ally in the region. However, the Jordanian government condemned the assault and emphasized that the U.S. presence is critical for securing its borders against threats from both the Islamic State and Iran-backed militias. Hence the country is unlikely to expel U.S. forces, thus underscoring the delicate balance it has to maintain between the imperatives of its international alliances and the mounting regional and domestic hostility against them. Regarding the domestic threats to national security, the government is concerned by the possibility of attacks carried out by Jordanians inside Israel. The incident in Neot HaKikar in the south Dead Sea, where Jordanian infiltrators wounded Israeli border guards, represents the most recent example.[11] Jordanian officials have issued a statement clarifying that the attackers were not members of the country's armed forces aiming to reassure Israel that the security forces remain committed to their duties. However, they seem to remain deeply concerned about the potential continuation and escalation of such incidents.

The convergence of the above-mentioned domestic and external pressures highlights the motivations behind Jordan's diplomatic actions. On the one hand, the government is internationally advocating for peace and for addressing the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, in an effort to domestically protect itself from the ripple effects of the conflict. On the other hand, it is striving to maintain certain partnerships that are critical to the country's national security, albeit being widely unpopular domestically. As part of this effort, the Hashemite Kingdom has emphasized the need to protect Palestinian civilians, focusing on initiatives to secure aid corridors into Gaza and to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. King Abdullah II has reached out to leaders in the Arab world and beyond, urging them to join in efforts for de-escalation, as well as addressing the root causes of the conflict, including the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, and Israel's persistent refusal to allow Palestinian self-determination. In the same context, Jordan's Foreign Minister, Ayman Safadi, condemned Israel's actions during a recent UN Security Council meeting, denouncing not only the war on Gaza, but also the bombing of Beirut and calling attention to the violations of Lebanon's sovereignty. Regardless, while Jordan's diplomacy seeks regional de-escalation, these efforts seem primarily aimed at quelling domestic grievances. This becomes evident as these efforts contrast with the country's reluctance to confront its U.S. ally directly on the Gaza issue, thus leaving the government vulnerable to increasing domestic criticism. While diplomatic moves are a key part of Jordan's strategy, they appear inadequate to satisfy the domestic calls for more decisive action.[12]

As the war in Gaza continues, Jordan finds itself at a critical juncture. The continuous domestic unrest, shows the inadequacy of the government's diplomatic efforts to reassuring popular grievances, thus highlighting the gap between what the Jordanian people demand and what the government is willing or able to provide. Jordan's leadership faces a difficult path in maintaining stability as it seeks to respond to the growing anger from its citizens, manage the humanitarian crisis and navigate the pressures of its alliances. Ultimately, the situation in Gaza is not just a distant conflict for Jordan but a pivotal issue that has profound implications for the country.

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