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Introduction

Jordan's relations with the United States are almost as old as the kingdom itself, with the country enjoying a generally strengthening relationship over the years ... until the arrival of the Trump Administration in 2017. In the four-year period since then, policy differences multiplied, with Jordan repeatedly on the outside looking in. Yet, at the same time, key aspects of the long-standing strategic relationship remained unchanged. Extensive American foreign military and economic assistance continued. But Jordanians at both the state and society levels felt increasingly neglected, marginalized, and at times ignored, even as the strategic and economic aspects of the relationship appeared to proceed apace.

In Jordan, and indeed in many Arab countries, there was a palpable sense of relief that the Trump years would soon be over and that US Middle East policy might change, even if only incrementally. Jordan's King Abdullah II was among the first Arab leaders to speak with President-elect Joe Biden. This might not seem particularly noteworthy at first blush, but Jordan is not a geopolitical heavyweight like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or the United Arab Emirates. While each of these three Arab states enjoyed particularly warm relations with the Trump White House, Jordan was left for four years in an uncomfortable and unaccustomed position of seemingly benign neglect. Jordanian kings were used to closer relations—both nationally and even at a personal level—with American presidents.

Despite this cooling of relations at the highest and even interpersonal levels, the strategic aspects of American-Jordanian relations remained strong and unchanged. In 2019, US aid to Jordan reached $1.5 billion, with $1.082 billion in economic aid via the US Agency for International Development and $425 million in military aid. A Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2018 committed the United States to contributing $6.375 billion to Jordan over a five-year period, and the United States had given additional funding to Jordan to help the kingdom deal with Syrian refugees and, more recently, with the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Jordan also remains a "Major non-NATO Ally," further enhancing its military relations not only with the United States but also with the member states of the entire NATO alliance. For the last 20 years, the kingdom has also maintained a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States, the first FTA for the US with any Arab country. Strategic cooperation and aid, therefore, remained strong in US-Jordanian relations, but significant policy differences emerged during the Trump years, dampening the overall sense of the relationship.

Jordan and the Trump Effect

Although the Trump Administration did not create a major rift in US-Jordanian relations, it did at times make the relationship—especially as viewed from the Jordanian side—profoundly difficult. In other words, Jordan had not changed its positions, but the United States had. The sticking point was a series of specific policy differences in which the Trump Administration ignored Jordanian concerns and proceeded with controversial moves, each a major departure from decades of American policy, and all to the chagrin and frustration of Jordanian officials. These included US recognition of Israel's

annexation of the Golan Heights as well as the decision to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The Trump Administration also cut off aid from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, the main organization supporting Palestinian refugees, severely impacting the lives of Palestinian refugees, including those in Jordan, and leaving the Jordanian government to scramble in an effort to find alternative funding sources. In each of the cases, Jordan had opposed the US policy move and had strongly advised against it, but to no avail. And every time, Jordan's influence appeared to be weaker to the point of irrelevance.

Jordanian officials and the Jordanian public alike were united in their opposition to the Trump/Kushner proposed peace plan between Israel and Palestine, especially as various proposals leaked such as a potential confederation between Jordan and the still-not-sovereign Palestinian territories. The alarm level in Jordan was so extensive that the Trump moves managed to re-ignite longstanding Jordanian fears regarding the idea of *watan badeel* (the alternative homeland) or the "Jordan Option"—scenarios in which Jordan would become a de facto Palestinian state or in which the Palestinian issue would, one way or another, be "solved" at Jordan's expense. Of course, all these scenarios were nonstarters for Jordan, in the views of both government and opposition.

For these reasons, many Jordanians hoped that a Biden presidency would mean the termination of these ill-informed experiments and an end to the ignominy of any version of the Trump peace proposal. But the very fears themselves had underscored another Jordanian concern: that the kingdom was becoming sidelined in the region by a White House that had put a premium on relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt—with cordial and proper relations with Jordan, but no more than that. Many Jordanian policy-makers felt that an emergent alignment (if not a formal alliance) between the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia was marginalizing the Hashemite Kingdom in the foreign policies of all three states. Jordan had previously created for itself a key role as regional intermediary and go-between for Israel and Jordan's Gulf allies. The closeness of US-Israeli-Saudi relations—and their apparent prioritization of an anti-Iranian front—seemed to threaten Jordan's long-standing regional role. Moreover, actual US policies under Trump only reinforced that impression, discounting Jordanians and Palestinians alike and contributing to the increasingly cold peace between Jordan and Israel.

This is also true of the series of normalization agreements—what the Trump administration referred to as the Abraham Accords—between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Israel and Bahrain. Jordan did not oppose these accords, but it did not applaud them, either. After all, the kingdom has maintained its own peace treaty with the State of Israel since 1994, so the Jordanians were careful not to openly criticize their Gulf allies. Nonetheless, they appeared to be startled as Gulf allies seemingly abandoned the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative by making separate deals without solving the core issue of the Palestinians' right to a state of their own. The Abraham Accords seemed to sideline Jordan once again; Jordanians openly discussed whether Jordan's unique geopolitical position and standing might be in jeopardy, and whether Jordan's important diplomatic role as mediator and force for moderation might no longer be valued by the United States.

Even more pressing was Jordan's historically unique role as protector of the Muslim and Christian holy places in Jerusalem. That responsibility is enshrined even within the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty. But Jordanians were concerned that an outgoing Trump Administration and the Netanyahu government in Israel might shift this role from Jordan to Saudi Arabia in exchange for Saudi-Israeli normalization. The Hashemites in Jordan, contrary to the views of their many critics, take this duty very seriously. The fear, then, was that the United States might go along with a major policy shift, potentially abrogating some of Jordan's historical roles and especially its guardianship of the al-Aqsa mosque on the Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary) in Jerusalem.

Domestic and Regional Pressures

In addition to foreign policy concerns, the kingdom, meanwhile, faces severe domestic and regional pressures that threaten the security of the state itself. Like most countries of the region, Jordan was deeply affected by the waves of protests that started at the end of 2010 and came to be known as the Arab Spring. Unlike Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, or Yemen, the Jordanian version of the Arab Spring did not lead to regime change, a coup d'état, civil war, or external military intervention. But it did include waves of protests, sometimes in the thousands, demanding greater political change, an end to corruption in public life, and help for Jordanians suffering from severe economic hardship.

These waves continued, rising and falling, long after the regional Arab Spring itself waned. In 2018, protesters returned to the streets in massive numbers across the country, in a nightly series of demonstrations during the month of Ramadan, to protest against tax increases, corruption, and perceived indifference by the government regarding the daily hardships of ordinary Jordanians. These protests succeeded in bringing down the government of Prime Minister Hani al-Mulqi and in seeing the rise of a reformist administration under Prime Minister Omar al-Razzaz. Other protests continued, including a nationwide teachers' strike in 2019. By the time Razzaz resigned in October 2020 to pave the way for new elections, many Jordanians were deeply disappointed in the latest government and disillusioned with the political process as a whole. Parliament remained weak and largely ineffective, and prime ministers and governments came and went with a similar lack of effect, though they provided a kind of buffer between monarchy and society. This does not mean, however, that many or most Jordanians were in any way placated. To the contrary, Jordanian elections (for the lower house of parliament) have seen a steady drop in an always-low voter turnout.

Somewhat surprisingly, Jordan continued with plans for its most recent elections—in November 2020—despite a massive surge in COVID-19 cases across the country. Jordan had initially pursued the most extensive set of lockdown procedures of any Middle Eastern country, a program that had even appeared to be wildly successful. But the winter saw the return of the coronavirus, this time with far more disturbing numbers of infections and deaths. Yet the elections continued, with voter turnout dropping from 36 percent in 2016 to a mere 29 percent in 2020. Political scientists criticized the elections for producing another weak parliament that was not particularly representative of Jordanian society—and certainly not of the Jordanian opposition—and also for being "one of the least democratic elections in Jordan's recent history."

The Jordanian state has tended to prioritize state and regime security, first, economic stabilization second, and political reform perhaps a distant third. For the state, security must come first in the context of the region in turmoil, civil wars and insurgencies across multiple borders, and terrorist threats from both without and within. In fact, Jordan has seen a rise in homegrown extremism, especially from the so-called Islamic State, including attacks in Irbid and Karak in 2016. But opposition figures and reform advocates are always quick to point out that Jordan's security concerns, while real, are also a constant in political life. They therefore reject the idea that security and counterterrorism should be allowed to override concerns with political and economic reform. The failure to achieve more real and lasting political inclusion and economic equality, activists often argue, is what actually constitutes Jordan's greatest national security threat.

Resetting US-Jordanian Relations

Both regime and opposition hope for a reset in US-Jordanian relations under a Biden Administration. The state is looking to maintain and expand its already-extensive strategic relationship, including US economic and military assistance, as Jordan sees itself as a frontline state in any war on terror and as a stalwart ally of the United States. Many in the Jordanian opposition, in contrast, see American geopolitical priorities as reinforcing autocracy and undermining reform and liberalization, regardless of US rhetoric or pronouncements to the contrary. While some Jordanian activists oppose any heavy US role outright, others hope for a different kind of reset: away from securitization and toward support for more genuine reform and change within the kingdom.

For the Biden era in US-Jordanian relations, Jordanians at both government and opposition levels are simply looking to be heard and appreciated by the United States. They also hope for a more balanced American foreign policy, one that embraces a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and values a Jordanian role in the peace process and in regional stability. But the kingdom is also beset by chronic fiscal crises, massive unemployment amid a staggeringly high cost of living, a terrifying surge in COVID-19 cases, and continued domestic and regional political pressures. The economic crisis, even without the hardships wrought by the coronavirus pandemic, is particularly dire, with national debt reaching 97.4 percent of GDP in 2019 and unemployment as high as 23 percent in 2020 (and likely far higher among youth). Jordan's needs, in short, are many.

At a state-to-state level, in some measure, Jordanian officials hope to see the incoming Biden Administration expand US aid to the kingdom as it continues to deal with fiscal crises, unemployment, refugees, and COVID-19. They also would like to see a Biden foreign policy team that will prioritize and value Jordan, once again, as a key component and concern in American Middle East policy. Jordanian officials often argue that the US-Jordanian alliance has now lasted for approximately 70 years, but for Jordan at least, the need for US support has never been greater.