

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan After Bashar Al-Assad

Shaul Shay

(Senior research fellow at the International Institute for Counter-terrorism (ICT) at the Interdisciplinary Centre Herzliya and former deputy head of Israel's National Security Council)

Jacob Rosen Koenigsbuch

(Former Ambassador of Israel in Jordan)

**Copyright: © 2025 Research Institute for European and American Studies
(www.rieas.gr) Publication date: 1 January 2025**

Note: The article reflects the opinion of the author and not necessarily the views of the Research Institute for European and American Studies

After the swift collapse of Assad's regime, like all the players on the international and regional arenas, Jordan too was surprised and observes the shifting scene in Syria with caution and great concern and adopts the necessary security measures to prevent threats to its security and sovereignty. The collapse of the Assad regime also illuminated at once both the strategic importance of Jordan but also some of its vulnerabilities.

Sharing a 370 km border with Syria required a swift realignment in face of the future developments in a very uncertain direction of events. On December 6, 2024, Jordann's interior minister, Mazen al-Faraya has announced "the closure of the Jaber border crossing opposite the Syrian Nassib crossing as a result of the surrounding security conditions in Syria's south." The minister added that Jordanians and Jordanian trucks would be allowed to return via the crossing, while no one would be allowed to cross into Syria. The same day Syrian armed

rebels seized control of the Nassib border crossing with Jordan, as well as nearby checkpoints and towns. ¹

Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi affirmed Amman's support for Syria during its rebuilding phase after years of war. "We support the continuation of Syrian state institutions to fully perform their roles, and we do not want them to sink into chaos," said Safadi.²

Jordan is not the only neighbor of Syria which shares those concerns. The Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad Al-Sudani arrived to meet King Abdallah on December 11, 2024 to discuss the regional developments.³

On December 14, 2024, the foreign ministers from Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar, met in the Jordanian Red Sea port of Aqaba, to discuss the future of Syria.

In a final statement after the talks the foreign ministers said they had agreed to "support a peaceful transition process" in Syria, "in which all political and social forces are represented." The Arab diplomats also declared their backing for a transitional rule agreed upon by Syrians, which would enable "a political system that corresponds to the aspirations of all parts of the Syrian people, through free and fair elections overseen by the United Nations." In their statement, the ministers said state institutions must be preserved to stop Syria from "slipping into chaos," also calling to boost joint "efforts to combat terrorism... as it poses a threat to Syria and to the security of the region and the world."⁴

In addition to the Arab foreign ministers' meeting, Jordan was also hosting US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and top EU and UN officials for talks on Syria.

Jordan has to deal with severe security and economic problems originating from its neighbor Syria. A stable and friendly government to Jordan may contribute to the solution of these problems, while a chaotic situation and a hostile regime in Damascus may worsen them.

The threat of drug smuggling from Syria - for more than a decade, the illegal drug Captagon has been mass produced in Syria, in laboratories either run by or with the blessing of a regime hard hit by Western sanctions and desperate to generate revenue. Under Assad, Syria was churning out 10\$ billion in Captagon exports each year, with much of it smuggled through Jordan.

While Assad himself carefully distanced himself from the trade, his brother Maher was heavily implicated with production and smuggling efforts in his role as commander of the Fourth Armored Division, a military unit whose primary mission was to protect the Syrian regime from internal and external threats.⁵

In his victory speech at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, HTS leader Abu Mohammed Al-Julani made a specific point of condemning the drug and Assad's part in its production. The ousted president, he said, had caused the country to become "a major Captagon factory in the world, and today Syria is being cleansed of it."⁶

Since the fall of Assad regime, multiple Captagon laboratories have been overrun by the rebels in areas formerly controlled by the Syrian government, with raw materials, machinery, packaging and countless pills found abandoned in haste.⁷

But the collapse of the Assad regime doesn't mean the end of the Captagon production and Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are worried that Syria's drug production could fall into the hands of one of the many armed groups now operating in the country.

The threat of arms smuggling from Syria

In recent years, Jordan has intensified its efforts to combat the smuggling of weapons and drugs by networks directed by Iran and its militias, to its territory. After the war in Gaza Strip broke out, a significant Iranian effort began to assist terrorists in the West Bank to escalate their attacks and open another “resistance front” closer to Israeli population centers.

Iranian attempts to form this new front, smuggling attempts have become more violent, especially along Jordan’s northern border and several border guards were injured in the exchange of fire with smugglers. In the past year, Jordanian security forces prevented dozens of smugglers with connections to pro-Iranian militias from infiltrating into the country from Syria with a large quantity of weapons. The weapons included rifles and pistols, explosives like C4 and TNT, anti-tank mines, anti-tank missiles and RPG launchers and mortars shells, as discovered in shipments intercepted by the IDF in March and November 2024.⁸

The most serious result of the subversive activity of the Axis of Resistance was a terror attack against Israel. On October 18,2024, two terrorists belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Jordan, Hussam Abu Ghazala and Amer Kuas penetrated into Israeli territory south of the Dead Sea and opened fire on two IDF soldiers. The spokesmen of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Jordan (the Islamic Action Front party), declared immediately after the attack that its perpetrators belonged to their movement. The spokesman Hamas in Gaza, Abu Obeidah, published a statement in which he praised the two Jordanian terrorists and noted that the military arm of the movement received exclusive photos of the site of the attack taken by the two Jordanian terrorists during the information gathering phase prior to its execution.⁹

The Syrian refugees in Jordan

There are many urgent bilateral issues which need to be tackled between the two neighbors. At the top are of course the 1.3 million Syrians who took refuge in Jordan since 2011. Their presence in Jordan puts a heavy weight on its limited resources in a variety of domains.

The Interior Minister of Jordan, Mazen al-Faraya, said that about 22,215 Syrians have crossed into their country from Jordan since the regime of Bashar al-Assad was toppled earlier this month (December 2024).¹⁰ But it certainly will take time before things will stabilize in Syria and it is very difficult to forecast how many of those Syrian refugees will be able to return to their homeland in the near future.

There are many problems arising from the presence of the Syrian refugees. Here are some examples:

The demographic challenge- during the decade that Syrian refugees have been living in Jordan, many marriages have been formed between the refugees and Jordanian citizens and now the question of the identity and status of such couples and their children arises.

The dilemma of the international aid - Jordan is receiving international aid to host the Syrian refugees on its territory. There is a concern that although it will take a long time for all the refugees to return to their country, even in light of the recent return of limited numbers, the shift of international aid may occur in favor of the rehabilitation of the refugees returning to Syria.

It has long complained about Syrian Jordan-**The water dispute** - deprivation of its annual water share from the Yarmouk River (estimated at 375

million cubic meters). This will be the litmus test for the willingness of Syria to restart a neighborly relations.

First steps to develop normal relations between Jordan and Syria

It took two weeks before Jordan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ayman Al-Safadi arrived to Damascus to meet the new leader Ahmad Al-Shara to discuss matters of joint interest.¹¹

Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi affirmed Amman's support for Syria during its rebuilding phase after years of war. "We support the continuation of Syrian state institutions to fully perform their roles, and we do not want them to sink into chaos," said Safadi.¹²

On December 13, 2024, Jordan Ministry of Industry and Trade, Yarub Qudah, announced that preparations are carried out to facilitate the resumption of truck exports via the Jaber border crossing and the Jordanian-Syrian joint free zone, subject to the readiness of the Syrian side. The decision does not apply to passenger traffic, and the goods will be exported through a delivery system that involves the transfer between trucks at the border. On December 19, 2024, Industry and Trade Minister said that all Jordanian products can now be exported to Syria through the Jaber border crossing and that Jordan has also allowed Syrian exporters to use its territory to export goods to global markets.¹³

King Abdullah II has said that Jordan seeks to ensure regional security and stability, including in Syria, by involving the international community in these prospects.¹⁴

In a phone call with French President Emmanuel Macron, King Abdullah II reaffirmed Jordan's support for Syria in building a free, independent, and fully sovereign state that fulfils the aspirations of all components of the Syrian people. He reiterated the centrality of Syria's security and stability for the

region, stressing Jordan's rejection of any encroachment on Syria's territory and sovereignty.¹⁵

Concluding Remarks

Following the war in Gaza, Iran tried to smuggle weapons from Syria into Jordan, which would boost terrorist capabilities to attack Israel and to destabilize Jordan. Jordan has foiled several attempts to smuggle weapons and drugs through the Syrian border by militias supported by Iran and Israel has also increased its efforts to prevent arms from being smuggled to its territory. The overthrow of the Assad regime undermined Iran's ability to transfer weapons through Syria. However, Iran's commitment to the "resistance" will most probably lead Tehran to seek alternative routes to replace the one through Syria and transfer weapons to its proxies for attacks on Israel, most probably via the Iraqi-Jordanian border which stretches along 111 km.

Today, the Hashemite kingdom observes the shifting scene with caution and great concern. Jordanian leadership recognizes the uncertainties of what lies ahead, given the unpredictable developments following the rapid fall of Assad's regime in just 12 days, led by the armed opposition factions under the control of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham . HTS is rooted in Al-Qaeda's Syria branch and is designated as a "terrorist" organization by many Western governments. Despite their reservations, Arab governments including Jordan have little choice but to engage with HTS, the de facto power inside Syria.

The ***best-case scenario for Jordan*** is for the power transition process in Syria to be peaceful, with the participation of all components of Syrian society, ***including the Kurds and Druze, and for Syrian refugees to return to Syria.***

The other scenarios should cause concern in Jordan. One scenario is that HTS establishes its rule creating a new Islamic dictatorship in Damascus replacing of the Assad dictatorship. In a possibly even more dangerous scenario, a civil war would break out in Syria and the country would be in a state of chaos.

In order to prevent the dangerous scenarios from materializing in Syria, the Arab countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, with the help of the US and European countries, need to concentrate a diplomatic and economic effort in order to restore stability to Syria and the entire region.

Notes

¹ Armed groups in south Syria take over Jordan border crossing: war monitor, Ahram online, December 6, 2024.

² Jordan supports Syria in rebuilding phase after years of killing: Foreign Minister, Al Arabiya, December 15, 2024.

³ Iraqi Prime Minister pays official visit to Jordan, AlSharqiya, December 11, 2024.

⁴ Arab FMs urge support for inclusive, 'peaceful' Syria transition, Al Arabiya, December 14, 2024.

⁵ Syria's opposition group exposes ousted government's drug trade, Al Arabiya, December 13, 2024.

⁶ What Assad's overthrow revealed about Syrian regime's Captagon empire, Arab news, December 14, 2024.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Captured documents reveal how Iran smuggles weapons via Syria and Jordan, The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center At the Israeli Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, December 22, 2024.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Jordan says 22,215 Syrians returned home since al-Assad's fall, Jo24News <https://jo24.net/article/520612December28>, 2024.

¹¹ Jordan's top diplomat holds talks with Syria's new leader, Al Arabiya, December 23, 2024.

¹² Jordan supports Syria in rebuilding phase after years of killing: Foreign minister, Al-Arabiya, December 15, 2024.

¹³ Jordan opens door for Syrian exports to global markets via Jaber border crossing, Jordan Daily, December 19, 2024.

¹⁴ Seth J Frantzman, Southern Syria's resurgence brings Jordan and Iraq back in key roles – analysis, The Jerusalem Post, December 14, 2024.

¹⁵ King tells France president Jordan supports Syria in building free, independent, sovereign state, Jordan Daily, December 27, 2024.