



## Jordan: geopolitics of equilibrium

Earth Thought Notebooks

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**At the heart of a conflict-ridden Middle East, Jordan is a haven of stability. This tour de force intrigues and raises questions. The conduct of a constant realpolitik and the exploitation of its own assets give the Jordanian state the capacity to avoid all the specific pitfalls of the region.**

Between 2009 and 2014, Iraq deplored 4,000 deaths each year as a result of attacks. Since the spring of 2014, the extension of the Islamic state in Iraq and the Levant (EIL) has exploded this sad toll. Civil war is still raging in Syria. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains virulent, particularly around the security issues related to East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip. At the epicentre of this particularly unstable area is Jordan.

A young nation whose independent state came into being in 1946, Jordan covers some 92,000 km<sup>2</sup>, or one fifth of France. Its approximately 6.5 million inhabitants are governed by a perennial monarchy that seems to be effectively facing the challenges of the 21st century, whether internal <sup>or</sup> regional. However, in addition to the constant dangers posed by the crisis situations in neighbouring states, Jordan also has internal factors that could lead it to sink into chaos and violence. How, therefore, does it manage to maintain its internal balance on the one hand and peace with its neighbours on the other?

Jordan is effectively facing this challenge by conducting a constant realpolitik and exploiting clearly identified assets. No other Arab State in the Middle East is in a position to do the same and thus avoid the specific pitfalls and traps of the region.

### Jordan at the heart of tensions

The idea of a Jordan free of all tensions does not correspond to the reality of the facts. There have been protest movements, especially since the explosion of the Arab

revolutions. A few attacks<sup>[2]</sup> have already disturbed this apparent calm. These sporadic events are the symptoms of a country that has to deal permanently with real destabilizing factors.

Firstly, the country has not been spared by the economic crisis. While its growth was 8% in 2007, it fell to 3% in 2014. Added to this is the foreign debt, of which energy imports (97%) are the main cause. In order to honour its debts, in November 2012, the state reduced subsidies aimed at moderating the internal market price of energy. As a result, prices rose rapidly by 10% for petrol, 11% for public transport and 53% for gas, fuelling the resentment of a population a quarter of whom live below the poverty line <sup>[3]</sup>.

A second source of tension is the scarcity of national water resources. Water consumption barely reaches 145<sup>m<sup>3</sup></sup> per year and per person (per 1,000<sup>m<sup>3</sup></sup> worldwide). Groundwater consists mainly of non-renewable aquifers. They will dry up in a few years. The two main rivers are the Yarmouk in the north and the Jordan in the west. But the Hebrew state controls part of the Yarmouk with the occupation of the Golan Heights and part of the Jordan River (not counting its tributaries) through its stranglehold on the West Bank. The diversion of much of these waters has turned the Jordan River, between Lake Tiberias and the Dead Sea, into a small, unusable stream. The situation can only get worse, especially in view of the steadily increasing needs.

Indeed, the population is growing exponentially, with the risks of crisis that such an acceleration entails. And for good reason, since the implementation of the Daleth Plan in 1948 by Israel, the proportion of Palestinian refugees in the population has gradually exceeded that of the original Jordanian tribes. They now constitute the majority population in Jordan (about 3.9 million). In addition, the wars in Iraq have drained 450,000 Iraqis. Finally, fleeing the civil war, some 600,000 Syrian refugees crossed the border in the summer of 2014. The Jordanian population is now composed of 60% Palestinians, 9.1% Syrians, 6.9% Iraqis and only 20% <sup>[4]</sup> original Jordanians.

Moreover, the country borders a zone of fracture between two spaces. In the north-east, Iraq is 51% Shiite. In the north, Syria is ruled by a Shiite caste, the Alaouites. In the north-west, in the south of Lebanon, Hezbollah is an outpost of Iranian Shiism. This "Shiite crescent", described by King Abdullah II in December 2004, is opposed to the Sunni area, of which Jordan is one of the bridgeheads. However, the clashes that have been raging in Iraq since May 2014 and the Syrian civil war cannot be decorated with the secular dissension between Sunnis and Shiites. The front lines may well shift within the kingdom.

Finally, the Muslim brothers are developing their protest influence in Jordan. Indeed, some Salafist groups are strengthening, especially in the south of the country, in the Ma'an region <sup>[5]</sup>.

<sup>5]</sup> Thus, factors of proven unrest are indeed impacting Jordan and could cause it to sink into a social crisis that could lead to armed confrontations. However, this scenario is still not a viable option.

### **Structural factors for peace in Jordan**

Jordanian stability, which is fragile but for the time being sustainable, is partly based on structural factors. Their juxtaposition contributes to the country's stability. These factors are historical and geographical.

In the first place, the king comes from the lineage of the guardians of the holy places of Hijaz [6]. Indeed, the current monarch, Abdullah, is the great-grandson of the first Jordanian king, Abdullah, who was also the brother of Prince Faysal [7]. Both were sons of Sheriff Hussein of Makkah, whose dynasty, the Hashemites, is in the same lineage as that of the Prophet Muhammad. This dynasty had been in charge of the holy places since the 12th century. In a region where Islam is in the majority, one can think that this lineage implicitly attributes tacit immunity to Jordan, while assuring it of the financial support of the oil monarchies [8].

The nature of the Jordanian political regime also contributes to the country's stability. Indeed, it is traditionally less authoritarian than those of other countries in the region. For example, since 2011, the crackdown on demonstrations related to the "Arab Spring" has resulted in only one death in the ranks of demonstrators. This is why, with a few exceptions, the political system in Jordan does not give rise to large-scale protest movements, such as those that shook the other dictatorial regimes in the region from 2011 onwards.

Finally, Jordan suffers from a weakness that can paradoxically be considered an asset for the purposes of this study. It is one of the only countries in the region whose subsoil does not contain any major hydrocarbon deposits. In 1987, only one relatively modest gas reserve was discovered (about 250 billion m<sup>3</sup>), and oil reserves amount to one million barrels [9]. [9] These small resources are also poorly exploited. Jordan imports 97% of its energy [10]. However, in the context of regional tensions, hydrocarbons generally contribute to complicating the situation. One can therefore seriously believe that the absence of hydrocarbon wealth contributes to distancing Jordan from the spectre of regional and global covetousness, often a cause of destabilization.

These structural factors are not the only reasons for Jordan's national stability.

### **A delicate Jordanian policy and diplomacy**

Jordanian peace is also indebted to the government's socio-economic and geopolitical choices, which are indicative of effective pragmatism and a sure sense of timing.

First of all, the political strategy of the Jordanian executive is based above all on its capacity to adapt and its responsiveness. In a tense economic context, the King has made the fight against poverty his priority. Social protection for the poorest has been put in place. The salaries of civil servants and pensions have been upgraded, while in 2010 those of ministers were cut by 20% [11]. To reduce energy dependence, the King is seeking to increase the share of locally produced energy in overall consumption. He wants to increase it from 4% to 39% in 2020 thanks to wind power, biomass, solar energy and oil shale [12]. While waiting for this medium-term project, it has advantageously negotiated a gas contract with Qatar. This will also make it possible to compensate for the supply cut decided by Egypt in 2012.

To defuse water-related tensions, the government has recently launched a large investment programme that includes no less than 60 projects. The Amman network has been upgraded to reduce leakage losses by 10%. Thanks to international assistance, an aqueduct carrying water pumped from the Disah aquifer in Amman was inaugurated in July 2013. The joint construction by Israel and Jordan of a 180 km canal between the Dead Sea and the Red Sea began in 2013 with the aim of supplying water to the salt lake. In addition, a desalination plant will be installed in Aqaba for the benefit of both countries.

As regards relations with the Palestinian cause, they have fluctuated according to the opportunities and pressures of the moment. At the end of the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948, Jordan, then called Transjordan, annexed the West Bank, setting itself up as the protector of the Palestinians. When it evacuated it after the Arab defeat of 1967, it became the host of the PLO. But from 1970, through bloody fighting, it ousted this organization, thus opening the way to normalization with Israel. Thus, Jordan has today succeeded in the paradoxical gamble of a peace with Israel, even though it is itself composed of a population of predominantly Palestinian origin.

As for the diplomatic options, they are characterised by a search for consensus that raises the country above regional tensions. In October 1994, Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel, thus becoming the second Arab country to recognize the Jewish state and securing the financial support of the United States. From 1951 to 1997, total US aid is estimated at \$3.9 billion. In 2000, a free trade agreement was signed between Jordanians and Americans. Jordan thus increased its exports from \$10 million in 1997 to \$994 million in 2004<sup>[13]</sup>.

<sup>13]</sup> If Jordan is today an island of peace in a Middle East under fire and blood, it owes it as much to its structural assets (historical legitimacy of power, traditionally moderate governance, etc.) as to its political and economic stability, as well as to its politics (pragmatic and appropriate choices despite high social stakes) and diplomacy (balanced international relations, especially with Israel). Paradoxically, it also owes this to its weakness in hydrocarbons.

But the question that arises today is how long the Jordanian exception will be able to hold out in the face of the destabilising factor constituted by the extremism of the EIL. Jordan has in fact decided to take part in combat operations against the EIL since September 2014, knowing that part of the territory claimed by the terrorist organization is on its territory <sup>[14]</sup>.

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**1] The challenge in Jordan dates back to January 7, 2011. However, it remained on a medium scale, except for the demonstration on 26 January 2011.**

**2] 9 December 2005 in Amman (57 dead), 02 August 2010 in Aqaba....**

**3] "Spontaneous demonstrations in Jordan against the rise in fuel prices", Angélique Férat, RFI, 14 November 2012.**

**4] "Les Palestiniens en Jordanie", Delphine Froment, "Les clefs du Moyen-Orient", 22 April 2013; "La Jordanie, terre d'asile à la croisée des chemins", Kristell Bernaud, Slate, 19 September 2012; website of the United Nations refugee agency . All these data only approximately reflect a situation that fluctuates on a daily basis and for which there are no official statistics from the Jordanian authorities.**

**5] "Le califat de l'État islamiste aux portes de la Jordanie", Gokan Gunes, l'Express, 24 August 2014.**

**6] Western strip of Saudi Arabia where Mecca and Medina are located.**

7] Prince Faysal led the Arab revolt of 1916 alongside Lawrence of Arabia and was the first king of Iraq after the First World War.

8] "Jordan, a country under infusion", Anne Bernas, [www.rfi.fr/moyen-orient](http://www.rfi.fr/moyen-orient), 22 June 2006.

9] [http://www.assecaa.org/French/F\\_Jordan.htm](http://www.assecaa.org/French/F_Jordan.htm).

10] "Jordan: recent measures to bring renewable energy to the market",

<http://www.naruc.org/international/Documents/JORDANIE>, 2010.

[11] "Jordanie, baisse du salaire des ministres", *Le Figaro*, 17 March 2010.

[12] "Faced with a rising oil bill, Jordan is preparing an ambitious energy strategy", Leïla Abboud, <http://www.mediaraabe.info>, 10 December 2007.

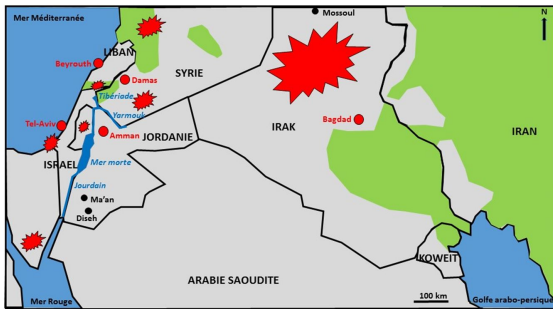
13] "Les relations jordano-américaines," Alia Al-Jiboury, <http://www.irenees.net>, October 2006.

14] Jordan: a separatist project? Nahid Hattar, <http://www.al-akhbar.com>, 9 June 2014.

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**★** Zones de tension *Carte élaborée à partir des sources suivantes:*  
<http://www.ecolinks.fr>  
**■** Zones à majorité chiite *Souffles, Chiffres et lieux saints au Moyen-Orient en 2010, Question internationale (6<sup>e</sup> 46 novembre-décembre 2010)*  
**■** Zones à majorité sunnite *Carte géopolitique de Jordanie, Source Encarta*