

White House Meeting with King of Jordan Needs Strong Bilateral Agenda

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

President Biden will meet King Abdullah of Jordan on July 19. Jordan is a vital ally, key to advancing U.S. interests, including a stable Middle East.

Continued deterioration of socioeconomic conditions in Jordan increases the risk of domestic instability, but the U.S. can help to chart a stable path forward.

President Biden should discuss with King Abdullah how Jordan can deter Iranian interference, reduce Israeli–Palestinian tensions, and promote economic freedom.

On July 19, Jordan’s King Abdullah II will be the first Arab leader to meet with President Joe Biden.¹ The two leaders have much to discuss. Jordan faces mounting pressure amid a spiraling economic and COVID-19 health crisis that has had far-reaching consequences for Jordanians, including the royal family.

In early April, a foiled coup attempt against the king punctured Jordan’s image as a stable country in a volatile region. Syria is in its 10th year of a brutal civil war, Lebanon is close to economic collapse, Iraq’s political stability is hanging by a thread, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict shows more signs of escalation than it does progress. Growing regional instability makes Jordan’s bilateral relationship with the United States more important now than ever. President Biden should use this

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meeting as an opportunity to strengthen bilateral ties by discussing economic and security cooperation, Iranian interference in the Middle East, festering Israeli–Palestinian tensions, and the impact of COVID-19 in Jordan.

A Critical U.S. Partner in a Tumultuous Region

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan’s strategic location, pro-Western outlook, and stability has made the country one of the most important U.S. partners for advancing a stable, peaceful Middle East.

Since establishing bilateral relations in 1949, Jordan has remained a close friend of the United States. Jordan works alongside the U.S. to counter terrorist threats. During the campaign of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, Jordan gathered and shared intelligence, participated in limited airstrikes, and provided training grounds for coalition troops. Today, more than 3,000 U.S. troops remain stationed in Jordan to help to prevent the return of the Islamic State, train the Jordanian Armed Forces on border defense, and enhance regional security.²

Jordan is also a critical mediator in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The country’s peace treaty with Israel and its historical and demographic ties to the Palestinian territories gives Jordan access to both sides of the negotiation, making it a key actor to advance the peace process.

In return for Jordan’s enduring friendship, the United States has helped the kingdom to shore up external and internal vulnerabilities. Jordan’s poorly resourced economy faces a number of challenges that limit its potential for economic growth. Landlocked with few natural resources, and more than 1.3 million Syrian refugees living alongside Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, Jordan’s economy is heavily reliant on foreign loans, international aid, and remittances from expatriate workers.

The United States is Jordan’s largest source of bilateral assistance, providing billions of dollars of aid over the years to strengthen Jordan’s military capabilities and aid Jordan’s ailing economy.³ While foreign assistance has helped to stabilize Jordan, it is only a Band-Aid solution to a larger crisis looming in the kingdom.

The Calm Before the Storm?

Socioeconomic conditions in Jordan have worsened over the years, making Jordanians increasingly frustrated with those in power. COVID-19 has only made the situation worse.

The kingdom was successful in preventing a large-scale outbreak in the beginning of the pandemic, but faced surges of COVID-19 infections after easing restrictions. Vaccines are now available, but the rate of vaccination is slow. Only 15 percent of Jordan's population is fully vaccinated, leaving the country at risk for further infections at a fragile time in its history.⁴

COVID-19 has shut down economies around the world, and Jordan is no exception. The economy contracted for the first time in decades by 1.6 percent with unemployment at an all-time high, rising to 24.7 percent in 2020. Among youth, rates of unemployment are even higher, at 50 percent.⁵ Jordan has one of the youngest populations in the world, with 63 percent of its population under the age of 30.

Jordanians are feeling the impact of this deepening economic depression. A recent report by the United Nations Development Program found that nearly 75 percent of people in Jordan reported difficulty in meeting basic needs, such as rent, food, heating, and medicine, and have faced challenges accessing health care under lockdown.⁶

Despite economic challenges, Jordan has historically maintained stability for two reasons: tribal support and a united royal family. Some have questioned the strength of these pillars given the coup attempt. Jordan was rocked by the reports of the attempted coup against King Abdullah involving the king's half-brother Prince Hamza, who was put under house arrest for allegedly plotting to orchestrate political protests that would be amplified by tribal support.

Hamza was removed as crown prince in favor of Abdullah's son Prince Hussein in early 2000, which may have caused resentment to fester over time. Prince Hamza is popular among the Bedouin tribes that form the backbone of the army and security services, a fact that poses a long-term threat to King Abdullah. State patronage granted to Jordan's tribes has waned, fueling discontent.

Citing corruption and mismanagement, the Majali tribe claims that the monarchy is ignoring needs of tribal Jordanians.⁷ Although multiple members of this tribe were arrested for their involvement in the alleged coup, the message is clear: Patience has its limits, even for the king's most ardent supporters.

Tribal support for the monarchy is crucial to ensuring the survival of the monarchy. The majority of Jordan's 10 million citizens are of Palestinian descent. In the past, these citizens were a problem for the state. In 1970, members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) tried to establish a mini-state in Jordan, but were defeated by the tribal-dominated Jordanian Armed Forces. The conflict almost toppled the monarchy. As a

result, Jordan's government remains wary of its Palestinian population and instead relies on the legitimacy provided by its tribal minority. Given the growing instability in the region, now is not the time for Jordan's tribes to turn their backs on the monarchy.

In early May, after Hamas attacked Israeli civilian areas with missiles launched from the Gaza Strip, the terror group and Israel fought an 11-day war. Although a cease-fire de-escalated tensions, peace, as usual, cannot be assumed to last. In Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian territories, the humanitarian situation is deteriorating due to political deadlock, endemic corruption, and collapsing economies. Iran and its proxies will benefit from regional chaos. Even worse, the Islamic State could make a comeback. At such a fragile time for the region, Jordan's stability is crucial.

Topics of Discussion

In many ways, the advancement of U.S. interests in the Middle East is tied directly to Jordan's prosperity and leadership. A strong U.S.–Jordanian bilateral relationship requires open communication on key issues and areas of opportunity that address joint U.S.–Jordanian security concerns. Therefore, the meeting between King Abdullah and President Biden should focus on how Jordan can:

- **Promote economic freedom.** Since implementing the Jordan Free Trade Agreement⁸ in 2000, the U.S. has worked to bolster Jordan's business environment. Jordan's economy suffers from poor fiscal health, a large government deficit, and problems associated with labor laws, property rights, and government integrity. President Biden should discuss ways that Jordan can mitigate these challenges. Expanding the private sector is key to ensuring economic rebound and growth, as well as creating a larger middle class, which is an important building block for greater political stability.
- **Deter Iranian interference.** Iran and its proxies in Gaza, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria threaten the security and stability of the Middle East. Jordan has been a key ally in containing Iranian influence. Joint U.S.–Jordanian security cooperation is key to deterring bad actors. President Biden should reaffirm U.S. commitments to U.S.–Jordanian security cooperation and training efforts to improve the capabilities and capacities of the Jordanian Armed Forces to deter external threats along its borders and across the region.

- **Reduce festering Israeli–Palestinian tensions.** An escalation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict has direct implications for Jordan. If another war breaks out between Hamas and Israel, a weakened Jordan may be vulnerable to cross-border spillover. Israel is a strategic partner of Jordan, though in recent years, the relationship has been strained. President Biden should focus on ways to bolster border security between Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Jordan.
- **Mitigate the impact of COVID-19.** America’s adversaries will use the chaos of COVID-19 to divide the United States from its partners, sow division and disinformation, and exert greater influence over Jordan’s young, vulnerable population. A power vacuum without Jordan’s dependable stability could spell a disaster for the United States—and an opportunity for Iran. President Biden should offer vaccines and discuss an economic recovery plan for Jordan. This plan should prioritize policies and incentives that target private-sector development, job creation, and sustainable growth for Jordan’s young population.

Moving Forward

In the Middle East, conflict is constant, and reliable partners are few. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a key ally to advancing U.S. interests, which very much include a stable Middle East, and it is facing serious challenges as it emerges from the pandemic.

The so-called Arab Spring protests demonstrated that young, dissatisfied populations can topple regimes—but that they cannot guarantee progress or stability. The continued deterioration of socioeconomic conditions in Jordan increases the risk of domestic instability. King Abdullah’s visit to Washington is the opportune moment for the U.S. and Jordan to chart a stable path for this vital U.S. ally.

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Endnotes

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