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Jordan's Experiences Highlight the Limitations of Renewed Ties With Syria

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INTRODUCTION

In the past half century, despite interludes of normal relations, Syria and Jordan have mostly been at odds. In summer 2021, when Jordan's King Abdullah II [declared on CNN](#) that “[Syrian President] Bashar [al-Assad] has longevity” and that there was a need to “talk with the regime,” he was preparing to reengage following a period of animosity. The king was the [first Arab leader](#) to call for Assad's departure after the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011 and was at the forefront of efforts to reengage [with him](#). However, just over a year later, Syrian-Jordanian ties remain cold and the achievements limited.

A major challenge to reengagement this time around is that both Syria and Jordan are constrained by the decisions of their more powerful allies. Damascus has less room to decide alone on certain domestic and foreign policy matters. This is especially true because of its relationship with Iran. Although Jordan has not faced the war and destruction of its northern neighbor, it has also had to take the views of its allies into consideration, particularly the United States. At the same time, Syria's

conflict remains unresolved, leaving the regime at odds with many major regional and international actors, with potentially harmful side effects for Jordan.

These challenges are nowhere clearer than along the Syrian-Jordanian border. Since 2011, all of Syria's borders have faced profound socioeconomic, political, and security transformations. The Jordanian border is no exception, with the broader border area having become a regional confrontation point between, on the one hand, the Assad regime and its allies—notably Iran and Hezbollah, whose presence and influence have grown in southern Syria—and, on the other, Jordan, Israel, and the Gulf Arab countries. Vital matters related to the Syrian-Jordanian border, including security and Iranian militarization of Syria's southern borderlands, have become regional concerns requiring regional solutions.

When progress has been achieved, it is in domains where Damascus and Amman have been able to act independently, where a regional agreement is in place, or both. Thus far, cross-border economic relations are the only example of tangible progress. Jordan's



experience shows that a small state reengaging with Syria in a bilateral format will have a limited impact on the improvement of ties and provides little incentive for Damascus to change its behavior on contentious regional matters. Change is more likely to happen following a rapprochement between Damascus and more powerful regional actors, such as Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, today, even such an outcome won't undo postwar realities in Syria, namely the ramifications of the Iranian presence.

A RAPPROCHEMENT WITH LIMITED ACHIEVEMENTS

Before Jordan and Syria resumed ties in summer 2021, Jordan had a list of concerns relating to its northern border. Hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees had crossed into Jordan, with little prospect of an immediate return. Southern Syria's stabilization was elusive, in part because of Iran's and Hezbollah's expansions there. Drugs and weapons were being smuggled into Jordan. And because of the border's closure, Jordan had minimal economic relations with its neighbor, negatively impacting its economy. Maintaining Syria's isolation was not in the Jordanian interest, as it failed to resolve any of these outstanding issues. Syria, in turn, sought reintegration into the regional economy and wanted Jordan to distance itself from Syrian opposition groups.

However, since then only bilateral trade has really improved. After the border's closure in April 2015, trade decreased significantly, except for the period between October 2018 and March 2020, when the border was partly reopened. Soon thereafter, the COVID-19 pandemic again limited all exchanges. Following the Jordanian-Syrian rapprochement, the Nassib-Jaber crossing fully reopened for trade and passengers. [According to the Jordanian statistics department](#), when comparing the July 2020–June 2021 period (when COVID-19-related restrictions were in place) to the July 2021–June 2022 period (when the border reopened after bilateral ties had resumed), Jordanian imports increased from \$51 million to \$75 million, while

exports increased from \$62 million to \$87 million, and reexports more than doubled from \$22.5 million to \$46.5 million.

Since 2019, the trade balance has also shifted in Amman's favor, as Jordan could be [benefiting](#) from Syria's appetite for goods and isolation from the global economy. While in 2017 and 2018 the value of Jordan's [exports](#) to, and [imports](#) from, Syria were similar, this has changed in the past three years. In 2019, Jordan's [imports](#) were valued at around \$43 million, against [\\$95 million in exports](#). In 2020, overall trade declined due to COVID-19-related border restrictions, but the value of Jordanian exports was [\\$63.8 million](#), against [\\$44.7 million in imports](#). In 2021, exports were valued at some [\\$118 million](#), against imports of almost [\\$71 million](#). More recent data from January–July 2022 [show that this trend is continuing](#), with Jordan exporting some 40 percent more than it is importing. According to the UN Comtrade Database, the overall trade volume (excluding reexports) [stood at \\$190 million in 2021](#). This remained small, representing only 30 percent of the all-time high volume of [\\$670 million in 2007](#). Yet, compared to the [volume of \\$108,000 in 2020](#), it showed an increase of around 76 percent.

The rise in trade volume was due to Syrian and Jordanian decisions to [adjust border policies](#) and some [customs regulations](#) to facilitate trade. This would not have happened had King Abdullah not [received a green light](#) from U.S. President Joe Biden's administration in July 2021. Prior to that, [Jordan's efforts to reactivate trade were blocked by Donald Trump's administration](#), which expected Jordan to comply with its strategy to isolate Syria.

Jordan and Syria also have a path forward when influential outside actors support their actions. An example was U.S. approval in 2021 for a project to supply Lebanon with gas and electricity. The [Biden administration partly sought to counter Hezbollah](#), which wanted to import sanctioned Iranian fuel oil to alleviate shortages in a country facing a deep financial crisis. In August 2021, Washington [officially endorsed](#)

a World Bank–funded agreement to bring Egyptian gas and Jordanian electricity to Lebanon via Syria. Ministers from the countries [inked the agreement in September 2021](#).

All the actors involved had an interest in advancing the deal. Lebanon would receive much-needed energy. Syria would take a step toward reintegration into the regional economy, in addition to receiving in-kind payment for allowing gas and electricity to transit its territory. Egypt would export its gas and Jordan its electricity. While Israel was not formally part of the agreement, [it consented so as to curb Iran’s influence in Lebanon and export its gas via Egypt](#). Despite these preparations, the deal has yet to go through, because [the World Bank wants Lebanon to undertake reforms before funding the project](#). Nonetheless, the episode shows that when there is regional agreement and no obstacles from major outside actors, this can reflect positively on Syrian-Jordanian relations, while the contrary is also true.

However, some dimensions of bilateral Syrian-Jordanian relations have not improved, even when both countries have been free to act. Since the 1950s, Jordan and Syria have discussed sharing the waters of the Yarmouk River, and these discussions resumed after the countries reestablished ties. However, they have made little progress. Damascus also accuses Amman of supporting armed groups in southern Syria, hindering the regime’s efforts to fully control the area.¹ Yet because both sides have room to take decisions independently, breakthroughs still remain possible. That is not the case when it comes to more sensitive issues such as border security.

FROM A BILATERAL TO A REGIONAL BORDER IN SOUTHERN SYRIA

The changes in the Syrian-Jordanian border area have created problems for Amman, with serious implications for the kingdom’s security. Two of the most pressing issues, with regional repercussions, are drug smuggling and Iran’s presence in southern Syria. While Assad may have some control over drug trafficking originating in

Syria, mending ties with Jordan is hardly an incentive for him to curb such a lucrative trade. As for addressing the deployment of Iranian forces and their proxies, Assad has no incentive to do so—and, additionally, he is unable to act against Tehran’s interests. Both of these issues are inherently tied to the dynamics on the Syrian-Jordanian border but cannot be tackled in a bilateral format.

The cross-border informal economy has taken many forms since the emergence of the Syrian-Jordanian border in the 1920s. For years, [petty traders would not pay duties on cigarettes](#), which they brought into Jordan through border crossings with Syria. Similarly, [established networks smuggled Syrian sheep to or through Jordan](#). However, the expansion of illicit trade to include weapons and synthetic drugs manufactured in Syria has become a [Jordanian national security problem](#), especially in the past three years, which have seen a vast expansion in the scale of drug trafficking, its politicization by Syria, as well as heightened drug use in Jordan.

Jordan [has become a transit country](#) for drugs destined for the Gulf. Statistics from [the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#), based on official Jordanian figures, indicate that the number of cases tied to drug possession and trafficking by nationals and foreigners in Jordan rose from around 6,000 per year in 2005–2012 to 119,000 in 2020, an almost 1,900 percent increase. In Jordan’s cities of Irbid and Ramtha, it is common today to hear stories about drug use, which was not the case in 2018–2020. The local population has become knowledgeable about the types of drugs available, a telltale sign that drug use is becoming a widespread problem.²

Assessing the scale of this shadow economy is difficult. However, the quantity of drugs confiscated suggests a steady increase. For instance, Saudi Arabia, the main market in the Gulf for Captagon, the brand name of a codrug of amphetamine and theophylline, [reported seizing around 12–14 million tablets in 2007, 2008, and 2009](#). In recent years, the numbers have multiplied. The kingdom [reported seizing 48.6 million tablets of](#)



Captagon in 2012. In 2020, Saudi Arabia seized [some 140 million](#) tablets, while in 2021 the [number reached](#) around 200 million, with most confiscated tablets originating from Syria or Lebanon. Outside the region, other countries have also confiscated drugs originating from Syria. In summer 2020, for example, the [Italian police seized about 14 tonnes of amphetamine pills](#), worth 1 billion euros (around \$1.18 billion at the time).

More worrisome, drug trafficking is becoming a large part of the region's illicit economy. The war in Syria, the financial crisis in Lebanon, and U.S. sanctions have led the Syrian regime and Hezbollah to seek alternative sources of hard currency. In time, the drug trade could become rooted in Syria's local economies. To put it in perspective, [some estimates](#) suggest that in 2020 Captagon exports from Syria reached a market value of at least \$3.46 billion. This was [\\$1 billion more than that year's state budget](#).

Jordan is a small country and its decisions, including reconciliation with Syria, are not about to change the course of the drug trade. But can Bashar al-Assad stop drug trafficking in Syria, and if so, why would he do so? Syrian officials have repeatedly [denied any state involvement](#), though it is nearly impossible to believe that the president is unaware of the regime strongmen's involvement in such a profitable enterprise. This suggests that the regime, if it wanted to, could reduce the scale of the drug trade. However, thus far it has shown little interest in doing so, primarily for financial reasons, but also because the trade provides Assad with considerable political leverage. Anyone who wants to stop the flow of drugs must offer something to Syria in return.

Jordan faces a similar situation with the Israeli-Iranian rivalry in Syria, which affects Jordan directly but over which it has little control. In the Russian-sponsored deal that brought Syrian regime forces back to the south in 2018, [Moscow took Israeli interests into consideration](#), which are close to those of the United States and Jordan. Since then, although information has been hard to come by, Iran appears to have refrained from building offensive capabilities in the south—an Israeli red line. This is evidenced indirectly by the fact

that Israeli airstrikes in the south are limited, while they are more intensive around Damascus and other areas deeper inside Syria.

Nevertheless, many reports suggest Iran's role in Syria will last for the long haul. Iranian officials and their local allies are [expanding their authority](#) by getting rid of opponents, installing friendly officials in local security and military bodies, recruiting people into the drug trade, spending resources through charity organizations, and buying up real estate. For instance, since 2018 [the Iranian Al-Zahraa charity organization has been active](#) and is growing in Daraa. Iran is also building local alliances. Among them, Iranian officials [have open relations with an independent parliamentarian and businessman from Daraa](#), Abdul Aziz al-Rifai, whom they have received and [continue to support](#).³

Whether Iran considers Jordan a target of attack is questionable. What's certain, however, is that Jordan would lose from instability in southern Syria. If Iran is slow-cooking a new front line against Israel in Syria's south, Jordan could see renewed volatility on its northern border. The best outcome would be a continuation of unrest in southern Syria, [which has become the new normal](#). The worst would be a more aggressive confrontation between Israel and Iran. As with the drug trade, this situation is larger than Jordan, but also larger than the Syrian regime itself, which is now hitched to the imperatives of Tehran's regional priorities.

Jordan's relations with Damascus have effectively become compartmentalized. Observers can expect progress on the economic front, on subregional cooperation, and even on water. In contrast, security in the border region will likely remain unsettled, guaranteeing lasting instability. Jordan is left with limited options—primarily mobilizing its allies and partners to aid the kingdom in addressing challenges from across its northern border.

Perhaps realizing that mending bilateral ties with Syria would not meet its overriding needs, Jordan, early on in its rapprochement with Syria, was an ardent advocate for a [greater Arab role in a resolution of the Syrian](#)

conflict. With the United Arab Emirates and Algeria, as well as Russia, Jordan has supported unfreezing Syria's membership in the Arab League. However, since 2021, the Saudi rejection of Syria's return to the Arab League has represented a setback for Jordan. In order to compensate for this, Amman has improved its security cooperation with the United States along its northern border and has relied on U.S. forces and their local proxies based in Tanf to act as a defensive line against smuggling activities from Syria. Moreover, the kingdom still seeks to enhance security coordination with Russia, which is present in southern Syria. At best, these efforts have strengthened Jordan's monitoring of its borders but without providing sustainable solutions to its problems.

THE LESSONS OF JORDAN'S RENEWED TIES WITH SYRIA

There are two main lessons from Jordan's decision to improve ties with Syria since 2021. First, it shows that rapprochement, especially when it involves small or medium-size regional states, brings limited results. These may include improved economic relations, the opening of diplomatic and security relations, and rhetorical support, but little more. This is normal, as Syria's government, which rules over a shattered country, has little to offer in a bilateral context. But at the same time, Damascus has little stake in surrendering what it has of value because it seeks to encourage a shift in other countries' approaches to Syria, particularly if these countries are influential regionally.

The second lesson is more straightforward. Even if the Assad regime controls some dimensions of its foreign policy and retains valued cards as leverage over more powerful regional actors to extract political concessions from them, some issues are beyond the regime's

authority. Iran's influence in southern Syria, indeed in the whole of Syria, is the prime illustration of this. It is hard to imagine that the Syrian leadership, even if it had the will, could end Iranian influence in the border area. Syria has become a major channel through which Iran can confront its regional enemies, as well as being a land link to Tehran's major ally Hezbollah. It is unlikely that any country's limited bilateral opening to Syria will make changes on that front.

The Iranian presence could evolve in different ways. The Assad regime may still have some margin of maneuver with regard to Iran and could even oppose it in specific contexts. However, the Iranian presence is not something the Assad regime can trade for bilateral contacts or even a regional opening toward Damascus. Its hands are tied and will remain so for some time to come.

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NOTES

- 1 Author interview with a researcher and senior journalist based in Damascus who has access to security and Foreign Ministry officials (via WhatsApp), November 22, 2022.
- 2 Based on the author's regular field trips to northern parts of Jordan, especially Irbid and Ramtha, starting in 2018 and continuing through October 2022.
- 3 Author interview with a Syrian journalist from Daraa (via WhatsApp), November 4, 2022; and author interview with a researcher and senior journalist based in Damascus who has access to security and Foreign Ministry officials (via WhatsApp), November 22, 2022.



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