

The Impact of Genocide in Gaza on Regional Security: Jordan's Relevance in Supporting Palestine

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Abstract. This study aims to analyze the geopolitical impact of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on its support for Palestine in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Using a geopolitical theoretical framework, this study explores Jordan's dynamic relationship with Palestine before and after the 1994 normalization of Jordanian-Israeli relations. The study also highlights Jordan's strategic role in maintaining regional stability and its response to geopolitical changes in the Middle East. This research uses a qualitative approach based on literature analysis to examine the political, economic and strategic dynamics that influence Jordan's stance towards Palestine. Based on the analysis, it is found that key geopolitical factors such as Jordan's strategic location, limited resources, and historical role as custodian of Jerusalem's holy sites influence its foreign policy. Jordan uses a pragmatic approach to deal with geopolitical pressures, including technological cooperation and water desalination with Israel. The main findings show that although Jordan normalized relations with Israel for the sake of stability and economic benefits, the country continues to support Palestine diplomatically, especially on issues such as Jerusalem and Palestinian rights. However, domestic challenges and external pressures often make this policy complex and sometimes contradictory. This research concludes that Jordan's geopolitics influenced its support to Palestine.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Jordan, Palestine, Genocide, Regional Security Complex

Introduction

As explained above, the genocide against the Palestinian people has impacted neighboring countries, including Jordan. This research will review and analyze the impact on Jordan's political, economic, and social aspects.

Jordan's strategy is reflected in its role as the guardian of the holy sites in Jerusalem. In 1924, King Abdullah I of Jordan was given the mandate as custodian of holy sites by Muslim leaders in Palestine, including the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock (The Hashemite Custodianship of Jerusalem's Islamic and Christian Holy Sites 1917–2020 CE, 2023). This role was reinforced after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, when Jordan took control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. However, the loss of West Bank territory in the 1967 Six-Day War transferred physical control of East Jerusalem to Israel, although Jordan retained a symbolic claim as custodian of the holy sites (Kattan, 2020). This role is not only a religious symbol but also an important geopolitical tool for Jordan. Guardianship of the holy sites strengthens the domestic and regional legitimacy of the Hashemite family amid growing challenges from Islamist groups and political opposition in Jordan.

In 2017, President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital sparked a huge wave of protests in the Arab world, including in Jordan. As the custodian of Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem, King Abdullah II denounced the move as a violation of international law and UN resolutions, stating that it threatened regional stability (Köprülü, 2021). This action

embodies the principles of hegemony theory, wherein the US aims to reinforce its supremacy in the Middle East by endorsing Israel as its primary ally. From a constructivist viewpoint, the symbolism of Jerusalem as a sacred city for Muslims and Jordan's identity as the guardian of these places reinforces King Abdullah II's position in advocating for Palestinian rights and preserving Jerusalem's international status quo. This action demonstrates Jordan's steadfast commitment to a two-state solution, with East Jerusalem designated as the capital of Palestine, notwithstanding geopolitical pressures.

The objective of this research is to identify the factors contributing to the spread of the Gaza conflict to Jordanian territory and its impact on the social, economic, political, defense, and security situation in Jordan. This is considered important to see that this conflict is long-lasting and has an impact on neighboring countries.

Based on this background, this research asks: how has the genocide against the Palestinian people impacted Jordan's political, economic, social, defense, and security conditions?

Methods

This research is a mixed-methods study that requires both primary and secondary data. Primary data was obtained from the official website and other necessary primary sources in the Jordan region. Then, the research data was analyzed using the regional security complex concept, which was used to identify the impact in various fields, namely economics, social, defense and security, and politics.

Results and Discussion

Jordan's Strategic Factors in its Support for Palestine

The 2017 move of the United States Embassy to Jerusalem by the Donald Trump administration became one of the most significant events in the history of Jordan's guardianship of the holy sites (Mohammad Khaer Faisal Ahmad Al-Dhmour, 2021). This move profoundly changed the geopolitical dynamics of the region. By recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the US unilaterally violated the international consensus that the status of Jerusalem is an unresolved issue that must be determined through negotiations between Palestine and Israel. This decision also contradicts UN Security Council Resolution 478 of 1980, which expressly prohibits countries from moving their embassies to Jerusalem (The Hashemite Custodianship of Jerusalem's Islamic and Christian Holy Sites 1917–2020 CE, 2023). As a result, the US move triggered strong reactions from the international community, the Arab world, and Islamic countries, including Jordan which has a strategic role as the custodian of Islamic holy sites in East Jerusalem.

For Jordan, the US decision amplifies domestic, regional and international challenges. As the custodian of holy sites such as the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, Jordan sees the embassy move as a direct threat to Jerusalem's status quo recognized since the 1967 Six-Day War. King Abdullah II insists that Jerusalem is a non-negotiable “red line” (Sharnoff, 2024). However, Jordan must also balance its response with maintaining a strategic relationship with the US, which is the main backer of the country's economic and military aid. In 2017, Jordan received \$1.3 billion in aid from the US, which is critical to addressing its domestic economic crisis. On the one hand, Jordan must be vocal in its support for Palestine to maintain

its political and moral legitimacy in the eyes of the Arab and Islamic world. On the other hand, the economic pressure makes Jordan unable to be too confrontational towards the US.

This US decision also worsens Jordan's relationship with Israel, despite the two countries having a peace agreement through Wadi Araba in 1994. The US move is seen as supporting Israel's agenda to accelerate the de facto annexation of Jerusalem, including through the construction of illegal settlements in East Jerusalem (Kattan, 2020). This not only weakens Jordan's historic role as the guardian of sacred places but also affects the stability of the entire region. Tensions between Jordan and Israel have escalated, although ongoing strategic collaboration around security and water matters. Israel has leveraged this momentum to reinforce its claim to Jerusalem, substantially reducing the probability of a two-state solution endorsed by Jordan and the international community.

This decision incited a significant surge of protests throughout the country, particularly among the Palestinian community, which constitutes the majority of Jordan's population. The domestic opposition, comprising the Islamic Action Front and nationalist factions, leveraged the issue to condemn the Jordanian government regarding its association with Israel and reliance on the United States. The protests exacerbated Jordan's internal circumstances, which were already grappling with a profound economic crisis, elevated unemployment, and many social tensions. Nonetheless, the Jordanian government succeeded in preserving stability by adhering to its discourse of support for Palestine while leveraging international help to mitigate local challenges.

The relocation of the embassy has faced extensive international criticism. One hundred twenty-eight countries in the UN General Assembly endorsed the resolution against US recognition of Jerusalem, whilst just nine countries, including the US and Israel, voted in opposition. The European Union, comprising nations such as the UK, France, and Germany, criticized the action and reaffirmed their endorsement of a two-state solution with East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. Nevertheless, the United States' veto in the UN Security Council guarantees that no substantive measures may be implemented to overturn this decision.

The relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem reinforces Israel's claim to the city, undermines the Palestinian position, and alters the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East. This action strengthens Jordan's role as the guardian of Islamic holy places while introducing domestic, regional, and international concerns. In light of these pressures, Jordan is endeavoring to preserve domestic stability, bolster its support for Palestine, and sustain its strategic alliance with the United States. Jordan must preserve its strategic capabilities. If Jordan is stripped of its guardianship duties over the holy site, its reputation both regionally and globally may deteriorate. Other Arab nations will attempt to assume roles and responsibilities to distance the Palestinian struggle from achieving independence from Israeli oppression.

The Impact of the Gaza War on Jordan's Domestic and International Politics

Since the beginning of the Gaza war in October 2023, Jordanians have been closely watching the enclave, and the rising tensions in the region, with deep concern and increasing anxiety. By January 2024, the war and related regional conflicts began to hit Jordan more literally, in the form of Israeli artillery strikes on a Jordanian field hospital in Gaza and drone strikes by Iran-backed militias on a U.S. base inside the Hashemite Kingdom. The crisis over funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) had profound implications for Jordan and its people. And all of these challenges helped to revive a protest movement in Jordan that demanded major changes to the kingdom's domestic and foreign policies, even as the state was trying to make itself heard in the international din and to bring about a ceasefire and access to aid for Gaza.



Many Jordanians get their news not from newspapers or television, but through social media. Like so many others around the world, they find themselves too often ‘doom scrolling’ through posts and videos about the Gaza war and its staggering civilian death count. It is not an exaggeration to say that the war may be taking a psychological toll on a country whose citizens deeply identify with, and care about the suffering of, the Palestinian people. This is true across Jordanian society—not just among Jordanians of Palestinian descent, but also among East Jordanians of tribal backgrounds, Chechens, Circassians, as well as among Muslims and Christians. As recent polling has shown, the cause of Palestine remains close to the hearts of almost all Jordanians and other Arab peoples, and the relentlessly negative news cycle is taking its toll (Arab Center Washington DC, 2024). At both the state and society levels, Jordanians were also deeply concerned about any further displacement of the Palestinian people (Ma’ayeh, 2023).

The UNRWA Crisis and Its Implications for Jordan

Throughout its history, Jordan’s domestic and international politics have been deeply affected by the politics of refugees, from the Nakba, to the Syrian civil war, to Gaza. This makes it uniquely vulnerable to the recent campaign against UNRWA, which operates multiple refugee camps in the Kingdom (Parker-Magyar et al., 2024).

On January 26, the Biden administration abruptly announced it was pausing funding for UNRWA—the main international organization supporting Palestinian refugees—following accusations by the Israeli government that several of its employees were connected in some way to the October 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel. Many European funders promptly followed the American lead. Jordanian officials quickly scrambled to press donors to restore funding, an exercise that felt very similar to one that followed the Trump administration’s 2018 decision to cut US funding for the agency. In 2021, the Biden administration had resumed funding for UNRWA, but then it too suspended aid.

As Jordanian officials and UNRWA itself were quick to point out, Israel leveled its accusations at 12 employees out of a staff of 13,000. UNRWA has long been controversial in Israel, and successive Israeli governments have at times sought ways to bring it down. But UNRWA, in addition to condemning the Hamas attack and firing the accused, stressed its key role as the main source of aid for Palestinians in Gaza. The Israeli government, in short, was trying to shut down UNRWA just when it was needed most, given the massive death toll, levels of displacement, destruction of hospitals, restrictions on aid, and emerging fears over the spread of famine and disease.

These are all, of course, urgent concerns for Gaza. But UNRWA’s work extends well beyond the Strip, as the agency delivers similar services in the occupied West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, and very importantly, Jordan. Specifically, UNRWA in Jordan provides key services to more than 2 million registered Palestinian refugees in the kingdom. This includes services in ten refugee camps, in 169 schools serving 119,000 students, and in 25 medical clinics and other health centers. Jordanian officials therefore urged the United States and other countries to reverse their funding freezes, especially in the heat of the ongoing war in Gaza and the broader regional crises. The links between the Gaza war and other regional crises were already clear with the Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, which impacted Jordan’s only port at Aqaba.

Tensions Over Border Security and U.S. Forces in Jordan

The costs became clearer still on January 28, 2024, when Iran-backed Shia militias professing solidarity with Gaza attacked a U.S. base in Jordan itself, for the first time killing American military personnel in the Hashemite Kingdom. The attack killed three U.S. soldiers

at Tower 22, an American base in Jordan located close to the Syrian border and not far from the U.S. Tanf base in Syria, which was also attacked. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a grouping of Iran-backed Shia militias, claimed responsibility. Such pro-Iranian militia attacks on U.S. forces in Syria or Iraq are not uncommon. The deadly attack in Jordan, however, was a significant escalation amidst the mounting violence and chaos across the Middle East. The attack also shed unwelcome light on Jordan's increasing regional insecurity and on its position in the crossfire between conflicts from Gaza to its own northern borders.

In addition to being a violation of Jordanian sovereignty, the attack on U.S. troops stationed in Jordan appeared to be retaliation against the United States for its support for the Israeli bombardment of Gaza. The ramifications of the Gaza war, in short, risked destabilizing the kingdom itself, even as it tried not to be dragged into a broader regional war.

The Jordanian government condemned the attack on U.S. forces, noting that their presence was meant to secure the kingdom's borders and to help Jordan fight terrorism. The foreign military presence also underscores the kingdom's broader concerns with securing the border against the Islamic State or Da'esh as well as against Iran-backed militias—long a concern for the Jordanian government. Border security issues in recent years have also included the plight of Syrian refugees and, especially at present, concerns with drug smuggling, most notably of Captagon pills into the kingdom.

But the U.S. military presence is a double-edged sword. It is intended to support Jordan's borders, its territorial integrity, and the security of the state and the Hashemite regime, a close ally of the United States. Yet the unpopularity of the U.S. military presence threatens to undermine the regime's domestic security and legitimacy. There may be an increasing disconnect between state and society on this issue, as the question of the U.S. military presence has become ever more controversial in Jordanian domestic politics, even as U.S.-Jordanian relations and military cooperation grow steadily closer.

In September 2022, the United States and Jordan signed their fourth Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the U.S.-Jordan "Strategic Partnership." The MOU pledged \$1.45 billion in U.S. annual economic and military aid to Jordan from 2023 through 2029, which represents the largest-ever American aid commitment to the already aid-dependent kingdom. Cooperation between the two countries has been extensive for decades—ranging from trade and aid to military and intelligence cooperation. In 1996, the United States and Jordan signed a Status of Forces agreement allowing U.S. forces to operate in the country and in the same year the United States designated Jordan a "major non-NATO ally." This was followed in 2001 by a free trade agreement between Jordan and the United States. Underscoring the extensive level of military cooperation, Jordan has since 2010 hosted U.S. and other international military forces for two weeks of annual military exercises known as "Eager Lion."

In 2021, Jordan and the United States added a defense cooperation agreement that became law by royal decree, bypassing parliament and generating considerable public backlash. Opposition members of parliament denounced the agreement as a violation of Jordanian sovereignty and as a national humiliation (al-Sharafat, 2021). While the backlash in no way changed the agreement, or U.S.-Jordanian relations for that matter, the indignant tone was a harbinger of things to come, as domestic opposition to the US military presence has grown since then. With U.S. support for the Israeli bombing of Gaza, that opposition became louder still.

The U.S.-Jordanian relationship has at times been bumpy, most recently during the Trump years, when bilateral economic and military ties remained expansive, but there was a widespread perception at both the state and society levels that Jordan was being marginalized and neglected. That changed slightly as the Biden administration took office and restored a

more active diplomatic partnership. But the two countries have diverged significantly over the Gaza conflict, with King Abdullah II and Jordanian officials at all levels consistently decrying Israel's use of force as excessive and calling for a ceasefire.

Jordanian Prime Minister Bishr Khasawneh warned Israel against any attempt to forcibly displace Palestinians from Gaza, saying that such a move would cross a “red line” for Jordan and amount to a “fundamental violation” of the 1994 peace treaty. In November 2023, Jordan recalled its ambassador from Israel, and told the Israeli ambassador not to return to Amman. Jordan also supported South Africa as it took Israel to the International Court of Justice, accusing it of committing genocide in Gaza. Jordan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi accused Israel of committing war crimes, while warning the international community of the threat of a broader regional war.

At the state level, the king, the prime minister, foreign minister, and other officials—none of whom are fans of Hamas—have been consistent in their harsh criticisms of Israeli policy and their demands for a ceasefire and the defense of Palestinian civilian lives. Yet at the grassroots level, Jordanian activists have gone further, as a revived protest movement has demanded more radical levels of change. The Gaza war has reinvigorated many of Jordan's opposition forces and its protest movements, even leading to the rise of an increasingly populist politics at the street level.

A Resurgent Protest Movement

As Schwedler (2024) has noted, “Jordan's government and citizens alike fear that Israel and the United States will pressure the country to accept another large wave of Palestinian refugees.” She also points out that “the issue of Palestine has, for decades, driven Jordanians to push the limits of permissible protest.” Some worry about another Nakba against Palestinians, while others focus on a longstanding fear in some Jordanian political circles: that Israel and the United States might try to “solve” the Palestinian issue at Jordan's expense.

Historically, countless ideological and identity issues have been used to drive wedges in Jordanian opposition movements, dividing and weakening them. But the Israeli use of force against Palestinians has long been a unifying issue within Jordan, and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has seemed uniquely disposed to have inadvertently unified Jordan's grassroots protest movements. This unity may turn out to be especially important in Jordan's new electoral and party systems, with general elections expected to take place by November 2024. Still, Jordan has a long history of political protest (Schwedler, 2022). In recent years these include the extensive protests of the ‘Arab Spring’ era (Ababneh, 2016; Ryan, 2018a). But they also include revived protests over austerity crises in 2018 and after (Ababneh, 2018; Moore, 2018; Ryan, 2018b, 2019).

The post-October 7 protest coalition brings together diverse ideological groups from leftists to Islamists to nationalists. This new coalition builds on the existing Jordanian movement against the gas agreement with Israel (Ryan, 2017). That movement followed an earlier anti-normalization campaign that had begun after Jordan signed the 1994 peace treaty with the State of Israel. Since October 2023, activists maintained a campaign of marches in Amman and elsewhere in increasingly large demonstrations that sometimes numbered in the thousands. The protestors echoed the harsh criticisms of Israeli policy already coming from state officials and from the king himself—and then went much further, calling for far more extensive measures and changes. As Schwedler has noted in her extensive work on Jordanian protests, many demonstrations tend to follow established repertoires (Schwedler, 2003, 2005, 2012). But recent protests in the Jordanian capital have pushed the usual parameters, with ever larger protests almost reaching the Israeli embassy (historically a red line not to be crossed).

A January 2024 communique issued by the protest movement referred to the 1994 peace treaty as “the treaty of shame” and demanded that Jordan cancel it. The communique also called on the Jordanian government to end all relations with Israel, to close each country’s embassies, and to annul the 2017 gas deal. It demanded that Israel open Gaza’s borders to the delivery of food, fuel, water, and medical supplies, and called on other states in the region to cease participating in trade with Israel.

But the protest coalition was not just making demands regarding Jordanian relations with Israel. It also sought to dramatically change Jordanian relations with the United States. Protestors focused on the U.S. military presence by calling for an end to the U.S.-Jordanian military agreements and the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the kingdom. This latter demand has especially been audible in the various slogans and chants in demonstrations across the country. For these increasingly active and vocal movements, the U.S. military presence does not strengthen Jordanian security but undermines it. As one Jordanian activist noted to this author, “a majority of Jordanians think that the US military presence is a threat to the country, may involve it in war if hostilities expand, and might be directed against Palestinians or other Arab and neighboring nations” (Jordanian protester and activist, personal communication, February 2024).

Even for the many Jordanians who do not attend protests or belong to any opposition movement, these seem to be increasingly widespread sentiments. The Gaza war has also hurt Jordan’s already struggling economy, causing tourism revenues to plummet just after they had revived following the COVID-19 pandemic. Aside from taking part in demonstrations, many ordinary Jordanians have joined boycotts of U.S. and European companies and products, while worrying that Jordan’s geographic location and its international ties may drag it into a broader regional war.

“Jordan is not in a position to start any wider conflict,” a Jordanian journalist told this author, adding that “Jordan wants this nightmare to end. After the Palestinians, Jordan has the most to lose with war in the region” (Jordanian journalist, personal communication, February 2024). This appears to be a majority sentiment in Jordan right now. From state to society, Jordanians are deeply and increasingly worried about the fate of the people of Gaza, of the occupied West Bank, and of Jordan itself as the Gaza war continues.

Conclusion

Jordan’s geopolitics influenced its support to Palestine. Key geopolitical factors such as Jordan's strategic location, limited resources, and historical role as custodian of Jerusalem's holy sites influence its foreign policy. Although Jordan normalized relations with Israel for the sake of stability and economic benefits, the country continues to support Palestine diplomatically, especially on issues such as Jerusalem and Palestinian rights. However, domestic challenges and external pressures often make this policy complex and sometimes contradictory.

The Gaza war has also affected Jordan’s domestic and international politics, especially through public anxiety, the UNRWA crisis, tensions over border security, the presence of U.S. forces, and the resurgence of protest movements. Jordan therefore faces a complex strategic position: preserving domestic stability, maintaining strategic relations with the United States, protecting its role as custodian of Jerusalem’s holy sites, and continuing diplomatic support for Palestine.



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