



THE JORDANIAN ARMY: BETWEEN DOMESTIC AND EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

By Alexander Bligh*

Jordan's armed forces have been an effective means for preserving the regime, though they have never been strong enough to spread Jordan's influence in the region, or even independently defend Jordan from external threats. This inadequacy has forced Jordan to rely on various coalitions to ensure its defense. In addition to examining the army's response to previous threats, the author examines the Jordanian regime's attempts to deal with its current and future security challenges.

From the 1920s into the twenty-first century, the Jordanian Arab Army (JAA)--originally called the Arab Legion--has served the Hashemite dynasty in eastern Palestine, Trans-Jordan, the Hashemite Kingdom and, since 1967, in the Jordanian Hashemite nation-state that emerged in the wake of the 1967 war. Yet changing political circumstances contributed very little to the nature of strategic risks, real or potential, facing this state.

Domestic, regional and international constraints affect the definition of Jordanian national interests and consequently, the main tasks of the army. While the armed forces are a central factor in Jordanian nationalism the only function they can fulfill on its own is maintaining the incumbent regime against any domestic threat. The Jordanian army cannot guarantee the existence of Jordan on its own and therefore the country, at times of crisis, always requires coalitions with other regional forces.

THE CONSTRAINTS

The JAA was first created as a police force on the East Bank in 1921.⁽¹⁾ Its main task at that time, as it is today, was to protect the Hashemite rule over that territory. In spite of its involvement in the 1948 and 1967 wars--obviously external threats--the army has

continued throughout this period to serve mainly as the regime's defender and it is mostly structured to be able to respond rapidly to domestic challenges. The main improvement in the second third of the twentieth century came in the context of the terrorist presence on Jordanian territory in the late 1960s, during which time the first commando battalion was established as well as the first police brigade (as differentiated from local police forces).

With a population composed of a majority of Palestinians, be it 51 percent or 70 percent of the total population, the regime has always been on the defense in domestic terms. Palestinian participation in the Jordanian economy is significant, but their service in the armed forces is problematic at best. They are always suspected of not being fully loyal to the regime even though their economic involvement and their past of not joining with the PLO during the 1970-71 civil war speak favorably of them in Jordanian terms. Moreover, many of them do identify today as being Palestinian Jordanian, meaning that their main focus of national identity and solidarity is Jordanian. Yet, traditional mistrust still dictates the policy of limiting the promotion of Palestinian officers in the Jordanian army: Palestinians cannot rise in combat units above the rank of major or lieutenant colonel at the most whereas in

supporting units they can reach a general rank.

From a political standpoint the outlook of relations between Jordanians and Palestinians seems positive. This is the result of the fact that one of the major elements of King Hussein's legacy is the creation of Jordanian nationalism as a uniting force. That ideology analyzed by this author elsewhere⁽²⁾ is composed of several ingredients, one of them--attributes of sovereignty--refers to the Jordanian armed forces as a source of solidarity for Jordanians and legitimacy for the Hashemite rule.

References to the Jordanian army were made very frequently in Hussein's public appearances. They were not made as frequently as the ones referring to Jerusalem but both are used along similar lines: providing two pillars of sovereignty in the form of national symbols: one spiritual, one materialistic. If Jerusalem is a source of inspiration and a reason for *jihad*⁽³⁾, then the armed forces are the Jordanian connection with the past, the carrier of *jihad* and the unchanged solid foundation Jordan is built on. The armed forces are in a sense Jordan itself, since the kingdom began with the Arab revolt against Ottoman rule of 1915 and so did the armed forces.⁽⁴⁾

Identifying the armed forces with Jordan, Arabism and Islam were recurrent motifs in Hussein's speeches. On many occasions he spoke of the army being the spearhead of Jordan and its defenses, connecting all the elements of Jordanian nationalism.⁽⁵⁾ But the king also included in this category the claim that Jordan's armed forces also served the entire Arab nation, saying their prime directive is the defense of Arab sovereignty, Arab pride and Arab civilization.⁽⁶⁾ All these expressions tie in very clearly in the king's speeches with the concept of Israel as an enemy since this is the army that protects for the Arab nation the longest border with Israel. These references to Israel disappeared with the 1994 peace treaty but the army continues to be depicted by the incumbent king as a symbol of nationalism and sovereignty.

On top of its claimed ideological role, however, the army is first and foremost a weapon to head off domestic criticism or challenge. For example, during the deep 1989 economic crisis, Hussein explained the problem as the result of military procurement needs.⁽⁷⁾ This connection immediately rendered impertinent any criticism regarding corruption and mismanagement since that would seem to be an attack on the armed forces.

While that particular economic analysis was not accurate, it is quite true that the capabilities of the Jordanian army have been shaped by the severe financial constraints facing the country. Since the 1980s, Jordan has not implemented any significant military modernization program and has also suffered from an acute problem of obtaining spare parts.⁽⁸⁾ Moreover, Jordan's siding with Iraq during the 1991 war caused a break in the channeling of funds already earmarked for Jordan by the United States and the Gulf Arab monarchies. All efforts since then to improve Jordanian economy have not resulted in any significant improvement.

Throughout the 1990s, Jordan had a high rate of unemployment--about one-fifth of its work force--and the foreign debt reached almost \$8 billion. In early 1999,⁽⁹⁾ international lenders rescheduled the kingdom's debt payments. Later that year, the International Monetary Fund complimented Jordan for its achievements, including a rise in foreign exchange reserves to \$1.180 billion. Yet Jordan still faced serious external factors. The ongoing international embargo on Iraq, formerly Jordan's largest trading partner, hurt Jordan despite efforts to circumvent those sanctions. The eruption of violence in the West Bank in late 2000 reduced trade with the Palestinians, which already stood at disappointing levels from a Jordanian perspective. A severe regional drought damaged agriculture.

Jordan's basic strategic problem arises from its geopolitical situation. It is surrounded by countries that are all militarily stronger or richer than Jordan. Each of these

states has some friction or problem with the kingdom. Syria and Iraq have ambitions to dominate Jordan. Saudi Arabia has a historical grudge over the past Hashemite domination over the western part of that country and a more recent conflict arising from Jordan's 1991 support for Iraq. Israel is a historic enemy whose dispute with the Palestinians threatens Jordan in different ways whether it flares into violence or is resolved with an agreement. The Palestinians are led by the same people who tried to overthrow King Hussein in 1970. As one observer wrote in 1989, "Jordan will never again rule the West Bank, but the Palestinians may eventually rule Jordan."⁽¹⁰⁾ This concern is perhaps the main interest guiding Jordanian strategists even to this day.

Iraq and Syria are perhaps Jordan's two most frightening neighbors. Since the Iraqi republican revolution in 1958, which deposed the Hashemite Iraqi dynasty, Jordan-Iraq relations have varied periodically from open hostility to virtual alliance. Periodically, Jordan preferred cooperation with Iraq as a better alternative to dependence on Syria.

This Iraqi orientation for Jordan was especially visible during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war and the 1990-1991 Kuwait crisis. On both occasions, Jordan and Syria backed opposite sides in these conflicts. If Syria constituted a risk to Jordan, Syria's two-decade-long alliance with Iran made this threat even more serious. Damascus views Jordan--like Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinians--as a proper part of "Greater Syria."

Yet if Syria has pushed Jordan toward Iraq, Israel and the American factor pulled Amman away from Baghdad during the 1990s. While Jordan once distanced itself from Israel from fear of Iraq's reaction, the Iraqi defeat in the 1991 war helped lead to the Oslo accords and Israel-Jordan peace treaty. The United States quickly forgave Jordan--far more quickly than did Saudi Arabia and Kuwait--for its pro-Iraq policy in 1991.⁽¹¹⁾ By moving toward Israel and the United States and even going so far as to accept high-ranking Iraqi defectors in 1995, Jordan risked

confrontation with Iraq. The United States provided Jordan with an important ally that could defend it against both Iraq and Syria.

Still, in case of war between Iraq and Israel, Jordan might be caught in the middle and face a serious strategic challenge that would not be easy to solve. Thus, the Iraqi massing of forces on its western borders during the October 2000 Palestinian intifada posed as much of a threat to Jordan as to Israel. Even after a decade of international sanctions, Iraq's army remained far more powerful than its Jordanian counterpart.

If Iraq is currently only a potential enemy, Syria already has a proven track record of open confrontation with Jordan. Syria's planned 1970 invasion of Jordan was stopped due to an Israeli warning that it would intervene militarily.⁽¹²⁾ In 1980, Syria, then the USSR's closest Middle East ally, massed troops and threatened Jordan with a new invasion. Again, a parallel Israeli concentration of troops along the Syrian-Jordanian-Israeli border removed the danger. Tensions have recurred sporadically. As with Iraq, Jordan has periodically sought good relations with Syria in order to reduce frictions.

Similar shifts over time have marked Jordan's posture toward Israel. While Israel helped guarantee Jordan's sovereignty against Syrian and Iraq threats, Jordan publicly viewed Israel as its main threat and enemy for many decades. Several months after Israel secretly intervened to stave off a Syrian invasion, King Hussein made a speech, in June 1981, declaring that the main problem in the Middle East is "Israel's seizure of the entire territory of Palestine, expulsion of its people and occupation of other parts of our Arab land adjoining Palestine."⁽¹³⁾ Part of Jordan's strategic dilemma is how to steer a course that takes advantage of Israel's need to preserve the kingdom against more radical forces without antagonizing other Arab states to the point that it hurts Jordanian interests. In this equation, Jordanian governments must take into account such additional factors as the United States--which wants Jordan to be friendly with Israel--and domestic Palestinian

and Islamist movements that demand a strong anti-Israel stance.

Despite its public rhetoric, one of the Jordanian regime's main concerns is that the creation of a Palestinian state might lend help to a longer-term Palestinian takeover of Jordan itself. The Oslo peace process revived this fear beginning in 1993. Jordan expected that the western side of the Jordan valley would be left in Israeli hands, thus leaving a barrier between the Palestinian territories and Jordan. Israel's conditional offer to turn parts of the valley over to a Palestinian state in 2000 encouraged Jordan to rethink its strategic view.

JORDAN'S MILITARY POSTURE

The Hashemite Kingdom is not known to have an attack plan against any of its neighbors. Jordan's investment priorities in the 1990s, for example, focused on anti-aircraft and anti-tank equipment in order to fend off any attack. However, Jordan does have offensive plans on the tactical level. Such plans are to be implemented in case of a defensive war and they mainly revolve around special operations, a specialty of the JAA for many years and especially since 1996 and the establishment of the Special Operations Command for that purpose.

The overall defensive doctrine of the Jordanian forces reflects a synthesis of British and American principles modified to suit Jordanian needs and capabilities. A key premise is that Jordan will only have to fight on one front and that in a military confrontation with Israel the kingdom will not fight alone. After the signing of the 1994 peace agreement with Israel the chances of such a confrontation are slim. Still, Jordan could expect that an Israel-Syria or Israel-Iraq confrontation could drag in Jordan and result in military operations and confrontations on its territory. This could also happen if two warring parties fought an aerial war over the heads of Jordanians.

Even though Jordan has never had any offensive posture it did modify its defensive doctrine as a result of two crises: the 1967

war and the 1970 crisis that came close to bringing a Syrian invasion. These events occurred some 30 years ago but Jordan has not had other challenges that supplanted these lessons, which thus remain valid. A key element in this planning is that tanks would carry the burden of battle. The infantry, which has been made much more mobile and is still being improved, would carry out commando raids in front of the tanks and mopping up operations behind them.

Since the implementation of reorganization programs in 1977, the Jordanian army has consisted of four divisions: 2 armored, and 2 mechanized. Their deployment has not changed for many years either: The 5th Royal Armored Division is deployed between the Iraqi border to Ramtha on the Syrian border, the 12th Royal Mechanized division is deployed from Ramtha through Umm Qays to the Zarqa River and it is designed to respond to challenges both from Israel and Syria, and the 4th Royal Mechanized Division is usually deployed from Zarqa River, north of as-Salt to the Dead Sea in order to protect Jordan on its Israeli wing. The 3rd Royal Armored Division is functioning as the Jordanian strategic reserve and it is deployed between Zarqa, to the northeast of Amman to Qatranah in the south on the way to Saudi Arabia.

This deployment of forces indicates that most of the Jordanian tanks are concentrated in the Amman-Zarqa-Mafraq area so that they are about the same distance from all major potential theatres of operations. In addition to these forces, certain other forces underline the basic function of the JAA: protection of the regime. One brigade of Royal Guards is deployed in Amman; its troops have been picked from beduin tribes known for their long-standing loyalty to the Hashemite family.

Last, but not least on this list of units that make up the backbone of the Jordanian army, is the Special Operations Command, the brainchild of King Abdallah. While serving as a senior officer in 1996, he collected from all branches of the army special operations units, led by 2 special

forces battalions (71 and 101), and two paratroop battalions (81 and 91). Attached to them are several other special operations units, equipped with advanced equipment to make them as mobile as possible. This is the command that is supposed to stop any attempt by foreign hostile forces to move into the kingdom. In other words, their main task is to buy time for the regime until an ally comes to the rescue. Equally important is the ability of the force to supplement the Royal Guards in Amman if and when they require such help against any domestic unrest.

Aware that its forces have lacked real combat experience for 30 years, Jordan embarked in 1975 on a policy of sending its troops on international missions. In the mid-1970s paratroop battalion 91 was sent to Oman where it helped fight against an internal radical insurgency. More recently, Jordanian forces participated in several UN missions mainly in the Balkans. Infantry and artillery units joined with other forces on these missions, contributing much-needed military experience while adding to Jordan's image as a peace-loving nation and trustworthy member of the international community.

The Jordanian armed forces' deployment and defensive doctrine has been a guiding light for the kingdom for many years. Three out of the four divisions are deployed along the borders ostensibly to counter any attack on Jordan. The task of the 12th Royal Mechanized division, however, is somewhat different. It is supposed to delay any Israeli advance into Syria through the Umm Qays area--a traditional route for armies invading the Damascus area from the south. Still, Israel has never been an enemy of Jordan through Hashemite eyes, and this particular responsibility is a sort of lip service to the Arab cause.

Comparing Jordan to its immediate neighbors strongly suggests that it stands no chance of resisting their standing armies. Its position even gets worse when their reserves are added. Only Saudi Arabia, which has never considered military confrontation despite its differences with Jordan, could be

said to be weaker among the neighboring states. In general, then, Jordan has no ability to initiate or stand on its own in any military confrontation.

Nevertheless, it can contribute to any coalition. Deploying one division along the border with Syria, another along the border with Iraq, and the rest along the border with Israel indicate a strategy of trying to hold back any invading forces until a coalition can be forged to save the regime. The regime counts on strong loyalty and good training among its ground forces and is strengthening its air umbrella, planning to have 70 to 80 F-16 fighters by about 2007.⁽¹⁴⁾

The other task of the relatively small JAA is to keep the regime in power by blocking any domestic challenge. In an indirect way, this would include the capacity to block forces that sought to attack Israel from Jordanian soil. It is important to note that the Jordanian army lacks a large reserve system, a compulsory draft, or a plan to call up major elements in the population. This is due to the fact that Jordanian Palestinians are not considered completely loyal and might use arms to attack Israel on their own. This constraint led Jordan into building a standing volunteer army mainly based on beduins from traditionally loyal tribes. While this arrangement has worked to the regime's interest, some anti-regime demonstrations by beduin in the south during the late 1980s did raise some questions about that strategy.

Given the quantitative inferiority of the Jordanian army compared with all its neighbors, with the exception of Saudi Arabia, it is clear why Jordan cannot defend itself from a major attack from any of its neighbors. This strategic situation dictates key elements of Jordan's foreign policy. It must at all times ally itself with Iraq or Syria (assuming they are at odds with each other), count on Saudi neutrality, and try to ensure that Israel would not be motivated to attack Jordan. The United States also provides some protection against Iraqi or Syrian ambitions. Such a posture minimizes the danger to Jordan, though it does not rule out the possibility that it might be dragged into an

unwanted war by a Syrian or Iraqi confrontation with Israel.

An additional unknown element in this situation is the Arab-Israeli factor, and especially the Israeli-Palestinian relationship in the future. A regional Arab-Israeli showdown would put Jordan in a difficult position. An Israel-Palestinian peace would be welcome especially if it minimized the militarization of any emerging Palestinian state and any Jordanian-Palestinian common border. On the other hand, Palestinian-Israeli violence or the emergence of a Palestinian state unilaterally, which included the Jordan valley, could bring some type of future confrontation between Jordan and a Palestinian entity.

These considerations attest to the fact that Jordan is always in need of a strategic ally, stronger and more reliable than regional allies. In the Jordanian analysis, the United States should be the force behind this alliance. But the United States itself need not necessarily dispatch troops in time of need. A long list of historical crises taught Jordan that the moral commitment of the United States to Jordan's survival usually stops short of any direct tangible moves.

The most that Jordan is expecting from the United States is an airlift in case of need. However, Israeli-Jordanian-Turkish cooperation is definitely to the liking of the United States. Indeed, this alliance, though it has never been put to the test of a real crisis, has already helped Jordan by forcing Syria to retreat on several issues. In this context, Israel and Jordan held joint consultations on military cooperation in early 1996 and the two countries, despite their attempts to downplay their military relations, conducted several operations chasing terrorists infiltrating into Israel and returning to Jordan. In the fall of 1998, the commander of the Jordanian military intelligence, General Bakhiti, visited Israel perhaps to continue negotiations on the consolidation of the Israeli-Jordanian-Turkish trilateral alliance. About the same time, Jordan also participated in the Bright Star exercise held with the United States and Egypt on Egyptian soil.

Considering the worsening demographic balance in Jordan between Trans-Jordanians and Palestinians and the prospects for a Palestinian state, which might induce irredentist sentiments among East Bank Palestinians, Jordan cannot afford to extend its army beyond its current size. Any enlargement would necessitate enlisting more Palestinians and weakening the current strong position of the East Bank Beduins.

Actually, with the economic constraints taken into account it makes more sense for Jordan to downsize the army to about two-thirds of its current size while maintaining its domestic function and ability to delay the advancement of an advancing hostile army until help arrives. That means cutting back from four divisions into two divisions--a change to be compared with the revision from five divisions to four in the 1970s for similar reasons. It also means improving the quality of troops and equipment as far as mobile units are concerned.

The other side of that change would be modernizing the remaining units by supplying them with improved supplies. Thus, in late 2000, Jordan took delivery of 44 Challenger 1 main battle tanks out of 288 scheduled to be supplied by the United Kingdom.⁽¹⁵⁾ Challenger is a development of the Centurion/Chieftain line, which had been in use in the JAA for many years as its Main Battle Tank. It took part in Operation Desert Storm where the Iraqi forces failed to take a single vehicle out of combat while Challenger destroyed roughly 300 Iraqi tanks.⁽¹⁶⁾

CONCLUSION

Jordan has for many years been subject to a potential threat by one or more of its neighbors, at times it turned into an open confrontation. In spite of the enormous degree of risk, Jordan could not put together a suitable army. The country's small size and relatively small population did not allow it to build a large standing army, but even a reserve army could not be put together since the majority of the East Bank population is

Palestinian and traditionally they have been suspected by the regime of disloyalty. Under these conditions, Jordan has since its independence had to depend on a system of revolving coalitions.

At any given moment in its history, Jordan has been in a coalition with one of its neighbors against a potential attack by another neighbor. Those coalitions, at most times, were backed by the United States. Given the size of the army, the alliance system, and the nature of Jordanian procurement for years, the Jordanian army's main utility has been as a tool in maintaining the incumbent regime. When it comes to real external battle it would always operate as part of a larger coalition.

Jordan is incapable of defending itself from an external enemy. Its defense is based on the presence of Arab expeditionary forces, if Israel is the enemy, and Israeli support if it faces an Arab enemy. Since the 1970 crisis the United States is practically responsible for the kingdom's existence, usually by using diplomatic means. At times, the Israeli military served as a major deterrence force. In terms of domestic stability the Jordanian army has reached its optimal capacity. It is loyal and fully capable of protecting the regime.

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NOTES

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2. Alexander Bligh, *The Political Legacy of King Hussein: "Smaller Jordan" as a Nation-State* (Sussex Academic Press, Forthcoming), chapter 4.

3. November 1, 1969 speech before Parliament, Official text of his proposal: *al-Majmu'ah al-Kamilah li-Khutab Jalalat al-Malik al-Husayn bin Talal al-mu'azzam* (Arabic)[the full collection of HM King Hussein b. Talal's speeches], [Amman: 1985?], vol. 3., 139; PRO/ FCO17/806/ NEJ1/4/[November 2, 1969], from: Amman.

4. June 7, 1967, *al-Majmu'ah*, vol. 2, 597 (June 7, 1967), vol. 3, 254 (April 3, 1971), 364 (March 15, 1972); *Amman Home Service in Arabic*, September 15, 1971, 4:00 and 5:00 p.m. GMT, BBC Monitoring, Summary of world broadcasts, ME/3789/A/5; September 1, 1980 *Der Spiegel* Interview, *FBIS*, September 8, 1980; Hussein's interview to Jordanian press published in all Jordanian newspapers on June 13, 1989.

5. *al-Majmu'ah*, vol. 3. 254.

6. Speech before the 28th class of graduates of the General Staff College as broadcast by Amman Radio, December 16, 1987; Address to the nation, Amman television Service, *FBIS*, April 27, 1989.

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8. Jane's Sentinel Country Focus - Jordan, October 2, 2000; <http://www.janes.com/regional_news/africa_middle_east/sentinel/country_focus/jords110.shtml>

9. Following economic data based on: Frederik Sladden, "1999: A Pivotal Year for Jordan's Economy", *US-Arab Tradeline*, November 19, 1999; *The Star* on-line, February 11, 1999.

10. Ze'ev Schiff, *Security For Peace: Israel's Minimal Security Requirements in Negotiations with the Palestinians* (Washington: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1989), p. 66.

11. Cf. George Bush. *All the Best, George Bush: My Life in Letters and Other Writings*. (New York, NY: Scribner, 1999), p. 538.

12. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 594-631.

13. Hussein speech at Kremlin, May 27, 1981, *FBIS*, June 2, 1981.

14. *Jane's Foreign Report*, August 24, 2000.

15. Janes's Sentinel Country Focus - Jordan, October 2, 2000; <http://www.janes.com/regional_news/africa

[_middle_east/sentinel/country_focus/jords110.shtml](http://www.janes.com/regional_news/africa/_middle_east/sentinel/country_focus/jords110.shtml)>

16. Federation of American scientists, military analysis network, <<http://www.fas.org/man/dod-101/sys/land/row/challenger1.htm>>

17. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2000-2001* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2000), 141, 143-144, 152-154.

Table 1: Comparing main military statistics (17)

	Jordan	Syria	Saudi Arabia	Iraq	Israel
Active armed forces	103880	316000	126500	429000	172500
Reserves	35000	396000		650000	425000
Corps		(3)		(7)	(3)
Divisions	4	12		23	8
Independent brigades (infantry, artillery, etc.,)	3	12	9	13	4
Main Battle Tanks	1246	4850	1055	2200	3900
Self-Propelled Artillery	412	450	200	150	855
Combat aircraft	106	589	417	310	446
Attack helicopters	16	87			133