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Jordan on the Edge: Pressures from the War in Gaza and the Incoming Trump Administration

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Executive Summary

This brief examines the implications of the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian and Israeli–Lebanese conflicts for the Kingdom of Jordan. While once seen as a central actor in the Israel–Palestine conflict, Jordan has not received significant consideration by the U.S. foreign policy establishment since the Hamas attacks on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. This oversight could prove perilous, as a destabilized Jordan would have broad effects across the region. This brief draws on firsthand author interviews with top-level Jordanian officials, Islamist leaders, journalists, and other experts to examine the kingdom’s outlook.

Since Jordan reached a peace deal with Israel in 1994, the kingdom has emerged as a strong American partner in the Middle East, exemplified by the two countries signing a fourth Memorandum of Understanding in 2022, in which the U.S. agreed to provide Jordan with \$1.45 billion of assistance annually. Despite the assistance, the U.S.–Jordanian relationship has become increasingly uncertain as the United States provides unconditional support for Israeli military actions in Gaza and Lebanon. Opposition to Israel’s wars has united the Jordanian public, which is distancing itself from the U.S. and Israel by widespread participation in the boycotts of American and European products and growing support for the main Islamist political party.

The prospect of Israel annexing the West Bank, an idea increasingly bandied about within Prime Minister Netanyahu’s Cabinet, would be especially threatening to Jordan. Many Jordanians now question if Israel aims not merely to prevent the creation of a Palestinian state, but to revive the idea that Jordan is Palestine — a notion that is categorically rejected by the Jordanian government.

A large-scale exodus of Palestinians from the West Bank into Jordan would lead to a profound crisis. With the kingdom already hosting over a million refugees — more of whom may arrive following Assad’s downfall and subsequent unrest — beset with economic problems, and incapable of providing water to its existing population, King Abdullah II’s continued rule could be jeopardized.

While the Trump administration’s position on Israel’s potential seizure of the West Bank remains to be seen, it is clear that a destabilized Jordan would be at odds with U.S. interests. Ultimately, to fulfill his campaign pledge to end the ‘forever wars’ in the Middle East, Trump may have to choose between reining in Israeli actions, or risk greater conflict in Jordan and beyond.

Introduction

Jordan has been largely absent from the otherwise extensive American media coverage of events in the Middle East since Oct. 7, 2023, and likewise has not featured prominently in efforts by the U.S. government to address the subsequent violence. Yet Jordan was once seen as central to the Israel–Palestine conflict. The majority of Jordanians are of Palestinian descent. Israel’s longest border is the one it shares with Jordan. Under Presidents Clinton, Bush, and Obama, Amman enjoyed a close working relationship with Washington due to Jordan’s centrality to both Israeli and regional security. Yet Jordan’s King Abdullah II found himself sidelined under the first Trump administration, which instead prioritized the interests of Tel Aviv, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi. After Biden was inaugurated in 2021, Abdullah was the first foreign leader to visit the White House, eager to reestablish the U.S.–Jordan partnership. Abdullah became the head of state that visited the Biden White House most frequently, coming three times before Oct. 7 and twice since, signaling Biden’s recognition of Jordan’s role in an increasingly violent Levant.¹

¹ Jacob Magid, “Biden Hosts Jordan’s Abdullah for Third Time, in Nod to King’s Role in Region,” *The Times of Israel*, February 3, 2023, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/biden-hosts-jordans-abdullah-for-third-time-in-nod-to-kings-role-in-region/>.

Trump's return to power alarmed many Jordanians about the possible implications for their country and their region. Israeli government officials have stated their intention to annex the West Bank, a move that would displace many more Palestinians into Jordan, which Amman views as an existential threat. What would political instability in Jordan mean for the region, which has long served as a refuge for civilians fleeing regional conflict? Might the U.S. and Israel push Jordan into a regional war against Iran? How will Assad's downfall and the resulting instability in Syria affect Jordan? With Trump's election further emboldening Israel's right-wing government, Washington should pay closer attention to how Israeli military interventions in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon have affected Jordan and the detrimental implications to U.S. interests if the violence continues to expand.

This brief is based on the author's travel to Amman in late September and early October 2024 to evaluate the impact of a year of war in neighboring Israel–Palestine on Jordan's politics and economy. The report draws from data collected from interviews with former ministers and other government and U.N. officials, leaders of Islamist groups, foreign policy experts, and journalists; the interviews include reactions to key events, including when Iran fired missiles through Jordanian airspace at Israel in response to its invasion of Lebanon. This incident served as a clear reminder that Jordan cannot escape its geography, and, despite the government's efforts to maintain stability, the coming year seems likely to only increase the risk of Jordan and the U.S. being dragged into yet another war in the Middle East.

Conditions in Jordan before Oct. 7, 2023

Jordan has long confronted political and economic pressures. The kingdom's inadequate resources are strained by demographics, especially as the kingdom repeatedly had to accommodate refugees fleeing regional violence. Jordan's royal family also faces threats to their legitimacy, given the Hashemites' origins in the Hejaz region of what is now Saudi Arabia. More recent pressures include intensifying

demands from Jordanians that King Abdullah do more to support Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and address the economic fallout of regional conflict.

Jordan and Palestine have been linked since the British Empire established “Transjordan” in 1921. Britain carved off the portion of the Mandate for Palestine that included the River Jordan and gave it to the great-grandfather of the current king. “Britain, hoping to quiet Abdullah and to be seen as making good on some of its earlier promises to the Arabs, lopped off the eastern part of the Palestine Mandate, dubbed it Transjordan, and made Abdullah its emir.”² The territory was nearly landlocked, had few natural resources, and, unlike Lebanon, Syria, or Iraq, had no city of historic significance to serve as a capital, nor much of an existing sense of national identity. Although Emir and later King Abdullah I enjoyed the religious authority bestowed by his family’s descent from the Prophet Muhammad, the king was an outsider, perceived by many as a British puppet.

The kingdom serves as the de facto refuge for hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. The establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 displaced more than 750,000 people, many of whom came to Jordan, tripling its population.³ After the 1967 war, Jordan accepted 300,000 more Palestinians when Israel seized control of the West Bank, which had previously been Jordanian territory. The Palestine Liberation Organization was based in Jordan until Black September, when clashes between the PLO and the Jordanian military in 1970 prompted King Hussein to expel the group, which moved to Lebanon in 1971. Until 1994, Jordan maintained an active state of hostility toward Israel, and participated in the wars of 1948, 1967, and 1973. But after the PLO and Israel signed the Oslo Accords in 1993 and President Clinton promised to forgive Jordan’s debts and provide economic and military support, King Hussein agreed

² Michael Barnett, *Dialogues in Arab Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 65–66.

³ Marwan Muasher, “Jordan’s Redline on Admitting Palestinians Is Unlikely to Change,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 21, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/11/jordans-redline-on-admitting-palestinians-is-unlikely-to-change?lang=en>.

to sign a peace treaty with Israel.⁴ In 1993, Amman received only \$44 million from the U.S., compared to \$1 billion in 2014.⁵ In 2022, Washington signed its fourth Memorandum of Understanding with Amman, committing to provide Jordan with \$1.45 billion each year.⁶ Although the peace treaty was never domestically popular and has become even less so since October 2023, Jordan depends on U.S. support, which would end if Jordan failed to uphold the terms. In several interviews, Jordanians expressed concern that Israel might abrogate key portions of the treaty, such as removing Jordan as the custodian of the Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, expelling Palestinians into Jordan, or attacking Jordan itself.⁷ If Israel were to undertake such actions, Jordan would be forced to respond, threatening U.S. support.

⁴ Bruce Reidel, "25 Years On, Remembering the Path to Peace for Jordan and Israel," Brookings Institution, October 23, 2019,

<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/25-years-on-remembering-the-path-to-peace-for-jordan-and-israel/>.

⁵ David Schenker, "Twenty Years of Israeli–Jordanian Peace: A Brief Assessment," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 23, 2014,

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twenty-years-israeli-jordanian-peace-brief-assessment>.

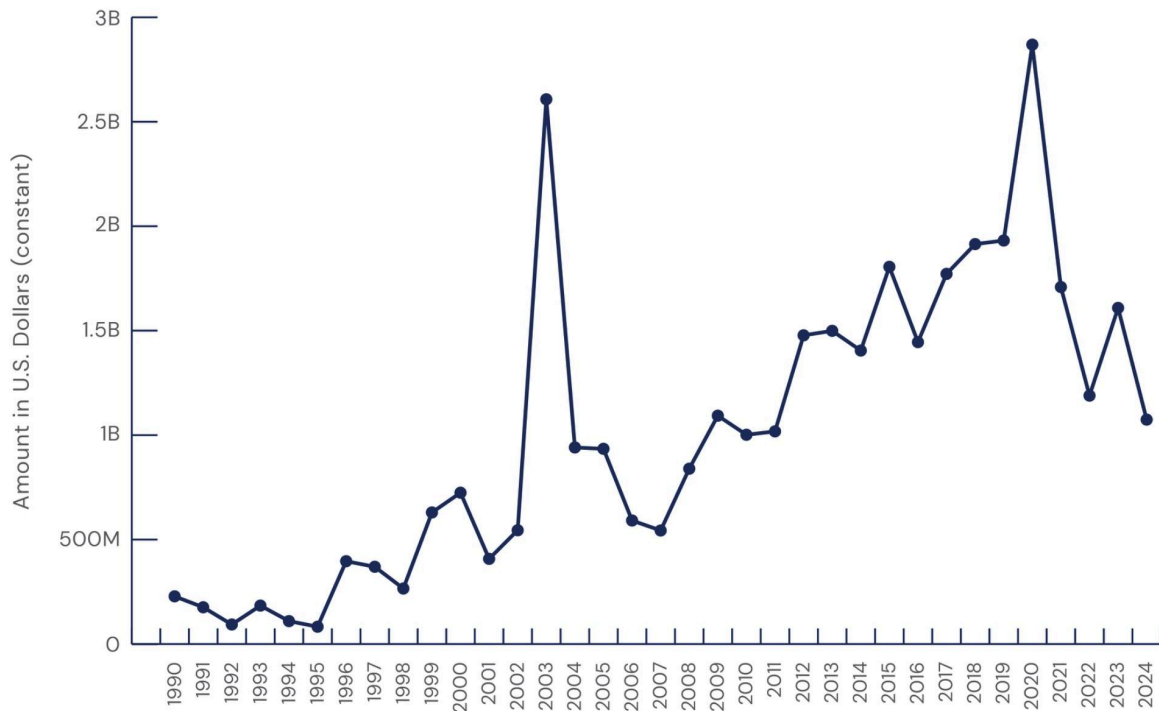
⁶ Jeremy M. Sharp, *Jordan: Background and Relations*, U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, RL 33546 (2024),

<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/RL/RL33546#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20has%20provided,includes%20%241.45%20billion%20for%20Jordan>.

⁷ Farah Bdour, "Jordan's Three Balancing Acts: Navigating the Post–October 7 Middle East," United States Institute of Peace, September 11, 2024,

<https://www.usip.org/publications/2024/09/jordans-three-balancing-acts-navigating-post-october-7-middle-east>.

U.S. Foreign Assistance Obligated to Jordan, 1990–2024



Source: U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Foreign Assistance by Country, Country at a Glance: Jordan," last updated September 26, 2024, <https://www.foreignassistance.gov/cd/jordan/>.

Subsequent bouts of violence in the Middle East brought additional waves of refugees to Jordan, including during the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s, following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, and after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011. As of 2024, the majority of refugees in Jordan were from Syria, accounting for 1.2 million out of Jordan’s overall population of 11 million.⁸ Not all refugees are registered with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, but of those that are, 90 percent are Syrian, with another 7 percent from Iraq, and others primarily from Yemen, Libya, Sudan, or Somalia.⁹ Along with Lebanon, which has also taken in large numbers of refugees, Jordan’s willingness to absorb those displaced by regional violence has prompted foreign governments to send money to support these

⁸ "Overview," The World Bank in Jordan, World Bank Group, updated February 5, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jordan/overview>.

⁹ "Overview," Jordan Operational Data Portal, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, accessed December 3, 2024, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/jor>.

populations. In addition to receiving billions of dollars from the U.S., the kingdom has received significant resources from Gulf countries, although that has periodically been cut off. After the most recent Memorandum of Understanding expired in 2017, the Gulf countries declined to renew it. This was in part due to frustration with Jordan's foreign policy, such as its support for a Palestinian state and its continued relations with Qatar, which defied the blockade imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, UAE, from 2017 to 2020.¹⁰

Abdullah II has ruled Jordan since 1999, following the death of his father, Hussein. In the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks and U.S. military intervention in the region, Abdullah established Jordan as a crucial U.S. partner in the 'War on Terror,' the invasion of Iraq, and the international coalition to defeat ISIS. Yet, in his first term, Trump ignored the interests of Jordan, including by trying to reduce U.S. funding for the kingdom for its opposition to his regional agenda. Congress and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson overrode him, and Jordan ultimately received more American funding than it had under Obama, a testament to relationships that King Abdullah and other Jordanian officials had cultivated on Capitol Hill.¹¹

In another move that sidelined Jordan, Trump abandoned any pretense of American neutrality on the issue of Palestine. Relocating the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was hugely symbolic of Trump's commitment to fulfilling Israel's wishes. Facilitating Israeli normalization with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco demonstrated that certain Arab leaders were willing to normalize with zero provisions for Palestinians and over the objections of their populations. This undermined the premise of the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which had established that Arab countries would normalize in exchange for recognizing a state of Palestine. It also undermined the American pretense of supporting a two-state solution, as established by the

¹⁰ Rachel Furlow and Salvatore Borgognone, "Gulf Designs on Jordan's Foreign Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 17, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2018/07/gulf-designs-on-jordans-foreign-policy?lang=en>.

¹¹ Matthew Lee, "U.S. Boosts Aid to Jordan Despite Trump Threats of Cuts," Associated Press, February 14, 2018, <https://apnews.com/united-states-government-461ac33c9a7b47fd92b6b64f12967c0a>.

U.S.–facilitated Oslo Accords of 1993. Regardless of the Abraham Accords’ incompatibility with the official U.S. position of two states for two peoples, the Biden White House was determined to one-up Trump’s achievements by persuading Saudi Arabia to normalize with Israel. But Oct. 7 made such an agreement too politically toxic even for Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. With Trump’s return, Jordanians fear that their interests will be further marginalized, as well as those of Palestinians, with major implications for regional stability and core U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Jordan on the edge: Political and economic pressures since Oct. 7, 2023

Political pressure on the Jordanian government increased significantly after Oct. 7 and Israel’s military intervention in Gaza. Many Jordanians — of Palestinian descent as well as full Jordanian heritage — have protested Israel’s actions and demanded their government do more to support Palestine. After Oct. 7, Khaled Meshaal, a former head of Hamas based in Doha, called on Jordanians publicly, saying: “Tribes of Jordan, sons of Jordan, brothers and sisters of Jordan. ... This is a moment of truth and the borders are close to you, you all know your responsibility.”¹² Several Jordanians heeded Meshaal’s call. On Sept. 8, 2024, a Jordanian truck driver opened fire near the King Hussein/Allenby Bridge, the border crossing between Jordan and the West Bank, and killed three Israelis. Commentators noted that the man was not of Palestinian descent, but from southern Jordan’s powerful Howeitat tribe, long a bastion of support for the Jordanian monarchy.¹³ On Oct. 18, two Jordanians crossed the border south of the Dead

¹² Meshaal held the global spotlight in 1997 when the Israeli government injected him with poison outside his office in Amman. King Hussein threatened to break the Jordan–Israel peace treaty until Prime Minister Netanyahu agreed to provide the antidote. See Nidal Al-Mughrabi, “Khaled Meshaal, Who Survived Israeli Assassination Attempt, Tipped to Be New Hamas Leader,” Reuters, July 31, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/khaled-meshaal-who-survived-israeli-assassination-attempt-tipped-be-new-hamas-2024-07-31/>; “Former Hamas Chief Calls for Protests, Neighbours to Join War against Israel,” Reuters, October 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/former-hamas-chief-calls-protests-neighbours-join-war-against-israel-2023-10-11/>.

¹³ Julian Borger, “Jordanian Driver Kills Israeli Workers at Border with West Bank,” *The Guardian*, September 8, 2024,

Sea and opened fire on Israeli soldiers, wounding several before the Jordanians were killed.¹⁴ On Nov. 24, a gunman opened fire on police near the Israeli embassy in Amman, injuring three before he was shot and killed.¹⁵ Several interviewees noted that opposition to Israel's war in Gaza has transcended a key divide in Jordanian society, that between Jordanians of Palestinian descent and those who historically lived in Jordanian territory. As Israel continues to wage war on Gaza and, increasingly, the West Bank, Jordanians may respond with more acts of violence against Israeli targets.

The establishment of a Palestinian state is a long-held goal of the Jordanian government, and the Jordan–Israel peace treaty was itself predicated on the Oslo Accords and the belief that the conflict would be resolved with an independent state of Palestine. Yet, with Israel's extreme right-wing government pursuing ethnic cleansing and probable genocide in Gaza, invading Lebanon, and possibly intending to annex the West Bank, many interviewees expressed doubt that Amman still has a partner in Tel Aviv. Zaki Bani Irsheid, the former secretary-general of the Islamic Action Front, IAF – the political wing of the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and the country's main opposition party – explained that when the Israeli Knesset passed a law in July 2024 forbidding the establishment of a Palestinian state, this was extremely concerning for Jordan, which had based its willingness to cooperate with Israel on the premise that such a state would eventually exist. “Netanyahu has said he doesn't want Hamas or Fatah” to control Gaza, he said. “There is not one person on the Israeli side that wants peace.”¹⁶ Israeli governments were previously willing to claim that they would consider the establishment of a state of Palestine at an unspecified future date, yet, under the

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/sep/08/senior-gaza-aid-official-and-family-killed-by-israeli-airstrike-on-home>.

¹⁴ “Israeli Military Says it Killed Two Attackers Crossing from Jordan's Red Sea Area,” Reuters, October 18, 2024,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-military-says-it-identified-number-terrorists-crossing-jordan-south-dead-2024-10-18/>

¹⁵ Suleiman Al-Khalidi, “Gunman Shot Dead, 3 Police Injured in Shooting Near Israeli Embassy in Jordan,” Reuters, November 24, 2024,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/jordanian-police-cordon-off-area-near-israeli-embassy-after-gunshots-heard-2024-11-24/>.

¹⁶ Author interview with Zaki Bani Irsheid, former secretary-general of the Islamic Action Front, Amman, Jordan, October 2, 2024.

right-wing government that came to power late in 2022 and especially since Oct. 7, Israel has explicitly rejected this path.¹⁷

The war has likewise exacerbated economic pressures. As of June 2024, Jordan's debt was 90 percent of its gross domestic product, GDP.¹⁸ Unemployment stood at 22 percent, but at 46 percent among youth.¹⁹ Tourism and foreign direct investment were significantly undermined by regional violence after Oct. 7. Populations surrounding Petra, the Dead Sea, and Wadi Rum depend on tourism and were particularly hard hit. Nasser Judeh, former foreign minister (2009–17), pointed out that regional violence has always harmed tourism to Jordan; even though the kingdom remains secure, tourists generally avoid regions where there is conflict. He joked: "In the '70s and '80s, a bomb would go off 2,000 miles away and tourists would stop coming."²⁰ Regional violence also affects foreign direct investment.

The war has also strained Jordan's economic partnerships with Israel, such as those intended to address Jordan's crippling lack of water. Jordan is one of the most water-scarce countries in the world, with less than 100 cubic meters available per person per year, far below the water scarcity threshold of 500 cubic meters per person per year.²¹ Israel takes more water from the Jordan River than Jordan and the West Bank combined, despite having a significantly smaller population.²² The governments of Israel and Jordan had planned to ratify a deal that would exchange Israeli desalinated water

¹⁷ "Netanyahu Boasts of Thwarting the Establishment of a Palestinian State 'for Decades,'" *The Times of Israel*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-boasts-of-thwarting-the-establishment-of-a-palestinian-state-for-decades/>.

¹⁸ "Jordanian National Government Debt," Jordan, CEIC, accessed December 3, 2024, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/jordan/national-government-debt#:~:text=Jordan%20National%20Government%20Debt%20reached.Jan%202002%20to%20Aug%202024.>

¹⁹ The World Bank, "Overview."

²⁰ Author interview with Nasser Judeh, former minister of foreign affairs, Amman, Jordan, October 2, 2024.

²¹ "Water, sanitation and hygiene," Unicef, accessed December 3, 2024, <https://www.unicef.org/jordan/water-sanitation-and-hygiene#:~:text=Jordan%20is%20the%20second%20most.the%20high%20levels%20of%20subsidies.>

²² Mark Zeitoun and Muna Dajani, "Israel Is Hoarding the Jordan River — It's Time to Share the Water," *The Conversation*, December 19, 2019, [https://theconversation.com/israel-is-hoarding-the-jordan-river-its-time-to-share-the-water-126906.](https://theconversation.com/israel-is-hoarding-the-jordan-river-its-time-to-share-the-water-126906)

for Jordanian solar energy, but that was abandoned after October 2023.²³ Inadequate water supply has especially harmed Jordan's agricultural sector in the Jordan Valley. Although not a significant portion of the GDP, agriculture remains a crucial employer in this region of the country. Historically, Jordan could rely on domestic production of key crops, but it now imports almost 90 percent of basic foodstuffs like grain.²⁴ In the absence of politics, Israel's access to the Mediterranean and desalination infrastructure could make it a useful partner for addressing Jordan's water crisis, but any further agreements have been rendered politically impossible by the war.

On Oct. 13, 2023, Parliament Speaker Ahmed Safadi requested a review of all agreements with Israel in order to make them contingent on the cessation of hostilities; the move received a unanimous vote in favor.²⁵ However, at the time of writing, 40 percent of Jordan's energy still came from Israeli natural gas.²⁶ On the issues of energy and water cooperation, the Jordanian government has few alternatives to Israel, but domestic resistance remains high. One way the government tries to manage this widespread opposition is by asserting that their cooperation with Israel allows Jordan to serve as a hub for aid to enter Gaza. Bani Irsheid of the IAF made this observation, explaining, "The official side," the government, "is unable to break ties with Israel. They justify that by saying that Jordan is giving aid to Palestinians, especially in Gaza."²⁷ Yet, as Israel has further curtailed aid from entering Gaza, it has become harder for the Jordanian government to argue that they are playing a crucial role in supporting Palestinians there.

²³ "Jordan Will not Sign Water-for-Energy Deal with Israel — Safadi," *The Jordan Times*, November 17, 2023,

<https://jordantimes.com/news/local/jordan-will-not-sign-water-energy-deal-israel-%E2%80%94-safadi>.

²⁴ Philippe Pernot, "'The Problems Are Endless': Farmers in Jordan Mobilise Against Desertification and Poor Pay," *The New Arab*, March 19, 2024,

<https://www.newarab.com/features/farmers-jordan-rally-against-desertification-and-poor-pay>.

²⁵ Saud Al-Sharafat, "The Impact of the War in Gaza on Israel–Jordan Cooperation," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 31, 2024,

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/impact-war-gaza-israel-jordan-cooperation>.

²⁶ Mohammad Ersan, "'Black Day': Hundreds Rally in Jordan over 'Treasonous' Gas Deal with Israel," *Middle East Eye*, January 3, 2020,

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/black-day-hundreds-rally-jordan-over-treasonous-gas-deal-israel>.

²⁷ Author interview with Bani Irsheid.

Public opposition to Israel has taken the form of a widespread boycott of Western franchises such as McDonald's, Starbucks, and Carrefour, as well as American and European products like Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and Nestlé. Journalist Daoud Kuttab described social pressure as central to compliance with the boycott; he saw that Nestlé water was served at a conference and observed participants asking the organizers why they were buying from a Western company like Nestlé. An anecdotal assessment of the state of the boycott in various locations in Amman in October revealed that McDonald's and Starbucks locations tended to be empty, with the few remaining employees waiting for absent customers. Zaid Eyadat, director of the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, decried the impact, citing 17,000 lost Jordanian jobs.²⁸ Alternatively, Kuttab pointed out that the boycott had provided unexpected opportunities for non-Western alternatives: "There was a guy who had a soft drink company called Matrix. He was about to close down in October [2023] and then everybody boycotted Pepsi and 7Up. And now he's the No. 1 soft drink company and you will have a hard time finding Pepsi or Coke."²⁹ In visits to local kiosks and shops, no Coca-Cola, Pepsi, or Nestlé products were visible, nor was advertising for boycotted products.

Many countries across the Middle East are participating in the boycott of Western products, although compliance is particularly high in Jordan, at 94 percent.³⁰ Several interlocutors explained the boycott as an expression of Jordanians' frustration with their government; although they cannot force the Jordanian government to withdraw from cooperation with Israel, they can control their consumption habits. Jawad Anani, who served as foreign minister and in other ministerial roles under King Hussein and helped

²⁸ Author interview with Zaid Eyadat, director of the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan, October 1, 2024.

²⁹ Author interview with Daoud Kuttab, journalist, Amman, Jordan, October 3, 2024.

³⁰ Yasmeen Serhan, "As Gaza-Inspired Boycotts Continue, New Brands Are Emerging to Fill the Void," *Time*, August 23, 2024, <https://time.com/7014399/gaza-boycotts-coke-cola-mcdonalds-starbucks/>; Tamara Turki, "Fizzing with Change: Jordanian Soda Sales Surge amid Anti-Western Boycott," *Arab News*, January 26, 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2436236/middle-east>.

to facilitate the 1994 peace treaty, explained, “People are angry with the acquiescence of their leaders about what’s happening in Gaza and now Lebanon.”³¹

The outcome of the parliamentary elections in September reflected Jordanians’ anger with the government. The Islamic Action Front, which is the country’s largest political party, won a plurality of seats — 31 out of 138 — despite efforts by the government to encourage other parties to compete.³² The IAF and other Islamist groups have been vocal critics of the Jordanian government’s response to Israel’s assault on Gaza. As a result, few were surprised by the IAF’s electoral successes, although some explained that the Islamists had performed even better than expected; Anani, the former foreign minister, said that he heard people predict that the IAF might win 11 or 12 seats, similar to their performance in the 2020 election, when the IAF won 10 out of 130 seats. Anani said that their success also reflected the perception that Islamists are less corrupt than non-Islamist politicians.³³ Participation remained low, at 32 percent, demonstrating Jordanians’ awareness that Parliament has little control over high-level decisions, including policy toward Israel.³⁴

Jordan over the edge: Annexation of the West Bank

Given the intensification of political and economic pressures in the aftermath of Oct. 7, the Jordanian government’s capacity to maintain stability is already tested. Yet the coming year is likely to aggravate that strain rather than relieve it.

Interviews occurred before the U.S. election, and several interlocutors expressed concern about the possibility of Donald Trump returning to the White House and the

³¹ Author interview with Jawad Anani, former foreign minister, Amman, Jordan, September 30, 2024.

³² Ahmad Sharawi, “Will Jordan’s New Electoral Law Bring Real Change?,” Atlantic Council, September 7, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/jordan-electoral-law-parliament/>.

³³ This perception is widespread and is studied by political scientists as a key factor in the “Islamist political advantage.” See, e.g., Melani Cammett and Pauline Jones Luong, “Is There an Islamist Political Advantage?,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 17, no. 1 (2014): 187–206, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2349385.

³⁴ Tariq Al-Nuaimat, “Analyzing Jordan’s Parliamentary Elections 2024,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 4, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2024/10/jordan-election-2024?lang=en>.

implications this would have for Jordan and the region. Jordanians remembered how the first Trump administration sidelined their interests and those of the Palestinians in favor of its preferred partners in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Rami Ayasara, of the National Society for Human Rights, pointed out that “eliminating the power of Jordan in the Islamic sites” in Jerusalem was part of Trump’s “Deal of the Century.”³⁵ In 2018, *Al-Monitor* reported that an anonymous senior official with the Palestinian Authority confirmed that Saudi Arabia sought to replace Jordan as the custodian of the Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem in return for supporting Trump’s peace plan for the Middle East.³⁶

A particular concern is Israel’s desire to annex the West Bank, an outcome that appears more likely following Trump’s election.³⁷ Israel’s finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, stated on Nov. 11 that he hoped that Israel would establish “sovereignty” over the West Bank in 2025, with Trump’s help; he also said that he had “instructed Israeli authorities overseeing West Bank settlements ‘to begin professional and comprehensive staff work to prepare the necessary infrastructure.’”³⁸ For his second administration, Trump’s appointment of prominent proponents of Israeli settlements, such as Mike Huckabee as U.S. ambassador to Israel and Steve Witkoff as special envoy to the Middle East, as well as Trump’s referring to Israel as “tiny,” appear to affirm Jordanians’ fears.³⁹

³⁵ Author interview with Rami Ayasara, executive director of the National Society for Human Rights, Amman, Jordan, September 30, 2024.

³⁶ Rasha Abou Jalal, “Is Riyadh Really Pushing for Control of Jerusalem Holy Sites?,” *Al-Monitor*, July 2, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/07/saudi-arabia-holy-sites-jordan-jerusalem-pa-guardianship.html>.

³⁷ Jonathan Saul and James Mackenzie, “With Trump Back, Israeli Settlers Revive Goal of Full Control of West Bank,” Reuters, November 23, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-settlers-set-sights-trump-support-full-control-west-bank-2024-11-23/>.

³⁸ Far-Right Minister Calls for Israeli Sovereignty in West Bank in 2025,” Reuters, November 11, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/far-right-minister-calls-israeli-sovereignty-west-bank-2025-2024-11-11/>.

³⁹ Lara Jakes and Adam Rasgon, “Trump’s Middle East Picks Signal Staunch Pro-Israel Policy,” *The New York Times*, November 13, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/13/world/middleeast/huckabee-israel-witkoff-middle-east-us.html>; Author interview with Attef Joulani, journalist, Amman, Jordan, October 2, 2024. Joulani referenced remarks from candidate Trump at an antisemitism event at his golf club in Bedminster, N.J., when Trump

Many interviewees expressed alarm at the prospect of Israel seizing the West Bank. Marwan Muasher, former foreign minister and deputy prime minister, underscored how Israel's actions have radically altered the Israel–Jordan relationship. There's now a debate in Jordan, he said, asking "if Israel's real aim is not just to prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state but to revive the idea of Jordan as Palestine."⁴⁰ Muasher, who is now vice president of studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, was instrumental in establishing the peace treaty and served as Jordan's first ambassador to Israel. Anani, another former foreign minister, pointed out that Israel has already tried to make life unbearable for Palestinians in the West Bank: "But they haven't succeeded, so what's the next thing they'll do? Put them in trucks and push them out."⁴¹ He acknowledged that this would be a war crime.

The notion of Jordan as an "alternative homeland" or "watan al-badil" for Palestinians has long been a red line for the Jordanian government.⁴² The government gave up its claim to the West Bank in 1988, partly in order to make clear that Jordan is not Palestine and should not be considered an option for resettling Palestinians outside their homeland. But given statements from Israeli officials like Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich in the aftermath of Trump's election, many fear that Israel may break the terms of the peace treaty and expel Palestinians.

Another possibility is that Israel could make life so intolerable in the West Bank that Palestinians try to escape. The U.S. Department of State estimated that 3 million

referred to Israel as "tiny," asking, "Is there any way of getting more?" on August 15, 2024. See "Former President Trump Speaks at Fighting Antisemitism Event in Bedminster, New Jersey," C-SPAN, August 15, 2024, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?537763-1/president-trump-speaks-fighting-antisemitism-event-bedminster-jersey>.

⁴⁰ Author interview with Marwan Muasher, former minister of foreign affairs, Amman, Jordan, September 29, 2024.

⁴¹ Author interview with Jawad Anani, former foreign minister, Amman, Jordan, September 30, 2024.

⁴² See Marwan Muasher, "Jordan's Redline on Admitting Palestinians is Unlikely to Change," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 21, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2023/11/jordans-redline-on-admitting-palestinians-is-unlikely-to-change?lang=en>.

Palestinians lived in the West Bank as of 2022.⁴³ Many Palestinians there have connections to Jordan and even Jordanian passports, some remaining from when Jordan controlled the territory before 1967. As Israeli settlers and the Israeli Defense Forces intensify their efforts to terrorize Palestinians in the West Bank, some may flee to Jordan. Tamara Alrifai, director of external relations and communications for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA, viewed Israel's increased pressure on Palestinians in the West Bank to such an extent that they decide to leave as a likelier scenario than Israel actively forcing Palestinians en masse across the border, which would violate the peace treaty and would generate greater international outcry. She acknowledged, however, that the international response to Israel's military activities in Gaza has not caused Israel or the U.S. to alter their policies, so criticism is clearly not a significant deterrent for either.⁴⁴

Jordan would consider a massive influx of Palestinian refugees to be an existential crisis, whether Israel forcibly displaced them all at once, or as the result of a slower exodus to escape the daily violence of occupation. To prevent this, Jordan might even consider revoking citizenship or other statuses that would allow Palestinians to cross the border legally.⁴⁵ When asked about the possible large-scale transfer of Palestinians to Jordan, former Foreign Minister Judeh responded: "This is a red line for us, as you cannot empty the Occupied Palestinian Territories of their demographic content. We will not accept or allow any measure that will challenge our national security, or the Palestinian people's right to independence on their national soil. The international community should stand against it too."⁴⁶ His response, like the official position of the Jordanian government, relies on international institutions like the U.N., which has thus

⁴³ U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, *Israel, West Bank and Gaza: West Bank and Gaza 2022 International Religious Freedom Report* (Washington, D.C., 2022), [https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel-west-bank-and-gaza/west-bank-and-gaza/#:~:text=Religious%20Demography,Gaza%20Strip%20\(midyear%202022\).](https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/israel-west-bank-and-gaza/west-bank-and-gaza/#:~:text=Religious%20Demography,Gaza%20Strip%20(midyear%202022).)

⁴⁴ Author interview with Tamara Alrifai, director of external relations and communications for UNRWA, Amman, Jordan, October 3, 2024.

⁴⁵ The source of this statement wished to remain anonymous due to the sensitivity of the topic.

⁴⁶ Author interview with Judeh.

far proven unable to stop Israel's actions in Gaza due to cover provided by the U.S., such as its veto on the Security Council.

For some, a greater fear than the displacement of Palestinians into Jordan is the Project of Greater Israel. Attef Joulani, editor and founder of the Sabeel news outlet, asserted that Jordanian concerns about Israeli escalation were higher than in any other country: "There is a basic fear due to the nature of the Israeli government. Those who govern in Israel, the far-right, their ideologies about Jordan are increasing now."⁴⁷ Although Israel's actually invading Jordan may seem far-fetched given that Jordan is a major non-NATO U.S. ally, American support for Israel did not waver even after its invasion of Lebanon, which arguably violated the U.N. Charter's prohibition on aggression.⁴⁸ However, Israeli military action against Jordan remains unlikely in the absence of a Hezbollah-style militia launching missiles from Jordanian territory or otherwise significantly escalating hostilities.

These issues felt particularly salient for Jordanians in early October: Israel began its invasion of Lebanon on Oct. 1, 2024, and Iran responded by firing missiles over Jordan at Israel. Working in partnership with U.S. forces stationed inside its territory, the Jordanian military stated that it had shot down some of the Iranian missiles on the prerogative of defending their airspace.⁴⁹ The day after the Iranian missiles crossed Jordanian airspace, former Foreign Minister Judeh asserted, "We have been very clear that we will not accept the use of our airspace as a battleground by anyone, and we will use all available measures to protect our skies and our citizens."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Author interview with Attef Joulani, journalist, Amman, Jordan, October 2, 2024.

⁴⁸ Lara Jakes, "What International Law Says About Israel's Invasion of Lebanon," *The New York Times*, October 12, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/12/world/middleeast/israel-lebanon-invasion-international-law.html>.

⁴⁹ "Jordan Says Air Force, Aerial Defenses Intercepted Projectiles During Iranian Attack on Israel," *The Times of Israel*, October 1, 2024, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/jordan-says-air-force-aerial-defenses-intercepted-projectiles-during-iranian-attack-on-israel/.

⁵⁰ Author interview with Judeh.

However, the official stance did not reflect the views of many Jordanians, who cheered as the Iranian missiles soared overhead, relieved that Israel's abuse of Palestinians would not go wholly unpunished. For some, the interceptions reflected the Jordanian government's decision to prioritize its relationship with Israel and the U.S. over the lives of Palestinians. Given that an intercepted missile fell inside its territory and killed a Jordanian, some felt that Jordan was putting Israel's security even above that of its own citizens. "Why is Jordan exhausting its forces and economy by shooting down missiles that are not directed at it?" Jordanian Iyad al-Rantsis told *Middle East Eye*.⁵¹ Although it remains unclear if the Jordanian military shot down the missiles or if the U.S. military stationed in Jordan launched the interceptors, neither scenario improves the image of the Jordanian government in the eyes of the public. Some interlocutors expressed doubt that Jordan would intercept Israeli missiles fired at Iran. And despite their decision to either engage or remain neutral, the Jordanian government will struggle to avoid being dragged in if Israel and Iran descend into full-blown conflict. As Eyadat of the Center for Strategic Studies observed, "Even if Jordan is not an active party, it will still be part of the war."⁵²

With a Trump administration incoming, even some of the most unlikely fears seem more plausible. Bani Irsheid of the IAF, when asked what Jordan would do if Trump won the election and allowed Israel to do whatever it wanted, replied, "It would be an international crisis. Jordan has alternatives; maybe not a war but it could reconsider all its agreements with Israel, including the security agreement." In response to the observation, "But if Jordan is invaded, all these agreements would be voided anyway," he answered, "If that were to happen, it would be a new era; Jordan would have a resistance movement. It would be crazy if Trump were to do this: The U.S. would lose its strategic interests in Jordan, like its bases." He made clear that he considered such a

⁵¹ Mohammad Ersan, "Jordanian Authorities Face Backlash over Role in Downing Iranian Missiles," *Middle East Eye*, October 2, 2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordan-backlash-over-role-downing-iranian-missiles-heading-israel>.

⁵² Author interview with Eyadat.

possibility extremely remote.⁵³ Yet others believed that if Trump won, Israel would feel it had been given an unprecedented opportunity to achieve goals that once seemed impossible, like the acquisition of additional territory.

With Jordan's debt already at 90 percent of GDP, unemployment high, economic development low, and insufficient water for its existing population, Israel does not need to invade to push Jordan over the brink. The prospect that Israel might try to force some of the 3 million Palestinians in the West Bank into Jordan represents an existential threat to the kingdom. King Abdullah spoke clearly against the possibility of Israeli annexation during his speech at the U.N. General Assembly in September. Referring to Israeli extremists, Abdullah said: "That includes those who continue to propagate the idea of Jordan as an alternative homeland. So let me be very, very clear — that will never happen. We will never accept the forced displacement of Palestinians, which is a war crime."⁵⁴ Several interlocutors mentioned this speech by King Abdullah, and expressed support for his clear stance on Palestine, even though some of them otherwise oppose his position. Bani Irsheid, of the IAF, said, "In His Majesty's speech at the U.N., he refuses [annexation], this represents the opinion of the majority."⁵⁵ Several also pointed out that prior to that speech, the Jordanian king had allowed his foreign minister, Ayman Safadi (no relation to Parliamentary Speaker Ahmed Safadi), to serve as his primary mouthpiece for condemning Israel's actions. Ayasara, of the National Society for Human Rights, explained that "Safadi said clearly that forcing Palestinians to move to Jordan is a sign for starting a war against Jordan."⁵⁶ Others opined that the Islamists' success in the parliamentary elections had caused the king to keep Safadi as foreign minister to

⁵³ Author interview with Bani Irsheid.

⁵⁴ Speech by King Abdullah II at U.N. General Assembly, September 24, 2024, <https://www.kingabdullah.jo/en/speeches/speech-his-majesty-king-abdullah-ii-79th-session-general-assembly-united-nations>.

⁵⁵ Author interview with Bani Irsheid.

⁵⁶ Author interview with Ayasara. Ayasara was referring to remarks from Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, who on September 6, 2024, stated that any Israeli attempts to displace West Bank Palestinians into Jordan would be interpreted as "a declaration of war." See the remarks in "Israeli Displacement of West Bank Palestinians into Jordan Will be 'Act of War': Safadi," *The New Arab*, September 6, 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/news/jordan-fm-displacement-palestinians-will-be-act-war>.

continue channeling Jordanians' frustration. In their view, if the Islamists had won fewer seats, the king might not have opted to keep such an outspoken foreign minister.

If a significant portion of Palestinians in the West Bank were to come into Jordan, either by force or of their own volition to escape Israeli violence, this would be extremely destabilizing. The king would have to either acquiesce to the demands of his citizenry and respond aggressively to Israel, or try to manage the political fallout of not doing so. Abdullah is more likely to maintain the treaty with Israel and ask for assistance from the U.S. to provide for hundreds of thousands or even millions of new refugees. Yet, under a Trump administration, it is not clear that such help would be provided.

In that scenario, the monarchy could be overthrown, as Abdullah would have inadequate resources to address both the needs and frustrations of his own population as well as those of Palestinians fleeing the West Bank. If the government were to fall, many Jordanians and displaced Palestinians would likely try to attack Israel, either individually, as has occurred already, or through organized militias. Israel would undoubtedly launch a massive military response. The resulting violence and instability could rival the Syrian refugee crisis of 2014–15, which proved so disruptive to European politics, to say nothing of the impact on the lives of Jordanians themselves.⁵⁷ Due to the strong support that the Israeli government would continue to receive from the U.S., Israeli politicians are unlikely to view low-level violence from Jordan as a deterrent. Even in the unlikely event that the Jordanian government that emerged in the aftermath of the Hashemites' overthrow might launch an attack on Israel, this would likely only reinforce Washington's support for Tel Aviv. This dynamic, that the U.S. provides unlimited support to Israel regardless of its actions, incentivizes more and more escalatory decisions from Israeli politicians, in direct contradiction of U.S. interests and expressed American wishes. The resulting moral hazard threatens to drag the United States into a conflict that it could otherwise have prevented merely by upholding U.S. law, which

⁵⁷ Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan and Elizabeth Collett, "Refugee Crisis Deepens Political Polarization in the West," Migration Policy Institute, December 11, 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugee-crisis-deepens-political-polarization-west>.

prohibits the transfer of U.S. weapons to countries engaged in gross violations of human rights, as well as to countries that block U.S. humanitarian assistance.

There is a small possibility that, despite the excitement from Israel's far-right over Trump's election, he may actually impose more consequences on Israel than Biden did. If Trump feels that Netanyahu and the Israeli government are trying to take advantage of him, he may be less willing than Biden to tolerate such behavior. Trump and his team might recognize that greenlighting Israel's annexation of the West Bank, for example, would derail his plan to persuade Saudi Arabia to normalize with Israel, for which he hopes to win a Nobel Peace Prize.⁵⁸ If Mohammed Bin Salman maintains his position that a state of Palestine with Jerusalem as its capital is a requirement for normalization, Saudi-Israeli relations remain extremely unlikely; yet that prospect may be enough for Trump to pressure Netanyahu not to annex the West Bank, and thereby prevent Jordan's slide into chaos.⁵⁹

Conclusion

Jordan's leaders have long portrayed their kingdom as "on the edge of instability" in order to encourage foreign governments to provide the funds needed to keep it solvent. That narrative was never inaccurate, it was merely deployed strategically to help the Hashemites stay in power. According to Judeh, the former foreign minister, "In the 1950s and 60s, some in the region always used to say, 'Jordan's days are numbered.' People expected Jordan to be the weak link, but it outlasted all those voices and regimes, so we must be doing something right!"⁶⁰ And yet, in the past, Amman could count on a U.S. government that was invested in helping to maintain Jordanian security to bolster regional stability, and in an Israeli government that saw the value in having a

⁵⁸ Quint Forgy, "Trump and His Aides Argue He's Long Overdue for Nobel Peace Prize," *Politico*, September 9, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/09/09/trump-nobel-peace-prize-410761>.

⁵⁹ "Saudi Arabia Will Not Recognise Israel Without Palestinian State, Says Crown Prince," Reuters, September 18, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-crown-prince-condemns-israels-crimes-against-palestinians-2024-09-18/>.

⁶⁰ Author interview with Judeh.

peace treaty govern its longest border. King Abdullah can no longer count on either, with Trump in the White House and Netanyahu dependent on the support of right-wing extremists in his governing coalition to keep him out of jail. Even if Kamala Harris had won the election, she had given no indication that she would veer from Biden's support for Israel, which would have further undermined Jordan.

Serious destabilization in Jordan elevates the risk to the United States. U.S. policy toward the Levant since the Clinton administration has invested in and relied on stability in Jordan. If an annexation of the West Bank by Israel pushed Jordan over the edge, either in the form of a massive refugee crisis or the overthrow of the Hashemites, the U.S. and Israel would both lose a cornerstone on which they currently rely. Trump has pledged to withdraw U.S. troops from Iraq and Syria, yet, if Jordan is in chaos, that campaign promise will be nearly impossible to fulfill. Militias continue to operate with relative impunity in Iraq, Israel's invasion has rendered Lebanon even more precarious, and the fall of Assad threatens to throw Syria into chaos. Although Trump campaigned on ending forever wars in the region, unless he reins in Israel, he may soon oversee even greater regional conflict that could drag in the United States, especially if U.S. service members are killed and the American public demands retribution.

Furthermore, if the U.S. fails to prevent Israel from annexing the West Bank, especially in the likely event that this breaks the fragile status quo in Jerusalem, the reaction from America's regional partners is likely to be swift. While rulers from Rabat to Cairo and Abu Dhabi to Riyadh welcomed Trump's election victory due to his willingness to reward them in his first term, they will face significant domestic pressure to respond decisively if Israel annexes the West Bank. As Israel's war on Gaza has yet again demonstrated, the issue of Palestine remains salient for Arab and Muslim publics. Trump wants to demonstrate his ability to achieve Saudi normalization with Israel when Biden failed. Rather than building on his image as a dealmaker, Trump could see his Abraham Accords unraveling if he fails to prevent Israel from further destabilizing the region.

Instead of restoring order, Trump might end up facilitating U.S. involvement in yet another unnecessary and futile war in the Middle East.

About the Author

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Annelle is completing a book manuscript on religious authority in the Middle East, focused on the countries of Jordan, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. She is a senior non-resident fellow at the Arab Center of Washington DC, a non-resident fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, and an adjunct faculty member at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Affairs. She holds a PhD in political science from George Washington University.

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