An aerial view of the Za'atari camp in Jordan for Syrian refugees, 18 July 2013, from a helicopter carrying U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh.

Jordanian Society's Responses to Syrian Refugees

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Syria's civil war is one of the most pressing national security dilemmas facing the United States. It threatens to further engulf an already volatile region and spill over the borders of a NATO ally (Turkey), the closest U.S. ally in the Middle East (Israel), and three fragile Arab states—Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Jordan, in particular, may be in existential peril as a result of the Syrian conflict. It is an important ally with a questionable ability to absorb the over six hundred thousand Syrian refugees now inside its borders. The regional crisis and a further influx of refugees into Jordan could destabilize that country permanently through a deterioration of its national identity.
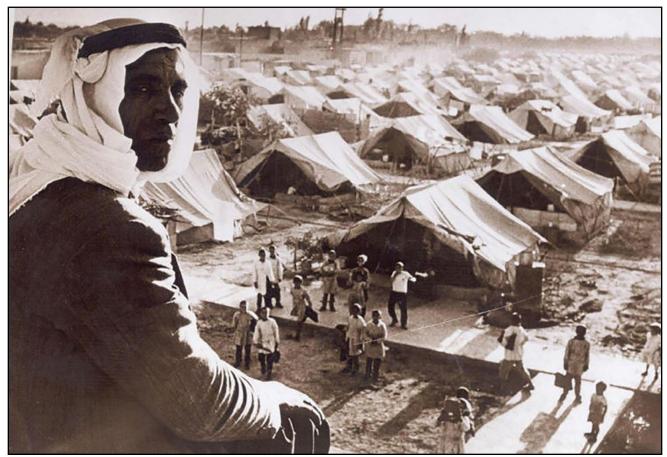
(Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

The Jaramana refugee camp for Palestinian refugees just outside Damascus, Syria, 1948. Approximately 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from areas that were later incorporated into Israel. A majority of these took refuge in similar tent cities in Jordan.

Understanding the social dynamics at work in the region is vital for helping U.S. policymakers employ the appropriate instruments of national power to advance U.S. interests there. Since the Department of Defense is deeply involved in the U.S. response to the Syrian crisis, questions pertaining to the ability of allied nations to absorb refugees are critically important to military leaders, who must properly align military strategy in support of policy.

This article analyses how the Syrian refugee influx threatens to change Jordan's culture and political structure, and how Jordanian society might respond to the threat of such a rapid change in demographics. It briefly examines Jordanian society and the status of both Palestinian and Syrian refugees there, laying out the current Jordanian response to the refugee influx, as well as announced or rumored future plans for integration or segregation of the refugees. Next, it analyzes models of ethnic tension and discusses examples of conflict-related changes in society as they may relate to the situation in Jordan.

This article adopts an outside observer (etic) perspective and examines ethnic conflict to make a prediction about future behavior to help U.S. policymakers.

Bottom Line Up Front

Given historical trends, the most likely outcome of the current crisis is that Jordanians will self-identify more strongly as an in-group, whereas they will ascribe out-group status to the Syrian refugees. Consequently, Jordanians will seek to limit integration of Syrian refugees into Jordanian society. As the Jordanian state apparatus seeks to mitigate tensions within its society in order to preserve internal stability, the likelihood is that King Abdullah (Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein) will seek greater U.S. involvement and support.

Background

Jordan is a staunch U.S. ally with a fractious society. During World War I, Sharif Hussein bin Ali revolted against the Ottoman Empire with British support. One

of his sons, Abdullah, became the king of Transjordan, a British protectorate created after World War I. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, named after Jordan's royal family, became independent following World War II. (The Hashemites trace their ancestry directly to the prophet Muhammad, providing religious legitimacy to their rule.[1])

After the Arab states' war against Israel in 1948, Jordan annexed the West Bank, adding to its territory and population but also laying the stage for future tension between the original Transjordanian Bedouins and the poorly integrated Palestinians.[2] "East Bank Jordanians," also known as the Bedouin, comprise the elite of Jordanian society. They serve in the military and government, are exempt from many taxes, and can purchase goods at lower prices than their Palestinian counterparts.[3]

The dozen or so major Bedouin tribes have, over time, grown increasingly forceful in demanding greater concessions from King Abdullah II and Jordan's government.[4] The northern tribes supported Syria when it invaded in 1970, and the southern tribes have shown themselves to be very effective at exchanging allegiance for monetary compensation; first from the Turks, then the British, and now the Hashemites.[5]

Relying on them for support, King Abdullah II is keen to curry favor. When the Islamic State captured 1st Lt. Moaz al-Kasasbeh in early 2015, the king hurried to pay his respects to the pilot's tribe, the powerful Bararsheh.[6] Following Moaz's death, the tribes united behind government policy against the Islamic State.

Status of Palestinian Refugees in Jordan

Palestinians, both the refugees who fled the area now claimed by Israel during Israel's 1948 War of Independence and their descendants, form a large portion of the population in Jordan. In fact, they are a majority, a truth so uncomfortable for the Jordanian government that it refuses to openly admit it.[7]

The history of Palestinians in Jordan has been marred by discrimination and conflict. Notably, the state's first king, Abdullah I, was assassinated by a Palestinian in 1951, and Jordan used military force to expel the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) together with thousands of PLO supporters during the 1970s' Jordanian civil war, known as Black September.[8]

The socioeconomic status and integration of Jordan's remaining Palestinian population today is uneven and complicated. There are over two million Palestinian-Jordanians registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine Refugees in the Middle East inside the country, many of whom still live in refugee camps. Jordan's withdrawal from the West Bank in 1988 led to the revocation of citizenship for thousands, rendering them essentially stateless. A Palestinian with only a Jordanian passport, but no national number, is ineligible for state schooling, medical care, state employment, and many other basic provisions necessary for economic advancement.[9]

Consequently, the third Hashemite king, Abdullah II, reigns in a context of historical threats to his kingdom from malcontents within, especially since Jordan made and is now at peace with Israel, its traditional foreign rival broadly despised by Palistinian refugees. Tellingly, Palestinians are not permitted in the Army, and they are very thinly represented in the top ranks of government.

Syrian Prospect for Settling in Jordanian Refugee Camps

Most troublingly for the newly arrived Syrian refugees may be the stark disparity between the status of Palestinians who live in the camps and regular Jordanian citizens, even after having lived in Jordan for decades.[10] The most recent UNRWA report (2013) on the Palestinian refugees in Jordan states, "Camp inhabitants have significantly lower income, larger households, substandard housing, lower educational attainment, perceived poorer health, and heavier reliance on UNRWA and other relief services."[11]

Currently, Jordan houses Syrian refugees in several large camps and within many population centers. Za'atari, the largest refugee camp, is now the fourth largest city in Jordan. In a country with a population of around 6.5 million, Syrians are now close to a tenth of the population. Approximately 440,000 of these refugees live outside of refugee camps.[12]

Outside of the camps, Syrians compete with Jordanians for work and housing, despite employment being illegal. This leads to the perception amongst Jordanians that Syrian refugees are responsible for difficulty in finding low-skilled employment in Jordan, and also for a drastic rise in housing prices there. The Jordanian government estimates that each refugee costs the state $3,000 (U.S.) a year (or almost $2 billion), compared to an annual gross

An overview of Za'atari Syrian refugee camp in Jordan, 21 November 2012.

domestic product of $33 billion. One consequence is that Syrian refugees are by definition excluded from political representation in Jordan's unicameral legislature.

Popular Response to Syrian Refugees among Jordanians

Although Jordanians were initially welcoming to the Syrians, this response has hardened. As a result, the government limits the inflow of refugees and devotes considerable resources to policing the border.[13] The Syrians place an additional burden on the health care system as well, such that Jordan's minister of health warned, "The system is dangerously overstretched."[14] More troubling is that many urban refugees are unaware of services available to them, resulting in low vaccination rates, for example.[15] Recently, Jordan's government announced a $3 billion Jordan Response Plan to meet the needs of both refugees and host communities, but the historical underfunding of aid programs for Syria does not give cause for optimism.[16]

In response to the stress caused by the refugee influx, Jordan is considering establishing a "safe zone" in southern Syria. This buffer zone would permit Jordan to halt the refugee influx and also to provide rebel forces with a protected area in which to train and prepare for attacks against the Assad regime. But, as Ala' Alrababa'h explained in a July 2015 article, this move poses risks. First, it may encourage the Syrian government to attack Jordan. Second, any buffer zone may also be utilized by extremist groups to foment unrest inside Jordan.[17]

Thus, Jordan risks exacerbating the situation with such a drastic remedy, and the willingness to entertain the option shows how worried Jordan's rulers are.

Analysis

Jordan is an ethnically heterogeneous state with the consequence that a sense of national identity and unity is not strong among much of the population. Tellingly, Jordan does not risk using the traditional state institution that many countries use to build a sense of national identity—the armed forces—because it fears providing training and weapons to groups with suspect loyalties. Consequently, Palestinians are excluded from armed service, which actually perpetuates the perception of discrimination, magnifies ethnic differences, and foments bitter resentment.

Therefore, the friction point between Palestinians and Bedouins in Jordan may be primarily viewed as ethnic in nature. Frederik Barth defined an ethnic group as a population

> that is largely biologically self-perpetuating; shares fundamental cultural values, realized in overt unity in cultural forms; makes up a field of communication and interaction; [and] has a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.[18]

With the above description in mind, ethnic delineation is especially important because ethnic identity

(Photo courtesy of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' Photo Unit)

determines benefits derived from and membership within the instruments of state power. Although they have a shared Sunni Arab ancestry, religion, and language, Palestinians and Bedouins in Jordan nonetheless differentiate among themselves in very inflexible ways.

Tribal identity is one such major ethnic discriminator within Jordanian society, especially among the powerful Bedouin tribes. Ethnicity is ordinarily derived in one of two distinctive ways. *Performative* ethnicity defines identity by shared beliefs, cultural characteristics, and actions. Consequently, the ability to adopt belief systems and cultural characteristics (such as adopting a religion, or learning the ethnic group language or dialect) enables outsiders to assimilate with greater ease into a new ethnic identity. In contrast to the more flexible performative concept of ethnicity, Jordanians generally adhere to a fixed *primordialist* one. Primordialism asserts kinship and obligatory fealty to an identity group based on assumed common origin and ancestry—kinship by blood ties. Therefore, the deeply ingrained Jordanian primordialist tribal outlook that derives ethnic identity based on the assumption of common geneology makes it difficult for outsiders to join the in-group. This primordialist concept serves as a defense mechanism of sorts for the Bedouins who use it to assert their in-group higher status at the expense of first the Palestinians, and now the Syrians.

Conflict as an Agent of Change

Conflict accelerates change, and culture is no exception to this rule. Sharon Hutchinson, for example,

outlined how conflict in the Sudan militarized Nuer ethnicity. She observed, "communities … have been grappling with an expanding regional subculture of ethnicized violence."[19] Similarly, emerging circumstances in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon show that Arab states are also increasingly vulnerable in this regard.

Keeping this in mind, there are several possible outcomes for conflict between tribe and state. The Bedouin tribes of Jordan will not willingly cede their privileged position to the Syrians, especially given their documented resistance to Palestinian empowerment. However, the unfolding conflict in the region may limit their choices and compel them to accept socio-cultural change. Choices include assimilation and cooperation, flight, or resistance (or a combination of these choices).

Historically, Jordan's Bedouin tribes tend to cooperate with the state and use the threat of resistance to extract concessions that reinforce their power in society. On the other hand, the Palestinians in Jordan, although not organized on strictly tribal lines, also have utilized all three strategies throughout recent history.

In contrast, the Syrian refugees are actively prevented from assimilating and have no real desire to flee back to war-torn Syria. This means there is a significantly increased chance of the third option in response to change imposed by conflict, resistance.

Analyzing Ethnic Resistance

One useful model of ethnic conflict is provided by Joan Estaban and Debraj Ray, wherein they examine discriminatory government policy and its responsiveness to

various forms of ethnic activism, including violence. The perceived responsiveness by the state "induces individuals to mobilize, often violently, to support their cause."[20]

Their model is applicable to Jordan because it accounts for inequality across groups; a victory over an opposing ethnic group that brings with it the possibility of full or partial expropriation of the opponent's resources. The model suggests that large income differences lead directly to an increased likelihood of ethnic conflict. However, the group with the greater income also has a proportionally greater ability to fund militants.

In Jordan, the Bedouins have the additional advantage of controlling the security services, making any armed resistance a dangerous proposition for the out-groups. Therefore, the greater risk to the Jordanian state in this model is from the armed forces, whose members, despite homogeneity with state structures, may act to preserve the tribes' prerogative to resources as opposed to the state's.

Esteban and Ray's primary conclusion is that within-group distribution of radicalism and income is more important than the simple level of either variable. Here they echo two preeminent experts in the study of ethnic conflict, Donald Horowitz and Robert Bates, by concluding that within-group inequality is an important factor in the beginnings of ethnic conflict.[21]

As such, understanding more about the disparities within Jordan's Bedouin tribes would be an important next step for assessing risk to Jordan's government and overall society. Additionally, the state's demonstrated responsiveness to agitation by the powerful Bedouin tribes may inspire similar activity from the out-groups, whose methods may be more forceful to attract the attention necessary to address their grievances.

Potential Involvement of the Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood is another powerful force in Jordan with the potential to shape any eventual response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Although its leadership comprises mostly Bedouins, it retains many traits of the organization established by Hassan al-Banna in Egypt. As such, it meets the requirements outlined by Beeman in his analysis of fundamentalism: revivalism, orthodoxy, evangelism, and social action.[22]

Unlike in Syria, where Haffez al-Assad destroyed the Muslim Brotherhood in his siege of Hama in 1982, Jordan's rulers have tolerated the Muslim

Brotherhood.[23] Although some commentators see this as a cynical move to keep an "opposition in waiting" with which to alarm the United States and ensure support for repressive policies, it also poses an existential danger to Jordan's government and society if the Bedouin decide to support it in lieu of the monarchy. William Beeman was clear about the risk:

> Because such movements often objectify the larger society as "Other" and oppressor, they can produce participants who defy civil authority and are difficult to predict or control. They often operate on the edge of the law, creating automatic tension in the society in which they exist.[24]

Alternatively, the Muslim Brotherhood may decide to champion the cause of Syrian refugees, increasing its own power vis-à-vis the state and drawing the Syrians directly into domestic Jordanian politics.

Conclusions

If the Syrian civil war ended tomorrow, the entire state apparatus of Syria would still be broken. Syria's formerly tolerant and cosmopolitan culture has been torn apart, and returning to a status quo ante bellum is impossible. There is no realistic outcome in which the majority of refugees might immediately return to Syria absent a forcible repatriation that would draw international condemnation.

With this in mind, the inevitable effects on Jordanian society are of primary interest to the United States. As an ally actively engaged in combat operations in both Iraq and Syria, a stable Jordan is strategically significant.

Despite the difficulty inherent in predicting cultural shifts during a conflict, the evidence and literature make a strong case that Jordanian society will come under increasing strain from the influx of refugees, and that could be perilous. Therefore, the evidence supports the hypothesis that Jordanians are likely to limit Syrian integration into society for fear of both instability and economic losses.

The strain of a sustained Syrian refugee presence in Jordan will threaten political stability as various subcultural groups jockey to protect or advance themselves, forcing the Jordanian regime to seek ways of alleviating the pressure to maintain itself. Since there are at present no options apparent that do not entail significant human suffering or lessening of instability, any action by Jordan will directly impact U.S. military

A Syrian refugee girl points at the tented settlement where she lives with her family in Jawa, in the outskirts of Amman, where a mere one hour of rainfall flooded large sections of the camp, 18 November 2013.

and diplomatic efforts. It is truly a matter of deciding carefully which is the best among bad options.

A constant worry in Jordan is that the Palestinians may see the stress created by the Syrian refugees as an opportunity to take what they see as their rightful place at the top of Jordanian society. Even if unsuccessful, such an attempt would have far-reaching ripple effects throughout the region, further distracting both U.S. and Israeli officials. If Jordan were to be preoccupied with internecine conflict, Saudi Arabia would become even more important as an Arab ally to the United States in the anti-Islamic State coalition. This outcome, especially given the current strain on U.S.-Saudi relations, would present even more challenges to military action in Syria and further limit U.S. options.

Consequently, Jordan's primary concern is to limit the emergence of ethnic conflict that might quickly become unmanageable. As Esteban and Ray's model shows, inequality and radicalism provide powerful explanations for ethnic conflict.[25] This is particularly worrisome to Jordan because it has a minority in-group with a high level of inequality in comparison to the out-groups. Additionally, the Muslim Brotherhood presents an existing organization with the potential to radicalize discontented and desperate refugees. Moreover, across the border in northern Syria, many of the militias combating the Assad regime are already extremely radical in nature.

There are many questions that remain. Most importantly, what is the risk of radicalization of both Syrian refugees and Jordanians? In this regard, what is the capability of the Muslim Brotherhood chapter in Jordan to ignite a fundamentalist movement that places unbearable stress on King Abdullah's precarious balancing act?[26] Further, what are the possibilities that Jordan's Palestinians, long discriminated against by the Bedouins, find common cause with their Syrian counterparts? After all, Jordan still considers the Palestinians refugees to properly belong in the West Bank and Israel, even after over half a century of living in Jordan.[27]

The one mitigating factor of consequence with regard to organizing refugees to oppose the Jordanian government seems to be the cost of mobilization, which the out-groups do not yet have a demonstrated ability to bear.

In devising a strategy to support the Jordanian state, the United States should first focus its attention on the Jordanian Bedouins to determine how the tribes perceive their own status in society, and how they might support stability in Jordan in the face of a continuing refugee crisis. It is from them that the greatest risk to Jordan's stability could possibly be mounted, or the greatest impetus to preserving Jordan's national integrity as a stable state be cultivated. ◼

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