

The Quite Unnecessary Kingdom of Jordan

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The Kingdom of Jordan is in a parlous state. Just a year ago, it was looking forward to 2.5% growth in the economy in 2021; now it predicts a 3% contraction instead, a colossal drop. Poverty levels now approach 20%. The Debt to GDP ratio is 96%; unemployment is at 19%. Minister of Finance Mohamad Al-Ississ has said: “This year’s budget is the most difficult for Jordan ever. The coronavirus pandemic and exceptional regional circumstances have minimized growth.”

Jordan has blotted its copybook with several of the rich Sunni Arab states by refusing to endorse the Abraham Accords. When the half-brother of Jordanian King Abdullah II, Prince Ali bin Hussein, shared an article which criticized the Accords, he “reportedly caused a diplomatic stir” between the UAE and

Jordanian leadership. King Abdullah reached out personally to Prince Hussein to ask Hussein to delete the tweet. King Abdullah's actions reflects the Jordanian leadership's concern for the tens of thousands of its citizens working in the Emirates, whose temporary worker status could be threatened if the Jordanian state criticized the Accords. These workers are part of the remittance economy that Jordan depends on for billions of dollars annually; the country can ill afford having its nationals lose their jobs in the U.A.E. Thus, even those against normalization in the Jordanian government have felt the pressure to stay silent. But the Emirates knows that in opinion polls, more than 60% of Jordanians have expressed their opposition to the Abraham Accords, and this is cause for resentment in Abu Dhabi.

Meanwhile, Jordan has unnecessarily created a contretemps with Israel. The Jordanians had arranged with Israel for the Crown Prince, Hussein ibn Abdullah, with a group of armed security men, to visit Al-Aqsa Mosque. The details had been worked out and agreed upon, as to the numbers of armed men, and the arms they would be allowed to carry, who would accompany the Crown Prince. But when the party reached Israel's border, there were far more men, and more heavily armed, than had been agreed upon, and they, though not the Crown Prince himself, were refused entry by the Israelis. Instead of cutting back his retinue to the previously agreed size, the Crown Prince angrily cancelled his trip to Al Aqsa, and the Jordanian government added its own condemnation of Israel to his.

The Al-Aqsa trip had been planned to emphasize Jordan's role as the sole Muslim guardian of the Temple Mount (known to Muslims as Haram al-Sharif), at a time when two other countries have shown an interest in sharing that responsibility, or even in replacing Jordan altogether. The first country is Turkey, whose President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has neo-Ottoman ambitions to reestablish a Turkish presence in former Ottoman lands, and to promote a Turkish role in

Jerusalem, where the Turkish government has already established an office to reach out to Jerusalem's Arab population; Turkey has begun to invite Palestinian Arabs in East Jerusalem to visit Turkey on subsidized trips. Through its Palestinian allies, who were recently allowed by Jordan to put representatives on the Waqf Council, which governs the Temple Mount, and which Jordan controls, Turkey hopes eventually to have its own representatives on the Waqf Council. The entire Arab world – save for the Palestinians – is against that development, and it's impossible to believe it could ever happen.

But Saudi Arabia also would like a role in the Waqf Council, and it may be hard for Jordan to deny it, given how much aid Jordan has received from the Saudis directly as aid, and the billions of dollars the country receives in remittances from Jordanian workers in Saudi Arabia, workers whom the Kingdom could expel in retaliation if Jordan were to refuse to share control of the Waqf Council with the Saudis. The Jordanians may huff and puff, but as of now they are in no position to deny the Saudis their wish. Once on the Waqf Council, it's not hard to imagine the Saudis attempting to wrest control of the Council from Jordan which, economically, is so dependent on the Kingdom. Israel's deepening alliance with Saudi Arabia suggests it will not only be pleased with a Saudi role on the Waqf Council, but will also secretly support a Saudi bid to supplant the Jordanians altogether. This prospect terrifies the Jordanians, whose prestige in the Arab world depends on Jordan continuing to control the third-holiest site in Islam. If it loses that role, what will it have left?

Given all this, shouldn't the Biden Administration, taking advantage of Jordan's desperate economic situation, threaten to cut its aid to Jordan – the country is the third largest recipient of American aid, for no good reason I can think of – unless it hands over the terrorist murderer Ahlam al-Tamimi, who planned and helped carry out the Sbarro Pizzeria massacre,

in which 15 were killed, including seven children, and 130 wounded? Two of those killed were Americans, a third American was wounded, and has been in a vegetative state for the last 20 years. Ahlam al-Tamimi has become quite a celebrity in Jordan, where she was given her own television show and now appears as a media personality, telling her adoring public that she has never regretted her attack on the pizzeria; she chose a target where she knew there would be lots of mothers with children; she would do it again if she had the chance; she only regrets that there were not even more victims. A moral monster who deserves to face American justice for killing and wounding Americans, Al-Tamimi is being protected by Jordan, which refuses to hand her over to our courts. Very well, then, the Americans should refuse to hand over to Amman the more than \$1 billion Jordan has continued to receive annually from Washington. That's our quid for their quo. How long can Jordan, deprived, for other reasons, of aid from its former friends Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., hold out against a resolute America?

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