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Jordan

A Gateway to EU-GCC Relations

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The Middle East is a region in turmoil. Conflicts rage in Yemen, Iraq and Syria, and the future of Libya remains uncertain. In addition, the underlying causes which triggered the instability wave in the first place have not been addressed. This can, potentially, spark a new wave of unrest and violence in the region which would endanger the interests of countries in Europe, and the Arab Gulf and compromise the security of the very few countries which have remained stable in the Arab Levant.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a strategic partner for key regional actors. In particular, Jordan enjoys long-standing relations with strong foundations with powerful international players such as the European Union (EU), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and their member states, which share common concerns with regard to the ongoing instability, but have been unable to coordinate and join forces to achieve common objectives in the Middle East and North Africa. Jordan retains the potential to become a primary facilitator for future EU-GCC joint stabilisation efforts in the region. For instance, Amman carved a role for itself as a privileged interlocutor for both Western and Gulf states involved in the fight against terrorism across the Arab Levant and the wider Middle East. Since 1996, Jordan has been regarded as a major non-NATO ally and has signed, in 2018, the NATO-Jordan Defence Capacity Building Project (DCB), designed to enhance Jordan's crisis management and border security capabilities. Crucially, Jordan has allowed NATO to use of its Muwaffaq Salti Airbase extensively. This constitutes a pivotal asset for Western regional interests now that the Turkish

role in NATO – and specifically that of Incirlik Air Base – is increasingly uncertain. Jordan is also a key player for a successful political settlement in neighbouring Syria: Amman has a privileged channel of communication with an array of groups active within Syria's southern Daraa province, which fled to Jordan after being defeated by Syrian government forces. Due to its military involvement and intelligence gathering on the ground in Syria, Jordan was the only other country, together with the organisers Russia, Iran and Turkey, allowed to take active part in all technical and plenary meetings during the Astana conference on Syria. Crucially, Jordan also neighbours another war-torn country, Iraq. Amman can become a platform for international initiatives to prevent that Daesh, and other terrorist groups, from using western Iraq as a safe haven. Jordan is in the privileged position to mediate a solution to some major regional diplomatic dilemmas. Having adopted thorough its history a variety of approaches for and against the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliated groups, Amman can contribute political know-how in the dispute between the pro-Islamist camp, led by Turkey and Qatar and the anti-Islamist camp, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the UAE. If adequately supported, the Hashemite Kingdom can also play a greater role in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, historically a major source of regional tension, while paving the way for greater Israel-Arab engagement. Jordan, together with Egypt, are the only Arab states to have full diplomatic relations with Israel and deep-rooted economic and political relations with the Palestinian leadership, also given the large number of Palestinians living in the Kingdom.

The aforementioned (geo)political clout adds to the historic depth of the Kingdom, and the special religious legitimacy enjoyed by the Hashemite dynasty, who descend directly from the Hasanid Sharifs of Mecca, which ruled over the Holy City for centuries. Over the past few years, the Arab countries of the GCC have repeatedly demonstrated their readiness to support the Hashemite Kingdom in times of trouble. This was recently evidenced in June 2018 when Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, authorised a \$ 2.5 billion (USD) investment, the investment was co-financed by Kuwait and the UAE, to stabilise Jordan's financial situation. In particular, the Sau-

di Arabia-Jordan relationship runs so deep, in all fields, that Jordan is one of the two countries outside of the Gulf region to ever be invited to join the GCC. Cooperation between the two Arab Sunni monarchies has been further encouraged by the rise of Iran's influence in the region. The Al-Saud family views Iran's regional ambitions as the main existential threat to the survival of Saudi Arabia as a state. King Abdullah of Jordan was the first regional leader to speak openly of the dangers of a growing Shia arc of influence in the region. Jordan is firmly against Tehran's interventionism in the domestic affairs of other nations. Despite such concerns, Jordan, like the EU, supports the international nuclear accord with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015. Jordanian officials argue that the JCPOA has, to date, not only thwarted Iran's ambition to acquire nuclear weapons, but, has also effectively prevented a possible arms race in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia-Jordan synergy was enhanced by the announcement, in April 2016, of a new joint Saudi-Jordanian council designed to deepen strategic relations and enhance co-operation in all fields. Jordan is also a key interlocutor for all other GCC members, including: Oman, Kuwait and Qatar, significant economic partners and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a key defence and economic partner. Following the execution of Muath Safi Yousef Al-Kasasbeh, the Jordanian pilot burned alive by Daesh in 2015, the UAE has prioritised military support and intelligence sharing with Jordan to target the perpetrators of the crime.

On the other hand, the Hashemite Kingdom is regarded, by all major EU member states, as a key trading partner and as a reliable interlocutor for EU interests in the Arab Levant. In fact, contributing to Jordan's stability and partnership with Amman, has been among the very few EU regional policies which enjoyed widespread consensus across the European continent. Such consensus was further underscored by the 2016 London Conference, organised by the United Kingdom, Germany, Kuwait, Norway and the United Nations, aimed at providing new significant help for countries hosting a considerable number of Syrian refugees such as Jordan. Dialogue between Jordan and the EU can be viewed as a success story. Politically, the EU-Jordan partnership is defined by the 2002 Association Agreement. Jordan was also the first Mediterranean partner country

to conclude technical negotiations leading to an “Advanced Status” with the EU in 2010. The EU has put in place mechanisms to financially cooperate with Jordan through the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). Such cooperation successfully developed into the Jordanian Action for the Development of Enterprises a.k.a. the JADE Project which was created with the objective of supporting the Private Sector Development (PSD) in Jordan. The importance, to all parties, of the EU-Jordan relationship is also linked to their trade volume, as the EU is Jordan’s primary commercial partner in terms of total trade volume as well as the major source of imports to Jordan. In July 2016, the EU and Jordan agreed to simplify the rules of origin that Jordanian exporters use in their trade with the EU, to make the export of Jordanian products to the EU easier. The EU’s ultimate objective, through the Association Agreement, was to foster the establishment of bilateral free trade with Jordan which could represent the first step towards creating a wider regional Euro-Mediterranean free trade area. Jordan’s Royal family has, on several occasions, declared that the Kingdom’s interest is to develop ever closer relations to the EU. The mutual interest in developing relations from economic to closer political and security cooperation was the main topic of the 2016 EU-Jordan bilateral talks which took place in Amman, within the framework of the EU’s European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). As recently as February 2018, the EU pledged to support Jordan’s efforts in the promotion of human rights, democracy and anti-corruption laws, as well as the latest influx of refugees fleeing from the conflicts in Iraq and Syria and to securitise its borders.

Jordan’s ties to the EU and the countries of the Gulf makes it a formidable facilitator for future relations between the EU and those important regional countries. Despite the common interests and potential dividends for both the EU and GCC countries to develop their relations, and the benefits that such increased cooperation could have, such relations have not (yet) reached their full potential. The Sharaka research project on EU-GCC relations found that obstacles to tighter EU-GCC relations include the contrast between the formal structural EU institutions versus the more informal approach of GCC ones, differences of perspectives on political issues, such as the issue of

human rights, as well as the structural difficulties for the EU to be a credible security partner and address the priority concerns of the GCC states. Amman's long history of engagement with both European and Gulf countries allows Jordan to have the expertise to mediate such differences. The Hashemite Kingdom currently supports important EU political stances which are viewed negatively in both Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. These include support for the JCPOA and the EU's benevolent neutrality towards Doha in the Qatar crisis, despite the Saudi-Emirati decision to isolate Doha. Jordan could also play a significant role in re-aligning the interests among members of the GCC. While sharing some of the concerns that led other Arab countries to interrupt all relations with Doha, Amman has so far favoured a soft approach and maintains dialogue with Qatar.

Such differences should not deviate attention from the fact that the EU ultimately shares with the GCC members strategic interests in stabilising key regional cross-roads. With regard to the Arab Levant it would be beneficial to make use of Jordan's mediation capabilities to coordinate efficient responses between the EU and the GCC to limit the current and future instability spreading from Iraq and Syria. Jordan is also an increasingly important player with regard to the Libya dossier. This was underscored by the recent visits to Amman paid by both leaders of Libya's rival administrations, Fayez Al-Sarraj and Khalifa Haftar. This could prompt further coordination in maintaining stability in North Africa, an area in which EU countries have an array of interests and in which GCC members have significant military and political influence. The UAE, for instance, has recently expanded its Al-Khadim military base in Eastern Libya and has significant leverage over Libya's Tobruk-based Government and over the Al-Sisi administration in Cairo: for better or worse, Abu Dhabi is a key interlocutor with regard to European policies in Libya.

All considered, further European engagement with the Hashemite Kingdom favours the geostrategic interests of the EU for a variety of reasons: Jordan represents a bastion of stability in a war-torn MENA, a region in geographical proximity to the EU and is able and willing to encourage further coordination between the EU and the GCC, a

coordination with the potential to accelerate the policy initiatives of all actors for the comprehensive progress of the region.

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