

Archived version from NCDOCKS Institutional Repository <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/>



Between Iraq And A Hard Place: Jordanian-Iraqi Relations

By: **Curtis Ryan**

Abstract

The strange alliance between Jordan and Iraq has undergone intriguing transformations. Jordan paid a heavy economic price for staying out of the coalition against Iraq during the Gulf war. The strength of domestic pro-Iraqi feeling led Jordan's regime to ask itself: was it possible not to support Saddam? Now, despite dealigning from Iraq in the mid-1990s, Jordan may still be the closest friend Saddam Hussein's regime is likely to find in the region.

Ryan, C. (2000). Between Iraq and a Hard Place: Jordanian-Iraqi Relations. *Middle East Report*, (215), 40-42. doi:10.2307/1520157. Publisher version of record available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1520157>

Between Iraq and a Hard Place

Jordanian-Iraqi Relations

Curtis Ryan

The strange alliance between Jordan and Iraq has undergone intriguing transformations. Jordan paid a heavy economic price for staying out of the coalition against Iraq during the Gulf war. The strength of domestic pro-Iraqi feeling led Jordan's regime to ask itself: was it possible *not* to support Saddam? Now, despite dealigning from Iraq in the mid-1990s, Jordan may still be the closest friend Saddam Hussein's regime is likely to find in the region.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 triggered the most comprehensive regional realignment since the Sadat peace initiative of 1977. Most Arab states, including Egypt, Syria and all the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), opposed Iraq and joined the US-led coalition. But noticeably absent from that coalition was the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, which stood firm as one of the few states *not* to realign. The Jordanians remained out of the war, urging a peaceful solution. To the displeasure of the United States and its allies, Jordan remained Iraq's closest ally, and the kingdom paid a heavy economic price for its decision. Ten years later, the strange alliance between the conservative Jordanian monarchy and the "revolutionary" Ba'athist regime—whose forebears had overthrown another Hashemite monarch in 1958—has undergone intriguing transformations. What explains Jordan's unwillingness to join the Desert Storm coalition? And only six years after King Hussein's treaty with Israel, what accounts for the current thaw in Iraqi-Jordanian relations?

Former Relatives, Economic Allies

Almost twenty years of Jordanian-Iraqi hostility followed the bloody military coup of 1958, which removed King Hussein's uncle Faysal from the Iraqi throne. King Hussein,

who had thwarted a coup attempt against his own regime in 1957, naturally loathed the successive Iraqi republican governments as the murderers of his uncle.¹ Immediately prior to the coup, the Hashemite Kingdoms of Iraq and Jordan had been united in the short-lived Arab Federation (February 14–July 14, 1958).

Given this history, observers were surprised when Jordan and Iraq began to develop closer ties by the late 1970s.² Both economic and political pressures pushed Jordan to shift its primary regional alliance from Syria—a major trading partner and a crucial frontline ally in conflict with Israel—toward Iraq. Iraq wooed Jordan with the kind of substantial economic support that Syria could not hope to match. In the realm of regional politics, Syria pushed for a hardline stance against the Egyptian peace initiative, while Jordan opted for a less confrontational approach, hoping to lure Egypt back into the Arab fold.³ The 1978 Baghdad Summit of the League of Arab States marked the beginning of the new Jordanian-Iraqi alliance.

Jordan backed Iraq unequivocally in the Iran-Iraq war, decisively breaking its earlier alignment with Syria, which backed Iran. Eight years of war reinforced the Jordanian-Iraqi alignment. Jordan became Iraq's main supply corridor as well as its main outlet for oil exports, given the closure of the Syrian pipeline and the difficulty of transporting oil out of the Persian Gulf. In the diplomatic arena, both actively rallied the oil states to make good on their aid commitments to Jordan and Iraq, in their capacity as the frontline states in two different Arab conflicts: Jordan with Israel, and Iraq with Iran. For the Hashemite regime,

Curtis Ryan teaches political science and international affairs at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Va.

perennially frightened of anti-royalist unrest, the necessity of checking Iran's "revolutionary threat" outweighed the domestic risks of attacking the new Islamic republic.

King Hussein's official condemnations of Iran and declaration of unequivocal support for Iraq met surprise and consternation in the Jordanian street. But the regime quickly embarked on a campaign to sell the unpopular alignment to Jordanian public opinion. Eventually, booming business opportunities linked to Iraq, and a seemingly endless set of Iraqi grants for groups like the Jordan Press Federation, swayed more and more Jordanians to support Saddam Hussein's regime.⁴

The economic benefits of alignment with Iraq also included a boom in Jordan's port of 'Aqaba as well as its overland transportation sector, as the kingdom became Iraq's main economic link to the outside world during the war with Iran. By 1989, Jordan received 17.3 percent of its imports from Iraq, and sent Iraq 23.2 percent of its exports.⁵ Most of Jordan's oil supply came from Iraq at no charge—the price of shipments was deducted from Iraq's large wartime debt to the Kingdom. Jordanian-Iraqi economic ties had become so deep by the time of the 1990 crisis that some regarded the relationship as a "de facto federation."⁶ These economic ties would constrain the monarchy during the second Gulf war.

Weathering Desert Storm

When Iraq invaded Kuwait, Jordan declined to join the US-led coalition. But the Kingdom also called for Iraqi withdrawal, maintained its recognition of the al-Sabah government of Kuwait and rejected the Iraqi claim of annexation. Many individual Jordanians volunteered to defend Iraq, but the Jordanian armed forces remained strictly neutral and did not fight alongside the Iraqi army. Critics saw Jordan's fence-straddling position in 1990 as pro-Iraq. In Western capitals, the predominant hawks argued that Jordan had allied itself with Saddam Hussein and against its long-standing friends in the West and against pro-Western regimes in the Arab world. Those more sympathetic to Jordan viewed its position as the definition of a balanced stance. But all sides recognized that Jordan's position bespoke its extreme vulnerability both domestically and regionally, and that no choice was without heavy costs.

Jordan's position during the second Gulf war was deeply rooted in economic problems and domestic politics—including its nascent "democratization" program. Following waves of riots triggered by IMF austerity measures in 1989, the Hashemite regime had initiated a program of political liberalization.⁷ This included loosening restrictions on the press and allowing for parliamentary elections in which opposition Islamist candidates fared very well. Both the parliament and the Jordanian public adopted far clearer and unequivocal pro-Iraq positions than the monarchy during the Gulf crisis. Numerous street demonstrations, speeches on the floor of the parliament and articles in newly established newspapers and magazines all indicated a popular

outpouring of enthusiasm for Saddam Hussein. In light of the strength of domestic feeling, the regime had to ask itself: was it possible *not* to support Saddam?

The regime's cautious stance kept King Hussein's domestic popularity intact, but Jordan suffered severe economic repercussions. Aid from the United States, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia was abruptly halted. Exports to and from most Arab countries also declined rapidly. The port of 'Aqaba was eventually all but shut off to commercial traffic, leading to a sharp decline in port revenues as well as in goods entering the country. Jordan's much-needed tourism income effectively evaporated. Finally, angry Gulf states—first Saudi Arabia and then liberated Kuwait—expelled several hundred thousand Jordanians and Palestinians working in their countries.

Jordan's Dealignment from Iraq

Global crisis and regional war did not persuade the kingdom to budge from its Iraqi alignment, yet less than four years after Desert Storm Jordan had signed a full peace treaty with Israel. Following the signing of the treaty, the Jordanian government grew steadily more critical of Saddam Hussein's regime. By January 1996, the government allowed Iraqi opposition groups to open offices in Amman. King Hussein and Jordanian officials met with Iraqi opposition leaders in London in early 1996, and the king met personally with Jalal Talabani, leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Masoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP).

The kingdom also granted political asylum to Iraq's highest-ranking defectors ever, including daughters and sons-in-law of Saddam Hussein. Some of these defectors, like the Kamil brothers, shocked Jordan by returning to Baghdad, where they met a grisly end. But less than a month later, Jordan granted asylum to another high-level defector, General Nazar Khazraji, who had served as chief of staff for the Iraqi army in the late 1980s.⁸

In 1997, Jordan reinforced its new international alignments and further distanced itself from Iraq, becoming the only Arab country to send observers to joint US-Israeli-Turkish naval exercises. President Clinton praised Jordan's new anti-Iraqi stance and announced that US fighter squadrons would be deployed in Jordan to monitor the "no-fly zone" in southern Iraq.⁹ Jordan developed closer bilateral ties with each of the three states in the US-Israeli-Turkish strategic alliance. In addition to the 1994 treaty with Israel, the American government declared in November 1996 that Jordan would henceforth be regarded as a "non-NATO ally," an unusual status in effect granting Jordan "priority consideration" for future arms and military aid requests.¹⁰ The kingdom further extended its bilateral military ties with Turkey, while vociferously denying that military cooperation with Turkey amounted to a Jordanian-Turkish alliance. In 1999, Jordanian troops participated in Egyptian-NATO military exercises in the western desert of Egypt.¹¹ In the last two years, Jordan also has gained admittance to the World Trade Organization and achieved "association status" with the

European Free Trade Association. In sum, Jordan's external realignment in the "New World Order" seemed to be complete and that, in turn, seemed to spell the end of good relations with Iraq.

Allies or Adversaries?

Yet it would be inaccurate to describe Jordanian-Iraqi relations today as uniformly adversarial. Despite the ever-deepening political, military and economic linkages between Jordan and major Western countries and institutions, the West accuses Jordan of not respecting the UN embargo on Iraq—a charge not without merit. The evidence here is mixed, yet the Jordanian-Iraqi border appears to be the most porous in the international blockade of Iraq. Jordan has been Iraq's main legal trading partner under the exceptions written into the UN Security Council resolutions that created the embargo, but the fact remains that Jordan (like Turkey and Iran) also conducts much illegal trade with Iraq. Illegal trade may not, however, be approved by the regime in Amman: Jordanian border agents impounded parts of Russian manufactured missile guidance systems that were being smuggled into Iraq in 1995 and, as noted above, US planes have monitored Iraq from Jordanian bases.¹²

Individual and private acts of smuggling, like the alleged use of 'Aqaba's port as a transit point for Lebanese consumer goods en route to Iraq, or the use of Jordanian front companies to import to Iraq military-use electronic equipment from Malaysia and Singapore, seem to dominate illegal trade.¹³ Though the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi community in Jordan are dissident exiles (including many artists), at least some Iraqi exiles appear to be running private firms that may be little more than fronts for Iraqi government interests.¹⁴ Smuggling isn't sanctioned by Amman, but one can't mistake the hostility of the Jordanian street and the government to the sanctions regime.

The riots of 1998, for example, were rooted in unease over numerous issues—such as peace with Israel and IMF austerity measures—but they also included explicit demonstrations against the sanctions and against the Jordanian government's complicity in enforcing them. A genuine concern for the suffering of the Iraqi people pervades Jordanian public opinion. At the same time, the Gulf war did not eradicate the business connections that Jordanians and Iraqis had built over more than 20 years. Many Jordanians believe strongly that the sanctions regime has not only hurt Iraqis, but that it is responsible for Jordan's current economic recession. The general sympathy for Iraq and hostility toward the sanctions regime

is rendered more explicit in Jordan's civil society: most of Jordan's political parties and most of Jordan's strong and vocal professional associations are on record condemning the sanctions and calling for their removal.

At least officially, this view extends to the very peak of the political system. When King Abdallah II ascended the throne in 1999, he softened Jordanian rhetoric toward Iraq and called—in his first speech before parliament—for lifting the economic blockade. When the Pan-Arab Games were held in Amman in 1999, Jordan ensured that Iraq would participate for the first time since 1985 (prompting a Kuwaiti boycott).¹⁵ In more substantial terms, in January 2000 Jordan and Iraq renewed their oil and trade protocols, allowing Jordan to import an average of 80,000 barrels of oil per day from Iraq, half of that for free, and the other half at a price well below market value.¹⁶

The rift of the mid-1990s has been replaced with a return to strong economic linkages of benefit to both regimes. Jordan may no longer be the full ally of Saddam Hussein, but it may be the closest friend his regime is likely to find in the region. ■

Endnotes

1 On the Iraqi revolution, see Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq Since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1987); and King Hussein's autobiography, *Uneasy Lies the Head: The Autobiography of His Majesty King Hussein I of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates, 1962).

2 See Amatzia Baram, "Baathi Iraq and Hashimite Jordan: From Hostility to Alignment," *Middle East Journal* 45/1 (Winter 1991); and Baram, "No New Fertile Crescent: Iraqi-Jordanian Relations, 1968-92," in *Jordan in the Middle East: The Making of a Pivotal State, 1948-1988*, Joseph Nevo and Ilan Pappé, eds., (Ilford: Frank Cass, 1994). On Jordanian-Iraqi relations, see also Laurie A. Brand, *Jordan's Inter-Arab Relations: The Political Economy of Alliance Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) and Marc Lynch, *State Interests and Public Spheres: The International Politics of Jordan's Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 140-165, 231-254.

3 Alan R. Taylor, *The Arab Balance of Power* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1982).

4 For details of Iraqi government donations, see Laurie A. Brand, "Economics and Shifting Alliances: Jordan's Relations with Syria and Iraq, 1975-81," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26/3 (1994): 407.

5 Economist Intelligence Unit, *Jordan: Country Profile 1991*, p. 28. See also W. Andrew Terrill, "Saddam's Closest Ally: Jordan and the Gulf War," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 9/2 (Winter 1985).

6 Baram, "Baathi Iraq and Hashimite Jordan," p. 67.

7 On the process of democratization, see Curtis Ryan, "Elections and Parliamentary Democratization in Jordan," *Democratization* 5/4 (Winter 1998). On the connections between IMF austerity programs and political unrest in the kingdom, see Ryan, "Peace, Bread, and Riots: Jordan and the International Monetary Fund," *Middle East Policy* 6/2 (Fall 1998).

8 Andrew North, "Another Defection," *Middle East International*, March 29, 1996.

9 North, "Confusion on Iraq," *MEI*, March 15, 1996.

10 Sana Kamal, "Shubaylat Freed Again," *MEI*, November 22, 1996.

11 *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, October 24, 1999.

12 "Jordan Identifies Arms Bound for Iraq as Russian," *New York Times*, December 9, 1995, p. 4.

13 See, Uli Schmetzer, "Iraq Allegedly Circumventing Blockade," *Chicago Tribune*, September 11, 1990; Nick Williams, "Iraqi Trade Rolls Despite UN Embargo," *Los Angeles Times*, December 8, 1991; "Arms to Iraq via Jordan," *The Economist*, May 7, 1994; Barbara Crossette, "Iraq Has Network of Outside Help on Arms," *New York Times*, November 20, 1998; "Middle East Smugglers," *The Economist*, April 3, 1999.

14 Hugh Delliios, "Iraqis Terrified in Jordan When Bribes Fail," *Chicago Tribune*, March 4, 1998.

15 To add to the symbolism, the final score of the gold medal soccer game was Jordan 7, Iraq 5. *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*, August 31, 1999.

16 *Agence France Presse*, January 31, 2000.