

## Jordan: A protest movement eclipsed

Low-level protests in Jordan throughout 2011 were met by offers of reform from the King, and subsided as neighbouring countries descended into chaos and civil war. The Syrian refugee crisis has diverted attention away from the causes of the unrest in 2011, but has given rise to new grievances that have the potential to undermine the stability of the country once more.

### The 2011 protests

Jordan never witnessed the kind of mass demonstrations against poverty, unemployment, corruption and political repression that toppled some of the longest-serving rulers in the Middle East and North Africa in late 2010 and early 2011. Inspired by their Arab brothers and sisters in neighbouring countries, Jordanians did take to the streets throughout 2011 to demand political change and an end to corruption, and to protest against unemployment and rising prices. However, with one exception, the protests never turned violent and the ruling establishment made efforts to appease the protesters by responding to their demands. The first protests in Jordan took place on 28 January 2011 and involved some 3 500 protesters from the Muslim Brotherhood, trade unions and non-Islamist opposition parties. By late February, protesters at a demonstration organised by the Islamic Action Front and opposition parties had swelled to 7 000 to 10 000. Violence finally broke out after Friday prayers on 25 March 2011, pitching anti-government protesters against government supporters and leading to the death of one person. However, the remainder of the protests that continued throughout 2011 were peaceful. King Abdullah responded to the protesters' demands in February 2011 by dissolving parliament, dismissing the prime minister and replacing him with a prime minister viewed as '[clean of corruption](#)'. In addition, the government made available [€450 million](#) to increase the salaries of government employees and subsidise basic food and fuel. On 12 June 2011, in a [speech](#) marking his 12th year as Jordan's ruler, King Abdullah promised to relinquish his right to appoint prime ministers and cabinets, and promised new election and political party laws. In October 2011, the prime minister was replaced once more. Notably, the protesters never – [openly](#) – called for the [end of the monarchy](#) or King Abdullah's rule.

### The situation in Jordan today

In 2011, the stability of the Hashemite Kingdom was threatened, mainly, by discontent among the East-Bank Jordanians who have traditionally formed the regime's core tribal base of support. Economic difficulties, the slow pace of reform, and corruption remain significant sources of popular discontent in Jordan, but the palace has succeeded in silencing the protest movement through trusted [methods of political appeasement](#) that have effectively not altered the governance model. The King's powers have actually increased as a result of recent changes to the [constitution](#). But while the risk of domestic unrest has diminished, the impact of the Syrian conflict, particularly through the very large number of Syrian refugees on Jordanian soil, continues to grow, posing an increasing threat to [Jordan's stability](#). Jordan has welcomed successive waves of refugees for nearly 70 years, but the arrival of at least [1.26](#) million Syrian refugees over the past five years, which has more than doubled the number of non-Jordanian residents in the country, is stretching the capacity of the Kingdom to its limits. Only half the Syrian refugees are registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and less than 20% live in formal refugee camps; the majority are spread throughout the country, mainly in the capital Amman and other urban areas in northern Jordan. The Syrian refugees – 13% of the total population of 9.5 million – are a major burden on Jordan's weak economy and public services. The [World Bank](#) estimates that Syrian refugees have cost Jordan over US\$2.5 billion a year, equivalent to 6% of GDP and 25% of the government's annual revenues. The official unemployment rate is [12.5%](#), and 30% among the young; in the northern governorates, which are home to large numbers of



refugees, unemployment rose to 21% in 2014 and wage levels have been depressed. [Public services](#) in these areas, including schools and hospitals, are overcrowded, while the cost of housing has risen sharply. At the same time, the Syrian civil war is threatening [security](#) in Jordan, with signs that some refugees – and Jordanians – sympathise with ISIL/Da'esh. An estimated [2 000 to 2 500](#) Jordanians are reported to be fighting in Syria, while members of alleged ISIL/Da'esh [sleeper cells](#) have been arrested in Jordan.

### The EU's response in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy

The EU has [excellent relations](#) with Jordan, one of the countries covered by the [European Neighbourhood Policy](#) (ENP), the policy by which the EU seeks to achieve the closest possible political association and the greatest possible degree of economic integration with its southern and eastern neighbours. The 2002 [Association Agreement](#) forms the legal basis for EU-Jordan [relations](#). It aims to foster political dialogue, progressive liberalisation of trade, and cooperation in a wide range of sectors. In October 2010, the EU-Jordan Association Council agreed on an '[advanced status](#)' partnership, which has led to an increase in the scope and intensity of political cooperation, and opened up possibilities for greater integration, Jordan's progressive participation in key aspects of EU policies and programmes, an approximation of economic legislation and the reduction of trade barriers. The [EU-Jordan Action Plan](#) that has governed cooperation since 2012 reflected this advanced status, including a stronger commitment in bilateral cooperation to core EU-values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law. In 2014, the EU and Jordan signed a [Mobility Partnership](#), to improve the management of mobility and migration. Since 2011, the EU has made available over [€500 million](#) for assistance to Jordan under ENP. The EU and Jordan are currently working on a set of 'partnership priorities' that will govern relations under ENP until 2020, with a focus on three priority areas, namely reinforcing the rule of law in Jordan, especially with regard to accountability and equity in public delivery, economic development, including employment and private sector development, and security and stability. Moreover, the EU is negotiating an [EU Compact](#) with Jordan, to further strengthen political, economic, trade and social ties and improve the living conditions of refugees and affected host communities. This is part of the EU's specific effort to help Jordan cope with the influx of Syrian refugees. Since the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2011, the EU has contributed more than €583.7 million to assist refugees and vulnerable communities in Jordan. At the London conference on [Supporting Syria and the Region](#) in February, the EU and its Member States pledged around €500 million over the next two years to assist Jordan with hosting its Syrian refugee population. In an effort to [improve the EU-Jordan trade balance](#) in Jordan's favour, and create jobs for Syrian refugees and the Jordanian host population, the EU is also offering to [ease rules of origin](#) for Jordanian products. Total trade with the EU amounted to [€4.3 billion](#) in 2015, with European exports to Jordan (€4 billion) currently far outweighing imports. Negotiations for a [Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement \(DCFTA\)](#) with Jordan started in 2011.

### Outlook

The strain of the ongoing refugee crisis on host-communities has led to public discontent, directed at the [Jordanian government](#). Syrians live mainly among Jordan's most disadvantaged communities. Increased competition for jobs, overburdened infrastructure and strained social services, like health care and education, are challenges that Jordan has faced for many years but that the sudden influx of large numbers of people has exacerbated. Marginalised Jordanians have begun to mobilise around their grievances as public frustration grows. To confront these challenges, Jordan will continue to depend on [external assistance](#). Creating job opportunities for Syrian refugees without discriminating against Jordanians will be a key policy challenge. Jordan's stability is a high priority for the EU. The country is an [important partner in ENP](#) and in the [fight](#) against [ISIL/Da'esh](#). It is one of only two Arab countries to have signed a peace treaty with Israel and is key to any future agreement between Israel and Palestine. Instability in Jordan, particularly if it were to threaten the monarchy, would further destabilise a region in the midst of an existential crisis.

The [European Parliament](#) has expressed its grave concern at the profound consequences of the fragmentation of Syria for the stability and security of the region, and at the high number of Syrian refugees in Jordan. MEPs have called on the European Union and its Member States to continue providing substantial humanitarian assistance to Jordan. [Parliament](#) has also called for the EU to actively promote a global partnership against terrorism and to work closely with countries that have been dramatically impacted by the Syrian conflict, including Jordan. MEPs have specifically called for increased dialogue between development and security experts from the EU and the countries concerned.