

Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and  
Globalisation in the Gulf States

# Saudi Arabia and Jordan: Friends in adversity

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July 2013

Number 31

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The Programme is funded by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences.

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# **Saudi Arabia and Jordan: Friends in Adversity**

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## **Abstract**

Saudi–Jordanian relations are a mismatch between broadly identical interests and differing means and capacities to realize them. Saudi Arabia has the potential to advance its interests, but is hamstrung by leadership structure, habit and political culture. Jordan has some advantages in terms of leadership structure, habit and political culture, but has only limited ability to affect its interests. Saudi Arabia’s historic sensitivities concerning its one-time Hashemite rival in Arabia are largely that; they do not directly affect Saudi policy towards Jordan. Tribal mobilization could be used by either side in the unexpected event of its neighbour’s collapse, but it is not a key means of realizing state objectives. Saudi Arabia’s internal political sensitivities do not drive its attitude towards Jordan. However, Jordan’s internal political situation makes it sensitive to Saudi Islamists, but its political problems are largely a domestic affair. These in turn affect Jordan’s foreign policy orientation. A mutual concern about domestic security vulnerabilities has long made both kingdoms relatively dependent on the US. The extent to which they cannot now wholly rely on the US, however, is one reason why they are drawn closer together. There are limits, though, to the importance of the relationship for either country. Neither side’s internal or external problems can be resolved by the actions or inactions of the other. Neither regime can guarantee the survival of the other or can even be expected to do much if the other were under threat. However, the two countries are trying to work more closely together. In a more threatening regional environment, this is important.

## **Keywords**

Arabia; GCC; Gulf Cooperation Council; Jordan; Jordanian monarchy; Saudi; Syria

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The research for this paper was conducted on the assumption that the publicly stated and common security concerns of the two neighbouring Sunni Arab monarchies of Saudi Arabia and Jordan dominate their bilateral relationship. In the course of the research the leaderships’ perceived vulnerability to these challenges was found to be more acute in the case of the Jordanian monarch, who, while by definition sharing with his Saudi Arabian counterpart an autocratic approach to decision-making, operates in a different domestic political environment.

The management of this bilateral relationship does not fall solely to the respective kings. However, the research confirmed an assumption based on previous analysis that any alteration to the basic parameters of the relationship are a matter for the monarch, in consultation with leading officials, including the head of their royal court, the foreign minister

and the heads of intelligence and internal security. While this does not preclude scope for emphasis and interpretation by such individuals, an essentially top-down system of decision-making can, in the case of the ageing Saudi leadership (see section 3), make adaptation difficult.

Interviews were conducted with figures close to the decision-making process in both countries, and, in the Jordanian case, also with leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), whose professed desire to constrain the powers of the monarch influences his domestic and foreign policy. Relevant analysis published in the Arab press, in political biographies and in other academic work was also considered.

Both kingdoms share a low level of institutional development, in part attributable to having economies overwhelmingly driven by the state's distribution of 'rent', as opposed to the state providing political representation in exchange for tax on private incomes. Decision-making in a rentier state can sometimes paradoxically be both detached from, and vulnerable to, those who are not politically sovereign. However, while rentierism arguably underpins autocracy in both these countries' cases, as well as in their Gulf neighbours' (see e.g. Partrick 2006), it does not enable the leaderships to be aloof from local factors, which, in the Jordanian case especially, are constantly being weighed by the king. The high levels of 'rent' that the Saudi monarchy has at its disposal does not make it immune from regional pressures either. Nor, as we shall also see, does it enable Saudi Arabia, a key rent provider to Jordan, to exercise that much leverage over Jordan's domestic or foreign policy.

In the conduct of this research, however, no serious impression was garnered that more mature, more institutionalized polities in Saudi Arabia and Jordan would produce a bilateral relationship characterized by different concerns and approaches from those that currently drive it, even though this would, ipso facto, mean that decisions affecting their relationship would be more transparent.

The paper begins by considering the historical background to the relationship and the internal decision-making processes shaping it. The paper then lays out the objectives of each leadership in relation to the other and the means being deployed in pursuit of these objectives. Consideration is given to both internal and regional factors, at state and non-state level, affecting both the objectives and the means used to realize them.

## **2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The cliché is that the historical fallout between the house of Saud and the house of Hashem over the Hijaz, and responsibility for the two holiest places in Islam in Mecca and Medina

(*haramain*) specifically, continues to sour relations and raise suspicions between the two states.

It is true that the ejection of Sherif Ali (brother of the great-grandfather of Jordan's present-day ruler) and the Hashem *sherifs* from the Hijaz in 1924 by the rival tribal alliance of Ibn Saud (i.e. King Abdulaziz, father of the present ruler of Saudi Arabia) was dressed in religious as well as family colours. The Hashemite lineage was traceable to the family of the Prophet Mohammed through the Qureish tribe. On this basis sherifian rule in the Hijaz was upheld by the Ottoman Empire, to which tribute had been paid by the Hashemites. (The Ottomans had also recognized Ibn Saud's rule in the Nejd.) The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War encouraged the Al-Saud–Hashemite struggle in Arabia. The Hashemites promoted an Arabized Islamic identity rooted in their historic sense of rightful rule over the *haramain*, but were unable to counter the Al-Saud's historic alliance with the *muwahiddun* (unitarian) puritanical tradition of Mohammed Abdul Wahhab ('Wahhabism').

Their clash had an intra-Sunni Islam dimension, but Ibn Saud did not want responsibility for Jerusalem or Palestine. In fact when Ibn Saud subsumed the territorial holding of the Hijaz into a recognized Saudi kingdom in 1925, he accepted British diplomatic facilitation that required the Hashemites retaining Aqaba and Ma'an. to the north for inclusion in the new entity of Trans-Jordan. (The port of Aqaba adjoined the emergent Zionist-held port town of Eilat in southern Palestine.) This fits with a Saudi strategic detachment from Palestine, even though Aqaba and Ma'an were seemingly attractive to Ibn Saud as a gateway to Syria, and its subsequent willingness to aid Jordan as a buffer against Israel. However, the Al-Saud's ideational projection of themselves as keepers of the *haramain* obliges them to continue to take an interest in Jerusalem, just as Jordan keeps an ideational and practical foothold in the *haram-a-sherif* (noble sanctuary, the third holiest site in Islam) in Jerusalem. They are not in meaningful political competition over it, however.

It is also true that when the Hashemites took control of the West Bank and East Jerusalem (including the *haram*) in the course of the 1948 war and later subsumed it into a new state called 'Jordan', Saudi Arabia did not recognize its legitimacy. However, nor did any other Arab state except Hashemite Iraq. The Jordanian king, Abdullah, and the Saudi king, Abdulaziz, had already settled their differences during the war in a historic meeting regarded by Saudi analysts as an adjustment (albeit one very much made from an Al-Saud position of greater strength) that saw the two kingdoms' leaderships begin to see a mutual interest in working together. While Saudi Arabia would later act against Jordan's perceived national interest in 1974 by going with the overwhelming Arab trend in favour of the Palestine

Liberation Organization (PLO) as the Palestinians' official representative, the two states maintained broadly amicable relations. At least, this was the case until the Gulf crisis of 1990–1, when the Jordanian leadership refused to take sides against Iraq, a judgement for the most part rooted, like many of its calculations, in domestic politics and geography.

### **3. POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING**

In Saudi Arabia, major decisions on foreign and domestic matters have to be agreed by the monarch. As a former advisor to several senior princes put it, 'If you have an energetic leader, decisions can be made on key things at the same time, particularly if you have someone who is smart and visionary' (interview, Al-Khashoggi, 2012).

Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah is over ninety; he has twice undergone major back surgery in 2012 and 2013, and his health appears to be increasingly on the wane. Saudi policy towards Jordan on a day-to-day basis is partly handled by his nephew, the head of foreign intelligence, Prince Bandar bin Sultan. He manages it in the context of his greater attention to Syria, where he has recently helped to promote a collective military leadership among the armed opposition. Bandar is highly experienced in secret as well as public diplomacy but is prone to health problems too. The formal, diplomatic, side of the Saudi–Jordanian relationship is handled by another nephew of the king, Prince Saud Al-Faisal. He has grave health problems. However, he so dominates the foreign ministry that it is said that, when he is ill, it ceases to function.

A consensual resolution of the country's succession crisis – a decisive move to the so-called next generation continues to elude the ageing members of the current generation – could enable at least some ageing and ailing figures to retire. What is commonly referred to privately by Jordanian officials and analysts alike as a Saudi leadership crisis is seen in both countries as complicating efforts to forge a more comprehensive and understanding relationship. However, it is also said that the parameters of the relationship and the basis for common working are understood and can be maintained by those in power further down the pecking order (Partrick 2006). For the foreseeable future, ageing or unhealthy leadership will determine matters on the Saudi side. On the Jordanian side there are whispers critical of a relatively young and certainly far-less experienced monarch, Abdullah bin Hussein. Some of this extends to a questioning of his personal judgement, concerns about which appear to be shared on the Saudi side. What is clear is that in Jordan, authority over foreign policy and much else resides with a relatively energetic and comparatively full-time king, even though

foreign ministers with greater experience than Abdullah have been given considerable autonomy since his accession in 1999.

Since Jordan's founding over ninety years ago, the succession has in practice passed from generation to generation. In Saudi Arabia the tradition of deference to age is likely to mean that even a resolution of the current impasse may involve transition to a quite old member of the next generation, who in turn, as part of any plausible consensus, will be likely to pass the leadership on to a comparably aged cousin. This will not encourage decisiveness and focus. Furthermore, on both sides there is criticism of a leadership style and of policy-making processes not seen as encouraging either careful reflection or considered and repeated reassessment.<sup>1</sup> Vertical decision-making on the Jordanian side can compound the problem as can the king's political judgement. Abdication scenarios in Jordan are sometimes privately mooted, and disaffected tribal members mutter about this to journalists, but it is not expected.

#### **4. OBJECTIVES OF EACH COUNTRY**

What then is either country's leadership seeking to achieve in its relationship with the other? The mutual interest in each other's survival is almost a given these days, and more generally there is a common desire to stick together in the light of shared regional concerns. Since 2003 there have been common strategic worries about the regional gains of Iran, most obviously in Iraq. This encouraged the Jordanian king's statement in 2004 about a 'Shia crescent' in the region. This view, while at odds with the Hashemite legacy to which his father King Hussein was so well attuned, suggested a desire to align firmly with status quo Sunni powers, which at the time included Egypt as well as, more reliably, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states.

Iraq, Hashemite in its early modern history, and under Saddam Hussein a de facto Jordanian ally in the 1980s at least, has been 'lost'. Abdullah's father King Hussein wanted at a minimum a restoration of Jordanian influence there in the 1990s. Mindful of how his great-uncle, Faisal I, had needed the support of the Shia to come to power in Iraq in 1921, Hussein tried to maintain the sympathy of Shia opinion generally. After 2003 Iraq appeared out of bounds to a new Jordanian king who wanted this time to be on the 'right side' of a US-led Gulf War, in contrast to his father in 1990–1. As a leading Jordanian analyst observed, King Abdullah bin Hussein has 'turned a page' and is not interested in what were residual Hashemite claims, including in the Hijaz province (interview, Al-Rantawi, 2013). There are some Saudi concerns about Hashemite irredentism, and both Saudi and Jordanian analysts

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<sup>1</sup> This critique of Saudi decision-making is made by a number of Saudi insiders and has also been made of other Gulf states. See Partrick (2006, 2007).

acknowledge sensitivity over the Hashemites' loss of the Hijaz. However, short of state collapse on either side, this is seen as finished business.<sup>2</sup> Rumours in Saudi Arabia about the interest of the former Jordanian crown prince, Hassan, in reviving Hashemite Hijazi claims need to be seen in the context of a now private figure focused on intellectual and cultural work, and a Hashemite regime that, as a senior western diplomat commented, has rather more pressing concerns than retrieving pre-state territory.

Iraq could yet again be a source of cheap fuel for the needy Jordanian economy. At present, however, Jordan wrestles with a political economy in which the maintenance of cheap Egyptian gas and unpopular cuts to public fuel subsidies emphasize its need for predictable Saudi and wider Gulf fiscal support. Jordan believes the Gulf can be the solution to its unemployment and under-investment. More widely, Jordan's water and power needs encourage it to promote a closer association with the Gulf states that are keen to secure alternative fuel sources and, relatedly, desalinated water.

#### *4.1. Countering the Brothers*

Since 2010 shared concerns about Iran have been almost supplanted by worries about the regional growth of the Sunni-orientated MB in the context of the Arab uprisings. King Abdullah bin Hussein's powerful MB opposition and his secular critics think he has mistakenly exploited this to emphasize Jordan's apparent political repositioning towards the Gulf. In widely circulated remarks, he reportedly told a meeting of Jordanian activists that there is a new axis including Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in opposition to an axis including Turkey, Egypt and Qatar that he argued was seeking to promote an Islamist government in Syria (Al-Najjar 2012). Some of his domestic critics argue that this regional perspective overlaps with domestic hostility to the MB. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (JMB) claim that the palace genuinely fears and almost wilfully misperceives them, as opposed to exaggerating their 'threat' as a means to attract external, including Saudi and US, support (interview, Al-Jolani, 2013). The desire to attract Saudi money *reinforces* King Abdullah bin Hussein's desire to constrain the power of the JMB, but does not drive it. A leading JMB figure, Sheikh Hamza Mansour, states, 'The experience since 1991 [when he was first elected to the Jordanian parliament] tells me that there is no place for us in the Palace's political outlook' (interview, Mansour, 2013).

Others within and close to the JMB acknowledge that Saudi Arabia is a contributory factor constraining their chances of getting a significant hold on power. A figure close to the

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<sup>2</sup> The two countries mutually recognized each other's borders in 1965.



JMB says that relations between the Brotherhood in Jordan and the Saudi government are good, but he believes the latter ‘overreacts’ about their strength in the region. This view is discreetly echoed by a well-placed Saudi analyst.<sup>3</sup>

The domestic strength of the JMB and the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood (SMB) respectively is not a feature of the two states’ bilateral relationship, says a Jordanian journalist close to the JMB (interview, 2013). Any JMB organizational relationship to the SMB is firmly denied by the JMB’s leadership. This view fits with the relatively low profile of the SMB. While it has successfully contested local elections and has some Islamist personalities associated with it, its political room for manoeuvre is limited.<sup>4</sup> However, the credibility of this JMB perspective is perhaps partly undermined when it is accompanied by an outright denial of any influence on the JMB emanating from Egypt, the birthplace of the movement and the seat of its *murshed* (spiritual guide).

If the Jordanian regime’s resistance to MB power, at home and abroad, is essentially domestically driven, in Saudi Arabia a largely externally focused concern about the Brotherhood has grown sharply in the wake of a series of leadership changes in the region, including in Egypt and, prospectively, in Syria. This overlap of interests places both Saudi Arabia and Jordan in a position critical of Qatari objectives, even as Saudi Arabia works with Qatar to promote regime change in Syria. However, Saudi Arabia is not likely to lead a political and economic charge against MB governments in the region, nor does it share the vehement hostility of the UAE, its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) state. Saudi Arabia has given the Egyptian MB government financial support, and, as one well-placed Saudi analyst remarked, the Kingdom’s policy has always been to deal with Egypt as the pre-eminent Arab power, regardless of who rules it (unnamed interviewee, 2012).

Saudi policy has long been to work with a broad range of potential allies, even if its preference has not been for the MB or for MB regimes. Like its Gulf Arab partners, Saudi Arabia previously gave a major platform to known foreign MB activists at public universities and in its education ministry and religious outreach bodies. This policy was born of hosting enemies of Arab nationalist Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s. It had an echo in Jordan’s historic accommodation of the Jordanian MB, but the latter was driven much more by Jordan’s need for domestic legitimacy in the struggle with Palestinian

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<sup>3</sup> An off- the-record comment made by one of the interviewees.

<sup>4</sup> Some figures associated with the SMB have come under increasing pressure since the Arab uprisings, while the political space for *salafi* critics of the government is usually more generous. (*Salaf* refers to the original companions of the Prophet Mohammed. To be a *salafi* has the connotation of following a doctrinaire, highly puritanical, interpretation of Sunni Islam.)

Nasserites and leftists. However, this association later came unstuck when the JMB could no longer be separated from the Palestinian issue (see section 5.3).

Saudi anti-Nasserism received a formal ideological imprimatur with King Faisal's founding of the Islamic Pact in 1965 (Partrick 2006: 73–4), a Saudi strategic gambit that fitted with its US alignment even if the US had earlier caused a bilateral rift by flirting with Nasser. This alliance of convenience with political Islam in some ways foreshadowed the commonality of cold war interests seen in Afghanistan after 1979. This accommodation of the MB was only reversed in Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf after 9/11. Even then Saudi pragmatism still created possible openings. Retired Saudi army general Anwar Eshki says he got the blessing of (the then) deputy interior minister, Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, for re-establishing discreet Saudi relations with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (EMB) in the months before President Mubarak's rule began to be challenged in Tahrir Square (interview, Eshki, 2013).

Saudi Arabia does not, however, like the EMB government's revival of the old Nasserite argument of an Egyptian responsibility for Arabia. This is despite the fact that in practice under Mubarak this used to be accepted by Riyadh, and was encouraged in the context of the 1990–1 Gulf crisis. Saudi Arabia, like Egypt, would like to see a change of regime in Syria, and undoubtedly this is part of its strategic desire to weaken Syria's ally Iran, even if it is more wary than Egypt concerning the political complexion of a possible new regime in Damascus.

#### *4.2. The Syria factor*

Saudi Arabia is worried, says a senior British official, about stability in Jordan, in part due to the possible ramifications for its own security (interview, senior British defence official, 2012). It follows from this that Saudi Arabia does not want Jordan to be in the front line of a major military mobilization against the Syrian regime, despite having been interested in such a scenario if it occurred in tandem with Turkey early on in the Syrian civil war (interview, Shobokshi, 2013). Jordan itself does not want to play such a role. It fears, like Saudi Arabia, that too strong a support for the opposition, especially in its more sectarian form, may prompt the collapse of the Syrian state. The Saudi leadership, however, is increasingly prepared to arm those Syrian fighters it believes are not *salafi* extremists, and is expressing exasperation with US caution in the amount and type of support it is giving (Economist Intelligence Unit 2013), a Saudi approach that some Saudi analysts see as threatening Syrian state coherence.

This has to some extent placed Saudi Arabia at odds with Jordan in that Jordan continued to engage with the Syrian leadership, even while hosting refugees and some of the Syrian opposition. It is unclear whether Syrian–Jordanian intelligence links are as closely connected as they were, however.<sup>5</sup> In any case, Saudi Arabia’s support for enhancing the armed capabilities of the Syrian opposition appears to be within the context of what the US finds acceptable, and neither Washington nor Riyadh wishes to take steps that would destabilize Jordan in the process.

As a small, vulnerable state and one neighbouring Syria, Jordan wants to promote a political solution, while accepting an indirect and, thus far at least, a relatively modest role in the military outcome. King Abdullah bin Hussein is mindful of Jordan’s difficulty in managing more than half a million Syrian refugees and of its long-standing concerns about a majority of Jordanian nationals who originate from Palestine and who to some extent are still influenced by the politics of that unresolved historic conflict.

The fact that many Jordanian-Palestinians vote for the JMB’s political wing, the Islamic Action Front, when it contests elections only compounds the king’s wariness of conceding the electoral and parliamentary reforms that the JMB demand. In Saudi Arabia it is said by one observer that Riyadh wants to make Jordan the ‘cat’s paw’ against Syria (interview, Turki Al-Rasheed, 2013). However, others familiar with leadership opinion in Saudi Arabia argue that Jordan is an important part of Saudi security, and any overt exposure to the fallout from the Syrian conflict could threaten the Jordanian regime. As Awadh Al-Badi of the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies commented, ‘Jordan’s position is a wise one for its own national security ... [T]here is worldwide division over what to do about Syria. Jordan is in the middle and is the most affected. It’s much better for it to adopt a wait and see strategy and to concentrate on protecting its border’ (interview, Al-Badi, 2013). Jordan is reportedly a covert conduit for Saudi-purchased arms supplied to sections of the Syrian opposition and for US training of some opposition fighters (Chivers and Schmitt 2013; Borger and Hopkins 2013). Jordan is, though, likely to remain reluctant to become a base for Syrian rebel fighters to conduct military operations inside Syria. While some Jordanian officers may be providing military advice to particular Syrian rebel groups (interview, Abu Rumman, 2013), Jordan remains cautious about whom it aids, a concern that the Saudi government, at least, shares. There has been speculation about Jordan’s northern border area

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<sup>5</sup> Mohammed Abu Rumman (interview, 2013) argues that Jordan’s intelligence contacts with Syria were cut in mid-2012. Jordan’s King Abdullah has of course alleged that his domestic intelligence service has frustrated his reform efforts (Goldberg 2013). However, it would seem likely that any downgrading of contacts with Syria would be at the monarch’s initiative.

being used to enforce a no-fly zone in southern Syria (Holland 2013). This could conceivably allow some refugees to cross back into Syria from Jordan. However, at the time of writing it was not clear that either the US, or its most likely partners, were willing to conduct an aerial policing operation without clear UN Security Council authorization. It is claimed that Saudi leadership frustration with Turkey and Qatar aiding Syrian Islamist fighters has encouraged a greater focus on working with Jordan to back perceptibly ‘secular’ Syrian fighters in southern Syria (interview, Saudi analyst, 2013; interview, Abu Rumman, 2013). However, there remain allegations of Saudi assistance to a range of *salafi* Islamist fighters in Syria, even if this excludes those connected to Al-Qaida.

Jordan has for many years presented itself as a prop to the security of the Gulf states, rather than a potential source of instability in Arabia. The Jordanian military and security apparatus are widely acknowledged in Saudi Arabia as being one of the best in the region. King Hussein offered his country’s services during the siege of Mecca by Saudi jihadis in 1979. While Jordan maintains that it played at least an advisory role in ending that conflict (interview, senior Jordanian official, 2013), Saudi and other accounts deny such suggestions.

In 1985, in the midst of the Iraq–Iran war, which was impinging on some of the GCC states’ security, King Hussein proposed an Arab Rapid Reaction Force comprising Gulf, Jordanian and Egyptian troops. In part due to Egyptian objections, this had no more success than Jordan’s reported attempt to become at least an associate of the GCC (Shlaim 2007: 469). It followed a long pattern of both symbolic and practical Jordanian assistance to a number of individual Gulf states’ security capabilities (interview, senior Jordanian official, 2013). Currently Jordan is, at the least, assisting in the training and development of Bahraini internal security forces (a long-standing role apparently) (interview, senior Jordanian official, 2013) and is believed to be assisting Emirati internal security capacity, and its forces are alleged by Kuwaiti opposition figures to have been recruited by the Kuwait government in case of a major domestic threat (M. Al-Rasheed 2013). In December 2012 Jordan also publicly offered to assist the Yemeni security forces with internal security. In Saudi Arabia there is acknowledgement that Jordanian internal security forces have been involved in the training of their Saudi equivalent (interview, Al-Shamlan, 2013), and they have assisted the US-led training of the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG). A senior western official says there is a long tradition of Jordanian military officers going to Saudi Arabia upon their retirement for something akin to a (presumably paid) debriefing (interview, senior western official 2013, 12 January).

On the Saudi side there is emphasis on the contribution of Saudi troops to Jordanian security, for example in the aftermath of the 1967 and 1973 wars when a brigade was dispatched (interview, Al-Faisal, 2013). Their role as a symbol of solidarity is appreciated in Jordan (interview, Jordanian professor, 2013).<sup>6</sup> A journalist close to the JMB points to the Saudi role after the 1970 Jordanian civil war, when it sent troops to Amman, Kerak and Talfilya. The Saudi desire for stability in Jordan was seen positively as having helped both sides by spending money and re-housing people (interview, Jordanian journalist, 2013).

A senior British defence official noted that the Saudis maintain a large military capacity at the northern city of Tabuk, less than 100 miles from the Jordanian border (interview, 2012). However, this is not seen by Saudi analysts as a likely launch-pad for a military intervention in its northern neighbour. That this is not part of Saudi political and military planning scenarios underlines, they say, why Riyadh is not pressuring Jordan to intervene directly in Syria. ‘However,’ says Awadh Al-Badi, ‘if the stability of Jordan was threatened by the Syrian, or any other crisis, and therefore the stability of Saudi Arabia was threatened as a consequence, then all options are open’ (interview, Al-Badi, 2013).

The Saudi involvement in Bahrain – where it sent SANG (accompanied by a symbolic Qatari and UAE contingent) in 2011 as it did in 1995 – and in Yemen, where its army intervened over the winter of 2009–10, is not seen as providing a clear precedent for Jordan. However, says Saudi academic Saleh Al-Khathlan, the collapse of the Jordanian monarchy would be a ‘red line’ for Riyadh, as would a threat to a ruling regime in the GCC (such as Bahrain) or in Yemen. Saudi Arabia is what he characterizes as a responsible regional power with ‘legitimate interests’. Therefore, the need for Saudi action in the region in support of those interests should be welcomed by ‘[foreign] governments, legitimate opposition and the international community’ (interview, Al-Khathlan, 2013).

Saudi analysts argue that identification among Jordanians of *bedouin* origin with Saudi Arabia would be important if the Hashemite monarchy were under threat, whether it came about as a consequence of events in Syria, or, perhaps, of a (rerun) Palestinian challenge. However, few see such a scenario as either imminent or something likely to generate contingency measures by the Saudi government any time soon.

There have been occasions when Saudi Arabia has tried to change Jordan’s foreign policy. When Jordan joined the UK-orchestrated Baghdad Pact in 1955 with its then

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to this a number of public accounts state that Jordan accepted Saudi Arabia’s offer to send 20,000 troops before the 1967 war. These were reportedly sent to the Saudi–Jordanian border. It has also been claimed that the Saudi troops entered Jordan before the war began (Churchill and Churchill 1967).

Hashemite ally Iraq, Saudi Arabia opposed the move and then privately expressed its disquiet over a planned Jordanian federation with Iraq (interview, Al-Badi, 2013) that could have included Kuwait (Partrick 2006). Jordan's attempt to resist Saudi and other leading Arab states' recognition of the PLO as the 'sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians' in 1974 came to nothing. Others have even argued that the Palestinian *fedayeen* (guerrillas) who fought to take over Jordan in 1970 were in part Saudi -funded (interview, Jordanian professor, 2013). It is true that PLO chairman Yasser Arafat and his faction received, and widely distributed, such aid. However, this is hardly *prima facie* evidence of a proxy Saudi Arabian attempt at an armed overthrow of the Jordanian monarchy.

The Saudi objective in Jordan is seeking to ensure that the latter does not do things that directly hurt Saudi Arabia, but it is not seeking to shape Jordan's internal politics, says a Saudi academic (interview, 2013); nor, claims Prince Turki Al-Faisal, the former head of Saudi intelligence, has it ever sought to (interview, Al-Faisal, 2013). If, however, Jordan were to align with Iraq, Syria or any regime seen as unfriendly to Saudi Arabia, then, say Saudis familiar with leadership thinking, Saudi Arabia might politically support those within Jordan opposed to such a policy (interview, Al-Badi, 2013; interview, Al-Shammri, 2013).

#### *4.3. Objectives towards other states*

An Iraqi Shia thinker says that the Iraqi premier Nouri Al-Maliki is seeking to improve relations with Jordan (interview, Iraqi scholar, 2013), a development occurring in the context of a fresh Iraqi diplomatic outreach to Saudi Arabia and more widely in the region.<sup>7</sup> It is also noted in Saudi Arabia that Iran (whose foreign currency revenues have been significantly constrained by US and UN sanctions) offered Jordan 'free oil' for thirty years in exchange for what it termed 'trade exchange and religious tourism' (Al-Samadi 2012). This offer was to all intents and purposes rejected by the Jordanian leadership and the Sunni-orientated JMB. However, the possibility of Jordan resuming at least aspects of its historic relationship with Iraq is not discounted in Saudi Arabia, or, it seems, Iraq, although this would be a major policy shift by King Abdullah bin Hussein.

There are a number of mutually reinforcing relationships with other countries, principally with the US, which encourage Saudi Arabia's and Jordan's participation in regional military exercises with American and other western partners. Saudi Arabia's developing economic relations with major Asian powers is not weakening its primary defence

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<sup>7</sup> An initiative, for example, being promoted by the Iraqi premier Nouri Al-Maliki's influential political advisor Sadiq Al-Rikabi.

and strategic relationship with the US. The Saudis still in some ways expect Washington to be Jordan's key prop, but are increasingly aware that it can no more guarantee that Jordan's monarchy survives than it could help preserve other Arab leaders since 2010. It is argued by some in Saudi Arabia that the US has blessed a non-military protective role by Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Jordan (interview, Al-Shamlan, 2013), reflecting the US military draw-down in the region and its resumption of an 'over the horizon' posture (its leading involvement in maritime security in the Gulf notwithstanding). Jordan's strategic movement towards the Gulf is also mindful of the Gulf states' growing military capacity and the US interest in making it more interoperable (see next section). In the Red Sea area, naval security is more a matter of international, including US, contributions. However, there has also been a Saudi effort to undertake diplomatic as well as practical measures that include multinational military exercises with a Jordanian contribution.

## **5. MEANS TO PURSUE OBJECTIVES**

### *5.1. Joining the Gulf Club?*

If Saudi Arabia and Jordan were already drawing closer in the light of shared concerns, then it appeared as if King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia was intent on making this official when he dramatically announced, at the May 2011 GCC summit in Riyadh, that Jordan as well as fellow monarchy Morocco was invited to join the GCC. Dismissed by leading Saudi journalist Jamal Al-Khashoggi in an interview a year later as 'a non-starter', the surprise initiative ran into internal GCC opposition and, it seems, resistance from the Saudi king's foreign minister, Saud Al-Faisal. The announcement, described by a Saudi analyst as 'the daughter of the minute' (interview, Al-Badi, 2012), survives in terms of an aid fund and official GCC–Jordanian discussion fora. However, the precise form that Jordan's membership might actually take in the future is unclear. The former Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Turki Al-Faisal, says the possible permutations are for Jordan (and Morocco) to take up (interview, 2013).

A few months after the Saudi king's offer of membership, he issued another quick-fire initiative regarding the GCC and urged the formation of a 'union in a single entity'. There has since been related talk of closer GCC defence cooperation. Jordan might be able to associate itself with such defence moves, if they happen. However, GCC interoperability in air forces and missile defence, whilst increasingly talked about, still looks elusive. This is hardly surprising when even joint intra-Saudi armed forces purchases are hard to establish.

Jordan is sanguine about the situation, although it would like privileged access to the GCC. A senior Jordanian official commented that full membership would require a series of changes to the GCC's founding charter (interview, 2013). In addition, its economy would have to become a low- or non-tariff market for the GCC's major trading partners; not something, he argued, that would suit its interests. While Jordan wants some degree of economic protection from cheaper imports, it would also like improved access to the GCC labour market, where remittances are already an important revenue stream, and which could 'at a stroke' end Jordanian unemployment (interview, senior Jordanian official, 2013). In addition to its historic security support, it is also emphasizing its potential in a Gulf alternative energy club. Jordan has its own civil nuclear ambitions that it is pursuing in tandem with the UAE, which (like Saudi Arabia) is keen to acquire such a capacity as well (Peel and Dyer 2013).

Since 2003, when Saddam Hussein's regime was overthrown, Jordan's King Abdullah has moved his country strategically eastward following the loss of cheap Iraqi oil. The UN (under the direction of the Security Council) had required Iraq to supply it as a reward for Jordan's economic hardship caused by the containment of Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War. Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, during which Jordan reportedly allowed parts of its adjoining territory to be used by US forces, Jordan has had less favourable oil deals with Iraq. Some energy deals below market rate have been struck with Iraq. However, Jordan has become more dependent on Saudi and other Gulf aid, and continues to hope that predictable levels of financial and oil support can be provided, rather than the sometimes large but often erratic and unpredictable payments from Saudi Arabia, its chief financial prop since 2003.

### 5.2. Cash leverage?

A Saudi gift of US\$1bn was made in 2011 but no *bilateral* assistance was given to Jordan in 2012 or, so far, in 2013 (BBC Monitoring 2013b). This raises the question of whether such unpredictability is a tool of Saudi policy designed to elicit Jordanian policy responses. Saudi Arabia officially denies it, of course, while one Saudi analyst simply says that policy is 'publicly framed' as using aid to assist a strategic neighbour (interview, Al-Shamlan, 2013). The most commonly stated reason by Saudi analysts for recent financial reticence is that Jordanian corruption is increasingly a political embarrassment in Saudi Arabia. There is a widespread belief among the Saudi elite that past Saudi contributions to ease Jordan's fiscal shortfall have been misappropriated. The Jordanian state's response to the efforts of the then



Figure 1. Northern Arabia



central bank governor, Faris Sharaf, to investigate alleged misuse of government money<sup>8</sup> is indicative of the scale of the problem. However, the suggestion that the Saudi Arabian leadership is frustrated at the size of the public sector salary bill that they have helped to meet in the past is harder to believe. A great deal of Saudi social media chatter about the Saudi budget in January 2013 mentioned aid to Arab neighbours like Jordan in the context of an officially projected surplus, and poor domestic services and infrastructure in some parts of the country.

The public is increasingly influential in the making of Saudi foreign policy, argues Assad Al-Shamlan (interview, 2013). Restricting public aid to dependent Arab neighbours (as is also evident with aid to Bahrain, Oman and Lebanon) plays well domestically. Private transfers to the Jordanian leadership are, say a senior Saudi official (interview, 2012), continuing. However, there is no coherent Saudi government strategy to leverage aid to influence Jordan's political direction. The limits to Saudi and Gulf financial support for Jordan, and the constraints on its GCC entry, are a corrective to claims that money is cementing a new alliance.<sup>9</sup>

Jordan has no complaints about Saudi Arabia's delivery of its component of agreed GCC project aid (although its actual disbursement is, so far, much less than agreed in December 2011), or about the Saudi public's generosity, which has assisted Jordan's running of the Zaatari camp for Syrian refugees. However, Jordan wants bilateral assistance that is both predictable and large. Some Jordanian parliamentarians are rude in public about alleged Saudi and other Gulf attempts to deny them aid for the sake of political leverage (Al-Baddarin 2013). However, there is no indication that these rhetorical flourishes are being orchestrated by the Jordanian royal palace.

Despite accusations, high-level Saudi engagement with the Jordanian security apparatus (Al-Baddarin 2012) does not confirm a quid pro quo of money for limiting political reform, even though King Abdullah bin Hussein blames his *mukhabarat* (intelligence service) for blocking domestic change (Goldberg 2013). Perhaps the relatively recent formation (at the time of writing) of a new Jordanian government will help open up the Saudi coffers. Either way, Saudi and Jordanian analysts, including those close to official thinking, do not see a direct Saudi hand in the Jordanian king's delivery of only modest change since the growth of popular pressure in his country.

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<sup>8</sup> In October 2011 he was sacked and his office was sealed off by members of the Jordanian internal security services (Pelham 2011).

<sup>9</sup> For a contrary view, see Pelham (2011).

There are some Saudi analysts who think that their leadership *should* leverage their financial support to try to secure policies to its liking, in Jordan and other dependent countries (interview, Saudi academic, 2013). Others argue that Jordan is vulnerable due to the influx of additional refugees and that Saudi Arabia, in tandem with its Gulf allies, should ease Jordanian debt, provide a steady source of subsidized fuel, and ensure a transparent framework for doing business (Al-Sagr 2013). However, on balance the Saudi leadership does not seem to think that Jordan is in imminent danger and its advisors are not clamouring for decisive action to relieve it.

### 5.3. Saudi–Jordan–Palestine dynamics

One reason for Saudi Arabia to prefer to keep Jordan at some remove politically and, in GCC terms, territorially is that the Hashemite Kingdom's membership of the ultimate 'Kings' Club'<sup>10</sup> would give Saudi Arabia a de facto land border with Israel. Bringing Jordan fully into the GCC would be an historic about-turn with possible security dangers for Saudi Arabia. The Jordanian demand for more access to the GCC labour market would mean that the post-1990 existential Gulf paranoia about 'untrustworthy' Palestinians (Jordanian labour is overwhelmingly Palestinian-Jordanian) would be compounded by a fear of upheaval in Jordan becoming, like Bahrain, a GCC matter. This is the antidote to the argument that the brief attempt by the Saudi monarch, Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, to resurrect the Kings' Club formally was premised on the idea of Jordan being a lead player in intra-GCC security – a claim strongly rebutted by Saudi officials at the GCC Secretariat (interviews, 2012).

Saudi Arabia is happy for Egypt and Jordan to remain the key Arab state actors on the Palestine Question. It did not welcome Jordan following in Egyptian footsteps by signing a peace deal with Israel in 1994. The US-backed Camp David Agreement of 1979 led to Saudi Arabia backing the exclusion of Egypt from the Arab League, much to the annoyance of the US. However, Saudi Arabia remained a firm US ally that had helped soften the impact of the oil price hikes only a few years earlier and that worked closely with it against Iran and in support of the *mujahideen* in Afghanistan. The exigencies of an Arab alliance against Iran at war with Iraq in the 1980s led Saudi Arabia to assist Egypt's move back into the Arab fold.

Saudi Arabia publicly participated in the initial stages of the Madrid Peace Process that primarily involved Israel, Egypt and a joint Jordanian–Palestinian delegation. It did not oppose the limited PLO gains represented by the 1993 Israel–PLO Declaration of Principles

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<sup>10</sup> See Partrick (2011). This brief bonding of Arab hereditary rulers was a 1950s phenomenon born of a shared fear of Nasser.

(the so-called Oslo Process) either. However, since then Saudi Arabia has been semi-detached from a process lacking a short path to independent Palestinian statehood with an uncompromised authority over East Jerusalem, including the *haram*. Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah's authorship of what became the Arab Peace Plan in 2002 offered Israel the possibility of a warmer peace than his half-brother Fahad had offered as crown prince with his eponymous plan in 1981. However, there was never any chance of public Saudi engagement with Israel to promote Abdullah's initiative, aside from occasional appearances by Saudi leaders at US- or UN-orchestrated events designed to promote the peace process or inter-faith dialogue.

Saudi Arabia's King Faisal helped settle the Jordanian and Palestinian competition in the PLO's favour in 1974, and Jordan officially abandoned its claims of representing the Palestinians or recovering the West Bank with its announced 'disengagement' of responsibility for the territory in 1988. However, Jordan retains a claim of responsibility for the Muslim places in Jerusalem and for the *Awqaf* authority running them, which was acknowledged in its peace treaty with Israel. This has not been contested by Saudi Arabia – even though it periodically raises tensions between the Palestinian Authority and Jordan.

Saudi Arabia has historical sensitivities to any talk about a resumed Hashemite role over Palestine. However, the shift in favour of the PLO from the 1970s was for Saudi Arabia a necessary accommodation to an Arab trend, not a means to weaken the Jordanian regime. This is to some extent evidenced by Saudi Arabia's symbolic 'intervention' in Jordan after the 1970 conflict (see section 4.2).

Talk within Jordan that it could become an alternative Palestine, if a perceived Israeli desire to encourage if not coerce more eastward Palestinian migration continues, is not welcomed there or in Saudi Arabia (even if the scenario is acknowledged by some Saudi analysts as plausible). Jordan's King Abdullah uses it to discourage Jordanian support for the JMB. He argues that any growth in their power would encourage such an Israeli option, implying that his throne would be vulnerable to a JMB takeover as a result. From the JMB's perspective, it is the Jordanian monarchy's disengagement from Palestine since 1988 that has increased Israeli pressure on Jordan to be the alternative homeland. The JMB stress 'fraternal, social, familial and religious' links (interview, Al-Jolani, 2013) with Hamas, the Palestinian offshoot of the Brotherhood that runs Gaza and remains popular in the former Jordanian-held West Bank. However, the 'break' with them (enforced by Jordan in 1999 when it shut the Hamas offices) is long-standing, they say, and has ended any contention about their relationship.

The threat to Jordan from possible developments in the Israel–Palestine conflict has long prompted Jordan to reduce its exposure. This was evidenced by the 1988 disengagement, and by King Abdullah bin Hussein’s shift in Jordanian domestic policy from relative accommodation of the Brotherhood,<sup>11</sup> Palestinian or Jordanian, to, in 1999, shutting down its leadership base. The offices had allegedly been made available and staffed by the JMB, and appeared to encourage JMB militancy. In 2006 Jordan accused Hamas of seeking to send arms into Jordan for use against Jordanian targets, a claim denied by Hamas and the JMB.

Some wealthy Saudis have aided the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, and its Hamas offshoot founded in 1988 (Abu-Amr 1994: 14). This has facilitated Saudi influence, despite the Saudi leadership’s preference not to have alternative centres of Islamic power and to work with relatively secular Arab leaders that have likewise accommodated US interests. Jordan’s constraint on Hamas, even after King Abdullah bin Hussein’s 2012 rapprochement with its leader Khaled Mishaal, remains in Saudi Arabia’s perceived national interest. Saudi Arabia does not want Palestine on its doorstep even if historically it has not wanted Jordan to have a strong role in Palestine.

The more that Jordan is vulnerable to the Palestinian conflict, within and without, the more Saudi Arabia runs the risk of a Palestinian state with radical credentials on its north-western border. This view has historically affected its relations with both the PLO and Jordan, and continues to underpin Saudi Arabia’s support for the Jordanian monarchy today. A Jordanian–Palestinian federation would be seen sceptically by Saudi Arabia, but, given that both the Jordanian and Palestinian leaderships stress that this could only follow an independent Palestinian state, it seems unlikely to raise deep existential fears among the Saudis.

#### *5.4. Tribal card or busted flush?*

When expressions of tribal discontent are heard in Jordan, there are often allegations of Saudi interference as a tool of state influence. This is firmly rebutted in Saudi Arabia as something that belongs to the pages of history (interview, Al-Faisal, 2013). However, Saudi links to the tribes are usually seen in more substantive terms by Jordanian observers.

Historically, tribes like the Huwaytat have moved across what in the 1920s began to emerge as the borders of the two states, while the Bani Sakhr, largely contained within modern Jordan today, have Saudi royal connections by marriage and diplomacy (interview, Al-

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<sup>11</sup> Historically the Hashemite rulers of Jordan had support from the local MB, in part due the ruling family’s credentials as descendents of the Prophet and given their shared antipathy towards Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s and to his sympathizers, Ba’athists and leftists in Jordan.

Shammri, 2013; interview, Mansour, 2013). Both tribes were the historic front line of opposition to Al-Saud expansion at the Hashemites' expense. Other tribes also played a historic role in that dispute and in the contest for power in what became Saudi Arabia. The Shammar, a huge tribal federation whose members included King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz's mother, are highly populous in northern Saudi Arabia and Iraq, but have a much smaller presence in Jordan.

There is residual Saudi financial support for a number of tribes in the south and east of Jordan. However, even those who have good reason to believe it is an ongoing feature do not see it as having a clearly defined strategic purpose. A Jordanian academic familiar with Saudi Arabia sees it as a historical overhang that has been useful for monitoring illicit trade and for additional 'eyes and ears' (interview, Jordanian professor, 2013). A senior Jordanian official describes it as aid that largely dried up after the 1990–1 Gulf crisis (a time when Jordan's King Hussein was arguably being encouraged by the tribes and his Palestinian subjects to stay out of the conflict in every possible way). However, Saudi tribal funding is a very long-standing source of Al-Saud influence across contemporary state boundaries. It is chiefly funnelled from, or at least with the approval of, the Saudi king. This occurs today across Arabia. It can be an outlet for Saudi interior ministry influence, or can simply be an ad hoc response of the king to traditional petitioning, as in the case of Yemenis (interview, Bin Sahl, 2013) and other seekers of Saudi largesse.

In 1989, disturbances began in the southern Jordanian city of Ma'an and spread across the country over the price of bread and other staples, at a time of anger at government corruption and declining foreign earnings from Iraq and the Gulf. The so-called 'bread riots' constituted a major challenge to King Hussein, and for some Jordanian analysts were evidence of Saudi manipulation of tribal discontent.

The MB<sup>12</sup> reject the idea that Saudi Arabia would pursue the risky strategy of prompting revolt across their border (interview, Mansour, 2013). In general the JMB leadership play down the idea of Saudi Arabia as influential in Jordan (some even portray their neighbour as a backward force associated with Jordan's more radically Islamist, *salafi* trend;<sup>13</sup> interview, Abu Mahfouz, 2013). The JMB argument does have some plausibility, encouraged by the fact that the 1989 riots also spread to Salt in the north of Jordan – an area not normally

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<sup>12</sup> The JMB were beneficiaries of the discontent in groundbreaking elections two years later when the Jordanian leadership introduced a social contract in part to make the Islamists culpable for difficult economic decisions.

<sup>13</sup> Jordanian internal security connections to Jordanian salafists have also been alleged, something that could equally be about penetration by the intelligence service of a movement that, in its political expression, has long been anti-regime.

seen as prone to Saudi influence. Some Saudi analysts argue that there is southern Jordanian cultural sympathy for the conservative and tribal characteristics found in their own country, but reject tribalism as a source of Saudi government policy, arguing that it can be a two-edged sword. That said, few Saudi analysts deny Saudi mobilization of the Al-Murra tribe in the attempt to restore Qatari ruler Hamed's deposed father in 1996, the ongoing role of some dual national Saudi–Kuwaiti tribal members backing conservative candidates in Kuwaiti elections, or the funding of Yemeni tribal figures as part of Riyadh's continued effort to influence developments in its south-western neighbour. However, direct Saudi tribal mobilization to put the Jordanian leadership under political pressure, not least at a time of great vulnerability in Jordan, would seem unwise and possibly beyond Saudi Arabia's capacity.

An identification with Saudi Arabia among southern and eastern Jordanian tribes is one thing, and financial support could therefore form part of what the former Saudi official Abdullah Al-Shammri calls a 'Saudi strategy' to try to exercise influence, but it does not ensure allegiance. Tribal links may well have encouraged Saudi Arabia's semi-aborted offer of GCC membership to Jordan, but, says Al-Shammri, Riyadh is 'not good at tribal diplomacy' (interview, 2013).

The supposed Saudi tribal card is often raised in relation to influencing events in Syria or Iraq, but observers often overstate both Saudi willingness to deploy it and the effectiveness of such a card if it were played. In Jordan it is noted that payments do not necessarily guarantee loyalty (from either a tribal sheikh or his followers). 'Loyalty bidding wars' initiated by some Jordanian tribes (interview, Jordanian journalist, 2013) do not ensure the efficacy of Saudi policy.

#### *5.5. Saudi salafi influence?*

Saudi Arabia is widely accused throughout the Arab world of approving, or at least allowing, ostensibly private funding to reach *salafi* groups. The JMB and secular figures (e.g. Oraib Al-Rantawi; interview, 2013) allege such links, including with Jordan's salafists. Some Saudi analysts say that there are private links between a few senior Saudi princes and Jordanian *salafis* but not necessarily to armed action. However, the Jordanian leadership is more concerned about Qatari links to *salafis* and to the MB throughout the region than it is about Saudi *salafi* connections. The influx of Arab (including Jordanian and Saudi) *salafi* fighters to Syria increases this Jordanian and Saudi government concern further. In fact a Jordanian *salafi*

leader states openly that Jordanian *salafi* fighters are aiding that struggle.<sup>14</sup> It is probable that, since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the subsequent Al-Qaida threat inside Saudi Arabia, an alleged Saudi policy of encouraging radical jihadis has been reined in, at least within bordering countries.<sup>15</sup>

Saudi Arabia's official salafists – the thousands of payroll clerics that give a Wahhabi sanction to its ruling family's claim of Islamic legitimacy – provide a potential means to influence events in Jordan and elsewhere. They can sometimes go 'off message' on issues that the Saudi political leadership would rather were not discussed, including domestic policy. However, their inveighing against the Arab Spring and the MB challenge to former Saudi allies indicates a role complementary to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy interests (interview, Al-Shammri, 2013). Saudi analysts reject the notion of their country being a counter-revolutionary power, citing its pragmatic relations with MB governments in Egypt and Tunisia, and its desire to assist regime change for strategic advantage – namely in Syria. However, it is accepted that Saudi Arabia would not welcome a JMB takeover next door and, thus, official clerical opposition to the MB generally has utility.

#### *5.6. Jordan's limited influence over Saudi Arabia*

Periodically Jordan will grab political opportunities to advertise its ability to contribute to the security of the Gulf Arab states. However, while this remains a feature – most actively in Bahrain at present – there are limits to the leverage that this can provide. Historic sensibilities aside, the Jordanians 'can't defend us against Iran', Hussein Shobokshi drolly observes (interview, 2013). Hijazi ambitions are also, it seems, largely dormant. As a Jidawi lawyer, and self-styled liberal Islamist, observed, no doubt Jordan would seek to exploit any Saudi state collapse. He says that Najdis are sometimes privately referred to by Hijazis as 'Serbs'.<sup>16</sup> However, neither he nor other Hijazi observers of Saudi politics think that a putative separatism would equate with historic Hashemite claims, whatever Jordan's rulers may privately think (interview, Alim, 2013). Competing claims of religious legitimacy have not been acutely expressed since the early stages of the Iran–Iraq war. King Hussein then felt the need to disinter the title by which his great-grandfather was referred to by his subjects, *sherif*

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<sup>14</sup> Mohammed Chalabi had his death sentence for involvement in a plot to attack a Jordanian military base housing US troops commuted. He recently claimed that 500 'of our men' were fighting in Syria (BBC News 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Saudi Arabia's Prince Bandar bin Sultan (now head of foreign intelligence) was accused of aiding *salafi* fighters in Tripoli in north-western Lebanon who were competing for authority with Syrian-funded Alawi fighters (Hersh 2007).

<sup>16</sup> A highly insulting suggestion that the rule of the Al-Saud from the heartland of Arabia is not just an occupation, but one akin to that of the Serbs over the (Muslim) Bosnians.



(the historic name given to the Al-Hashem as keepers, until 1924, of Mecca and Medina). This was around the same time that King Fahd made *khadim al Haramain* (custodian of the two holy places) the official title of the Saudi monarch.

These days Jordanian influence upon politics in Saudi Arabia is modest, however. Some shierifian sympathy in Mecca and Medina does not make Jordan a guiding hand for discontents in the Hijaz. While the SMB is seen by some as the only obvious contender to be a meaningful opposition within Saudi Arabia, it is very far from being able to fulfil this role. Either way it is not beholden to its Jordanian counterpart, and is certainly immune from the historic legacy and Islamic ideational projections of the Al-Hashem, unlike the JMB. The fact that there are MB sympathies in Saudi Arabia means that there is support for the JMB, a public and legal organization, and its array of social activities, among Saudi nationals too. Gulf benefactors fund a variety of Islamic causes throughout the region and more widely, and the JMB has played a major role in welfare provision in Jordan, even though one of its major charities, the Islamic Centre, has come under state control in recent years.

#### 5.7. *Saudi media outreach*

Saudi Arabia has long been known to flex its media muscles for regional political influence. There is a complex web of Saudi media ownership among senior princes or commoner businessmen linked to them by marriage and business partnerships. This means that the international satellite channel, as well as the more traditional domestic and foreign (Arabic) newspapers, employ a large pool of foreign Arab (as well as some Saudi) journalists who are at the disposal of Saudi Arabia's national interest and who have a capacity to reach a large Arab audience. While direct media ownership in Jordan is not clearly linked to Saudi Arabia, the latter's political and economic clout is seen within Jordan as affecting what Jordanian journalists will say and write. However, their greatest concern, says a Jordanian journalist, is the Jordanian state (interview, 2013). This in turn can reinforce their caution about upsetting Saudi Arabia. The need to travel there, including for religious pilgrimage, and the basic desire not to antagonize the Jordanian leadership by insulting a more powerful and wealthy neighbour create, it is said, a relatively cowed media. In part this is because of Jordanian legal constraints on criticizing regional allies.<sup>17</sup> Periodically Saudi media coverage of Jordan is indirectly critical in so much as there is a general tendency to attack the MB in the region.

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<sup>17</sup> For example, Fahad Al-Rimawi, editor of bi-monthly Jordanian publication *Al-Majd*, was arrested in May 2004 and detained for 36 hours under a law that bars harming relations with a 'brotherly country'. *Al-Majd* was suspended and Al-Rimawi was accused damaging Jordanian relations with Saudi Arabia in an editorial he wrote, in which he accused Saudi Arabia of being a 'lackey of the US'. He has also strongly criticized Wahhabism in previous press commentary.

However, as this research paper has argued, the general rule is not to challenge Jordan unless it is taking decisions that appear to impinge directly and negatively on Saudi Arabia.

## **6. CONCLUSION: FUTURE SHOCK?**

Saudi and Jordanian analysts observe that a future Syria that is either ‘Somalia-ized’ or democratized is not in the interest of Riyadh or Amman. Nor, they say, are the leaderships seeking to promote such outcomes or taking steps that might precipitate them. This paper has argued that both Saudi Arabia and Jordan currently have an unprecedented investment in the stability of each other’s leadership, evidenced in the Saudi leadership’s approach to Syria. However, this does not mean that they will be unaffected by instability in each other’s country, or that they have the means to plan, implement or follow up on steps to aid the other’s hold on power. In the case of Jordan there is little the leadership could do to assist the rule of the Al-Saud, although there are those in Saudi Arabia, whether of an overtly conservative clerical hue or Saudi nationalists, who want a tighter Saudi rein on the JMB.

There are some Saudis who see the bilateral relationship changing if the EMB successfully consolidates power, aided, perhaps, by Turkey’s ongoing soft domestic Islamization, and the possible emergence of an Islamist-type regime in Syria. The latter scenario in particular could affect the traditionally gradualist approach of the JMB, observes Bassim Alim (interview, 2013). It is conceivable that this in turn would affect the Saudi government’s relationship with Jordan – with both the monarchy and the JMB. However, it is also stressed that these movements are not the same, and Syria and Palestine have arguably had a much more militant MB tradition.

Turkish business interests and Egyptian political influence could be deepened in Jordan and Syria. However, a possible drawing-in of Jordan into a new (Arab) Levant that is more open in economics and politics, and that perhaps is broadly democratic as well as Islamist in orientation, does not necessarily mean that Saudi Arabia would follow in its wake. Jamal Al-Khashoggi says that Saudi Arabia could be affected by a possible long-term democratic outcome in the Levant and Egypt, but also argues that Saudi investment and business, if nimble enough, could give his country a strategic foothold in a more open region (interview, 2012).

Saudi and Jordanian policy planners are not, it seems, fleshing out dramatic scenarios. Jordan does, though, have a clearer agenda than Saudi Arabia. Jordan is focused on emphasizing why the Gulf needs to hug it more closely in financial, energy and, to an extent, political terms. Saudi Arabia wants to use its money to assist a suitable change of regime in

Syria, and its political, financial and, to some extent, military influence to affect developments in Bahrain and Yemen. It does not expect to be acting as directly over events in Jordan, or, for the most part, to have to. Common interests but a limited capacity (and political will in the Saudi case) to pursue them seems most likely to continue to characterize the bilateral relationship.

At the non-state level there is an array of country-to-country links, but a very different domestic relationship in each country between the MB and the government. The existence of a large number of Saudi official and non-official *ulema* that are *salafi*, and at some remove from the more pluralist, party-orientated, political approach of the JMB, puts limits to the interaction between each other's Islamist politics.

An unequal power relationship is manifested in a Jordanian leadership enthusiasm to emphasize to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states that it is indispensable – a stance long stressed to the west with regard to stability in the Levant as well as the Gulf. Saudi Arabia is concerned about what is happening in Jordan, a fellow and neighbouring Arab monarchy, and the small size of the Hashemite ruling family gives it further pause. However, Saudi Arabia does not see its national security as vulnerable to events there.

This seemingly complacent Saudi attitude is in part a product of a policy process that is not usually proactive or strategic, but is sometimes prone to making ill-considered statements rather than conducting a careful consideration of threats and policy options. Its offer of GCC membership to Jordan falls into this category, whereas on Syria, the key issue for both states' strategic interests, Saudi Arabia has been reactive, cautious, discreet, and largely ineffectual.

The Saudi–Jordanian relationship is currently based on mutual interests against political change in the Arab world that favour the MB. The two countries share a strategic opposition to Iran too, but differ on the utility of a regime change in Syria that would weaken Iran but probably favour the Brothers. Saudi Arabia and Jordan are committed to each other's survival, but, as in Syria, are fairly powerless to impact on events in each other's territory or elsewhere. Saudi Arabia's resources could, however, be used more effectively to ease Jordan's economic plight further and, therefore, to help to stabilize Hashemite rule. Saudi economic assistance is likely to continue to be sizeable, but subject to fluctuations in quantity and in regularity.

Jordanian and Saudi leaderships are tied together by common interests<sup>18</sup> and a roughly comparable political culture. However, their differences – in economics and politics, and given Jordan’s exposure to Palestine – limit their alignment. More dramatic changes, in Syria or elsewhere in the region, would probably lead to a marked increase in Saudi economic assistance to Jordan, but would also underline for Saudi Arabia the need to ensure that Jordan is no more than a semi-detached player in Gulf affairs.

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<sup>18</sup> A senior Jordanian official characterized the two countries as having ‘somewhat identical interests’ (interview, 2013).

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This is the third research paper Dr Neil Partrick has written for the LSE's Kuwait Programme. His previous papers were 'Nationalism in the Gulf states' and 'The GCC: Gulf State integration or leadership cooperation'. Neil has contributed to the Economist Group's publications on Gulf Arab states for more than a decade; and he is an Associate Fellow at RUSI, the Whitehall defence and security think-tank. From 2008- 9, Neil taught at the American University of Sharjah (UAE), and in the early 1990s he worked for Panorama, a Palestinian research centre in Jerusalem.

This research paper was written under the auspices of the Kuwait Programme on Development, Governance and Globalisation in the Gulf States at the London School of Economics and Political Science with the support of the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences.

