A Military Practitioner’s Guide to Jordan

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Introduction

Jordan is a key United States strategic partner located in a volatile area of the Middle East. It borders Syria to the north where a civil war has raged for over three years and where the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) operates. Because of the conflict, hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees have sought safety within Jordan’s borders. Iraq is located to the east where ethnic violence continues and where ISIS holds terrain. To the west is Israel where negotiations with the Palestinians on a two-state solution have stalled, and where Gaza Palestinians and Israeli clashed in the Summer of 2014. Conversely, Jordan is a relatively stable country with a history of good relations with the West. Jordan is part of the coalition of nations that will fight ISIS. Given Jordan’s stability, established defense and intelligence systems, and location, western military personnel will have a greater likelihood of operating inside Jordan and with Jordanians in the fight against ISIS. This essay provides basic information about Jordan the military practitioner should know.

History & Background - The Hashemites as Descendants of Mohammed

For centuries, Jordan was part of the Ottoman Empire. After the defeat of the Central Powers in World War I, Great Britain controlled most of the Middle East by mandate from the League of Nations, and designated the current country of Jordan as Transjordan. Jordan was granted its independence as The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan after World War II. The current government is a hereditary, constitutional monarchy led by the Hashemite family who claim direct lineage from the Prophet Muhammad. The first king of Jordan was King Abdullah who reigned from 1946-1951. King Hussein bin Talal ruled Jordan from 1953 to 1999 following the assassination of his grandfather, King Abdullah, in 1951, and the brief rule of his father, Talal. King Hussein held power during significant events in Jordanian history, including a large influx of Palestinian refugees following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1949, the enactment of Jordan’s first constitution, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War in which Israel gained control of the West Bank, a civil war with Palestinian rebels in 1970, and the establishment of a peace treaty with Israel. Jordan relinquished its claim to the West Bank in 1988, granting such right to the Palestine Liberation Organization (“PLO”).

After King Hussein’s death in 1999, his eldest son, Abdullah II, became king. King Abdullah II is named after his great-grandfather, who played a leading role in the Arab revolt from the Ottoman Empire. The current king was educated in the United Kingdom and the United States, and his mother is a former citizen of the United Kingdom. King Abdullah II is married to Queen Rania, who is of Palestinian descent and the presumed next in line is his twenty-year-old son, Crown Prince Hussein.
Prior to taking the throne, King Abdullah II served as commander of the Jordanian Special Operations
Command. [xx]

**Government**

The king possesses the power to appoint a prime minister who serves at the king’s pleasure. [xxi] The
prime minister is the head of the government and the cabinet, known as the Council of Ministers. [xxii] The
Jordanian parliament is composed of a bicameral National Assembly. [xxiii] The Senate or House of
Notables consists of sixty senators who are appointed by the king to four-year terms. [xxiv] The elected
Chamber of Deputies or House of Representatives consists of 150 seats who also serve for four-year terms.
[xxv] Under Jordanian law, fifteen legislative seats are reserved for women, nine seats for Christians,
nine for Bedouins and three for Jordanians of Chechen or Circassian lineage. [xxvi] Political parties are
permitted; one of the most influential is the Muslim Brotherhood. [xxvii]

Despite the existence of the legislative branch, the king has extensive executive powers that permit him to
deliver decrees that are not subject to parliamentary review or veto. [xxviii] In addition, the king is the
commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and has the authority to unilaterally declare war and to approve
treaties. [xxix]

While the king appoints all judges, the Jordanian constitution nonetheless provides for a judiciary that
operates largely independently. [xxx] Jordanian courts fall into three categories:

1. **Military courts** hear not only cases brought against uniformed personnel, but also cases against
civilians involving matters of state security, including espionage, bribery of public officials,
narcotics or weapons trafficking, and other criminal offenses. [xxxi]
2. **Religious courts** hear family law and estate matters such as divorce, child custody and support,
adoption, guardianship, and challenges to inheritance; [xxxi] and
3. **Civil courts** hear criminal and civil cases that are not otherwise reserved for military or religious
courts. [xxxii]

While Jordan has experienced sporadic anti-government protests over the years since the emergence of the
Arab Spring, the degree of hostilities has not reached the levels witnessed in nearby Syria or Egypt. [xxxi]
While it is against the law to insult the king[xxxv], a degree of public criticism of the monarchy has been
forthcoming from some of its own historically supportive base – the tribal/military elite with roots from
the East Bank of the Jordan River. [xxxvi] However, billboards of the current and former kings adorn the
country, and portraits are frequently found hanging in government offices, hotels, and shops.

**Jordanian Armed Forces**

As of 2014, Jordan was the eleventh largest supplier of military personnel to United Nations peacekeeping
operations around the world. [xxxvii] Most recently, the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) have supported
operations in Haiti and Brazil. [xxxviii] In addition, Jordan has provided troops in Afghanistan, including
medical personnel, civil affairs personnel, instructors and security forces. [xxxix] The JAF consists of the
Royal Jordanian Land Force, the Royal Jordanian Navy, the Royal Jordanian Air Force, the Special
Operations Command, and the Border Security Command. [xl] Military service for both males and
females is voluntary, and typically consist of a two-year enlistment with an option to reenlist for up to
eighteen years. [xli]

While its military is small compared to that of most of its neighbors – (110,700 active personnel), JAF
personnel are considered well trained and organized. [xl] The JAF is currently officer-heavy, and is in
the process of building its non-commissioned officer corps. The officer ranks are the same as in the...
United States – second lieutenant through four-star general. The highest rank is reserved for the king as commander-in-chief. The officer rank insignias are depicted below starting with second lieutenant rank that consists of one star up to a four-star general that consists of a crown, star and crossed sabers.

![Figure 1 – Picture of ranks compliments of http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jordanian_military_ranks.](image)

Enlisted ranks consist of private, corporal, and sergeant. The rank insignia is the same as in the United States Army for private second class, corporal, and sergeant (E-5); however, the insignia faces in the opposite direction. The JAF have the equivalent of warrant officers that are called “wakeels.”

Closely related to the Jordanian military is the General Intelligence Department (“GID”). Some regard the GID as one of the most respective intelligence agencies in the Arab community. It is known for its ability to infiltrate enemy organizations of Jordan, but also known for its heavy-handed ways of gaining information.

The Jordanian People

The current population of Jordan is approximately 6.5 million, the vast majority of which is of Arab descent (98%). A large percentage is of Palestinian descent, with estimates ranging from one-third to as high as three-quarters of the Jordanian populace. The other ethnic groups are primarily Circassians (1%) and Armenians (1%). Over 90% of the population is Sunni Muslim. The other religious groups are Christian (6%) and other Muslim sects (2%). Jordan has a high literacy rate (95% for males and 89.2% for females). Arabic is the official language of Jordan, but English is spoken by many in and around the capital city of Amman. English is taught as part of each student’s primary education.

Economy

The currency of Jordan is the Jordanian dinar (JD). ATMs located throughout Amman provide easy access to dinar using a western debit or credit card, notwithstanding the United States dollar is also commonly accepted throughout the country.

Although there is a railway, much of the commerce is transported via commercial roads. The roads are generally of good quality, especially on the highways in and around Amman. Secondary roads are paved, but are frequently narrow and not labeled. Many of the primary roads are labeled in both Arabic and in English. Rush hour traffic in Amman is hectic and the drivers are aggressive. Most intersections have traffic circles as opposed to traffic lights. It is recommended that a hired driver coordinated through the embassy be used when travelling within Jordan. If this is not an option, a global position satellite (GPS) device should be utilized. The current practice for U.S. Army military personnel is to travel in civilian clothing (not in military uniform) when in commercial vehicles, but verify this with your local
representative at the United States embassy in Amman.

Unlike many of its Middle East neighbors, Jordan is not an oil rich nation. It has few natural resources (limited generally to phosphates, fertilizers, and agricultural produce), and access to fresh water is limited. Jordan’s economy relies heavily on tourism and foreign aid, most of which is provided by the United States. Since 2008, the United States has provided approximately $660 million per year in foreign assistance.

Arab Spring

The unemployment rate in Jordan is extremely high for youths ages 15 to 24; in 2014 it was 27%. This has set the stage for unrest in recent years. Protests have not reached the fevered pitch of violence in other Arab nations since the Arab Spring; however, demonstrations have occurred over the past two years in Jordan. The protests have focused on the economy, corruption in the government, alleged rigged elections, and a call for democratic reforms. King Abdullah II has defused violent uprisings by “reshuffling his government, promising political and economic reforms.” and calling early parliamentary elections in January 2013. The elections were boycotted by the Muslim Brotherhood as a sign of protest.

Geography

Jordan is a relatively small country, roughly the size of the state of Indiana. Most of its terrain consists of arid hills and mountains, and its only seaport is the port city of Aqaba on the Gulf of Aqaba. Besides commercial activity, Aqaba has resorts and reportedly some of the best coral reefs in the world. Jordan has the lowest point on earth located at the Dead Sea. Many resorts are also at the Dead Sea that markets the alleged healing powers of the salt water and the silt from the waterbed.
The agriculture center is found in the northern part of the Jordan Valley located in the western border. This area runs from the northern border to the Dead Sea (which is also where the Jordan River ends). The Jordan Valley continues past the Dead Sea and becomes the Wadi Araba. This hot, dry area is a fairly barren. Some commercial mining occurs here for potash.

![Map of Jordan](http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/jordan_map.htm)

Figure 3 – Map compliments of http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/jordan_map.htm.

The mountains and hilly regions of the country separate the Jordan Valley from the eastern desert. This area contains most of the population centers of the country: Amman, Irbid, Karak, and Zarqa. These areas also receive the highest amount of rainfall. The eastern desert (Badia Region) encompasses approximately 75% of Jordan, and ranges into Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Temperatures in the summer can exceed 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) in this part of Jordan. The temperatures in Amman are similar to those in the Southeastern United States, with temperatures ranging from 40 to 91 degrees Fahrenheit over the course of a year. Rarely does the temperature go below freezing or above 97 degrees Fahrenheit in most of the country.

Courtesies and Customs

Jordanians are a friendly and hospitable people. Arrival at a meeting or appointment early is discouraged, but arriving late can be a sign of disrespect. Business meetings often run longer than scheduled, due to (sometimes multiple) servings of tea, water, and/or coffee. If a beverage is served, it is acceptable to decline the first or second offering; however, once a beverage is accepted, do not leave the meeting until everyone is finished with the beverage, or when your host signifies that the meeting is concluded. It is customary to exchange business cards at initial meetings.

Feel free to shake hands with your male Jordanian host. Only offer your hand to a Jordanian female if she...
offers her hand first. A firm handshake is customary between men, but use only a light grasp of fingers if shaking the hand of a Jordanian woman. Some Jordanians stand closer than westerners are accustomed to. If you enter a room in which Jordanians are already present, greet them with a handshake moving around the room from right to left. Before choosing a seat, estimate your social standing in the room. The closer you are to the door, the less your social standing. Like other Muslim cultures, the bottoms of the feet are considered dirty, and it is a sign of disrespect to show the bottoms of your feet when seated. Stand to greet people who newly enter the room unless they are someone of social or military standing much lower than your own. When leaving the room, thank the host and acknowledge the other people who remain.

There are certain times of the year where it is difficult to conduct business in Jordan. Ramadan is a month-long religious holiday where Muslims observe a strict fast from dawn to dusk. It is a reflective period in which the practitioner is to focus on prayer and spirituality in order to cleanse the mind and body. During this period, military practitioners should anticipate a slow response if interaction is necessary with Jordanians. Following Ramadan, there is a three- to five-day national holiday called Eid al-Fitr (the Festival of Fast-Breaking) in which donations are given to the poor and families gather to celebrate.

Business hours are generally from 0900 hours to 1700 hours, Sunday through Thursday. Municipal offices typically open from 0900 to 1600 hours. During Ramadan, business hours are shortened to end at 1400 to 1500 hours. Lunch hours are usually from 1300 to 1500 hours during non-Ramadan periods. Like many European countries, lunch is the large meal of the day. Dinner is usually a light meal at around 2100 or later. If you are eating traditional Middle Eastern cuisine, be prepared to eat with your fingers. Mansaf is a popular Jordanian dish, which consist of lamb and/or chicken served over rice and dried yogurt. It is a celebratory meal, served to signify events such as weddings, graduations or to honor a guest. It is also served on certain holidays. Unlike in the United States, beverages are often consumed after a meal, not during.

If a military uniform is not prescribed, a suit and tie is customary for men. A dress is the normal business attire for women. The lower the hemline of the dress, the better, but at a minimum should cover the knees. The sleeves should cover at least the elbows. Low necklines or other exposed areas of the female anatomy are discouraged. When in doubt, check with your embassy liaison for advice.

Like other Muslim countries, relations are built on associations. Since few Americans have a familial or tribal connection to Jordanians, it is best inform the person you meet that you have a connection to someone they know. For instance, “I’m a friend of Captain X” or “I have dealings with Major Y who I believe you know.”

**Jordanian and U.S. Agreements**

Jordan and the United States have entered into a number of bilateral military and financial agreements. A 1996 status of forces agreement (SOFA) between the two countries permits United States servicemembers to enter and exit Jordan with government identification and collective or individual travel orders, wear uniforms and carry weapons while on duty, and enjoy the same status as that provided to the technical and administrative staff of the United States Embassy. However, it is preferable to use a passport when entering or exiting Jordan. The SOFA also provides duty-free treatment on property, materials, and equipment imported into or acquired in Jordan by the United States, and requires both countries to waive all claims (other than contractual claims) against each other for damage, loss, or destruction of property arising out of any official duties. In 1996, Jordan was granted non-NATO Ally status, which makes it eligible to receive excess defense equipment, training, and loans of defense equipment for research and development.
Joint Exercises and Training

Many Jordanian officers have studied in the United States, and Jordan is among the top three receivers of United States Military Education and Training (IMET) funding. Approximately 300 JAF personnel attend school in the United States each year. Training exercises occur on a regular basis between the United States military and the JAF. The United States assisted with the building of the King Abdullah II Center for Special Operations Training, at which Jordan has trained approximately 2,500 Afghan Special Forces. Other training occurs at Jordan’s Peace Operations Training Center and Jordan’s International Police Training Center (JIPTC).

Joint training exercises between United States and JAF forces have been ongoing for several years. Exercise Eager Lion has taken place annually since 2011, with a focus on interoperability between the country’s militaries. The latest exercise, in June 2014, focused on integrated air and missile defense, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.

Conclusion

Given the uncertainty in the Middle East, the new coalition to combat ISIS, and the strong partnership between the West and Jordan, it is likely that a western military practitioner will have an engagement in Jordan. Any time spent in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan will be a rewarding one. The Jordanians are gracious hosts, and one will find numerous cultural treasures to explore. The JAF is a well-trained and educated force, and a gratifying host to interact with. Although a mostly secular country, one should be guided by the general principles of decorum as outlined above to appropriately represent your country.

End Notes


[ii] This essay is a basic outline of Jordanian history, culture, etiquette, and strategic significance, and offers suggested tips for interacting with Jordanian military personnel and civilians. It should not be regarded as complete or an authoritative guidebook, and is subject to interpretation and opinion. The views of the authors derive from their personal observations, interactions, and research, which are not necessarily the views and opinions of the United States government, the Department of Defense, or the Department of the Army. Although this essay is a useful guidebook, any practitioner in Jordan should defer to the opinions and suggestions on proper protocol from representatives of the United States embassy in Amman.


[iv] Ibid.


Carter, 138.

Ibid., 138.


Goldberg, J. (2000). *Learning How to be King*.

Ibid. Per T.E. Lawrence, “Abdullah plotted the revolt; his father, Sharif Hussein, ruler of Mecca, was its inspiration.” Goldberg quoting from Lawrence’s “Seven Pillars of Wisdom.”

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid., 4.
The Muslim Brotherhood is not a popular organization with King Abdullah. He refers to them as "wolves in sheep’s clothing." Ibid.


Although the king has the power to appoint and dismiss judges, the management of the judges such as appointments, promotions, and transfers are made by the Higher Judicial Council. Sharp, “Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations,” 11.


At one demonstration, the police handed out water at the suggestion of Queen Rania. Other demonstrations were quelled with force and the use of tear gas. Goldberg, The Modern King.

Sharp, 10.

2 and 5.

[xli] Ibid.


[xliv] Ibid.


[xlviii] Ibid.

[xlix] Ibid.

[li] The exchange rate as of the date of this article is $1 = .70 JD. The U.S. 2015 per diem rate in Amman is $249 for lodging and $141 for meals and incidentals. Retrieved from http://aoprals.state.gov/web920/per_diem_action.asp?MenuHide=1&CountryCode=1160

[lii] CIA World Factbook.


[liv] Ibid.


[li] Ibid., 4.


[lx] Ibid.


[lxv] Ibid.

[lxvi] Ibid.

[lxvii] Ibid.

[lxviii] Ibid.


[lxx] Ibid.

[lxxi] Ibid.

[lxxii] Ibid.

[lxxiii] Ibid.

[lxxiv] Ibid.

[lxxv] Ibid.

[lxxvi] Ibid.

[lxxvii] Ibid.

[lxxviii] Ibid.

[lxxix] Ibid.


The right hand should be used to eat mansaf, and any other food since the left is considered unclean. It is sometimes eaten standing up in the Bedouin tradition. Goldberg, The Modern King.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid., 14.

Ibid.

Ibid.


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