



# THE EUROPEAN GEOPOLITICAL FORUM

## **External Relations Briefing: Russian-Jordanian Relations**

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**1 July, 2010**

Jordan has always been a moderate monarchy and, taking into account the role of the British Empire in the foundation of the Hashemite Kingdom, one of the most pro-Western regimes in the Arab East. Jordan's well-established relations with Russia, which have become even closer and warmer during the last decade, might therefore seem surprising. However, in the Middle East, perhaps even more than in any geopolitical regions, neither generalizations nor stereotypes are able to reflect complex realities. Moscow and Amman have a number of reasons to preserve and cultivate their cooperation.

On August 21, 1963 the Jordanian Monarchy established full diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. Jordan's King, Hussein Bin Talal, who had always been seen as a Western stalwart, was well aware that he could develop friendly relations with the USSR without causing anger or arousing undue suspicion from the Americans or their allies. During his visit to Moscow in June 1976 he presented himself as a non-aligned leader, willing to improve his political image among the Arab public. Via such rapprochement with Moscow, which was at the time seen as Damascus' main ally, King Hussein also wanted to insure his country against any unpredictable actions by Syrian leaders or other Arab nationalists. Furthermore, it should be noted that Soviet Middle-Eastern policy was at the time in crisis and King Hussein was seen in Moscow as an open minded, pragmatic partner with whom it was possible to do business. Though Post-Soviet Russian-Jordanian relations have quite different international context and importance, some of their reasons and major features remain similar to bygone years.

In its Middle-Eastern policy the Russian Federation seems to be well balanced and friendly towards Arabs. Relations with Moscow could be seen in Amman as a means to strengthen its international position and security of the country in relation to Israel and its allies. As a show of independent policy, relations with Moscow could also strengthen the nationalist credentials of the regime in relation to its Arab population, which is certainly not pro-American. For the Russian leaders Jordan is a relatively



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secure foot in the Arab East, a country with good relations with the United States and Israel, but one with which they can do business.

From Moscow's view point there are at least two more factors which elevate Jordan's importance in the foreign policy context. First, the country is a close neighbor of Israel/Palestine and until 1967 the West Bank was part of the Hashemite Kingdom. Relations with Amman provide Moscow a chance to acquire some influence in Arab-Israeli relations, something that Moscow has been quite keen to achieve. Second, and even more important, is the fact that Jordan is home to between 80 to 100 thousand persons of Chechen (and other Circassian nationalities') descent who settled in the area during the Ottoman Empire period in the 19th Century. The Jordanian Chechens are a relatively wealthy and politically influential group of the Jordanian citizens. In the 1990's, at least part of their number supported anti-Russian Chechen separatist guerrilla movements in southern Russia and even now they have numerous links with their ancestral homeland. The Islamic University in Grozny, Chechnya's capital, and many mosques in around the country have been built as a result of their donations. Moscow, which is highly paranoid about the interlinked threat of separatism and Islamic extremism in the Russian south, needs to keep an eye on Jordan's Chechens and preserves some links both with them and the Jordanian authorities.

Russian-Jordanian relations as initiated during the Soviet period by King Hussein, have been expanded further by his son and successor King Abdullah II, who inherited the throne after King Hussein death on February 7, 1999. The new Jordanian monarch found a suitable partner and interlocutor for the development of the relationship in the new Russian leader Vladimir Putin, who came to power at the end of 1999. The two leaders met for the first time on August 27, 2001, when King Abdullah II arrived in Moscow for his first official visit. The two men have forged a close partnership and during the last seven years Abdullah II made nine more visits to Russia. There are now many important political reasons for close cooperation between Moscow and Amman and the ideological gap which caused some level of partition between the countries during the Soviet period no longer exists.

In the political and strategic arena, both countries are deeply concerned about the developments in the Israeli occupied Palestinian Territories and Israeli policy towards its Arab neighbours. Russia's



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stand on the Palestinian issue is an important element of Moscow's geopolitical manoeuvring in the Middle East peace process and broader regional policy. Jordan is actively used as conduit country in order to assist Palestinian doves under the wing of the Head of the Palestinian National Authority, Mahmoud Abbas. Fifty armoured personnel carriers were recently shipped to Jordan and their onward shipment to the West Bank should be anticipated.

Another common focus is the ongoing instability in Iraq and the American role in the region. Both countries want to prevent the further spread of Islamic fundamentalism and social upheavals, which remains a threat to regime stability in both Russia and the Middle East. In July 2003 the influential Jordanian daily, the Jordan Times wrote: "It is undeniable that when it comes to crucial Middle East issues such as Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Jordan and the Arab World in general have been sharing identical views with Russia over the past few years". This opinion seems to be equally valid in May 2010. For Jordan and as for other Arab nations, Chechen separatism has been a peripheral issue that has not affected friendship with Moscow.

Another cause for close ties between Russia and Jordan is mutual economic cooperation and business opportunity. In 2004 the Russian Ambassador to Amman Alexander Shein described Jordan as a 'window to the Middle East' and between 2001 and 2009 the volume of Russian-Jordanian trade turnover increased 10 times from \$40 million to \$400 million. In addition to the political and economic aspects, Russian-Jordanian relations also include scientific and cultural cooperation. This year the Russian cultural centre has been re-opened in Amman and there is a growing presence of Russian tourists and pilgrims in the country. The enhancement of further economic cooperation between the two countries, especially by increasing Jordanian fresh produce exports to Russia is currently on the agenda and under discussion on ministerial level.

On March 11, 2010 Russia and Jordan signed an intergovernmental program for scientific and cultural cooperation between the two countries for the period 2010-12. A notable aspect of both countries' relations with one another is their growing military-technological cooperation, where Russia is to provide Jordan with (Ilyshin) Il-76 MF military transport airplanes, (Kamov) Ka-226 helicopters and RPG-32 Hashim multi-calibre grenade launchers, as well as to assist the Jordanian military-industrial complex to commence assembling helicopters and grenade launchers under license. Moscow's



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emerging cooperation with Amman in the military sphere alludes to the fact that despite the challenges, Russia is starting to access the lucrative arms market of the Arab monarchies. While the art of forecasting (future political or economic developments) in the Middle East is akin to forecasts

from card wielding gypsy fortune tellers, it appears that Russian-Jordanian relations may be forecasted to yield further symbiosis for both sides as long as the present Jordanian monarch, King Abdullah II, remains in power.