



2018

The Southern Syria Military Operations and Their Impact on the Kingdom of Jordan

Brief

INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND:

Beginning on 18 June 2018, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and Russian forces, launched *Operation Basalt* against the Islamic State and other opposition forces in southern Syria. This military offensive began as an attempt to retake the opposition-held provinces of Daraa and Quneitra, on the borders of Jordan and Israel, respectively. Known as the “cradle of the revolution,” these southern provinces were the birthplace of the 2011 protests in Syria and are vital to



the economic future of the region. The Daraa province boasts one of the most important trade route crossings in the Arab World, the Nassib-Jaber crossing. Once an economic hub, the civil war forced the crossing closed, exacerbating already-dire economic conditions in Jordan.

Because of their geopolitical and economic importance, Daraa and Quneitra were under the protection of a de-escalation agreement between the United States, Russia, and Jordan. Adopted in mid-2017, the agreement essentially halted the war in Southern Syria. It was crucial for the Kingdom of Jordan because it would limit the number of Syrian refugees fleeing into the country and ensure that Shi’ite militias would not take up posts along its shared border with Syria, effectively quelling the possibility of violence. The agreement even established a center in Amman tasked with monitoring the ceasefire.¹

During the recent *Operation Basalt*, the SAA and its allies attacked Daraa and Quneitra through shelling, airstrikes, and ground attacks, displacing approximately 330,000 Syrians to the Jordanian-Syrian border.² This displacement was one of the quickest in the war’s seven-year history and alarmed both governmental and nongovernmental officials worldwide, especially those in Jordan, the country that has borne the brunt of the Syrian crisis.

¹ <http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/amman-centre-south-syria-ceasefire-control-embarks-mission>

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/07/daraa-assad-jordan-israel-rebels/564611/>

On 26 June 2018, Omar Razzaz, Jordan's new Prime Minister, stated that the Kingdom "will not receive any new refugees from Syria" as it had "reached capacity," despite calls from international organizations to open its borders. Two days later, amid escalating fighting and public discontent, Jordan agreed to provide humanitarian support to Syrians by opening three passageways from Jordan to Syria to deliver supplies.³ Throughout this time, Jordanian officials were allegedly pressuring the opposition groups holding the Syrian side of the Nassib-Jaber crossing to negotiate with the Syrian regime and Russia because the crossing is seen as the golden ticket to Jordanian economic recovery.⁴

Initial negotiations between the two sides failed; however, by 6 July 2018, a ceasefire agreement was reached between the SAA and the Syrian Opposition forces. In exchange for the rebels relinquishing their weapons, the SAA agreed to leave several villages in Eastern Daraa as well as provide safe passage for opposition forces to northern Syria.⁵ According to the agreement, the Russian military will now supervise the Jordan-Syrian border, especially the Nassib-Jaber Border Crossing, once a free trade zone and hub for economic activity between the two countries.⁶ Jordanian officials have welcomed the takeover as many believe that opening the crossing will boost Jordan's economy, which is in dire need of revitalization.⁷

The recent capture of the Nassib-Jaber Border Crossing reveals the Syrian Regime's commitment to retaking rebel-held areas and ending the war swiftly while also normalizing relations with neighboring countries and reviving Syrian President Assad's legitimacy in the international arena. The border crossing is crucial to Assad's plan as it effectively links the M5 highway from the Jordanian-Syrian border to its

³ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/04/syria/jordan-open-borders-daraa-residents>

⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/jordan-syria-rebels-regime-control-south-nassib-crossing.html>

⁵ <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=97173>

⁶ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/jordan-syria-rebels-regime-control-south-nassib-crossing.html>

⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/07/daraa-assad-jordan-israel-rebels/564611/>

capital, Damascus, and Aleppo.⁸ Not only does this demonstrate Assad's territorial advantage, but it also allows for trade routes between Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, and the Gulf to resume through Syria, thus revitalizing the war-torn economy.

After retaking Daraa and the Nassib-Jaber Border Crossing, Assad's forces will head to the Quneitra province, bordering the Golan Heights. Analysts believe that Assad sees this area as key to re-establishing his regional support in the Arab-Israeli conflict.⁹

Jordanian officials have welcomed the capturing of the Nassib-Jaber Border Crossing. Once a hub of economic activity for the Kingdom, opening the border crossing will facilitate economic recovery in Jordan as well as in Southern Syria. Analysts point to the influx of refugees as one of the roots of the economic malaise in the country. Additionally, many believe that economic recovery needs to happen in Syria to dissuade refugees from fleeing into Jordan. And, with the Russian and Syrian armies patrolling the border, it will inevitably be more secure, limiting the opportunities for an uptick in terrorism, something Jordanian officials fear.

THE ECONOMY:

Jordan has been embroiled in an economic crisis for decades, which has only been exacerbated due to regional developments and conflicts. **Since 2012 the Jordanian economy...**, the rate of unemployment has increased to 18%; only 38% of the Jordanian population participates in the labor force; roughly one-third of Jordanians live in poverty; and the country's debt has reached a staggering \$40 billion (from roughly \$19 billion in 2012) and its debt to GDP ratio is 95%.¹⁰

⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/syrian-forces-reach-jordanian-border-crossing-as-rebels-negotiate-surrender/2018/07/06/30d467a4-8129-11e8-b3b5-b61896f90919_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.64f1837727d0

⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/russian-jets-hit-syrian-south-u-n-urges-jordan-to-open-border-idUSKBN1JV0JE>

¹⁰ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/11/jordans-protests-are-a-ritual-not-a-revolution/> and <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/02/jordan-economic-crisis-threatens-political-stability-180214112245542.html>

The economic woes peaked in May and June 2018 when thousands of Jordanians took to the streets all over the country to protest a draft income tax law, which would raise individual income tax, as well as rising fuel prices. After three days of protests, the King suspended the fuel prices and, just two days later, the Prime Minister resigned. King Abdullah appointed a new Prime Minister, Omar Razzaz, and the country received emergency foreign aid from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar. While these “quick fixes” quelled the public anger, Jordan is looking for more permanent answers to its economic issues.¹¹

According to the World Bank, regional conflicts have disrupted the Jordanian economy: “This is reflected in an unprecedented refugee influx, in disrupted trade routes, and in lower investment and tourism inflows.”¹² Therefore, given its economic malaise, the Jordanian government is eager to revive itself and opening the Nassib-Jaber Border Crossing seems to be its ticket in doing so.¹³

The border crossing supported trade routes through both Syria and Jordan, connecting Europe with Arab countries in the north with those in North Africa and the Gulf. Revitalizing these routes will create jobs in local economies and spur investment. According to Al-Monitor, “Reopening the border crossing should revive Jordan’s economy and encourage Jordanian companies to participate in reconstruction efforts in southern Syria in the future.”¹⁴

TRADE:

The wars in both Syria and Iraq, previously Jordan’s most important and lucrative trading partners, have had devastating effects on the Jordanian economy. Once a vital trade route in the Arab world, Jordanian authorities closed the Nassib-Jaber border crossing in April 2015 after it was captured by opposition groups in Syria. Jordan had originally supported the opposition groups’ capture of the crossing; however, chaos ensued with opposition fighters looting the free trade zone, destroying somewhere between

¹¹ <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/a-hollow-victory-for-jordanian-protectors>

¹² <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jordan/overview>

¹³ <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/opening-soon-story-syrian-jordanian-border-crossing/?agreed=1>

¹⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/jordan-syria-rebels-regime-control-south-nassib-crossing.html>



100 and 150 million USD in property. Refusing to work with non-state actors, Jordan quickly closed the border crossing.¹⁵

The crossing was the busiest between Jordan and Syria and enjoyed a free trade zone, creating advantageous economic conditions for local and international merchants and businesses. Acting as a mini-city, the crossing was also home to a number of restaurants and shops, bringing a lot of economic activity to locals living close to the border. This land “artery of trade” connected most of the Arab world and brought in roughly \$1.5 billion in revenue to Jordan. By closing the border, not only did Jordan lose this revenue, but many businesses were forced to completely alter trade routes, rerouting many through Aqaba, Jordan’s southern-most city on the Red Sea, and costing businesses both time and money.¹⁶

The border closure also impacted the local communities surrounding the Nassib-Jaber border crossing, whose citizens were employed in, and benefited from, the free trade zone. Since its closure, many are still unemployed, augmenting the already-stagnate employment rates in the country.

THE BORDERS AND REFUGEES:

Jordan has been a pacifying force in the middle east and has provided shelter to refugees from Palestine, Iraq, and, most recently, Syria. According to the United Nations, Jordan hosts roughly 650,000 Syrian refugees; however, Jordanian officials estimate that, in reality, the number is at least twice that. With a faltering economy, a dip in foreign aid, and a suicide car bomb that killed 6 people on its border, Jordan closed its borders to Syrians in late 2016. In 2017, international organizations documented that Jordan was deporting nearly 400 Syrian refugees monthly in what the international community calls “refoulement.”¹⁷ Researchers assert that the spike in armed attacks in Jordan amplified this “refoulement.”

In June 2018, as the SAA and Russian forces increased airstrikes on Daraa, the international community called on Jordan to reopen its borders to the roughly 75,000 Syrians fleeing the military

¹⁵ <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/opening-soon-story-syrian-jordanian-border-crossing/?agreed=1>

¹⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/syria-takeover-key-crossing-boost-jordan-economy-180709113820216.html>

¹⁷ <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/jordan-syrian-refugees-deportation/543057/>

offensive. While Jordan kept its borders sealed, mounting public pressure convinced Jordanian officials to open humanitarian aid passageways to those Syrians stranded on the border. Since then, the Kingdom has welcomed any action that might limit the influx of refugees, regardless of who is in charge.

In a recent statement, Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi announced that the country was encouraging Syrians to return to Syria and that Jordan is interested in “creating international mechanisms to secure protection and to provide assistance to the Syrians on their land.”¹⁸

CONCLUSION:

In July 2018, Brig. Gen. Khaled Massaid, commander of the northern military region for the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) said that the recapture of the border by the Syrian regime is a “positive development.” The Kingdom of Jordan sees any action in ending the refugee crisis as progress and its priority is to end the war and revitalize its economy. By welcoming the recapturing of the border crossing by the Assad regime, the country has sent a strong message to the international community that it supports ending the conflict.

Since Assad’s forces have recaptured the Daraa province and the border crossing, Jordanian officials have not yet opened the border. Instead, they are looking to Russia to facilitate negotiations with the Syrian regime and for help in repatriating Syrian refugees, securing its border, and with the return of jihadist fighters.¹⁹ Additionally, some Jordanian MPs have recently visited Syria unofficially in an attempt to begin paving the way for the normalization of relations between the two countries.

Jordan’s next political, security, and economic steps require careful thought and strategic planning. Officials have not yet made any decisions regarding the opening of the border crossing because, when they do, they will have to walk a fine line to maintain a balanced position between Jordanian citizens, the United States, Russia, Syria, and the rest of the Arab world.

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/30/world/middleeast/syria-jordan-border-daraa.html>

¹⁹ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/jordan-syria-relations-normal-refugees-nasib-assad-moscow.html>