

Jordan's migration diplomacy and the Syrian refugees

Peter Seeberg

News

The World Bank Economic Outlook for Jordan (October 2016) has just been published, stating that the Jordanian economy is losing momentum. Not surprisingly the explanations for the economic hardship can, according to the World Bank, be found in the fact that “Jordan has been managing spillovers from the Syrian crisis including closure of trade routes with Iraq and Syria and hosting more than 656,000 registered Syrian refugees.” Furthermore lower levels of tourism and remittances from Jordanians working abroad contribute to the recent downturn. In this not too positive situation Jordan has begun implementing the so-called *Jordan Compact*, a programme funded by the World Bank and other international donors aiming at creating new jobs for Jordanians and Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Summary

Taking its point of departure in the newly published World Bank Economic Outlook for Jordan (October 2016) the article discusses the recent political and economic realities in Jordan with a focus on the Syrian refugees and the so-called Jordan Compact programme, launched in connection with the conference “Supporting Syria and the Region”, held in London 4 February 2016. The initiative can be seen as an example of a successful migration diplomacy effort in the sense that Jordan mobilized strong international state actors and also the World Bank behind the Jordanian interests. At the conference they launched the mentioned programme, according to which 200,000 job opportunities for Syrian refugees would be offered “while they remain in the country, contributing to the Jordanian economy without competing with Jordanians for jobs”, as it said in the document. Taking this move Jordan is to some degree moving away from its official encampment policy and this provides Jordan with new opportunities in the context of migration diplomacy.

Key Words

Jordan, Syrian refugees, Jordan Compact, job creation, migration diplomacy

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Analysis:

Introduction

In March 2016 the World Bank decided to offer Jordan US\$ 100 million at low rates, a type of loan usually reserved for the poorest countries, in financing the creation of job opportunities for Jordanians and Syrian refugees in Jordan (World-Bank 2016). The initiative can be seen as an attempt at promoting peace and stability in a region, which – due to unrest in Iraq, the ongoing war in Syria and the emergence of Da'esh (Islamic State, IS) at the political and military scene in the Levant – is in a highly difficult and volatile situation. Spill-over effects from the complex situation threaten to destabilize Jordan, and the aim of the financial support is to help the Jordanians in dealing with one of the most challenging recent consequences of the lasting crisis in Syria, the large number of Syrian refugees who seek refuge in neighbouring Jordan. Furthermore the loan is part of a strategy, which as two of its official goals has to restore trust between the regime and the Jordanian people and to strengthen the resilience of countries and communities hosting large numbers of refugees. Taking its starting point in the recent political and social realities in Jordan, this article focuses on how the Jordanian state tackles its recent foreign and security policy challenges.

Jordan, the refugees and the national challenges

The long-term stay of Iraqi refugees and – as a result of the Syrian crisis – the Syrian refugees constitute a somewhat controversial phenomenon in Jordan (Shteiwi, Walsh, and Klassen 2015). An important aspect of the strategies attempting to accommodate the internal criticism against the regime is the question of refugees. The issue is obviously highly relevant in Jordan, and it is being emphasized by the presence of more than 2,1 million Palestinian refugees (UNRWA 2015). Furthermore the refugees have become a part of the Jordanian migration diplomacy, and are being used by Jordan in order to raise political support and funding (Turner 2015: 387).

Jordan's economy is weak and vulnerable. Jordan is suffering from a dramatic water shortage, frequently resulting in droughts affecting the agricultural production schemes. The Jordanian mining industry, mainly based on phosphate reserves, is deteriorating due to global competition. Tourism is stagnating, contributing to a chronic account deficit, only to some degree balanced off by remittances primarily from Jordanians working in the Gulf (MENA 2015). The Jordanian National Resilience Plan, offering an overview of proposed responses to the impact of the Syrian crisis, shows convincingly the major logistical and economic problems in connection with the presence of high numbers of refugees and migrants in Jordan. The issues are related to education, employment, ener-

gy, health, housing, social protection, water and sanitation (MPIC 2014). The major donors contribute to helping the Jordanian state in tackling the challenges, as it can be seen in programmes financed by the World Bank (ESSA 2016) or the EU, as part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (EU-Commission 2015) or programmes directly related to the refugees issue (EU-Union 2016).

Refugees and the Jordanian encampment policy

The public discourse in Jordan regarding the refugees is not particularly positive. Rather many Jordanians feel that they are worse off as a result of the arrival of the Syrian refugees. The same was earlier the case with the Iraqi refugees, as shown by Stephanie Nanes (Nanes 2007). As mentioned by Doris Carrion, this was hardly a fair interpretation of the realities, since the economic downturn rather was a result of a broader regional crisis (Carrion 2015). Most important, if justified or not, is probably the feeling that the refugees take the jobs from the Jordanians and especially in the low-paid areas not only outcompete Jordanians but also migrants from other countries like Egypt, Thailand, the Philippines, and India – the groups of Asian migrants in particular in connection with the female labour market. The Jordanian state claims to have significant financial burdens related to the refugees and that the situation regarding unemployment, even though the structural problems of high unemployment hardly can be traced back to the Syrian refugees, gets worsened (Hüser 2016: 84). The picture should not, however, be exaggerated, as demonstrated by Lionel Beehner, for instance in the sense that the Za'atari-camp in Jordan apparently has shown signs of being “an engine of economic growth” (Beehner 2015: 171).

It is not only a question of economy. The refugees in Jordan are to an increasing degree securitized, and it has added to this dimension that IS has become an active part of the ongoing crisis in both Iraq and Syria. It puts all actors in the regional confrontations under pressure and has made it even more important for Jordan to secure good relations with the major international powers. Jordan therefore practices an active migration diplomacy aiming at maintaining close security cooperation with the main international actors and also to attract funding from state donors, the World Bank etc. Seen from the side of the EU the interest is about supporting Jordan as much as it is possible in order to contain the crisis in the Levant. As mentioned by Luigi Achilli (2015) there has been fears in Bruxelles that the Jordanian government in the long run would be unwilling to uphold the high level of acceptance regarding the number of Syrian refugees.

It is a well-known fact that many refugees, despite this being illegal according to Jordanian law, informally work in Jordan – and this has resulted in protests and tension be-

tween the refugees and the Jordanian host communities (Achilli 2015). The presence of high numbers of refugees has become a part of the Jordanian migration diplomacy. The conference "Supporting Syria and the Region", held in London 4 February 2016 can be seen as an example of a successful effort in this respect – in the sense that Jordan mobilized strong international state actors and also the World Bank behind the Jordanian interests. At the conference they launched the Jordan Compact programme, according to which 200,000 job opportunities for Syrian refugees would be offered "while they remain in the country, contributing to the Jordanian economy without competing with Jordanians for jobs" (Jordan 2016).

The World Bank has furthermore been engaged in close cooperation with Jordan in preparing an "Environmental and Social Systems Assessment" aiming at improving economic opportunities for Jordanians and for Syrians working in Jordan and, as part of that, legitimizing the status of Syrians already working in Jordan (ESSA 2016). Preliminary assessments seem to indicate, that the programmes are not too successful (Reznick 2016). Firstly, it is very difficult in a short-term perspective to create high numbers of new jobs, and secondly: in a country with a high level of unemployment it is controversial, if many Syrians become employed as a result of the programme. This is the reason why the programme also is meant to provide jobs for Jordanians. Summing up it seems that attempting to move away from the official encampment policy might prove difficult. However, the important thing seems to be, that international donors like the World Bank, the EU and the US are working together to help Jordan dealing with its recent challenges.

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