

Jordan Invites US Targets for Syrian Retaliation

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Located at the crossroads of several regional crises, including the Palestinian – Israeli and Iraqi conflicts, Jordan has been in the eye of the Syrian storm for more than thirty months, and managed to navigate safely so far, but the reportedly imminent US strike is pressuring the country between the rock and the hard place of the antagonists of the war on Syria.

Heavily burdened by the pressure of its strategic allies and financiers in the US and the GCC Arab states, who have been leading an unwavering bloody campaign for a “regime change” in Damascus , Jordan could not but yield to their demands for logistical facilities in the country, consequently shooting its self-proclaimed neutrality in the legs.

Thus, grudgingly or otherwise, Jordan has in practice invited potential US targets for Syrian retaliation on its territory if and when the Syrian government perceives that those facilities are used in any US-led strike, now expected.

Anthony Cordesman, an analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, on August 29, interviewed by [abcnews](#) online, said that “Jordanian targets” could be targeted by Syria or by a Syrian allied “third party,” a possible development that could embroil the US in defense.

Should such a scenario develop, Jordan will evolve unwillingly into a war zone, to regret yielding to the prerogatives of its strategic alliance with the United States regardless of who emerges winner or loser in the war.

US Targets Invited

When the Eager Lion 2013 exercise ended in June this year, Jordan , inviting a US target for Syrian retaliation, asked the US military to leave behind some equipment, including some F-16s and a Patriot missile defense system.

Then, Jordan’s Prime Minister, Abdullah al-Nsour, indicated a second US target when he told reporters that some 900 U.S. military personnel were in the country, of whom 200 are experts training Jordanians to handle a chemical attack and 700 manning the Patriot system and reportedly 45 F-16 fighter jets.

On last August 14, Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that Jordan asked the United States to provide manned US surveillance aircraft to help keep an eye on its border with Syria; thus a third US target for Syrian retaliation was invited.

The USA embassy would be a fourth target should any planned US strike target Syrian non-military presidential or governmental headquarters.

However the Centcom’s Forward Command in Jordan , officially called Centcom Forward-Jordan (CFJ), remains the oldest and the most important US target for Syrian retaliation.

In mid-August, Gen. Martin Dempsey was in Amman to inaugurate the CFJ, which is manned by 273 US officers, with a closed section, which “houses CIA personnel who control the work of US agents going in and out of Syria,” and also a communications center, where “atop the underground facility is a large surface structure accommodating the American military and civilian offices dealing with Syrian issues from Jordan,” according to the Israeli [www.debka.com](#) on August 17, 2013, which confirmed a report two days earlier by The New York Times according to which “American correspondents were allowed to visit the site

under ground rules that its location not be disclosed.”

However, on October 18 last year the Egyptian Al-Ahram Weekly reported that the location chosen to host the CFJ was “a Jordanian military base built in an abandoned quarry north of the Jordanian capital Amman, just 35 miles from the Syrian border,” which extends 300 miles along Jordan’s northern flank, and some 120 miles from the Syrian capital Damascus.

Al-Ahram explained that “the origins of the previously secret US deployment in Jordan ” dated back to May the same year, “when the Pentagon sent American troops, including Special Forces units, to the country to participate in joint military exercises dubbed Operation Eager Lion. Some 100 military personnel stayed behind and were then joined by dozens more. The task force, according to the New York Times, is commanded by a ‘senior American officer’.”

Speaking to the media at the close of a two-day NATO defense ministers meeting at the time in Brussels, former US Defense Secretary Leon Panetta confirmed the existence of a “US task force that has been sent to Jordan this week after it was first reported in The New York Times,” Al-Ahram added. “The force would be tasked with ensuring the security of the chemical and biological weapons in Syria ,” Panetta was quoted as saying. Al-Ahram’s report added: “the outpost near Amman could play a broader role should American policy change” and Washington decide to launch an intervention in Syria .

Denial in Doubt

The denial of the initial reports about the existence of the CFJ as “not true” by a spokesman from the country’s armed forces, quoted by the state-run news agency Petra, sheds doubt on a statement by Jordan’s PM al-Nsour, quoted by the London -based pan-Arab daily Al-Quds Al-Arabi on Monday, that his country knows nothing about the timing, track and targets of a US military strike in Syria, which the US President is now seeking an “authorization” from the Congress to launch.

Al-Nsour’s “lack of knowledge” sounds odd in view of the long established multi-faceted strategic ties between Jordan and the United States, which makes it the obligation of Washington to inform Amman in advance of at least the “timing” of the imminent US strike and makes it an obligation of the Jordanian government to ask for it, at least to be on equal footing with the other Israeli strategic “partner” of the US; it is public knowledge now that the US is committed to inform Israel in advance of any imminent US strike on Syria.

In comparison, at least logistically, if not militarily, especially as far as the Syrian conflict is concerned, Jordan is much more important to the US than Israel to deserve a US warning in advance of any imminent strike.

Moreover, Jordan is in the immediate danger of being flooded with more Syrian refugees who for sure will be an integral part of the humanitarian crisis that the US strike will inevitably exacerbate in Syria .

Unless Jordan is denying its “knowledge” to avert being accused by Syria of complicity with the US, al-Nsour’s “lack of knowledge” sounds more odd not only because his country hosts the CFJ.

Hosting and participating in the meetings of the US - led so - called “Friends of Syria,” as well as the military meetings of eleven chiefs of staff of “The Friends of Syria Core Group,” in addition to hosting the annual Eager Lion exercises, let alone the bilateral strategic ties between Jordan and the US and the anti-Syria members of the GCC, have all combined to posture the country as being an active member of what the Syrian government rename as the “Enemies of Syria,” who are party in the conflict and not part of its solution.

Moment of Truth Approaching

The Eager Lion exercises, from the start, focused on training to intervene and secure the purported Syrian chemical weapons if and when developments dictate such an intervention, which the imminent US strike is now turning into a matter of time.

Last June 18 the AP reported that the Eager Lion Drills “are focused on ground operations, involving commandos from Jordan ... practicing offensive operations.” Although the Jordanian embassy spokeswoman in Washington D.C. , Dana Zureikat Daoud, told The Center for Public Integrity earlier this year that those drills are “not mission-oriented,” reported recent involvement of Jordanian commandos in Libya and elsewhere in the region gives credence to the reports on their possible involvement anew in Syria .

US Secretary of State, John Kerry, during his testimony at the Congress on Tuesday, while confirming that the administration of President Barak Obama “has zero intention of putting troops on the ground,” he in practice retained the option of sending US “boots” to Syria.

“I don’t want to take off the table an option that might or might not be available to the president of the United States” in a scenario where “Syria imploded” and stockpiles of chemical weapons needed to be secured from extremists, he said.

It is public knowledge now that what Obama said will be a strike “limited in time and scope” aims at “degrading” Syrian chemical “capabilities;” the purported Syrian chemical weapons which are now very well secured will be far less secured after the strike and will demand immediate intervention to secure them.

So the moment of truth is around the corner for an intervention either from or with the participation of Jordan , where training in preparation for this moment has been going on by leaps and bounds for the past two years, expectedly inviting reciprocal Syrian preparations for retaliation.

A Syrian possible military clash with Jordan or with Jordanian - hosted US - led intervention units was only a postponed development and will most likely be accelerated by the US planned strike, which is expected to embroil Jordan militarily in the Syrian conflict, willingly or unwillingly.

Counterbalancing with Syrians

To counterbalance with the Syrians, who so far seem flexible enough or under too much pressure to open a diplomatic or non - diplomatic dispute with their southern Arab neighbor, Jordan kept the diplomatic and security channels of communication open with Damascus and went on record to offset its “enemy” posture, but only verbally, to make Jordan a place where words and deeds collide.

As recently as August 29, Jordan’s King Abdullah II after a meeting with Pope Francis, according to an official Vatican statement, reaffirmed that dialogue is the “only option” to end the conflict in Syria .

More than twenty two months ago, in comments in the Oval Office alongside President Obama, King Abdullah II was the first Arab leader to urge Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step aside. “I believe, if I were in his shoes, I would step down,” he told BBC World News in an exclusive interview.

So far, Jordan declined to go public and on record in a clear-cut opposition to the imminent US strike; not excluding the military option, Information Minister Mohammad Momani said that “Jordan believes diplomatic efforts must be exhausted before Washington opts for military action,” but PM Al-Nsour said there will be “no strategic” benefit in insisting on striking Syria and he as well his Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh reiterated that the territory of the kingdom “will not be a launchpad for any military operation against Syria.”

Jordan’s noninterference in internal Syrian affairs is the officially declared policy, but the reported training in the country of Syrian opposition fighters, the recent visit to the country by the President of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), Ahmad al-Jarba, the latter’s visit to southern Syria across the Jordanian borders and the reports about opening a SNC representative office in Amman after al-Jarba’s meeting with Nasser Judeh, and the reported infiltration of arms and “Jihadists” from Jordan into Syria are all indications that compromise Jordan ’s officially declared policy of noninterference.

In April this year, Syrian President al-Assad said that Amman “is facilitating the passage of thousands of fighters into our country;” it was his first public warning to Jordan . His state TV told the Jordanians they were “playing with fire.” The Syrian newspaper Al-Thawra, also said in a front-page editorial that the Jordanian government “could not claim neutrality” anymore.

Al-Assad added that he had sent envoys to the kingdom during the preceding two months to remind Amman of the two countries’ shared goal of fighting the “terrorists.” “The fire does not stop at our border and everyone knows that Jordan is exposed to what Syria is exposed to.”

In November 2005, al-Qaeda mounted a series of devastating bomb attacks at three luxury hotels in the Jordanian capital, killing some 60 people. The attacks were said to be in retaliation for Jordan hosting training centers for the new Iraqi army and police, and for becoming a de facto logistical transit base in support of the US occupation of Iraq in 2003.

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