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Thwarting Jordan's *Bahhara* Trade With Syria Risks Social Unrest in Ramtha

ARMENAK TOKMAJYAN

The Syrian conflict has transformed the economy of Jordan's northern border region. The changes have been painfully felt in Ramtha, 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) away from the Syrian city of Daraa. Ramtha was a prime destination for Syrian goods imported formally or informally. Petty cross-border trade, especially informal trade, was not only the basis of the city's economy but also the foundation of an implicit contract between the authorities and locals. The state allowed such trade because it supplemented local revenues, enhancing social stability. This saved the state from investing resources that would have been needed to create jobs. By undermining this understanding, the Syrian conflict provoked growing local discontent.

Jordanian drivers licensed to enter Syria—known as *bahhara* (sailors)—have played a crucial role in bringing Syrian products into Jordan, especially Ramtha. For them and their networks, the border has been a vital resource for generations. The secret of their economy was simple. They would bring in goods from Syria and

Iraq where they were relatively cheaper and resell them at higher prices in Jordan. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the ensuing decline in cross-border trade, Syria became the main lifeline of border communities, [as well as of traders in general](#), providing a land route to important markets in Lebanon, Turkey, and beyond.

As the violence in Syria increased in 2012–2013, and as it became riskier for the *bahhara* to venture into the country, the cross-border activities dried up. Consequently, businesses closed in Ramtha and poverty and unemployment rose. This lasted until October 2018, a few months after Syrian government forces [had retaken southern Syria](#) from the rebels. Jordan reopened the main Nassib-Jaber border crossing, though with fewer border authorities and fewer vehicle tracks than before. However, as the *bahhara* rushed to resume work (through Nassib-Jaber, as the Daraa-Ramtha crossing remained closed), it soon became clear that the old bargain between drivers and border authorities was no longer valid.



Against this backdrop, in August 2019 protests broke out in Ramtha. The bahhara were at the forefront of these, but their grievances were supported by the city's inhabitants. They sought to restore the old border arrangement, at least partially. Drivers also repeatedly tried to link their cause with those of other protest movements in the country. However, the government refused to compromise. In March 2020, because of the coronavirus pandemic, Jordan closed its border with Syria to all but commercial trucks. This momentarily froze the problem of the bahhara, though tensions with the authorities continued to rise over the ensuing months. As the rate of vaccinations in Jordan increases and crossings are reopened, the border population's displeasure is likely to intensify once again.

THE WAY OF THE BAHHARA AND OFFICIAL ACQUIESCENCE

Until the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the Jordanian-Syrian border was Ramtha's main economic resource, as cheap goods were brought in from Syria to be resold in Jordan at a profit. Just before 2011, there were some 800 cars licensed to work on the Syria route.¹ Most car owners were from Ramtha, though some drivers came from other cities, including Amman and Irbid, and sold goods in Ramtha on their way back home.

Officially, the car owners were supposed to transport passengers and on their way back could bring goods for their private use. In practice, however, they were allowed to carry a certain amount of tax-free products.² For instance, while the rules specified that every driver could bring home one carton of cigarettes, in reality customs officers tolerated more than that. The trade was profitable and not risky. It could generate revenues of at least 30–40 dinars per trip (\$32–56).³ To put this in perspective, before the Syrian uprising, ten to twelve trips per month could earn income roughly equivalent to Jordan's minimum wage.

This petty trade became more lucrative when drivers managed to bring in more than the tolerated amounts by paying low or no customs duties. This practice—either by concealing goods or making surreptitious arrangements with the border authorities—created a major informal economy before 2011. While failing to declare goods kept prices competitive for consumers, it was costly for the state, which often accused the bahhara of smuggling. The bahhara, in turn, denied the accusation, saying they benefited their communities by keeping prices low. Moreover, they took pride in earning their income themselves, without relying on the public sector,⁴ traditionally the largest employer in Jordan. In 2016, the state employed 43 percent of the labor force between the ages of fifteen and sixty-four.

The main destination of the Jordanian bahhara was the rest area of Daraa al-Balad, located right after the Daraa customs crossing.⁵ There they could find products produced from all over Syria. If drivers did not sell the Syrian goods themselves, they transported those already purchased by traders in Jordan to their owners in Ramtha. Ramtha was first and foremost a major market for Syrian products, but it also had its own traders who served as links to markets deeper inside Jordan. On an ordinary day before 2011, a trip to Syria and back could take as little as three hours.⁶ Quick delivery meant fresh goods but also door-to-door service for those in Ramtha.

The scale of this economy is hard to pin down. Neither Jordan nor Syria published official statistics on the Daraa-Ramtha crossing. However, there is evidence suggesting that formal and informal trade was not negligible, at least at the district level in Ramtha. For instance, cigarettes were a major import into Jordan. They are easy to transport and financially rewarding. In 2010, border authorities tolerated each driver bringing in seven cartons, each containing 200 cigarettes.⁷ With an average of 250 drivers crossing per day, the daily amount would total 1,750 cartons containing 350,000 cigarettes. Thus, in 2010, the daily amount brought

from Syria by the bahhara would have likely covered more than the Ramtha district's daily needs of around 294,000 cigarettes.⁸ This is a conservative estimate since the bahhara usually brought in more than was tolerated. But it gives a sense of the importance of the market in the border economy.

Aside from cigarettes, the bahhara brought in other goods, including clothing, vegetables, fruits, dairy products, sweets, and more. Thanks to lower production costs in Syria, many essential commodities remained affordable. Predictably, the impact of the Syrian conflict was devastating to the bahhara, as well as the borderland in general. After the first antiregime protests in Daraa in March 2011, the traffic [gradually decreased](#), coming to an end in 2013.

To cope with the new situation, a local transport official explained that the bahhara were allowed to change their Syria licenses into local taxi licenses or to traverse other international routes (for example, between Jordan and Saudi Arabia).⁹ The problem was that these routes were already too congested, meaning fewer trips and lower profits for all. One driver who later drove a local taxi noted, "I used to make 100–200 dinars per day [as a *bahhar*]. When I started driving a taxi, the working hours were long and I made 10–15 dinars per day, which was only enough to get by."¹⁰

The economy the bahhara had generated was hit hard. According to the Ramtha Chamber of Commerce, in 2017, [some 4,500 out of 5,500 stores closed in the city](#), most of them having traded in Syrian goods. According to a driver who used to have a shop in Ramtha's market, after 2011, rents for a commercial space in a good location dropped from about 300 dinars (\$420) per month to about 70 dinars (\$95).¹¹ Poverty rose in Ramtha, even though it had already risen significantly from [8.6 percent of the inhabitants being poor in 2006 to 25 percent](#) in 2010. While there isn't a more recent census on poverty at the district level, observable

conditions, such as the number of street beggars, indicate that the situation has become dire over the last decade.¹²

A local observer summarized the deteriorating conditions in this way:

Most of the locals in Ramtha earned their income from the border. After the closure, people started using their savings. After the savings ended, they started asking for state employment—a demand they had never made previously. Then they demanded that the state invest in their areas. You started seeing people queuing for government aid.¹³

The Syrian regime's recapture of Daraa in 2018 and the partial reopening of the Nassib-Jaber border crossing in October of that year was a turning point. Many of the bahhara resumed work. Syrian goods flooded the Ramtha market and prices declined. For example, the availability of cheap Syrian olive oil brought down the price of a 16 kilogram tin of oil from around 110 dinars (\$150) to around 70 dinars (\$100).¹⁴ However, the Jordanian authorities would soon thwart the hopes of the bahhara.

BORDER RESTRICTIONS AND THE RETURN OF SOCIAL UNREST

In the months following the border reopening, it became clear that the decades-old trade system had changed. The U.S. decision to isolate Syria politically and economically had a noticeable impact on cross-border trade. In 2019–2020, Washington [discouraged](#) Jordan from reviving its economic relationship with its northern neighbor. Reportedly, Western diplomats [paid a visit](#) to major traders in Ramtha to dissuade them from dealing with Syria.



A crucial change also had taken place in Syria. After almost a decade of war, the country had become a major supplier of **weapons** and drugs. In July 2020, the Italian authorities **seized** fourteen tons of amphetamines worth \$1.1 billion. Later that year, the Egyptian authorities **apprehended** three shipments of Captagon pills. In both instances, Syria was believed to be the source. This pushed Jordan to toughen controls at the Syrian border, and, in February 2021, it **deployed** military reinforcements to secure the northern and eastern borders.

The smuggling of permissible goods, especially cigarettes, appeared to be another major problem leading to increased border restrictions, including with Syria. According to Jordanian estimates, the first seven months of cigarette smuggling in 2019 **cost the treasury around 130 million dinars** (\$180 million). Although that figure included all borders, the Syrian border seemed to be a prominent conduit. According to the bahhara who had entered Syria, at that time the authorities were lenient toward their informal trade, which included cigarettes.¹⁵

Against this backdrop, governmental restrictions became tighter at the Nassib-Jaber border crossing, east of Ramtha. Indeed, a few months after the border's reopening, Jordan's government took measures that made petty trade barely profitable. Because the border authorities were working at a lower capacity than before, with shorter working hours and stricter customs monitoring, they created bottlenecks. A journey that previously took only a few hours became days long.¹⁶ The Jordanian authorities also prevented some bahhara from crossing. A lawyer from Ramtha who sympathized with the bahhara **claimed** that 600 Jordanians, including many drivers, had been barred from traveling to Syria—without a court decision and only on the basis of alleged misconduct at the border.

The last straw was the government's decision on August 23, 2019, to limit to one carton the quantity of cigarettes that drivers, including the bahhara, could bring into Jordan. On the same day, unprecedented violent protests broke out in Ramtha, which lasted for three days. **Demonstrators set** tires on fire, blocked roads, vandalized public buildings, and clashed with the police, who arrested sixteen people and used **tear gas** to break up the protests.

The government **claimed** it was fighting cigarette, weapons, and drug smuggling and that its response did not target any specific group—by which it meant the bahhara. In essence, the authorities were implementing the law as written. But that meant renegeing on the unwritten understanding with the bahhara, which had allowed for petty formal and informal trade.

The government's decision also sparked a debate over the state's double standards. On television, bahhara spokespersons and public figures from Ramtha portrayed the bahhara as victims of the government's policies. While they were being penalized, politically well-connected personalities who were involved in **largescale cigarette smuggling** continued to profit. Indeed, the bahhara **released a statement** condemning the government for “undermining [their] livelihood,” when its efforts should have been directed against major smugglers who were importing tons of tobacco and drugs from Syria. The statement went so far as to name one such person and his backer within Jordan's ruling elite.

Initially, the bahhara took an escalatory approach. In their **statement**, they threatened to intensify protests and unveil the pervasiveness of corruption in Jordan unless the government reversed its policy decision. The bahhara representative **said on television**, “We don't want [government] salaries . . . like others do. We are

rightful claimants. Next time, we will take our right with our hands. The king is a red line. . . . The people of Ramtha are rightful claimants.”

Their cause, however, did not gain traction nationwide, despite the matter of major smugglers being a national concern.¹⁷ When the coronavirus pandemic hit the kingdom in March 2020, the border with Syria was closed and the demands of the bahhara were largely put on hold. During the time between the August 2019 protests and the pandemic’s onset, there were negotiations between bahhara representatives and the authorities, but the state refused to backtrack.

The government’s uncompromising approach, which persists to this day, might be justified by the fact that Jordanian officials has other policy priorities, such as addressing U.S. pressure not to normalize relations with President Bashar al-Assad’s regime or neutralizing security threats from Syria. The Jordanian government also might not regard the bahhara protests as a serious threat to the country’s political stability. That may well be true, since the bahhara are not seeking radical change but rather pursuing localized aims.

Nonetheless, the state’s attitude remains risky. The bahhara protests will add to other local grievances faced by the central authorities in an explosive economic context caused by the pandemic. The kingdom’s GDP [shrank by 3.6 percent](#) in the second quarter of 2020—the largest contraction in two decades—while during the pandemic, unemployment rose from [19 percent](#) in the fourth quarter of 2019 to [24.7 percent](#) in the fourth quarter of 2020. In numerical terms, this means that in 2020, there were about [404,000 unemployed Jordanians](#). In 2019, youth unemployment was a staggering [37 percent](#). A [poll conducted](#) that same year showed that 97 percent of people didn’t earn enough to allow for savings, while 75 percent described

the economic situation as “bad” or “very bad” and 66 percent thought that Jordan was heading in the wrong direction.

In this environment, there is always a possibility that a spark might trigger protests by deprived groups. A good example of this occurred in March 2021 when a medical error caused the death of nine patients infected with the coronavirus in a hospital in Salt, causing [widespread protests in several cities](#). The bahhara took advantage of this moment to again voice their grievances. Defying a nighttime curfew, they organized a small [demonstration](#) at Ramtha’s central roundabout.

Another example is the [protests](#) of November 23, 2020, by taxi drivers in Zarqa who drive between Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The bahhara, on their official Facebook page, [expressed solidarity](#) with their Zarqa colleagues and organized actions in parallel with theirs.¹⁸ Although there is no clear sign of coordination between the two groups, separate protest movements can certainly feed off of each other before expanding.

A more noteworthy example is the schoolteachers’ protests in August 2020, a year after the bahhara protests in Ramtha. Jordanian teachers have a [long history](#) of social protest action, including for demanding higher salaries. This time the cause was the arrest of senior elected members of the Teachers’ Syndicate on [questionable charges](#). Thousands of protestors took to the streets across Jordan and were [severely](#) repressed. During the demonstrations, security forces were on high alert in Ramtha. They quashed the efforts of a Teachers’ Syndicate member from the city to organize a protest there, seemingly with the hope of exploiting Ramtha’s anger over the bahhara. The authorities were alarmed by the possibility that these two unrelated causes could be linked in a larger context of dissatisfaction with the government.¹⁹



A way forward in restoring social stability in Ramtha requires recognition that what's at stake is not merely the livelihood of the bahhara but also that of the entire Ramtha population. By suddenly renegeing on the informal deal it had with the bahhara, and more generally with Ramtha itself, the Jordanian government turned the border from an advantage into a liability for the population, given that the region had not received investment due to its reliance on the border economy.

THE PATH FORWARD: COMPROMISE OR RISK UNREST

As the COVID-19 vaccination rate increases in Jordan, the government will have to revise its policies on the Syrian-Jordanian border. When more border crossings reopen, the issue of the bahhara, and by extension of Ramtha, will come back to the forefront. Much will depend on how the state decides to view the border. Should it be an instrument that can be used to quell social instability among border populations, or should it be another lever of state authority, where rules are imposed regardless of how they might affect the local population?

The Jordanian government will have to weigh its options carefully. The post-pandemic period in the country, as in the wider Middle East, will almost certainly produce new waves of social discontent. States will be forced to come to grips with the economic losses imposed on their societies.

For the time being, Jordan's authorities are unable to offer most people in Ramtha a viable economic alternative—such as through larger investments, development

projects, or public sector employment. The interim solution lies in reviving at least some elements of the old bargain, which, in turn, will generate economic activity and restore a measure of social peace in the district.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Armenak Tokmajyan is a nonresident scholar at the Malcolm H. Kerr Middle East Center in Beirut, where his research focuses on borders and conflict, Syrian refugees, and local intermediaries in Syria.

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- 1 Local research assistant interview (on behalf of the author) with an official from Jordan's Land Transportation Regulatory Commission, Irbid branch, February 17, 2021.
- 2 Based on accounts from three drivers from Ramtha, all of whom preferred to remain anonymous: author interview with a driver in his late thirties, Ramtha (via Zoom), November 16, 2020; author interview with a driver in his early forties who holds a bachelor of science degree from the University of Irbid, Ramtha (via Zoom), November 19, 2020; and author interview with a veteran driver who has worked since the early 1990s, Ramtha (via Zoom), December 8, 2020.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Author interview with a former schoolteacher who is a driver and who ran a supermarket in Ramtha (via Zoom), December 17, 2020.
- 5 Author interview with a Syrian trader with firsthand experience, Nassib, Syria (via Zoom), February 16, 2021; all five Jordanian drivers who were interviewed for this research confirmed that before 2011, the reset area of Daraa al-Balad was the main destination for the bahhara.
- 6 One driver said, "I used to study at the university and work. It was very easy; the whole trip [to Syria and back] took three hours." Author interview with a driver in his early forties who holds a bachelor of science degree, Ramtha (via Zoom), November 19, 2020.
- 7 Seven cartons was not a set-in-stone cap. The amount of cigarettes that bahhara could bring with the authorities turning a blind eye changed. In later 2010, it was common knowledge among the bahhara (and Ramtha in general) that each driver could bring seven cartons without trouble. Author interview with a researcher from Ramtha based in Irbid (via Skype), April 10, 2020.
- 8 The [2011 census in Jordan](#) estimated the population of Ramtha District to be 130,000. Of this number, 85,000 were adults (44,000 males and 41,000 females). The [national average for smokers](#) in Jordan in 2012 was 43.4 percent for males and 8.5 percent for females. In applying those figures to the population of Ramtha and then multiplying this number by thirteen (the average number of cigarettes smoked per day in Jordan [according](#) to the World Bank), the daily consumption of cigarettes for the district is estimated to be around 294,000.
- 9 Local research assistant interview (on behalf of the author) with an official from Jordan's Land Transportation Regulatory Commission, Irbid branch, February 17, 2021.
- 10 Author interview with a driver in his late thirties, Ramtha (via Zoom), November 16, 2020.
- 11 Author interview with a former schoolteacher who is a driver and who ran a supermarket in Ramtha (via Zoom), December 17, 2020.
- 12 Author interview with a researcher from Ramtha who specializes in poverty issues (via Zoom), January 16, 2021. Author interview with a researcher from Ramtha based in Irbid (via Zoom), December 16, 2020.
- 13 Author interview with a researcher from Ramtha based in Irbid (via Skype), April 10, 2020.
- 14 Author interview with Syrian refugee, northern Jordan, March 10, 2020; and author interview with a food products trader from Ramtha (via Zoom), February 17, 2021.
- 15 Author interview with a driver in his late thirties, Ramtha (via Zoom), November 16, 2020. Author interview with a former schoolteacher who is a driver and who ran a supermarket in Ramtha (via Zoom), December 17, 2020.
- 16 According to one driver with firsthand experience, customs officers "spent hours on each car thereby creating long waiting lines. Sometimes one trip [to Syria and back] took four days." Author interview with a driver in his late thirties, Ramtha (via Zoom), November 16, 2020.
- 17 Author interview with a Jordanian researcher and longtime observer of Jordanian politics based in the United States (via Zoom), January 26, 2020; and author interview with a Jordanian researcher and activist based in Amman (via Skype), January 26, 2020.
- 18 Author interview with a researcher from Ramtha based in Irbid (via Zoom), December 16, 2020.
- 19 Ibid.

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