



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Covering 34,495 square miles (89,342 square kilometers), Jordan is about the size of Indiana. The Jordan River flows through the Great Rift Valley (Jordan Valley), which forms a flood plain between the Jordan River and the West Bank. Jordanian territory is also referred to as the East Bank because it lies east of the Jordan River. Jordan shares the Dead Sea with the West Bank and Israel. At 1,312 feet (400 meters) below sea level, the Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth. Jordan's only outlet to the sea is at al-Aqabah. Central highlands run north to south. Deserts in the east cover about two-thirds of the country. Olive, fig, pomegranate, and citrus trees grow in areas of adequate rainfall.

Winter (November–April) is cold and wet. Some snow falls in the mountains. The average wintertime temperature in Amman, the capital, is 45°F (7°C). Spring and summer (May–October) are dry and pleasant in the west. In the desert, in the Jordan Valley, and near al-Aqabah, temperatures are much higher. Jordan's water sources are diminishing, causing water shortages and rationing year-round. Aquifers are increasingly relied on for general and agricultural use. Some heavily used aquifers suffer from increased salinity. In some areas, the country's water supply is shared with Israel and Syria.

### History

The region of present-day Jordan has witnessed many civilizations throughout its history. The Amorites, Edomites,

Moabites, and Ammonites were followed later by the Hittites, Egyptians, Israelites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Muslim Arabs defeated the Byzantines in the seventh century, and the area became part of the Umayyad Caliphate, with Damascus (Syria) as its capital. Christian crusaders ruled at times, but the area basically has been Muslim since the Arab invasion.

The Ottoman Turks ruled from 1516 until the Great Arab Revolt (1916). The Arabs were aided by the British, who then (1923) created the Emirate of Transjordan as a semiautonomous region ruled by the Hashemite prince Abdullah. Over the years, Britain gradually turned power over to local Arab officials, and in 1946, Transjordan became independent. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War resulted in a mass exodus of Palestinians from their homes. Many settled in the areas of the West Bank and Jordan. In 1946, the country adopted its current name and in 1950 included the territory now known as the West Bank.

King Abdullah was assassinated in 1951. His son, Talal, became king but was in poor health and abdicated the throne in favor of his eldest son, 17-year-old Prince Hussein. In the 1967 War, Jordan lost control of the West Bank to Israel, and many Palestinian refugees fled to Jordan. This and other factors led to internal unrest and violence between the government and Palestinian resistance members (*fedayeen*) in Jordan. They were expelled in the years following a 1970 assassination attempt against Hussein.

Even after 1967, Jordan claimed the West Bank and provided for Palestinian representatives in the Jordanian parliament. In 1988, Hussein dropped claims to the West Bank, eased tensions with the Palestinian Liberation

Organization (PLO), and dissolved parliament. A new all-Jordanian parliament was elected in 1989. Two years later, Hussein restored multiparty democracy. This paved the way for full multiparty elections in 1993 (the first since 1956), when a strong turnout brought centrist-minded leaders to parliament. Their support for King Hussein eventually allowed Jordan and Israel to sign a historic peace treaty in October 1994. Not all Jordanians welcomed the treaty, and some were critical of King Hussein's positive relations with then Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin. Years later, disillusionment is high among Jordanians, who have yet to see tangible gains from the 1994 treaty.

In February 1999, just before he died of cancer, King Hussein appointed his eldest son, Abdullah, age 37, as heir. King Abdullah has worked to revitalize and modernize the economy; Jordan joined the World Trade Organization in 2000. However, regional instability, such as conflict in neighboring Iraq, has hindered economic progress. Abdullah's close affiliation with the United States and other Western nations has been condemned by some Jordanians. Still, his supporters retain firm control of parliament. Amid allegations of fraud by the opposition Islamic Action Front (IAF), pro-government politicians won key victories in November 2007 elections to increase their number of seats. In 2009, King Abdullah appointed a new prime minister (Samir al-Rifai) to press the issue of economic reform.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Jordan's population of 6.4 million is growing by 2.2 percent annually. More than 1.2 million people live in Amman. About 20 percent of Jordanians live in rural areas. Except for small minorities of Circassians (1 percent) and Armenians (1 percent), all Jordanians are Arabs. While about one-fourth are of Bedouin descent, less than 5 percent are currently nomadic. Nomadic Bedouins move about (mostly in the south and east) to take advantage of seasonal changes and to graze their livestock. Population figures do not include more than 750,000 Iraqis exiled in Jordan by the Iraq War.

Palestinians comprise about half of the Arab population. They are either refugees from the West Bank (having crossed into Jordan after the 1948 and 1967 wars) or were born in Jordan. A large number still live in refugee camps even though they are Jordanian citizens. Palestinian and Jordanian Arabs enjoy the mutual respect that comes from their common heritage, but Palestinians are keenly aware of their descent. Despite holding Jordanian citizenship, some Palestinians resent being called Jordanians. Most support establishing a Palestinian homeland.

### Language

Arabic is the official language. The Jordanian dialect of Arabic (*al-lahjah al-'Urduniyyah*) is considered by locals to be the closest dialect to Modern Standard Arabic. Slight dialectal variations exist in different areas, between city-dwellers and nomads, for example. Modern Standard Arabic is used in schools and the media. The Arabic alphabet

consists of 28 letters and is written from right to left. English is widely understood among the upper and middle classes and is taught as a second language in schools. Circassians speak Circassian and Arabic.

### Religion

About 92 percent of Jordan's people are Sunni Muslims. Islamic values and laws are an integral part of society. Christians (Greek Orthodox, Catholics, Protestants, and others) represent about 6 percent of the population. Each religious community has the right to regulate personal matters such as marriage, divorce, and inheritance according to its religious laws. Muslims believe the *Qur'an* contains the word of *Allah* (God) as revealed to the prophet Muhammad. They demonstrate their faith and devotion through the Five Pillars of Islam: professing there is no God but *Allah*, and Muhammad is his prophet; facing Makkah, Saudi Arabia, while praying five times daily; making at least one pilgrimage to Makkah; donating money to the poor; and fasting from sunup to sundown each day during the holy month of *Ramadan*.

### General Attitudes

Jordanians respect those who are good-natured, friendly, and hospitable. They are proud of their rich cultural heritage and their country's accomplishments. Jordanians place great importance on the family and traditions. At the same time, many embrace Western influences. For example, young people enjoy wearing European fashions and owning the latest high-tech products, especially cellular phones.

Jordanians admire an educated, honest, and good-natured person more than a wealthy, uneducated one. Still, the wealthy are powerful and therefore command respect. Aggression is not admired, but bravery and patience are. Because of the value placed on learning, parents will sacrifice much to provide a proper education for their children. People look up to those who are religiously devout. Making a pilgrimage to Makkah becomes increasingly important as one ages.

Many Jordanians are suspicious of the peace treaty with Israel. Professional unions ban their members from contact with the neighboring country. Ordinary citizens fear domination by Israel's larger and more developed economy; some express concern about the possible influences of secular Israeli attitudes. Many oppose any peace with Israel until a Palestinian homeland is established, and others are not willing to lay aside the history of animosity between the two peoples.

### Personal Appearance

Most men wear Western clothing, often accompanied by the traditional white- and red-checkered headdress. Women in urban areas also wear Western clothing. Younger women often prefer casual attire such as jeans. Many add a brightly colored headscarf. More conservative women wear traditional floor-length dresses and headscarves. On special occasions, women wear embroidered dresses. In Western or traditional styles, clothing is always modest and never revealing. Adults and teenagers wear shorts only for sports. Jewelry (mostly gold) is an important part of a woman's dowry and a symbol

of her wealth and financial security.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

Jordanians warmly greet each other with a handshake. Close friends of the same gender often kiss on both cheeks. Common verbal greetings include *Al-salām ‘alaykum* (Peace be upon you), *Ahlan wa sahlan* (roughly “You are welcome in this place”), *Sabah al-khayr* (Good morning), *Masa’ al-khayr* (Good evening), and the more casual *Marhaba* (Hello). After initial greetings, each person inquires about the other's welfare. When one joins or leaves a small gathering, it is customary to shake hands with each person.

Gender and age peers address one another by first name after an initial introduction. Other people are referred to by various titles, depending on their relationship to the speaker. For instance, adults are often respectfully addressed as the mother (*um*) or father (*abu*) of their eldest son. So, the parents of a boy named Ali would be *Um Ali* and *Abu Ali* to family friends and relatives. It is a sign of great respect to use *al-haj* (for men) or *al-hajjah* (for women) as nicknames for those who have completed a pilgrimage to Makkah. Acquaintances may be addressed as *akhi* (my brother) or *ukhti* (my sister) with the last name. A young person may address an older person as *ammo* (paternal uncle) or *khalto* (maternal aunt) as a sign of respect, even if they are not related.

### Gestures

Jordanians use several hand gestures to communicate. When speaking of money, one rubs the thumb and index finger together. One might emphasize a point by punching a fist in the air or shaking the index finger at the person being spoken to. “No” can be expressed by tilting the head quickly upward and making a “tsk” sound. To show respect, one touches the fingers briefly to the forehead and bows the head slightly forward. Rubbing the back of one's hand on the forehead shows great disrespect. Jordanians generally use the right hand or both hands to pass items or eat. It is impolite to point the sole of one's foot at or to turn one's back to another person. Good posture is important, especially at social events.

### Visiting

Visiting plays a fundamental role in Jordanian society, and hospitality is considered a sacred duty. Occasions for visits include births and graduations. Friends and family are expected to visit those who are sick. In urban areas, close friends and relatives may visit without prior notice, but advance arrangements are expected otherwise. Men and women traditionally socialize in separate rooms. Westernized couples or close relatives might socialize in mixed company. No matter how short the visit, hosts nearly always offer their guests tea, coffee, cola drinks, or fruit drinks. During a longer visit, coffee often is served shortly before guests are expected to leave; one does not leave before this coffee is served. Guests not originally invited for a meal may be invited to stay if their visit extends into a mealtime. It is polite to decline initially—even as many as three times—before accepting the

offer.

Guests might take gifts to hosts on special occasions or present hosts with sweets, flowers, or fruit if visiting after a long absence. The recipient does not immediately accept the gift, out of modesty. If the gift is wrapped, the recipient does not open it in the giver's presence.

### Eating

Lunch is usually the main meal of the day and is eaten between 2 and 4 p.m., when children come home from school. Breakfast and dinner tend to be small. After washing hands, the family gathers together for a meal either around a table (in many urban homes) or on the floor. No one eats until all are seated and a blessing is pronounced: *Bism Allah al-rahman al-rahīm* (In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate). Some use the shorter *Bismillah* (In the name of God). Many families eat meals from a common platter. Utensils and separate plates are used for some foods. If guests are present, they are served first and are given large portions of the meal, and a wider than usual assortment of food is prepared. At the end of a meal, diners say *Al-hamdu lillah* (Thanks to God).

Coffee, served in small cups, is important at all meals. Turkish coffee is most common; one drinks it slowly and does not stir it, so as to keep the thick grains at the bottom of the cup. *Qahwah Saadah*, a bitter Bedouin coffee, is served on special occasions and drunk quickly. To indicate one is finished, one shakes the cup back and forth.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

The extended family is unquestionably Jordanian society's most important unit. Members often live in the same city or housing area. Cousins are usually as close as brothers or sisters are in the West. Jordanians traditionally desire large families, but family sizes are declining due to economic pressures. Arabs love children and lavish time and attention on them. Likewise, the elderly are greatly respected; adult children typically prefer to remain close to the home to care for aging parents. It is considered an honor and duty to be able to help another member of the family. Parents often help or support their children even after marriage. Children are expected to obey family rules strictly and to not tarnish the family's reputation. Families are fiercely protective of their honor.

Gender roles follow mostly traditional lines. However, while the mother still cares for the children and household, the percentage of women in the workforce is growing. The father is head of the family and expects to provide for it financially. Sons, especially the oldest, hold an elevated position in family hierarchy; daughters often play a minor role and are expected to serve their brothers and parents.

### Housing

A typical rural home is built of stone and concrete, has a flat roof, and is painted a neutral color, such as gray, white, or beige. Many urban residents now live in apartment buildings.

In either case, the home has separate areas for men and women to socialize. Male guests are invited into a special hosting room, which often has the most expensive furniture and decorations. Women entertain female guests in a separate sitting room. Family members may watch television together in this room when guests are not present. People often relax on a traditional piece of furniture called a *farsha*, or *junbeeya*. This is a long, flat, rectangular couch that doubles as a bed. Many urban families have abandoned this traditional furniture for Western couches, chairs, and tables. Nearly all homes in Jordan have electricity, and most have running water. Most houses have a water tank on the roof. This tank fills up about once a week when the local municipal office turns on the rationed public water supply. If a family uses up their tank, they are out of water until the supply is turned on again.

### Dating and Marriage

Dating in the Western sense does not occur. Young urban people often meet at universities, offices, clubs, or coffee shops. The custom of arranged marriages still exists in towns and rural areas. One-on-one dating is reserved for after the engagement party or after the marriage contract has been signed. The groom must give a bridal token to the bride's family. Because of economic reasons, the average marriage age for men has risen to the midthirties. Women tend to marry in their late twenties or early thirties.

At the wedding festivities, men and women celebrate separately. The parties are usually at the respective parents' homes, although wealthier families might celebrate at a hotel or large rented hall. The groom and the men in his wedding party perform a traditional line dance in their finest suits. At the bride's party, she dances as her guests sing and dance around her. To mark end of the celebration, the bride is seated on a chair on top of a platform. The female members of both families adorn her with gold jewelery. The women put on their veils and conservative clothing before the groom and the bride's father and brothers enter to present her with gold. Then the new couple dance together at a party with all of their guests. Later, the bride puts on a white cape and leaves with her husband. Family members follow them in their cars until they reach the hotel where they will stay for the night.

### Life Cycle

A family celebrates the arrival of a newborn by hosting a *sebu'a'a*, a seven-day open house during which neighbors and relatives bring small gifts. A sheep may be slaughtered and served to visitors. The mother's female family members and friends throw a separate party to congratulate her.

Funerals are formal affairs. According to Islamic custom, the body must be buried as quickly as possible, although no burials take place at night. The body is washed by family members of the same sex as the deceased. It is then covered by a *kaffan* (white cloth) and brought to the mosque during prayer time. Those gathered say the regular prayers in addition to one for the deceased. Male family members then carry the body to the burial ground, where a final prayer is offered. For the next three days, relatives and friends visit the family of the deceased to offer their condolences.

### Diet

Jordan's national dish is *mansaf* (a large tray of rice covered with chunks of stewed lamb, including the head) with *jameed* (yogurt sauce). Other popular dishes include *mahshi* (stuffed vegetables), *musakhan* (chicken with onions, olive oil, pine seeds, and seasonings), and *meshwi* (shish kebab). Jordanians often eat *hummus* (a dip made of chickpeas) with fava beans and *falafel* (fried balls of crushed chickpeas mixed with oil and spices). Bread is dipped into olive oil and *zatar* (a mixture of oregano and other spices). Lamb and chicken are the most common meats. Islamic law prohibits the consumption of pork and alcohol, and most Muslims avoid these foods. Meals often include locally grown vegetables (such as onions, eggplant, tomatoes, and cabbage) and seasonal fruits (including grapes, apples, oranges, apricots, watermelon, and figs).

### Recreation

*Football* (soccer) is the most popular sport in Jordan, followed by volleyball, basketball, and martial arts. Due to social restrictions, women do not participate in sports in public as much as men do; however, they do play some sports in school and clubs. Watching television and movies or visiting others is a common leisure activity. An extended family might gather at a park for an evening picnic and barbecue. Cultural activities, including theater, lectures, concerts, and festivals, provide recreation in urban areas. Women like being active in social activities, business and volunteer work, and family responsibilities.

### The Arts

A rich blend of Arab and Islamic imagery is reflected in Jordanian crafts, which include handmade glass, earthenware, basketwork, carpets, and embroidery. Partly because Islam traditionally prohibits the depiction of living things, art forms such as architecture and complex traditional calligraphy or geometric designs are common. Both photographs and traditional artwork are common adornments in Jordanian homes today, however.

Popular culture is expressed in songs, poetry, ballads, and storytelling. Villagers have special songs for births, weddings, funerals, and harvests. Several types of *debkha* (dances accompanied by a rhythmic stomping of feet) are performed on festive occasions. Favorite instruments include the *oud* (a traditional lute), *gasabah* (cane flute), and *durbakkah* (earthenware drum). Both Arabic and Western music are popular.

### Holidays

National holidays include New Year's Day, Labor Day (1 May), Independence Day (25 May), Arab Revolt and Army Day (10 June), King Hussein's Accession to the Throne (11 Aug.), and King Hussein's Birthday (14 Nov.). Christians celebrate their own festivals and holidays, such as Christmas and Easter, but these are not national holidays. Islamic religious holy days follow the lunar calendar. *Eid al-Fitr* is a three-day feast at the end of *Ramadan*. During *Ramadan*, after fasting during the day, Muslims gather in the evenings to eat and visit with friends and relatives. The Feast of Sacrifice,

which honors Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, is known as *Eid al-Adha*. Jordan also marks the birth of the prophet Muhammad with *Mawlid al-Nebi*.

## SOCIETY

### Government

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a constitutional monarchy, but King Abdullah has wide-ranging powers. He appoints the prime minister (currently Samir Zaid al-Rifai) as head of government; he can also dismiss the National Assembly or overturn its laws. The National Assembly consists of a 55-seat Senate and a 110-seat House of Deputies. Senators are appointed by the king, and deputies are elected by the people. Of the 110 seats in the House of Deputies, 9 are reserved for Bedouins, 9 for Christians, 6 for women, and 3 for Jordanians of Chechen or Circassian descent. The voting age is 18.

### Economy

Jordan's few natural resources include phosphate, potash, and limestone. The most important exports are fruits and vegetables, phosphates, and fertilizers. Agriculture and industry make up a small part of the economy, while services constitute more than three-quarters. The country relies heavily on tourism, foreign aid, and remittances from Jordanians working in foreign countries. Jordan's economy has been hindered by turmoil in oil-rich Iraq, its largest trading partner and main source of energy. When oil prices or supplies fluctuate, Jordan's economy suffers. Slow economic growth has made it difficult for Jordan to find relief from its heavy debt burden; debt payments consume one-fourth of the national budget. Unemployment and underemployment remain chronically high. The currency is the Jordanian *dinar* (JOD).

### Transportation and Communications

Roads are in good condition and connect all major cities. Modern vehicles are common in cities and rural areas. Camels may also be used for travel in the desert. Taxis are available in cities. Service taxis, which travel fixed routes and carry a small number of passengers, are less expensive and widely used. Buses are also common. Cars are too expensive for the average person. Communications systems, including mobile phone networks, are modern. Internet access, while relatively expensive, is growing. Jordan's power grid is connected to the grids of Egypt and Syria. Radio and television stations are owned by the government. The press is subject to government censorship.

### Education

Jordan has one of the most highly educated labor forces among Arab states. The literacy rate among youth is 99 percent. Public education is free and compulsory for 10 years and is available to qualified students through grade 12. Most school-age children are enrolled. The public school week starts on Saturday and ends on Thursday. One must pass the difficult *Tawjihi* exam to obtain access to higher education

and financial aid. Jordan has 8 public and 12 private universities in addition to many smaller institutes of higher education.

### Health

Good medical care is available in Jordan. Higher life expectancy rates and lower infant mortality rates represent significant progress over the past generation. Nearly all Jordanians have access to government-sponsored immunization programs, as well as health clinics where care is provided for a small fee. Smoking-related diseases are among Jordan's most common health problems.

## AT A GLANCE

### Contact Information

Embassy of Jordan, 3504 International Drive NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 966-2664; web site [www.jordanembassyus.org](http://www.jordanembassyus.org). Jordan Tourism Board, 6867 Elm Street, Suite 102, McLean, VA 22101; phone (877) 733-5673; web site [www.visitjordan.com](http://www.visitjordan.com).

### POPULATION & AREA

Population	6,407,085 (rank=102)
Area, sq. mi.	34,495 (rank=111)
Area, sq. km.	89,342

### DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	82 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	76 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$5,100
Adult literacy rate	95% (male); 85% (female)
Infant mortality rate	17 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	79 (male); 81 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).