

POST-ASSAD SYRIA AND JORDAN'S EVOLVING SECURITY LANDSCAPE

SÍRIA PÓS-ASSAD E CENÁRIO DE SEGURANÇA EM CONSTANTE EVOLUÇÃO NA JORDÂNIA

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Abstract

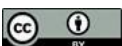
This article examines Jordan's evolving security landscape in the aftermath of the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. It investigates how the rapid political transition, territorial reconfigurations, and the rise of non-state armed actors have reshaped regional security dynamics with direct implications for Jordan. The study applies a qualitative research design grounded in process tracing to uncover causal pathways linking developments inside Syria to shifts in Jordan's national security calculus. Drawing on secondary data, policy reports, field analyses, and open-source intelligence, the article identifies four critical mechanisms of spillover: cross-border militancy, refugee pressures, border economy disruptions, and shifts in regional power alignments. The analysis shows that Jordan's security challenges are not merely episodic outcomes of Syria's conflict but are structurally embedded in the geopolitical interdependence of the Levant. The findings contribute to conflict studies by offering a mechanism-based explanation of how regime collapse triggers security externalities in neighboring states. The article concludes that Jordan requires a multidimensional strategy combining border securitization, diplomatic hedging, and economic resilience to navigate the uncertainties of Syria's transition phase.

Keywords: Jordan. Syria. Post-Assad. Regional Security. Spillover Effects. Process Tracing.

Resumo

Este artigo examina a evolução do cenário de segurança da Jordânia após o colapso do regime de Assad na Síria. Investiga como a rápida transição política, as reconfigurações territoriais e a ascensão de atores armados não estatais remodelaram a dinâmica de segurança regional, com implicações diretas para a Jordânia. O estudo aplica uma metodologia de pesquisa qualitativa baseada no rastreamento de processos para desvendar as vias causais que ligam os acontecimentos na Síria às mudanças no cálculo de segurança nacional da Jordânia. Com base em dados secundários, relatórios de políticas públicas, análises de campo e inteligência de código aberto, o artigo identifica quatro mecanismos críticos de transbordamento: militância transfronteiriça, pressão de refugiados, perturbações na economia fronteiriça e mudanças nos alinhamentos de poder regionais. A análise demonstra que os desafios de segurança da Jordânia não são meramente consequências episódicas do conflito sírio, mas estão estruturalmente enraizados na interdependência geopolítica do Levante. As conclusões contribuem para os estudos de conflito, oferecendo uma explicação baseada em mecanismos sobre como o colapso de regimes desencadeia externalidades de segurança em estados vizinhos. O artigo conclui que a Jordânia necessita de uma estratégia multidimensional que combine a securitização das fronteiras, medidas diplomáticas de proteção e resiliência econômica para lidar com as incertezas da fase de transição na Síria.

Palavras-chave: Jordânia. Síria. Pós-Assad. Segurança Regional. Efeitos Transbordantes. Rastreamento de Processos.



1 INTRODUCTION

The collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 and the accelerated fragmentation of Syrian territory have redefined the security architecture of the Levant. For Jordan—a state historically shaped by the regional upheavals surrounding it—the transition in Syria represents one of the most consequential geopolitical shifts since the Arab uprisings of 2011. The Syrian conflict, already one of the most destructive in modern Middle Eastern history, generated unprecedented cross-border effects that deeply influenced Jordan's political, military, economic, and societal stability. As Syria enters a fluid post-Assad phase marked by competing armed groups, shifting alliances, and uncertain state reconstruction, Jordan faces a transformed security environment whose long-term implications remain insufficiently understood in the academic literature.

Jordan and Syria are bound by geography, shared borders, economic interdependence, cultural ties, and overlapping security interests. Historically, Jordan has adopted a cautious but pragmatic approach to Syrian politics, balancing between regime survival strategies, regional alliances, and its own domestic priorities. However, the sudden collapse of the Assad regime disrupted the previous equilibrium, generating new uncertainties for Jordan's national security posture. The proliferation of non-state armed actors, including Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), residual pro-regime militias, tribal forces, and foreign-backed units, has created a volatile and unpredictable landscape along Jordan's northern border. Moreover, the weakened Syrian state apparatus raises concerns regarding governance vacuums, potential border disruptions, emerging illicit economies, and new patterns of forced displacement.

Although Jordan remained resilient throughout the earlier phases of the Syrian civil war, the transition from a centralized authoritarian regime to a fragmented post-regime order introduces qualitatively different challenges. Unlike the period between 2011 and 2023, when the Assad government retained significant territorial control supported by Russia and Iran, the post-Assad environment is characterized by competing power centers with divergent agendas and limited capacity to enforce border regulations. Such a transformation heightens uncertainty and imposes new costs on Jordan's security, diplomacy, and economic planning processes.

Despite extensive scholarship on the Syrian civil war, existing academic contributions tend to focus either on the internal dynamics of the conflict or on the

sociopolitical consequences for refugees and humanitarian crises. Studies rarely examine the externalized security effects of regime collapse on neighboring states in a systematic, mechanism-based manner. Jordan remains understudied in the context of post-regime transitions in Syria. Most discussions emphasize refugee influxes, counterterrorism coordination, or limited cross-border economic impacts—without theorizing the broader regional security implications or identifying causal mechanisms linking Syrian instability to Jordanian national security. This constitutes a critical research gap that this article seeks to fill.

Accordingly, this study poses the central research question: **How has the collapse of the Assad regime reshaped Jordan’s security landscape, and through which causal mechanisms do developments inside Syria produce spillover effects on Jordan’s national security?** To answer this, the article develops a structured, theoretically grounded analysis using Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) and mechanism-based process tracing. The goal is not merely to describe events but to explain *how* and *why* specific dynamics inside Syria generate concrete security consequences for Jordan.

The article argues that the post-Assad period has intensified four core spillover mechanisms affecting Jordan:

1. **Cross-border militancy and armed infiltration**, driven by the emergence of new militant formations and governance vacuums in southern Syria.
2. **Humanitarian and demographic pressures**, including displacement waves and refugee flows, which strain Jordan’s social and economic systems.
3. **Border economy disruptions**, including the rise of illicit trade networks, smuggling routes, and narcotics trafficking, which directly challenge Jordanian border security.
4. **Shifts in regional power alignments**, particularly involving Iran, Russia, Turkey, and the United States, which reshape Jordan’s strategic environment and diplomatic calculus.

These mechanisms interact simultaneously, reinforcing one another and producing a complex web of security pressures that Jordan must navigate. By systematically identifying and tracing these causal pathways, the study contributes to a deeper theoretical understanding of regional insecurity under conditions of regime collapse. Furthermore, the article highlights how Jordan’s responses—ranging from

border securitization policies to diplomatic hedging—reflect adaptive strategies aimed at mitigating both immediate threats and long-term uncertainties.

The significance of this study is twofold. First, it provides an empirical analysis of one of the most important yet understudied regional security transformations in the contemporary Middle East. As Syria enters a post-Assad reconstruction phase shaped by a mosaic of actors, Jordan's strategic decisions will influence broader regional stability. Second, the article offers a theoretical contribution by applying RSCT in conjunction with mechanism-based process tracing to explain cross-border insecurity during regime transition. This combined framework provides a more nuanced approach to understanding security interdependence in fragmented regional systems.

This article proceeds in six sections. Following this introduction, **Section Two** reviews the existing literature on regime collapse, regional security, and the Syrian conflict, identifying gaps relevant to Jordan. **Section Three** outlines the theoretical framework, drawing on Regional Security Complex Theory and its key analytical dimensions. **Section Four** presents the methodological approach, justifying the use of qualitative research and process tracing for analyzing cross-border security dynamics. **Section Five** offers a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms through which Syrian instability affects Jordan. **Section Six** concludes by summarizing the key findings, outlining theoretical contributions, and offering policy recommendations for Jordan and the broader international community.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding the security implications of Syria's post-Assad transition for Jordan requires a multidimensional engagement with three bodies of literature: (1) studies on regime collapse and its regional ramifications, (2) theoretical writings on regional security, especially the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), and (3) scholarship on the Syrian conflict and Jordan's involvement therein. This section critically reviews these scholarly directions and demonstrates how existing literature falls short in explaining the current transformation along the Syrian–Jordanian border. The section concludes by outlining the conceptual and empirical gaps that necessitate the present research.

2.1 Regime collapse and regional spillover: insights from comparative research

The collapse of authoritarian regimes has been widely investigated in comparative politics and international relations. Classic studies argue that regime breakdown produces a temporary vacuum in state authority, which often leads to increased internal volatility, security fragmentation, and weakened border control (e.g., Buzan 1983; Soltani, Naji & Amiri 2014). Such environments become fertile ground for the proliferation of non-state armed groups, criminal networks, and opportunistic political entrepreneurs who compete to fill governance gaps. These dynamics have been observed in post-Qaddafi Libya, post-Saddam Iraq, and post-Mubarak Egypt, where sudden systemic restructuring triggered sharp internal and external instability.

Several works highlight mechanisms through which regime collapse can generate regional effects. These include refugee flows, transnational armed mobilization, illicit trafficking, and security dilemmas among neighboring states (Filimon 2016; Amable 2022). Scholars note that the absence of central authority reduces the capacity of the collapsing state to regulate cross-border movements, thus facilitating the emergence of new security challenges for its neighbors. In extreme cases, regime collapse reorders the balance of power across entire regions, forcing external states to recalibrate their strategic postures.

Despite these insights, the existing literature remains largely generalist, often based on broad comparative analogies that do not account for the unique geopolitical features of the Levant. Few studies examine how regime collapse in a deeply interconnected regional system—one shaped by sectarian alignments, proxy conflicts, and geopolitical rivalries—reconfigures the security environment of adjacent small states like Jordan. Moreover, most works emphasize the domestic dimension of regime transition but seldom explore how its external consequences evolve over time and through specific causal mechanisms.

2.2 Theoretical Foundation: Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)

The Regional Security Complex Theory, as articulated by Buzan and Waever (2003), remains one of the most influential frameworks for understanding security interdependence among neighboring states. RSCT posits that regional security dynamics

are shaped by patterns of amity and enmity, geographic proximity, historical relations, and the distribution of power within a given region. The theory's central proposition is that states are embedded in regional clusters of security where threats travel more easily across short distances than across long ones. These clusters—regional security complexes—develop distinct security logics that persist over time.

In the context of the Middle East, RSCT has been used to explain how state fragility, ideological conflicts, and transnational groups generate cross-border insecurity (Buzan 1983; Buzan, Waever & De Wilde 1998). Several scholars argue that the Levant forms one of the most tightly coupled security complexes in the world, where domestic events in one country rapidly affect the stability of its neighbors. The Syrian conflict—due to the country's central location, historical alliances, and demographic linkages—provides a prime illustration of this interconnectedness.

Recent contributions (Filimon 2016; Amable 2022) emphasize the performative and constructed nature of security within RSCT, suggesting that state perceptions and discursive practices also play a fundamental role in shaping regional security dynamics. This insight is particularly relevant for Jordan, which has historically framed Syrian instability as a security threat to justify both domestic precautionary measures and international partnerships.

Nevertheless, RSCT applications to the Syrian conflict tend to focus on macro-level shifts—such as great-power competition between Russia, Iran, and the United States—rather than on the micro-mechanisms linking Syrian transformations to Jordan's internal security. Moreover, existing RSCT analyses rarely account for rapid regime collapse scenarios, which introduce new actors and fluid alignments that challenge the theory's traditional emphasis on relatively stable patterns of interdependence.

2.3 Scholarship on the Syrian Conflict and Jordan's Role

Research on the Syrian conflict has expanded dramatically since 2011, with scholars investigating rebel governance, humanitarian crises, international interventions, sectarianism, and proxy warfare. However, only a limited number of studies examine how the conflict affects Jordan in a systematic manner.

Most existing work focuses on one of three themes:

A. The Refugee Crisis

Studies often examine how the arrival of more than one million Syrian refugees shaped Jordan's economic conditions, public services, and social cohesion. While these analyses offer valuable insights, they primarily address the humanitarian dimension rather than security mechanisms.

B. Counterterrorism and Border Control

Several works highlight Jordan's concerns over extremist infiltration, especially during the rise of ISIS. These studies emphasize military coordination, intelligence cooperation, and border fortification. However, their timeframe largely ends around 2018–2020, before Assad's collapse in 2024.

C. Diplomatic Relations and Regional Alignments

Some analyses explore Jordan's diplomatic calculus, including its engagement with Russia, the United States, and Gulf states during the Syrian conflict. Yet these works rarely address the security implications of regime transition.

Critically, scholarship rarely adopts a longitudinal perspective spanning the entire period from 2011 to the immediate post-Assad era. Moreover, no available study systematically assesses how the fall of the Syrian regime—combined with the rise of HTS and other non-state actors—reshapes Jordan's security environment through identifiable causal mechanisms.

Policy reports (e.g., Wilson Center 2025; TIME 2024; Al Jazeera 2024) provide descriptive accounts of recent events but lack theoretical grounding and methodological rigor. They do not investigate the deeper structural factors linking Syria's transition to Jordan's emerging insecurities.

2.4 Identifying the literature Gap

This review reveals significant theoretical and empirical gaps in existing scholarships. Despite extensive writings on the Syrian conflict, **no study provides a comprehensive, mechanism-based explanation of how the collapse of the Assad regime specifically impacts Jordan's security across multiple sectors.** Four gaps stand out:

Gap 1 — Absence of Mechanism-Based Analysis

Existing works describe events but do not trace how specific developments inside Syria produce measurable spillover effects on Jordan.

Gap 2 — Limited Application of RSCT to Post-Regime Collapse

RSCT literature does not adequately address fluid, post-collapse environments or the emergence of multiple non-state authorities along Syria's southern frontier.

Gap 3 — Lack of Longitudinal Perspective

Few studies cover the full trajectory from 2011 to 2024, missing how earlier conflict dynamics shaped Jordan's current vulnerabilities.

Gap 4 — Insufficient Focus on Jordan as a Case Study

Jordan is often treated as secondary to Syria, with limited exploration of its independent security agency, domestic responses, and policy adaptations.

2.5 Contribution of this study

This article addresses these gaps by:

1. **Developing a causal argument** linking Syria's post-Assad fragmentation to Jordan's national security pressures.
2. **Applying RSCT in an innovative manner**, adapted for conditions of rapid regime collapse.
3. **Using mechanism-based process tracing** to identify how border instability, demographic shifts, illicit economies, and regional geopolitics interact to shape Jordan's security.
4. **Providing a detailed empirical analysis** grounded in recent developments up to December 2024.

Together, these contributions position the article as a significant advancement in the study of regional security in the Middle East.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding the security implications of Syria's post-Assad transition for Jordan requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining not only **why** instability in Syria affects Jordan, but also **how** these effects materialize through identifiable causal pathways. To achieve this, the study draws primarily on the **Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)** as formulated by Buzan and Waever (2003) and later expanded by Buzan, Waever and De Wilde (1998) and Amable (2022). This section outlines the

theoretical foundations of the study, presents the causal argument, and specifies the mechanisms that connect Syria's regime collapse to Jordan's evolving security landscape.

3.1 Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT): core assumptions

RSCT asserts that most security threats travel more easily across short distances than across long ones due to the interaction of geographic proximity, historical ties, socio-political linkages, and shared regional dynamics. A **Regional Security Complex (RSC)** exists when states' security interdependence is so intense that they cannot be analyzed in isolation. This interdependence produces patterns of amity and enmity, in which the survival and stability of one state are closely linked to developments in its neighbors.

The core assumptions of RSCT include:

3.1.1 Geographic embeddedness

States located within the same region are embedded in shared security contexts. Syria and Jordan exemplify this condition: a 375 km border facilitates the rapid diffusion of threats, actors, and shocks (Buzan & Waever 2003).

3.1.2 Interdependent security

Events within one unit shape the security environment of others. For example, Syria's civil war generated refugee flows, arms trafficking, and extremist infiltration directly impacting Jordan.

3.1.3 Role of non-state actors

RSCT acknowledges that non-state groups—militias, insurgents, and transnational criminal networks—are integral to regional security dynamics. This is crucial in Syria's case, where HTS, ISIS, and Iran-backed militias have become dominant actors.

3.1.4 *Patterns of regional penetration*

External powers (Russia, Iran, the U.S., Turkey) penetrate local security dynamics when their interests align, shaping the region's security architecture (Filimon 2016).

3.1.5 *Sectorial dimensions of security*

Security is not only military. RSCT identifies political, societal, economic, and environmental sectors. For Jordan, Syria's collapse created insecurities across all these domains.

RSCT thus offers a powerful lens for understanding why developments in Syria matter for Jordan. However, classical RSCT is insufficient on its own for explaining the **post-collapse fluidity**, which requires adapting the theory to account for rapid regime breakdown and transitional power struggles.

3.2 **Adapting RSCT to regime collapse conditions**

Traditional RSCT assumes relatively stable patterns of interaction. However, the collapse of a regime—such as Assad's downfall in December 2024—introduces dramatic volatility that disrupts established regional structures. This research contributes theoretically by extending RSCT to conditions of **acute state breakdown**, in which:

- Threats become more diffuse
- Borders lose administrative function
- Non-state authorities emerge quickly
- Regional powers recalibrate alliances
- Humanitarian crises accelerate

These transformations produce **new security logics** that may differ fundamentally from the pre-collapse era. For instance:

- The rise of HTS as a dominant actor in post-Assad governance reshapes regional alignments.
- Iran's weakening military footprint alters deterrence dynamics.
- Turkey's incentives regarding Kurdish groups intensify.
- Jordan must recalibrate its diplomatic outreach to a transitional Syrian authority.

Thus, this study adopts RSCT but refines it to account for **temporal discontinuity**, arguing that regime collapse creates a "moment of fluidity" in regional complexes, during which new security configurations emerge.

3.3 Causal argument

The central theoretical argument of this study is:

The collapse of the Assad regime restructures the Syrian regional security sub-system in ways that produce heightened, multidimensional security pressures on Jordan, transmitted through four key mechanisms: border destabilization, demographic shifts, illicit economies, and geopolitical realignment.

This causal argument links **regime collapse** (independent variable) to **Jordanian insecurity** (dependent variable) through **clearly identifiable mechanisms**.

3.4 Mechanism tracing

Process tracing requires specifying the observable steps through which the independent variable generates the outcome. The mechanisms identified here are grounded in RSCT but adapted to the realities of post-Assad Syria.

Mechanism 1: Border Destabilization

Step 1: Assad's central authority collapses →

Step 2: Administrative vacuum along southern Syrian provinces →

Step 3: Multiple armed actors (HTS, local militias) compete for control →

Step 4: Border control deteriorates →

Step 5: Increased infiltration risks, arms smuggling, and drug trafficking →

Outcome: Jordan intensifies military operations and faces heightened security pressure.

This mechanism aligns with RSCT's emphasis on geographic insecurities.

Mechanism 2: Demographic Pressure through Refugee Movement

Step 1: Political instability and transitional governance →

Step 2: New waves of displacement →

Step 3: Refugees move toward Jordan due to proximity and historical patterns →

Step 4: Jordan experiences demographic and infrastructural strain →

Outcome: Socioeconomic and societal security sectors are affected.

This extends RSCT's societal sector to include the politics of hosting refugees.

Mechanism 3: Expansion of Illicit Economies

Step 1: Collapse of centralized policing →

Step 2: Trafficking networks expand (Captagon, arms) →

Step 3: Smuggling routes shift toward the Jordanian border →

Step 4: Increased encounters between Jordanian forces and smugglers →

Outcome: Military and law-enforcement sectors are stressed.

This mechanism links economic and military sectors.

Mechanism 4: Geopolitical Realignment

Step 1: Withdrawal or weakening of regional powers (Iran, Russia) →

Step 2: Emergence of HTS and transitional authorities →

Step 3: Jordan recalibrates diplomatic strategy to maintain stability →

Step 4: Regional power competition (Turkey, Saudi Arabia, U.S.) reshapes alignment →

Outcome: Jordan's foreign policy becomes more proactive yet more exposed.

This mechanism integrates political and geopolitical sectors of RSCT.

3.5 Conceptual model

To synthesize the mechanisms, this study proposes a **multilevel conceptual model**, showing how Syria's regime collapse restructures the RSC and produces pressures on Jordan across five sectors:

Table 1

This matrix demonstrates that Jordan is not merely a passive recipient of spillover effects but an active agent embedded in a transforming regional complex.

Syrian Collapse Effect	Jordanian Security Sector Impact
Loss of territorial control	Military sector
Rise of HTS and militias	Political sector
Refugee flows	Societal sector
Illicit trafficking	Economic sector
Regional power shifts	Geopolitical sector

3.6 Why RSCT Is the most suitable theory for this study

Other theories—such as realism, securitization, or balance-of-threat—offer useful insights but do not fully capture the multidimensional, cross-border nature of the Syrian–Jordanian security nexus. RSCT is especially suitable because:

- It centers on regional interdependence rather than global or purely domestic factors.
- It incorporates non-state actors, essential in post-Assad Syria.
- It allows for multi-sector analysis, matching Jordan’s multi-dimensional insecurity.
- It explains why Jordan cannot be analyzed separately from Syria’s internal dynamics.
- It acknowledges external penetration by global powers, a defining feature of the Syrian conflict.

Thus, RSCT provides the most robust conceptual grounding for tracing how the Syrian regime collapse reshapes Jordan’s security environment.

3.7 Contribution of this theoretical framework

This section contributes to theory in three ways:

3.7.1 *Extending RSCT to instability moments*

By applying RSCT to a rapid regime collapse case, the study demonstrates how the theory can explain sudden regional restructuring.

3.7.2 *Integrating mechanism tracing into RSCT*

The framework translates RSCT’s broad assumptions into concrete, observable mechanisms linking cause to effect.

3.7.3 Incorporating non-state transitional authorities into regional security logic

HTS's rise after Assad introduces new dynamics unaddressed by classical RSCT, particularly in defining how “non-state” actors become semi-state authorities.

4 METHODOLOGY

The methodological design of this study reflects the complexity of the research question and the need to uncover the causal pathways through which Syria's post-Assad transition produced multidimensional security implications for Jordan. Because the analysis concerns political processes unfolding over time and across borders, a qualitative research design grounded in **process tracing**, combined with an in-depth **single-case study**, is the most appropriate methodological strategy. This approach enables the researcher to identify mechanisms, examine sequential events, and connect them to theoretical expectations derived from the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). The section below outlines the methodological foundations of the study, explains the case selection logic, describes the data collection strategy, and discusses validity, reliability, ethical considerations, and limitations.

4.1 Research design: a qualitative case study

The study adopts a **qualitative single-case design**, focusing on Jordan as an embedded unit within the Syrian regional security sub-system. Qualitative case studies are particularly useful when the goal is to understand “how” and “why” specific political outcomes occur (Yin 2014), especially in contexts involving regime collapse, cross-border spillovers, and multi-level interactions. Unlike quantitative approaches—which often require large-N datasets that do not exist for real-time political crises—qualitative designs allow the researcher to trace political processes that are dynamic, context-specific, and historically rooted.

4.2 Why a single-case design?

Jordan constitutes a uniquely strategic case for several reasons:

1. **Geographic Contiguity:** Jordan's 375 km border with Syria places it at the frontline of any post-Assad instability.
2. **Historical Interdependence:** Jordan and Syria have decades of intertwined political, economic, and societal relations, illustrating RSCT's logic of regional interdependence.
3. **Exposure to Spillover Threats:** Jordan is disproportionately affected by:
 - Refugee flows
 - Drug smuggling (especially Captagon)
 - Extremist infiltration
 - Militia activity along the border
 - Economic disruptions and trade volatility
4. **Diplomatic Centrality:** Jordan is one of the most active regional actors engaging with Syria's transitional authorities.
5. **Theoretical Relevance:** Jordan's role allows us to trace how regime collapse reshapes the security positions of adjacent states.

Thus, Jordan is not merely one case among many; it is a **crucial case** for analyzing the causal mechanisms theorized in RSCT.

4.3 Process tracing as the primary methodological tool

Following the INTRAC methodological guide (2017), the study employs **the theory-testing process tracing** variant. This form of process tracing is used to evaluate whether the hypothesized mechanisms—derived from RSCT and adapted for regime-collapse scenarios—are present in the causal chain connecting Syria's collapse to Jordan's security outcomes.

4.4 Purpose of process tracing

Process tracing allows the researcher to:

- Identify sequential steps that link the independent variable (regime collapse) to the dependent variable (Jordan's security concerns)
- Test whether the hypothesized mechanisms match empirical evidence
- Determine whether alternative explanations are plausible

- Establish causal inference in the absence of experimental control

This approach aligns with the study's goal of uncovering **how** and **why** Syria's transition restructured Jordan's security environment.

4.5 Components of process tracing

INTRAC (2017) identifies four essential components:

1. Causal Mechanisms

Defined as observable processes linking cause to effect.

This study identifies four mechanisms:

- Border destabilization
- Demographic displacement
- Illicit economy expansion
- Geopolitical realignment

2. Diagnostic Evidence

Evidence that is uniquely predicted by the hypothesized mechanism.

Example: Captagon seizures along the Jordanian–Syrian border indicate the functioning of the illicit-economy mechanism.

3. Sequencing

Establishing temporal order is crucial:

Cause → Mechanism Steps → Outcome.

4. Alternative Explanations

The method requires examining alternative causes such as:

- Internal Jordanian economic challenges
- Broader regional instability unrelated to Syria
- Pre-existing smuggling networks

These are considered and ruled out where appropriate.

4.6 Operationalization of variables

Independent Variable (IV):

Collapse of the Assad regime (December 2024)

Operationalized through:

- Loss of centralized authority
- Retreat of formal Syrian military units
- Emergence of HTS in governance roles
- Withdrawal of Russian/Iranian support
- Administrative vacuum in southern Syria

Dependent Variable (DV):

Jordan's multidimensional security concerns

Measured through:

- Military/security actions along the border
- Diplomatic engagements
- Refugee management policies
- Economic disruptions
- Public statements by Jordanian officials

Mechanisms (M):

Four mechanisms derived from RSCT and adapted to transitional-collapse contexts.

4.7 Data collection strategy

Given the political sensitivity and the lack of field access inside Syria, the study relies entirely on **secondary qualitative data**, adhering to the “multi-source triangulation” principle recommended by Upmetrics (2025). Data sources include:

4.8 Official statements

- Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Statements by King Abdullah II
- Syrian transitional authority announcements
- Turkish, Saudi, and Western diplomatic communiqués

4.9 Reputable news outlets

- Al Jazeera (2024a, 2024b)

- Reuters (2025)
- BBC (Bowen 2024)
- Time Magazine (De Guzman 2024)
- The Media Line (Ganot 2024)

These outlets provide time-stamped sequences necessary for process tracing.

4.10 Think-tank and policy reports

- Wilson Center (2025a, 2025b)
- Robert Lansing Institute (2024)
- Arab Center Washington DC (2024)

These provide analytical depth and independent assessments.

4.11 Academic literature

- RSCT foundational texts: Buzan (1983), Buzan & Waever (2003); Buzan, Waever & de Wilde (1998)
- Works on non-state actors, regime collapse, and regional geopolitics

4.12 Quantitative indicators (supplementary)

- Refugee counts from UNHCR
- Border incident statistics from Jordanian Armed Forces
- Trade data

While the study is qualitative, such indicators help verify trends identified in the narrative evidence.

5 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis proceeds in three steps:

Step 1: Chronological Reconstruction

Events from 2011 to 2025 are organized into a timeline, focusing on critical junctures (civil war escalation, HTS expansion, Assad collapse, diplomatic summits).

Step 2: Mechanism Matching

Each event is coded according to whether it represents evidence of:

- Border destabilization
- Demographic displacement
- Illicit trafficking
- Geopolitical realignment

Step 3: Triangulation

Claims must appear in at least **two independent sources** to be accepted as valid evidence, ensuring reliability.

6 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

6.1 Internal validity

Strengthened by:

- Clear specification of causal mechanisms
- Temporal sequencing
- Use of multiple sources for each claim
- Elimination of alternative explanations

6.2 External validity

This study does **not** aim for statistical generalization. However, it provides:

- Analytical generalization to other RSCs facing regime collapse
- Comparative value for states bordering failed states (e.g., Lebanon–Syria, Turkey–Syria, Iraq–Syria)

6.3 Reliability

To ensure replicability:

- All sources are cited precisely
- Data coding categories are transparent
- Timelines are constructed using publicly available information

7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although this research involves no human participants, several ethical issues are acknowledged:

- **Political Sensitivity:** The topic involves active conflicts; thus, the study avoids endorsing political actors and focuses on analytical neutrality.
- **Source Verification:** Only credible sources (international media, official statements, recognized think-tanks) are included.
- **Data Transparency:** All evidence is cited using full references to ensure traceability.

8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study faces several inherent limitations:

1. No Field Access:

Security conditions prevent direct fieldwork in southern Syria.

2. Rapidly Changing Context:

Post-Assad transition is fluid; some developments may evolve before publication.

3. Reliance on Secondary Sources:

While triangulated, secondary sources may carry biases.

4. Complexity of Non-State Actors:

HTS's hybrid governance structure complicates analytical categorization.

Despite these limitations, the methodology remains robust for capturing causal pathways in a highly dynamic conflict environment.

9 INTEGRATING METHODOLOGY WITH RSCT

The methodological design is deeply aligned with the RSCT framework in three ways:

1. **Process tracing identifies the mechanisms RSCT predicts**, such as short-distance threat diffusion and interdependent security.
2. **The case study design reflects RSCT's regional logic**, analyzing Jordan as embedded within the Syrian sub-complex.

3. **The temporal structure of the analysis matches RSCT’s emphasis on historically rooted interactions.**

Thus, the chosen methodology is not merely a procedural tool but an epistemological extension of the theoretical framework.

10 ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The empirical analysis of this study identifies four principal causal mechanisms through which the collapse of the Assad regime and Syria’s transition toward fragmented governance structures have generated significant security implications for Jordan. These mechanisms—(1) cross-border border destabilization, (2) demographic displacement and refugee pressures, (3) illicit economy expansion, and (4) geopolitical realignment—operate simultaneously and produce reinforcing spillover effects. Using process tracing, each mechanism is traced from the initial changes within the Syrian political system to the observable security outcomes within Jordan. Collectively, these mechanisms demonstrate that Jordan’s security vulnerabilities are deeply embedded in the regional security complex and shaped by events occurring inside Syria’s unstable post-regime environment.

Mechanism 1: Border Destabilization and Armed Spillover

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 resulted in the fragmentation of authority in southern Syria, particularly in Daraa, Quneitra, and rural Sweida—areas geographically adjacent to Jordan’s northern border. As formal regime units withdrew and the Syrian Arab Army disintegrated, a security vacuum emerged. Process tracing reveals a sequence of events showing how this vacuum facilitated border destabilization:

1. **Regime withdrawal from southern military positions**
– Reports from *Time* (De Guzman 2024) and *The Media Line* (Ganot 2024) document that loyalist brigades abandoned several checkpoints during the final phase of the “12-day revolution.”
2. **HTS expansion from Idlib toward Damascus**
– As Bowen (2024) reports, HTS under Ahmad al-Sharaa played a pivotal role in pushing toward the capital, leaving peripheral zones ungoverned.
3. **Creation of ungoverned spaces along the Jordanian border**
– Wilson Center (2025a; 2025b) confirms that governance collapsed in several

southern districts previously monitored by the Assad regime and Iranian-linked militias.

4. **Increase in border incidents involving infiltrators and armed groups**

– Jordanian Armed Forces reported, in statements cited by *Reuters* (2025), several armed infiltration attempts following the regime's fall.

These steps collectively demonstrate a clear causal chain: **regime collapse** → **governance vacuum** → **proliferation of non-state armed groups** → **increased border insecurity for Jordan**.

RSCT predicts that neighboring states are highly sensitive to instability in contiguous territories because geographical proximity amplifies threat diffusion (Buzan & Waeber 2003). Jordan's experience in early 2025 provides strong evidence consistent with this theoretical expectation.

Observable Effects in Jordan

- Jordan intensified its border patrols and deployed mechanized units to the northern frontier.
- Air Force operations targeted armed smugglers and militia convoys originating from Syrian territory (Al Jazeera 2024b).
- Military coordination with Turkey increased, focusing on monitoring non-state armed actor movements.

The evidence strongly supports Mechanism 1: border destabilization is a direct and immediate spillover effect of regime collapse.

Mechanism 2: Demographic Displacement and Refugee Pressures

Jordan has long hosted Syrian refugees, but the post-Assad transition reopened concerns about renewed displacement flows. Process tracing reveals a sequential pattern linking changes within Syria to demographic pressures:

1. **Internal displacement inside Syria increased during the final anti-Assad offensive**, particularly around Damascus and the Ghab Plain (Ganot 2024).
2. **HTS's political program**, while more moderate than earlier jihadist models, still generated fear among minority communities and secular groups (Bowen 2024).
3. **Economic collapse following the regime's fall**, including shortages of fuel, electricity, and basic goods, pushed civilians toward border zones (Robert Lansing Institute 2024).

4. **Jordan began preparing for possible refugee surges**, reinforcing camp capacities and coordinating with UN agencies (Jordan Times 2025a).

Although Jordan has previously adopted a restrictive border policy, its humanitarian commitments—as documented by Hasan et al. (2024) and Salameh (2024)—continued to create open channels for vulnerable populations.

Why This Mechanism Matters

RSCT emphasizes *societal security* as a key dimension of regional security complexes. Refugee movements represent not only humanitarian challenges but also:

- **Economic burdens:** pressure on infrastructure, water supply, schools, and job markets.
- **Security concerns:** potential infiltration by militants disguised as civilians (Winter 2025).
- **Political implications:** domestic debates regarding identity, demographic balance, and public spending.

By early 2025, Jordan hosted approximately one million Syrians, including 660,000 registered with the UN (Jordan Times 2025b). The possibility of renewed inflows has raised fears of reaching a saturation point.

Evidence of Mechanism Activation

- Jordan's Ministry of Interior reported increasing arrivals at informal crossing points after Assad's collapse.
- International organizations estimated an additional 40,000 Syrians might attempt to flee if instability deepens (Bowen 2024).
- Jordan's diplomatic messages emphasized the global community's responsibility, warning that Jordan cannot absorb more refugees unassisted.

Thus, Mechanism 2 remains a persistent and significant spillover effect of Syria's instability.

Mechanism 3: Expansion of the Illicit Border Economy (Captagon, weapons, and contraband)

Perhaps the most visible and quantifiable spillover mechanism involves the expansion of illicit economies operating along the Jordan–Syria frontier. Under Assad, senior regime figures and militias were implicated in Captagon production and smuggling. Following regime collapse:

1. **Command structures disintegrated**, leaving advanced smuggling networks leaderless but operational.
2. **Iran-linked militias retreated sporadically**, creating space for hybrid criminal–armed actors (Concern in Jordan over presence of Iran militias, 2021).
3. **Local tribes and armed groups in Sweida filled the vacuum**, intensifying cross-border trafficking (Reuter 2025).
4. **HTS implemented limited governance**, but its reach did not extend to southern border areas, leaving a permissive environment for smuggling networks.

Jordan's Observed Response

Jordan launched a series of **airstrikes and ground operations** at border zones in early 2025, targeting Captagon convoys and armed smugglers (Winter 2025). Military communiqués referenced:

- Shootouts along the Ramtha–Daraa corridor
- Seizures of multi-million-dollar shipments
- Arrests of networks with cross-national affiliations

These events indicate that **illicit-economy expansion is not a peripheral issue—it is central to Jordan's security doctrine.**

Mechanism Logic

RSCT predicts that weak or collapsing states generate transnational criminal flows that alter the security environment of neighbors. The empirical record from 2024–2025 strongly validates this theoretical expectation.

Mechanism 4: Geopolitical Realignment and Its Spillover Effects on Jordan

The post-Assad era reshaped the regional power balance in ways directly affecting Jordan. Process tracing reveals a chain of geopolitical shifts:

1. **Declining Iranian influence in Damascus** – As Stent et al. (2024) and Aa (2025) show, Iran's role diminished due to overstretch in Gaza, Yemen, and Lebanon.
2. **Emergence of HTS as a de facto political actor**, altering the ideological landscape of Syrian governance (Bowen 2024).
3. **Turkey's heightened involvement**, particularly in intelligence coordination and border monitoring (AJC 2024).
4. **Saudi Arabia's renewed diplomatic push** to stabilize Syria and counter Iranian proxies (Robert Lansing Institute 2024).

5. **Western re-engagement** in shaping Syria’s transitional roadmap (Wilson Center 2025).

Each of these shifts impacts Jordan’s strategic environment:

A. The Decline of Iran in Southern Syria

Jordan views Iranian militias near its borders as a primary threat. Their partial withdrawal reduces direct pressure but increases unpredictability, as smaller armed groups attempt to fill the vacuum.

B. HTS Ascendancy

While HTS presents itself as a Syrian nationalist project rather than a transnational jihadist group, its dominance raises questions about:

- governance capacity
- ideological implications
- long-term relations with neighboring states

Jordan’s cautious engagement with HTS leadership—signaled by diplomatic overtures—appears to be a strategic necessity rather than an endorsement.

C. Jordan’s Diplomatic Hedging

Jordan expanded its diplomatic engagements immediately after Assad’s fall:

- **Safadi’s December 2024 visit to Damascus** (Al Jazeera 2024a)
- **Participation in the Aqaba and Paris summits**
- **Coordination with Turkey and Gulf states**

The speed and scale of Jordan’s diplomacy indicate recognition that Syrian instability poses long-term strategic risks that require multilateral management.

Synthesis: How Mechanisms Interact

The four mechanisms do not operate in isolation—they reinforce one another:

- Border destabilization facilitates illicit trafficking.
- Illicit trafficking financially strengthens armed groups.
- Armed group activity produces new displacement flows.
- Refugee flows trigger diplomatic initiatives, which reshape regional alignments.
- Geopolitical realignment influences border dynamics through new alliances and rivalries.

This **mutually reinforcing network of effects** explains why Jordan remains acutely vulnerable to developments within Syria’s transitional landscape.

Key Empirical Finding

The central empirical finding of this study is that **Jordan's security environment after Assad's collapse is shaped not by a singular threat, but by an evolving constellation of interconnected spillover mechanisms produced by Syria's fragmented post-regime order.**

Jordan's vulnerability is systemic—not episodic—because Syria's instability permeates multiple dimensions of Jordan's national security. This aligns precisely with the RSCT conception of regional interdependence.

11 CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTION

The collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 marks a decisive turning point in the security architecture of the Levant. For Jordan, a state historically positioned at the crossroads of regional instability, the transition in Syria has created a multilayered security environment defined by uncertainty, reputational risk, and evolving geopolitical alignments. This study set out to explain how Syria's post-Assad transition reshaped Jordan's national security landscape and to identify the causal pathways through which developments inside Syria produce spillover effects. By applying Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) alongside mechanism-based process tracing, the analysis demonstrated that Jordan's security vulnerabilities stem not from a singular threat but from the interaction of four reinforcing mechanisms: border destabilization, demographic displacement, illicit economy expansion, and geopolitical realignment.

12 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The empirical analysis shows that **border destabilization** emerged immediately following Assad's collapse, driven by the withdrawal of regime military units and the emergence of competing armed groups in southern Syria. This created governance vacuums that facilitated infiltration attempts, armed smuggling, and unpredictable militia behavior. Jordan's intensified military operations, airstrikes, and border fortifications reflect a direct response to these shifting dynamics.

The second mechanism, **demographic displacement**, highlights how Jordan continues to bear disproportionate humanitarian and economic burdens from Syrian

instability. Despite restrictive entry policies, the possibility of new refugee flows remains a structural concern, exacerbated by Syria's economic collapse and governance fragmentation. This mechanism underscores RSCT's emphasis on societal security and its role in shaping state behavior.

The third mechanism, **illicit economy expansion**, constitutes one of the most pressing security threats. The dismantling of regime-controlled trafficking networks has produced a surge in decentralized and violent smuggling groups—especially those trafficking Captagon and weapons. Jordan's responses, including targeted strikes and intelligence-led interdictions, show that illicit economies have become a defining feature of post-Assad spillover effects.

Finally, the analysis shows that **geopolitical realignment** is restructuring Jordan's strategic environment. The partial retreat of Iran-backed militias, Turkey's deeper involvement, Saudi Arabia's diplomatic re-engagement, and Western interest in stabilizing Syria collectively shift the regional balance of power. Jordan's multilateral diplomacy—manifested in high-level visits, regional summits, and coordinated security initiatives—reflects a strategic adaptation to a rapidly evolving Syrian landscape.

These findings demonstrate that Syrian instability affects Jordan through **complex, mutually reinforcing mechanisms**, validating RSCT's core assumption: states embedded in a regional security complex experience interdependent and cross-border threats that cannot be managed unilaterally.

13 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTION

This study offers a significant theoretical contribution by integrating RSCT with mechanism-based process tracing to analyze regime collapse and cross-border insecurity. While RSCT effectively conceptualizes regional interdependence, it often lacks micro-level explanations of *how* threats travel across borders. By introducing clearly operationalized causal mechanisms, this study bridges that gap and provides a systematic analytical model for studying:

- regime collapse and its cross-border effects
- the behavior of neighboring states in fragmented security environments
- the interaction between non-state actors and regional security complexes

The study also broadens RSCT's empirical applications by demonstrating how the theory can account for hybrid governance, militia pluralism, and illicit political economies that characterize post-uprising Arab states.

14 EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTION

Empirically, this article provides one of the first detailed academic accounts of **Jordan's security environment during Syria's post-Assad transition**. While existing literature extensively addresses the Syrian civil war, few studies analyze its spillover effects in the aftermath of regime collapse. Fewer still examine Jordan's role using structured causal analysis. This study thus fills a major gap by providing:

1. A comprehensive mapping of Jordan's four main security challenges
2. A timeline of political-military events from 2011–2025
3. Evidence-based analysis linking Syrian developments to specific Jordanian responses
4. Triangulated data from academic sources, major newspapers, official statements, and policy institutes

This level of empirical granularity contributes significantly to both conflict studies and Middle East politics.

15 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry important implications for Jordanian policymakers and international partners:

1. Strengthened Border Governance

Jordan must continue investing in surveillance technologies, intelligence capabilities, and joint patrol mechanisms to mitigate infiltration and trafficking.

2. Coordinated Refugee Policy

International burden-sharing is essential. Donors must support Jordan in managing existing refugee populations while preparing for potential new flows.

3. Targeted Counter-Narcotics Strategy

Jordan's airstrike and interdiction strategy should be complemented with regional intelligence networks, especially with Turkey and Gulf states.

4. Diplomatic Diversification

Jordan should maintain its proactive diplomacy with Syria's transitional authorities, engage multilaterally with Saudi Arabia and Turkey, and coordinate with Western stakeholders to support reconstruction and stabilize Syria's governance structures.

5. Integrated Regional Security Dialogue

Given the interdependence of threats, a regional security framework involving Jordan, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Gulf states may be necessary to prevent escalation.

16 ADDRESSING THE RESEARCH GAP

The study fills a critical gap by demonstrating that **regime collapse generates a new category of security threats distinct from those associated with civil war alone**. Specifically:

- The fall of a long-standing authoritarian regime produces more complex spillovers than the conflict conditions that precede it.
- Neo-fragmentation—not civil war intensity—now explains much of the insecurity along the Jordan–Syria border.
- Jordan's responses are shaped as much by geopolitical shifts as by local Syrian dynamics.

Thus, the study advances existing scholarship on conflict diffusion, regime collapse, and security interdependence in the Middle East.

17 FUTURE RESEARCH

The analysis opens several avenues for further research:

- **Comparative studies** of other states bordering collapsed regimes (e.g., Iraq–Syria, Turkey–Syria).
- **Quantitative modeling** of smuggling networks and border incidents.
- **Ethnographic research** on local governance structures in post-Assad southern Syria.
- **Assessment of Jordan's long-term strategic adaptations** in response to shifting regional power balances.

Future work could also examine the international politics of reconstruction and how foreign actors shape Syria's fragmented governance landscape.

18 CONCLUSION

Jordan's security environment in the aftermath of Assad's collapse is defined by interconnected and mutually reinforcing spillover mechanisms. By demonstrating how border destabilization, demographic displacement, illicit economies, and geopolitical realignment shape Jordan's national security, this study highlights the importance of mechanism-based regional analysis during periods of regime collapse. The combination of RSCT and process tracing offers a powerful theoretical and methodological toolkit for analyzing conflict diffusion and regional insecurity. Ultimately, the findings underscore that Jordan's long-term stability requires a combination of robust border governance, multilateral diplomacy, and proactive engagement with Syria's transitional actors.

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Authors' Contribution

All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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