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HOW STABLE IS JORDAN?
KING ABDULLAH’S HALF-HEARTED REFORMS
& THE CHALLENGE OF THE ARAB SPRING

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INTRODUCTION

In the wake of revolts in Egypt, Tunisia, and Bahrain, Jordan – another seemingly stable pro-Western regime with a reputation for progressive social and economic policies – has received curiously little attention. In the early 1990s, Jordan was one of the region’s most democratic countries, registering the highest ever Freedom House scores for an Arab country in 1992 (a 3 on political rights and 3 on civil liberties). Since then, however, Jordan has undergone a concerted process of de-liberalization, stripping away many of its earlier political gains. In 2011, Freedom House classified the kingdom as “Not Free,” granting it a score of 6 for political rights and 5 for civil liberties. In addition, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2010 democracy index rates Jordan 117th out of 167 nations, placing it firmly among those considered “authoritarian.”

Despite this, the United States has remained a staunch supporter of the Hashemite monarchy. Jordan is the second largest per capita recipient of American aid, with total U.S. assistance shooting up from $228 million in 2001 to $818 million in 2010. As the Arab revolts broke out in 2011, the Obama Administration increased aid by $100 million, with an additional $400 million promised through the U.S. Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC).

In a June 2008 speech, then-candidate Barack Obama praised King Abdullah, saying “Jordan’s leadership is a source of pride for its own people. I have long admired King Abdullah’s example of moderation and modernization.” To be sure, Jordan held reasonably free elections in 1989, 1993, 1997, 2003, and 2010. Whether they were fair is another matter. Save 1989, all were conducted under the “one-vote” electoral law, widely criticized for the stifling effect it has had on opposition parties. Today, Jordan has one of the region’s weakest political party systems and one of its most unrepresentative parliaments. Remarkably, the current 120-seat parliament, elected in November 2010, has no formal opposition representation. Furthermore, the nation has experienced two prime ministers since February, signalling discontent with the increasingly challenged system.

The November elections, boycotted by the country’s largest opposition party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), confirmed the stagnation of political life, setting the stage for the weekly Friday protests that began on January 14. The heterogeneous make-up of protests – involving Islamists, liberals, leftists, and East Bank tribes – has hampered their impact due to competing agendas. Unlike in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, protesters lack an unpopular leader like Hosni Mubarak or Ali Abdullah Saleh against whom to rally support. However, there is growing support among opposition groups for a “constitutional monarchy,” which, among other things, would mean an elected prime minister and a significantly stronger parliament. Reduction of the king’s powers and prerogatives was long the third rail of Jordanian politics; that they are increasingly being debated in public is just one sign of a shifting political discourse.

On March 25, 2011, Jordan saw its first major outburst of violence between protesters and regime loyalists and police, leading to one death – Jordan’s first “martyr” – and more than one hundred injured. “There is a sense,” warned the prominent Jordanian writer Fahd al-Khitan, “that the situation may explode at any moment.” An already deteriorating political situation has been exacerbated by sectarian tensions between East Bank Jordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin. Many East Bankers fear that any transition to democracy would threaten their power, given that Palestinians now form a

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majority in Jordan. Opposition groups, particularly Islamist and nationalist parties, have disproportionately Palestinian memberships (although their leadership tend to be more mixed). This contributes to perceptions of a loyalist-opposition split across sectarian lines. That said, even East Bank tribes have increasingly offered criticisms of the monarchy, including unprecedented attacks on the royal family – particularly Queen Rania – for corruption and profligate spending. But these East Bankers, as will be discussed later, have also made limiting Palestinian influence in the kingdom part of their “reform” platform.

With mounting calls for reform and a heightened risk of polarization, it may be time for the Obama Administration to focus greater attention on Jordan, a key ally and only one of two Arab countries that has a peace treaty with Israel. Thus far, the United States has been reticent to put pressure on the Jordanian regime. When the Arab uprisings began, President Obama reportedly called King Abdullah personally to reassure him of American support. He also sent the State Department’s number three official William J. Burns and Admiral Michael G. Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to Amman in a show of commitment to bilateral ties between the two countries. It is precisely these same ties that give the United States considerable leverage with the Jordanian regime.

Relative to other countries like Syria and Bahrain, Jordan appears quiet and stable. Certainly, even the largest protests – attracting around 6,000 people and largely limited to Amman – have paled in comparison to those in other Arab countries like Egypt or Yemen. Friday protests, however, have become a regular feature of political life. During one stretch from January through April, protests were held on twelve successive Fridays. Unlike many other Arab countries, violence on either side has been limited. Only one person has died in protests compared to well over 2,700 in Syria. Ideally, though, the international community – and the United States as Jordan’s largest donor – should act before, rather than after, countries become roiled by civil conflict.

Jordan, along with Morocco, is one of the few Arab countries that has publicly declared its commitment to political reform and taken steps to address popular grievances. Whether these steps are significant or satisfactory is less clear. On June 12, King Abdullah spoke to the nation in his first major televised address since the protests began. He said that Jordan would move toward an elected government drawn from the majority party in parliament (currently, cabinet ministers are appointed by the king, regardless of parliamentary results). No timetable was offered. Two days later, the king clarified his position, saying that political parties were not yet sufficiently mature or organized and that the process could take “at least two or three years.” The question remains: are Jordanians willing to wait that long?

No one in the Jordanian opposition is calling for the downfall of the monarchy. The Hashemite monarchy enjoys considerable historical legitimacy, which gives it ample room for maneuver. The Jordanian government, then, is well positioned to embark on a path of meaningful reform – assuming the political will to do so exists. For these reasons, Jordan is a promising “test case” for the Obama Administration. The country is a strategically vital ally, which would suggest treading cautiously. But, because of strong bilateral ties, a large economic assistance package, the warm personal relations between Obama and King Abdullah, and the monarchy’s genuine interest in limited reform (if not democracy), the United States has the opportunity to make the kind of push in Jordan that it cannot elsewhere.

A NEW GOVERNMENT

Protests began on January 14, 2011, when leftists and tribal leaders, emboldened by the ouster of Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, called for the end of Prime Minister Samir al-Rifai’s government. The demonstrators lamented high taxation, rising prices, and the lack of jobs. According to a 2009 poll by the International Republican Institute, soaring living costs are the top concern for Jordanians, followed by unemployment, which is estimated to be as high as 30 percent.
On January 20, Prime Minister Rifai, in an effort to stem the tide of protests, announced a $230 million package, which would lower the costs of bread and fuel and help create jobs. When this measure failed to deter protesters, the prime minister offered a $550 million subsidy package for fuel and staple products like rice and sugar. Three days later, on February 1, King Abdullah dissolved the government, naming Jordan’s ninth cabinet in 11 years. However, the appointment of Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit suggested a continuation of the status quo. Bakhit, a retired army general who helped oversee the implementation of peace with Israel, was prime minister from 2005 to 2007, a period which saw an unprecedented crackdown on the Islamist opposition. His resignation in 2007 followed Jordan’s most fraudulent elections in decades.

After the cabinet reshuffle, six ministers stayed on, including such key figures as the ministers of foreign affairs and finance. Thus, the “old guard” retained control of key strategic portfolios. (Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh, for instance, is well-liked in Washington and seen as a strong supporter of bilateral ties with the United States.) Taher Adwan, a prominent journalist who has since resigned, and Abdelrahim al-Akour, a former Muslim Brotherhood leader, were two notable additions to the cabinet. Five leftists also received seats in the 26-member body. Despite the additions, the new cabinet seemed to promise more of the same – a view shared by much of the opposition. “This cabinet is like previous ones,” said IAF secretary-general Hamza Mansour, “but what matters is whether the new ministers will deliver on promises of quick reforms.”

Notably, in October, King Abdullah again used the tactic of replacing his prime ministers as a means to demonstrate his seriousness about change. Awn al-Khasawneh, a judge on the International Court of Justice and former adviser to King Hussein, has been charged with the task of forming a new, reform-minded government.

TOP-DOWN REFORM

The Jordanian monarchy has a long history of pledging reform yet failing to deliver, beginning in 1989 with an initially promising but soon aborted democratic experiment. In the past decade, King Abdullah announced three major programs: “Jordan First” in 2002, the “National Agenda” in 2005, and “We Are All Jordan” in 2006. They have had little impact on political and civil rights in Jordan and have since been discarded or ignored by those in power.

In March 2011, the “National Dialogue Committee” (NDC) was formed to consider and revise the much criticized political party and electoral laws. The existing 1993 electoral law, known as “one-vote” (sawt al-wahid), has long been one of the most contentious issues in the country’s politics. The legislation enforced the use of single non-transferable vote (SNTV), an exceedingly rare voting system used on the national level by only two other countries in the world, Afghanistan and the microstate of Vanuatu. For its purposes, though, the legislation was a success, minimizing Islamist and leftist influence in parliament and returning pro-government and largely tribal super-majorities.

The NDC-proposed electoral law provides for a two-tier system, with 115 deputies elected at the district level and 15 seats reserved for national lists. SNTV is scrapped for an open proportional list system, which will give a boost to opposition parties and particularly the IAF. However, the law does little to address gerrymandering, where rural and tribal areas are given disproportionate weight at the expense of predominantly Palestinian cities like Amman and Zarqa. Former Prime Minister Taher al-Masri, the head of the NDC, was forthright about the proposed law’s shortcomings – a result of the need to avoid “agitat[ing] different forces.” It is unclear whether the NDC’s law will even see the light of day, at least in its current form. Six years earlier, the National Agenda had already proposed a new electoral law, but it was simply ignored by the government – a government headed by none other than Marouf al-Bakhit.

The intricacies of a convoluted electoral law, how-
ever, seem increasingly beside the point. The way in which parliament is elected does not change the fact that parliament remains a weak institution with limited powers. Indeed, any national dialogue committee, no matter what its composition, can only hint at the structural problem that has defined Jordan’s politics since the beginning of the so-called “democratic experiment” in 1989: the grossly unequal distribution of power between elected institutions and those that remain unelected – the monarchy, the royal court, the prime minister, and the cabinet.

A DIVIDED SOCIETY

Jordanian protesters, unlike their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts, have been calling for the downfall of the “government” (hukouma) rather than the “regime” (nizam). Criticism of the king and the royal family is a punishable crime, carrying with it prison sentences of up to three years. The constitution, moreover, ensures that the king is “immune from any liability and responsibility.” The king appoints the prime minister and other ministers, as well as all 40 members of the upper house of parliament, which can scuttle legislation from the lower house. More importantly, the king can unilaterally dissolve parliament, as he did in 2001. In the absence of parliament, King Abdullah ruled by decree, instituting more than 210 temporary laws. The king once again dissolved parliament in 2009, ruling by decree for nearly a year until elections were held.

Despite the monarchy’s direct involvement in running and controlling affairs of the state, King Abdullah, like his father before him, has portrayed himself as non-partisan and above the fray. This too is how many in the opposition say they see him. As the blogger and activist Naseem Tarawnah notes, “even opponents have seen the Hashemite regime as the thing that holds this all together.”

This has more to do with the fear of the alternative rather than any deep appreciation for Abdullah himself, who, while respected, does not elicit the same kind of admiration and impassioned loyalty his father did. In King Abdullah’s less capable hands, the country’s simmering tensions are becoming increasingly apparent. Jordan, like Bahrain and Syria, has a major sectarian divide, with effective minority rule of East Bank Jordanians (at least in the political and military arenas) over the majority who are of Palestinian origin.

As noted earlier, East Bankers, historically the king’s power base, have expressed growing frustration with the monarchy, pointing to rampant corruption and economic inequality. In an unprecedented development, the National Committee of Military Veterans, representing some 140,000 former military members, circulated a petition in May 2010, which criticized the monarchy, warned of growing Palestinian influence, and spoke of a Zionist plot to resettle Palestinian refugees in Jordan. As Assaf David notes, this was “the first time that an organization representing tens of thousands of military veterans [expressed] controversial political views, particularly on such extremely sensitive issues.”

The regime has also faced resistance in the tribal south. On one occasion, demonstrators physically blocked the route of the prime minister and his aides, forcing them to hold meetings in a local hospital. The frustration has extended to the king himself. In Tafila, Abdullah’s convoy was reportedly hit by stones and bottles. The government spokesman at the time, Taher Adwan, denied the reports. “What happened,” he explained, “is that a group of young Jordanians thronged the monarch’s motorcade to shake hands with him.” Shortly thereafter, the Amman office of Agence France Presse – which first broke the story – was vandalized. The scenes of unrest in rural areas should not come as a surprise. East Bankers are more dependent on government largesse and are more directly affected by ongoing economic difficulties.

This points to a major divide in Jordan’s fractious “opposition” movement. East Bankers have little gripe with the king’s dominant role. They would simply like him to use his power to redistribute economic gains, build up the country’s poorer interior, root out corruption, and limit what they perceive
as the growing economic and political influence of
the Palestinian majority. Moving toward true “con-
stitutional monarchy” would only empower Pales-
tinians – at the likely expense of the East Bankers.

THE KING’S POWER

Acting above politics, the king sees himself as criti-
cal in uniting the heterogeneous nation, using the
threat of sectarianism to justify a top-heavy reform
process. While Abdullah may, in fact, support the
cause of reform, he has shown little willingness to
cede control of that process. As he said in May, “I
have the responsibility to lead the debate in the right
direction.”24 What, though, is the right direction?
While King Abdullah portrays himself as above the
fray and non-partisan, many of his policies have
centered on limiting the influence of the Islamist
opposition. In an interview with Christiane Aman-
pour, he explained his thinking: “We’re a monar-
chy, yes, but if we can show democracy that leads
to a two-, three-, four-party system – left, right, and
center – in a couple of years’ time, then the Muslim
Brotherhood will no longer be something to con-
tend with.”25

The desire to engineer the process from above has
gone hand in hand with a resistance to any con-
stitutional revisions that would dilute the power of
the throne. In a letter to Prime Minister Bakhit on
March 22, King Abdullah noted the necessity of en-
acting political reforms while also citing the need
to “protect the state and the constitution.”26 Even
parliament – dominated by pro-regime and tribal
figures – has accused those calling for constitu-
tional revisions as seeking the “dissolution” of the
Jordanian state.27

In the wake of the Arab revolts, however, the op-
opposition’s reticence to question the king’s prerog-
avatives has been steadily eroded. After the NDC
and groups like the IAF insisted that constitution-
al change be part of any reform package, the king
relented, appointing a royal commission – made
up of former prime ministers and not even one
member of the opposition – to consider revisions
to the constitution. To what extent, though, would a
royal commission, appointed by the king, strip the
king of significant power? The answer is not very
much. The proposed amendments limit the power
of security services, establish for the first time a
“constitutional court,” and transfer the oversight
of elections from the Ministry of Interior to an in-
dependent electoral commission.28 However mean-
ingful such changes are, the monarchy’s monopoly
on power remains unbroken. As the Carnegie En-
dowment’s Marwan Muasher describes it, “Other
than limiting the king’s ability to indefinitely post-
pone elections, his powers have been left intact.”29

But these powers, and those of the Royal Court,
remain obscured by the still considerable deference
that the monarchy enjoys. Although they may not
say so, everyone knows who holds the power in
Jordan, yet at the same time, no one is entirely sure
what that means in practice. For example, when
Prime Minister Bakhit, along with Jordan’s power-
ful and unaccountable intelligence services, rigged
the vote in the 2007 elections, to what extent, if
any, did they do so with the king’s knowledge? And
if the king knew what was happening, why did he
not intervene to stop it?

Abdullah has offered up an answer of sorts, sug-
gesting that the challenge of reform in Jordan is
that political and social forces resist change to “pro-
tect their own interests.”30 Muasher, who served the
king as foreign minister and deputy prime minis-
ter, writes that Jordan’s problem is with a group of
“entrenched and ossified” elites that have turned
against the king and have a vested interest in the
status quo.31

This notion – that the problem lies not with the king
but with those around and under him – is something
one hears often in countries ruled by royals. There
is no doubt that strong forces in Jordan are staunch
opponents of reform. The problem is that many of
them – including prominent ministers – are ap-
pointed (and re-appointed) by the king. In Moroc-
co, a country which features a similar dynamic,
critics often point the finger at the Makhzen. Mah-
ken is often translated as “royal court” but, in fact,
captures a broader range of interests and personali-
ties connected to the Palace and ultimately dependent on the person of the king. Similarly, Jordan’s Royal Court is a power center unto itself. Many of its members are former ministers, and many current ministers are former members (Current Prime Minister Awn al-Khawsawneh, for example, served as Chief of the Royal Court in the 1990s). This revolving door has a corrosive effect on Jordanian politics, further entrenching the same elite and providing a particularly conducive environment for corruption.

The role of Jordan’s shadowy General Intelligence Department (GID) – the feared Mukhabarat – also stymies reform efforts. In July, the IAF’s Hamza Mansour accused the GID of controlling government policies and limiting freedom of expression in the kingdom. “Intelligence approves cabinets,” Mansour said, “and dismisses them at will if [they do] not implement the policies of limiting the freedom of expression, intimidating citizens, and frightening the regime’s opponents.”32 Human Rights Watch corroborates many of these claims, stating in a 2011 report that the agency “continued to influence decisions in most aspects of Jordanian public life, including academic freedom, government appointments, and the issuing of residency permits to non-Jordanians.”33

Presumably, the king (in Jordan as in other Arab monarchies) knows who is “resisting” change. Yet the king avoids confronting these groups and individuals. More often than not, he keeps these officials in positions of power and influence. Perhaps he is afraid they may plot against him – though this is unlikely in a country where reverence for the king is accepted, even if reluctantly, by all, and particularly by the political elite.

In short, King Abdullah, like all dominant monarchs, is at least partly responsible for the stagnation of political reform in Jordan. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the king himself, to the extent that he believes in substantive reform, thinks that it should be done gradually, and in accordance with the interests and security of the nation. It is this latter part that is crucial. In his June 12, 2011 speech, Abdullah emphasized the “difference between the required democratic transformations and achievable ones on the one hand, and the risks of chaos and fitna (sedition) on the other.” He went on, “We in Jordan must distinguish between those democratic transformations that take us towards the desired reform and the exploitation of the same in the interest of some partisan or factional agendas that steer us away from national consensus.”34

Abdullah has also warned of “the deterioration of political and media discourse” in a way that could “trigger hatred.”35 Indeed, the government has become increasingly intolerant of a critical media. In 2011 alone, the Committee to Protect Journalists has reported numerous abuses, including the assault of journalists covering protests, threats against Al Jazeera reporters, and the hacking of websites critical of the government.36

In addition, the king’s latest “media strategy” calls for a national “code of conduct.” This strategy would require the imposition of new laws, creating higher penalties for publishing “unsubstantiated” accusations of corruption both in print and on-line at a time when corruption has become the top political issue. These changes prompted the resignation of Taher Adwan, who called the proposed laws “a real blow to the reform process.” Adwan added, “It’s clear the forces resisting reform and supporters of corruption have a [loud] voice and are able to abort any true national effort for reform.”37

**AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE**

All senior officials – as well as the king himself – go to great pains to emphasize that real reform will be a “gradual process.” The Jordanian regime does appear to believe in reform, but on its own terms and at its own pace. The Jordanian people, on the other hand, are becoming increasingly impatient, particularly as economic conditions continue deteriorating for the Jordanian underclass.

For years, Jordan has been described as a “powder keg.” Sectarian tensions, demographic challenges, and the destabilizing effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict make for a potent mix. Despite these challenges, Jordan has stayed relatively stable. But
stability, as is often the case in the Arab world, seems increasingly illusory. Fortunately, the Jordanian government has refrained from using violence against its opposition. It showed a real, if tentative, interest in genuine reform by convening the National Dialogue Committee. But it has also dragged its feet on the key question of monarchical power. This, of course, is the way some in the region want it.

Saudi Arabia, under the auspices of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), has invited Jordan to join the council. Membership in the body holds the promise of much needed financial assistance. A flurry of Jordanian and Gulf officials have made reciprocal visits to pursue discussions. As unlikely as full membership may be – Jordan is, after all, not in the Gulf – leaders on both sides are taking significant steps to strengthen bilateral relations. Saudi and Emirati support is likely to relieve some of the pressure on Jordanian officials to pursue substantive reform. Saudi support does not come with stringent conditionality, yet it does come with its own rather obvious political implications.

In early July, Saudi Finance Minister Ibrahim al-Assaf made the first explicit promise of aid for Jordan: “Saudi Arabia and the other brotherly Gulf countries have always supported Jordan and will do so to help it overcome its temporary financial difficulties,”38 he said. In September, the GCC announced a five-year economic development plan for Jordan as well as for Morocco.

Notwithstanding Saudi attempts to insert itself in Jordanian politics, the United States remains Jordan’s most important ally and funder. Using the personal ties between the Obama Administration and King Abdullah while recognizing the leverage it has as Jordan’s largest donor, the United States should use back channels to emphasize the need for both quicker and more substantive reform. Rather than merely asserting the importance of democratic values, the Obama Administration should specify an end goal for reforms: a constitutional monarchy in which the king devolves significant powers to elected institutions. Being able to distinguish between cosmetic reforms – that tinker around the margins but fail to alter entrenched power structures – and genuine reforms is critical.

Until now, however, the United States, under successive administrations, has promoted Jordan as a “model” for economic and political reform. This may have been acceptable before the Arab Spring, but it no longer is. Jordan’s stability is no longer guaranteed, particularly as economic conditions worsen. After the events in Tunisia and Egypt, Jordanians are looking for actions, not just words – having heard the words too many times before. While they have not yet reached a critical mass, opposition forces, including Islamists, leftists, and youth movements, have slowly grown more emboldened. For the first time in decades, they are challenging the monarchy’s grip on power. Their deference toward the king persists, but it will not last forever.
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