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Jordan is Boiling

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In the forthcoming months King Abdullah II will face his toughest test, certainly his most difficult since he succeeded his father nearly thirteen years ago. Within the Kingdom and across three of its borders, unfolding developments carry far reaching implications for the region in general and Jordan's stability in particular.

Inside Jordan, the opposition – both that of the Muslim Brotherhood and that coming from the supposedly loyal southern tribes and towns – is sizzling.

The US final withdrawal from Iraq may cause anarchy there, which in turn will increase the flow of Iraqi refugees to Jordan. More than half a million people fled to Jordan in the wake of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, exacerbating economic demands and inflationary pressures. Ongoing Sunni-Shiite tension may draw Jordan against its will into the conflict, as occurred in 2005 when a Jordanian suicide bomber killed 127 Iraqis in Hillah, mostly Shiites, approximately 100 km south of Baghdad.

The uprising in Syria has created a new challenge for the Jordanian regime. For decades, King Hussein viewed Damascus and its leaders, especially Hafez al-Asad, with much suspicion. His concerns were far from unjustified, especially given his awareness of the ploys by the Syrian regime itself and other players who found shelter in Damascus. Relations, however, remained "correct," and the current leaders have even managed to soften them. But the uprising in Syria has yet again awakened the perennial Jordanian fear of becoming a safe haven for those fleeing the cruelty of the current Syrian government and those who will likely flee, primarily from the Alawaite minority, if the regime is replaced by a government with a Sunni majority. Several thousand Syrians have already crossed the border, even though the Jordanian army has increased its deployment there.

After several months of silence regarding the events in Syria, in mid November interviews to CNN and the BBC, King Abdullah departed from his previous detachment. In what for a Jordanian monarch was an atypical statement, he said that he called Bashar al-Asad

twice to advise him to introduce reforms but that the Syrian president refused to listen. "I believe if I were in his shoes, I would step down," the King said.

On the one hand, a regime change in Syria, if it prompts both an untying of the Damascus-Tehran knot and less hospitable treatment by the Syrian regime to groups that in the past tried to undermine Jordan's stability, might be viewed positively in Amman. On the other, the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan has sided with the Syrian anti-government forces and on November 16 called upon the King to recognize the Syrian National Council puts King Abdullah in an awkward situation. The specter of Jordanian and Syrian Muslim Brotherhood cooperation no doubt raises concerns in the Jordanian palace. A sample of problems to come was the death of a Jordanian youngster last week in the border town of Ramta. The person who was arrested, allegedly for helping Syrians to buy arms, died in jail. Although the Jordanian authorities claimed he committed suicide, the hundreds of Jordanians who took to the streets to demonstrate thought differently. Leading figures in the Jordanian government rushed to Ramta to express their condolences to the family of the youngster, indicating an increased sensitivity to the fragile situation on the border with Syria.

Unrest also returned to the streets of Amman and the remote towns of Karak, Shoubak, and Ma'an. The south is the Monarchy's base of strength, but severe problems of poverty and unemployment have driven demonstrators to violence and vandalism. In the face of public outcry against corruption and especially in the government, King Abdullah resorted to the traditional measure of changing prime ministers. This time, though, the appointment of a new prime minister aims to be more than just a routine political move. Awn Khasawneh is one of the most prominent Jordanians who until the King's call served as a judge in the International Court of Justice in the Hague. He knows the Royal Court, as he was its head in the mid-1990s during the negotiations leading to the 1994 peace treaty with Israel.

The prestige of an international jurist as prime minister was likely seen by the King as an asset in trying to convince the Jordanians that the government will fight corruption and become more transparent. The other motive in the appointment of Khasawneh was the attempt to buy Muslim Brotherhood endorsement of the King's attempts to introduce certain reforms in the Constitution and the electoral laws. Khasawneh has not hidden his views that banning Hamas in Jordan in 1999 was a mistake, and he has maintained cordial relations with the Muslim Brotherhood. Nonetheless, Khasawneh's appointment maybe prove insufficient, especially if the Jordanian Brotherhood will – together with the rest of the world – witness political success of fellow organizations in other Arab countries.

This issue of government-Brotherhood relations must have been in the King's mind when he decided to visit Palestinian Authority President Abba in Ramallah on November 21. The rapprochement between the two major Palestinian factions and the possible cooperation between them will affect Jordan. This may occur, for example, if Hamas is allowed to renew its activities in the West Bank, which is closer to Jordan than Gaza, both geographically and demographically. In addition, a Fatah-Hamas joint platform of action, which may put an end to any prospect of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, would be viewed with great concern in Amman. The absence of any negotiations may drift into violent friction between Israel and the Palestinians with dire consequences for all concerned, Jordan included. The fear in Jordan of another wave of Palestinians fleeing a third intifada, in addition to fears from Syrian and Iraqi refugees, must surely cause sleepless nights in Amman.

Israel's Foreign Minister made an important statement (November 14) saying that those claiming that Jordan is the Palestinian state are causing harm to Israel's security interests: "Jordan is a stabilizing factor in the region in terms of what takes place in other states. Talk about Jordan as a Palestinian state runs contrary to the Israeli interests and reality." This statement, which was deliberate and more than simply off the cuff, must have been heard and read in Amman, even though no reaction came from there. Official Jordan should encourage and commend such statements.

