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A New Jordanian Government

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Jordanian prime ministers do not resign; they are replaced. Thus it is hard to believe that Awn Khasawneh actually resigned on April 26, 2012 – while on a visit to Turkey, no less. Moreover, the new Prime Minister, Fayez Tarawneh, was appointed in a hurried fashion, and the King's letter, which was publicized immediately, was unusual in the harshness of the criticism aimed at the outgoing PM, more indicative of a dismissal than a resignation.

In the appointment letter, the King praised the new PM and hinted at the role Tarawneh – who served as prime minister at the end of King Hussein's rule – played in the transition to the rule of King Abdullah II. The smooth, peaceful transition seems to justify the praise.

The King made it clear to Tarawneh that he is being appointed for a transition period, during which he must implement several reforms: the political parties law, the establishment of a constitutional court, the establishment of an elections commission, and most of all, the electoral law. The King noted that the latter is meant to ensure that "the lower house will indeed represent all Jordanians...the high level of representation of a just representation." The driving idea is to make elections possible before the end of the year. The King added that local government elections must be held, that freedom of the press must be ensured, and that it is necessary to expedite economic reforms alongside the political reforms. The letter emphasized in particular the importance of dealing with corruption and completing an energy and water development master plan.

King Abdullah thus took a conciliatory stand vis-à-vis protesters by telling Tarawneh that they must be treated in a "civilized manner," with the need to understand their motives in order to make sure that closer links between the people and state institutions are forged.

The security forces were not omitted from the letter – the King noted the need to abide by their requirements – and neither, of course, were the Palestinians. The King stressed Jordan's support for the establishment of a sustainable Palestinian state inside the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital: "We, the Hashemites, will continue to play our historic role in defending and preserving the sites holy to Islam and Christianity in Jerusalem."

The new government, sworn in on May 2, 2012, has 30 ministers, 12 of whom served in the outgoing cabinet, including Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh.

The election law is the toughest of the challenges facing the new government. The King is trying to steer a course between the demand by the opposition – particularly the Muslim Brotherhood – for full proportional representation, which would reflect the support for the organization, and the King's own desire not to lose control of parliament even while projecting the appearance of a reform-minded sovereign. It is safe to assume that the jurist in him confronted outgoing Prime Minister Awn Khasawneh with many thorny dilemmas and put him in conflict with the King. Finding a formula that will bridge the opposition's demand and the royal court's desire for political survival is all but impossible, as the Muslim Brotherhood draws encouragement from the party's victories in Egypt and the Jordanian Teachers' Union elections.

The current formula presented to the Jordanian parliament in early April, before Khasawneh's resignation-cum-dismissal, was not favorably received. According to the formula, every voter will vote for three candidates: two from expanded voting districts that have not yet been drafted and one from a national list of the parties participating in the elections. While this is the first time that national lists will be presented to voters, the number of candidates elected in national and proportional elections will not exceed 50 percent of the members of the house of representatives as demanded by the opposition. Only 15 national candidates out of the 138 members of parliament determined by the law will be elected in national elections; a national party cannot win more than five of them. The objective is clear: reducing the representation of the Islamic Action Front, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood and diluting the Palestinian representation.

Aware of the need for international backing, the King is trying to garner support for his way of confronting the dilemmas presented by Jordan's particular situation. The King recently visited Brussels, the capital of the EU, and Strasbourg, the seat of the EU parliament, and on his return met with EU ambassadors. Furthermore, in a meeting with American Congressional aides the King presented his position on the political parties law. It seems that the King is thinking in terms of three political parties (right, left, and center) whose platforms are national rather than representative of sectarian interests, a message to the Muslim Brotherhood that it will have to produce a comprehensive political and economic platform that goes beyond what has been presented in the organization's weekly demonstrations.

The opposition (i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood and left-leaning groups) expressed their displeasure with Tarawneh's appointment in the May 4, 2012 protests that focused on revoking the October 1994 peace agreement with Israel, of which Tarawneh was one of the main architects. Hundreds of demonstrators called the peace agreement an "agreement of surrender." Demonstrations spread also to cities in the south, considered bastions of support for the Hashemites. In fact, slogans calling for reforms were noticeably absent in

the most recent demonstrations; it was clear that the focus on Israel was meant to undermine Tarawneh's credibility and emphasize that he is not the choice of all segments of Jordan's population.

On May 6, 2012 the King appointed the elections commission; it is headed by Abdul Ilah Khatib and consists of four additional members with legal background. Khatib, who served as foreign minister in several governments between 1998 and 2002, coordinated the international political activity over the Libyan crisis for the UN Secretary General and earned high praise. The role of the elections commission is to oversee all stages of the elections process and make sure that the outcome of the process is "a lower house that will express the true will of the people and represent all segments of society" – an inherently problematic statement. The first reactions to the establishment of the commission were positive, but despite its importance and the qualifications of its members, the transparency and propriety of the elections is merely a secondary issue.

It seems that the King will be forced to soften the proposed law and increase the number of representatives of national parties, even if the final number is less than half of parliament. Without any effort to accept some of the opposition's demands, the opposition is liable to boycott the elections and cast doubt on the representative nature of the next parliament.

At this point, the King and his government will likely avoid posting a new ambassador to Israel so as not to upset further the delicate relationship with the opposition. It may be that this approach will be expanded to include other official steps in the sphere of Jordanian-Israeli relations, unless King Abdullah II succeeds in his attempt to revive the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

