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**Jordan in Face of Three, and Perhaps Four, Challenges**

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**The parliamentary elections that will be held in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on November 10, 2020 will take place in the shadow of three crises – Covid-19, economic distress, and growing civil tension as a result of the government's actions against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Teachers Association. On the one hand, the King's decision to hold the elections in accordance with the constitution, despite the social unrest, is admirable. On the other hand, his firm stance toward professional and political organizations has prompted domestic and external criticism. In addition, Jordanian fears of Israeli annexation of territories in the West Bank have not subsided. If Israel refrains from annexation measures, it is possible that if a Democratic wins the race for the White House in the coming months, there would be one less potential obstacle facing the Jordanian regime, increasing its chances of successfully weathering the 2020 elections. Nonetheless, over time it will need to continue to address additional challenges in the economic, demographic, and governance realms.**

The Covid-19 crisis hit Jordan when the Hashemite Kingdom was already weathering poor opening conditions. The war in Syria brought some 1.4 million Syrians to Jordan in search of refuge, intensifying the Kingdom's existing economic problems, chief among them unemployment. Oil prices, which were already in decline before 2020, harmed Jordan's ability to look to the Gulf states for financial assistance. Negotiations in 2019 between Jordan and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on a multi-year loan stipulated that Jordan must undertake fiscal reforms, which led to much criticism among many groups in Jordan, as acceding to the demand threatens their interests. In September 2019 thousands of teachers demonstrated throughout Jordan against the decline in their salaries and thus prevented the opening of the school year. After prolonged negotiations, the government yielded to most of their demands.

The Jordanian regime's efforts to confront the Covid-19 pandemic earn high marks, especially against the backdrop of the opening conditions. King Abdullah II allowed the government and the relevant ministers in particular to manage the crisis, who ensured the government's ongoing connection with the public regarding behavioral guidelines, information on the spread of the disease, and economic aid. The King's appearances in

the media were few and measured, and aimed to depict him as a unifying figure, not as someone dealing with the details. In the unwritten division of labor between him and the government, the King assumed the role of fundraiser. Indeed, the amazingly low number of fatalities and seriously ill from Covid-19 (11 fatalities so far) can be attributed mainly to the quick efforts of the regime, the emergency steps taken, and the uncompromising enforcement of regulations, including at mosques. Moreover, a significant portion of the cases diagnosed are among foreign citizens, including truck drivers from Syria and Saudi Arabia.

Like other governments, Jordan was forced to increase its budget deficit in order to reduce the damage to essential sectors, workers, and especially temporary workers. Until the last few years, Jordan had succeeded in maintaining a reasonable and low debt-to-GDP ratio of 80 percent, enjoyed loans from international financial institutions, income from industries and in particular tourism (10 percent of GDP), the export of phosphates, and money transfers from Jordanians employed abroad. Assistance from the Gulf states helped Jordan cope with the ongoing economic distress since the arrival of the refugees from Syria. However, the pandemic prompted the majority of workers abroad to return to Jordan; the tourism industry was paralyzed; and there was a drastic decline in oil prices (influenced in part by the lack of agreement between Russia and Saudi Arabia on how to cope with the reduced demand due to the pandemic). The drop in oil and gas prices influenced the ability and willingness of the producer states to help other Arab states, including Jordan.

However, despite the negative economic growth forecast for 2020, at a rate of minus 3.7 percent, the financial system expressed confidence in Jordan's economic management. Aside from the multi-year loan of \$1.3 billion, the IMF granted another loan of \$396 million for coping with the Covid-19 crisis. In addition, the issuing of Jordanian government bonds met with excess demand at reasonable interest rates (4.95 percent for five years, 5.85 percent for 10 years).

With the establishment of the new government in Israel on May 17, 2020, and in light of the agreement between the Likud and Blue and White parties on April 23 that enabled the Prime Minister to submit the agreement between Israel and the United States on the application of Israeli sovereignty in West Bank territories to the government or the Knesset for approval from July 1, 2020, Jordan began a political campaign to prevent this measure. More than half of Jordan's citizens are of Palestinian ancestry, and any Israeli annexation would provoke waves of protest – especially if the King were not to stand up and take action against the annexation. On this issue too, the King displayed tactical wisdom in managing the campaign in the international arena in coordination with the Palestinian Authority, especially in order to receive the appreciation that he could present

to Jordan's Palestinian citizens. The messages were simple and clear: any amount of annexation in any part of the West Bank would kill the two-state solution, which is the solution accepted by all of the international community; annexation would undermine peace and security in the region and intensify the region's difficulties. Israel and the United States were barely mentioned in these messages, and the King and Jordanian foreign minister, the only ones who managed the campaign, were actively involved in it. Jordanian Prime Minister Omar Razzaz, in an unusual statement (*The Guardian*, July 21) went beyond the official version, stating that the death of the two-state solution would lead to an apartheid state, but if Israel would accept a single democratic state, in which the Arab citizens would enjoy complete and equal rights, Jordan could relate to this positively. The fact that at present no concrete annexation proposal has been submitted by Israel for the approval of the government or the Knesset helps the King win points in the Palestinian arena on both sides of the Jordan River and in the Arab states, as well as in the international arena, which almost in entirety has voiced opposition to annexation.

Against the backdrop of this impressive record, the decision to abide by the law and hold parliamentary elections on November 10 seemed free of significant risks. During the Covid-19 crisis only limited criticism was voiced about the government's performance, and public opinion polls also indicated solid support for specific ministers, including the health minister. The outgoing parliament did not function as a rubber stamp for the regime, but aside from several issues, including the reforms demanded by the IMF or the deal to acquire natural gas produced in Israel, it was careful not to cross the line and confront the King and force him to dissolve the parliament. With the Covid-19 crisis, most activity moved to the executive branch, while the Speaker of the lower house makes headlines regarding Israel's annexation intentions, to pacify Palestinian or Islamists house members.

Ostensibly the November elections should not substantially change the balance of power between the King and his government on the one hand and the parliament on the other hand. However, in July the regime took two steps that signal its doubts as to public satisfaction regarding its achievements; hence the recourse to measures that damage its enlightened and responsible image, which the King has worked hard to develop. On July 16, the Court of Cassation ordered the dismantlement of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in Jordan. The political and legal motivations for this step are not clear, because with the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the movement was outlawed, its offices were closed, and the movement itself decided not to run in the previous elections. The other step, which appears drastic and draconian, was the arrest on July 25 of the Board of Directors of the Teachers Association in Jordan and the closing of its headquarters in Amman, along with 11 branches throughout the country. The Attorney General prohibited the publication of press reports on the issue, and the next day the Education

Ministry announced the appointment of a temporary board. In the eyes of the regime, the two organizations are collaborating: for example, the Interior Minister claimed that at the teachers' protests in early August in the city of Karak, representatives of two political parties also participated (the minister did not mention their names).

The steps against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Teachers Association signal that the regime will oppose any change in the rules of the game and in the existing balance of political-legal power. Some of the parties, including the Islamic Action Front, have an interest in increasing the number of members of parliament elected on a national basis at the expense of the members of parliament representing electoral districts: as such they would not lose votes in these districts to local candidates, who enjoy tribal support. In the current parliament, the biggest party is the Islamic Action Front, which represents the Muslim Brotherhood. Presumably this party would benefit from increasing the number elected based on national lists. The Front collaborates with smaller parties that together form the coalition for reform, which has 15 members of parliament, ten of them members of the Islamic Action Front. The regime is concerned that the economic distress will increase support for candidates from the parties that make up this coalition, and thus seeks to prevent discussion on changing the electoral system.

In light of the limited time remaining before the elections, in addition to the regime's ability to take administrative steps due to the pandemic to disrupt organizing (for example, movement between governorates is prohibited) and the end of the parliament's term, the odds of change are nil. The regime will seek to welcome election day with the positive image that has been built in recent months, and thus it is likely that it will attempt to resolve its relations with the Teachers Association, if only in order to prevent a repeat of the events of 2019.

If Israel refrains from annexation measures in the West Bank, and if a Democrat wins the coming race for the White, there would be one less potential obstacle in the set of challenges before the Jordanian regime, increasing its chances of success in the 2020 elections. However, over time it will need to continue to address the challenges originating from the severe and economic distress, and the tension between the desire to advance an enlightened and democratic regime and the demographic reality, in which the founders of the Kingdom do not have a majority.