

Jordan: A New Political System Faces Longstanding Problems

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In advance of the parliamentary elections in Jordan scheduled for November 10, 2020 King Abdullah has appointed Dr. Bisher al-Khasawneh, a close advisor, as Prime Minister. The new government was sworn in on October 12. In addition to the changes in the government and those likely to occur following the elections, the King has also changed the composition of the Senate, the other Jordanian legislative body. This will complete the shake-up in the Jordanian political system. The new system, however, will have to continue to confront longstanding problems, mainly economic, that were aggravated by the decade of effects from the "Arab Spring," as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. For Israel, it is possible that the agreement for the passage of Israeli airplanes through Jordanian airspace could signal Jordanian willingness to take part in projects made possible by the agreements between Israel and the Gulf states. The Israeli government and the new government in Amman should discuss economic plans that can include Jordan and enable it to take advantage of its geo-strategic location between the Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea.

The elections to the Jordanian parliament will take place on November 10, 2020, unless King Abdullah II decides to postpone them because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The outgoing government under Prime Minister Omar Razzaz submitted its resignation, as required by Jordanian law. The King gave the task of forming a new government to Dr. Bisher al-Khasawneh, who has served in a number of senior posts in the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and has been the king's closest political advisor in recent years. The new government was sworn in before King Abdullah on October 12 in a ceremony conducted according to Covid-19 restrictions: those present wore masks, and no group photograph was taken.

Certain ministries are particularly important in the context of the bilateral relations between Jordan and Israel. Minister of Foreign Affairs Ayman Safadi kept his post in the new government, and was also promoted to Deputy Prime Minister. The new Minister of Water and Irrigation is Motasem Saidan, a professor of chemical engineering. The Minister of Environment is Nabil Masarweh, who has much experience in the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources Hala Zawati kept her position in the new government. The Minister of Tourism and Antiquities is Nayef al-

Fayez, who served in this position and others in previous governments. Also of interest to Israel is Minister of Media Affairs Ali al-Ayed, who formerly served as his country's ambassador in Israel.

Both the King's letter to the new Prime Minister and the response (presumably both of them were written by the incoming Prime Minister) concentrated on the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing consequences. Jordan weathered the first wave of the pandemic with surprising success, with only 20 fatalities in the first four months. To date the number of fatalities has risen to 380, and the number of those infected is nearly 39,000. In addition to the difficulty faced by the Jordanian healthcare infrastructure in coping with the high morbidity, the kingdom has had severe difficulty in meeting the economic challenge created during the decade-long "Arab Spring," which severely damaged the Jordanian economy by reducing trade with neighboring Syria and Iraq, the centers of the struggle between the Islamic State and forces from regional states and the international coalition. The Covid-19 pandemic has afflicted all of the countries in the region, but its effect in Jordan has taken a particular toll. Jordan lacks natural resources (other than phosphate); its economy relies on tourism and money transfers from workers outside the kingdom, as well as revenues from the transit of goods through its territory. These sectors have all been hit hard by the global economic impact of the pandemic, and no improvement is projected in the coming months.

In his letter of response to the King and in the new appointments in his government, Prime Minister al-Khasawneh explained how he would attempt to deal with these two existential challenges – the pandemic and the economic crisis. Of the three Deputy Prime Ministers, one of is Minister of State for Economic Affairs Umayya Toukan, an economist who previously served in senior economic posts. Ever since gaining independence, Jordan has been dependent on regional and international aid, which the King makes great effort to secure. Toukan's appointment is designed to show both the internal and international economic communities that Jordan's new government is sound and has relevant professional experience. In addition to new Minister of Health Nathir Obeidat, whose medical specialty is respiratory systems, Prime Minister al-Khasawneh plans to appoint a czar to head the campaign against the Covid-19 epidemic.

As expected in a country where the majority of the population is Palestinian, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has not been ignored. King Abdullah himself headed the campaign against President Trump's plan for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and against the Israeli government's plan to annex territories in the West Bank. In his response to the King's appointment letter, al-Khasawneh wrote that the Palestinian issue was the highest priority (even though it appears at the end of the letter), and that his government would devote its efforts to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state on the June 4,

1967 borders with its capital in East Jerusalem. He also promised to pay special attention to the holy sites in Jerusalem, based on Jordanian custodianship, and what he described as Israel's efforts to change the historic and legal status quo in Jerusalem.

At the same time, the removal of the annexation issue from the Israeli agenda, the internal division among the Palestinians, the downgrading of the Palestinian issue in the Arab and international agendas, and the desire to avoid a public confrontation with the Gulf states that have formed relations with Israel without any solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have had an effect. These events have enabled Jordan to focus rather on dealing with its domestic challenges, and to prepare for possible changes in the regional and international set-ups, following the peace agreements between Israel and the Gulf states and particularly a possible change of president and administration in the United States,.

Under Jordanian law, the government will appear before the newly elected parliament and present its work plan and the new budget. The vote on these two questions in effect constitutes a vote of confidence in the new government. Despite having been elected through a system that guarantees the regime's control over its decisions, the outgoing parliament was not regarded as a rubber stamp. It clashed with the government of Hani al-Mulki (which preceded the government of Omar Razzaz) on the issue of the financial reforms forced on Jordan by the International Monetary Fund as a condition for receiving a huge loan, and also on the question of purchasing natural gas from Israel.

The upcoming elections feature a significant increase in the number of political parties running, both single-district parties and nationwide parties. In the outgoing parliament, the largest bloc was a coalition between the Reform Party and those elected on behalf of the Muslim Brotherhood, which did not run under its own name because of its decision to boycott the 2016 elections. Presumably the mounting unemployment, the recurring lockdowns imposed in order to rein in coronavirus morbidity, and the absence of a positive economic horizon will influence the election results, even though voter turnout is expected to be lower than in the past. The new parliament is expected to challenge the new government on issues that have already arisen in recent months, among them the effect of the emergency laws (designed to facilitate lockdowns and restrictions on movement) and freedom of assembly and speech. Also on the agenda are the poor relations between the government and the teachers union, which worsened following the closure of the union's offices throughout the kingdom and the arrest of its leaders.

It appears that thus far the government has not been able to contain the pandemic or its economic consequences. However, the government claims that it has the situation under control, certainly in comparison with the situation and damage in the neighboring

countries. The appointment of al-Khasawneh shows King Abdullah's confidence that the public has complete trust in him and his decisions, although the combination of a deteriorating economic situation and the health situation creates a highly tenuous environment. The King and the new government will have to face these challenges in the near future.

Regarding Israel-Jordan relations, the suspension of Israeli annexation in the West Bank also facilitates a thaw between the two countries. The agreement between them on the passage of Israel airplanes through Jordanian airspace is a signal by Jordan of its willingness to take part in regional projects made possible by the peace agreements between Israel and the Gulf states. The Israeli government and the new government in Jordan should begin a dialogue to explore economic plans that can include Jordan and enable it to take advantage of its geo-strategic location between the Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea.