

Jordan 2021: Cause for Concern in Israel, but No Need to Panic

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Recent developments in Jordan and its immediate neighborhood have raised questions about the stability of the regime in the kingdom, and with that, have aroused concern in Israel. The questions stem from the possible ramifications of the economic crisis in Jordan, especially among the tribal Bedouin population, which is the traditional support base of the monarchy, and from the response to the reforms that the king intends to implement in the parliamentary electoral system; from the direct challenges by various Jordanians toward the monarchy; and from the changes in Jordan's regional policy, especially regarding Syria. The stability of the Hashemite regime was and still is an important cornerstone of Israel's security. Any significant change in Jordan's political-military orientation or undermining of the regime could have implications for Israel's strategic balance.

The Ongoing Economic Crisis

The World Bank report published on October 7, 2021 points to a worsening economic situation in Jordan, resulting from a drastic decline in revenue from tourism and import duties, from few and meager remittances, from skyrocketing energy prices, and from the fiscal and humanitarian steps taken by the government to meet the economic ramifications of the pandemic. At the end of 2021 the government debt to GDP ratio will reach 109 percent, and in 2023 it will likely reach 115.2 percent – a high, troubling rate that could make it difficult for the Jordanian government to borrow money. If the rise in energy prices of recent months continues, and if the government continues to subsidize the price of energy for manufacturers and for ordinary citizens, Jordan's national debt will grow significantly.

Furthermore, unemployment in Jordan grew by more than 5 percent compared to 2020 and reached 25 percent (28 percent among women

and 48 percent among the younger generation). The report notes that 40 percent of the Jordanian workforce is employed in an unregulated manner, and among foreign workers the percentage is even higher. The combined consequences of all of these led the writers of the report to express concern at the levels of poverty in Jordan. However, World Bank economists expect real growth of the Jordanian economy in 2021 at a rate of 1.9 percent, and with an improvement in the global economic situation in the coming years, an average annual growth rate of 2.3 percent.

Is the Monarchy in Jordan in Danger?

When the Jordanian regime exposed the conspiracy allegedly planned by Prince Hamzah, the son of King Hussein and Queen Noor and half-brother of King Abdullah II, together with Bassem Awadallah, a former senior official at the palace, it indirectly confirmed rumors that all is not roses in the royal family, and that even 22 years after Abdullah II ascended the throne, there are those who challenge his entitlement and suitability for the kingship.

In August, Osama al-Ajarma, a former member of parliament, was put on trial after being accused of threatening the king's life in a wild and inflammatory speech to his constituents, in which he was also seen drawing his sword. Another member of parliament took the seat in parliament reserved for the Prime Minister and defiantly refused to vacate it. In early October reports were published in the international press of secret investments by various global figures, including the Jordanian king, via companies operating in tax havens. The affair was not silenced and the palace published an explanation, and immediately afterwards, references to the issue in the Jordanian press stopped. It is possible that the majority of Jordanian readers were not surprised by the fact that the king is the owner of real estate assets, and it was an open secret that the late King Hussein had property outside of Jordan. The surprise is perhaps in the fact that these are assets estimated at \$100 million. Presumably there are those who wonder privately how the king has reached such great wealth while the kingdom's citizens are suffering under the ongoing economic plight.

Tension has also arisen vis-à-vis the reforms that the king seeks to implement in the Jordanian parliament's electoral system. For years Abdullah II has striven to institute reforms in the structure and functions of the parties in order to reduce their number and make them better suited to statesmanship. Last June he appointed former Prime Minister Samir Rifai as head of a committee to recommend changes in this direction. The committee submitted its recommendations to the king in early October; the principal recommendation is indeed to strengthen the national lists over those focused on single electoral districts. According to the recommendations, Jordan will be divided into 18 districts and the 19th district will be the whole of Jordan, which will be allocated 41 seats in a 138-member parliament. Other recommendations include strengthening the representation of women and the younger generation. Proposed corrections, including limiting the immunity of members of parliament to detainment but not against trial, could seem aimed at reducing the power of the parliament, although from what has been published so far, it seems that the committee did not submit recommendations aiming to change the balance of power between the palace and the parliament.

The very establishment of a committee and the reports on its discussions prompted anxiety among the Bedouin tribes, who constitute the support base of the Hashemite regime. They are concerned that changes in the system would weaken their parliamentary power, which relies on a distribution of seats in parliament that benefits their districts at the expense of the number of seats assigned to the big cities, where citizens of Palestinian ancestry are a majority. If the king's support for the committee's recommendations leads to opposition, especially on the part of the tribes, he will be forced to grant them weight due to their dissatisfaction at the lack of attention that the palace has demonstrated toward their view of their interests and place in the ruling hierarchy.

A Change in the Regional Approach

Relations between King Abdullah II and the United States, specifically during the Trump administration, deteriorated to a low point reminiscent

of the period in 1990-91 following King Hussein's support for Saddam Hussein after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The "deal of the century" – proposed by the Trump administration to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in which Israel was meant to continue to rule a third of the territory of the West Bank and all of Jerusalem after the institution of a permanent arrangement – left the king no choice other than a direct confrontation with the US President. The confrontation intensified in 2020 with the signing of the Abraham Accords at the White House, which left Jordan (and the Palestinians) almost alone in the campaign against the Trump plan.

Furthermore, King Abdullah II has no doubt studied the geostrategic map and Washington's intention in the region, which emerged already in the first years of the Obama administration, to focus American political-military-economic efforts on the Indo-Pacific region, and he began searching for alternatives, if only partial. The king's sour relations with former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the tension between Jordan and Israel on a series of issues have ruled out thinking about regional partnership arrangements that include Jordan and Israel. On the other hand, recent changes in Iraq – the election of a government characterized by increasing independence from Iran – as well as political and geographical proximity have created a basis for political/economic Egyptian-Jordanian-Iraqi partnership, which may have difficulty producing significant economic results but would provide Jordan with the standing of a regional player.

The developing cooperation between Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon that is centered on the provision of electricity and natural gas to Syria and Lebanon should also be assessed through these lenses. In October a border crossing between Jordan and Syria was opened, and economic meetings between the countries took place – both at the governmental level and in the private sector. Following groundwork between the heads of the security establishments of both countries, King Abdullah and Syria's President Bashar al-Assad spoke by phone, which more than anything else symbolizes the change in the king's approach toward the regime in

Damascus. A few days after this phone call, the foreign ministers of Jordan and Iran also spoke by phone, after years without communication, and this too illustrated the developing change in Amman's regional policy. The two phone calls should cause concern in Israel.

Like many others, King Abdullah II is presumably resigned to a reality in which the Syrian regime and President Assad remain in place and in which sooner or later a gradual reconstruction process will begin in Syria and in Lebanon, for which at least partial funding will be found. Jordan has an economic and political interest in taking part in any such process. At the same time, it is likely that the king is also wary of Iran's presence in Syria and control over parts of it. While cooperation with Syria provides a kind of insurance policy against subversive Iranian activity in Jordan, such an assumption can turn out to be a dangerous illusion. Inter alia, it is not clear to what extent the Assad regime wants to or can stop the flood of smugglers bringing drugs produced in Syria into Jordan almost every night.

In any case, the Jordanian regime likely updated the US administration about the expected steps and did not receive a negative response. Ostensibly, Israel too has no reason to see these steps in a negative light, aside from the historical baggage of several mistaken strategic steps taken by the regime in Jordan – engagement with other Arab countries that ended in significant damage to Jordan. If there were comprehensive strategic dialogue between Israel and Jordan, this would be the appropriate forum for an in-depth discussion of the consequences of changing the Jordanian stance on Syria.

A positive development from Israel's perspective is the water agreement signed with Jordan on October 12. According to the agreement, Israel will provide 50 million cubic meters of water in a year with an option of two more years, removing a stumbling block and providing hope for continued cooperation on infrastructure issues between the two countries.

In conclusion, there is cause for concern in Israel about events in Jordan, but no reason to panic. The occurrences in Jordan are troubling because even a marginal undermining of the kingdom's stability could have consequences for the day-to-day balance sheet of relations between the countries as well as the long-term relations. The bilateral dialogue at the most senior level in Israel and in Jordan that was renewed after the establishment of the Bennett government needs to be continued and cultivated, so that sensitive issues can also be discussed with the utmost openness. It is proposed to consider establishment of a trilateral Egyptian-Jordanian-Israeli political-military forum where it would be possible to discuss the regional consequences of issues that directly concern the three countries. The regional developments justify and enable these and other initiatives.

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