The End of Jordan as We Know It?

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Throughout the course of history, some states have been born out of long periods of gunfire, blood, and destruction. Others were the result of colonial officials conferring in smoke-filled rooms, poring over maps, and penciling in lines that ultimately became the borders of new states. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan belongs to the second category, as do its neighbors, Syria and Iraq. Of course, there are those who will argue that several thousand Arabs fought and died in World War I, following Sharif Hussein of Mecca’s decision to side with the British Empire against the Ottomans, but historians will continue to quibble over whether this sacrifice merited the creation of three different states. There is, however, no arguing that the existence of all three is now challenged in a process that threatens the collapse of the Middle East political order that emerged in the wake of the Great War and that has lasted for generations.

The Birth of Jordan

In early 1921, Winston Churchill was appointed colonial secretary in the British government. Within days of assuming office, Churchill was to travel to Cairo to attend a conference of His Majesty’s senior diplomats and military men serving in the Middle East. In the short period between his appointment and his boarding the ship to Egypt, Churchill created the Middle East Department. This department was, as Churchill explained, to be the administrative arm with which he would run the affairs of Mesopotamia and Palestine. Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon not unreasonably viewed the new entity as a body through which Churchill could run the affairs of the British Empire throughout the entire region. The new department was in large measure based on the experience of T.E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) and two other British officials. Before sailing for Egypt, the three officials handed a memorandum to Churchill in which they recommended “….setting up in Trans-Jordan a political system somewhat different from that in force on the other side of the river. If British promises are to stand, this system must be Arab in character. We consider that it should preferably be centralized under an Arab ruler acceptable to His Majesty’s government and acting in important matters under their advice.”
Disregarding the written plea to Churchill by Dr. Chaim Weizmann, the leader of the Zionist movement, to extend the borders of the British Mandate over Palestine right up to the Hejaz Railway, Churchill accepted the recommendation of the three trusted officials to disconnect politically the two banks of the Jordan River. In vain did Sir Herbert Samuel, the first British high commissioner of Palestine, travel to Cairo in a last-ditch effort to prevent the separation of the two territories.

From Cairo, Churchill carried on to Palestine. There, he met with Emir Abdullah, a son of Sharif Hussein, who had already established himself in Trans-Jordan. In a series of meetings in Jerusalem, Abdullah was easily convinced that he should accept the British proposal. He made only a feeble plea to have the territory on the other side of the Jordan River also included in the area allotted to him. The British rejected that request out of hand.

**Ninety Years of Economic Troubles**

The ease with which Jordan was created could not foretell the decades of tribulations and crises that successive Hashemite rulers would experience in their continuous effort to preserve the integrity of their kingdom. King Abdullah II is no exception and has been forced to confront Jordan’s almost-perennial problem—absorbing waves of refugees fleeing from conflicts in which Jordan has not always been a belligerent. In five successive wars, Jordan became home to almost 3 million refugees.

The Jordanian Department of Statistics does not provide data on the number of Palestinian refugees within the borders of the country. However, three successive waves of refugees (1948, 1967, and 1991) led to a situation in which Palestinians constitute a clear majority among the 6.25 million people who lived in the kingdom at the end of 2011. Unlike the close to half a million Iraqis who found shelter in Jordan in the wake of the 1991 and 2003 wars or the 175,000 Syrians who have fled the bloodbath in their country, the Palestinians are citizens with full political and civil rights. This is an ever present and always decisive fact guiding Jordan’s internal and external policies.

The latest waves of refugees have confronted Jordan with long-term strains on an already fragile economy. The chaos and political uncertainty in Iraq and Syria are unlikely to disappear in the foreseeable future. This only increases the urgency of finding permanent solutions to the housing, education, health, and employment needs of refugees who have sought sanctuary in the kingdom. Beyond the unique circumstances of its present situation—having absorbed vast numbers of refugees in short periods of time—Jordan has had to wrestle with the impact of the global economic crisis, including severe hikes in the prices of oil and basic staples. The
International Monetary Fund (IMF), in recognition of the dire economic and political situation in Jordan, recently granted the kingdom a $2 billion loan—far exceeding its special drawing rights.\(^2\)

The loan comes as an addition to $700 million that Washington granted Jordan in 2012 and the $1.25 billion grant that the kingdom received from a special fund created by some members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. That fund aims to assist Amman to a tune of $5 billion. Pledges to help Jordan were also made by other donors including the European Union. All told, this represents an impressive level of assistance that could alleviate the economic situation in the short and medium terms. If properly managed, these funds could go a long way toward reducing popular resentment against the government and the palace. In recent years, such discontent has also spread to segments of the population that have traditionally been pillars of the regime and this may be a last chance to remedy the situation.

**New Political Pressures**

While trying to cope with demographic and economic pressures, Jordan is engaged in a domestic political battle that must be seen as part of the Arab awakening sweeping the region, but one that has its own local dimensions. King Abdullah II was one of the first Arab rulers to understand the explosive nature of the unrest in the Middle East and one of the first to introduce political reforms. Unlike other Arab states in which some reforms have been introduced, such as Tunisia and Morocco, far-reaching political changes could threaten the very essence, and perhaps even the existence, of the 1921 Churchillian creation called Jordan.

All its shortcomings notwithstanding, it is the absolute monarchy that has held Jordan together since it was initially created and that has preserved its territorial integrity. From 1948–67, Jordan was in control of the West Bank, but was stripped of that territory in the 1967 Six-Day War. In hindsight, the loss of the West Bank may have delayed the Hashemite Kingdom’s confrontation with the existential dilemma it now faces.

In the attempt to maintain at least a semblance of “political correctness”—democracy on the one hand, and the political supremacy of the pre-1948–67 Palestinian refugee society, mostly Bedouin tribes on the other—the “one person, one vote” electoral system was developed. While every vote of a Palestinian or a Bedouin is equal, their representation in parliament is not. It is intentionally skewed to keep the overwhelming parliamentary majority in the hands of the non-Palestinian segments of society, which constitute a minority of the population. This is done by assigning disproportional weight to thinly populated areas, mainly those south of Amman, which constitute the regime’s Bedouin support base. This
is done at the expense of voters in Amman, Irbid, or Zarqa, where the Palestinians reside. Thus Tafila, a small town in the south, is assigned four seats in parliament while Amman, with a population thirty times larger, receives only twenty-three.

This system, however, will soon be revamped in accordance with the proposals of the government as approved by the current parliament. The king agreed to allow national parties to run and to allow twenty-seven deputies of the proposed 150-seat lower house to be elected on a national basis. This, of course, is a far cry from the opposition demand that half of the delegates be elected on a national basis. That demand is mainly advanced by the Muslim Brotherhood, which has a well organized political arm, the Islamic Action Front. The Brotherhood stands to become the biggest winner under any system that allows political parties to field candidates for a national ballot. At this point, all the mushrooming opposition parties have said that they will boycott the elections the king and the elections commission are committed to holding before the end of 2012.

In a recent interview, the king directly addressed the Muslim Brotherhood, stating that they are making “a tremendous miscalculation.” He admitted that the reforms and the new elections law are not perfect but maintained that they are supported by two-thirds of Jordanians. “… we cannot in Jordan create a law tailored to just one political party or minority grouping that happens to be the most vocal.”

The king has thus drawn a line in the sand. It is now up to the Muslim Brothers to decide whether they have the ability and sufficient political support to mount a direct confrontation with the regime in an effort to elicit more concessions within the electoral law. They may be encouraged to continue their boycott by the fact that the government has already agreed to amend the law by increasing the number of the nationally elected members of parliament from seventeen to twenty-seven. However, this was somewhat of a cosmetic amendment since the government also increased the overall number of seats from 140 to 150, thus leaving the proportions almost intact.

Battle Royale

To be sure, this is not merely a battle over the number of seats in parliament or even over the method by which the new deputies in the next parliament will be elected. This is a battle for the future of Jordan—a battle to determine who will rule the country. What is at stake here is whether King Abdullah II will be able to preserve the role and powers proscribed to his great-grandfather Abdullah I by Churchill. But the situation is even more complicated when we recall that Jordan’s borders were determined by pencil lines drawn across maps of the desert. Beyond the future of the kingdom and the monarch is the future of the 1915–16 Anglo-
French (albeit with some Russian cooperation) co-production called the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which is the basis for the current political configuration of the Middle East.

The Arab uprising that erupted at the beginning of 2011 has rattled Arab states from North Africa to the Fertile Crescent and has even led to regime change in a number of them. It catapulted the Muslim Brotherhood in one form or another to political power in at least two countries. Thus far, no borders have changed in the eighteen months of upheaval in the Middle East, yet new geopolitical realities are emerging. Iraq is already a de facto confederation maintaining a thin veneer of statehood. This, of course, is a development that may be replicated in Syria after the collapse of the Assad regime. The Hamas government in Gaza is gradually separating itself (with some encouragement from its Israeli and Egyptian neighbors) from the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and demonstrating willingness to ally itself with Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood government.

Is Jordan next? The developments described above are known and are all viewed with either concern or hope. The leaders of the Jordanian flank of the Muslim Brotherhood cannot but be encouraged by the developments elsewhere in the Arab world and especially Egypt. Although greatly concerned with the current boycott of the forthcoming elections, the king can also take comfort in the fact that few members of the opposition have taken to the streets. As yet, there has been no Amman equivalent to Tahrir Square. If a sober attitude prevails on both sides of the Jordanian political divide, and if Egypt can moderate the Muslim Brothers in Jordan, a compromise formula for withdrawing the boycott of the next elections may yet be found. In the aforementioned interview, the king expressed his willingness to consider further reforms during the next parliamentary term.

The generous response of the IMF, the United States, and some of the Gulf oil-producing states has given the Jordanian monarch some breathing space. The financial resources he has at his disposal can produce short-, medium-, and long-term employment. Of course, that money has to be managed strictly so as to prevent any allegations of corruption, mismanagement, and waste.

King Abdullah II can probably manage the domestic problems and crises by wielding a velvet fist—that is, the judicious use of power, the careful management of economic means, and the implementation of political reforms. Of course, he has no control at all over developments in the surrounding neighborhood. His great-grandfather and his father barely escaped regional storms. In their travails, they were assisted politically and militarily first by Great Britain and then the US. Like others in the Middle East, the king is probably asking himself whether Washington can be expected to provide assistance beyond money and military hardware.
The Israeli Angle

The Arab uprising has already caused a deterioration in Israel’s geostrategic balance. Despite the very cold peace that existed between Egypt and Israel and between Jordan and Israel, Jerusalem still had interlocutors with whom it could maintain a reasonable dialogue. In this regard, the elimination of the Mubarak regime in Egypt has left a large vacuum. In fact, the weakening of this strategic belt began in 2010 when relations, and especially security cooperation, between Israel and Turkey came to an abrupt end.

Relations between Jordan and Israel have gone sour and are confined to contacts within the two countries’ respective security agencies. King Abdullah II frequently criticizes the Israeli government for the lack of progress in the political process with the Palestinians. For example, in the interview mentioned earlier, the king accused Israel of putting pressure on potential partners Jordan sought for development of its nuclear program. Irrespective of any Israeli pressure, it is clear that given the economic morass in which Jordan finds itself, Amman cannot afford such a multi-billion-dollar project. The king’s decision to pin the suspension of the plan on Israel is indicative of the current state of relations.

The evolving situation in the Middle East is a cause for concern for both Amman and Jerusalem. Both should seek to maintain a quiet, high-level dialogue on Syria, the Palestinian issue, and the ascendency of fundamentalist regimes in the region. Israel would do well to aid Jordan economically as much as possible. For example, Israel can do much to assist in solving Jordan’s ongoing problems with water. Israeli leaders should refrain from responding to provocative statements by the Jordanian monarch just as they did in the case of his remarks on the nuclear project or, more importantly, on the Palestinian–Israeli peace process. While some of the that criticism of Israel may be justified, the king’s evaluation of Abu Mazen’s political strength and of his ability to conduct serious negotiations cannot be much different from Israel’s. Irrespective of any current tensions, Israel’s preference must be the political stability and continuity of the present regime in Jordan. Some may argue that in 1948, 1967 or 1970, Jordan faced crises of greater existential severity. Never before, however, have the internal, regional, and international stars been as negatively aligned as they are today. To salvage the kingdom as we know it, King Abdullah II will need every ounce of the wisdom, courage, and aptitude for manoeuvrability bequeathed to him by his forefathers.

Notes

3 Agence France Presse, September 12, 2012.