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Jordan's Internal and External Pressure Cooker

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A year and a half after the civil uprisings broke out in the Arab world, Jordan is still struggling with their economic and political ramifications.

Efforts by King Abdullah II to achieve broad agreement for the political reforms he has proposed, and in particular, the elections law, have thus far been unsuccessful. The King is determined that elections be held by the close of 2012, and the Minister of Information has announced that voter cards will be distributed soon. However, the various opposition movements, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, insist that the government's proposals do not meet their demands and that they will boycott the elections. The main point of contention remains the number of parliamentary representatives on the national lists vs. the number of those who will be elected on a constituency basis.

In early July, the government endorsed an "improved" proposal that increased the number of those to be elected in national lists from seventeen to twenty-seven. The opposition claims, not without some basis, that not only does the government's proposal not meet the demand that half the members of the House of Representatives be chosen on a national basis, but the government has even diluted its proposal by increasing the size of the parliament from 140 to 150, thereby maintaining control over it. (The current system allows the government to give greater weight to provinces with smaller Palestinian populations.) Moreover, the Muslim Brotherhood is not alone in criticizing the proposal; other movements, such as the Jordanian Democratic Popular Unity Party and the National Reform Front have also announced that they will boycott the elections. Personalities who in the past were identified as clear supporters of the regime, such as Awn Khasawneh, a jurist with an international reputation who was prime minister until several weeks ago, are criticizing the government's attitude on the issue of reforms.

Thus far, the government's proposed system of elections is the primary object of criticism, and the King's status is not significantly challenged. If the battle over the system of elections intensifies, this is also liable to lead to a broader assault on the delicate issue of the King's status and to the demand to establish a constitutional monarchy. Khasawneh was perhaps hinting at this when he stated that Muslim nations long for freedom and justice, and that revolutions could be expected to erupt where poverty and tyranny prevail (*Jordan Times*, July 23, 2012).

The bloody battle in Syria between the Bashar al-Assad regime and the opposition has implications for Jordan and creates immediate and long term dilemmas. Prime Minister Fayez al-Tarawneh claimed he was misunderstood when he was quoted as calling for military intervention in Syria. According to al-Tarawneh, “I just said that as the umbrella of international legitimacy, the Security Council can impose a ceasefire as a prelude to finding solutions to the crisis” (various Jordanian sources, July 18, 2012). Either way, his statements reflect increasing concern in Amman that Jordan will perhaps be called on to allow the transfer of aid to the rebels, and perhaps even the use of Jordanian territory for expediting the fall of the Syrian regime. Jordanian government spokesmen vehemently deny this possibility, and downplay the importance of the exchanges of fire that occurred last week between Jordanian and Syrian military units positioned along their border.

Beyond the particular concerns that Israel also shares – e.g., that chemical weapons will reach and be used by various non-state actors in Syria – the Jordanian government, like other states in the region and elsewhere, must consider the identity of Syria and the regime that will be established after the current regime is ousted. In the absence of broad agreement between Syria’s many ethnic and religious groups, the country’s demographic division threatens its integrity as a political unit, and this has implications for all of Syria’s neighbors, including Jordan. Some of the 150,000 Syrians who have fled the country to northernJordan have familial-tribal connections to the Jordanian population in that area. The possibility that the Syrian faction of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria will have a foothold in the new government in Damascus, which no longer seems an unreasonable possibility, along with the organization’s seizing of power in Egypt and its momentum in Jordan, no doubt makes the heads of the Jordanian government jittery. Jordanian responses to Mohamed Morsi’s election as Egyptian president were subdued. (Ten days after the final results were announced, Foreign Minister Judeh delivered a letter from the King expressing his desire to meet with President Morsi.) Similarly, Khaled Mashal’s visit to Jordan about a month ago and his cordial reception should not be seen as more than a political need to monitor the situation and demonstrate involvement. Assessments about the possible opening of a Hamas office in Jordan appear to be groundless at this point. The King certainly wishes to wait and see how the struggle between Fatah and Hamas will develop, and he will certainly also wait for the results of the internal confrontation he is engaged in over the direction of the Jordanian regime.

Yet even before these issues assume greater clarity, Jordan is called on to cope with the wave of refugees mentioned from Syria and the economic pressures that this creates, as well as problems with the supply of energy created by the frequent explosions in the

Egyptian gas pipeline and the rising prices of basic foods. There are also fears that the enormous wave of refugees has brought with it the seeds of trouble, planted in the form of terror cells of organizations like al-Qaeda smuggled into Jordan in the guise of refugees.

King Abdullah II has succeeded in persuading key players in the international community of the severity of Jordan’s distress, and the country has received a significant financial boost from two major sources. The International Monetary Fund has authorized, pending final approval by the Executive Board, credit amounting to 1.364 billion SDR over three years (SDR is the IMF’s customary unit of calculation, equal to $2 billion). The amount involved is exceptional, as noted in the IMF’s announcement, and it reflects concern and understanding for the kingdom’s special situation.

The Gulf Fund, established by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait has decided to grant $5 million over five years for development projects. It has certainly not escaped the donors’ notice that there is a need to support a sister monarchical Arab regime suffering from domestic political pressures that is coping with the results of the massacre by the Syrian regime. King Abdullah II, who left for Kuwait on July 29, owes his host thanks for the decision to expedite the transfer of Kuwait’s part of the contribution to Jordan. It is possible that senior Jordanian officials’ predictions that the aid from the Gulf Fund will attract $12 billion in foreign investments to Jordan are slightly exaggerated, but there is no doubt that the Jordanian king has succeeded, at least in the economic arena, in strengthening his position.