



INSS Insight No. 391, December 13, 2012

**Challenges and an Internal Balance of Deterrence:
Jordanian Discourse on the Social Networks, December 2012**

Udi Dekel and Orit Perlov

An analysis of internal processes underway in Jordan based on the discourse in the social media is limited, given the regime's control (in September 2012 a censorship law on op-eds on the internet and the social media was passed) and the scarcity of in-depth analyses by public opinion leaders in Jordan. Young Trans-Jordanians and Palestinians, who understand the power of the new media, have used the networks to sound demands for reforms and a new socio-political order. The new media is also host to members of the political echelon and business community, but their rate of participation falls short compared to other Arab countries.

The protest in the social media is influenced by developments in the entire region, but especially the domestic, social, and political processes within Jordan. The network discourse intensified after the demonstrations of November 2012, which were sparked by the increase of fuel and gas prices in the country. Labeled the "November Uprising," the protests were distinguished by their severity and spread through the kingdom, bringing all elements critical of the situation in Jordan into the street. In tandem, social media contributors expressed a lack of confidence in the kingdom's ability to confront the range of domestic and foreign challenges.

In light of the political instability and in advance of the parliamentary elections scheduled for January 23, 2013, network discussions have dealt with the election process, the demand for additional changes to the constitution, the status of the opposition and the impotence of the government, and criticism over corruption. Other frequent topics are Jordan's socio-economic problems; the Syrian refugees, the struggle between the Trans-Jordanian elite and the Muslim Brotherhood; and the situation in the West Bank. Together these issues could undermine Jordan's stability and further damage the status of the king. Three issues that dominate the social network discourse are discussed below.



The Trans-Jordanians versus the Muslim Brotherhood

The Trans-Jordanian opposition, comprising primarily army veterans and youth opposition organizations, was the first to express dissatisfaction and expose the cracks in Jordanian society when the regional upheavals began. The public criticism against the king and his regime came from an unexpected direction: the tribal chiefs and clans, the Hashemite royal household's traditional bastion of support. They pressured the king and court to undertake socioeconomic reforms and expand financial support for the rural and urban sectors. The Trans-Jordanian labor market focused on the public sector, especially government employees and the military. The younger generation, seeking professional opportunities, has not managed to break into commerce, finance, and industry, fields traditionally dominated by Palestinians. The harsh criticism directed at the king led to funds – essentially hush money – distributed to the tribal leaders.

Ironically, the calls for reforms by tribal leaders led to the awakening of the second opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood. The Islamist group seized the opportunity provided by the protest wave of the Trans-Jordanians and the rest of the Arab world, while stressing the fight against corruption and the demand for democratic reforms, including changes to the constitution, curtailment of the king's authority, and expression of the movement's political power.

A balance of fear has been created, with neither group interested in helping the other gain strength. The Trans-Jordanians are not interested in democratic reforms, as the demand for a parliamentary government would strengthen the influence of political Islam and the Palestinians in Jordan, possibly even leading to their dominance in the domestic arena. The Trans-Jordanians, who hold most of the key positions in the country, also worry about being sidelined. For its part, the Muslim Brotherhood is interested in political reforms, making the people the true sovereign of Jordan and expanding its influence in the country, but they are also concerned about moves by the trans-Jordanians against the movement.

Open Calls to Topple the King

In response to the demonstrations, the king has dissolved five governments in the last two years. Every attempt to undertake some type of political reform has failed. New legislation has increased protests, which immediately halted implementation. The "November Uprising" brought harsh criticism of the king to the surface, and for the first time people burned pictures of him and called for toppling the regime.



While criticism of the king and his government has resounded increasingly on the social media in recent months, talk about the king's removal is more moderate, with reservations of the legality of such a move and the concern about a loss of control, changes in the rules of the game, and the creation of anarchy. On the other hand, the king's weakness is mentioned frequently, and which puts pressure on the trans-Jordanian tribal leaders who openly express their dissatisfaction with the king's performance. They are even calling for the appointment of Prince Hassan Ibn Tallal, the king's uncle, to the post of prime minister during this period of upheaval, and would like to restore the title of crown prince to Prince Hamza Ibn Hussein, who is very popular with the younger generation of Trans-Jordanians.

The Regional Events

The Palestinian arena affects the mood of Jordan's Palestinian population, seen as riding the coattails of the Muslim Brotherhood's political protest. As for Syria, the common assessment in the new media is that in every possible scenario the ramifications for Jordan will be negative, both in terms of peace and stability and in terms of the economy. This assessment gains credibility as the waves of Syrian refugees entering Jordan increase (there are currently some 250,000 Syrian refugees in the country), creating further socioeconomic stress, bringing cheap labor, and producing more security and personal safety problems (arms dealing, infiltration of jihadists, rape, and murder).

The influence of government propaganda is evident in the social media, where participants have voiced bitterness toward the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, which have not come to Jordan's aid and do not understand the implications for themselves should the kingdom collapse, namely, "the last barrier between the Gulf states and the flood of the Islamic anarchy wave."

Future Directions

This is the first time ominous sentiments in the social media suggest that the kingdom will fail to confront its many complex challenges. There is a dire foreboding about a wave of anarchy that will be exploited by radical elements at home and abroad. Still, the assessment is that the escalation has not yet changed the rules of the game because of the internal balance of forces. The Trans-Jordanian protest movement is not interested in switching the rules out of fear this would both lead to a takeover by political Islam and enhance Palestinian influence in Jordan. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood is flying the flag of social justice and demanding democratic and constitutional reforms. The assessment in the social media is that the Brotherhood has not yet attained a critical mass of Palestinians public support.



There are contradictory assessments about possible developments. On the one hand, there is the fear of a brutal domestic struggle, caused by the Trans-Jordanians' inability to accept a Muslim Brotherhood takeover. On the other hand, voices in the social media are also insisting that "September 1970 will not recur."

Those active in the social media are expressing unprecedented criticism of the king and his ability to lead Jordan in a rapidly changing era of regional and domestic instability. The more the king tries to strengthen his hold using restrictive legislation, the more he will lose the support of the masses. In the social media, the king is variously described by his opponents as susceptible to pressure, weak and spineless.

Public opinion in Jordan has become a key player on the political and socioeconomic arenas. The question is whether the main players – the Muslim Brotherhood, the National Front for Reform, and the Trans-Jordanian opposition – can control public opinion and enlist the masses to promote their goals, or whether they will be overcome by radical trends, leading to anarchy and a real threat to the kingdom's survival.

The election is the king's next test. The key question is whether he will support a change in the election law so that the results are representative, with the next government parliamentary and more legitimate, or will he uphold his most recent decision, which is liable to prompt the opposition's boycott of the elections.

