

Stability in the Kingdom of Jordan

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The upheaval pervading the Arab world since late 2010, reflected in the fall of regimes and the effective dissolution of a number of countries in the region, gives rise to many questions, including whether the stability of regimes can be assessed analytically (as opposed to intuitively), and consequently, whether dramatic changes in the regimes under evaluation can be anticipated. Any attempt to add policy recommendations to the analysis requires minimizing the subjective element and assigning the correct weights to the various causes of stability or instability. The general and theoretical literature is extensive, as are analyses of stability by international institutions and organizations. At the Institute for National Security Studies, for example, Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov proposed a complex model for this purpose, composed of four key parameters: the internal arena, the regional-international arena, the economic situation, and the power of the opposition.¹

Clearly even an analytical approach is not free of subjective elements, given differing assessments of the relative weight of the various elements in the total picture, and the assessment of each of these elements itself. In the absence of completely precise tools, the existing models are the lesser evil. At the same time, the shelf life of the various findings, and even of the models themselves, is narrowing. The validity of the various conclusions is liable to expire within a few months, and frequent examinations of the basic knowledge base used for the assessment of the life expectancy of the regimes in such a volatile region as the Middle East are therefore essential.

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Parameters Affecting Stability in Jordan

The Internal Arena

Jordan differs from other countries in the region in a number of key elements that greatly affect its current and future stability. Jordan was founded as an independent country at the same time that Syria and Lebanon were founded, but its original population is relatively “new,” and Jordan lacks the collective national memory present in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon, which extends back to ancient times. Its ethnic and religious groups have no territorial claims to Jordan’s current physical area. In addition, Jordan is a perpetual target for regional immigration and has experienced several massive waves of immigration during key events, led by the 1948 war (which prompted the mass exodus of people from the from the western side of the Jordan River to Jordan); the Six Day War in 1967; in 1991, following the expulsion of Palestinian and Jordanian workers from the Gulf states as a result of support by King Hussein and Yasir Arafat for Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait; in 2003, following the US invasion of Iraq; and since 2010, when refugees began fleeing en masse from Syria to the neighboring countries.

From a purely demographic standpoint, these waves of immigration have made the original population, i.e., the Bedouin tribes from the Arabian Peninsula, a minority ruling Jordan through its control of the governmental and political system and the security forces. The fact that the Jordanian military in its ethnic composition and command staff is in effect a military of the Bedouin tribes ensures its absolute loyalty. The army is an existential interest of the Bedouin-Hashemite minority, which will accept no alternative that would materially change the status quo. It is well-trained and well-equipped by the United States, and the Jordanian royal family wants the army to feel that they see themselves as part of the army. Most members of the royal family study in military colleges and go through officer courses. At the same time, the regime understands that even among the retired senior officers, there is a sense of discrimination, given the inability of many of them to find places in the private economic sector, which is controlled almost entirely by the Palestinians.

The events in Jordan since the onset of the Arab Spring have revealed breaches in the Jordanian regime’s wall of legitimacy. In contrast to his father, King Hussein II, who was generally admired, especially since Black September of 1970, when he sent the Jordanian army into action against the PLO forces in Jordan and no one attempted to question his authority and

leadership, King Abdullah II is subject to criticism. This criticism has been fed by two sources, one involving his behavior, which the people regard as ostentation on the part of the royal family, and the other consisting of those seeking to reform the ruling system in Jordan. Significantly, elements of the Hashemite-Bedouin population, which constitutes the essential base of support for the current regime, are among both sets of critics.

At the same time, even those supporting governmental reforms have not challenged the royal family's existence. They have proposed, however, the British model of a constitutional monarchy, which the King regards as unacceptable, because it would eliminate Hashemite control of the governmental establishment in Jordan. When the Jordanian constitution was revised in 2011, the royal house controlled and managed the process. The process did not affect Section 28 of the constitution, which states that the monarchy passes from father to son within the family of the founding King, Abdullah I. The amendments to the constitution that were accepted made no substantial change in the King's control of state institutions. The change in the election law loosens the King's absolute control of the Jordanian parliament, but not enough to jeopardize the royal house's supremacy in all matters pertaining to decision making in areas that appear essential to the King.

The King is right to be disturbed by the charges of corruption among the ruling elite in the royal family, and he will likely have to take steps that are perceived by the Jordanian public as a serious, ongoing campaign against corruption, not mere lip service. The fact that some of the demonstrations on this issue occurred in cities in southern Jordan, where the Palestinian population is extremely small and where the King's power base is located, will require the allocation of greater financial resources to the region, which suffers from unemployment and poverty rates far above the national average.

Although the Arab Spring events were not ethnically based, the upheaval in the Middle East is closely related to the Shiite-Sunni divide. Because there are few Shiites in Jordan, this aspect is irrelevant, but the weight of fundamentalist extremism is rising among both the veteran Jordanian population and the new population that arrived in the recent waves of immigration.

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The Regional-International Arena

Bloody political struggles are underway in three of Jordan’s four neighboring countries. The regimes in Syria and Iraq face the threat of collapse, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is liable to ignite another violent chapter on the West Bank, beyond the current escalation in Gaza. Jordan is directly affected by these events, first, as a result of the wave of refugees coming from Iraq and Syria, which threatens its economic stability and is liable to inject active and dormant subversive elements. Because of the large Palestinian demographic element in Jordan, any change in relations between Israel and the Palestinians, however minor, is felt in Jordan immediately. The failure of the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, as well as any escalation into a violent conflict between them, is liable to have a significant effect on the stability of the regime in Jordan. In addition, Jordan is to a large extent dependent on the capability and good will of the US and other parties, such as NATO, in taking decisive action to counteract factors affecting stability in Jordan.

The absence of direct military intervention has helped the Syrian regime survive. It is also likely to contribute to the fall of the current regime in Iraq, and to accelerate the dissolution of the country and the establishment of an autonomous political entity in eastern Syria and western Iraq. Furthermore, there are a number of patterns of external intervention, usually without any

significant military element, that significantly affect the chances of survival of regimes in the Middle East.

In any case, possible undermining of the regime in Jordan has other consequences that may be even more ominous than those accompanying the fall of other regimes in the region. For this reason, the weakening of the central government in Jordan may well lead to direct military action by external parties, such as the US and perhaps NATO as well. This scenario is also liable to cause a form of Israeli involvement different than the largely passive behavior regarding Syria. Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Ya’alon have openly commented on the need to assist

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Despite the great interest of the Gulf states in preserving the regime in Jordan, it is doubtful whether these countries will deviate from their traditional pattern of providing economic aid and employ military force. More likely, they will apply heavy pressure on Washington to use the means at its disposal to protect the Jordanian regime. To be sure, financial aid is no less critical for Jordan than military aid, and the oil producing Arab countries play a key role in this aspect. They have already granted financial aid to Jordan, but increasing it now would help protect the Jordanian regime, and reduce the chances that elements seeking to exploit economic distress in various sectors in Jordan will succeed, be they Jordanian citizens or refugees from Syria and Iraq.

The Economic Arena

In analyzing the stability of the Jordanian regime, it is hard to overestimate the importance of the economic factor. Since the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan was established, it has relied on external financial aid, without which it will not survive in the long term. The waves of immigration have only aggravated the need for a steady stream of financial aid. Most of the refugees in Jordan arrived without means and have imposed a heavy burden on the Jordanian regime, which has had to deal with their absorption. Other than the 2003 wave of Iraqi refugees, many of whom were wealthy and some of whom returned to Iraq, all the other refugees, starting in 1948, have become permanent residents; the Palestinians have also become Jordanian citizens. The working assumption about the Syrian refugees must be that they will be in Jordan for many years, with all the economic and political consequences incurred by their stay. The US, the European Union, the oil-producing Arab countries, and the international financial organizations have all enlisted in the effort to aid Jordan, but it is necessary to ensure that this aid continues to flow for many years.

Jordan's economic vulnerability is also due to events in the neighboring countries. The flow of natural gas from Egypt to Jordan has been disrupted a number of times, causing suffering among the population in Jordan and the loss of 2 percent of Jordan's GDP. The deteriorating situation in the Gulf region, and even worse, in the friendly Arab regimes helping Jordan, is liable to reduce Jordan's sources of financial aid. The Jordanian regime is already under pressure from international economic institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund, to cut its subsidies for certain goods and services. As in the past, even before the Arab Spring, the Jordanian regime

has had to confront violent demonstrations in the Bedouin-dominated outlying southern area by sending army forces to suppress them. This violence was partly caused by a rise in prices for basic commodities.

The economic gaps in the population and the awareness of these gaps among disadvantaged groups regularly spark unrest. These enormous gaps span the divisions between the two main population sectors: the Palestinians and the Hashemite Bedouins. On the one hand, the Bedouin tribes owe absolute loyalty to the royal family, which is an existential interest for them as a decisive factor in Jordan. On the other hand, the royal family's greedy behavior, the rumors of corruption among those closely associated with it, and the deteriorating economic situation, following the rise in unemployment and the cuts in subsidies, have increased incitement against the regime, especially among the younger generation. The entry of nearly 1.5 million refugees from Iraq and Syria has had a double effect. Many of them flock to the large cities in search of work, where they cause a drop in wages and deprive the local population of jobs. However, in the long term, absorbing the refugees will require investment in permanent infrastructure, thereby creating economic momentum in the initial critical years.

Joining the problem of the economic gaps is the fact that the private economic sector is entirely controlled by a Palestinian economic elite. This elite has an interest in maintaining the current political stability, which grants them both local and international economic stability. Any undermining, and certainly the elimination, of the current regime is liable to have destructive results for this economic elite. On the other hand, there is still alienation between the upper levels of the two main populations in Jordan, the Hashemite Bedouins and the Palestinians. Senior Jordanian officials of Hashemite-Bedouin origin hesitate to look for work in Palestinian-owned businesses and companies after leaving their positions. This phenomenon highlights the feeling of economic inferiority among large sections of the Hashemite Bedouin population. Thus the economic factor has great destructive potential, and from the regime's perspective, finding long term sources of financial aid to enable it to cope with 1.5 million refugees without massive tumult, especially of an internal political nature, is of crucial importance.

Weakness of the Opposition

The opposition to the Jordanian regime is fueled primarily by the economic distress affecting the two main sectors of the Jordanian population, anger at

the regime's leaders because of corruption, and the desire for constitutional change, which for many favoring those changes conceals a desire to be rid of the Hashemite royal regime, even if only gradually.

All this has so far failed to create a critical mass opposing the regime's continued existence. The Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood is among the leaders of protest in Jordan and the demand for reforms in the governmental structure. Most of the demonstrations since 2010 were initiated by this organization. Even though the organization has not called for the elimination of the monarchy, the Muslim Brotherhood constitutes the center of the monarchy's opposition. A series of tactical errors by the organization and judicious action by the regime in suppressing the demonstrations caused the Muslim Brotherhood's efforts to fail, and enabled the government to meet the challenge successfully. The Muslim Brotherhood's call for an election boycott and demonstrations drew no significant support. The regime's avoidance of the use of live ammunition in dispersing demonstrations gave it calm authority and security as it dealt effectively with pockets of opposition. In the short term, relations between the organization and the regime will be affected by the ongoing confrontation in Egypt between the central government and the Muslim Brotherhood; developments in Syria and Iraq, especially the degree of success enjoyed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in consolidating itself as a political entity in the long term; and developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. The failure of the parent organization, the Muslim Brotherhood, to retain power in Egypt, along with reports of murderous behavior on the part of ISIS, has lessened the Muslim Brotherhood's chances in Jordan of gaining support and becoming a significant political force there. Any attempt by ISIS to openly invade Jordan will force the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan to decide how to respond, and any response will damage its standing. On the other hand, a conflict, especially a violent one, between Israel and the Palestinians will strengthen the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, especially among ethnic Palestinians in Amman and the outlying areas.

In the parliamentary theater, the January 2013 elections, which allowed nationwide representation for the first time (albeit for only a small proportion of those elected), did not bring any significant political force to the fore. Although members of parliament tried to show independence on some issues and to differentiate themselves from the King, Abdullah II has thus far succeeded in imposing his will on the parliament. At this stage, it appears that with the help of minimal amendments to the constitution

and the election law, the regime has succeeded in preserving an election system that perpetuates the situation. Looking ten years into the future, the problem of minority rule is liable to reemerge if the hundreds of thousands of refugees from Iraq and Syria do not return to their countries of origin, and the question of their political rights is raised. On the other hand, if this question becomes an important issue, it is by no means certain that this will weaken the regime headed by the Hashemite minority, since granting citizenship to refugees from Iraq and Syria will dilute the weight of the Palestinians in the electorate. However, every country in the world now accepts Jordan's electoral system, which has so far ensured the King's control of parliament. The Jordanian royal house will have to make great efforts in these countries to convince them to ignore this system's distortion of the principle of majority rule.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A society that has experienced traumatic events that included massacre or destruction and chaos will hesitate to support another uprising that

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would be accompanied by similar events. The collective Jordanian memory has a trauma engraved on it from more than four decades ago, namely, Black September. Black September brought with it formative events in Jordanian political history, and to this day they affect both the opposition organizations and the regime in their considerations of what steps to take. Both sides seek to avoid the bloodshed that accompanied the conflict between the PLO and the regime in September 1970. This refraining from the use of force is obviously helpful to the regime, which does not have to deal with the byproducts of funeral processions of demonstrators shot dead by the security forces. The electronic media and social networks transmitting the suffering of the average Iraqi, Syrian, or Libyan undermine any desire on the part of the embittered population in Jordan to

take to the street and stay there until the desired change is achieved. In addition, several factors unique to Jordan will help the regime slow the dynamic that overthrew regimes or subverted their absolute control of

the political system elsewhere in the Arab world. The Jordanian regime obviously can exploit these factors to strengthen its standing.

Nonetheless, these factors are not enough to eclipse the regime's weak points, which will affect its stability in the future. These are revealed mostly in the macroeconomic sphere and the regime's ability to successfully solve the problems arising from what in absolute terms are huge waves of immigration, and certainly relative to the size of the absorbing population. Five to fifteen years from now, a situation in which the refugee-settler population accounts for 25-35 percent of the total population but has no civil or political rights, is liable to prove extremely problematic for maintaining the Hashemite regime in Jordan. The financial distress has affected and eroded the regime's traditional support base among the Bedouin tribes. At the same time, there are elements of stability in which it is easier for the international and regional community, including Israel, to provide assistance, since no military aid involving deployment on the ground is necessary.

Any significant weakening of the regime in Jordan will almost certainly not occur in a quick process of an attempted invasion by an extremist Sunni entity from Iraqi or Syrian territory, but in a slow process of popular incitement of an economic or religious nature, which is liable to complicate efforts by countries and international organizations to provide security aid to Jordan, leaving the latter to cope virtually on its own in combating sustained attempted internal subversion. Finding a formula that will allow legitimate criticism of faults and a desire for reform, while preventing criticism motivated by a desire to effectively destroy a royal regime that relies on a minority of the population, even if not through direct constitutional change, has been, and will always be, difficult to accomplish. The full significance of Egypt's double revolution, even if no further change occurs in the coming decade, is not yet entirely clear. It is doubtful whether Jordan could withstand governmental vicissitudes like those experienced by Egypt, and it is hard to imagine how the consequences could be confined to Jordan, as occurred in Egypt.

Israel has a clear interest in the survival of the Jordanian regime. In order to promote this objective, Israel would do well to adopt a policy that includes the following elements:

- a. Action behind the scenes to ensure continued financial aid from international agencies.

- b. Provision of economic aid equivalent to money, such as an increase in the quantity of low priced water flowing to Jordan.
- c. Government encouragement for labor intensive projects in Jordan, such as in transportation and energy infrastructure. Aid to Jordan, especially in these areas, should be moderate and judicious, due to the risk, however small at this stage, of a regime change in Jordan that could also lead to a change in relations with Israel. The Jordanian plan to build nuclear reactors for peaceful purposes should also be considered in the light of the assessment of the Hashemite monarchial regime's chances of survival in Jordan. Israel is likely to be an importer of electricity produced in Jordan, but this should be made contingent on the use of bitumen and oil, of which Jordan apparently has an abundant supply, and for whose use Jordan has already signed initial contracts.
- d. Continuation of security aid.
- e. As much consideration as possible for Jordan's concerns in the context of Israel's relations with the Palestinians.

Note

- 1 Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov, *Regime Stability in the Middle East: An Analytical Model to Assess the Possibility of Regime Change*, Memorandum 131 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2013).