

Policy Paper

Propping up Jordan's Stability

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Publisher:

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Amman Office

October 2018

Amman, Jordan

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By

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المملكة الأردنية الهاشمية
رقم الإيداع لدى دائرة المكتبة الوطنية
(2018/10/4825)
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Published in 2018
by Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Jordan & Iraq

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ISBN 978-9957-484-89-7

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Introduction

This paper addresses two interrelated issues: the long term stability of Jordan and the future legitimacy of the regime in light of changing dynamics within state-societal relations and the pervasive uncertainty in a conflict-prone region. A glance at the not-so-distant past reveals that even when Jordan experienced instability, the regime's legitimacy was never seriously called into question.

Historically, the legitimacy of the Jordanian regime has been propped up by a combination of external alliances and a rentier relationship between the regime and Jordanian citizens¹. Jordan's alliances with the United States and other regional powers have been a crucial tool for the regime's survival and internal stability. Additionally, Jordan's role as a lynchpin for regional stability, security and peace has made the regime practically indispensable for much of the Middle Eastern political landscape. The key to understanding Jordan's resilience is its geographic and political centrality in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Domestically, the regime has resorted to a formula of co-optation; cultivating a rentier relationship with much of the Jordanian populace. The regime has built-up the public sector and institutions, and in the process has made the society fully dependent on the regime². Interestingly, the ability of the government to sustain a social contract based on rentierism has been dependent by and large on its foreign policies; and therefore its ability to secure rent. This historical, implicit social contract is the cornerstone for both national stability and regime legitimacy.

That being said, the role played by the security apparatuses and the army have been of paramount importance to Jordan's stability. Prior to independence, the army had helped build a national identity at a scale unheard of in the modern Arab world. On the whole, Jordanians trust the army and the security apparatuses. In a recent public opinion poll, Jordanians' trust in the army and the security agencies

¹ The Hashemite family enjoys a sort of religious legitimacy, but this paper focuses on the regime rather than the throne. In November 1920, Emir Abdullah- who later became King Abdullah I- led forces from the Hijaz to restore his brother's throne in Syria. But Emir Abdullah was obliged to delay his pan-Arab goals and focus on forming a government in Amman. Confident that his plans for the unity of the Arab nation would eventually come to fruition, the emir established the first centralized governmental system on April 11, 1921. Ever since, the Hashemite family's legitimacy was not questioned.

² Interview with Adnan Abu Odeh

exceeded 90 percent³. Additionally, the General Intelligence Department has intervened to maintain stability of the country on many occasions. Its efforts in counter-terrorism have been widely acknowledged and acclaimed at the international level.

Furthermore, some key external actors believe that Jordan's stability is better anchored by upholding an autocratic status quo. For many regional and international powers, the stability of Jordan serves the entire region. In the words of the renowned historian Asher Susser: "owing to the Kingdom's geopolitical centrality, the regime and the state have been constantly supported by an array of external allies, for whom the Kingdom's destabilization would be a nightmare. Those regional and international powers have always been willing to assist in bailing out the regime in times of need."⁴ For this reason, influential players have never exerted their financial influence to pressure Jordan into pursuing a more genuine democratic reform. As I have outlined in my previous paper, "the scope of Jordan's political transformation has been a function of the interplay between three factors: external forces, domestic pressure for reform, and the regime's reaction to – and in some cases, its manipulation of – the aforementioned two."⁵

In present-day Jordan, the conditions required to support a prospering and genuine democracy are not yet existent. While Jordan has indeed weathered the Arab Spring, emerging almost intact, Jordanians have become increasingly restive due to the short-sighted policies embraced by successive governments. Indeed, these policies have exacerbated the declining living conditions of the Jordanian populace. Thus, the recent wave of demonstrations at Amman's Fourth Circle⁶ was hardly surprising. With the public's perception of itself and their unelected leaders profoundly shifting since the start of the Arab Spring, a new, pervasive sense of empowerment poses an unprecedented challenge to Jordanian authorities. The once-blindly loyal trans-Jordanian public has become discontent with the reality of Jordanian political life.

Because Jordan is no longer a rentier state and its Western allies may push for a new set of regional policies that could jeopardize the kingdom's stability, the

³ Public Opinion Survey, Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, June 26 -July 2, 2018

⁴ Asher Susser, "Is Jordanian monarchy in danger?" Middle East Brief, No. 72, (10 April 2013), p. 2.

⁵ Hassan A. Barari, "The Limits of Political Reform in Jordan," International Policy Analysis, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2013, p.2.

⁶ Amman's Fourth Circle, a traffic roundabout, is the location of the Prime Ministry and has become both a physical and linguistic symbol for the Jordanian government among citizens.

regime's strength is now dependent on vibrant democratic institutions. Furthermore, short of building strong, independent governing bodies, the government runs the risk of being blindsided by a wave of devastating protests in the years to come. Jordan can no longer afford to place institutional reforms and strengthening its democratic process on the back burner. Fortunately, King Abdullah's discussion papers reflect an intrinsic understanding of the need for internal reform should the regime seek to fortify its structures against social dissent.

This paper is divided into three sections. Section one chronicles the Jordanian government's twin objectives of stability and legitimacy. Section two examines the regime's internal awareness of domestic reform, reviewing the King's discussion papers and alternative directions. The final section offers policy recommendations for the regime to ensure stability for years to come.

The Resilience of the Regime

By default rather than design, Jordan has been in the eye of the storm since its independence in 1946. The regime's decision to get involved in the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948 led to two interrelated consequences: a sudden and overwhelming increase in territory and population. In fact, Jordan's involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict and its geostrategic centrality has been both an asset and a liability. This new reality would shape much of Jordan's foreign policy. Since its involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, the regime has used regional rivalries to secure its needed support from world powers. All along, the Jordanian regime performed a balancing act to create a regional order that allows Jordan and the regime to survive.

To the dismay of its regional critics, the regime has survived the ebb and flow of a region riddled with instability and conflict. Long-time observers of Jordan highlight the kingdom's role as a stabilizing force as a main reason for the country's survival. And yet, one can think of three other factors at play. First; Jordan is connected to a web of international and regional coalitions with key countries prepared to provide heavy-handed support in times of instability. Of course, this is due to the geopolitical centrality of a country wedged between stronger and more aggressive neighbours. Second; Jordan is far from being ruled by one person. As a result of the historical factors which led to the state's founding, the political elite have developed a great stake in the survival of

Jordan's current political infrastructure⁷. Also, the presence of a staunchly professional and loyal security establishment has been of great importance for the country's stability.

It is hard to avoid the reality that the unwritten social contract whereby the state offers jobs as a quid pro quo for full loyalty is unsustainable⁸. According to Mohammed Abu Rumman, a prominent researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, the regime is no longer capable of funding this rentier relationship. In other words, the historical trade-off of loyalty for jobs has become a liability⁹. Abu Rumman goes as far as demanding a new social contract to reflect the current reality.

The regime walks a tightrope between the need to secure a balanced foreign policy and the need to grapple with the increasingly-varied domestic constraints. In effect, the King's state crafted and well-adjusted foreign policies have helped insulate the country from the fallout of a region fraught with enduring conflicts. This balanced foreign policy has served Jordan well for an extended period of time. Not only has Jordan managed to keep external threats at bay, but it has also managed to secure the steady inflow of external rent from its allies to maintain a rentier relationship with Jordanians and co-opt citizens and social groups as well. To the vexation of many, the regime is no longer in a position to sustain the same system. To put it bluntly, it is imperative to look for alternative ways to foster the regime's legitimacy in the years to come.

A Paradigm Shift

Long-time observers of Jordanian politics have argued that King Abdullah is a reformer¹⁰. His statements indicate that he is bent on steering the kingdom toward a more representative state with a responsive governance. However, this is easier said than done. The King is constrained by the legacy of a rentier system that has been built up over decades. King Abdullah II is not oblivious to the fact that his country has long been hard-pressed financially; thus the changing reality

⁷ For more details on state formation and the rule of tribes for instance see, Yoav Alon, *The Making of Jordan: Tribes, Colonialism and the Modern State*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007)

⁸ Interview with Mohammed Abu Rumman

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Interview with Khaled Ramadan, Amman, July 21, 2018.

of the state-society relationship. He is determined to reform Jordan as failure to do so would be borne by the country and the regime itself.

In the Letter of Designation to Prime Minister Omar Razzaz, King Abdullah sets an objective to delineate the relationship between Jordan's citizens and the state through a new social contract that identifies rights and duties. Casting aside the agendas of the entrenched ruling elite who favour the perpetuation of the status quo, the King has come to the realization that the autocratic status quo is in fact untenable. King Abdullah clearly understands "that the Hashemite throne, and perhaps Jordan itself, will not survive the coming decades if he does not move his country briskly toward modernity."¹¹

No regime is immune to the gusting winds of change, and the eruption of the Arab Spring in early 2011 served as an eye opener for the regime. The King himself talked about the need for an all-inclusive politics and for political empowerment. And yet, while he seeks to be seen as someone who advocates democracy, his ambivalent attitude towards the Muslim Brotherhood is well-documented. On the one hand, the King wants to realize his goals of modernity and political openness, but on the other he does not trust the intentions of the Muslim Brotherhood, the strongest political current in Jordan, which may benefit the most from democratic reforms. In an interview with then- The Atlantic correspondent Jeffery Goldberg, he made it perfectly clear that this organization would use democracy as a vehicle to reach power. In his words, the Muslim Brotherhood is run by "wolves in sheep's clothing" as they seek to enforce their retrograde vision onto society. Implicit in his statements is his desire to transfer his power— but to the right people.¹² The years of hesitancy on the part of the regime seems to have come to a close. Never before has the regime needed its domestic support base as much as it does now. Besides, the regime is in no longer in a position to buy off legitimacy with the dwindling shares of rent coming from allies and powers abroad. If anything, it is the perennial effect of the teetering economic crisis that creates an impetus for a paradigm shift.

Jordanians' growing dissatisfaction with economic conditions and government policies reached a boiling point when demonstrations erupted in Amman in June, with thousands of people gathering at the Prime Ministry in the Fourth Circle on a nightly basis to make their demands heard. An in-depth

¹¹ Jeffery Goldberg, "The Modern King in the Arab Spring," The Atlantic, March 18, 2013, 2, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/04/monarch-in-the-middle/309270/2/>.

¹² Ibid, p.1.

enquiry of Jordanians during and after the Arab Spring revealed that the traditionally revolution-adverse Jordanian political culture can no longer be taken for granted. Such severe transformations may pose serious challenges with the potential to push the kingdom to a tipping point, thus jeopardizing the country's stability. Short of addressing Jordanian citizens' deep-seated political frustrations, the entrenched ruling elite would run the risk of putting the country in the trajectory of irreversible instability.

Though critics of the regime argue that the government lacks the political will to affect the desired reform, the fact remains that the King has presented his views on reform in a series of discussion papers.¹³ While there is a bifurcation of Jordanians over the desired political outcome, it seems that the top-down approach to enact reform remains the most ideal one. At the conceptual level, the King's discussion papers reflect a deep understanding of what it takes to address the inherent contradiction in the country's current formula for stability.

At the heart of the discussion papers is a far broader theme: the notion of a country radically scaling back its archaic unwritten social contract. The discussion papers criticized the implicit understanding of the ruling elites who squandered opportunities to enact reform. Needless to say, the Jordanian political limbo between lofty reform promises and resistant elite may no longer be tolerable. In his first discussion paper, King Abdullah II outlined a roadmap for a more **sustainable political** future.¹⁴ But his sixth paper in October 2016 nails it down: a civil state and the rule of law are the linchpins of Jordan's stability. In the King's words: "Our region is made up of a complex matrix of diverse religious, racial, ethnic, sectarian and tribal constituents. This diversity can lead to social and cultural enrichment, political pluralism, and economic enhancement; or it can foment nationalism, ethnic conflict, or even war. The dividing line between these two realities is demarcated by the presence or absence of rule of law."¹⁵ Seen in this way, the safeguarding of citizens' inalienable rights through a state-sanctioned rule of law is paramount. "If any member of our society feels unsafe or unfairly treated because he or she belongs to a minority, then all of us must feel that we are standing on shaky grounds," the King affirms. To be sure, the King is right when he considers the rule of law as the sine qua non of civil state.

¹³ Interview with Khaled Ramadan, Amman, July 21, 2018.

¹⁴ Interview with Mohammed Abu Rumman, Amman July 25, 2018

¹⁵ King Abdullah II Official Website, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/vision/discussion-papers>

Unfortunately, the King's vision has yet to be translated into policies and laws. Genuine reform should not take a backseat to immediate policy concerns and should not be used as a strategy to buy time. Moreover, the last tranche of reforms during the Arab Spring fell short of the definition of real reform. Many observers would argue that "the package of reforms was designed to stifle internal opposition and reproduce the much-loathed undemocratic status quo. Meanwhile, most citizens do not trust state institutions. Indeed, it is the growing trust gap between the state and most of its citizens that may be the country's Achilles' heel of stability. If anything, the Jordanian protests of the past several years reveal and reinforce one idea; the ruling elite is broadly seen as being unresponsive, unaccountable, non-transparent, and dangerously untrustworthy."¹⁶

Policy Options

A comprehensive paradigm shift is essential should Jordan seek to maintain its stability; therefore we must outline Jordan's policy options. First and foremost, the regime should internalize the importance of restoring citizens' trust. Unfortunately, democratic transitions have been slow in the making and the reform packages introduced in recent years have been little more than a drop in the bucket.

The key to maintain stability and legitimacy is an inclusive political process. As one would expect, the politics of exclusion in any society allows for conflict and fragility. An inclusive political system is fundamental for rectifying the root causes of conflict. This in turn could help ameliorate the structural violence caused by the chronically-fractured political framework that has become the hallmark of governance in the Levant.

Second, the regime should fight corruption with the aim of stamping it out. Adnan Abu Odeh, former Royal Court chief and advisor to both King Hussein and King Abdullah, believes that there is a historic opportunity to do so.¹⁷ The Al Razzaz-led government appears to be focused on fighting corruption, garnering widespread public support. In fact, the only issue that commands a national consensus is fighting corruption.¹⁸ In addition to an effective anti-corruption

¹⁶ Hassan A. Barari, "Reform and the Dynamics of In/stability in Jordan during the Arab Uprisings," PERCEPTIONS, Winter 2015, Vol. 20, no.4.

¹⁷ Interview with Adnan Abu Odeh, Amman, July 26, 2018

¹⁸ Interview with Khaled Ramadan, Amman, July 21, 2018.

campaign, Jordan needs a long-term strategy to fight this phenomenon. In his sixth discussion paper, the King alludes to types of corruption other than financial graft. “We cannot address the issue of rule of law without recognizing that *wasta*¹⁹ and nepotism jeopardize development efforts. *Wasta* does not only impede the country’s progression, it erodes achievements by undermining the values of justice, equal opportunity, and good citizenship; which are the enablers of development in any society.” All forms of corruption, whether administrative or financial, will undermine human development in Jordan.

The persistence of unchecked corruption can lead to two interrelated outcomes: the increased inequality among citizens and the diverting resources—both fragmenting the country. Second, it deepens the trust gap between citizens and state institutions. For Jordan to curb corruption it must strengthen and empower institutions with oversight prerogatives. It remains to be seen if this current government can tackle the most ubiquitous and alarming corruption carried out by influential decision-makers.

A third policy option is the empowering of institutions. In fact, the stability of Jordan should be anchored in developing responsive and accountable institutions in the parliament and the Jordanian government. Perhaps the regime should be attentive to crucial issues related to the integrity and credibility of elections. Many of us are aware that official interference in elections has discredited the election process all together. Opinion polls conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan reveal that Jordanians do not trust parliament. In the latest poll, the popularity of the parliament took a nosedive with only 14% describing parliament as “trustworthy”.²⁰ As long as members of the parliament are dependent on the government and security apparatuses for their re-elections and patronage, chances for establishing the much-needed system of checks and balances are modest. Worse still, people will bypass the parliament with their criticism; focusing instead on the government and creating a suitable environment for anarchy in the years to come.²¹

What’s more, Jordanians do not believe that the government enjoys the full prerogatives mandated by the Jordanian constitution. Thus, many believe the

¹⁹ *Wasta*, a form of nepotism in which government jobs are granted to relatives, friends and spouses regardless of their qualifications is a form of administrative corruption recognized by Transparency International as endemic in Jordan and elsewhere in the Arab world

²⁰ Public Opinion Survey, Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, June 26 -July 2, 2018

²¹ Interview with Khaled Ramadan, Amman, July 21, 2018.

Prime Minister to be a mere employee with no real power. What Jordan needs most is an inclusive, transparent power-sharing government which builds a collective vision of the state and society. This transparent government should be representative of people and accountable to them. For many decades, people have become alienated from the democratic process due to the autocratic elite. Remarkably, following the publication of the King's discussion papers, people have begun to express themselves more freely; corresponding with senior officials behind closed doors. How can the regime take advantage of this once-in-a-generation opportunity to create a more structured and effective partnerships with its citizens?

Finally, one should think of the development gap between Amman and the outlying governorates. This is of particular importance given the relevance of the archaic-nature, of an unwritten social contract between the regime and those living in the periphery. Undoubtedly, the development gap is a direct reflection of the official policies. According to risk analyst Fares Braizat, the outcome was "the unintentional creation of a permanent, marginalised underclass outside urban centres, which suffers from higher levels of financial debt than urban centres and unequal development in services and infrastructure, rendering it largely uncompetitive (sic) in urban settings where opportunities exist. The result is socio-political alienation and a quantitatively qualified sense of disenfranchisement."²² Perhaps, this can in part explain the tendency among some youth to join radical groups. The regime should be aware of this development gap and act to assure a degree of even development. The failure to deal with this important issue can pose future threats to the stability of the regime.

For this reason, the stability of Jordan and the legitimacy of the regime rely on the changing nature of the state-society relationship. Gone are the days of Jordanian political passivism. In a nutshell, with a staggering economy, widespread corruption, a lack of accountability, and the absence of a system of checks and balances, conditions are ripe for instability in Jordan. Undoubtedly, if the economy does not markedly improve and the state continues with its intolerable levels of taxation, more people will be forced to look for alternatives that could jeopardize the status quo. The government's inability to create jobs could lead to a devastating combination of frustration and hopelessness. This in turn could set in motion an unpredictable state of instability. If the Kingdom does not adjust to the rising tides, there could be an undeniable crisis looming in the distance.

²² Jordan times, July, 14, 2018

About the author

Dr. Barari is currently a professor of International Relations and Middle East politics at the University of Jordan. Prior to that, he was a professor of Middle East politics at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and at Yale University. He also served as a Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) based in Washington, D.C. for the year 2006-07. From 2001-2006, he was a senior researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. He received his Ph.D. from Durham University in England, his MA from Leeds University in England and his BA from the University of Jordan. He is a columnist for the English Jordan Times. He is also a frequent commentator for key Arab and international TV stations.

Dr. Barari's core area of research is the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Middle East peace process, Israel-Jordan relations, and regional security and Middle Eastern politics. He has written extensively on the Arab-Israeli conflict and the peace process. His most recent books include *Jordan-Israel: A Troubled Relationship in a Volatile Region* (2014), *Israelism, Arab Scholarship on Israel: A Critical Assessment* (London: Ithaca, 2009), *The Middle East- Peace by Piece* (Amman: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2009), *Israeli Politics and the Middle East Peace* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), *Israel Jordan Ten Years Later* (Amman: CSS, 2004). He has also contributed numerous scholarly articles to different international journals and participated in scores of international conferences throughout Europe, the United States, and the Middle East.

FES Amman

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is a non-profit organization committed to the values of social democracy and is the oldest of Germany's political foundations. In Jordan, FES opened its office in 1986 and is accredited through a long-standing partnership with the Royal Scientific Society (RSS). The aims of the activities of the FES Amman are to promote democracy and political participation, to support progress towards social justice and gender equality as well as to contribute to ecological sustainability and peace and security in the region. FES Amman supports the building and strengthening of civil society and public institutions in Jordan and Iraq. FES Amman cooperates with a wide range of partner institutions from civil society and the political sphere to establish platforms for democratic dialogue, organize conferences, hold workshops and publish policy papers on current political questions.

The background of the page is a vibrant blue. A world map is rendered in a dotted, halftone style, centered on the page. Overlaid on the map and the entire background are numerous thin, white, wavy lines that create a sense of movement and depth, resembling a digital or network structure.

ISBN 978-9957-484-89-7