

Jordan's Eternal Promise of Reform

ACHIM VOGT

When protests and popular uprisings started sweeping the Middle East and North Africa in early 2011, international observers and media were quick to point to whom they speculated could be the next »domino« to follow long-time dictators Zine Al Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Husni Mubarak in Egypt. Among the countries mentioned most prominently, besides Yemen, Algeria and Syria at the time, figured Jordan. One of the key reasons for this – as it turned out, premature – assumption was the fact that the first demonstrations in Jordan were held as early as January 7: before Tunisia's Ben Ali fled the country on January 14 and substantially earlier than protests began in earnest in Egypt (25 January 2011).

As soon as events in Jordan took a different turn, with an early cabinet reshuffle on February 1 and public overtures by the monarchy and the new government of the Hashemite kingdom towards the protest movement, commentators and analysts were equally quick to argue that, given the moderate regime and the genuine interest of King Abdullah II in modernizing his country, Jordan would be able to avoid major public unrest and the risk of an eventual collapse of the regime.

Both assumptions proved to fall considerably short in their analysis. As it has turned out after more than nine months of an increasingly heterogeneous protest movement in the Arab world, the political equations for Jordan are far more complex, intertwined and overlapping on a national as well as a regional level than either analysis had considered. Therefore, long-term developments in Jordan are less predictable – and might even prove to be difficult to anticipate and manage for the regime itself. While the monarchy still has a chance to shape Jordan's political future by actively promoting and managing a peaceful reform process, it also faces the difficulty of having to cope with the different currents of a protest movement whose extremely divergent positions, demands and expectations are hard to merge and will be difficult to transform in a meaningful way into a sustainable political agenda for the country's

future. At the same time, failing to appease the different currents of the protesters might still constitute a severe risk, endangering the very foundations of the Hashemite regime and causing violent unrest along Jordan's ethnic fault lines.

Early Rumbblings before the Arab Spring

Several incidents and developments in this moderate, pro-Western kingdom had indicated long before the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia on December 17, 2010 (which triggered the Arab Spring) that politics and society in Jordan were far from enjoying the stability that international observers attributed to the country often described and lauded as a haven of calm in a troubled region. The monarchy was able, or so it seemed, to navigate the country through the regional turmoil with the ongoing conflicts in neighboring Iraq and in Lebanon, as well as – first and foremost – between Israelis and Palestinians. Conventional wisdom had it that an enlightened, although autocratic regime was advancing the country in a controlled transition towards more democratic structures and improving living standards through a liberal economic policy.

Beneath this rather superficial analysis, however, rumbblings of a mainly socio-economic nature showed that the tectonic shift in Jordan's society had the potential for substantial internal conflict. In November 2009, King Abdullah II had dissolved the country's parliament, frustrated with the deputies' resistance to the royal vision of economic modernization. A month later, he fired Prime Minister Nader Dahabi and replaced him with Samir Rifai, a neoliberal and close friend of the king. Without a parliament to control the new government, Samir Rifai was instructed to implement the royal vision without further delay. During the course of 2010, protests by daily laborers and teachers hinted at a growing socio-economic imbalance. Rising levels of poverty and unemployment which the state was not able to address adequately, given the government's austerity policy, further aggravated the situation.

While those indicators are not unusual in the region and were at least partially responsible for many of the upheavals of the Arab Spring, another incident was unprecedented in Jordan's history: in a manifesto published in May 2010 that raised eyebrows among the highest echelons of the state, the National Committee of Military Veterans attacked the

regime head on, accusing it of solving the Palestinian question at the expense of Jordan. The mention of a sell-out of Jordan to the Palestinians was substantiated by claims that Palestinians had been promoted to key positions, implying that Queen Rania – who is herself of Palestinian origin – had interfered (David 2010).

Like in a prism, the military veterans, whose committee carries considerable political influence due to its membership of 140,000 ex-soldiers, including high-ranking generals, mirror the underlying current of dissatisfaction in Jordanian society that was already virulent long before the upheavals in the Arab world started in early 2011. It was no coincidence that the military veterans' manifesto was published only days after a controversial military order in Israel came into effect on April 13, classifying Palestinians living in the West Bank without proper papers issued by Israel as »infiltrators.« Commentators and human rights activists argued that up to 70,000 Palestinians might be expelled to Jordan. Trans-Jordanians, who constitute a minority of around 40 percent in their own country, were alarmed by the prospect of yet another massive influx of Palestinians which would further marginalize them.¹

According to the social contract which traditionally prevailed between the Hashemite regime and the Trans-Jordanian tribes, the tribes would assure the monarchy of their loyalty in exchange for state services, employment opportunities, and financial support. Trans-Jordanians historically enjoy important privileges and dominate in public sector employment, the armed forces, the security services and the police. Jordanians of Palestinian origin, on the other hand, dominate in private sector businesses. The neoliberal policies of the government that tried to limit the role of the state in the economy were seen by Trans-Jordanian tribal leaders as further limiting their ability to provide jobs for their constituency, while Palestinians – in their view – increased their economic dominance and at the same time strengthened their influence in politics. Prime Minister Samir Rifai, whose family has Palestinian roots, was seen as a symbol of this growing political influence, as was Basem Awadallah, the controversial long-time advisor of King Abdullah II and former head

1. Palestinians first settled in Jordan after the wars of 1948 and 1967. A third wave of several hundred thousand Palestinians were re-settled in Jordan in 1991 when they were expelled by Kuwait and other Gulf states as a punishment after the PLO had publicly supported Saddam Hussein. The demographic balance was further changed at the expense of Trans-Jordanians with the influx of Iraqi refugees in the aftermath of the 2003 war that toppled the Saddam regime.

of the Royal Court. For many of the Trans-Jordanian tribes it became evident that they were losing ground in the battle for national identity.

These grievances were further fuelled by the increasing marginalization of the rural areas, mainly in the Southern regions of Jordan which are marked by their Bedouin character, in favor of urban centers such as Amman with a Palestinian majority in the local population. These poverty gaps between the cities and the periphery – which would prove to be a key factor in the uprising in Tunisia – had been grossly neglected by successive governments in Amman. King Abdullah II, whose traditional role is to balance the demands of the different strata of society, was – from the perspective of the tribes – surrounded by technocrats and increasingly distanced from the people. The doors of the palace, observers noted, were closed to the tribes.

One of the many dilemmas the king faces is that he relies on a parliament which is purposefully composed mainly of Trans-Jordanian individuals, most of them tribal leaders or elders. Due to a grossly unjust electoral law, which through its grotesque distortion of electoral districts favors rural and tribal areas, Trans-Jordanians are guaranteed a solid majority of deputies, thereby in the past ensuring their loyalty to the regime. While this serves the interests of the monarchy, the king has progressively become more and more frustrated by the extremely conservative mentality of the vast majority of the members of parliament who blocked economic reforms that King Abdullah II and as his neoliberal government deemed necessary to weather the global financial crisis. Thus, his dissolution of the parliament in November 2009 was immensely popular with ordinary citizens who had become more and more dissatisfied with its performance. There is a twofold irony in that the king dissolved a parliament that had been composed in accordance with the regime's liking and with citizens' expectations that only individuals and representatives of the tribes could provide the services to their constituencies that they expected.

When the new parliament, elected on November 9, 2010 under an only cosmetically reformed electoral law, gave the unpopular Rifai government a vote of confidence with a stunning majority of 111 out of 119 members present on December 23, 2010, its credibility slumped to an all-time low just weeks after its election.

While some of these seemed to be isolated events at the time and few observers saw the potential for deeper troubles ahead, the timing could not have been worse for the monarchy with regard to the whirlwind

developments that unfolded just a few days later in the region and deeply affected Jordan as well.

Divergent Protest Movements and Ambiguous Reactions

Protests started in Jordan on January 7, 2011. It is noteworthy that they did not originate in the capital but in Dhiban, a provincial city south of Amman. Mohammed Sneid, the popular leader of the Daily Laborers' Movement, had started the demonstrations in his hometown, only to bring them to Amman the following Friday. Again, slogans focused on socio-economic issues. A heterogeneous group of protesters took to the streets, mainly comprising leftist and youth activists. As in other countries of the region, the traditional opposition, including the Muslim Brotherhood, did not join the protesters at that stage. The attempt of the Islamists to stage a sit-in in front of parliament two days later failed – contrary to the expectations of observers, the Muslim Brotherhood was not able to mobilize a significant number of followers. During the early weeks of demonstrations, the Islamists were active but did not dominate the Friday protests in downtown Amman.

The reaction of the regime was rapid and predictable: immediately after the first protests, two economic aid packages, totaling 390 million Jordanian dinars (550 million US dollars) were meant mainly to increase subsidies on food and fuel, keep prices of basic commodities stable and raise salaries of civil servants – including the pensions of military veterans. Even though the new subsidies brought the planned budget deficit to a record high of more than 2 billion US dollars rather than further curbing it as the government had planned, the measures were not enough to placate the protesters.

On February 1, the king surprised many observers with the sacking of Prime Minister Samir Rifai. While Rifai himself was without doubt highly unpopular, the king's decision at this early stage of the protests was seen as bowing to the demands of the street too easily. It is not without some irony that Rifai's father Zeid, also a two-time prime minister, was fired by Abdullah's father, King Hussein, in April 1989 after bread riots had erupted in the southern city of Ma'an. Changing the government is a well-established mechanism of Jordanian politics to ease social tensions, re-orientate the course of politics and keep the monarchy above the fray of day-to-day politics.

The king's choice as successor was significant in itself: Marouf al-Bakhit is a representative of the old guard, a member of a powerful Jordanian tribe, former general and ambassador to Israel and Turkey, who had already served as prime minister from 2005 to 2007. At that time, Bakhit had been chosen to restore order after the hotel bombings in Amman on November 9, 2005 which led to a security-oriented policy and an intensified confrontation with the country's Islamists. In addition, critics accused him of being responsible for the rigged parliamentary elections of 2007. It became apparent that the king aimed to stabilize the country not through reforms but rather through reverting to conservative forces. Later, this deliberate political choice would be underlined by the nomination of Khalid Karaki, another conservative, as the new head of the Royal Court on March 2, 2011. The new prime minister's economic orientation, being less of a neoliberal and more open to the social dimension of economic policies, at first sight seemed to prove a major concession to the protesters on the streets – in reality his positions on economic policy were rather indicative of the fact that with regard to the economy, the demands of the tribes were remarkably close to those of the reformist movement in that they objected to the neoliberal privatization policy of the former government and were thus in direct opposition to the economic vision of the king himself.

Meanwhile, the reform movement which had started in early January tried to consolidate and form a common platform. In its first phase, the protesters had demanded improvements in their living conditions and pushed for the dismissal of the government which it blamed for the economic deterioration of the country. Not surprisingly, the change of the cabinet brought a first split: while most protesters – including the Islamic Action Front (IAF, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood) and the small leftist Popular Unity Party – wanted to continue with the Friday demonstrations, the majority of the »Coordinating Committee of Opposition Parties« agreed on a break to give the new prime minister a chance to implement his agenda.

Within the reform movement, the »Jordanian Campaign for Change,« also nicknamed »Jayeen« (»We are coming«), managed to some extent to group many of the protesters loosely under one umbrella, including the Social Left Movement, the Democratic Youth Union and many of the formerly non-organized protesters. Jayeen had been founded in the southern city of Kerak at the end of January. The movement was also divided in terms of the debate on the extent to which the Muslim

Brotherhood should play a role. The Brotherhood itself publicly exerted restraint: It did not officially engage actively in the movement, while its own youth movement tried to involve itself more. This became obvious with the foundation of the »24 March Movement« which later tried to lift the protests to new levels.

Inspired by the protests in Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen where demonstrators had camped out in central squares such as Tahrir (Cairo), Pearl (Manama) and Taghyeer (Sana'a), the »24 March Movement« which assembled several initiatives including Jayeen and the »1952 Constitution Movement« tried to set up an indefinite tent camp on the centrally located Dakhlich Circle in Amman, also known as Jamal Abdel Nasser or Interior Circle. The choice of a major thoroughfare in the very heart of the capital which, in addition, was in the direct neighborhood of the Ministry of the Interior, immediately proved too much of a provocation for the regime. Within 24 hours, the camp site twice came under ferocious attack by »loyalist« thugs and was disbanded with brute force by the special forces of the gendarmerie (»Darak«).

The events of March 24 and 25 showed the two-pronged reaction of the regime to the protest movement that had gained some momentum over the course of two months and become more political in its demands. While the early demands had been mainly socio-economic, the formation of the »1952 Constitution Movement« – among others – had shown that the movement was willing to touch the fundamental pillars of Hashemite rule. Since 1952, the Jordanian constitution had been amended 29 times, weakening the government and parliament in favor of an ever stronger position for the king. Asking to return to the original constitution of 1952 was meant to limit the powers of the king and ultimately to lead to an elected government which had in the meantime become one of the key demands of the protesters. Only the demand to intensify the fight against corruption proved to be an issue better placed to reconcile the expectations of the divergent protest movements.

Besides the reform movement and the earlier protests of the nationalist military veterans, another protest had in the meantime emerged from the tribes. In an open letter published on February 6, which stirred up considerable anxiety in the regime, 36 tribal figures – though not leaders – had strongly protested against widespread corruption and harshly attacked the monarchy: if reforms were not implemented, it threatened, the events of Tunisia and Egypt would sooner or later be repeated in Jordan. Although nationalistic in tone and written in a sometimes bizarre rhetoric,

the letter – which also personally accused Queen Rania – demanded that the »crisis of governance« be overcome and both chambers of the parliament dissolved, as well as the formation of a unity government, democratic freedoms, and an end to the government's privatization policies (Ammonnews 2010). With these demands there was, again, some overlap with the reform movement.

The attack on the protesters on March 25 showed that neither the monarchy nor the security services are ready to accept more than controlled and managed protests. The attacks, preceded and followed by several others on protesters and media alike, raised a number of serious questions with regard to Jordan's power structures. Observers widely noted that elements in the security services were obviously following their own agenda which coincided with that of the nationalistic anti-reform bloc.² The gendarmerie proved to be ill-equipped to keep its neutrality and was seen celebrating together with thugs.

Even worse than the security forces' reaction was that of Prime Minister Marouf al Bakhit who did not blame the attackers but the protesters for the violence, accusing them of »playing with fire.« The anti-reform movement as well as parts of the regime attacked the protesters as being Palestinian and Islamist – an unfounded accusation since the majority of the protesters were Trans-Jordanian. Bakhit went as far as insinuating that the Muslim Brotherhood received instructions from senior Islamist leaders in Syria and Egypt. Indeed, it was the regime that played with fire at this particular juncture of the Jordanian wave of protests, deliberately playing the card of rising ethnic tensions which had become a topic of heated debate in the media, as well as among the public by the summer.

In the short run, the regime succeeded in silencing the protesters of the »24 March Movement« who withdrew from the scene for two months, being traumatized by their own political miscalculation and by the attacks of both the conservative establishment inside and outside the government and the security forces.³ The success of the regime was a pyrrhic victory,

2. The latest incident was an attack on protesters and journalists during a demonstration in downtown Amman on July 15. The journalists had been given orange vests to distinguish them from demonstrators and to protect them. In spite of these measures, more than a dozen media representatives were deliberately singled out and injured in attacks by police and security forces. Four police officers were arrested.
3. The »24 March Movement« was further weakened by a split between pan-Arabist supporters of the Assad regime in Syria and a second current demanding democratic rights there.

however, with Jordan's image as a moderate and modern regime being severely shattered internally and abroad.

On the other side of the equation is the king's proclaimed desire to seriously engage in a sustained reform effort. Not only has he entrusted the new government with the explicit order to speed up democratic reforms, ordering »practical, swift and appreciable steps to initialize a process of true political reform,« but he ostensibly followed his own claims by first forming a »National Dialogue Committee« on March 14 and complementing it on April 26 by establishing a »Royal Committee on Constitutional Review« on possible amendments to the constitution.

After three months of deliberations, the 52-member »National Dialogue Committee« finally presented its recommendations on a new electoral law. The most important reforms concern the introduction of a representative element in the law, reserving 15 seats to be decided by votes for an open list at national level, and the formation of a panel of 13 notable members, including seven retired judges to oversee future elections, thereby edging closer to an independent electoral commission. With regard to the political parties' law (the second mandate of the Committee), the number of required founding members will be reduced from 500 to 250 (including a minimum of 25 women).

The king has indicated several times that in the long run he aims at introducing an elected government. In a speech on August 2, 2011, he reiterated that »the reform package will establish a legal basis to finally see elected parliamentary governments in the future.« The »Royal Committee on Constitutional Review« presented its recommendations in this regard in mid-August. According to these, a Constitutional Court and an Independent Electoral Commission will be established which will indeed be major progress on the path to a state based on the rule of law. In addition, the ability of the government to issue temporary laws will in the future be restricted. It remains to be seen how the independence of the new institutions will be guaranteed (the judges of the Constitutional Court being – according to the recommendations – appointed by the king). On the question of elected governments, the »Royal Committee on Constitutional Review« did not present a recommendation. The authority of the king will basically remain untouched.

Other measures already implemented include the reform of the Public Gatherings Law which now allows for protests without prior permission from the authorities, and laws allowing the long-rejected professional association that teachers had been fighting for for decades. There are

indications that the secret service might in the future refrain from interfering in student affairs at Jordan's universities.

It might seem that under pressure from prolonged street protests and a reform movement that has become much more outspoken given the influence of the regional tide of events, Jordan's leadership has finally got the message and is trying to live up – at least partially – to the expectations of its citizens rather than to prescribe rhetorical placebos. Nevertheless, many analysts remain rather skeptical about the level of possible reforms that Jordan might see in the near future, asking whether »real change or illusion« is on the horizon.⁴

Indeed, some doubts remain about what the king is actually ready to concede. In his speech on the occasion of the Great Arab Revolt, Army Day and the twelfth anniversary of his accession to the throne on June 12, Abdullah II. reiterated that the process of reform had »always been at the top of our priorities« and that he himself had »worked through various means in order to bring about reform and change.« The king announced his »vision for Jordan,« of a »firmly established parliamentary monarchy, based on the separation of powers that shall be accountable to the nation as their constant source of authority.« The electoral process, he continued, should in the future allow for the »formation of governments based on parliamentary majority and political party manifestos.«⁵

Only two days later, however, King Abdullah II tried to diminish public expectations by saying that elected governments would need a number of years. Before they could be achieved, a landscape of political parties needed to be created, consisting of three major parties representing the right, centre and left of the political spectrum. This top-down approach

4. Title of an op-ed by Rami G. Khouri, a well-known Palestinian-Jordanian journalist, in the Lebanese newspaper *Daily Star*; June 18, 2011; <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/mobile/Article.aspx?id=141543> (accessed August 7, 2011). Other sceptical voices included the Jordanian political website *Black Iris* that argued the proposed reforms were nothing but a »heightened state of déjà-vu« (*And Then The King Spoke*, June 15, 2011; <http://www.black-iris.com/2011/06/15/and-then-the-king-spoke>, accessed August 7, 2011), and Kareem Fahim of the *New York Times*, who wrote that the anger fuelling the protests had »grown into broader doubts about the king's intentions« (»Jordan's Protesters Ask Little, and Receive Less,« July 19, 2011; <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/20/world/middleeast/20jordan.html?ref=kareemfahim>, accessed August 7, 2011).

5. King Abdullah II was actually crowned on February 7, 1999. Quotes from the English translation of the speech by the *Jordan Times*, June 13, 2011; <http://www.jordantimes.com/index.php?news=38420> (accessed August 7, 2011).

will almost certainly not work: political parties can develop only through the commitment of citizens, not through royal initiatives.

More importantly, another paragraph of the king's speech rang alarm bells: while restating his firmness in the »fight against corruption in all its forms,« he sharply warned those »dealing with corruption on the basis of rumors and gossip« that they were marring »Jordan's reputation regionally and globally, and negatively affect[ing] any endeavor to attract investment to the country.« Therefore, the king added, it was »imperative that a legal mechanism is found to deal with those who fire off false accusations and rumors.« It remains to be seen how seriously the regime will try to tackle the grave problem of corruption – the lowest common denominator of all protest groups in the country.

From the moment of his accession to the throne, King Abdullah II has made the reform process his priority concern. Each of the eight Prime Ministers under his rule (Marouf al Bakhit being nominated twice) has received clear instructions to advance the democratic transition process. In reality, however, the process never really took off. On the contrary, it has suffered several serious setbacks: the political party law of April 2007 and the NGO law of July 2008, to name just two examples, were severe hindrances in the process. More importantly, the king himself had initiated several commissions since 2000 tasked with developing coherent programs to democratize the kingdom. Most prominent among them was the National Agenda of 2005, a committee of 27 members representing a wide variety of social groups.⁶ This group took a holistic approach and came up with a far-reaching set of recommendations in the political field (including a mixed electoral system and proposals to free political parties, non-governmental organizations and the media from government interference) and in the economic and social sector (proposing measures that would move Jordan from a rentier state to a productive and self-sufficient economy). With the exception of medical insurance for all employees which was introduced in 2010, none of the recommendations were ever implemented.

As Marwan Muasher, a former deputy prime minister and the head of the »National Agenda Committee« argues, a resilient rentier system and its proponents of the nationalist Trans-Jordanian current have »become so entrenched, powerful, and ossified that [they are] now not

6. The other notable initiatives were the »Jordan First« initiative of 2002 and the »We Are All Jordan« initiative of 2006.

only resisting such reform from below but – more dangerously – from above« (Muasher 2011). The resistance of the anti-reform forces in the country was further reinforced by crucial regional events at the time, such as the Muslim Brotherhood's success in parliamentary elections and the hotel bombings in Amman (both in 2005) and the victory of Hamas in elections in the Palestinian territories (in 2006). These events led the regime to put aside any reform agenda and adopt a security-based policy approach instead. It is interesting to note that King Abdullah II has rediscovered the »National Agenda« in 2011, asking policymakers in the government as well as in the commissions to base their deliberations on the recommendations presented five years earlier.

Domestic Policies Entangled in Foreign Affairs

In very few countries of the region are foreign and domestic policies as much intertwined as in Jordan. Given the majority of Jordanians of Palestinian origin in the country, which has never been officially recognized, Trans-Jordanians have always feared not only Palestinian dominance in domestic Jordanian politics but a Palestinian takeover of the country. The military confrontation between Jordanian forces and the PLO in 1970/1971 still traumatizes the population on both sides after four decades. Reform efforts in Jordan which are meant to democratize politics would – in the perspective of Trans-Jordanians – inevitably lead to a growing political influence of Palestinians and ultimately to the »Jordan Option,« the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by creating an alternative Palestinian state in Jordan.

Therefore, official Jordanian politics has always insisted vigorously on the implementation of the two-state solution. With Israeli politics rapidly turning to the right during the past decade, King Abdullah II has walked a delicate tightrope, maintaining the Wadi Araba peace treaty of 1994 with Israel, while at the same time increasingly criticizing Israeli politics. Relations with Israel, though still operational in the security sector, are at an all-time low and suggestions by right-wing Israeli politicians to make Jordan the alternative homeland led to massive outrage in politics and the broader public in Jordan in the spring of 2011. While the protests – similar to Egypt – have not focused (yet) on demands to abrogate the peace treaty with Israel, a further deterioration of the situation in the Palestinian territories might trigger a new dynamic in the protest movement,

given that the Muslim Brotherhood and many leftist activists who are already active in the Anti-Normalization movement have been critical of Jordan's foreign policy for years.

A second front has evolved in recent months with regard to Jordan's assistance to the United States in conflicts such as Afghanistan. On December 30, 2009, a Jordanian suicide bomber killed seven CIA operatives in East Afghanistan when he arrived at a meeting to discuss the whereabouts of Al Qaeda's then second in command, Egyptian Ayman al Zawahiri. His handler, who also died in the attack, was another Jordanian, Captain Sharif Ali bin Zeid, a distant relative of King Abdullah II. The fact that Jordanian Special Forces are operating in Afghanistan alongside the US has caused considerable public debate. It should be noted, however, that other Jordanian operations abroad in recent months went widely unnoticed in the Jordanian media and public. In Libya, Jordan committed a number of fighter planes to help Western forces fight the regime of Muammar al Ghaddafi; in Bahrain, at least 500 Jordanian police have been helping the regime to quell an uprising since April 2011.

Jordan's pro-Western foreign policy has helped the country to contain its economic burden and maintain some room to maneuver to spend additional funds on social programs. Before the Arab Spring, Jordan received the highest per capita amount of foreign aid in the region. In September 2008, the US signed a cooperation agreement with Jordan that will provide the country with American aid worth 660 million US dollars annually over a period of five years.⁷ As an early reaction to the growing socio-economic tensions in Jordan, the Obama administration agreed in January 2011 to increase its assistance by 100 million US dollars to specifically help Jordan's poor, youth and underprivileged. With the protests ongoing, the US committed itself, through its Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), to providing another 400 million US dollars in financing with the aim of mobilizing 1 billion US dollars of development projects in Jordan.⁸

The second most important foreign donor is Saudi Arabia which agreed to aid Jordan with a grant of 400 million US dollars in early June 2011. Jordanian media reported at the end of July that Jordan might receive an additional 1 billion US dollars from Saudi Arabia, but details

7. 360 million US dollars are economic assistance – an additional 300 million US dollars are earmarked for military assistance.

8. Fact Sheet of the US Department of State, May 19, 2011; <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prsps/2011/05/163820.htm> (accessed August 8, 2011).

of that agreement were not available at the time of writing. In the past, Saudi Arabia has significantly helped Jordan financially several times. It is widely said that at least some of those funds were outside the official budget.

Fearing the uprisings in its own backyard (Bahrain, Yemen, to some extent Syria) and what is perceived as a growing threat from Shiite Iran, Saudi Arabia has been keen in recent months to consolidate its immediate neighborhood. One concrete step has been to lobby the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to invite both Jordan and Morocco to join the regional alliance. The GCC published its surprise announcement on May 9, 2011. Reactions in Jordan were mostly positive if not enthusiastic with high expectations that billions in financial assistance were imminent and job opportunities opened up for Jordanian labor. Few skeptics argued that membership of the GCC would also bring a cultural backlash with a rising conservative influence of the Gulf on Jordan's traditionally more open society.⁹ The process of negotiations to join the »club of kings,« as it is nicknamed, started in September 2011 and will probably last several years. Among other factors, Saudi Arabia counts on Jordan's experienced and well equipped security and police forces. The GCC's decision was muted by the fact that while Saudi Arabia and – not surprisingly – Bahrain were strongly in favor of Jordan's membership, others – such as Kuwait and Oman – put up considerable resistance. Kuwait still reproaches Jordan with making Khalid Karaki the head of the Royal Court. Karaki had written controversial poems lauding Saddam Hussein in 1991.

Jordan's rentier system is based on foreign aid as the single most important factor to keep it running. In addition, the country badly needs additional funds to address the most pressing socio-economic grievances. Possible future aid from the Gulf states is, therefore, very welcome. The king has already announced the creation of the Tafila Development Fund, valued at 21 million US dollars, which will be used mainly to create jobs in the region. An even larger amount, 150 million JD (211 million US dollars), has been earmarked to support economic development in the governorates.

9. Jordan's applications to join the Gulf Cooperation Council had been rejected twice before, in the 1980s and in 1996. Morocco has not officially declined the offer yet and even joined the process of negotiations but on the other hand hinted that its cultural affiliation is closer to its Maghreb neighborhood and the Mediterranean.

Whither Jordan – Reform or Rhetoric?

So far, Jordan has weathered the storm of the Arab Spring very well. The regime, it seems, has managed the domestic uprising and avoided large-scale unrest for the time being. Nevertheless, the king finds himself sandwiched between the demands of a liberal protest movement of mainly young, formerly unorganized activists who demand – inspired by regional events – political inclusion in the system, and a conservative and nationalist protest movement on the other side that – while sharing some of the socio-economic complaints of the reform movement and also demanding a fight against corruption – wants to keep its traditional privileges and maintain the primordial structures of *wasta* (as clientelism is called in Jordan).

Therefore, it is difficult to determine, at this point, to what extent the king is willing and able to reform traditional structures in politics and society. It will be difficult to placate both currents of protest simultaneously. It remains to be seen whether the monarch will finally confront the outlived structures of the old system head on or eventually retreat – as has been the case in the past – to more placebo-style rhetoric, raising expectations and hopes regularly which in the end are not fulfilled and, therefore, cause more frustration among young educated Jordanians in the future.

At the same time, the king needs to adjust his own vision of modernization which has focused too much on neoliberal approaches of liberalization and privatization, while neglecting rising levels of poverty and unemployment as much as other social grievances.

Jordan still has a fair chance of emerging from the current turmoil in the region as a model of a country that has peacefully reformed towards a more inclusive democratic society. But all will depend on bold decisions – first and foremost by the king himself.

References

- Ammonnews (2011): Statement by national figures warns of dangers to Jordan if reform is not implemented fast, February 6, 2011; <http://en.ammonnews.net/article.aspx?articleNO=11523> (accessed August 7, 2011).
- David, Assaf (2010): »The Revolt of Jordan’s Military Veterans,« in: *Foreign Policy*, June 16, 2010; <http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/15/>

the_revolt_of_jordans_military_veterans (accessed August 4, 2011 [subscribers only]).

Muasher, Marwan (2011): *A Decade of Struggling Reform Efforts in Jordan. The Resilience of the Rentier System*, The Carnegie Papers, May 2011, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/jordan_reform.pdf (accessed August 8, 2011).