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What did the Arab Spring bring to Jordan?

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Last year's events have caused a domino effect in the region of the Middle East and the developments could not have left the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan unaffected. The impact of these events became apparent both on the domestic issues and on the relations of the Kingdom with other states and actors. To some extent the developments in Jordan resembled those in the rest of the Arab World. On the total, though, Jordan's case is different.

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On January 2011, Jordan, just like the rest of the Arab World, was hit by the waves of the uprisings. Protests, demonstrations and public demands for change made their appearance in the major cities of the country. The demonstrators consisted of men and women of all ages, Islamists led by the Muslim Brotherhood branch in Jordan, leftists, as well as the unemployed and the educated people. The agenda consisted of demands for both economic and political reforms. The protesters called for measures regarding the high unemployment, the rise of taxes and prices and, as it could be expected, the corruption. One of the main demands was the resignation of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, but also the revision of the electoral law and the establishment of fair and free elections.¹

Unlike, however, other leaders, the positive reaction of Jordan's King Abdullah II was immediate. On February 1st the King dismissed his Cabinet and Prime Minister and within a week the new government was formed.² People continued to demonstrate and on August the King approved a list of constitutional amendments and revisions. These amendments included the creation of a constitutional court and special independent bodies for election monitoring.³ Nevertheless, the scenery remained almost the same, even after last October, when the King fired once again his government, forming a new one.

During the protests, the authorities had adopted a «carrot and stick» policy, giving some space to the demonstrators to express their frustration, whilst using at the same time force to establish certain red lines, especially when it came to critiques against the Monarchy.⁴ Arab Spring in Jordan compared to other countries was not brutal and concluded in only one and rather controversial death. However what really makes the difference in the case of Jordan is the very nature of the protests, since the majority of the people are not protesting against the regime per se. Unlike Egypt or Libya, Jordan's demonstrations are not seeking the change of the Monarchy, but rather some constitutional reformations. And the reason why the Jordanian uprising has remained so restricted and moderate is that both activists and the Kingdom seem to understand very well that once the revolution exceeds those red lines, the deep conflict between East Bank tribesmen and Palestinians of Jordan would come to the surface again and possibly lead to a civil war.⁵

Yet the Arab Spring has affected Jordan in many ways. As an important regional actor, Jordan could not remain idle towards the ongoing crisis in Syria. Jordan once again tried to keep a moderate position, balancing its interests and the regional trends. Though the King and the government were initially quite reluctant, their official stance on the Syrian crisis started to shift after August. This was partly due to public pressure from various groups, including the Islamic Arab Front (IAF), which was gaining more influence, as the King was remaining silent.⁶ But Jordan was also taking into consideration the international approach and even more the position of the GCC states, with which the Kingdom is now enjoying ever-closer ties, after the long awaited invitation to join the Group.⁷

Once Jordan adopted a more critical position towards Assad's regime, developments succeeded one another. King Abdullah became the first Arab leader who openly called Assad to resign.⁸ Following the reactions that the statement raised, the Cabinet stated in local newspapers that it was misinterpreted.⁹ A similar approach was practiced regarding the sanctions imposed on Syria by the Arab League, with Jordan going along with the sanctions, but later requesting to be excluded from their implementation, since this could seriously harm its economy.

And while all these were happening, another development of great importance was taking place: the rapprochement of Jordan and Hamas. Twelve years after his exile, Hamas Chief Khaled Meshaal was allowed to visit Jordan and to hold discussions with the King himself, according to a statement made by the Minister for Information Affairs, Rakan Al-Majali.¹⁰ Hamas is making an effort to move its politburo to Jordan, due to the crisis in Syria.

Such a decision could, according to the official analysis, jeopardize the Kingdom's relations with Israel and hence, it has already been rejected from Jordan's side. For Jordan, according to Labib Khamawi, an independent political analyst, this development should be seen within the context of the Arab coalition led by Qatar, aiming at alienating Iran.¹¹ According to that line of thought, by removing Hamas from Syria and placing it in Jordan, Iran would lose one of its stepping stones in the region and thus its influence would be reduced. This scenario is supported by rumors that Qatar has offered Jordan economic incentives in exchange to its hosting Hamas.¹²

Ties with Hamas would also strengthen Jordan's relations with other Islamic Movements around the world. And in a time that political Islam is emerging in the region of the Middle East, this perspective should not be ignored. Through the course of the Arab Spring we have seen that Islamic Movements have gained power, both social and political, in the Arab countries. The Islamic Action Front, which is the political branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, is not an exception. IAF, which is the only established opposition party, came to the front through its participation in the rallies calling for reformation, especially in regard to the election laws.

Although IAF has tried to stress that it does not pose any threat to the regime by expressing their goal to participate in public life in cooperation with secular groups, recently a growing anti-Islamist sentiment has emerged among the tribes. These groups conceive the Movement's demand for reforms as a general plan to transform the Kingdom into a Republic.¹³ Hamza Mansour, secretary general of IAF, attributes this increasing gap between tribes and Islamists to a wider strategy seeking to undermine the reforms, while tribe leaders make clear that they would not accept any attempts by Islamists to rule the country.¹⁴ IAF has also another challenge to face, as the internal division between the hardliners and the moderates causes certain volatility within the Movement. This became apparent when the Salafis -a smaller extremist wing of the IAF- separated themselves during the demonstrations and clashed with the police.¹⁵

It is still too early to judge over the future of the political Islam in Jordan, but one thing is sure: Jordan has many challenges to address due to its deep-rooted divisions, the economic difficulties and the regional fragile security. The Monarchy has so far managed to control the tensions, but further confrontation could prove disastrous for the Kingdom's stability.

NOTES

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