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Jordan: Still Serene?

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The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan did not experience the large number of protests and riots that took place in the frame of the revolutionary wave known as the Arab Spring. Even the large-scale demonstrations of 2011 and 2012 that erupted across the country did not have any tangible success. However, the stability of the Hashemite Kingdom is now being threatened by several emerging challenges posed by the ongoing Syrian crisis and domestic opposition groups.

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The main concern of the Hashemite Kingdom currently revolves around possible spillover effects of Syria's civil war. The influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees has had significant impact. As of February 2014, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) had registered almost 600,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan – with the possibility that there may be thousands more who are unregistered. Over 80,000 refugees are registered in the refugee camp of Zaatari, which is now the fourth largest city in Jordan and the second biggest refugee camp in the world.¹ This large proportion of exiled Syrians creates a series of problems for Jordan. Firstly, Amman has to cope with the cost of hosting the Syrian refugees, whose influx into Jordan has increased the country's population by 10%, during a time at which its economy, labor market, public services, and administrative structures, are all under massive strain. Secondly, Amman has already been dealing with the effects of an austerity program implemented to meet IMF terms, and the growing number of refugees is placing even more strain on public services, leading even the most loyal of supporters to direct their anger towards the Jordanian regime.

Of special interest is the situation in the poor Zaatari region regarding the tension between locals and refugees over limited water resources. Locals blame refugees for the water shortage, given that before the formation of the refugee camp, municipal water pumped through the village twice a week. But after the arrival of the refugees, water began being pumped only once a week.² There are other pressures too; schools in the Zaatari village run double shifts in order to accommodate the increased number of students, and health centers have seen an increase of up to 40% in their number of cases. Locals see the arrival of the Syrians as a real disaster, especially considering the fact that many of them relied on donations distributed by the Zaatari Organization for their survival, all of which are now allocated to Syrians based on donor conditions.³ In light of such disputes, King Abdullah II has also had to address issues of protection for both Jordanians and Syrians. A few international and local NGOs have established programs aimed at fostering good relations between locals and Syrians, strongly motivated after the October 2013 release of an Amnesty International report charging the Jordanian government with contravening international humanitarian law by forcibly deporting people back to Syria.⁴ Unfortunately, all matters remain unsolved and in reality, they are becoming more worrying as the civil war in Syria continues. A detailed long-term approach is now required.

From a security point of view, the Syrian civil war poses a number of risks for Jordan. Amman is highly concerned as the center of gravity of military operations inside Syria shifts towards the borders with Jordan, since Syrian rebels are striving to extend their stronghold in the south to counter the regime's efforts to eliminate rebels power in Damascus. In addition, not only have border guards exchanged fire with Syrian government forces and opposition groups, but fears remain prevalent in Jordan regarding the possible dispersion of radical ideologies, jihadis, and sophisticated weapons inside Jordan, as well as the threat of cross-border terrorism. In October 2012, the Jordanian government arrested 11 Jordanians found with explosives from Syria that they reportedly intended to use against various targets in Amman.⁵ Consequently, even though Jordan had initially adopted a policy of neutrality, this policy has since changed, with Jordan deciding to realign its foreign policy closer to that of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.⁶

These escalating problems resulted in Jordan holding early parliamentary elections. The early parliamentary elections, held in the midst of intensifying economic and political disappointment, revealed an increasing demand for strong opposition. Even though social forces were not entirely united, they clearly asked for an end to corruption and monarchy and political reforms, offering a great opportunity to the country's opposition movements. However, Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, the only well-organised opposition movement – with the Islamic Action Front (IAF) as its political wing-, failed to capture any gain from the

elections. Once a powerful voice within the Kingdom, now, the Jordanian Brotherhood, sees its power at a standing decline. Just a year ago, the Brotherhood 's influence was surging as it participated in demonstrations with both tribal and secular forces against King Abdullah's government. But internal divisions, the fear of creeping extremism, and changes in the Brotherhood's orientation toward Hamas, all worked towards making the Brotherhood less appealing among East Bankers, eroding the group's power.⁷ Most importantly, the decision taken by the Brotherhood 's leadership to boycott the 2013 early elections, with an eye towards delegitimizing the vote, resulted in its losing claim as the Islamist leader of Jordan. Meanwhile, the Salafist movement appears to be increasing its confidence in the society of Jordan both by exploiting all the potential triggers and by receiving support from the Salafist movements in the region. The burgeoning Salafists are now taking advantage at the expense of the decline of the Brotherhood's popularity. Their political ambitions largely depend on whether or not Islamists' will hold prominent roles in post-Assad Syria as well as on the activity of foreign Islamist groups' activity in Jordan.

Under these pressing conditions, the appointment by the King of Abdullah Ensour as Prime Minister of Jordan on 30 March 2013, was a rather clever move, since Mr Ensour, as a veteran politician, has good connections to the Royal Court as well as to opposition movements, including IAF and Palestinians.

However, Palestinians' increased participation in street demonstrations, in combination with the arrival of approximately 11,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria, poses another threat to domestic political stability. Mass protests broke out in Amman, Zarqa, Ibrid, and other areas where there are significant concentrations of Palestinians, the primary support base of Jordan's Islamist movement. In the last few days, rumors have been spreading alleging that a deal was in the works to turn Jordan into an alternative home for Palestinians have been spread. The claim was contradicted by S. Rawabdeh, President of the Jordanian Senate , who declared that there is no existence of what is referred to as "substitute land" on Jordan's map, adding that the right of return will be an individual decision for every Jordanian of Palestinian origin.⁸ Furthermore, taking into consideration the emerging disaffection among East Bankers - once loyal supporters of the regime - because of the worsening of their economic situations and their perceived marginalization in favor of "nouveau riche" and descendants of Jordan's original Beduins, Amman has to cope with an explosive situation.

Under these difficult circumstances, promoting peace and good neighboring relations with Israel, regardless of historical ties to Palestinians, is of utmost importance to the Jordanian government. King Hussein, the previous King of Jordan, had concluded that peace with Israel must be one of Jordan 's major priorities. Following his father's orientation, and considering that friendly relations and cooperation with Tel Aviv are advantageous to Jordan 's strategic interests, in 2012, King Abdullah appointed a new ambassador to Israel, filling the two-year vacant post. Recent efforts to promote cooperation between Jordan and Israel include the Israeli facilitation of Jordanian trade with Iraq and Turkey in 2013, and the negotiations concerning sale of Israeli natural gas to Jordan,⁹ which reveals Jordan's will to build good relations. In addition to Jordan's interests to build cooperation, Israel has its own reasons for strengthening its relations with Amman, as a breakdown of the Kingdom will change both the balance of power in the region and Israel's security plans.

The perpetuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains an obstacle to Jordan's own development and its plans for cooperation with Israel. Although not as deep-rooted in Jordanian society as it is for East Bankers, Palestinian grievances regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may represent a dangerous evolution for the King. An estimated 2 million UN-registered Palestinian refugees reside in Jordan, and while many no longer

regard their stay as being temporary, they have retained their status as refugees as a sign of support for Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.¹⁰ For these reasons, Jordan continues to monitor the Palestinian question and the surrounding negotiations with concern.

The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, which began in July, 2013, and the potential adoption of a mutually acceptable solution is a matter of political survival for the monarchy. The Israeli-Palestinian negotiations touch upon future security arrangements along Jordan's borders with a potential future Palestinian state, and arrangements for either an Israeli or international security presence in Jordan's Valley.

Jordan is highly concerned that a Palestinian state in the West Bank would challenge Amman's legitimacy, by claiming the allegiance of at least part of its Palestinian majority. Regarding the Jordan Valley, Israel has made it clear that it wants to have presence there and to maintain the Valley's Jewish communities. On the other side, Jordan supports Palestinian statehood and opposes the Israeli annexation of the Valley. However, it is doubtful that the Jordanian Kingdom in practice would support the imminent creation of a Palestinian state. The status of Jerusalem is also of high interest for Jordan, since in its peace treaty with Israel there is a clause in which Amman declares that it maintains a high priority for determining the future of the Holy places in eastern Jerusalem. The control of Holy sites may create additional rivalries between Jordan and the Palestinians. In addition, both Jordan and Israel are afraid of the possibility that the West Bank could turn into a heaven for terrorists.

Water resources are another matter of special interest to water-poor Jordan as far as the borders of the West Bank and its rich aquifers are concerned. The peace treaty of 1994 includes requirements that Israel would supply Jordan with a specific amount of water. But, the question always exists of whether Israel would respect its commitments.

On February 13th, 2014, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu paid a surprise visit to King Abdullah during a critical point in peace talks, for a closed-door discussion.¹¹ Jordan wants an Israeli-Palestinian solution that will not affect its internal stability, which is already under significant pressure. The Israeli-Palestinian talks concern exactly these core issues. Netanyahu assured King Abdullah that Israel would take both Jordan's interests and the peace treaty signed in 1994 into consideration in any peace agreement.

However, a possible power shift in Jordan always remains a concern for its allies, especially now that movements of local Salafists and jihadis are on the rise, as they will probably bring about changes in Jordan's security and foreign policy. A telling example is the large Islamist protest in Amman that took place on February 14, 2014, during which King Abdullah met with United States President Obama in California. The protesters requested the rejection of a peace deal as a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The 1,200 protesters also burned the Israeli flag.¹²

Jordan is afraid of another conflict arising between Israel and Palestinians if they do not reach a real agreement. In such a case, Jordan would have to deal with another wave of thousands of refugees, and the possible outbreak of another Intifada, or resistance, which would further radicalize the Palestinians inside Jordan. The Royal House is fearful of such a prospect, especially at the current moment that has limited tolerance for political and diplomatic maneuvers. Jordan's options appear to be limited on actions like those taken on Wednesday, February 26, 2014. Jordan's parliament voted unanimously to expel the Israeli ambassador and recall its own envoy,¹³ while the Islamist opposition asked the government to freeze the twenty-year peace treaty with Israel,¹⁴ after Tel Aviv expressed its wish to take over Muslim Holy sites in Jerusalem, a vision unacceptable for King Abdullah II whose dynasty claims ancestry to the Prophet Muhammad and consequently does not intend to hand over Jordan's historic role as custodian of Jerusalem's Muslim sites.

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