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# Political Instability in Jordan

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# Political Instability in Jordan

## *INTRODUCTION*

Jordan has so far weathered the political storm that has engulfed much of the Middle East since late 2010. However, several emerging challenges have the potential to develop into serious threats to the stability of the Hashemite Kingdom. While Jordan's moderate, nonideological, and revolution-adverse political culture is a strong mitigating factor, the risk of domestic instability is greater today than at any time since the country's bloody 1970–71 period. For the United States, systemic political change that is the product of instability—which, for example, would result in the abdication or removal of King Abdullah, a dramatically altered monarchical system, or the demise of the monarchy, replaced by an anti-Western form of government—could lead to Jordanian policies inimical to U.S. interests. Given Jordan's pro-West strategic orientation, commitment to peace with Israel, and cooperation on counterterrorism and security matters, the United States has a strong interest in helping Amman manage potentially destabilizing change. Instability in Jordan is by no means inevitable, and prudent steps taken now can prevent undesirable developments.

## *THE CONTINGENCIES*

Jordan's King Abdullah faces a combination of rising external and internal challenges. The main external sources of instability are the spillover effects of Syria's civil war, including possible military entanglement in the border zone, the spread of Salafist radicalization, the heavy cost of sustaining a large refugee population, and the potential interference inside Jordan of Islamist movements from other regional countries. Internal sources of instability include rising public anger resulting from economic austerity, insufficient political reform, and perceived government tolerance of corruption, as well as growing confidence in the country's Muslim Brotherhood and burgeoning Salafist movement. While external threats pose significant challenges, the most serious danger to the regime is when these threats catalyze or exacerbate domestic instability. Here, the three most plausible contingencies are the following: a "Tahrir Square"-like uprising in Amman, an Islamist squeeze play against the monarchy, and the defection of the regime's core base of support in the East Bank.

### **"Tahrir Square" in Amman**

Frustration with slow, inadequate political reform snowballs into mass demonstrations that the regime cannot contain without resorting to unprecedented levels of force against a largely unarmed citizenry. Potential triggers include popular outrage at a glacially paced reform process, dissatisfaction with a government filled with corrupt ruling elites, or a particularly egregious public spectacle of royal corruption that goes unpunished. This scenario envisions growing demonstrations driven by a

gradual but steady erosion of support for the king and possibly the monarchical system itself. Participants run the gamut of Jordan's activist population (itself a small segment of the overall population): underrepresented Palestinians, long-suffering Islamists, and potentially, East Banker Jordanians with tribal origins who have lost confidence in the king's ability to improve the economy, govern transparently, or deliver patronage at traditional levels. Under pressure not to use force, and sharing many similar grievances, the king's security apparatus breaks down. The result could be the king's acceptance of fundamental political change (e.g., a European-style constitutional monarchy), Abdullah's abdication, or the demise of the monarchy and establishment of a republic.

The likelihood of this scenario is low because the lack of political reform is neither the leading grievance in Jordan nor one that unifies the opposition. Not only is popular discontent focused more on the weak economy and perception of widespread corruption, but political reform highlights deep antagonism between East Bankers and Palestinians. After all, real reform—in the sense of a fairer demographic representation in national voting—would dilute the privileged role of East Bankers, including the status of Jordan's tribal-heavy security services and the political empowerment of Jordanians of Palestinian origin. The absence of political reform alone is unlikely to trigger mass opposition to the regime.

### **An Islamist Squeeze Play Against the Monarchy**

In a moderately likely scenario, after decades of an ambivalent relationship with the regime, Jordan's Islamist movement capitalizes on Islamist successes in Jordan's neighbors to directly challenge the Hashemite monarchy, with the goal of transforming Jordan into an Islamic state. Mass protests break out in Amman, Zarqa, Irbid, and other areas where there are significant concentrations of Palestinians, the primary support base of Jordan's Islamist movement. Clashes with security forces are difficult to suppress without substantial loss of life and attract foreign fighters into Jordan from Syria, Egypt, and Iraq, leading to a contest over the survival of the regime.

Islamists' ambitions in Jordan will largely be determined by events outside the country, particularly the extent to which they, and particularly the jihadists among them, assume prominent roles in post-Assad Syria; the potential for Hamas to overtake Fatah as the dominant player in Palestinian politics; and whether Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood leadership, with Qatari financing, looks to Jordan as an avenue for expanding its regional influence. It is unlikely that any one of these developments would trigger an Islamist contingency in Jordan, but two may be enough to convince local Islamists to flex their muscles and three—a “perfect storm”—could trigger an Islamist version of the Nasserist/Ba'athist effort to subvert Jordan in the 1950s and 1960s. If this were to happen, King Abdullah would likely respond by trying to burnish his Islamic credentials, especially the Hashemites' hereditary claim to the Prophet Mohammed. Ultimately, however, he would rely on his security apparatus while stoking fears of Jordan's takeover by Palestinians to secure the support of East Bankers. A concerted effort to undermine the king by Islamists in Cairo, Damascus, and Ramallah working with the local Muslim Brotherhood and more radical Salafists would pose a substantial threat; factors that militate against its success are the ideological divisions and ethnic splits (i.e., Palestinian versus Transjordanian) within the Brotherhood and the fact that Jordan's tribal-based security apparatus is likely up to the challenge, assuming it is confident of the political will of the king and his regime.

## The East Bank Core Defects

For decades, analysts have focused on Jordan's large Palestinian population as the most likely source of regime instability. At least since the Jordanian army quashed a Syrian-supported Palestinian rebellion in 1970–71, Jordan's Palestinian population has generally been quiescent. Far more dangerous for the regime would be the development of a critical mass of disaffection among its traditional East Bank supporters—those who live in and near the spine of Transjordanian cities (e.g., Ma'an, Karak, Tafilah) and who supply the manpower for Jordan's armed forces and security services. Recently, such opposition has begun to emerge due to poor economic circumstances, alienation from Amman's nouveau riche, anger at the regime's apparent indifference to tribal grievances, and disgust at what is perceived as royally sanctioned corruption. Given the isolationist streak among many East Bankers, Jordan's deepening involvement in Syria—including reports that it is permitting Israeli drone flights over its territory and welcoming deployments of U.S. troops—could feed protests, too. The tribal-based opposition has coalesced around a political organization called HIRAK (“Movement”), which has staged persistent street protests in East Bank cities as well as in the capital.

In this scenario, East Bank disaffection metastasizes into full-blown opposition to the regime as a result of an event that both offends tribal sensibilities and feeds the idea that the regime has broken its covenant with its East Bank supporters. This could include the killing of HIRAK members during street protests or their deaths while in detention, fueling a blood feud against the palace that attracts broader tribal support; a “man-made tragedy,” such as the collapse of a bridge or tunnel that kills members of an East Bank family, attributed to shoddy construction linked to corruption; or the shuttering of public institutions, such as clinics, schools, or hospitals, that is viewed as unfair and disproportionate belt-tightening affecting poor East Bankers without similar sacrifices from the political leadership and better-off Ammanites. In each of these cases, demonstrations would spread quickly based on public sympathy and elements of the security services—themselves mostly East Bankers—would be supportive.

Of the three scenarios for instability, disaffection among the regime's East Bank core is the most threatening and, since the emergence of the persistent and vocal HIRAK in 2011, the most plausible as well. While its numbers are not yet huge, the organization has spread throughout the kingdom, and the regime might not be able to rely for long on East Bank security personnel suppressing East Bankers, whose concerns they may share. So far, the HIRAK has no defined and unifying political agenda, but that could quickly change in the context of a wildfire-like spread of riots and demonstrations.

## WARNING INDICATORS

Warning signs of a “Tahrir Square”-in-Amman scenario include bold and direct criticism of the monarchy and the state in Jordan's growing online media, the appearance of leaflets and banners calling for national unity to combat a corrupt government, and a rise in the frequency and size of labor protests, university demonstrations, and sit-ins at government offices. This would all presage the emergence of mass protests. Likewise, increased participation by Palestinians—who have generally stayed out of recent demonstrations—might be another portent of instability.

In the Islamist squeeze-play scenario, warning indicators would be less dramatic. One signal would be Islamist regimes or leaders in Egypt and Syria encouraging Jordan's Islamists to take bolder positions or use violent resistance. Increased activity in Jordan by foreign Islamist groups would complicate efforts by the regime to manage the challenge posed by local Islamists. Further growth of

Jordan's indigenous Salafist movement, a regional trend already taking place in Jordan, would constitute another warning sign.

For the last and most likely contingency, the East Bank core-defects scenario, warning signs might include increasing frequency, size, and coordination of HIRAK protests; greater cooperation between the HIRAK and Islamists, possibly to condemn the monarchy for "selling out" to foreign interests; increasingly heavy-handed suppression of the protests; defection to the HIRAK by some of the "king's men" (i.e., older East Bankers of formerly unquestioned loyalty to the monarchy), and the explosion of "bread riots" in tribal areas, which attack the king and his family.

It is important not to view these contingencies as discrete possibilities; rather, they have the potential to affect and even trigger one another. For example, a spread of HIRAK protests that neutralizes the regime's security apparatus would make Jordan more vulnerable to subversion from radical Islamists. It is critical to keep a watchful eye on the potential contagion effects of any particular set of events.

### *IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. INTERESTS*

Radical anti-Western change in Jordan coerced by popular opposition—for example, royal abdication or constitutional reforms compelled by street protests—would almost certainly trigger profound change in Jordan's strategic posture that would harm U.S. interests. The monarchy plays a critical role in maintaining Jordan's pro-West, pro-peace orientation; any coerced diminution of royal prerogative would harm Jordanian-American and Jordanian-Israeli relations. Radical change at home is sure to bring about radical change in Jordan's foreign policy. Potential setbacks for the United States include, but are not limited to, the severance of the Jordan-Israel peace treaty, Jordan's refusal to participate in U.S.-led counterterrorism and regional security efforts, and, by implication, heightened instability in Gulf monarchies, which view Jordan as a critical line of defense. At the same time, the United States has humanitarian and other political interests in Jordan: avoiding major bloodshed brought by popular unrest and furthering stable, if incremental, democratic change in line with its larger regional goals. Given these stakes, preventing radical and/or violent change in Jordan is a high U.S. priority.

### *PREVENTIVE OPTIONS*

Most analysts emphasize political reform as the best way to insulate Jordan's monarchy from local Islamist and secular challenges alike. This is a mistake. First, as commonly understood in the West, reform is a divisive issue in Jordan; due to the population's demographic divide, its very definition is contested. Second, the most serious potential source of instability, East Bank disaffection, exists apart from reform or the lack thereof. Rather, the two most significant contributing factors to potential East Bank disaffection are perceptions of widespread corruption and insufficient and misallocated government spending.

This is somewhat ironic, of course—many East Bankers are not angry about corruption per se, but rather, that they no longer receive what they consider to be an appropriate and equitable share of government largesse at a time when they see "business as usual" among the well-connected elites in Amman. The most effective way for the government to defuse the potential for a critical mass of disaffection is through a somewhat contradictory mixture of taking some high-profile measures against official—and, perhaps, royal—corruption while spending more money on local needs in crucial East Bank

communities, thereby dividing the opposition. Unlike Islamists, a significant portion of East Bank opposition is not ideologically alienated from the regime; placating East Bankers should be a top priority.

To be sure, the task of preventing instability in Jordan lies principally with the king. Nevertheless, Washington could take the following steps now to help avert a crisis.

### **Provide Additional Financial Support**

Since its inception, Jordan has been a debtor state, dependent on foreign donors for critical recurrent and discretionary funding. Lately, however, the kingdom's financial struggles have been exacerbated by the cutoff of cheap natural gas from Egypt and the violence in neighboring Syria. Meanwhile, Amman has embarked on an austerity program, cutting food and energy subsidies—and engendering popular anger—to meet the terms of its International Monetary Fund (IMF) Stand-By Arrangement. To prevent the rise of domestic instability, the kingdom will need more financial backing. The United States has wisely supported Jordan's efforts to access the international bond market by providing the kingdom with loan guarantees. But refugees are flowing over the border in increasing numbers, placing an ever-expanding burden on Jordan's public services and fueling what is likely to be competition with the regime's most loyal supporters for scarce public funds. In this environment, additional support will be needed. Washington could take several steps, including providing Amman with more bilateral aid, organizing "friends of Jordan" to augment their own support to the kingdom, and using its influence to convince Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to fulfill their pledges of financial support.

### **Support Credible Anticorruption Measures**

Corruption has served as a potent rallying cry for the kingdom's disparate opposition groups. It has also proven highly corrosive to the stature of the monarchy, which—withstanding the establishment of an Anticorruption Commission in 2006—suffers from the perception that it is insufficiently committed to rooting out high-level corruption. While Jordan ranks among the least corrupt Arab states and the government has pursued some sensitive, high-profile cases, the perception of endemic public corruption prevails. To counter this perception, Washington could encourage the king to intensify his stated commitment to fighting corruption by pursuing high-profile trials, licensing organizations such as Transparency International to open offices in Jordan, and rescinding legislation restricting Internet publications, which have been outspoken in efforts to expose corruption in the kingdom.

### **Promote Sound Leadership and Adequate Funding for Military and Security Services**

Holding government officials accountable is essential in the fight against corruption. However, viewed from a different perspective, Jordan's partners and allies should not take solace in the fact that two recent heads of Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate have been jailed for financial crimes. The public disgrace of these intelligence chiefs almost surely has had a demoralizing effect on the institution on which the king relies for internal security. In this regard, there is little Washington can do other than keep a close watch on disaffection within the security services and encourage the appointment of leaders focused solely on protecting the kingdom.

Washington could also push Amman to take measures that strengthen its armed forces—the other pillar of regime security. Washington could encourage the government to shrink the procurement

budget for the air force, which has long enjoyed special attention (and oversized budgets) despite its peripheral role in national security, in favor of the land forces, which provide the men and equipment that are vital in addressing threats facing the kingdom. Particularly during difficult economic times, it is important that Jordan retain traditional levels of funding for military hospitals and schools, a critical social service for poor East Banker families. Jordan should be counseled to not commit the “unforced error” of slighting military infrastructure that is essential for its internal stability.

### **Enhance Quiet Cooperation on Syria**

Syria—both in its current state of civil war and in the post-Assad era—will pose a substantial threat to Jordanian security, one that rivals or even surpasses the heightened operational tempo of al-Qaeda in Jordan following the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The spread of radical ideologies from Islamist groups in Syria, an influx of violent jihadis, the threat of cross-border terrorism, and trade in sophisticated weapons will erode Jordan’s internal stability. To help Jordan address this range of threats and insulate its internal politics from developments in Syria, the United States could increase its already strong intelligence sharing and cooperation with Jordan. But it should work with Jordan quietly. Whatever additional deterrence is created vis-à-vis Syria by advertising U.S.-Jordanian military and intelligence cooperation, including the deployment of U.S. forces to prepare for contingencies, is offset by inflaming local passions that could ignite if circumstances worsen.

### **Promote a Natural Gas Deal with Israel**

Jordan’s economic morass has much to do with energy. While Egypt was long a source of cheap gas, the absence of security in postrevolutionary Egypt made the pipeline to Jordan vulnerable to terrorist attacks, forcing Jordan to find alternative energy suppliers at exorbitant prices. Amman faced an unbudgeted expense of more than \$1 billion in 2012, and Egypt will not return as a reliable supplier of cheap gas in the foreseeable future. In the short term, a concessionary arrangement with Iraq and, perhaps, discounted Gulf oil may fill the gap. But Jordan’s strategic answer is Israel, soon to emerge as a major gas exporter, which is willing to provide Jordan’s needs at concessionary prices well into the future. Anti-Israel sentiment pervades Jordanian public opinion and inhibits Jordan from pursuing a gas deal. The United States could play matchmaker, persuading the palace and the Jordanian people to accept a deal that is manifestly in Jordan’s strategic, commercial, and security interests, all while strengthening the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty.

### **Advocate for Credible, if Modest, Reform**

While political reform is not the main source of opposition to the monarchy, modest democratic changes would no doubt be welcome, both for their substantive benefits and for the improved image of the king they would provide. Shortly after the Arab revolts began in early 2011, the king initiated a process that resulted in constitutional reforms approved by 70 percent of Jordanians. While the United States should not endorse the transformational changes advocated by Islamists, Washington should support more moderate reforms, including the revision of media laws to provide for a less repressive press environment and the modification of the electoral law to modestly increase the



number of representatives elected from a national list, which would give political parties greater representation in the lower house of parliament.

### **Engaging with Israel and Saudi Arabia**

Two Middle Eastern states have deep interests in Jordan's stability—Israel and Saudi Arabia—and the United States could bolster Jordan by promoting ties with each. For Israel, whose peace with Jordan is a major strategic asset, finding ways to ensure stability in its eastern neighbor is a high priority. Saudi Arabia's interests are more complicated. Despite the Saudi ruling family's checkered relationship with the Hashemites, Jordan is a critical buffer against instability from the north. While Israeli and Saudi interests are not identical, they are complementary, and there is much that Washington can do to deepen political, security, and intelligence coordination vis-à-vis Amman with Jerusalem and Riyadh. Other actors—the United Arab Emirates, major European states, and pro-Western East Asian countries—have a supportive role to play, especially in terms of the provision of economic aid. Their role at a moment of crisis, however, will be minimal.

### *MITIGATING OPTIONS*

Should Jordan face a rapidly deteriorating situation, the United States should first take actions that ensure the safety of U.S. embassy personnel and American expatriates residing in the kingdom. Beyond that, there are important steps Washington could take on its own and in concert with other states to mitigate dangerous instability in Jordan. They include the following.

#### **Public Messaging of Support**

In the event of violence or large demonstrations in Jordan, Washington could privately encourage the palace to continue its longstanding policy of nonviolent crowd control while avoiding public criticism of King Abdullah II and high-profile contacts with opposition figures; both would be taken as signs of wavering U.S. support for the monarchy. Pressing the king to make drastic political changes such as allowing for full or near-full parliamentary representation by national list candidates may appear to mesh with democratic principles but is only likely to benefit Jordan's Islamist movement instead.

#### **Securing Immediate Infusions of Cash**

Money cannot ensure stability in Jordan, but it could buy the king time to ride out economic difficulties fueling popular unrest. A large cash infusion provided by Gulf states or Western donors in the midst of a crisis could prove a helpful stopgap measure, enabling the palace to temporarily resume subsidies, provide pay increases to government employees, or take other steps to defuse demonstrations. The king could then resume his program of managed reform once the situation stabilizes.

#### **Warning the Muslim Brotherhood's External Patrons**

Washington could consider more assertive measures to prevent outside actors from stoking instability, such as issuing stern warnings to Egypt (where the Muslim Brotherhood is strongest) and Qatar

(the Brotherhood's main financier) not to interfere in Jordanian politics. In the event Amman finds itself embroiled in East Bank disaffection, Cairo and Doha could sense an opportunity to expand Islamist influence and contribute to a dangerous escalation by urging Jordanian Islamists into the streets in a tactical alliance with East Bankers. To dissuade them, the United States could communicate the substantial costs that Egypt and Qatar would pay for intruding in Jordan's domestic affairs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States has important interests at stake in Jordan and should take steps now to lower the likelihood of major threats to Jordan's stability emerging in the near future. The most urgent factor contributing to instability in Jordan is financial; the IMF recently reported that Jordan's midterm fiscal situation appears positive, but to get to the "midterm," especially if the regional security situation worsens, Jordan needs help. At the same time, Jordan cannot be insulated from the deepening crisis in Syria but it can be protected from its most negative repercussions. In this regard, the Obama administration should take the following steps.

- *Work with Congress to maintain military assistance to Jordan and organize "friends of Jordan" to provide additional financial support to offset the costs of sheltering Syrian refugees.* The precise amount of additional support—which may be in the hundreds of millions of dollars—should include needs assessments conducted by the U.S. and Jordanian governments and relevant international institutions as well as a political premium designed to cushion the regime against shocks and prevent the rise of instability resulting from competition for limited public funds. In addition, the Obama administration should encourage Saudi Arabia and other donors to fulfill outstanding aid commitments. Together, these steps should ease Jordan's budget deficit and provide Amman with the means to address the demands of important constituencies.
- *Lobby King Abdullah privately to implement more systemic anticorruption efforts while boosting open, transparent investments in East Banker-dominated areas.* This message should be a consistent talking point high on the agenda of U.S.-Jordan consultations. The European Union's leadership should reinforce this message and provide technical assistance on anticorruption measures.
- *Encourage Amman to prioritize its military expenditures on areas most essential for regime maintenance.* Spending should be focused on land forces, intelligence agencies, and military support institutions (e.g., hospitals and schools), rather than air force procurement and other areas peripheral to maintaining stability.
- *Urge the Jordanians to continue incremental political reform.* This might include loosening media restrictions and increasing the number of national list parliamentarians. Any changes should strike the balance of maintaining forward movement without raising expectations of a rapid political transformation or providing regime opponents with opportunities to advance revolutionary change.
- *Counter the spread of radical Islamist ideologies and jihadist terrorism to Jordan.* This can be achieved by enhancing the already cooperative U.S.-Jordanian intelligence-sharing relationship, warning outside actors—especially Egypt and Qatar—against efforts to exploit Jordanian vulnerabilities to expand Islamist influence in the country, working to prevent a Hamas takeover in the West Bank, and bolstering Jordan's quiet cooperation with Israel and Saudi Arabia.

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