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JORDAN
& THE PEOPLE'S
PERCEPTION OF THE KING

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Jordan & and the People's Perception of the King

The ousting of Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on January 14, 2011 sparked an explosion of popular unrest whose ripples spread across the Middle East, causing significant upheaval for many of the regimes in the region. In comparison to the likes of Egypt or Bahrain, Jordan would seem to have so far avoided the worst of the turmoil, and indeed, protests in that country have rarely reached more than a few hundred people. However, the Hashemite monarchy still now faces greater challenges than any it has confronted over at least the past 40 years. First, Jordanians have many of the same complaints as those in other countries upended by the Arab Spring: poor economic conditions, rampant corruption, and a mostly closed political system. Some have even openly questioned the true source of King Abdullah's authority, arguing that even the National Charter recognizes that "the people have been the source of all powers."¹ Compounding the challenge posed by these problems though are changes to certain perceptions some Jordanians have of their king; in particular, some now view him much more closely connected to the corruption and poor governance that many feel has characterized his reign.

Any examination of the future of Jordan not only requires a look at the nation's problems, the nature of the perception changes, and the role of the monarchy's image in helping the regime weather the storm so far but also an investigation into how these changes affect King Abdullah's legitimacy and thus alter the relationship between the people and the king. In reality, because this new aspect of his image is forcing aside the long-time legitimizing aspect in people's conception of the king, these changes have the potential to cause the situation in Jordan to spiral out of control.

¹ *The National Charter*

Historical Background

The nation of Jordan came into being in 1921 in the aftermath of World War I and the Great Arab Revolt when Emir Abdullah I was able to unite the tribes of the area and create a new nation. His death as a result of an assassination emphasizes how turbulent the Arabs' defeat in the 1948 War was for Jordan. The reign of King Talal saw the creation of Jordan's constitution, but after only 13 months as sovereign, he abdicated in favor of his son, King Hussein. For the following 46 years until February 1999, King Hussein piloted Jordan through several tumultuous episodes including Nasser's ideological and physical attacks, the unrest caused by the Six Day War and Black September three years later, and the period of economic liberalization that started in 1988. In general throughout most of his rule, King Hussein allied the monarchy with certain local and international actors, and by doing so he was able hold onto power. During the period of liberalization, much like for the current situation, poor economic conditions sparked protests across the country, but the political reforms instituted by King Hussein at that point appeased many people. Of the instances of major turmoil, Black September then remains the outlier, the only time when the monarchy had to resort to widespread brute military force to stay in power. For the most part, the kings in Jordan have traditionally been able to keep public unrest relatively quiet by using other methods.

First among these, the regime, like its counterparts throughout the region, has taken measures to prevent activists from coalescing into a significant movement. Quintan Wiktorowicz contends that the monarchy, in pursuit of that goal, has formed a bureaucracy that strives to manipulate civil society through the use of "disciplinary technologies."² In particular, strict laws, such as the Law of Societies and Social Organizations and the Law of Public Meetings,

² Wiktorowicz 49

require the registration of all non-government organizations; this allows the ministries of culture and social development, the regional governors, and the General Union of Voluntary Services to monitor such groups, and this monitoring has partitioned civil society so that it is “difficult for social movements or proponents of democracy to create a wide-scale popular surge for political change.”³

A number of other laws in Jordan have served to highlight internal societal differences. Among other things, the “one-person-one-vote system,” first put in place by the 1993 Election Law, emphasizes sub-national loyalties by incentivizing block voting. Indeed, most of the policies put in place since the legalization of political parties have “reinforced tribal ties” and other social divisions, thereby “creating axes of political competition between social groups thus undercutting the ability of a formation of block that could unity to challenge the hegemony of the monarchy.”⁴ This conforms to Lisa Anderson’s work, in which she asserts that monarchies are often in great positions to serve as “the central focus in balancing, manipulating, and controlling” different segments of society in order to play one group off the other.⁵

Unfortunately for the monarchy today, the ubiquitous nature of social media and the internet makes such means of social division much more difficult if not impossible for the state to maintain. Furthermore, other protests in the region have been characterized by their lack of leadership, at least for the initial stages, meaning the lack of political organization has not been a significant barrier to preventing people from taking action.

Keeping society partitioned not only helps prevent popular opposition from coalescing but also has historically helped legitimize the rule of the king. Russell E. Lucas argues,

³ Ibid. 58

⁴ Lucas (2008) 289

⁵ Lucas (2004) 107

“Monarchies can stand above tribal, religious, ethnic, and regional divisions by acting as the linchpin of the political system.”⁶ Many in the country believe that it would be “a mess with the royal family.”⁷ Thus, according to the legitimating logic of this belief, King Abdullah II and King Hussein could rule because the monarch is what prevents widespread internal discord. Curtis Ryan noted a few practical elements of the king’s vitalness; although its members do not monopolize political institutions in the same way as the Saud family does in Saudi Arabia, the Hashemite family still exerts “considerable royal influence and control” by playing “key roles through patronage of various societies, organizations, and institutes.”⁸ Indeed, since the start of the unrest, the “royal court and its networks have been giving money everywhere,” perhaps not just solely to appear kind but to remind certain institutions of their dependence on the royal court.⁹

Some scholars, such as Joseph Massad, argue that this goes beyond momentary concerns over political contests or economic crises though. This idea of the king as the linchpin of Jordanian society has become part of country’s national identity, so that “few are willing to imagine Jordan without its monarchy.”¹⁰ The king’s success in maintaining such an integral place in Jordan’s national identity is important because an identity helps determine a person’s interests or a society’s set of norms, and these then play a major role in motivating or restraining certain actions.

In order to establish a national identity that produced the desired norms, the monarchy in Jordan has had to rely on “an imagined tradition, a myth based more on the state’s

⁶ Ibid. 107

⁷ Interview 1. These have been numbered only in order of their appearance in this text.

⁸ Ryan (2002) 88

⁹ Interview 2

¹⁰ Herb 231.

reinterpretation of history than on factual heritage and reality.”¹¹ The argument, as stated by Lisa Anderson, is that most monarchs in the Middle East, King Abdullah II and King Hussein especially, have been able to “oversee vast changes in the name of preserving” tradition, and this traditional authority is magnified by the fact that they often “invent those traditions as they go along.”¹² Since Jordan’s very beginning, people with interests in the keeping the king in power have espoused views like the one held by a British general who in 1946 noted that Jordanians are “a simple people, united behind the throne, [who] have stood like a rock while rebellion followed rebellion in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia.”¹³ More recently, King Abdullah II, like his father before him, has taken numerous measures to ensure that this notion of the monarchy being the vital stabilizing keystone of the nation remains in the minds of all Jordanians. Official histories in Jordan emphasize that the land was “highly divided, lawless, having no central authority and plagued by internecine rivalries, a condition which could only be remedied by the arrival of the Hashemite Amir ‘Abdullah, who ‘unified the country both demographically and territorially.’”¹⁴

The creation and maintenance of the national myth has required a lot of work on the part of the monarchy. King Hussein took great efforts to portray Bedouins as “the carriers of Jordan’s true and authentic culture.” Then, he “rendered the country tribalized” so that everyone, not just Bedouins, adhered to the traditions and values of Bedouins. King Hussein’s efforts to “Jordanize the country” only intensified after the sanguine events of Black September.¹⁵ Today, King Abdullah has not personally done more to strengthen the instruments

¹¹ Kamrava (2004) 76

¹² Anderson 13

¹³ Massad 161

¹⁴ Ibid. 26

¹⁵ Interview 3

of this tribalization, but he certainly has not opposed this vision of Jordan. For example, *mansaf*, created in its current form in the 1950's when it was promoted as the quintessential Bedouin dish, is still the national dish of Jordan. While this re-imagined heritage incorporates everyone into Bedouin society, it also places the king's tribe in a spot of pre-eminence and reverence, an interpretation of history that clearly adds legitimacy to the king's rule.¹⁶ Furthermore, posters and billboards scattered across Jordan often depicting the king with Queen Rania and their children emphasize how he acts as a bridge between Palestinians and East-Bankers. Photographs of the monarch of this sort, some of which project other ideas, have been placed everywhere in Jordan: on the sides of buildings, along the roads, on the money, and inside many homes. This means that the image of King Abdullah II, like that of his father before him, penetrates the fabric of everyday Jordanian life, thereby generating for the public a sense of necessity and inevitability inherent in the role of the king. In addition to those that indicate the king is the glue that holds a fragmented society together, other different pictures highlight other legitimating aspects of the king's rule. Often King Abdullah II is shown surrounded by or at the end of a row of images of the four previous kings of Jordan, King Abdullah I, King Talal, and King Hussein. Thus, the display intimates that his ancestor's traditional rule legitimizes his own reign. After enough time exposed to these images, many Jordanians begin internalizing their messages; they accept that the king keeps Jordan unified and that fealty to him is a positive, traditional aspect of being Jordanian.

Even if it does not admit to doing so, the National Charter does a good job of succinctly laying out this national myth; it argues that only “through their allegiance to their roots and their profound understanding of the dangers of disunity and disarray,” have Jordanians be able to

¹⁶ Massad 70

weather the destabilizing forces that have constantly beaten at the kingdom's door.¹⁷ Because of the connection infused in Jordanians' psyches between the monarch and national unity and traditional allegiances, this claim highlights the necessity of the king in preserving the country's existence, let alone peaceful existence. This myth has created in the minds of most Jordanians the fundamental rationale for accepting the authority of the Hashemite monarchs; in other words, it has shaped in their minds the identity of the king in a way that legitimizes his reign.

The example most widely cited today of the king's vitalness is his ability to balance the needs of both the Jordanian East Bankers and those of Palestinian origin. Most Jordanians feel that the Hashemites, because of their roots in the Arabian Peninsula, have a supra-Jordanian identity that is neither Jordanian nor Palestinian. Despite the assertion's questionable accuracy, some Jordanians demonstrate their belief in this notion when they note that, in order to maintain this status, most royals have married non-Jordanians. Thus, because of its identity, the Hashemite family is perhaps the only family in the minds of Jordanians that could act as this bridge and ensure stability for the country. Adnan Abu Odeh notes that in this regard then truly "the enduring guarantor of national unity in Jordan, after all is the Hashemite royal family."¹⁸

Probably at least as important to the monarchy's stability historically as the national myth, Jordan's extensive security and intelligence services, known collectively as the *mukhabarat*, have played a major role in maintaining the stability of the monarchy. Their mere existence, coupled with their manufactured aura of omnipresence, only works to further intensify the disciplinary power of the regime. However, their utility has come in much more tangible forms as well; they have ransacked the offices of the opposition and used other means to intimidate them. Insulting the king has always been a crime while the prevalence of torture of

¹⁷ *The National Charter*

¹⁸ Lucas (2008) 289

political dissidents has ebbed and flowed depending on a variety of factors. Two different agencies, the Department of Public Security and the General Intelligence Directorate, make up the bulk of Jordan's *mukhabarat*. Although the Department of Public Security (DPS), with its 25,000 employees, is apart of the Ministry of the Interior, it falls under the power of the legislation of the armed forces, and its director reports to the king.¹⁹ Split from the Jordanian military in 1964, the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) concentrates on the security of the state, rather than its citizenry.

Despite the fact that Parliament has the authority under the constitution and other legislation to regulate the *mukhabarat*, in practice King Abdullah II, like his father before him, has managed to keep unrestrained control over them. The king keeps the intelligence budget classified even from parliament by lumping its expenditures with all the defense spending that is submitted as a monolithic block to parliament. Furthermore, "the fact that most security procurements are externally funded by foreign aid" only further curbs the power of the parliament to restrict the GID, even if it tried taking the initiative to do so.²⁰ The Law of General Intelligence assigns the king the power to appoint all intelligence officers, pending only the approval of the Prime Minister, who of course the king also appoints.²¹

In addition to his control over the GID and the DPS, King Abdullah also counts on the support of the military. Indeed, King Abdullah had joined the military in 1981 and was promoted up through the ranks over the next 16 years until in 1997 he became the commander of Special Operations.²² Thus, he has spent considerable time with most high-ranking officers and developed relationships with them. Furthermore, "loyalty to the king is the sole criteria for

¹⁹ Tell 8

²⁰ Ibid. 18

²¹ Law of General Intelligence

²² Kechichian 368

promotion; the only ideology any officer is allowed to have is the credo of the monarch.”²³

Thus, control of the state’s security apparatus and the legitimizing power of the king’s identity in the minds of the people as established by the national myth have been the two main factors, along with efforts to keep the opposition fragmented, that have historically allowed the Hashemites to stay in power.

Problems Facing the Monarchy Today

The history of Jordan’s monarchy successfully navigating through previous waves of unrest at first suggests that King Abdullah II will not have too much difficulty in surviving this turmoil with his grip on power holding firm. On the other hand, other previously successful regimes in the region have succumbed, and his twelve years in office have resulted in little or modest progress made towards improving economic conditions or establishing greater political freedoms. Now, the monarchy faces truly significant problems; Jordan suffers from a poor economy, deep-rooted corruption, and an oppressive political apparatus, the same set of problems that led protestors in other Arab countries to revolt.

Perhaps the greatest problem facing the monarchy is Jordan’s poor economic situation. Jordan’s own Department of Statistics admits that unemployment rose by .6 percentage points (12.5-13.1) during 2011 while youth unemployment rates increased by 3.6 percentage points (28.1-31.7). Unofficial sources place the unemployment rate in Jordan at 30 percent, which happens to be identical to Libya’s.²⁴ The Department of Statistics also reported that prices went up by 4.2 percent during 2011 alone, and they have increased by 8.7 percent since 2008;

²³ Kamrava (2000) 90

²⁴ *The CIA World Factbook 2011* 340. Ibid. 384. "Jordan's Unemployment Rate Hits 13.1 Percent." International Labor Organization

however, GDP per capita only grew by 3 percent in 2011 and 3.4 percent since 2008.²⁵ Thus, the cost of living has significantly increased since 2008. In particular, global increases to oil prices, coupled with much higher post-February-11th prices on gas imports from, have dramatically increased energy costs to the point that the government lost US\$1.4 billion in 2011 in the electricity sector alone with a \$2.1 billion loss in 2012 because it has had to avoid raising fuel prices and forgo planned hikes in electricity prices.²⁶

One of the most prominent demands of the activists in Jordan is that the king put an end to corruption, which is widespread in the country. This has been a major concern for several years, and King Abdullah II has taken a number of steps to crackdown on corruption. However, these past efforts have not been effective. Jordan actually fell six spots on Transparency International's 2011 list of least corrupt countries, indicating that in 2010 Jordanians' concerns about corruption grew.²⁷ Nimer al-Assaf, the Deputy General Secretary of the Islamic Action Front, stressed in March 2012 that "corruption is noticeably worse" than at any other point in Jordan's history.²⁸ One recent case that caused the significant public outrage was the affair of Khalid Shaheen. A wealthy businessman, he bribed officials to win a government contract; despite a three-year prison sentence, he was allowed to leave for medical treatment in London, yet in June 2011 some Jordanian media sources reported him to be in fine health.²⁹ In the fall the king also encouraged investigations that targeted figures once assumed to be "untouchable," like former intelligence chief Dhahabi and Amman mayor, Omar Ma'ani. Many in Jordan agree that the anti-corruption fight has devolved into a "witch-hunt," but a "witch-hunt with real

²⁵ "Price Indices." International Monetary Fund

²⁶ Al-Rawashdah. Obeidat. "Jordan: Fuel Orders Spike on Eve of Threatened Refinery Boycott." "Jordan Ponders Higher Energy Rates in Lieu of Egyptian Gas Suspension."

²⁷ Khatatbeh

²⁸ Al-Assaf

²⁹ Neimat

witches.”³⁰ Despite these measures, activists remain unsatisfied, with even avid supporters of the monarchy admitting that “most people” are concerned over the failure of the government to begin prosecuting these people.³¹ One Jordanian journalist indicated that prosecutors had not even interviewed Ma’ani or any of his family members, indicating that they were not serious about prosecuting him.³² Another journalist that, despite the background of current Anti-Corruption Committee Chair Samih Bino, for the most part the actions taken by the government boil down to “corruption trying corruption.”³³ Many activists feel that the regime’s refusal (or inability) to increase the transparency of the security apparatus poses a major obstacle to true reform.³⁴ Mr. Assaf offered a summary quote of many activists’ feelings about the steps taken so far; “genuine and serious political will” is lacking, and the current measures in place “are not enough at all.”³⁵

In addition to the end of corruption, many Jordanians are calling for political changes as well. Despite the political liberalization that occurred in the late 1980’s, Freedom House still classified Jordan as “Not Free” in 2011, with a score of 6 for political rights and 5 for civil liberties (on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being the most free).³⁶ The Political Parties Law of 1992 allowed the creation of political parties, but as mentioned above, since 1993 Jordan has used a “one-person-one-vote system” for elections. This mandates the use of a single non-transferable vote, meaning that citizens cast only one vote for one candidate even though their respective electoral district may have multiple seats to be filled; activists assert that this encourages

³⁰ Interview 3

³¹ Interview 4

³² Interview 5

³³ Interview 3

³⁴ Interview 2

³⁵ "Jordan on Corruption Hunt but Islamists Skeptical." Danin. "Arab Spring Impact Major Challenge to Jordan King."

³⁶ Freedom House

tribalism and emphasizes divisions within the population. It also reduced the amount of influence the Islamic Action Front has a realistic chance of achieving in Parliament.³⁷

Like in Mubarak's Egypt or Ben Ali's Tunisia, the democratic façade on the Jordanian political system does not really restrict the power of the king. According to the country's constitution, the king, who has immunity under the law, appoints all ministers, and it gives him the responsibility and power to "direct the enactment" of all laws.³⁸ The king is vested with both executive and legislative powers, and the judiciary makes its rulings "in the name of the king." Informal institutions, in the form of precedents, ensure that the parliament does not use its constitutionally granted regulatory powers. King Abdullah is the person wielding power.

One of the major differences usually cited between the unrest in Jordan today and that of Jordan in previous times is that the criticism has come from sectors of society that have traditionally supported the monarchy. Indeed, his "biggest problems [come from] among his East-Banker constituency."³⁹ This group has targeted most of their anger towards what they see as the corrupt practices of the royal court and poor economic policies adopted by the government. In early 2011, a group of former generals and intelligence officers wrote a letter to the king after demonstrators protested the lavishness of Queen Rania's birthday celebration in Wadi Rum.⁴⁰ In it they declared, "We still have loyalty to the Hashemite throne, but we believe that King Abdullah should stop his wife and her family from abuse. Otherwise, the throne might be in danger."⁴¹ Even up through April 2012, most of the protests have taken place in East Bank cities, like Tafileh, Ma'an, and Karak. In reality, they are displeased with changes that have

³⁷ Ma'ayeh

³⁸ *The Constitution of The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan*

³⁹ Interview 3

⁴⁰ Zecchini

⁴¹ Habib (2011)

taken place that would be associated with any liberalization period regardless of the amount of corruption in the system. Many East Bankers had come to depend on the handouts offered to them by the king in the form of jobs in state-run businesses. Privatization, especially that of the cement and phosphate industries, took away their safety net, which they feel the king has the responsibility to protect.

In addition to many East-Bankers, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) has been unusually critical. A large political party in Jordan associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, the IAF has been the main opposition party in Jordan over the last 25 years, but even as part of the opposition, it, or at least the Muslim Brotherhood, has historically backed the monarchy even if the support is not always advertised. However, since the beginning of 2011, it has continually pushed King Abdullah to make more and more changes. Supporters of the king argue that they have only done this to try to make the same gains their cohorts have achieved, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Nahda party in Tunisia.⁴² Tensions between the regime and the IAF seem to be heightening. Indeed, after the leaders of the party publically called the new draft election law “disappointing and undemocratic,” the Lower House of Parliament endorsed a law banning the formation of religious-based political parties.⁴³ The Senate is unlikely to approve the ban, but this move nonetheless outraged many in the IAF and deepened a widening gap.

Changes in Jordanians’ Perceptions of the King

Compounding the danger these economic and political troubles pose to the king, a number of transformations in ways Jordanians view both the monarchy and the nation itself has taken place. In Jordan now, almost all “ordinary people [including avid supporters of the

⁴² Interview 4

⁴³ "Jordan's Parliament Bans the Muslim Brotherhood's Part."

monarchy] recognize that corruption is a major problem,” and they are more concerned about it than at any point in the past.⁴⁴ This slow revelation, to a large degree has been able to spread simply because of the factual reality noted above; the economic liberalization process begun in 1988 brought about more cases, but corruption really increased dramatically after King Abdullah’s coronation as the privatization process sped up. In addition to those mentioned previously, the most notable cases include the Marsa Zayed Project in Aqaba and the sales of the phosphate and potash industries to foreign companies. Most Jordanians have always recognized that corruption existed in the government, but many now see the nature of current corruption to be very different from that of the past; it was seen under King Hussein as being used to help fund the state.⁴⁵

Not only do many Jordanians simply see a greater prevalence of corruption, but, in a development more detrimental to the monarchy’s stability, some now view the royal family as intimately involved in the corruption as well. Jordan’s media openly discussed the fact that from 2000-2003 King Abdullah permitted over 1000 acres of the treasury’s land to be registered under his name.⁴⁶ The royal court issued a statement explaining how that was done to avoid red tape and “facilitate implementation of development and service programmes.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, many activists have taken pains to note how King Abdullah worked closely with the directors of Mawared in developing the al-Abdali neighborhood. ACC president Samih Bino noted that “there is a good possibility of corruption” in how the company managed its projects.⁴⁸ The letter sent by important tribal figures in February 2011 to the king went so far as to accuse Queen

⁴⁴ Interview 1

⁴⁵ Interview 3

⁴⁶ Interview 6. Ghazal. al-Samadi

⁴⁷ "Royal Court Clarifies Facts Related to Treasury Lands Registered in King's Name."

⁴⁸ Hazaimh. Shaoul. Cronin

Rania of “corruption, stealing money from the Treasury and manipulation in order to promote her public image – against the Jordanian people’s will.”⁴⁹

Closely connected to this changing notion of the king’s involvement in corruption comes a change in the public’s perception of the king’s role in politics and governance. Historically, many Jordanians felt that the king most of the time did not involve himself directly in the minutia of the government and thereby could remain above the fray of petty politics, intervening only when a particular government appears to have grievously failed in its duties. Rumors though of King Abdullah being much more hands-on than his father means that image is changing. Some have even viewed him as such a micromanager that he has over the last 12 years “castrated the previous power structure” by taking so much of the responsibilities onto himself.⁵⁰ Consequently, anger that had previously been targeted against the government now has been redirected towards him, and even the king himself is rumored to have admitted that what’s going on is a trial of his first 12 years as the monarch.⁵¹ These changes in perception have resulted in tangible differences to how some Jordanians are acting.

At a basic level, as noted above, these transformations have led a number of Jordanians to criticize the royal family itself because its is now appears very culpable; moreover though, some activists are going so far as to burn images of the king, an act which symbolizes how at least some people have lost all respect for King Abdullah, a fact which makes those people quicker to take more drastic action. The real problem though with the king being perceived as part of the corrupt governance system is that he can no longer as easily deflect criticism or blame. The common base sentiment shared by most Jordanians is simply a desire for improved economic

⁴⁹ Simioni

⁵⁰ Interview 3

⁵¹ Ibid.

conditions, which many activists argue requires reforming government institutions. With many now viewing the king as closely connected to these institutions, some activist/political groups, such as the IAF, now argue that only fundamentally altering the constitution in Jordan will bring about the political conditions required to truly deal with the economic problems. When speaking about changing the electoral law and amending Articles 34, 35, and 36 of the Constitution, Deputy General Secretary of the IAF Nimer al-Assaf argues that such “political reforms are needed to fix the corruption issue.”⁵² Amending those articles would accomplish the IAF’s goal as stated by Zaki Bani Rshaid to transform King Abdullah into a figure “like the queen of England or the president of Israel.”⁵³ Such arguments can only resonate among people if they believe the king is somehow connected to the state’s corruption. For this reason, Laurie Brand was able to assert that the notion of the king somehow transcending politics “has proved a valuable fiction,” and so any decline in its prevalence among Jordanians is very worrying.⁵⁴

Aspects of the Monarchy’s Survival so Far

King Abdullah’s greatest source of strength so far perhaps has been his firm control over the General Intelligence Directorate, the Department of Public Security, and the Jordanian Armed Forces because it ensures that in Jordan the king alone commands the institutions of violence and their coercive powers. This situation may not differ from the one in Syria at the beginning of 2011, but the way in which such force is exerted does differ. Jordan’s *mukhabarat* under King Abdullah II have avoided many of the mistakes made by the other similar services in the region. Nathan Brown noted that the DPS and the GID do not display the “daily

⁵² Al-Assaf

⁵³ Bronner

⁵⁴ Brand (2011)

thuggishness of [their] late Egyptian cousin” which means that the country has not transformed into the Orwellian police state that characterized Hosni Mubarak’s tyrannical leadership.⁵⁵ Certainly many activists have reported being verbally threatened or having their offices ransacked, yet two things make Jordan’s *mukhabarat* appear restrained. First, except for a couple of notable instances, security personnel have not come into conflict with protesters. Thus, King Abdullah has avoided inciting further anger and entering the nation into the cycle of protests-repression-funerals into which Syria plunged. Second, the security services are much less brutish than they once were. Like the transforming perceptions of both corruption and the king, this change alters many Jordanians’ expectations, which in turn affects their drive to do certain things.

In addition to his note about “daily thuggishness,” Brown added, “Jordan’s top government officials have responded, however imperfectly, to their people’s voices.” These responses indicate to many Jordanians that the government possesses the political infrastructure and will capable of solving the country’s problems.⁵⁶ Therefore, even though many Jordanians now view King Abdullah as closely connected to the problem, and thus also as a government figure whose role needs to change, many, many others disagree with this diagnosis.

In such a situation the question of expectations becomes extremely important. One Jordanian activist avowed that Jordanians “have to be able to trust the person instituting reforms” for them to accept such reforms while Nimer al-Assaf stated that unrest in Jordan will not escalate “as long as people have hope” the situation will change, but if people no longer expect

⁵⁵ Brown

⁵⁶ Ibid.

real reforms to take place under the leadership of the king then “problems may arise” as they begin to demand a new political system be established that could bring about real changes.⁵⁷

King Abdullah has worked hard to portray himself both as deeply vested in bringing about political and economic reforms. As early as February 2011, he was making speeches in which he asserts, “and when I say reform, I want real and quick reform, because without genuine reforms, the situation will remain as it was.”⁵⁸ In the numerous speeches he has given of this kind, he has gone so far as to declare, “No one is above the law or has impunity.”⁵⁹ By emphasizing his responsiveness and the extent of his conviction, he is trying to make sure people still have hope. Therefore, the lack of public repression is important part of this message of hope; it is a sign of the Jordanians’ future political freedom. In addition to his dismissal of two governments and his constant pleas for Parliament to take quicker action, his supporters also eagerly point to how he has pardoned the most of the arrested protestors, including the first individual who burnt his image, and to how he also attended a controversial play critical of the government.⁶⁰

In presenting himself in such a light, King Abdullah has calculated that people will abstain from revolutionary activity as long as they expect the king himself to eventually bring about the necessary changes. In reality, hope is the only thing he can offer because much of what the people want requires altering central ways of how the government acts, a fact that means several of the reforms cannot produce results immediately. This tactic was effective because to some extent, a person’s decision whether or not to trust the king to follow through does not always depend on how involved he/she perceives the king to have been in the

⁵⁷ Interview 7. Al-Assaf

⁵⁸ King Abdullah

⁵⁹ “People Need Clarity, Openness, the Corrupt Must Be Punished, No One Is above the Law’, King.”

⁶⁰ “King Orders Special Pardon for Udai Abu Issa.” Brand (2012)

corruption. One reporter noted that some Jordanians who think the king was involved still have faith in him; they believe that although he was corrupted by those around him, now he “gets it.”⁶¹ While the general lack of overt repression has signaled to many Jordanians the king’s acceptance of the need for greater political freedoms, the arrests of 13 protestors charged with insulting the king, in addition to a few who have called for Jordan to become a republic, has worried more moderate activists. Although the king later pardoned those people, many in Jordan have taken these arrests to be the first indication of the regime’s new more aggressive strategy for dealing with protestors, a strategy the activists claim that will only increase tensions, because “even though arrests are not as bad as violence, there’re still bad.”⁶²

The Islamic Action Front and most activist leaders argue that the constitutional amendments and the proposed new election law are overall only minor or cosmetic changes and that they in fact demonstrate that “the state is still not serious in its commitment to real, democratic reform.”⁶³ The continuation of protests every Friday though indicate that many still feel the king or at least his government need the reminders; they do not trust the government to act otherwise.

Despite the important changes that have slowly been happening with regards to King Abdullah II’s image becoming tainted by corruption or issues of poor governance, the public for the most part still views him as transcending the Jordanian/Palestinian divide, despite one view held by only a small minority who feel otherwise. This is extremely important because it still means that many see him as the ideal person to maintain a peaceful balance between the two groups. Indeed, this is one aspect of a greater set of conditions that have helped him remain on

⁶¹ Interview 3

⁶² Interview 2. "Jordanian Authorities Storm Protest Critical of King."

⁶³ "Activists to Protest against Elections Law."

the throne. As Nathan Brown put it, “the deep and broad consensus to maintain the monarchy is easy to explain: it is based less on Jordanians’ loyalty to Hashemites and more on their suspicions of each other.”⁶⁴ The Palestinian/East-Banker divide remains a major source of worry for many of both origins. Activists often note that the government is quick to play up the notion, alleging that the *mukhabarat* has done stuff like spread rumors that “Palestinians are trying to take over Amman” to generate more fear among East Bankers.⁶⁵ Despite whatever role the government has in perpetuating and increasing this fear, the concern does exist among some Jordanians that the country would plunge into civil war between Palestinians and East-Bankers if the Hashemites were to set aside their authority. As one reporter noted, people still feel that the king is “the glue that keeps people together.”⁶⁶ One Jordanian noted while participating in a protest that King Abdullah “is a factor of stability for the country. I am sure he's a kind of stability for the country.”⁶⁷ Some also worry that because any true democracy would leave a Palestinian group in charge, Jordan would come to be accepted as a suitable alternative Palestinian homeland. Although many dismiss this fear, some Palestinians admitted that at least a sizable portion of the Palestinian population (meaning both those who are Jordanian citizens and those who are not) has remained apolitical out of such concerns. When publically speaking about such worries, King Abdullah lamented, “Regrettably, although we keep reassuring these people, they keep bringing it up again and again.”⁶⁸ The fact that the king even addressed the issue of the “so-called ‘substitute homeland’” question at all reveals the extent to which it is an issue among public discourse. Perhaps though, the most significant fear is that which many pro-

⁶⁴ Brown

⁶⁵ Interview 6

⁶⁶ Interview 3

⁶⁷ Beard

⁶⁸ Royal Court

democracy reformers have of the Islamic Action Front. To them the thought of an Islamist government is “scary.”⁶⁹ None of the other revolutions in the region has produced what they would classify as a success. This too acts as a major deterrent against seeking greater political change beyond the new constitutional reforms and the proposed election law. Giving more power to political parties at this moment “is not appropriate.”⁷⁰ The sense that the Arab Spring itself is making it harder for countries to improve economic conditions is also slowly growing, while many Jordanians are getting fed up with “the inability of the reform movement to unify and create a national agenda.”⁷¹

This slow change in King Abdullah’s image has the potential to cause the situation in Jordan to spiral out of control because of how it affects his position in relation to the civil myth of Jordan. At the most basic level as noted above, the king is allowed to rule because he is what prevents internal discord; however, if more people lose hope and consequently start demonstrating in much greater numbers in support of more changes then the king’s legitimacy is weakened because he would be failing his requirement to prevent discord. Therefore, this change not only motivates people to protest by making them think more is needed, but to some extent it actually removes mental barriers to their decision to participate, since the king is not keeping up his end of the social contract. Jordan then risks falling into a loop of unrest that spirals Jordan out of control as increasing numbers of demonstrations create more discord, which in turn makes more people unhappy and willing to protest. One possible point of ignition would be even greater unrest and more violence in Syria since the resulting influx of even more refugees would only create more chaos.

⁶⁹ Interview 2

⁷⁰ Interview 3

⁷¹ Torchia and al-Khalidi. Interview 2

Likewise, any instance of Jordanians associating King Abdullah with corruption pushes aside in their minds his identity as the unifier of the nation or as the righteous descendants of the prophet Muhammad. This last image already has lost most of its currency, even according to the IAF.⁷² The addition of these new negative characteristics reduces the significance of this older vision and thus weakens its power to legitimize. Although these new aspects of his image do not necessarily contradict the old aspects, some Jordanians do view the corruption with an additional sectarian spin that does contradict the civil myth. A number of East Bankers feel that Palestinians have benefitted a lot from the corruption, which they feel has only cost them jobs.⁷³ The most high profile arrests have both been of prominent East Bankers; Ma'ani comes from the large Ma'ani tribe, which protested his arrest, and Dhahabi fervently struggled to maintain the East Bankers' dominance when he was an intelligence chief. The choice of these two for prosecution during the "witch-hunt," combined also with King Abdullah's marriage to a Palestinian, has lead some East Bankers to question his performance in the role of balancer of Trans-Jordanian and Palestinian interests. To them, he has sacrificed their interests in favor of those of the Palestinians. If this trend of more and more people re-imagining the corruption of the past 12 years in terms of "these ethnic identity... dynamics," then King Abdullah risks loosing his primary claim to legitimacy.⁷⁴

Implications for U.S. Interests

Because the changes to peoples' perception of King Abdullah risks popular dissent and unrest spiraling out of control, the future of Jordan, especially over the next year, is extremely

⁷² al-Assaf

⁷³ Interview 2

⁷⁴ Ryan (2012)

important matter for the United States. The complete collapse of King Abdullah's legitimacy leave him reliant upon his security apparatus to maintain stability. With East Bankers representing the majority of both protestors and security personnel and given how at least some of them disapprove of the king's liberalization/Palestinianization efforts during his reign, the loyalty of the security apparatus to King Abdullah is not be guaranteed as it once was, a reality that leaves armed conflict a distinct possibility. Furthermore, other regimes in the region that have relied primarily on its security forces for maintaining stability and that have had the same economic problems as Jordan, like Tunisia, Libya, and Syria descended into violence or experienced a revolution. At the very least, even if Jordan's transformation into a security regime would further damage the US's prestige in the region since numerous US officials have for years made statements like President Obama's "I have long admired King Abdullah's example of moderation and modernization" as the leader of Jordan, "a great friend of the United States."⁷⁵

One of the region's most pro-Western countries, Jordan maintains close ties to America and cooperates with it on a variety of initiatives of mutual interest. Amman has arrested and prosecuted individuals linked to Al Qaeda, banned the banking operations of such persons, helped enforce a no-fly zone over Libya during the recent NATO-led campaign, assisted the U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq by sending medical personnel and mine-clearing units, and trained Iraqi police and soldiers. (Jordan provided this assistance to Iraq even though it opposed the U.S. decision to invade in 2003.) The government's ties with Iran are also strained. Jordan has paid a steep price for its pro-Western policies: In November 2005, near-simultaneous explosions at three hotels in Amman killed 58 people, with Al Qaeda in Iraq claiming

⁷⁵ Hamid and Freer 2. President Barack Obama

responsibility. Such incidents reflect the two countries' shared enemies and have strengthened America's commitment to bolster its Arab ally and ensure the country's stability.

The United States has long been providing significant amounts of military and economic aid to Jordan. Between 1951 and 2011, U.S. assistance to Jordan has amounted to some \$12.47 billion.⁷⁶ In 2008, the United States and Jordan reached an agreement stipulating that the United States would provide \$660 million in annual assistance over a five-year period, with the 2012 amount thought to be \$663.7 million. The two countries also maintain a robust and growing intelligence partnership that plays a key role in advancing the U.S. missions in Iraq and Afghanistan and the U.S. war on terror.⁷⁷ As large as that number is, the amount has not changed significantly since 2005 despite total US foreign aid increasing more than 40 percent.

In 1994, Jordan became the second Arab country to sign a peace agreement with Israel, which came with the ancillary benefits of improving its relations with Western countries and receiving much-needed foreign aid. Since then, the monarchy has been a major player in the peace process. Public opinion within Jordan has complicated Abdullah's efforts, however, since the country's Palestinian majority opposes the peace process, while the Islamic Action Front (IAF) – the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood – openly supports Hamas and opposes any efforts to normalize relations with Israel. Despite his pursuit of limited talks with Hamas in the first 12 years of his reign and his past repudiation of the IAF's agenda, his policies have already begun to shift as he responds to the internal regime-security concerns. Viewing the Muslim Brotherhood as a both a long and short-term threat to his leadership, he allowed in late January 2012 Hamas President Khaled Meshaal to have an official visit to Jordan, the first in more than 12 years, to discuss with personally with the king Jordan's stance towards the Israeli-Palestinian

⁷⁶ Sharp

⁷⁷ Peter

conflict. Many saw this as an attempt of the regime to earn back some support from the IAF.

During the meeting the king reaffirmed his support for a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, but he also echoed the US's position when he added that negotiations remain "the sole means to regain Palestinian rights."⁷⁸

In this context, America can hardly assume that a post-revolutionary Jordan would maintain the breadth and depth of current U.S.-Jordanian relations. In fact, the implications for U.S. interests would likely be quite detrimental. While the Muslim Brotherhood hardly commands majority support in Jordan, it remains the country's most well-organized political group, and much like Egypt's Islamists, probably stands the best chance of winning a fair and free democratic election, if one were to occur in the near future. If such a development came to pass, the full range of U.S.-Jordanian collaborative programs would be in jeopardy: intelligence cooperation would likely crumble, efforts in Afghanistan would suffer a blow, and America would lose a key ally in the war on terror. The Israel-Jordan peace treaty would be at risk, while Iran could gain another foothold in the heart of the Fertile Crescent. Jordan would evolve from its historic role as the buffer that separated Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia from each other and from Israel and instead could become a thoroughfare for the region's most extreme elements.

Since Jordan now teeters on the brink of chaos, the United States should not only follow the situation closely, but it must take active steps to help prevent a potentially violent situation from coming about. Despite many who assert that King Abdullah now "gets it," as of February 2012, at least a third of the populations of Karak, Tafileh, Ma'an, and Aqaba still thought the country was heading in the wrong direction, while only 63% across Jordan as a whole said it was

⁷⁸ Haniya

going in the right direction.⁷⁹ This leaves a substantial portion of the nation that still needs to be convinced to have faith. Admittedly, this does not necessarily reflect their opinion of or faith in King Abdullah, but it does at least a large percentage could lose faith quite quickly. Since economic problems remain at the core of most the complaints, helping Jordan procure additional international funding should be a priority for the US government. Obviously, providing additional non-military aid to Jordan for the next few years would be extremely beneficial to the monarchy. However, the US could support Jordanian attempts to get more assistance from other sources as well such as from the Gulf Cooperation Committee countries, which have promised to give \$2.5 billion in 2012.⁸⁰ Admittedly, obtaining additional money from those countries could be difficult considering that Saudi Arabia alone has given well over \$1.4 billion million to Jordan since January 2011, but it would be extremely beneficial.⁸¹ The public outrage that spilled out over the possibility of increased electricity costs reveals how necessary it is for King Abdullah to keep government subsidies in place. However, these measures may not be enough; Jordan's full admission to that organization would not only provide actual yet limited economic benefits to Jordanians-since more would be able to look for work in those places-but would also provide a morale boost by giving many the impression that the economy would be able to recover faster.

To keep people's hopes up that some authority in Jordan will fight corruption, King Abdullah needs to do more than give speeches and have a few people arrested on occasion, because the continuation of the protests show that many average Jordanians are at the least unsure of the king's commitment. If the king wants to continue "sacrificing people in this witch-

⁷⁹ al-Khatib and Masri

⁸⁰ "GCC Pledges \$5 Billion to Jordan and Morocco."

⁸¹ Tayseer

hunt,” then he may end up sacrificing himself if he is not careful.⁸² First, the United States must make sure King Abdullah understands how, given the prevalence of technology and media today, the Hashemites must regulate themselves so that they not only avoid any corruption but that they also alter their conspicuous consumption tendencies. Furthermore, ideally, the US would convince King Abdullah to create an institution-or allow the already established Anti-Corruption Commission-to crackdown hard on corruption. As a sign of renewed commitment, it would target Bassem Awadallah or Majdi Yassine, the two people probably most associated with (and disliked because of) corruption. At the very least, the United States must get the king to arrest a corrupt Palestinian and have fair trials for all three individuals start soon. Unfortunately, persuading the king to take such action would be difficult to do since Bassem Awadallah’s prosecution would be an admission of corruption taking place inside the royal court, yet any continued delay in reforming the culture of corruption that has arisen in the government only makes it harder to convince the rest of the country that, this time, the reforms are meaningful. In one year alone from February 2011 to February 2012, the percentage of Jordanians who thought corruption was Jordan’s biggest problem doubled.⁸³ No poll could ask how involved they thought the king was in the corruption, but this at least shows how more and more Jordanians perceive corruption to be a bigger problem than before. Consequently, drastic action is needed in order to mollify many Jordanians’ concerns; such a temporary fix is needed while the long process of reforming the culture of corruption in the government starts progressing.

The United States should urge King Abdullah, regardless of whatever he decides to do or not do about corruption, not to abandon economic liberalization policies in the long term, even if the East Bankers’ demands put the process on hold temporarily. The country lacks the natural

⁸² Interview 3

⁸³ al-Khatib and Masri

resources necessary to fund such a welfare system without foreign aid; since the amount of US foreign aid is likely to remain a contentious issue as part of the debate about government spending, the US would retain more influence in a Jordan that was less reliant on foreign assistance flooding in from Saudi Arabia.

Although not likely, the state in Jordan might be able to increase prices without significant repercussions right after the upcoming elections because they could significantly increase or restore Jordanians' faith in King Abdullah. At the same time, the elections may also severely damage the king's image even more. Polls note that right now only 7% of Jordanians upset with the government do not have any faith in it to effectively carry out the reforms. However, 39% of activist leaders, who might be less afraid to admit their true dissent, have no confidence. Curtis Ryan goes so far as to say that "there is a profound... lack of faith in the regime."⁸⁴ This response option did not appear in surveys prior to September 2011, a fact which might indicate how it only became an issue of concern recently. With more people then finding it harder to keep faith in the political system, the elections are important as they signify the culmination of all the reforms over the past 18 months and generally will be seen as a litmus test for how committed the regime is to bringing about the other desired changes. As long as elections go smoothly, more people will have no reason to lose faith. However, as Nimer al-Assaf noted, "if there is tampering or intimidation, people will not stand for that at all," because such actions would indicate to them that the current political system can neither meet the demands of the people nor effectively implement the new reforms. This sentiment then again leads to more protests, which as detailed above, could spiral out of control.

⁸⁴ Ryan (2012)

In order for King Abdullah to regain the full benefits of having the government be an alternative target for criticism, he must shed the image of him being a micromanager. As with his family's corruption and spending habits, his involvement in governance has become very difficult to keep hidden. For the moment, his publically known involvement is expected by his subjects because of the critical nature of this time, he must sit back and let loyal friends in Parliament or the ministries rule in his name or at least find other extremely subtle means to exert influence without taking a hands-on approach. Of course he must not go too far and give off the appearance of being apathetic.

Up to this point in Jordan, fear of both violent conflict, chaos, and the mukhabarat has kept many Jordanians from joining the protests and has kept most activists from being too critical or from demanding too radical reforms. Nevertheless, changes in many Jordanians' image of the king have placed the monarchy in a precarious position. Because the image of a corrupt king is slowly overtaking, (even if not necessarily contradicting) the image of a unifying king, King Abdullah's legitimacy is slowly weakening. Meanwhile, this change in perception incites more people to demonstrate (because they lack faith in the government to act otherwise⁸⁵), an action that further weakens the king's legitimacy. This creates a situation where the unrest might escalate drastically over a short period of time. At this point this new way of perceiving has only spread slowly, and thus, hope has not evaporated for most Jordanians, which many believe that "steps taken so far are indeed "the start of something bigger."⁸⁶ However, the manner in which the next parliamentary elections are run will go a long way towards strengthening or destroying people's faith in the political system with the king at its head.

⁸⁵ Taxi Cab Driver

⁸⁶ Interview 3

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