ARAB UPRISINGS

Jordan, Forever on the Brink

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Project on Middle East Political Science

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network which aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation and the Social Science Research Council. It is a co-sponsor of the Middle East Channel (http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com). For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.

Jordan, Forever on the Brink

The sudden, unprecedented resignation by Jordan's Prime Minister Awn Khasawnah last week threw a sudden spotlight on the ongoing shortcomings of political reform in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The deficient new election law rolled out last month, like every step the king has taken over the last year and a half, did too little, too late to respond to the concerns of Jordanian citizens. Limited reforms have done little to stem a rising tide of protest across the towns of the south, a deeply struggling economy, loud complaints of corruption, and an intensifying edge of political anger. Add in the potential impact of the ongoing crisis in Syria or of a new escalation in the West Bank, and concerns for Jordan's political future seem merited.

Veteran observers of the region can be excused for rolling their eyes ever so slightly at reports of instability in Jordan, of course. The kingdom has seemed on the political brink virtually constantly for many decades, its stability always questioned and the monarchy's command doubted (often, admittedly, by me). And yet the Hashemite monarchy has survived. Warnings about political crisis in Jordan therefore sound just enough like boys crying wolf or Chicken Littles shouting about falling skies. That long history of frustrated protest and successfully navigated challenges should caution anyone predicting a real explosion. But it would be equally wrong to dismiss the signs of a rapidly escalating political crisis to which the palace seems unable or unwilling to respond.

This post previews a new POMEPS Briefing, "Jordan, Forever on the Brink," which collects 20 articles from the last three years explaining the nature of the kingdom's political crisis, the shortcomings of its attempted reforms, and the current political state of play.

The context of last year's Arab uprisings adds urgency to Jordan's problems, but its political stalemate has been developing for many years. The democratic opening, which followed an outbreak of social protests in 1989, including press liberalization, freely contested elections, and the crafting of a "National Pact" for a democratic monarchical system, now seems a distant memory. Then-King Hussein began rolling back the new freedoms in the middle of the 1990s, as he moved to conclude an unpopular peace with Israel. A new election law designed to curb the power of the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front Party produced a series of weak, ineffectual parliaments too often dissolved early at the whim of the palace.

Since replacing his father, the current King Abdullah has not behaved like a leader deeply committed to democratic procedures or credible about reform. Palace officials often argue that he is a true reformer frustrated by the slow pace of change, but if so then he has remarkably little to show for more than a decade's effort. He suspended parliament soon after taking the throne and ruled by emergency law for several years. Reform initiatives such as the National Agenda disappeared without a trace. The political history of the last decade has been a depressing litany of failed governments, incompetent parliaments, and frustrated civil society. The last elections, in November 2010, ranked among the worst in the kingdom's history.

That frustration has been exacerbated by grinding economic problems, which have largely wiped out the middle class and badly hurt the poor. Cuts to government spending or the state bureaucracy, meanwhile, tend to disproportionately hurt the East Bankers who have generally been favored by the state for political reasons. The ostentatious new wealth on display in parts of Amman only fueled the simmering resentment, as ever more open talk of corruption at the top permeated political society... and circulated freely through new social media and in every day conversation. I still remember being shocked a few years back at being regaled in public by near strangers with stories of Queen Rania's new private jet and the backers of a new big dig in central Amman. Official efforts to censor and control such information are long since hopeless.

The Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings inspired as much enthusiasm and popular protest energy in Jordan as they did elsewhere in the region. Jordanian youth mobilized large protests, while traditional opposition movements also gathered strength. Jordan's impressive community of online activists pushed the boundaries of public debate, with unusual criticism of corruption at the highest levels - even (or especially) Queen Rania. Perhaps more troubling to the regime, discontent spread relentlessly into the south as a protest culture took hold. Military veterans spoke out in unprecedented ways, signaling potential problems at the very heart of the regime. And Jordanian-Palestinian identity politics, always at the center of Jordanian politics and society, played out in ever more intense forms.

The king's responses have been consistently behind the curve, suggesting a failure to appreciate the full extent of the regime's problems. The dismissal of several prime ministers in succession were dismissed as the mere shuffling of deck chairs with little practical significance. The king's speech in June disappointed activists hoping for more concrete and far reaching promises of political change. Promised constitutional reforms compared poorly to even those limited changes offered in Morocco. By November, oft-promised reforms remained largely "fictional," in Sean Yom's incisive verdict. More effective has been the traditional moves to polarize society around the Jordanian-Palestinian conflict to divide and distract opposition — but even that strategy holds risks for the monarchy under current conditions. As Laurie A. Brand and Fayez Hammad recently asked, "what exactly does the king understand?"

Some hopes had been placed in the appointment of the respected liberal jurist Khaswaneh as prime minister. With his departure, that hope too has been frustrated. The long history of the regime's surviving such frustrated hopes and failed reforms would suggest that this too shall pass. But Jordan's palace should not be so confident. The spread of protest into new constituencies, the rising grievances of the south, the intensifying identity politics, the struggling economy, and the pervasive fury at perceived official corruption create a potent brew. The violent dispersal of an attempted Amman sit-in last March shocked activists and broke their momentum, but the protest movement has proven resilient and creative. I would rank Jordan today only below Bahrain as at risk of a sudden escalation of political crisis — at which point the impossible would in retrospect look inevitable indeed.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
May 7, 2012

Jordan's fictional reforms

By Sean Yom, November 9, 2011

Compared to recent dramatic events — Qaddafi's demise in Libya, Tunisia's groundbreaking elections, the Coptic killings in Egypt — Jordan's latest cabinet shuffle barely registered as a news blip. Indeed, King Abdullah's dismissal of wildly unpopular Prime Minister Marouf Bakhit had been expected as early as this summer. Still, many analysts greeted new Premier Awn Khasawneh with hope and anticipation. In a country that has simmered with growing unrest, the appointment of a new government explicitly charged with rejuvenating a moribund political reform process may represent a decisive royal concession. As opposition protests enter their eleventh month, perhaps the monarchy has realized that democratization can wait no longer.

Such an appraisal is admirably optimistic, but it is a convenient fiction produced for Western consumption. Scryers of Jordan must look beyond any given cabinet to understand that although the Hashemite palace trumpets the cause of democracy, its goal during the Arab Spring has been to preserve autocratic supremacy. A transition to constitutional monarchy exists more as fantasy in the minds of liberals than a goal supported by the palace. Yet that is the logical endgame of Jordanian democratization: a near-absolute monarchy devolving power to a fairly elected parliament, alongside a General Intelligence Directorate that no longer interferes in public life.

Despite the heroic assumptions of reformists expecting progress toward such transformation, Khasawneh's new government is designed to fail. Why? It is not simply that Khasawneh's task is Herculean. (Starting off by promising no more rigged elections, given that every past election was declared free and fair, does not inspire much confidence.) Rather, in Jordan cabinet changes are *signals* rather than causes of major policy shifts. While prime ministers have always been executors of royal imperatives, since the political opening of 1989 they have become part of a new system of cyclical management. Premiers are appointed with impossible jobs because they are expected to stumble — and popular cabinets do not get sacked. When their inability to deliver generates an inevitable crisis of public confidence, the king ritualistically intervenes.

Such essential reboots allow the palace to maintain its fictive distance from the political fray by sympathizing with (and, in theory, defusing) popular frustration, while promoting another loyal retainer into the top spot. Parliament ironically lubricates this cycle because the imbalanced electoral system favors independent MP's who, bound by no party, raucously echo their constituents' displeasure because it wins votes. The historical record exposes the dispensability of cabinets: this is the 61st premiership since the 1950s, and the ninth government since Abdullah's 1999 ascension. Either Jordanian prime ministers are all incompetent, or else cabinet stability — the institutional foundation for any sustained policy change — is not the goal.

Analysts should thus use the latest session of the musical chairs game to consider the direction of royal strategy. It starts with the logic of selection. During his half-century of rule, King Hussein placed trust in a small coterie of East Bank advisors and loyalists. They often rotated between the official cabinet and royal court (a parallel government of sorts), and many served as prime minister multiple times given the King's confidence in their skill. By contrast, King Abdullah's strategy has been to experiment more diversely, plucking out new political talent from a broader network of clients. At times this backfired. For instance, conservative tribal supporters still bitterly recall the King's early endorsement of Bassem Awadallah, a Palestinian technocrat who gained unparalleled authority and prominence — it was their ferocious criticism that eventually forced his resignation from the royal court in 2008.

However, such eclecticism now makes sense now in a context of weekly protests and social tension. With his quiet credentials as an international jurist, Khasawneh lacks domestic experience and political baggage — the

former would have kept him unknown under Hussein, but the latter makes him Abdullah's newest superstar. He will pursue whatever limited reforms the palace suggests, such as the recently ratified constitutional amendments and tepid changes to the elections and political parties laws. Thus, he is the ideal successor to Bakhit, who was the only prime minister to serve twice under Abdullah but whose reputation had been irrevocably decimated by scandals — e.g., the Casino-Gate corruption hearings, tribal agitations that forced the postponement of municipal elections, and violent attacks against opposition demonstrations.

Given the inevitable collapse of this government, the changeover's real benefit has been to give the palace time to regroup. The sheer volume of public discontent floored royal insiders this year, and they will use the next several months to rebuild relations with opposition forces. For example, the Islamists were offered several posts in the new government, and have been encouraged to reenter the political scene after they boycotted the last general elections. Khasawneh met with the professional syndicates and to their approval pledged to improve relations with Hamas. Urban youth activists disgusted with their brutal treatment by riot police and anonymous thugs received invitations to royal summits and other high-level gestures.

Notably, what surprised the regime was that many of those youth activists, such as the March 24 Shabab, were not Palestinian but rather hailed from tribal backgrounds. That hostility from East Bankers has grown immensely significant. After all, the Jordanian "street" does not threaten the monarchy when it encompasses the Muslim Brotherhood, professional associations, and leftist parties — predictable actors easily contained through targeted repression and legal constriction. Existential danger instead emerges when dissent emanates from the very social forces that staff the state, man the army, and operate the mukhabarat (GID).

That danger has become tangible in recent years, as prominent regime veterans and disaffected tribal communities have loudly complained about the status quo. They are neither traditional opposition nor lockstep liberals. They occasionally march with Islamists, manipulate the Palestinian issue to benefit their cause, and often focus on material demands like halting economic privatization. Yet like other Jordanians, they are furious about corruption, frustrated with economic stagnation, and disappointed with Abdullah's reign. Towns like Tafileh have witnessed repeated protests, and East Bank activists have spearheaded the creation of new opposition fronts. Most of all, public disparagement of the monarchy has become startlingly brazen, far more so than in 1989. Much as condemnation of Queen Rania broke a major taboo last year, reports of tribal gatherings openly criticizing both king and crown have become common.

However, the regime's old method of preserving East Banker support — sacrificing its fiscal health to maintain the institutions that employ them and the welfare that assists them — is invoking untenable costs. The absurd sacking of Central Bank Governor Faris Sharaf is a case in point. Among other reasons, his insistence on fiscal austerity threatened the price subsidies, public salary increases, and other grant programs promised this past year. Only Saudi aid grants have prevented the budget deficit from swelling further, but such expectations are unsustainable given the king's acknowledgement that living conditions precede democracy. Simply put, the regime lacks the financial resources to continue its lavish public spending spree.

Politically, the new opposition is using the Sharaf controversy to decry the overreach of the regime's security apparatus. In doing so, they have highlighted an uncomfortable fact: that the monarchy is either unwilling or unable to downsize the mukhabarat's interference in political affairs. Western analysts often assume the palace and mukhabarat are inseparable, but this is not always true. Both institutions seek to preserve authoritarian order, but over the past year the latter has exhibited an independent resistance to even half-hearted reforms that surprised the King himself. Not coincidentally, Khasawneh's installment as prime minister coincided with the appointment of a new GID director, General Feisal Shobaki, alongside a royal promise to review the agency's role.

For the Jordanian monarchy, maintaining stability depends on whether it can demobilize East Bank dissent while checking traditional opposition forces. It must accomplish these goals by foreclosing genuine democratic reforms, which would endanger its capacity to command the social policies central to its survival. Herein lays the current paradox of Jordanian politics: the monarchy shall succeed when its government fails.

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Just what does Jordan's Abdullah understand?

By Laurie A. Brand and Fayez Y. Hammad, January 17, 2012

"*Fahimtkum*," meaning "I get it," (literally, "I have understood you") became famous this time last year when then-Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali cynically proclaimed it in a speech, a last ditch effort to convince the Tunisian people that he had heard their discontent and was ready to make serious changes.

In late summer 2011, a new Jordanian political satire taking its name — "*Al`an fahimtkum*" ("Now I understand you") — from the same phrase of Ben Ali's, began running on the stage of the Concord Theatre in Amman. Using the family of a Jordanian of modest means who works as a driver for a government minister, Abu Saqr, the play's successive scenes address a range of the country's current political scandals and woes: from repeated references to the government's questionable sales of state land and assets, to mocking the process by which government ministers are chosen, to raising questions about just who has been sending the *baltajiyyah* (thugs) to beat up protesters at opposition meetings and demonstrations over the past year. In December, demand for tickets increased dramatically after King Abdullah II attended and reportedly much enjoyed the play.

What does this play and its reception, both by the Jordanian public and the palace, indicate regarding the current state of affairs in the kingdom? Concern, indeed, anxiety is widespread and palpable in Jordan these days, not only over the direction of the country and its future stability, but also concerning who is actually making decisions, and what recent developments reveal about possible conflicts between unspecified "centers of power." Awn Shawkat al-Khasawneh, the third prime minister in a year, and a respected international lawyer, has recently taken what appear as bold steps to respond to growing demands for greater accountability. Old scandals thought put to rest have been reopened. For example, there is Casinogate, the project for a gambling complex at the Dead Sea that was signed by an earlier prime minister, Ma`ruf al-Bakhit, without proper government approval. There is also the case of the business tycoon, Khalid Shahin, convicted for bribery in a corruption case regarding the Jordan Petroleum Refinery Company, who was released from prison for a trip abroad for medical treatment only to be spotted in London dining with his family at a fancy restaurant.

However, toward year's end, new "irregularities" came to light on nearly a weekly basis. Most notably was the revelation of the title transfer of thousands of acres of state land to the king's name, which the royal court attempted to explain away as a move simply intended to

avoid cumbersome bureaucratic procedures that could slow down their disposition for development purposes. Khasawneh is also apparently opening investigations into the privatization of numerous state enterprises, cases that are likely to involve at best mismanagement and at worst criminal profit at state expense. While cracking down on corruption has certainly been central among protestors' demands, the way new cases are being announced raises important questions. Is this the beginning of a serious process? Is it an unrepresentative sample of characters intended to serve as sacrificial lambs? Or are we about to witness a period of account settling among various power centers by denouncing certain figures for corruption?

Adding to the sense of uncertainty regarding what is happening and who is responsible, some forces in the regime seem to believe that sending in goon squads to intimidate critics or opponents calling for reform can be accomplished with no trail leading back to them as long as the perpetrators don't wear government-issued uniforms. In the past, behind-the-scenes intimidation by the mukhabarat (internal intelligence) or, more recently, by the baton-wielding Darak (gendarmerie) forces has been used in such situations, generally achieving the desired effect. But for the last several months, some center(s) of power — perhaps from within the security services or, according to other speculation, even the palace, (given the king's special forces background) — have sponsored seemingly unaffiliated baltajiyyah to intimidate opposition meetings and protests. In some cases they have merely attacked peaceful protesters while uniformed state security forces look on. M; more recently, following a march by the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in the northwest town of Mafraq, they upped the ante by setting the MB headquarters on fire. If the intent was to intimidate the Brotherhood, the assault backfired miserably, as Khasawneh responded by returning the influential and charitable Islamic Center Society to Brotherhood control. The Brotherhood responded by organizing a major demonstration in downtown Amman the last Friday of the year featuring a martial display of young demonstrators intended to clearly send the message that it is capable of defending itself against the baltajiyyah if the state is unable or unwilling to provide security.

All of this may seem relatively tame for those who look to Jordan's neighbor to the north and compare the use of force in Syria with that in the Hashemite Kingdom. But Jordan's population is much smaller than Syria's and, superficial appearances notwithstanding, still largely based in tribal structure. In such a setting, the state cannot get away with the use of deadly force, particularly not against an opposition which to date is overwhelmingly composed of Transjordanians, not Jordanians of Palestinian origin.

Hence, recent regime behavior raises many questions. Who within it supports Prime Minister Khasawneh's attempts at reform? Who feels most threatened by demonstrations calling for an end to corruption? Who is making the decisions to send in the thugs, and how long will it take before someone with an ounce of wisdom realizes that such crude attempts at repression, generally by Transjordanians against other Transjordanians, have serious potential to spin out of control? (And can we finally put to rest the tired canard about Jordanians of Palestinian origin being the source of potential unrest or threat to the system?)

King Abdullah apparently enjoyed "Al`an Fahimtkum," smiling throughout the entire production. If so, one can only wonder, has he really understood? Even more important, exactly what is it that he thinks he understands? There is no shortage these days of open and direct criticisms of the king, including references to his inability to understand his people because of his poor Arabic. While the play's critiques all attribute responsibility for the country's problems to "the government," several of its references should have hit home with the monarch personally. In any case, few Jordanians believe corruption stops at the ministerial level. Just as serious, much popular anxiety is a direct result of Jordanians' no longer believing the king has control of the situation or that he is capable of steering Jordan effectively through the current regional and domestic turmoil. Indeed, he is increasingly seen as part of the problem. The palace called for a meeting this past

week with a group of former prime ministers to consult regarding the current situation. If press accounts of the meeting are to be believed, this gathering, the likes of which has not been held for some eight years, served to air myriad criticisms and concerns, including from one former prime minister who reportedly told the king, "Sidi, I have worked in the state bureaucracy for 50 years...frankly, I don't understand what is happening these days, nor do I understand how the affairs of this country are being run."

If the regime — palace, government, and security forces — continues on its current course, the possibilities for more serious instability are real. Given the current murky nature of the alliances of actors involved and the balance of power among them, it is troubling that the gap between what the king has understood and what he needs to understand to manage the current demands for change seems unlikely to narrow; indeed, it threatens to continue to widen as the region enters year two of what long ago stopped feeling anything like an "Arab Spring."

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Identity and corruption in Jordanian politics

By Curtis R. Ryan, February 9, 2012

Former head of Jordanian intelligence Muhammad Dhahabi was detained this week on charges of money laundering and corruption. He wasn't the first. In December, former Amman mayor Omar Maani was arrested on corruption charges. Last month, a young pro-democracy activist from Madaba, Ibrahim Braizat, was arrested and then convicted - in the State Security Court — for setting fire to a banner picturing King Abdullah II. Last week, police arrested the always-controversial former Member of Parliament Ahmad Oweidi al-Abbadi, allegedly for suggesting that Jordan should become a republic.

Each of these arrests has generated considerable discussion, and sent signals about where exactly Jordan is on the barometer of the Arab Spring. While the Maani case was greeted by some in Jordan's reform movement as part of a crackdown on corruption — a key opposition demand — Braizat's two year sentence was met with serious concern, as the state seemed to have come down unusually harshly for what amounted to minor vandalism. As should be expected from those who follow Jordanian politics, the signals are mixed.

The most surprising arrest may have been Dhahabi, the former head of the General Intelligence Department (GID) who has been a controversial political figure since his departure. His detention came just after reports in local websites that he had paid off a network of journalists while he was head of the mukhabarat. These reports have, understandably, sent the entire Jordanian media community into a whirlwind of speculation. But most Jordanian journalists and media analysts that I have talked to over the last 20 years had long assumed mukhabarat links and infiltration in newspapers and other media. The difference this time was the explicit nature of the charges, and the arrest of such an influential political figure.

The arrests suggest a regime reining in not just corruption, but also dissent. As different as the Dhahabi and Abbadi cases are, both men have been accused by their many detractors of fomenting ethnic identity divisions in the kingdom, by actively pushing for a resurgence of conservative East Jordanian nationalism and tribal identities in the face of perceived Palestinian inroads into the levers of power in Jordan.

Abbadi in particular has long been associated with a kind of chauvinist Jordanian nationalist trend, and can be seen as a more polarizing and even marginal or extreme figure. Dhahabi, however, had been head of one of the country's centers of power, the mukhabarat, and is suspected of having paid off journalists to bring down the political career of another controversial figure — former Finance Minister Basem Awadallah. East Jordanian nationalists had particularly despised Awadallah, then a close confidante of the king, as the very archetype of a Palestinian technocratic business mogul in a seat of political power.

There is no question that ethnic identity tensions within Jordan have dramatically increased over the last ten years. This is due, in part, to the severe economic hardships, but also to the kingdom's extreme vulnerability to regional tensions: from Israeli discussions of Jordan as an "alternative homeland" for Palestinians, to war in Iraq and massive Iraqi refugee flows into Jordan (after 2003), and now to fears of complete civil war and even collapse of Syria to the north.

These identity dynamics have been most clear in the strong nativist trend that has emerged to "protect" Jordan for "real Jordanians." This has led to unprecedented levels of criticism of the regime and of the monarchy (including of the king's Palestinian wife, Queen Rania) for allegedly selling Jordan to a Palestinian economic and now increasingly governmental elite. Tensions have abounded in the largely East Jordanian southern cities and towns, and between and among Jordanian tribes. High profile criticism of the monarchy has emerged from tribal leaders and retired military officers, and the latter have now also formed their own political party.

Recent alarmist accounts of Jordanian politics have indeed picked up on these tensions, but they too often mistake the more polarized views of particular Palestinian and East Jordanian political figures for the views of most Jordanians. Jordan is actually a diverse country, and should not be confused with the ethnic caricatures that both Palestinian and East Jordanian chauvinists use for each other. It is not, in short, a country of tribal bigots and disloyal rich Palestinians. Rather, it is predominantly an Arab state with a significant Circassian minority and predominantly a Muslim country with a large Christian minority. Some have tribal backgrounds, but many do not. And regardless of the exclusivist nativist trend supported by some in Jordanian politics today, all Jordanians actually have ties across one or more of the kingdom's borders. Not least among these is the Hashemite royal family (a point often made by former crown prince Hassan). As one Jordanian activist put it, "Just a few years ago, talking identity was blasphemous in progressive circles. Now it's valid. But these are all fabrications. Jordan was a fabrication. All families have roots across borders." While political tensions in Jordan frequently manifest in ethnic, tribal, or identity terms, they are more often than not more deeply about class divisions between rich and poor, and between haves and have-nots. And these cut across ethnic lines.

Still, the violence in Syria has exacerbated these tensions. Even as the regime remains deeply concerned about the implications of the Syrian imbroglio for Jordan's own security and stability, the kingdom's broad-based reform movement has splintered in its responses. The large Islamist movement, based in the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic Action Front, has called for the ouster of the regime of Bashar al-Assad and broken from many secular left opposition parties who have stood by Damascus. Some of the latter parties, originally allied with the Islamists as part of a broad reform coalition in Jordan, now fear that the Arab uprisings have led only to Islamist empowerment and even charge that there is a new "Islamist-American-Zionist" conspiracy to that effect. As one democracy activist told me last month "there is also a certain sense of waiting for what will happen in Syria. It divided the opposition. Some of the

Jordanian opposition backed Bashar, because he and they take an anti-U.S., anti-Israel, and anti-capitalist stance. This includes the old socialist Baathis or Arab left. Their main focus isn't necessarily pro-democracy, but anti-privatization and Jordanian foreign policy." The same activist noted the contradictions in both leftist and Islamist positions, regarding one another. "The secularists are sometimes so terrified that they end up supporting an authoritarian regime, while the Islamist discourse links secularism and liberalism, as though Ben Ali and Mubarak were liberal." An opposition that was already splintering along ethnic identity lines, in other words, is now dividing ideologically as well.

Yet despite the various ethnic and ideological fault lines in Jordanian politics, pro-reform and pro-democracy demonstrators — from the leftist, nationalist, and Islamist parties and also from non-partisan youth movements across the country — have marched and protested against corruption and for reform almost every Friday for more than a year. The Arab uprisings have certainly helped inspire the reform movement, and have also spurred the regime to push through revisions in the constitution and soon in the electoral laws as well. It has also made moves to combat corruption, and the current government is led by a highly regarded former judge, Prime Minister Awn Khasawneh.

Yet the regime's moves are still often met with reserve rather than applause, and with suspicion about motivations rather than praise even for anti-corruption moves that the opposition has demanded. Why is this? The answer is that there remains a profound lack of trust within Jordanian politics, and lack of faith in the regime. This does not mean looming revolution or civil war. Indeed, most Jordanians still support the monarchy, and want it to lead the country to genuine reform.

But the depth of suspicion and lack of faith is apparent in virtually every government move. Does reform really mean reform, or is it more of the cosmetic changes Jordanians have become accustomed to? Are arrests for corruption really arrests for corruption, or signs of political moves against opponents? For Jordanian royalists, these types of questions are maddening. The regime, they argue, can't seem to get any credit no matter what it does. But the lack of faith has, unfortunately, been well earned, and activists interested in genuine political and economic change are no longer interested in promises and plans, but await only actual and demonstrable reform in practice. As usual, there are both promising and alarming signs, and so...they are still left waiting.

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Jordan's "open door" policy for Syrian refugees

By Nicholas Seeley, March 1, 2012

As the battle in Syria continues to escalate, international media is beginning to pick up on the situation of those the fighting has displaced. News outlets are already predicting that Syria's civil war will result in a refugee crisis of "epic" proportions, which will swamp Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan.

Among Syria's neighbors, it is Jordan that has the best reputation for welcoming refugees — its short history has been measured in waves of successive migrations, from the Caucasus, Palestine and Israel (several times), and Iraq. Unlike Lebanon, it is not saturated by Syrian security services, and compared to southeast Turkey in February, the climate is temperate. It is here that one would expect the lion's share of Syrians to flee.

Given the current estimates of those numbers — in the thousands rather than even tens of thousands — epic seems a stretch. What is certain is that the situation is serious, changing rapidly, and appears to be getting worse. For months, Syrians have been fleeing to Jordan in relatively small numbers. A few weeks ago, the feeling among many of the people already working to help refugees in Jordan was that the situation, though it bore watching, was within the capability of local institutions to manage. Today, that feeling is rapidly dissolving.

But so far, the Jordanian government has not put forth much of a strategy for dealing with this crisis, which could evolve in many different ways. Handling the current uncertainty requires learning the lessons of past forced migrations, and in particular of the Iraqi refugee crisis of 2006-2010, which evolved under somewhat similar circumstances.

Jordan's last refugee crisis came about, at least in part, because the Jordanian government and the international community had prepared themselves for the wrong disaster. When the bombs started falling on Baghdad in 2003, everyone expected Jordan's borders to be swamped by tens to hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, demanding sanctuary. When that didn't happen, it was assumed that the danger was over.

No one seemed to predict what came next — the slow, continuous buildup of a displaced population. The border between Iraq and Jordan had long been heavily trafficked, and by 2006 many more Iraqis were entering Jordan than were leaving. Some came on business or vacation and decided to stay until home got safer. Some who already lived in Jordan decided to bring their families. Others fled — often after a kidnapping, or threats of violence against a family member. Many started off able to care for themselves, but months or years in exile, unable to work, ate away at their savings and left them in desperate need.

Today, in a strange sort of déjà vu, the discussion of Syrian displacement appears to center around the same assumption that a "crisis" will mean millions of families trying to cross the border all at once. The first response of the Jordanian government to this worry was to build a camp on the Syrian border. The partially state-owned *Jordan Times* recently ran a photo of a vast paved lot, surrounded by water tanks (it's not clear where you'd pitch a tent on the paved ground), and unnamed officials told the paper two more camps are being planned. But both the government and the Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization, which was put in charge of preparing the camps, have declined to talk about how the camps will be managed, or by whom — or even who is supposed to live in them.

The first camp was meant to open in mid-February, but there is no news of anyone actually using it; displaced Syrians, like the Iraqis before them, are taking up residence in Jordan's cities. It is possible that President Bashar al-Assad's next bombing campaign will indeed trigger an epic mass migration, with tens of thousands crowding Jordan's borders, a situation that might call for camps to house the

large numbers of displaced. But it seems rather more likely that the migration of Syrians will continue in the vein in which it has begun, which resembles the movement of Iraqis in 2006 more than the crowds fleeing the Nakba in 1948.

Syrians still appear to enjoy free entry to Jordan, without need for a visa (though again, the government has declined to clarify its border policies). They settled first in the northern towns of Ramtha and Mafraq, according to the Jordan Health Aid Society (JHAS), a local non-governmental organization (NGO) that provides free medical care at a network of clinics around the country. But as the numbers of the displaced have grown over the past year, (and, perhaps, as housing has become harder to find in Ramtha and Mafraq) many have moved to other cities and towns across the kingdom. JHAS treats Syrians living even in the southern governorates of Kerak and Ma'an.

Some Syrians try to cross into Jordan illegally — perhaps fearing being denied exit by their own government. So far, those who have been caught are temporarily detained at a government "guest house" in the north, until they pay a fee and normalize their status. The only Syrians kept under long-term detention are military defectors, of which the state papers report about 200.

In this situation, for whom is a camp intended? Will the government start sending all new arrivals there? And what about Syrians who are already living in Jordanian cities? Does the government think to move them? Or to provide services in the camps and hope that impoverished Syrians will come on their own?

The mostly likely guess (and it is, at best, a guess) is that the camps are not meant for Syrians at all, but for non-Syrians who might end up fleeing the fighting across borders. Such groups might include Palestinian and Iraqi refugees currently living in Syria, as well as Egyptian and East Asian migrant laborers. (There are plenty of precedents for this; after 2003, Jordan and Syria refused entry to Palestinian and Iranian refugees who were trying to flee Iraq, instead housing them in border camps.)

In the nightmare scenario of massive, sudden displacement, camps are useful; but in another predominantly urban refugee situation, they may turn out to be large white elephants that divert attention away from where the real issue is: the cities.

The second major lesson of the Iraqi displacement is that, particularly in a situation of urban displacement, there needs to be a serious attempt to find out who and how many are among the displaced, at least to an order of magnitude, and what are their needs.

In 2007, the Jordanian government wildly overestimated how many Iraqis needed aid, inflating the numbers aid organizations were seeing — possibly by a factor of between five and 10. Presumably this was a tactic for getting financial assistance from the international community, as use of the inflated numbers went hand-in-hand with requests for financial assistance. And substantial amounts of aid did arrive — perhaps because of the presumed scale of the crisis. But the aid was also delivered quite inefficiently, much of it spent on large infrastructure projects that did little to help displaced Iraqis, or put into programs that didn't reflect the refugees' needs.

Today, the government appears to be doing something similar in terms of its claims about the numbers of Syrians. Jordan's state-owned media continues to headline claims from anonymous official sources that more than 78,000 Syrians have "fled to Jordan" since the beginning of Assad's military crackdown last March.

The state papers are usually careful to caveat those headlines: that 78,000 is the total number of Syrians in Jordan, that they may not all be refugees, and that the number seeking aid is much smaller. But international media outlets often do not pick up on these subtleties of phrasing.

Indiscriminate claims of over 80,000 refugees are certainly misleading. UNHCR, which is allowing vulnerable Syrians to sign up to receive aid, has registered about 4,100 people as of this week. (That's up from just over 3,000 at the beginning of the month, and the agency continues to see

demand from Syrians already in the country who wish to register.) JHAS, which has done interviews with displaced Syrians around Jordan, recently proffered a rough estimate of perhaps 9,000 Syrians in need of aid.

There are many possible explanations for the disparity. Jordan and Syria (much like Jordan and Iraq, once upon a time) share a much-trafficked border. Syrians are always entering and leaving, and at any given time there will be some number of Syrians in the country. Then there are dual nationals, who may reside in Jordan as Jordanians, but use their Syrian passports to cross the border. The government has not responded to numerous requests to explain its figures, but it seems inevitable the state's estimates include large numbers of Syrians or Syrian-Jordanians who are in Jordan for reasons other than "fleeing the fighting," and who should not be considered refugees.

Any attempt to help the Syrians in need would be greatly improved by being based on a more accurate estimate of the number who need assistance, and a better idea of the kind of support they feel they need.

And there do appear to be real, serious needs among displaced Syrians. JHAS's interviews show many refugee families face a catalog of familiar problems: poor housing, limited access to water, and no income. Some have chronic health problems with few treatment options other than from already-crowded charity clinics. Most disturbing, the vast majority of refugees interviewed were from families with few resources and limited education — out of just over 400 adults interviewed, 31 were illiterate, and only a handful had more than a primary education.

The refugees are not allowed to work in Jordan. As was the case for Iraqis before them, some families that are not currently vulnerable may become so if the crisis goes on for years, and they find themselves exhausting their savings. Some may find work in the informal sector — though competition for those jobs will likely only get tougher. Others will remain dependent on aid for their survival. And Jordan is in the middle of a profound economic slump; the urban communities Syrians have settled in are almost universally under-resourced. As the numbers of displaced grow, local schools will face crowding issues, hospitals will be under-staffed, and the Jordanian treasury will be further taxed by the increased consumption of heavily subsidized water, gas, electricity, and consumer goods.

At the moment, a variety of humanitarian organizations are involved in trying to improve the situation. The UNHCR and its partners, including JHAS, have been providing assistance to some displaced Syrians for months. In the cities where Syrians have settled, there are numerous reports of local charities, aid organizations, and private individuals helping provide for the basic needs of the displaced. The Islamic Kitab wa Sunna organization is also dispensing aid. More get involved every day. The UAE Red Crescent has stepped in to help, according to the latest news reports. The government is working on setting up a field hospital in Mafraq to deal with wounded refugees, and the European Commission has offered a few million euros of humanitarian relief.

But if 1,000 or more Syrians continue to register each month (and if that number reflects an ongoing trend in actual arrivals) then those resources will soon prove insufficient. And if there is not enough planning put into the response, the aid provided risks, again, solving the wrong problems, while leaving the real issues faced by the most vulnerable un-addressed.

However, the indicators are not all bad. For one thing, the numbers, though growing, still seem reasonably manageable (though that management could likely be aided both by strategic planning and transparency).

Jordan's is already home to nearly 2 million Palestinians who are classified as refugees, and tens of thousands of Iraqis. In some sense, another refugee population is Jordan's nightmare. In 2006, when unprecedented numbers of Iraqis first began to appear in Jordan, the government seemed to adopt a policy of quietly making life difficult for the visitors, in the hope they would decide to go back home. (Call it self-deportation.) However, this time there have been no reports of such a policy. Though cagy about

its plans, the government has been open to acknowledging the presence of displaced Syrians, and even accepting that some may be "refugees," a word that carries problematic connotations in this context. The government has also been proactive in making it clear Syrian children would have full access to Jordanian schools — though it's not clear how long that commitment will last. (Jordan waffled on school access for Iraqis for years, offering it and then taking it back repeatedly.)

Iraqis were eventually offered access to government hospitals at the same rate as Jordanians; it is not clear if any such offer extends to Syrians. The state press has reported that Syrians will get free medical care but the government has not commented and some NGO sources say those reports are erroneous.

JHAS officials have been able to handle most of the medical needs they are seeing, but this too, is shifting — and officials there worry health access could become a serious problem if the arriving Syrians begin to include large numbers of injured (especially since local hospitals are currently crowded with Libyans in Jordan on aid packages).

And so far, at least, the public response to displaced Syrians appears positive. The state media apparatus has lined up, to the degree it can, with the Syrian people. Government newspapers faithfully cover both reports of violence over the border and anti-Assad protests at home. The overall impression that is conveyed is that the Syrian people are brother Arabs, fighting for liberation against an oppressive government.

But this too could change. In the immediate aftermath of the Iraq war, which was wildly unpopular in Jordan, Iraqi refugees too were widely seen as "brothers," victims of U.S. colonial aggression. Yet, over the next three years, the increasing violence, including an attack on the Jordanian embassy by Iraqi insurgents and a suicide bombing in Iraq by a Jordanian national, set off a series of political crises between the two countries. Growing fears of Iranian influence may have negatively influenced Sunni Jordanians' perception of the Shiites among the refugees. By 2007-2008, Jordanians were very willing to blame a mass influx of Iraqis for all their country's economic woes.

If economic conditions worsen in Jordan (as they well might, given the country's budget problems and the recent crisis over its Egyptian natural gas supply) or if violence in Syria increases and starts to affect Jordanian citizens, attitudes toward Syrians may quickly sour. Already there are tensions between the governments, which could cut either way in terms of public perception.

That the refugee issue is, at the moment, manageable is all the more reason for governments and aid organizations to work together to plan, in a transparent manner, for the most likely eventualities. They should work to ensure that assistance is delivered to those who need it, and that Jordan is able to maintain its "open door" policy, without being made to suffer economic or social consequences in exchange for its generosity.

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The implications of Jordan's new electoral law

By Curtis R. Ryan, April 13, 2012

The government of Prime Minister Awn Khasawneh unveiled its new draft electoral law this week. Promulgated by the government, and then issued by royal decree, the new law now goes to parliament for study and debate. The response has been swift, with the debate occurring not only under the dome of the Jordanian Parliament, but also throughout society — from street discussions, to cafes, to the twitterverse. Political parties in particular have been quick to condemn the new law, with the opposition threatening an electoral boycott that would render the whole process meaningless. Today, activists are participating in major demonstrations protesting the proposed law and commemorating the 23rd anniversary of the 1989 unrest that led to the liberalization process in the first place.

These demonstrations, then, are not new. The kingdom has seen street demonstrations almost every Friday since December 2011 calling for various aspects of reform: combating corruption (especially in the context of the economic privatization process), checks and balances between the branches of government, a more independent judiciary, a reduced role for the mukhabarat in public life, and new more democratic laws on parties and elections. As the winds of change swirl around the region, leaving trails of violence and unrest across almost every Jordanian border, Jordanians themselves have continued to pursue reform rather than revolution. Whether or not that situation takes a more dramatic turn depends on the extent of successful and meaningful reform in the kingdom, with the electoral law as one key piece of the overall puzzle.

Since initiating the political liberalization process in the kingdom in 1989, Jordan has seen many new electoral laws. Almost every parliamentary election is preceded by a new one. The current lower house of parliament, for example, was elected on the basis of the most bizarre system in Jordanian history, including both real and "virtual" electoral districts. Most Jordanians found the system baffling and were happy to see it go. But since then debate has continued on the best parameters for a more democratic electoral system. And indeed the debate over reform in Jordanian politics has ranged far beyond elections. The 2012 electoral law bill is therefore part of a broader package of reforms — including laws on political parties as well as amendments to the constitution.

Previous electoral laws used differing versions of a district plurality system. The 1989 elections, for example, allowed for multiple votes matching the number of representatives in one's electoral district. Elections from 1993 onward switched to a one-person one-vote system, and gradually changed the districts and overall representation, so that from 1989 to the 2010 election, the number of members of parliament (MPs) in the lower house of parliament increased from 80 to 120. Opposition parties have consistently called for revoking the one-person one-vote system, and replacing it either with the earlier multiple vote system, or with proportional representation based on party lists.

As is typical of the overall reform process, the regime responded minimally to opposition demands, but came nowhere near the position of opposition parties and activists. The new law does, however, abandon the one-person one-vote system and it also eliminates any thought of "virtual districts." Further, it provides for an independent electoral commission to oversee the electoral process (which had been especially problematic in the 2007 and 2010 elections).

For the first time, Jordan's proposed new electoral law also provides for a mixed electoral system, in which voters will actually cast three votes — two votes will go to representatives in their multi-member electoral districts while a third vote will go to a party list at the national level. The parliament will expand from 120 to 138 representatives, including 15 seats to be allotted as part of the "women's quota" to ensure women's representation in

parliament. This is an increase from the previous 12 seats.

Another 15 seats (within the overall 138) will be drawn from political parties via a party list system. This is new in modern Jordanian politics, and indeed opposition parties have been demanding party lists and some form of proportional representation (PR) to replace the one-person one-vote system. In a strict and perhaps technical sense, the government has met this wish, but only technically. The parties have consistently demanded either a straight PR system, or a mixed one — with 50 percent of seats each from PR or plurality voting systems. What they got, so far, is 15 out of 138 seats — a far cry from their actual goal. And even within this limited framework, no party is permitted to take more than five seats. Predictably, the Islamist movement has seen this as a dig aimed at them. And also predictably, the opposition parties went on the offensive immediately, spanning the ideological spectrum from leftist parties to the Islamist movement.

The bill remains, however, only a draft piece of legislation, subject to amendment by parliament. So why all the fuss? Surely parliament can make the necessary changes and bring the law more in line with what the pro-reform opposition parties are demanding. Or can it? As many Jordanian activists noted on twitter, the parliament itself may be an obstacle to reform. To be blunt, most (but by no means all) pro-democracy opposition activists are outside of parliament, precisely because of problems with the previous elections and electoral laws. The current parliament was elected in 2010, via the now-infamous virtual district format. Accordingly, in several recent visits to Jordan I heard no end of jokes at the expense of parliament, including multiple plays on the idea of virtual elections having produced a virtual parliament.

But MPs have begun to address the legislation, some voicing support, some criticizing it. Many voiced concern not over the electoral system, but over the ethnic implications of districts, representatives, and the distribution of seats by locality — which can often be read as distribution by ethnicity. Conservative MPs in particular often want to maintain East Jordanian majorities in parliament, while many other activists — both Palestinian and East Jordanian — often call from a more majoritarian and democratic level of representation (which would, in effect, represent a demographic shift toward more Palestinian representation).

Unfortunately, these debates often trigger accusations of disloyalty and unpatriotic motives, not from the regime to its opposition, but rather between and among political elites. In debates that should actually sound familiar to observers of U.S. politics, what one faction sees as essential to fairness and equality, another invariably sees as appeasement of a particular constituency.

Meanwhile, in recent weeks MPs have been embroiled in debates of a very different nature, mainly rejecting assorted other reform efforts. The elected deputies of the lower house, for example, have rejected amendments from the royally-appointed upper house to reform the civil service retirement law. At present, the law provides for retirement pensions for civil servants, naturally; but the controversy concerns whether MPs should receive retirement pensions for life, even if they have served a mere one term or less. The MPs of the lower house disappointed Jordan's reform movement, once again, by rescuing their own pensions from the budgetary chopping block. And this came only days after voting in favor of permanent diplomatic passport privileges for MPs (and therefore against moves to restrict these privileges to sitting ministers, select top officials, and members of the royal family).

This may not be the best body, in short, to make key decisions regarding the future of elections, parties, and governance in Jordan. So while the MPs may indeed tweak the legislation before them, the larger demands for far greater change and far greater reform will actually come from outside parliament — from opposition parties, professional associations, independent activists, and youth movements. Voices favoring greater democratization and reform can be heard in the streets, in the media, in the blogosphere, on twitter, and in public discussion such as the Hashtag Debates.

As much debate as the new law has triggered amongst Jordan's many pro-reform constituencies, political opposition in Jordan has taken a major turn in the last few years by moving beyond just the perennial new electoral law debates. The electoral law matters, to be sure. But opposition forces have rallied over a diverse set of demands that may seem disparate or even muddled to less democratically minded forces in the kingdom, but in actuality represent a fairly clear program. Pro-democracy and pro-reform activists in parliament have at various times called for more checks and balances between the legislature and executive authority (often arguing for a more constitutional monarchy), a more independent judiciary, the release of activists jailed in demonstrations, a reduced role for the mukhabarat in daily life, and an end to corrupt governmental and business practices in the context of the country's longstanding economic privatization program.

The stakes are high regarding all these issues — and of course regarding the electoral law as well — since the new rules will set the stage for new elections and a new parliament, and opposition forces hope (for the first time in modern Jordanian history) to see future governments drawn from parliamentary majorities, rather than by royal appointment. But the stakes are also high in the broader regional sense. As these debates over the nature and parameters of participation in Jordanian governance and public life proceed, the Arab uprisings continue to transform the region. Jordan is by no means immune to these pressures, especially as civil war rages in Syria and tens of thousands of Syrian refugees cross the border into Jordan.

As a recent detailed report by the International Crisis Group suggests, the internal and external pressures for change show no sign of receding. For the regime, these dangerous currents signal a need to be slow and methodical, but for reform activists, they signal a desperate need to move faster, and more thoroughly, in transforming Jordan via reform, before it is too late.

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Jordan's prime ministerial shuffle

By Mohammad Abu Rumman, April 30, 2012

Prime Minister Awn Shawkat al-Khasawneh shocked Jordan on Thursday by suddenly resigning. Jordanian prime ministers typically come and go at the discretion of the king. They are often the last to know of their fate, and passively accept their dismissals until the next time their services might be needed. Khasawneh violated political tradition by submitting his resignation while abroad in Turkey, through one of his ministers, with a language devoid of the traditional praise and reverence. Jordanian monarchs are not accustomed to being curtly dismissed by their hand-chosen government officials.

The king's discomfort with this perceived disrespect, and concern that it might become a rallying point for the opposition, was palpable. He responded with an aggrieved letter that blamed the premier for slowing down the process of reform. The palace hinted that Khasawneh was the obstacle to holding early parliamentary elections because he preferred postponing the elections to 2013. A massive media campaign denouncing the former prime minister has likely been inspired by the palace, which clearly hopes to prevent the opposition from exploiting Khasawneh's resignation to blame the king for the absence

of meaningful reform. It will now fall on the government of the conservative new Prime Minister Fayez Tarawnah to deliver on these reforms... or, more likely, to oversee their continuing failure.

The disagreement between the prime minister and the king had been an open secret among Jordan's political circles and media for some time. The king's defenders felt that Khasawneh was delaying the adoption of important laws, such as: one for a new independent body to oversee elections in a way that would ensure fairness and avoid the lapses that made a catastrophe of the previous elections and a consensual electoral law for conducting the elections to produce a more qualified and representative parliament with a better image, leading to a "parliamentary government" or quasi-parliamentary government that would emerge from the political powers of the parliament.

Khasawneh took office widely seen as a reformist and a liberal politician. He entered government sharply critical of how the country was being managed. He denounced the corruption, and expressed his intention to bring an end to the intervention of the intelligence department into public affairs. He defended the principle of the constitutional "guardianship of the state," and sticking to its mandate. He began a dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood and the opposition, and introduced advanced positions, both intellectually and politically, to the public landscape.

But this impressive rhetoric did not reflect itself on the ground in a tangible way. Reformists felt very disappointed by the PM in the recent days, as he seemed unable to prevent the arrest of a number of political activists, and reports continued to appear exposing abuse and torture in prisons. These were seen as punitive behaviors conducted by various bodies in the state against the activists of the popular movement for what the officials consider an alarming crossing of the traditional red lines, as the protests' slogans mounted up to include explicit and implicit criticism of the Jordanian monarch and his family.

The greatest disappointment was the new election law that the prime minister presented to parliament. The proposed law retains the states' traditional method of designing laws under the pressure of traditional scarecrows, such as the conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood and dwarfing the opposition. Thus the draft was turned down immediately by the opposition parties, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the National Front for Reform, dozens of institutions of civil society, and most of the political forces, all of whom saw it falling short of the least political ambitions, and not likely to fulfill the promise of a parliamentary government after elections. Many were shocked by the prime minister's refusal to withdraw the law from parliament for amendment, in spite of the negative reactions it provoked. Instead, he seemed to be hoping that the controversy would drive the king to the parliament and call for new elections as soon as the law is approved.

Khasawneh's resignation was sparked by the king's decision to extend the current parliamentary session, made while he was on a visit to Turkey. The decision was meant to facilitate the rapid passage of the election law, leading to the dissolution of the parliament and early parliamentary elections. Khasawneh preferred to continue the regular session of parliament until its natural end, which would have delayed the elections until next year. He believed that the new independent commission to oversee voting would need a full year to be able to manage the elections, or at a minimum six months, to ensure that the electoral process would be clean. Perhaps his legal background predisposed him to focus on the UN's standards for such commissions rather than the urgency of the political dynamic, to the dismay of many reformists hoping for speedier change.

What will happen now that Khasawneh has left the stage? Reformists were unpleasantly surprised by the selection of a conservative prime minister, Fayez Tarawneh, to succeed Khasawneh. But some justify this choice by saying that the new PM's tenure will be very short, since his key mission will be the withdrawal of the election law and conducting speedy negotiations about it with the opposition, before sending it again to parliament for approval within a few months. After this, the PM will recommend dissolving the parliament and holding early parliamentary elections, which will require him, according to the new constitutional amendments, to submit his resignation. The second

government will hold the elections and resign in turn to leave the stage for another government after the elections. Thus, we are likely to see two governments until the end of the year or the presumed date of the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Although the task seems clear, it still requires reaching an agreement with the opposition and the various political forces on the required law. This requires the PM to have a great deal of political power and flexibility in order to persuade the opposition to participate. He will have also to include in the deal package — for the first time — the nomination of the anticipated president of the independent commission that will run the next elections. The character of the president of the commission will be an important indicator of the credibility of the reform process.

This political confusion in Jordan is particularly dangerous given the mounting signs of a serious economic crisis. Jordanian ministers who were recently engaged in talks with the World Bank warn that this will be the toughest on the country since 1989, when the upheaval of the south erupted as a result of social protest against corruption and bad economic conditions. There has been growing dissent and unrest across Jordan's south for the past year, with no signs of letting up. The 1989 events led to reviving the Jordanian democratic life and ended with holding the best elections in the history of the country. Will it take another explosion of popular anger like that of 1989 to convince the decision-making circles in Jordan that political reform is the only reliable guarantee for political stability?

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Jordan's new electoral law: reform, reaction, or status quo?

By Curtis R. Ryan, May 24, 2010

Jordan finally unveiled its new electoral system last week, after long months of anxious speculation and promises that the new law — passed after the early dissolution of parliament — would demonstrate the regime's commitment to liberal reforms. Reviews from Jordanian reformists have been devastating, however, with the new law described as everything from "disappointing" to "a disaster." Their dismay is easy to understand. While the new law does make some key changes that reformers were demanding, it is not at all transformative and at most makes some minor adjustments to the status quo. Given the realities of monarchical power within Jordanian politics, however, the details of parliamentary elections are not really the main point. The new law touches upon a much deeper struggle over identity politics within Jordan — an identity politics whose most defiant and demonstrative voice is not at all rooted in the "usual suspects" of Palestinian or Islamist opposition, but rather in the ruling Transjordanian elite itself. Its implications will be felt not only on domestic change in Jordan, but also on the attempts to resolve the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the region.

Like the election laws which came before it, the new law is a temporary measure designed to set the ground rules for the parliamentary elections scheduled for late this fall. This follows the November 2009 dissolution of parliament — two years before the completion of its term. That move was met with surprisingly little opposition, but rather with a certain palpable relief, given the widespread belief across Jordanian society that the parliament was hopelessly ineffective and that corruption had become endemic. The regime has tilted more consistently in a conservative direction over the last few years, essentially siding with the more reactionary traditional elite over the reformers. It periodically provides small elements of reform and change to keep those reformers (and foreign critics) at bay, usually with new slogans and marketing campaigns having more prominence than the actual reforms. As one disappointed reform activist told me recently, the monarchy's "words are with the reformers, but its actions are for the status quo."

When King Abdullah II appointed a new government following the dissolution of parliament, he charged it with producing a new and improved electoral law and carrying forth the reform process. Yet the actual appointments sent different signals. The new deputy prime minister tasked with implementing reform was Rajai Muasher, a vocal opponent of the liberalization and reform process. As prime minister, the king appointed Samir Rifai, scion of a powerful, conservative, and consummate insider family. Indeed Rifai became the fourth member of his family to serve as prime minister since Jordan's independence.

The Rifai government unveiled its new electoral law in anticipation of parliamentary elections this fall. The new law responds to some key reformist demands by adding four more seats specifically in Amman, Irbid, and Zarqa — all major cities with large Palestinian populations and all historically underrepresented in parliament. Also of importance, the regime doubled the quota for women's representation (introduced in the 2007 election) from six to 12 parliamentary seats. The law also maintains the practice of guaranteed representation for key minority groups, with nine seats reserved for Christians and three more for Jordan's Circassian or Cherkess minority.

The law does not, however, address any of the many proposals to strengthen political parties in Jordanian politics. It maintains the one-person, one-vote system — which virtually every reformist trend has called to change since its adoption in 1993 — and eschews any attempt to shift toward proportional representation or party lists. Instead, the law adds more parliamentary seats (from 110 to 120 overall) and changes the current electoral districts to electoral "zones," each of which is broken down into multiple subdistricts. Voters will be able to vote for one

candidate in any subdistrict (within their designated electoral zone) that they choose.

What is noticeably missing, therefore, is implementation of one of the main recommendations of the much-heralded National Agenda of 2005. The National Agenda commission was a broad-based group appointed by the king and charged with creating the architecture for political and economic reform in the kingdom for years to come. Its recommendations had tackled the issue of electoral reform by specifically attempting to curb "tribalism" and instead encourage more nationally oriented parties. It had proposed a gradual shift in the electoral system, maintaining district representation, while also adding elements of proportional representation and party lists. Variations on this general idea have been pushed by key opposition groups as well. Jordan's large Islamist movement, for example, has consistently argued that Jordan's electoral laws are routinely used to dampen the more "natural" strength and support they believe they would enjoy in a fairer system.

Instead, the 2010 elections will be contested in a way that, despite the minor reforms, should minimize the development of political parties and encourage localized rather than national voting. It should also ensure a parliament that is once again largely elected based on tribal linkages, far outweighing whatever strength the democratic opposition is able to muster. And that is, of course, precisely the point. Why? If the regime dissolved parliament because of its alleged dissatisfaction with its conservative tendencies, why create a law which reproduces the same likely outcomes? What, exactly, do the status quo elites who demanded this approach think they are doing?

The answer is that they think they are securing the regime and even the nation against urgent foreign and domestic challenges to the very nature and identity of Jordan as a Hashemite state. The battle over the new election law, like so much in Jordanian politics, is permeated by the demographic and political battles over the role of its citizens of Palestinian origin and the prospects of an eventual Palestinian state. Every move that Israel's far-right government makes seems to dim prospects for a Palestinian state and a two-state solution. This, in turn, has led many in Jordan's largely East Bank or Transjordanian political elite to fear that Israel still intends to resolve its Palestinian problem at Jordanian expense. Jordan's most powerful right-wing elements have therefore mobilized to avoid that outcome at any cost. These fears have even led groups of retired officers to publish unprecedented critiques of perceived government weakness in addressing these concerns.

While Israeli policy has clearly aggravated fears on the Jordanian right, so too has the domestic reform process. Economic liberalization and privatization have empowered Jordan's largely Palestinian business class, alienating many East Bank Jordanian families whose power base had been in large state-run industries. Similarly, political liberalization has provided moderate electoral successes for Jordan's Islamist movement, alarming Jordan's conservative secular elites. Given that Islamist electoral strength is based heavily in urban Palestinian districts, these are actually mutually reinforcing fears. In each case there is a pervasive sense — among reactionary elites at least — that Jordan's real identity is being steadily undermined both from the outside and from within.

Indeed, these status quo elites see destabilization and insecurity everywhere they look: to the west in Israel and Palestine, to the east in Iraq, within the economy as Jordan too is affected by the global downturn, and even in domestic politics as external conflicts have brought terrorism within Jordan itself (in the form of the Amman suicide bombings on Nov. 9, 2005, by al Qaeda in Iraq militants). For these reasons, Jordan's most reactionary elites — with strong bases in the armed forces and intelligence services — are playing ever greater roles in Jordanian politics and producing the duality of considerable moderation in foreign policy, while also pursuing more reactionary policies aimed at minimizing reform at home.

As these identity, policy, and reform debates continue, it is clear that the forces of the status quo have the upper

hand. This is not, however, without cost. Expectations of real and lasting reform were very high a decade ago. Now each great new reform initiative is greeted with disappointment by the general public. The general level of disillusionment can be expected to carry over into the 2010 parliamentary elections, and the regime will therefore get the conservative, traditional, tribalistic, and pro-regime parliament that it wants. But it would be a mistake to underestimate the level of domestic discontent boiling just below the surface, especially as it seems to increase with each new initiative of "reform."

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Jordan's Islamists lose faith in moderation

By Jillian Schwedler, June 15, 2010

Jordan's Islamic Action Front (IAF) party elected centrist moderate Hamzeh Mansour last Saturday as its new secretary-general (the party's highest executive office), hoping to ease conflicts between the self-described "hawks" and "doves" over the direction of the party — the hardliners prefer a more confrontational position toward the Jordanian government and stronger relations with Hamas, while the moderates want to focus on domestic issues while leaving the Palestinian matter to the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood, a.k.a. Hamas. The IAF is now debating whether to boycott the November parliamentary elections, having won only six seats in the 2007 contest amid blatant government manipulation of those results.

What the Jordanian regime should be doing is using Mansour's election as an opportunity to reach out to the IAF and its sister organization, the Muslim Brotherhood. Continuing to alienate Jordan's pro-democratic, moderate Islamist movement (at a time of economic turmoil and while radical Islamists are gaining a toe-hold in the country) is a long-term strategy for disaster. With tensions between Jordan's Palestinian citizens and Transjordanian nationalists at their most heated in decades, King Abdullah needs to take a cue from his father and build bridges to all sectors of its citizenry, not just the security personnel, tribal elites, and economic reformers on whom he has relied.

The IAF's most recent internal conflict began when its shura council met on May 8 to fill the office of shura council president — head of the party's 120-person decision-making body. Moderates stormed out of that session after a heated debate with the hardliners, leading temporary council president Husni Jarrar to adjourn the meeting. The remaining hardliners recognized that they still had a quorum and reconvened the meeting, quickly voting Ali Abu al-Sukkar to the position. The IAF's legal council ruled the vote invalid.

Abu al-Sukkar and the hawks initially refused to accept the legal council's ruling, and Sukkar announced that the shura council would meet a few days later to elect the party's secretary-general and executive officers. That meeting was canceled when the legal council deemed that Sukkar did not have the authority to call the meeting in the first place. A new meeting was scheduled for a week later, but key leaders in the Muslim Brotherhood threatened to resign if a vote went forward. Hammam Said, the Brotherhood's

secretary-general, then threatened resignation if the IAF shura council failed to follow the recommendation of a majority of Brotherhood shura council members to elect hardliner Zaki Bani Irshid as IAF's secretary-general.

A May 29 vote of the IAF shura council saw Sukkar re-elected as council president with 60 votes, beating moderate candidate Adnan Majali's 50 votes. The hardliners seemed to have cemented control of the party, but the date for IAF's secretary-general election was postponed several times as tensions between the doves and hawks reached fever pitch. New elections for the IAF shura council gave the moderates an edge, but discord over the position of secretary-general continued. Only last week a compromise was reached: Irshid agreed to withdraw from the election, as did moderate favorite Salim Falahat; Muslim Brotherhood secretary-general Said promised that the Brotherhood would stop insisting that Bani Irshid be elected to the office. Portrayed by many as a consensus candidate, Mansour was elected.

Jordan's mainstream Islamists have always known internal tensions, notably over whether IAF deputies should continue participating in the parliament once Jordan had signed its peace treaty with Israel in 1994. With few exceptions, those differences have been settled democratically. Hardliners within the Brotherhood and IAF seemed to gain dominance in recent years, especially following the IAF's weak showing amid government manipulation of the 2007 elections. In April, 2008, moderates lost the election for the Brotherhood's secretary-general by a single vote, and moderate Falahat was replaced by Said, a conservative and longtime critic of close engagement with the government. The firebrand Irshid was elected as secretary-general of the IAF, but he was forced out after only one year due to his antagonism over the party's participation in the 2007 parliamentary elections. He was replaced as a temporary measure by Ishaq Farhan, a longtime moderate who had served as both secretary-general and shura council president of the IAF in the 1990s; in the 1970s he held a cabinet portfolio in the government.

Irshid's resignation in spring 2009 took place in a domestic context still marked by the Gaza protests and violent police repression that winter. As those protests escalated in late December, 2008, King Abdullah dismissed General Intelligence Directorate head Muhammad Dhahabi, who had been advocating for closer relations with Hamas. Dhahabi's dismissal was also viewed as the latest rebuke to Jordan's moderate Islamists. The Brotherhood had a relatively close relationship with King Hussein's regime, but with Abdullah's 1999 assent to the throne, those relations steadily soured. As early as 2002, prominent IAF officials complained to me that they could no longer get high-level government officials on the phone. Following the emergence of a real but very small stream of radical Islamists in Jordan since the mid-2000s, the regime should have sought to embrace Jordan's moderate Islamists. Instead, it alienated them, manipulating the 2007 elections to significantly reduce their 17-seat representation in the 2003 assembly. That's why Dhahabi's advocacy for closer relations with Hamas was a conciliatory gesture toward Jordan's mainstream Islamists, and why his dismissal was understood as a message to the movement.

The IAF elections can have three meanings.

First, the choice of Mansour reflects the IAF's effort to heal itself. The moderates have a slight edge over the hardliners — for the moment — but hardliners including Zayoud and Irshid were among the eight elected to the executive committee. While the party's conflicts run deep, it has again sought to resolve those differences by adhering to its formal internal governing practices, which are democratic. Mansour's election was not a foregone conclusion going into last Saturday's poll, and he did not win by a landslide.

Second, Mansour is stressing that the party hasn't decided yet whether or not to participate in the November parliamentary elections and that any decision will be taken by the IAF shura council. The Higher Coordinating Committee of Opposition Parties — of which the IAF is part — is also debating whether or not to boycott the elections. The regime should strive to encourage all political parties to participate in the contest or else the new

assembly's legitimacy will be questionable. If the Islamists do contest the elections, they will limit their candidates to certain sub-districts to improve overall performance in the polls. The new election law added four seats to districts where the movement might be expected to perform well — one each in Irbid and Zarqa, and two in Amman. This creates new possibilities for IAF gains over its current six seats in the assembly, assuming the government allows the poll to be free and fair.

Third, the Jordanian government should view Mansour's election as an opportunity to renew relations with the country's mainstream Islamists. The regime has almost systematically alienated the Muslim Brotherhood and IAF at a time when it should be striving to encourage moderate Islam, not because it can necessarily turn those moderates into full-fledged liberal democrats, but because supporting moderate Islamists can deny radical Islamists the constituency support-base that they need to flourish.

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Post-democratization lessons from the Jordanian "success story"

By Morton Valbjørn, June 15, 2010

The European Union has just released a positive 'ENP Country Progress Report' on Jordan, praising the Kingdom's substantial progress in areas related to political reform, governance, and transparency. According to the EU Ambassador to Jordan Patrick Renault, Jordan is on the right track. The EU is far from alone in presenting the small Hashemite Kingdom as one of the few success-stories in the recent years' efforts in democracy-promotion in the Middle East. In a discussion about democratic reforms in the so-called 'moderate Sunni Arab' states Condoleezza Rice stated that "Jordan is making really great strides in its political evolution." When Barack Obama had a one-to-one dinner with King Abdallah II during his presidential campaign, the story goes that he was so impressed with the visionary and reform-eager young Hashemite ruler that he told him: "Your Majesty, we need to clone you."

But how then to explain that the most recent annual report from Freedom House actually downgraded Jordan to 'not free'? Indeed, by some measures Jordan is today less free than in 1989, when its much-claimed democratic transition began. This does not, however, mean that Jordan's 'transition to nowhere' should be framed as an example of 'failure of democratization.' Instead, Jordan should be seen as an example of a 'liberalizing autocracy': always appearing as being in the midst of a promising reform process, but still always an autocracy. Those in real power are not accountable to their citizens and they do not aim to give up or even share their power. They are only following Lampedusa's old advice that "if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Such liberalizing autocracies should not be perceived as being a transitory state on the road toward democracy, but rather as a distinct and quite resilient kind of authoritarian regime.

Liberalization in such autocracies typically focuses on areas of special concern to international audiences which do not touch the heart of power. One of these areas is the

field of civil-society, to which democracy-promoters have assigned much attention due to the role of NGOs in the Eastern European democratic transition. The King has several times emphasized the importance of a dynamic civil-society and has called on his fellow Jordanians to get involved in the more than 2,000 NGOs. However, this 'civil-society promoting' policy is supplemented by a number of subtle techniques which ensure that NGOs will not turn into a significant political force. These include the 'Law of Societies', which states that NGOs must obtain licenses from the authorities and are moreover not allowed to be political or to 'contradict with the public order'. It also provides authorities with supervisory power over budgets and authority to reject foreign funding. If the deliberately vaguely-stated requirements are not fulfilled, it is possible to dissolve an NGO or put it under administration. This has been the case with Islamic Charity Center Society, which is one of the largest NGOs in Jordan. The board of the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated health and education charity was replaced by the Ministry of Social Development in 2006 based on quite unclear charges about economic irregularities and violations of the bylaws, but the members have so far not been brought to trial. Finally, so-called Royal NGOs, wealthy associations sponsored by members of the royal family, make up nearly 60 percent of Jordan's civil society, crowding out more independent NGOs.

The highly praised economic liberalizations initiated by the King similarly seem to have little to do with democratization. Rather, they represent a 'market first, democracy later...maybe' depoliticization of the public sphere. Selective economic liberalizations have primarily given rise to crony capitalists more concerned about business than democracy. Moreover, anti-corruption campaigns have also been rather selective while independent critics have paid a heavy price for bringing attention to stories about corruption within the elite. When two former Parliamentarians did so, they were convicted for harming Jordan's international reputation and imprisoned. Subsequently they were pardoned by the gracious King, but due to the prison-sentences they had — very conveniently — lost their eligibility to the parliament and the right to form NGOs.

What about the rule of law? Jordan is no arbitrary oriental despotism, but a constitutional monarchy. The powers of the King are defined by the constitution and the citizens are entitled with basic rights. However, the constitution is not only written *by* but also *for* the regime. Thus, the King is given extensive powers without being accountable and a nominal recognition of fundamental civil liberties is often balanced by various exceptions. The King has famously stated that the 'sky is the limit' when it comes to the level of freedom of expression, which is also protected by the constitution. In reality, there are 'red lines' regarding criticism of the King, the royal court, 'friendly nations', or statements that may hurt Jordan's international reputation. Similarly, while Jordan can boast about being the first Arab country with a freedom of information act, the law makes it possible to withhold information concerning 'national security' and due to a very broad interpretation of what this means, critics complain that it has become even more difficult for journalists and citizens to get access.

A reflection of how it often makes more sense speaking of 'rule *by* law' than 'rule *of* law' is the Jordanian election system. On the one hand, Jordan has since 1989 — with a few exceptions — regularly held both local and parliamentary-elections, which from the perspective of democracy-spotters is a promising sign of a democratic transition. While being (almost) spared for simple fraud, these elections have on the other hand been regulated by means of a highly controversial election law. Due to the voting-procedure and the distribution of constituencies, the elections are accused of favoring 'independent' candidates over political parties, rural tribal areas over more regime-critical urban ones and Transjordanians over the Palestinian part of the Jordanian population. Recently, a new election law has been presented. Despite of official statements that it will "ensure fairness and transparency" in the 2010 election, the new election law falls short of recommendations made by a coalition of Jordanian NGOs and parties and some go as far as to describe it as a "declaration of the death of the Kingdom's political reform efforts."

Although the parliament, according to the King, is "a main pillar of political work in Jordan" and it nominally

constitutes the legislative power, it does not hold any political significance and it is marked by surprisingly little political debate. Real politics takes place in the royal court, whereas the parliament is primarily an instrument for the distribution of patronage among loyal supporters of the regime. Thus, 80 percent of Jordanians think that their MPs primarily serve their own financial interests and only 4 percent state that the primary function of the parliament is to legislate and to check the government. If this 'main pillar of political work' becomes too much of an obstacle to the passing of what the regime considers important legislation, the parliament is suspended by the King and the country is then ruled by means of 'temporary laws', which often become permanent. This was the case between 2001 and 2003 and since November, 2009 Jordan has once again been without a parliament.

As real power and politics are situated in the royal court, the role of the government is primarily to implement decisions taken elsewhere. Usually the prime minister and his team are reshuffled once a year as part of a never-ending elite-circulation, where members of the elite revolve between the royal court, the government and the parliament. In this way, the emergence of alternative basis of power with own client-networks is avoided. Their loyalty is at the same time maintained as they remain within the inner-circles with the privileges this implies.

Seen through this lens, it is less puzzling that two decades of reforms have been a 'transition to nowhere'. It also becomes clear why Jordan is not an example of a 'failure of democratization': democratization was never the real intention, so nothing has failed. Rather, the Jordanian story should be grasped as the 'success of (a particular upgraded form of) authoritarianism'. The Hashemite regime has managed not only to stay firmly seated without any significant opposition, but Jordan has also been successful in leaving the impression among international donors, including the EU Commission and the US president apparently, that the country is on the 'right track' toward democracy. Except for smaller episodes of local riots, where police-posts for instance are burned down, this 'transition to nowhere' has — so far at least — not lead to larger social unrest.

This 'success' does however come at a price. It has given rise to a political culture marked by political apathy, widespread cynicism to the official reform-lingo and a disillusion about the possibility of making changes through the official political institutions. The weakening and fragmentation of the Muslim Brotherhood has not strengthened secular political forces as an alternative. Instead, it might have fuelled a Wahhabi-salafist current. Against this background, it is natural to question if Jordan is on the right track and whether King Abdallah II as a Middle Eastern Lampedusa really constitutes such a role-model for the region.

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The revolt of Jordan's military veterans

By Assaf David, June 15, 2010

Last month, Jordan's "National Committee of Military Veterans" published a rare petition directly attacking the monarchy and the Palestinian population of the kingdom. This petition should not be dismissed lightly. This is the first time that an organization representing tens of thousands of military veterans has expressed controversial political views, particularly on such extremely sensitive issues. Crafted by a higher committee of 60 military veterans (including some ex-generals), the document expresses the concern about what they see as moves to solve the Palestinian problem at the expense of Jordan through external pressures to settle the refugees in the kingdom, with the cooperation of "treacherous" elite members.

The permanent settlement of most of the Palestinian refugees in Jordan, a likely scenario in any potential outline of Israeli-Palestinian peace, is a great source of trouble for the regime, as it touches the very heart of its relationship with its Transjordanian backbone. A Wall Street Journal reporter heard from King Abdullah last April that Jordan could not annex the West Bank population since, among other things, "we don't have the water to be able to do so." This phrase was too sensitive to be included in the interview's final version: the Jordanian public opinion is not willing to see a conditioned refusal to this Armageddon scenario. While the challenge posed by the "veterans' uprising" eventually faded, the incident is an ominous sign for the coming phase in regional politics.

The veterans' petition lamented the king's neo-liberal economic policies and directly criticized the appointments of Palestinians to key posts, implying the involvement of Queen Rania in these appointments. The signatories concluded with demands to constitutionalize the disengagement from the West Bank of July 1988; to disenfranchise the entire Palestinian population of the kingdom, whether immediately or subject to the implementation of United Nations Resolution 194 calling for the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes; and that the military be strengthened and prepared to deal with the Zionist threat by adopting guerrilla warfare methods. They also demanded genuine political reforms, curbing corruption and greater authorities to the government and parliament (i.e. less to the palace and other independent power centers). Most of these statements are well known claims of the Transjordanian national movement — an opposition trend with very different implications than the better known challenge posed by the large number of citizens of Palestinian origin.

This was not a sophisticated call for dialogue: it was a straightforward statement of clash. It marked the culmination of a gradual process in recent years, whereby senior army veterans interfere in political matters. In an extraordinary guest appearance in Al Jazeera, the chair of the national committee of veterans stated bluntly that "we want to make clear to the decision-maker that the constitution may not be violated by anyone, whomever he may be," and implied that the fact that the three branches of government are currently headed by non-Transjordanians proves their claims. An interesting discussion ensued between him and Laith Shbeilat, the old time symbol of the Jordanian opposition, on whether Jordanians of Palestinian origin should be at the center of the veterans' arguments or rather Israel is the main target.

The distress and anxiety of the regime were apparent: its old time power base had turned against it. Sympathetic media outlets proudly dubbed the petition "Communiqué No. 1," a term dating back to the officers' revolts in the Arab world. Rumors began to spread that the old-time regime loyalist (and father of the current prime minister) Zaid al-Rifa'i blamed the recently retired Chief of Staff of the army, the senator Khaled al-Sarayreh, and other former politicians and generals, for masterminding the petition. The king paid separate visits to the Rifa'ies and Sarayreh (who reconciled with each other a few days ago). If army generals were indeed part of the scheme, this amounts to

an almost explicit case of a nationalist opposition trickling down to, or coming from, the senior ranks of the military. Up until now it could be no more than an educated guess.

A striking testimony to the regime's predicament is that it was helped by Ahmad Obeidat, the former head of the *Mukhabarat* and Prime Minister, whose relationship with the regime has seen more down's than up's for the past two decades. Obeidat's counter-petition was much sharper with regard to Israel and the peace process, and more moderate with regard to the Palestinian population in the kingdom. It was signed by thousands of people, Transjordanians and Palestinians, including senior figures from the heart of the political, economic and social elite and counter-elite. While the signatories may well have joined Obeidat's petition for the cause of safeguarding national unity rather than for its anti-Israel flavor, the petition is significant nonetheless: it represents the only politically defensible vision uniting the Transjordanians and Palestinian elite: cancellation of the peace agreement with Israel and support for the struggle against it; turning away from Fatah (still bitterly remembered in Jordan for its role in the civil war); and getting closer to Hamas, despite the U.S. position.

The "veterans' uprising" reveals deep undercurrents. One possible scenario is that the regime will slowly drift towards adopting the lowest common denominator among the Transjordanian and Palestinian elite: Israel is the strategic threat for Jordan (the country, if not the regime). As demonstrated in the two petitions, the refugees' factor is clearly a growing concern for both elites, but especially for Transjordanians, regardless of the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The worse news for the regime comes from its traditional power base: Transjordanians will not lose their earned benefits and privileges without a fight. More of these might do for now, but not for the long run. Perhaps it is time for the regime to pay more attention to the growing grievances of the Transjordanians, and to the dangerous development gap between the urban center and the rural periphery in Jordan.

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Jordan's boycott and tomato woes

By Jillian Schwedler and Josh Sowalsky, November 7, 2010

The parliamentary elections slated for Tuesday to replace the body dissolved late last year have not exactly set the kingdom's political life on fire. Some Jordanians will undoubtedly go to the polls to vote. But there is no election fever, and flaccid election campaigns have mostly avoided reference to the Kingdom's political and economic woes. The government launched a massive get-out-the-vote effort to counter widespread apathy, but citizens — if they talk about the elections at all — seem most excited by the possibility of winning a car. Popular support for the boycott now coordinated by the largest political party, the Islamic Action Front, and the smaller leftist Jordanian Popular Unity Party (Wihda) remains uncertain, but the boycott shows that at least some Jordanians are rejecting the charade of democratic elections.

Freedom House downgraded Jordan's rating from "Partly Free" to "Not free" in January, largely due to

King Abdullah II's early dissolution of the last parliament in November 2009. The regime has since been eager to repair its image and signal that Jordan is back on the democratization track. But most Jordanians now view the parliament as more of a tribal assembly than one that represents the citizenry, and a weak turnout at the polls will further challenge the regime's proto-democratic credentials. Outside of elite circles, Jordanians are not talking about the election at all; they are talking about the skyrocketing price of tomatoes, which peaked a few weeks ago at two Jordanian dinars (JD) a kilo, 10 times higher than normal. This vibrant public debate demonstrates that Jordanians can indeed be engaged in politics, but the regime has been unable to capture that energy.

Decisions to participate or boycott in elections offer a window into Jordan's political development. Two decades ago, Jordan was a model for political liberalization in the Arab world. King Hussein called for elections in 1989 in response to riots against unpopular IMF economic reforms. But Jordan paid dearly for refusing to support the United States-led and United Nations-sanctioned coalition to oust Iraqi troops from Kuwait in 1990-91: the United States and several Gulf nations severed aid to the kingdom, and hundreds of thousands of Jordanian migrant workers were sent home. To restore relations with Washington, King Hussein offered his most valuable prize: peace with Israel. Because a treaty would need approval from the parliament, the regime devised a new elections law to return a compliant assembly in 1993; all political groups participated, despite their concerns about the new rules, the opposition's presence declined, and the 1994 Wadi Araba treaty was signed a year later.

Jump to the 1997 elections. The regime made only minor changes to the unpopular elections law, preserving the "sawt wahid" system — one person, one vote — which sounds reasonable but in practice has ensured that local notables and tribal elites have considerable advantages over political parties. Combined with a districting system that under-represents regions with large Palestinian populations, the regime de facto disenfranchised most voices critical of its political and economic policies. This time, a broad coalition of parties launched a boycott, which also condemned changes to the press and publications law that forced some two-dozen political newspapers to close until they could raise substantial amounts of capital required by that law. Supported by two former prime ministers, the boycott captured the reasonable and widespread fear — correct, it turns out — that Jordan was becoming yet another authoritarian state holding meaningless elections.

The 1997 boycott failed to pressure the regime to change the elections law, though the press and publications law was revised after being found unconstitutional by the Court of Cassation in early 1998. From the perspective of the Islamic Action Front, the 1997 boycott was a particular failure, as it saw moderate Islamists isolated from the political system until the next election (which came only in 2003, after King Abdullah postponed elections in 2001). The IAF expelled six party members for violating that boycott by running in the elections. But ironically, the two successful candidates became the Islamists' only connection to the assembly. Having learned that exclusion from the assembly is not desirable, why has the IAF decided to boycott again this year?

Part of the reason is the widely acknowledged (except by the regime) electoral fraud in 2007 — which saw the IAF's 16 seats from the 2003 vote reduced to six seats (with no other party winning any seats at all). In 1997, enough pressure might have forced the regime to restore components of the elections law that provided for real competition, giving political parties a chance to compete against prominent tribal leaders. Today the democratic opening of the early 1990s is a distant memory. IAF leaders were divided on whether to boycott, split along an internal moderate-hardliner fissure that has troubled the IAF party as well as the Muslim Brotherhood for at least two years. Both the IAF and the Brothers polled their membership and nearly 75 percent favored a boycott. Ironically — and not for the first time — Jordan's moderate Islamists engaged in more substantive democratic practices than has the regime. The IAF repeatedly asked the regime to consider substantive revisions that might reintroduce real political competition and dialogue, but to no avail.

A few IAF members have again defied the boycott and registered as candidates. At least seven IAF candidates and three Muslim Brotherhood candidates — the latter also voted to boycott the elections — face expulsion from those organizations. TheIAF/Muslim Brotherhood ban on its members participating has been largely resolute, although one female Islamist running in Jerash, Seham Bani Mustafa, has not yet been threatened with expulsion. Like other Islamist candidates, she has positioned herself on a tribal platform and is hoping to vie for one of the 12 women's quota seats.

The Wihda party launched its boycott independently of the IAF, specifically targeting students and younger voters. Its "Boycotters for Change" campaign has sought to reach Jordanian youths largely through the Internet and a Facebook page, although its visibility in Jordan has been limited to a few small events and newspaper coverage. One boycott event coordinated with the IAF resulted in the arrest of some dozen protesters, although a similar protest outside of parliament this past Saturday ended peacefully even though the governor had denied a permit for the event. The presence of international election monitors likely affected the decision of the security services to exercise restraint.

For its part, the Jordanian government has been struggling to get out the vote, launching its own youth-targeted campaign, "Let's Hear Your Voice." The voice that the government is hearing, however, is not that of a citizenry excited about elections. Save for newspaper articles — which have been consistently enthusiastic about the upcoming poll — few people in Jordan other than candidates and the boycotters are talking about the elections at all. What they *are* talking about is tomatoes.

Jordanians are estimated to consume some 800 tons of tomatoes per day. Prices have soared as a result of both extraordinary summer heat and the spread of an invasive moth, Tuta Absoluta, which likely entered Jordan from Egypt around the end of 2009. This summer's yield was an abysmal 50 percent of average, although fortunately the pest did not spread to the Jordan Valley or to Irbid in the North. The Minister of Agriculture, Mazen Khasawneh, announced renewed efforts to protect uninfected areas and to aid areas hit worst, pledging JD 1.7 million toward the eradication of the pest, JD 350,000 (USD $493,300) this year, and JD 1.35 million (USD $1.9 million) next year. But Jordanians have been less than impressed, as market prices remain high and pesticides are simply too expensive for many farmers.

Despite the tomato shortage, the kingdom has continued to export some 550 tons of tomatoes daily. To meet its domestic needs, it has also been forced to import tomatoes, which many Jordanians imagine to be the very tomatoes the kingdom exported. On October 1, Consumer Protection Society president Mohammad Obeidat called on the Ministry of Agriculture to entirely halt tomato exports in order to lower domestic prices, which are not likely to stabilize until the Jordan River valley crops enter the market in mid-December. Whether or not Jordanians are actually buying back their own tomatoes sent abroad, the pitch of anger and frustration at the government's inability to stabilize prices has led to some of the most vibrant public debates about policy in years.

Indeed, debate is animated not only among newspaper columnists but also in the blogosphere and printed political satire. Since September, Imad Hajjaj'spopular "Mahjoob" comic strip has drawn five references to tomato crisis. One cartoon published October 1 depicts a doctor beside a bandaged and bruised patient. The doctor asks his patient what has happened, and the patient explains that the local produce prices have caused his condition. Another from October 17 depicts two men walking past political banners that appear to advertise large tomatoes, noting the similarity between shopping for tomatoes and politicians. And a cartoon from October 19 juxtaposes a government propagandist and a street tomato seller — the former declaring that the boycotter will be sorry, while the latter suggests that it is the poor who will be sorry. The cartoons reflect both the immense distrust of government and the widening gap between Jordanians and the regime.

Thus as some Jordanians go to the polls next week to elect a new parliament, the regime will be hoping that the spectacle of election day — complete with multiple

international monitoring teams, the first in Jordan's history — will quell domestic discontent while re-earning a "Partly Free" rating from Freedom House. Steadfast in their boycott, Jordan's moderate Islamists are nonetheless concerned about losing what little remaining political power they have; a great deal is riding on their ability to mobilize their sizable constituency to boycott. Looking ahead, the Muslim Brotherhood and Wihda party have announced the formation of a national pro-reform coalition calling for substantive political reforms. Their more radical approach to delegitimizing the newly elected government aims, in part, to demand that the assembly and the regime live up to the promise of the constitution and National Agenda: that Jordan is a constitutional monarchy in which the elected assembly plays a major legislative role. In this sense, the success of the boycott in limiting voter turnout may be a crucial indicator of the potential support for an impending conflict between the regime and this new reform movement.

Meanwhile, the current electoral system — favoring tribal candidates and under-representing a majority of the population — is tearing at the social fabric of Jordanian society, bringing tensions between Jordanians of Palestinian origin and those with East Bank roots to a boiling point. For more than a year, tribal clashes have spread into urban areas where such violence was seldom known. As long as the parliament is viewed as more of a tribal council than a democratic assembly, these tensions are only going to worsen. In this sense the boycott tells us a great deal about how Jordanians see the elections, and perhaps stands as a more authentically democratic political act than participation in meaningless elections. Either way, the deputies elected in Tuesday's poll will undoubtedly enjoy the fruits of their offices, while average Jordanians will once again get stuck with the check.

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The day after tomorrow
Prospects for real electoral reform in Jordan

By Andrew Barwig, November 8, 2010

Last November King Abdullah issued a decree that Jordan's upcoming parliamentary elections should be a "model for transparency, fairness and integrity." As a result, the government has made some noteworthy efforts to comply with the king's instructions. Official voter registration lists have been published, women and urban populations will receive greater representation and, for the first time, international election observers will monitor voting on election day.

On the other hand, the recent electoral campaign has also reaffirmed the salience of identity politics based on patronage. Despite the growth of campaign websites and debates over participation through social networking sites, city streets are littered with posters that underscore the dominance of prominent personalities. Certain tribal-backed candidates have already locked up requisite support while other candidates are relying on family names and pre-existing "vote banks" to carry them to victory.

In election tents across Jordan, politicos of all stripes (including women) are dishing out *mansaf* in hopes of reaching voters' hearts through their stomachs.

Opinions are thus decidedly mixed about the significance of the 2010 parliamentary elections for the liberalization process in Jordan. Although most are skeptical that the Nov. 9 elections will provide an impetus for far-reaching political reform, some have expressed cautious optimism about improvements in administrative procedures. Will a "better election process" lead to electoral reform down the road?

Judging from the stark realities of the current campaign and likely victories for regime loyalists, changes in election administration should not be afforded too much meaning. At the same time, the new electoral framework does not make the elections meaningless.

The Temporary Elections Law for the 2010 elections was unveiled in May and quickly became a lightning rod for criticism across the political spectrum. Reformers were expectedly disappointed that the controversial "one vote" system was maintained while proposed electoral changes from a coalition of organizations were ignored. Surprisingly, a group of military veterans also expressed concern in the form of a public petition. Although the content focused on the status Palestinian refugees in Jordan, the timing was more significant as a warning to the regime over fundamental issues of national identity.

This is not the first time electoral reform efforts have shown deep divides within Jordan's ruling coalition. In 2005, King Abdullah appointed a Royal Committee, comprised of a wide range of forces in the country, to develop a "National Agenda" for reform, including the electoral system. Marwan Muasher, who was former deputy prime minister and headed the committee, wrote about the tug of war that erupted between conservative political elites (who he calls the "old guard") and reformists. He recounted how "all hell broke loose" when the committee began discussion of the electoral law in particular.

Provisions in the new law also threaten to reignite conflicts among ruling elites. Lost amidst the recent hubbub are the sub-districts carved out of existing electoral districts, now labeled "electoral zones." These sub-districts have injected a new dynamic into electoral competition since candidates can only run in, and be elected from, one sub-district. They also narrow the scope of campaign support bases and force candidates to be more localized. As a result, the sub-districts will increase factionalism among pro-government elites and exacerbate conflict within some tribes. How?

Amman's 3rd electoral zone, for example, is divided into five sub-districts. Each will elect one representative from the 17 total registered candidates. This constituency spans some of the capital's most affluent neighborhoods and is known as the "whale" district because it typically features so many political heavyweights. In 2007, the five elected candidates won by comfortable margins with votes distributed somewhat evenly among them. In 2010, four out of the five have staked out a sub-district and will likely win reelection. This coordination has undoubtedly angered other competing candidates who have been left out in the cold. In other key sub-districts across the country, however, prominent candidates are undoubtedly pitted against each other. With Islamists on the sidelines, the electoral system will work against regime supporters, as it did in the 1997 elections with the National Constitutional Party (NCP).

This dynamic is also playing out within some tribes across Jordan. While the gerrymandered constituencies and smaller sub-districts have facilitated internal elections of tribal representatives, they also may accentuate a generational conflict within other tribes. In the 2007 elections, a number of young upstarts brought out support from older members and were elected. While the new electoral law does very little to curb tribalism, recent history suggests that single-member sub-districts may not be able to accommodate tribal representation over the long term.

In January 1984, King Hussein announced a series of by-elections to fill vacancies that had been left in the wake of the parliament's suspension. The defeat of several notables from prominent tribes who were closely connected to the ruling family resulted in considerable dismay. Many

elites called for electoral change and a few tribal leaders even joined an opposition party. In response, the regime crafted a new electoral law in 1986 that included the Block Vote in which voters cast as many votes as there are seats allocated to their constituency. The rationale for the multiple vote system (which was reaffirmed by a small circle of ruling elites before landmark elections in 1989) was to prevent infighting within clans and tribes so as to shore up traditional bases of support. This episode not only demonstrated the influence of a mobilized elite but also the need for inclusive electoral mechanisms that ensure regime supporters win elected office.

In sum, Jordan's monarchy has embarked on a risky course by holding elections under a new framework that exposes cracks within the main pillars of the regime's support. Just as the 1993 amendments that instituted the "one vote" system were extremely consequential for how Jordanians vote, the establishment of sub-districts has dramatically affected how elites and tribes negotiate the boundaries of their electoral influence. The results from Tuesday's elections will reveal the extent to which loyalists competed against each other and how certain pro-regime factions fared. In the aftermath, estranged elites could soon join the chorus of those calling for fundamental electoral reform.

If history is any guide, the temporary election law promulgated this past May could actually spur meaningful reforms — not because of improvements in election procedures — but because elite dissatisfaction and uncertainty associated with single-member sub-districts render the "one vote" system unsustainable.

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Déjà vu all over again? Jordan's 2010 elections

By Curtis R. Ryan, November 15, 2010

On Nov. 9, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan held its sixth round of national parliamentary elections since 1989. Long before Jordanians went to the polls, the elections were immersed in controversy. The new temporary electoral law announced in May had included few changes, and ceded little ground to opposition demands for greater reform. This, in turn, led to the announcement of an electoral boycott organized by the Muslim Brotherhood and its political party affiliate, the Islamic Action Front. As expected, many secular left activists joined their religious right counterparts in calling for a boycott. While the regime organized a vast get-out-the-vote campaign under the slogan "Let us hear your voice," many in the opposition countered with a campaign rejecting the "sawt wahid" or "one voice" system — that is, the "one person, one vote" electoral system that they see as undermining prospects for democratic opposition.

Last week's election gave Jordan-watchers a definite feeling of déjà vu, as the 2010 elections seemed reminiscent of the 1997 campaign, with similar points of tension, similar government and opposition standoff, and similar results. Yet in other ways, election day signaled a déjà vu of a different sort, reminiscent of the 1989 political unrest that triggered the liberalization process in the first place. The violence and unrest which erupted on election day was centered mainly within the very East Jordanian

communities that are usually seen as the bedrock foundations of the Hashemite regime itself.

Jordan's political liberalization process began in 1989 following widespread rioting in response to an IMF austerity program. Riots swept through several towns and cities especially in the south of Jordan, notably in East Bank Jordanian or Transjordanian communities. The regime responded with a revival of national elections for the lower house of the Jordanian parliament. The opposition scored impressive victories that totaled more than half the 80 parliamentary seats, including 34 seats for the Islamist movement. In 1993, the regime altered the electoral laws, shifting to a one-person, one-vote system, with uneven electoral districts, in a successful attempt to limit Islamist representation. Fed up with the process, the Islamist movement and 11 other opposition parties boycotted the 1997 polls.

The opposition returned to participate in the next rounds of elections in 2003 and 2007. Yet in each case there were allegations of vote rigging (the 2007 polls seemed particularly egregious), in addition to the now very familiar list of opposition complaints: the districts are gerrymandered to be uneven and unrepresentative, the voting system keeps political parties weak and marginalized, and even after elections, the government is not drawn from parliament itself, but appointed by the palace. The newest temporary election law addressed none of these concerns. It did expand the quota for women's representation from six to 12 seats, and added several seats in mainly Palestinian urban districts (in Amman, Irbid, and Zarqa). But the core concerns of the democratic opposition — from the secular left to the religious right — were unanswered. Opposition activists vented their anger and frustration, while more reactionary elites made clear that they felt the regime was actually going too far in empowering Palestinians within Jordanian politics.

Perhaps most confusing was the introduction of multiple "sub-districts" within each of Jordan's multi-member electoral districts. Candidates had to select one sub-district to run in, while voters could cast their votes in any of the sub-districts within their designated home districts. This, in turn, created an even more localized politics than usual. In addition to the confusion this seemed to create for voters, it also seemed to instigate ever harsher levels of competition within these micro-constituencies. As Andrew Barwig suggested in a pre-election analysis, "the establishment of sub-districts has dramatically affected how elites and tribes negotiate the boundaries of their electoral influence." Indeed it has. And the resulting dynamics were not only conflictual, but at times even violent.

Jordan's 2010 elections saw violence erupt in numerous towns and cities around the country, including Ajlun, Irbid, Jerash, Ma'an, Mafraq, and Zarqa. But since the opposition maintained a peaceful boycott of the polls, how could there be such dissent and unrest on election day?

As had been the case 21 years ago, the violence did not stem from Palestinian, Leftist, or Islamist opposition, but rather from within ethnic Transjordanian communities. It was, in short, loyalist on loyalist — or royalist on royalist — violence, and almost invariably linked to inter and intra-tribal tensions. And as was the case in 1989, that should be of concern to the regime itself. Incidents such as these have been on the rise in the last few years, as rural tribal disputes have spilled over into larger towns and cities, and this is in addition to the already rising tensions between Palestinian and East Bank Jordanians.

In the 2010 election (as in the last several elections) voters tended to use their sole vote in support of a relative, or member of their clan or tribe. One of the main arguments for multiple votes in multimember constituencies, in fact, was that it allowed voters to cast that more personalized vote, but that it also encouraged voters to then vote for parties, for policies, and for more specific platforms. But since 1993, the voting tendency has been quite the reverse: voting for tribal figures. This phenomenon has become so prevalent that many Jordanians view the parliament itself as a kind of tribal assembly, as though even upscale West Amman has somehow participated in the election of a Jordanian Loya Jirga.

But now, with the introduction of subdistricts, candidates were forced to compete for even smaller slices of the electorate. These in some cases pitted rival tribes against one another, but just as often provoked intra-tribe tensions, often along generational lines. Since tribes tend to organize as voting blocs, each voting group goes into election assuming its vast bloc of voters is assured of victory. Yet all other tribal voting blocs do precisely the same thing...and someone is going to lose. Most acts of violence over the polls emerged as the results were being posted, and supporters of losing candidates claimed fraud, attacking rivals, committing acts of arson, or clashing with the police.

Prime Minister Samir Rifa'i (whose grandfather was Prime Minister during the April 1989 riots) attempted to thwart unrest by allowing for greater transparency than in previous elections. The 2010 polls, for example, allowed for participation by Jordan's own "Civil Coalition for Monitoring the 2010 Jordanian Parliamentary Elections," which deployed more than 1,600 election observers around the country. For the first time, the kingdom also permitted international election observers as well, including the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, among many others. Following the outbursts of violence, the Ministry of Interior posted full elections results (rather than just the winning candidates names), so that the full tallies were clearly visible for every district and sub-district.

Jordan's new parliament, as expected, can be considered overwhelmingly loyalist, tribal, and Transjordanian. At least two-thirds of incoming MP's are newcomers, as even some old loyalists lost to new loyalists. Given the lack of substantive policy debates in the electoral campaigns, the elections instead included fairly innocuous slogans but very large meeting tents, where candidates who could afford to do so dished out ample amounts of Jordan's signature national dish, mensaf, and met with potential voters. Not surprisingly, the winning candidates tended to be either well-connected tribal figures or financially well-endowed business people.

No political party candidate won outside of a special quota seat, and the Left parties in particular felt sidelined by the costs of campaigning, the voting system, and the vote-buying practices of some other candidates. Abla Abu Elbeh, the secretary general of the Hashed Party (Hizb al-Sha'ab al-Dimuqrati) did manage to secure a seat as one of the 12 MP's elected on the women's quota. That quota also saw the election of the first woman from a bedouin district, Myassar al-Sardiyyah of the Northern Badia. Salma al-Rabadi won on the women's quota, adding an extra seat for Christian representation in parliament. Independent Islamist Wafa Bani Mustafa (who defied the Islamist boycott) won a seat in her home district of Jerash. And Reem Badran, daughter of former Prime Minister Mudar Badran, became the first woman to win a seat outright — without the quota — meaning that there will be 13 rather than 12 women in the new Jordanian parliament. In short, while the numbers are small (13 out of 120 members of parliament), Jordan's female MP's comprise a very diverse group, representing very different backgrounds and viewpoints.

In contrast, aside from independent Islamist Wafa Bani Mustafa, Jordan's large Islamist movement will remain unrepresented inside the dome of the Jordanian parliament. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Action Front can, perhaps, claim that their boycott worked, to the extent that it seems to have kept voter turnout low. Even the government's own figures suggest overall turnout was around 53 percent. But the more glaring figures show in the now-familiar discrepancies in turnout between districts. In largely East Jordanian communities like Kerak, turnout was posted at 73 percent, and averaged around 80 percent in the Northern, Central, and Southern Badia (Bedouin) districts. In urban areas with large Palestinian populations, either the boycott or low feelings of efficacy and interest kept turnout down to a mere 33 percent in Zarqa and 34 in Amman itself.

By boycotting the elections, Jordan's large Islamist movement can be counted among the losers at the polls, without even having contested them. They know this. And they knew the risks going in, precisely because of their

boycott experience in 1997. Having boycotted those polls, the Islamist movement found itself outside parliament for several years, and had to find new ways — or perhaps revive old ways — to organize and maintain their own relevance. The Islamists did so largely by refocusing their energies on successfully winning elections to the leadership posts of most of Jordan's professional associations. So they may not have had representation in government, but they did re-emerge through civil society organizations. Since Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood is as old as the Hashemite regime itself, and since it began as a social movement long before creating a political party, this was a natural move, and will be again. In addition, the IAF intends to work with other groups, such as the leftist al-Wihda Party, to maintain an opposition coalition to press for greater reform despite their boycott of the polls.

Most Jordanian Islamists — both moderates and hardliners — agreed with the boycott, while knowing full-well the likely costs. This should make clear just how illegitimate they felt the previous 2007 polls were, how discriminatory they feel the new electoral law is, and also, how ineffectual they believe the parliament itself is. This is a key point not just for the Islamist movement, but also for democratic opposition throughout the kingdom: it's not just about the electoral system; it's also about the legislative system.

Is the parliament just a tribal assembly? Given the diverse nature of Jordan's actual population, clearly it should not be. But it is clear that many Jordanians see the House of Representatives in precisely this way: as a bastion of tribal loyalists competing not for policy but for patronage. This is not just a function of public disaffection with the electoral rules. Rather, it is also a function of the role of parliament. Jordan's royally-appointed governments initiate legislation which they then expect parliament to debate and pass. In short, the executive legislates, and the legislature is then expected to execute those decisions.

Despite the high levels of disagreement, lack of participation, and even violent unrest demonstrated on election day, most Jordanians are still looking for more substantial reform. The state focused on refining the act of voting, by modernizing and computerizing the process, attempting to cut back on electoral fraud (such as forged voter cards) and posting results online. But reformers and opposition figures of all stripes increasingly agree on a set of clear reforms: They want the parliament to be a body that actually legislates. They want government to be drawn from the elected representatives of the people. They want districts that are equal rather than gerrymandered, and many want to see the end of the one person, one vote electoral system. Most of these reforms have already been put forward in various forms — not just in opposition statements — but also in the regime's own "National Agenda" for reform, which was echoed again more recently by the government-created National Center for Human Rights. In short, there is actually considerable consensus on more far-reaching change that would reform and actually stabilize the system.

In the aftermath of the 2010 elections, calls for greater change will grow stronger, not weaker, and will include ever larger numbers of people previously considered loyalist, royalist, and even "tribal" Transjordanians, who have already demonstrated their own disaffection with the electoral process and results. Meanwhile, the regime should at least have the parliament it seemed to want: loyalist, royalist, tribal, and mostly Transjordanian. That also means, however, especially in the context of severe economic hardship in the Kingdom, that it will now be expected to deliver. The patterns of violence on election day and the extent of the boycott suggest that time is of the essence.

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Jordan's troubling new parliament

By Assaf David, January 6, 2011

Recent analysis of Jordan's November parliamentary elections have focused on the odd, sub-district electoral system that further fragmented clans and tribes and resulted in violent clashes between them. While real politics takes place outside the parliament, the 16th parliament is presumed to be "loyalist" due to its overwhelmingly tribal and Transjordanian makeup.

However, a conservative parliament is by no means good news for the regime. The big majority of politically novice MP's render the House rather unpredictable, and the fact that there are very few Islamists and Palestinians in it is of no consequence, since the makeup of the previous parliament was not substantially different and it was still dissolved before the end of its term. Moreover, the new parliament is only part of the political equation, as the new government and senate seem to balance it. Finally, the fact that both traditional as well as Transjordanian opposition circles gradually dismiss the political institutions as irrelevant to the management of social and political conflicts is alarming. The new parliament, which granted the government a record vote of confidence, may be another signal of the demise of the old patterns of state-society relations in the Kingdom and the rise of new, dangerous trends.

Election Day itself was a successful show of fair and transparent electoral procedures and saw reasonable voter turnout. However, a close examination of the figures reveals a different story. As of the date of closing the voters registry, some 2.4 million voters were registered, or 55 percent of the 4.3 million eligible voters. Therefore, while the 1.26 million voters comprised indeed a turnout of 53 percent of registered voters, they amounted to less than 30 percent of all eligible voters in the kingdom. All in all, as few as 473,000 citizens, namely 13 percent of eligible voters, voted in favor of the 120 newly elected MP's. The doubts raised by military veterans on the one hand, and the Muslim Brotherhood on the other hand, regarding the level of representation and even the legitimacy of the new parliament seem, therefore, quite in place.

Two-thirds of Jordan's 16th Parliament are entirely new faces in the Lower House of Representatives. Official sources estimated that about 12 percent of all voters were Palestinian-Jordanians, and rumor has it that the King had expressed distress and disdain about that. The reasons for Palestinians to avoid the elections were the boycott by the Muslim Brotherhood, which has many Palestinian supporters, as well as concern that any contact with Interior Ministry branches for registration may result in citizenship withdrawal. Notably, not only Transjordanians interpreted the demographic makeup of the new parliament as a subtle recognition of Palestinian-Jordanians of their "guest status" in Jordan.

This said, some interesting occurrences could be observed in the "Palestinian" context of the parliamentary elections. First, four residents of Palestinian refugee camps at the center and north of the kingdom were elected to parliament. Interestingly, three of them are official members of the Fatah movement (including one who made a failed attempt at the elections for the sixth general assembly of Fatah in Ramallah). Further, two of the most popular candidates in the elections were of Palestinian origin: Mijhem al-Sqour, who originates from Beesan/Beit-Shean, representing the poor Jordan Valley area (first place in Jordan), and Khalil Attiyeh, a well-known old time Palestinian-Jordanian politician from Amman (second place).

Faisal al-Fayez, formerly Chief of Royal Court and Prime Minister (October 2003-April 2005) was elected as chair of the new Parliament. Spending much time recently denying his future 'appointment' to this position, al-Fayez nonetheless traveled across the kingdom meeting with tribes and asking for their support, as rival candidates gradually withdrew from the race in order to clear the way for him. The Transjordanian opposition considered

this an official appointment by the state, and tied this with the amendments to the Election Law that allowed the regime to strengthen the "divide and rule" practices between the tribes.

With this, the regime completed the intentional breaking of the "Abd al-Hadi branch" of the Majali tribe. The long-time chair of parliament, whose relations with the regime was on a downhill slope in recent years given his strong opposition to the liberal elite, was not only impeached, but three brothers from the competing branch of Majali (that of the late Hazza') were appointed to (or allowed to assume) important political and security positions. It is hard to tell whether these changes in the tribal map of official power centers, and the increasing fragmentation between tribes, will assist the regime in materializing its economic and political strategies. Al-Fayez himself was impeached from the position of Prime Minister in 2005 after colliding with the liberals headed by Dr. Bassem Awadallah.

As is customary following new parliamentary elections, a new government (still headed by Samir al-Rifa'i) was sworn in. The main appointments were for the positions of Deputy Prime Ministers: the two past deputies, senior economic minister Raja'i al-Muasher and the conservative Interior Minister Nayef al-Qadi were removed from office. In their stead, the King's advisor Aiman al-Safadi was appointed deputy prime minister and spokesperson for the government, and Sa'd Hayel al-Srour was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister. The chair of the Lawyers Association was appointed Minister for Parliamentary Affairs and the old time opposition leader Musa al Ma'ayteh remained the Minister of Political Reform. All these counter-balance somewhat the conservatives in the government and parliament. Observers commented that the new composition of the government is in fact a cocktail of liberals and technocrats hailing from several important tribes represented in the new parliament. It appears that inner regime circles estimate or hope that the current composition of the government, especially after the impeachment of al-Muasher, will promote the passing of controversial economic legislation in parliament that met the objection of the previous House.

Notably, the regime took the opportunity to get rid of the powerful al-Qadi, who was too determined to disenfranchise Palestinians, and may have even worked to undermine al-Srour, claiming that the latter sought to naturalize Palestinians so that they can vote for him. For quite some time, the King has been uneasy with the overly broad interpretation of the "decision of disengagement" from the West Bank (1988) and allegedly even instructed al-Qadi to avoid that. As part of the regime's counter pressure against the conservatives, data was published "proving" that very few Jordanian women married foreigners, but these data did not detail the number of Jordanian women who married West Bank Palestinians. In any event, the expectations that the new government take a more moderate line regarding the citizenship of Palestinians seem to materialize. Power brokers in the 16th parliament, headed by the new chair, may play a role in this regard, and some new MP's already declared that they would object to the withdrawal of citizenship from Palestinians.

The new Senate — another common move following parliamentary elections — remains headed by the popular and seasoned politician of Palestinian origin Taher al-Masri. Thirty out of the 60 members of the Upper House are new, while another 28 were members in the last Senate and two others were ministers that were ousted from the government. As a rule, the composition of the Senate constitutes a significant blow to the old elite and the conservatives, and compensation to liberals and Palestinians for their under-representation in the government and parliament. The number of past Prime Ministers declined, and the number of past senior officers from the security establishment, Chiefs of Staff, heads of Mukhabarat and retired generals, was also significantly reduced. Al-Muasher and al-Qadi were not included in the new Senate. Abd al-Majid Dhnebat, the past leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, who is on good terms with the regime, was also included in the Senate composition. He may be facing disciplinary proceedings in the movement, though the likelihood of that is not great at this stage. The fact that the appointed House — also called "the King's Council" — includes many liberals and Palestinians, and

few strong conservatives and senior military and security officials, is a telling one.

The new parliament's record vote of confidence in the government — 111 of the present 119 members of the House (93 percent) — was the subject of bitter jokes in Jordan, portraying the government's embarrassment of the ridiculous vote. Some lamented Jordan's missed opportunity to score a world record as the first constitutional-partisan political system ever to grant a government a unanimous vote of confidence. It appears that most members of parliament were attentive to the state's standpoint that confronting the government means confronting the King himself, and at any rate did not want to jeopardize the allocation of resources to their constituencies. However, this development, too, is an ominous sign to the demise of Jordan's hardly-earned patterns of political bargaining, as it marks an underlying assumption that real conflict management does not take place in parliament anymore. Opposition groups, both old and new, might coalesce (the MB's contacts with military veterans are a good case in point) against the political order or, far worse than that, take their differences to the streets.

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Why Jordan isn't Tunisia

By Laurie A. Brand, January 18, 2011

On Jan. 14, angry over increasing economic hardship in the kingdom, and certainly with their eye on events in Tunis, Jordanian leftists organized a protest march that attracted several hundred demonstrators in downtown Amman. Two days later, a combination of leftist, nationalist and Islamist members of various professional associations held a gathering that attracted several thousand. Those protests have led many observers to focus on the question of whether Tunisia's revolution will spread to the Hashemite Kingdom. There are good reasons to be skeptical, however. Jordan is not Tunisia, and these protests do not likely mean that King Abdullah will follow President Ben Ali into exile.

This is not the first time that Tunisia has paved the way for protests across the region. In November 1987, Ben Ali initiated the first in what became a wave of liberalizations across the Arab world by setting aside the ageing president-for-life Habib Bourguiba and promising a "New Era" of democracy and freedom. If this was a coup from the top, the outbreak of the Palestinian *Intifada* only a month later marked a more radical change in Arab politics, coming from the grassroots and transferring the heart of resistance to Israeli occupation from an armed struggle outside, to a people's revolt of civil resistance, stones and slingshots inside the West Bank and Gaza. Then came the explosion in Algeria, leaving hundreds dead, but also ending more than a quarter century of monopolization of power by the National Liberation Front (FLN). In spring 1989 it was Jordan's turn, as riots triggered by IMF-dictated reductions in petroleum product subsidies exploded in what the Hashemite regime viewed as the heartland of its traditional support and forced the holding of the first relatively free elections since 1956.

The years that followed witnessed the failure or betrayal of all of these experiments in political liberalization or democratization. The Jordanian government, like most of its Arab counterparts, steadily withdrew the early promise of liberalization by manipulating elections and tightly policing dissent. Only now, more than 20 years later, do we witness what could be a new beginning.

An examination of the response in Jordan, however, shows the limits of a potential Tunisian "demonstration effect." Growing instances of societal violence in Jordan have been noted with increasing concern by policymakers and commentators in recent months, many on university campuses among youth from different tribes, but others between the police or the *darak* (gendarmerie) and demonstrators, from port workers to teachers.

But what were their demands? The slogans were a mixture of complaints about prices and dissatisfaction with the current government, led by Prime Minister Samir al-Rifa'i. The problem is that they have the wrong target. In Jordan, it is not the members of the government — the prime minister and those holding portfolios — who set the major policy lines. Policy is made by the king and a small group of advisors who are directly responsible to no one but him. That said, since 1989, when parliamentary elections were resumed in Jordan after a more than 20-year hiatus, the regime has excelled in creating the image of a government (prime minister and cabinet) responsible for all manner of domestic policy and problems, while the king is portrayed as above the fray, intervening only to set aside governments that have not lived up to his or the people's expectations. It has proved a valuable fiction which seems still to have currency with some Jordanians, although it is hard to say how many. In such a political system, what can really change with the replacement of a prime minister, or even a number of key ministers?

As a result, demonstrations calling for the resignation of the Rifa'i government may help let off steam, and the regime's allowing such manifestations may serve to perpetuate the image of a state that allows freedom of expression. But so far, none of the banners or chants has dared to criticize the Hashemite monarchy. Just as

important, given the current balance of forces in the kingdom — particularly the heightened tensions between Transjordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin which complicate the formation of cross communal alliances based on shared economic interests — one should not expect a repetition in Jordan of a critical part of the Tunisian script: that of the national army first refusing to fire on Tunisian protesters and then intervening *to protect* average Tunisians and their property against some elements from the police and security forces.

Such a defection of significant elements of the army is critical in successful revolutions. In Jordan, in the current circumstances one would instead expect the swift and decisive mobilization of a united (and brutal) front — army, *darak* and police — against any and all whose slogans call for an end to the regime of the Bani Hashim. At least in the near term, the demonstrations may continue, but the messages on the banners in Jordan are likely to remain tame, criticizing the government and its policies, but never those who actually rule.

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Don't forget about Jordan
A regime caught between contagion and consent

By Sean Yom, February 2, 2011

King Abdullah of Jordan celebrated his 49th birthday this past Sunday, and his reign turns 12 years old on Feb. 7. Neither anniversary could fall at a more unpropitious time. As popular protests roil the Middle East, with Tunisia's dictatorial incumbent ousted and another in Egypt on the way out, observers have wondered whether the Hashemite Kingdom will be the next to catch revolutionary fever. With Jordan's lively blogosphere and independent press insinuating about the "contagion" effect, the monarchy has also been squeezed by its increasing inability to extract consent. For several weeks, weekend protests have punctuated urban life, with thousands of demonstrators cheering the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts while demanding the dismissal of the king's cabinet led by Samir al-Rifai — a Harvard-educated technocrat from a prominent East Bank family. Yesterday, they finally received their wish. In an ironic twist of history, Abdullah dismissed Rifai, mirroring his father Hussein's sacking of Rifai's father, Zeid, from the premiership in response to rioting in April 1989. He brought Marouf al-Bakhit, a career military officer who previously served a two-year stint as prime minister, back to office.

The Hashemite monarchy now faces an extraordinary challenge. Though the U.S. media has focused on the drama of nearby revolutions, the absence of Anderson Cooper in Amman should not connote that Jordan matters any less to U.S. foreign policy. Indeed, the fate of its pro-Western regime holds more consequences for American interests than any Arab state not named Egypt and Saudi Arabia — something better ruminated now than at the eleventh hour.

The kingdom is Israel's other peace partner and remains the keystone to a two-state Palestinian solution. It reliably backs American initiatives, from the invasion of Iraq to the anti-Iranian containment strategy. Its intelligence services have provided vital services during the war on terror, something rarely exposed. In return, Jordan has received enormous economic and military aid from Washington, reaping

more than $7 billion since 2000 and enjoying $660 million in annual support through 2013. It has also welcomed democracy-promotion programs, a contradiction that begs scrutiny. Above all comes diplomatic intimacy: It surprised few that King Abdullah was the first Arab leader to visit President Obama in April 2009.

The Hashemite regime has been in full-crisis mode for weeks, but its economic problems are long-standing. Despite pursuing market liberalization in the 2000s, which envisages converting the public-sector-dominated economy into an investment-friendly haven for technology and services, there are not enough viable jobs. More than two-thirds of the unemployed are under 30, and more than half of these jobless have university degrees. In addition, middle- and lower-income households — the social classes at the heart of the Arab world's mobilizational wave — have chafed at heightening living costs, with inflation in 2010 hitting more than 6 percent. Already facing a huge fiscal deficit, the bloated state can do little more. It pays $4.7 billion annually to nearly 800,000 public employees and pensioners, alongside nearly $1.4 billion for subsidies on goods and housing — which will devour this year's $8.5 billion budget.

Yet it was the November elections that catalyzed the current opposition upsurge. The 2007 parliamentary contest saw representation for the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front Party, the leading opposition force, fall from 17 to 6 seats due to significant fraud. That experience helped hawks ascend to leadership positions in the MB and IAF, raising the stakes in their democratic reform demands. The November 2009 dissolution of parliament marked a potential turning point, as the king was able to promote Rifai to push through economic liberalization measures while recalculating its strategy for the next elections.

The chosen strategy backfired. Last May, the much-anticipated royal reformulation of the Elections Law drew instant criticism. Though it enhanced female representation, untouched were the perverse SNTV balloting system and district malapportionment, which both Islamists and secular reformists — such as Marwan Muasher's 2005 National Agenda Report — had recommended overturning. More troubling was a new "subdistricting" statute, a complicated maneuver that reinforced the predominance of conservative candidates like tribal elders, wealthy businessmen, and service deputies. Little wonder that the IAF boycotted the hollow contest, a decision made with nearly 75 percent support of its membership. Further, the fact that just one quarter of mostly Palestinian Amman bothered to vote gives good reason to weigh the claim by Hamzeh Mansour, IAF secretary-general, that national turnout did not exceed 30 percent. Even if the official 53 percent tally was cooked to minimize the boycott's impact, consider the implication: It means one out of every two "non-Islamist" voters stayed home on Nov. 9, despite the months of glitzy marketing campaigns urging mass participation.

How did the Rifai government collapse so quickly? The first sign of trouble came when the new parliament presented its Christmas gift, providing a record 111 votes of confidence for the cabinet. Despite the quick passage of a $169 million subsidy measure to lower fuel and food prices, Friday, Jan, 14, saw protest marches in Amman and smaller cities like Irbid, Zarqa, and Karak. This "day of anger" did not evoke hard-line demands, as demonstrators channeled their frustrations about the lack of economic and political opportunities on parliament while avoiding attacks on the monarchy. Neither were they violent. The most pertinent fact instead was the participants' diversity. With the IAF and the professional associations holding a Sunday protest, the Friday marches drew a variety of Palestinians and East Bankers, including leftist activists, urban professionals, university students, military retirees, and civil pensioners. Two days later, the IAF led its parliamentary sit-in, with protesters targeting the high cost of living and reiterating demands to sack Rifai and dissolve parliament.

The last few weeks reveal a spiral of concessions followed by countermobilization. The Jan. 20 passage of a $422 million package of more subsidies and civil salary raises could not obscure statements made days earlier by Mansour, who suggested that the prime minister needed to be elected rather than appointed by the king — an affront to the palace's authoritarian supremacy, though still one that fell short of attacking its legitimacy. The following two

Fridays saw the continuation of this informal opposition coalition, with the IAF vowing to continue leading the peaceful rallies. Multiple charm offensives, including a campaign by Rifai to reach out to opposition groups and personal visits by the king to poorer constituencies, did little to palliate the fury. Neither did last week's royal chastising of parliament to explore the possibility of more political reforms; as many Jordanians note, the legislature has little independent authority and could not undermine royal power if it tried. Reforms originate from the palace.

It is thus tempting to see the cabinet dismissal as an embarrassing concession, especially in light of other regional events. The IAF had begun dialoguing with the government days earlier, so perhaps this could commence the process of winning back their support and returning them into the fold. The protesters had also embraced the Tunisian and Egyptian revolts enthusiastically, a worrying fact that weighed on a special security committee convened by the king. The smart money, however, is to see the regime's move as strategic.

Rifai's dismissal is not unprecedented. Prime Ministers are the shock absorbers for the palace; during bad times, they draw popular fire while the king maintains a safe distance, acting as deus ex machina to reboot the system as necessary by shuffling governments or calling for elections. The Rifai clan knows this all too well. Samir also suffered from the curse of privilege during a time of austerity. The scion of a wealthy East Bank dynasty, he represents an elite political class that no longer resonates with lower-income East Bank and tribal Jordanians who have become dislocated under the kingdom's neoliberal putsch. Signs of friction between the palace and these historical pillars of loyalty surfaced in recent years; former ministers publicly lambasted the government's privatization efforts several years ago, and military veterans last summer ridiculed the influx of Palestinian technocrats and businessmen into the state.

Rifai's fall sends a subtle hint to the opposition that the regime's tolerance for further dissent is running short. Abdullah previously anointed Marouf Bakhit after the November 2005 Amman hotel bombings, and the next two years saw the imposition of new draconian constraints on public life, such as regulations that eviscerated legal opposition parties and slapped new press restrictions. The ignominious 2007 elections unfolded at the end of his tenure. Further, given his tribal background, Bakhit's return sends a reassuring signal to East Bankers: By his own words, he is one of them — a fellow son of the military, the bedrock of the Jordanian state.

Laurie Brand is right. Because even sustained protests transmit their rage against cabinets and parliaments rather than the throne, it is unlikely that today's opposition will morph into the massive revolts that toppled Ben Ali in Tunisia and are now encaging Mubarak in Egypt. Further, even ardent critics grudgingly concede a measure of respect for the Hashemite dynasty as a historical institution. They frame their democratic ambitions in gradualist rather than radical overtones; few insist that the king suddenly abdicate power. This is for good reason: The Jordanian monarchy is no house of thuggery. It refused to enact violent crackdowns against the peaceful marches because it plays chess, not checkers. It knows when to dialogue with dissenting groups and when to suppress them, when to mollify irked supporters and when to neglect them.

Yet the persistence of this autocracy does not guarantee internal stability. Caught between the chiliastic winds of regional contagion and the task of extracting consent from reluctant citizens, the Hashemite monarchy needs to start considering real reforms in order to foreclose future opposition. Bakhit's reappointment at prime minister is neither a meaningful concession nor a positive portent; further Friday protests have been promised. The real solution is to re-engage its citizens on issues that matter. It could start with the one systemic flaw that triggered this winter's crosscutting discontent — the stagnant electoral system, which has long resulted in parliaments that have little incentive to clash with the palace and generate meaningful debates. The palace cannot control the global economy, but it can reconfigure its institutions. How many happy anniversaries it celebrates in the future will depend on how it responds to this gauntlet.

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Jordan's stubborn regime hangs in the balance

By Sean Yom, March 31, 2011

The Hashemite regime of Jordan is running out of time. Last Friday, a 2,000-strong opposition gathering in Amman dissolved into a spectacle of violence, leaving one dead and over a hundred injured. Although described by the Western media as the country's first repressive crackdown during this winter of discontent, the reality is more complex — and more unsettling. Opposition activists infused by a new youth movement assembled near the Interior Ministry to vocalize a familiar chorus of democratic demands. Hundreds of armed government loyalists counter-rallied, cursing their fellow citizens and bombarding them with rocks. The street police were complicit in the breakdown of order until special *darak* riot forces began assaulting activists outright, allegedly using tear gas and then water cannons. Alongside many loyalists, they cheered and marched after "liberating" the circle from the reformist encampment.

This day of violence encapsulated all that has gone wrong since popular protests began three months ago: reform demands falling on deaf ears, apathy by agents of the state, brutality by government proxies. Above all, it exposed the bankruptcy of this authoritarian regime's strategy of coping with the current opposition upsurge by furnishing vague promises of gradual reform while quietly manipulating social divisions from within. It failed in the first but is beginning to succeed in the second, creating a dangerous political climate that could result in further violence. The crisis will end when King Abdullah provides a *credible* commitment to reform — one that goes beyond hollow invitations to dialogue and instead furnishes a concrete timetable for change. Yet to do that would require the palace to reverse its stubborn stance, something that might well demand U.S. involvement.

How did Jordan come to this? While Tunisia and Egypt roiled in rage, Western observers insisted that the kingdom would right itself, for citizens here venerated the Hashemite crown and preferred moderate change. But the persistence of public protests has problematized such narratives. Starting in mid-January, weekly demonstrations drew thousands of frustrated Jordanians onto the streets over the rising cost of living, November's toothless parliamentary elections, and political corruption. The protesters represent not only the Muslim Brotherhood, professional associations, and leftist parties — long-standing groups in which the Palestinian majority is well represented — but also East Bank tribesmen, military retirees, and civil pensioners, more conservative forces that the palace never predicted it would need to pacify. The youth movement that spearheaded last Friday's assembly, the March 24 Shabab, also reveals profound dissatisfaction within the kingdom's largest demographic: More than two-thirds of the population is under 30.

However, the regime has repeatedly squandered opportunities to defuse such burgeoning criticism. In February, King Abdullah dismissed his unpopular cabinet and charged new Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit with formulating democratic reforms. Yet many activists saw the return of Bakhit, a consummate military hand and Hashemite retainer, as an insult, recalling the security restrictions that typified his first premiership in the mid-2000s. Equivocal pledges to review the Elections Law, extirpate corruption, and pursue other changes lacked any benchmark for resolution. In mid-March, the king anointed a 52-member National Dialogue Committee to explore options for restructuring government, but the consultative group excluded representation from youth activists and received no guarantee that its recommendations would be ratified. Sensing a repeat of the ill-fated 2005 National Agenda, 22 members have resigned.

The king and his men have hence miscalculated how to deal with a wave of public dissent that lacks any ideological foundation and instead revolves around a shared understanding that the current autocratic political system is neither transparent nor fair. Months of resistance from

above combined with Friday's infighting has catalyzed deepening frustration from various constituencies. Some tribes petitioned the palace to resolve its crisis of governance and make good on its reform vows, pointedly reminding the king that they are abnaa al-watan — sons of the homeland. Other tribes have embraced the cause of March 24 Shabab, noting that they contributed many of its young activists. Hundreds of political elites, including the king's uncle, Prince Hassan, and former Prime Minister Ahmad Obeidat, demanded that the government take responsibility for the violence. Student activists now insist that the , the ever-present General Intelligence Directorate, halt its inference in civil society. And Islamists and secular activists alike are openly discussing the merits of constitutional monarchy by first removing the king's prerogative of appointing prime ministers — a radical idea unthinkable just years ago.

That the regime has missed the reform boat is bad enough. However, the current crisis also stems from its equally precarious tactic of exploiting social tensions in hopes of fragmenting popular pressure. Government officials have excavated long-standing fears with their East Bank and tribal allies that rapid political change would allow the Palestinian majority to dominate Jordan's national identity. Similarly, Bakhit incredibly blamed the Islamists for recent disturbances, suggesting that they had been taking orders from Syria.

Further, just days after lifting security restrictions against public gatherings in mid-February, a move presented as a concession, officials idly watched as pro-government protests began shadowing opposition marches. Over the past month, the rapid countermobilization of loyalist demonstrations across the country has not only made public spaces more contentious — it has destroyed the middle ground. Reformists are portrayed as traitors to Jordan, enemies of the king, and Palestinian to boot — extreme rhetoric that precipitated Friday's clashes and shows no signs of abating.

In addition, the progressively uncertain domestic security environment reflects official complicity, if not outright manipulation. Activists began complaining about the lack of police protection from knife-wielding, pro-government demonstrators more than a month ago, while the darak riot forces secured their atrocious reputation after Friday. Although Bakhit blamed such acts as failures of errant officers, Obeidat (himself a former GID chief) has countered that given the reach of the mukhabarat, police collaboration with loyalist attacks could not have occurred without government knowledge.

This is state repression by other means, which journalists know all too well. Threatening phone calls, complaints that foreign reporters fabricate stories, critical news websites mysteriously hacked — these are recent signs that the regime fears that journalists will stop practicing the self-censorship that has long restrained public debate. It has good reason to worry: When over 200 reporters protested for broader press freedoms in early March, leading the charge were staffers from *al-Rai* newspaper, the state-owned daily.

The Jordanian regime now faces a crucial juncture. Bloggers and journalists warn of the possibility of civil conflict unless the palace shifts course and negotiates with, rather than patronizes, its critics. However, King Abdullah has only offered another open-ended promise for considering reforms through the National Dialogue Committee, whose remaining members are bitterly arguing whether to take the king's word seriously anymore. Bakhit seems to be in little danger of losing his job, and parliament has predictably rejected any initiative to review, much less curtail, the crown's constitutional supremacy. At the same time, pro-government loyalists will assuredly attack opposition groups again, who now have little incentive to moderate their position and put faith in dialogue. The March 24 Shabab have already promised to return to the streets this Friday, heightening social tensions. If they are assaulted once again, tragedy could ensue.

Here, Barack Obama's administration can play a vital role in nudging Abdullah toward a constructive solution, one that begins with demobilizing the more rapacious pro-government thugs and ends with a shared reform

timetable that includes major opposition forces and explicitly lays out which, how, and when major political changes will occur. Such credible compromises could convince opposition activists to take dialogue seriously and thereafter achieve immediate progress on issues with broad appeal, such as reconfiguring the Elections Law and reducing state corruption, before tackling thornier issues like the constitutional scope of parliamentary authority.

Washington has both the leverage and interests to make that push. Jordan remains one of the most voracious consumers of American economic and military aid in the world. Key policy principals have visited Amman several times in the past two months; Secretary of Defense Robert Gates's brief visit last week coincidentally overlapped with Friday's violence. Moreover, given that few policymakers would enjoy watching revolutionary paralysis unfold on Israel's strategic East flank, there is universal consensus that the Hashemite Kingdom must remain stable. The next step is realizing that such stability will now only come with meaningful democratic reforms.

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The King's Speech

By Curtis R. Ryan, June 15, 2011

On Tuesday, King Abdullah II of Jordan delivered a rare televised address announcing a wide range of planned political reforms. He outlined plans to have governments selected by parliamentary majority rather than by monarchical appointment, and to strengthen political parties. The next day, however, as Abdullah toured the southern city of Tafila, he was reportedly bombarded with stones and empty bottles.

The king's reform initiative and the stories about his rough welcome in a traditional Hashemite stronghold highlight that Jordan has not been immune from the Arab spring. It has been affected by the Arab uprisings deeply. Jordanians have been demonstrating for months, calling for the ouster of the government. But unlike their Tunisian and Egyptian counterparts, the Jordanian demonstrators aimed their anger mainly at the appointed government of Prime Minister Samir al-Rifa'i, leading an alarmed monarchy to dismiss the entire cabinet.

Today, the calls for change in Jordan remain extensive and persistent, and they have come from almost every direction. Even the most pro-Hashemite constituencies have repeatedly challenged the king in various ways. Retired military officers have called for change while condemning the regime's policy priorities, tribal leaders have railed against the allegedly intrusive role of Queen Rania herself — even going so far as comparing her to deposed first ladies Leila Tarabulsi and Suzanne Mubarak. The main question is simply to what extent the monarchy realizes this.

The image of the royal motorcade being welcomed with flying objects contrasted with the previous several days of national (but mainly royal) celebrations marking the anniversary of the Great Arab Revolt, Army Day, and Coronation Day. Thousands of cheering rural residents were bused to parade locations to celebrate as the royal motorcade passed by. The carefully orchestrated celebrations suggested that the king and the monarchy were not only secure but wildly popular. A more accurate

read would require separating the two terms: the king is not popular with many Jordanians these days, yet most Jordanians continue to support the monarchy.

Public questioning now crosses red lines that would have been unthinkable under King Hussein. But for King Abdullah, as one Jordanian analyst noted "all his choices are contested; his choice of prime minister, his choice of crown prince, his choice of wife. All are contested." The monarchy should be concerned, because it is actually hard to find a Jordanian that is satisfied with the status quo right now. When I made these very observations to members of the soon-to-be-dismissed Rifa'i government in December 2010, I was assured that I was mistaken. The government had a comprehensive reform plan and people just needed to be patient.

Within weeks, patience clearly exhausted, Jordanians were in the streets. But the king then replaced a government largely of Neoliberal technocrats with a more old guard elite that had strong tribal and East Jordanian roots, ties to the security services, and virtually no record of commitment to reform. The monarchy also launched yet another round of national committees of various notables to reassess the laws on elections, parties, the judiciary, and the constitution itself.

Buoyed by their success in toppling the government, protesters continued Friday demonstrations, calling for an end to perceived endemic corruption and for greater inclusion, democratization, and the return to a more constitutional monarchy with more checks and balances.

Organized online as the March 24 movement, Jordanian democracy and reform activists gathered at the Ministry of Interior Circle for perhaps their most important demonstration yet. Despite the presence mainly of red checked East Jordanian *keffiyehs*, Hashemite and Jordanian nationalist songs, and a clearly peaceful protest, the demonstrators were attacked on March 25 by *bultajiyya,* or thugs who appear to have been bused into the city. Calling themselves the "Da'wa al-Watan" (Call of the Nation) and believing they were saving the monarchy from "Palestinian" revolutionaries who were "occupying" their capital, they stormed the peaceful demonstration, leading to the death of one participant.

Similarly, on May 15, at demonstrations in the Jordan valley for the Palestinian right of return, still-unknown assailants in civilian clothes opened fire on the gathering of activists. Twenty-one-year-old Jalal al-Ashqar was shot in the back and rushed to the hospital in critical condition. Jordan has had no central tragic figure, such as the late Khalid Said of Egypt, to rally their anger around. But many in both government and opposition watched closely the prognosis for al-Ashqar. Prime Minister Bakhit visited the young man, assuring his family that the state would pay all medical expenses.

More recently, in June 2011, the *bultajiyya* issue returned as thugs attacked the offices of Agence France Presse and threatened well-known veteran journalist Randa Habib, perhaps because of reporting on the Tafila incident. In each of these cases, countless Jordanians remarked to me just how distinctly un-Jordanian these incidents seemed. Indeed, each seemed like the kind of news one associated with some of Jordan's neighbors, rather than with Jordan itself.

Despite such incidents, most Jordanians remained strongly in favor of reform rather than regime change. Meanwhile, outside Jordan, the extreme violence of the latter round of Arab uprisings — in Libya, Yemen, and especially Syria — may actually have helped the Hashemite monarchy, since no Jordanian wants to see their country take those routes. It bought the monarchy at least some more time, and most Jordanians seemed willing to give the king a chance to join and even lead reform.

In his June 12 speech to the nation, King Abdullah II once again decried disunity, *fitna*, and irresponsible media reporting. But the king also called for strengthening the party system and shifting from governments that are royally-appointed to those that are drawn from the majority bloc in a democratically elected parliament. If the latter idea is indeed implemented, it meets a major demand across the opposition spectrum. But the new

electoral laws themselves can still be expected to minimize representation for leftist and Islamist activists, so in practice the new governments may actually have a familiar feel. Almost every Jordanian I talked to had a conditional response to the proposal of democratically-elected governments. As one activist put it, summarizing the general view, "it's a good idea ... if it happens;" because the speech omitted any timetable for implementing this key opposition demand.

If the king had made this exact speech three years ago, the response might even have been enthusiastic. It might have been seen as path-breaking. But the muffled response suggests a more pervasive pessimism that has been well-earned. Even before the speech, every Jordanian I met with expected to be disappointed. Jordan's liberalization process began in 1989, not in 2011, and since its beginnings has seen countless retreats from reform, new royal committees, cabinet reshuffles, slogans and marketing campaigns. As one opposition activist put it, "the whole region is moving at high speed like a BMW while we are riding donkeys: ... *donkeys*, not even horses."

If the king's call for reform is genuine, then it will require some immediate and clear signs of implementation. Otherwise, it will be dismissed as still more cosmetic reform. But regardless of the regime, the spirit of 2011 across the Arab world remains a major point of departure for the Jordanian public. It has seen the rise of extensive levels of youth activism, both in the streets and in cyberspace, from blogs to Twitter to Facebook groups. It has seen a revitalization of old political movements, from leftist parties to the more well-organized Muslim Brotherhood and its party, the Islamic Action Front (but interestingly none of these seem to be of interest to Jordan's energized youth). It has seen a rise in public sphere discussions on virtually all topics, in cyberspace, in print, and in person, such as the impressive Hashtag Debates organized by youth activists.

The constituency for real reform, in short, stretches across Jordan's generation, class, ethnic, and gender divides. But it continues to be thwarted by entrenched anti-reform elites. As former Jordanian government official Marwan Muasher noted in a recent Carnegie Endowment report, "the political elite must recognize that the only way they can retain power is by sharing it, and governments will have to acknowledge that substituting serious implementation with reform rhetoric fools no one." Exactly. Jordanians have one of the most literate and well-educated populations in the entire Arab world, so if old authoritarian tactics seem to work less and less well across the region, they can be expected to be even more useless in Jordan. If the regime takes that point to heart, then Jordan will provide a very different and very positive model for reform in the region. If not, then calls for regime change will soon arrive in Jordan too.

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Jordan Goes Morocco

By Sean Yom, August, 19, 2011

Jordan unveiled a package of constitutional amendments last Sunday which offered the most drastic overhaul of the 1952 constitution ever proposed. King Abdullah promised these revisions on June 12 in a surprising televised speech. The new push came in response to five months of increasingly strident protests and criticism, and seemed designed to emulate the constitutional reform gambit of Morocco's King Mohammed VI.

Many Jordanians were stunned by the explicit promise in June of a future system that would draw governing cabinets from the elected parliament rather than appointment by palace fiat. The idea of constitutional monarchy, which entails divesting absolute royal power to the legislature alongside other sweeping institutional changes, captivated the political salons, business magazines, and civic debates of Amman through July. Many intellectuals compared the excitement in the air to 1989, when King Hussein began to end decades of authoritarian closure through unprecedented political reforms.

The revisions unveiled on Sunday made some serious changes, but fell far short of that promise of elected governments. Unlike in Morocco, there will be no popular referendum. The reforms do not curb the king's core powers or move toward a constitutional monarchy in which he would reign but not rule. The election and parties law, unchecked security services, and rife corruption go untouched. Economic development outside Amman remains laggard. Will such a limited reform gambit be enough to blunt popular pressure on the embattled king?

The royal committee tasked with revising the constitution — a 10-person panel loaded with former prime ministers and legal luminaries — predictably did not ask the Hashemite dynasty to surrender its absolutist crown. The 42 amendments do recommend meaningful changes, such as establishing a constitutional court, ensuring independent oversight of elections, limiting the dreaded security courts, and reaffirming protections of expressive freedom. The reforms mostly ignore the monarchy's lopsided executive supremacy that lies at the heart of Jordanian autocracy. Further, unlike Morocco's recent example, the amendments will not face popular referendum.

Many Jordanians noted the subtle shift within official discourse from *malakiyyah destouriyyah*, or constitutional monarchy, to *islah destouri*, or constitutional reform — a maneuver that symbolized the unwillingness of the monarchy to distance itself from executive affairs. True, the king can no longer postpone elections indefinitely following parliamentary dissolution. Yet his imperative alone, rather than an elected majority, still determines the prime minister, and by extension a governing cabinet that will initiate laws and disburse the budget. Foreign relations remain under the purview of the palace, not parliament. Likewise, intact is the pervasive but shadowy role of the formidable mukhabarat, the General Intelligence Directorate, whom many critics accuse of infiltrating civil society, monitoring university students, and disproportionately influencing royal opinion — all while standing above legal reproach.

Reactions have been mixed. Marouf al-Bakhit's Cabinet has loudly lauded these steps as historic, and Britain and France were among the first Western voices to applaud the move. In the middle ground stood many cautious optimists, who saw a tentative opening to a long-term reform program that will require sustained commitment, unlike the ill-fated 2005 National Agenda. Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front and many liberal elites were unimpressed and demanded more concessions. The Brotherhood has already promised to organize more protest marches. Youth activists and bloggers have been most critical; their deep distrust of public officials stems from witnessing a decade's worth of empty promises. Some grumble that an independent Palestine seems more likely than a democratic Jordan.

Nobody is under any illusions that these reforms are an entrée to real democratization. The amendments have all the hallmarks of controlled liberalization, giving just enough political leeway to blunt popular grumbling while preserving the monarchy's authoritarian prerogative to dictate the terms of future policymaking. Yet what is more, too *much* talk of constitutionalism will mask other systemic issues that have fueled public frustration since last fall. If these are not also addressed, even successful promulgation of the amendments may fail to foreclose the kind of social tensions and urban violence that briefly exploded in late March and again this past July.

Critics of the revisions point to a number of similar more fundamental demands. Their first priority is improving the electoral and political parties laws, which produce conservative parliaments that consistently under represent the Palestinian majority and are dominated by service deputies and tribal figures. Last November's elections for the Lower House were typical: real voter turnout was less than the official 53 percent, the contest suffered an Islamist boycott, and a complex virtual sub-districting method confused voters while eviscerating competition in many general districts. Public anger hastened the fall of the Samir al-Rifai's cabinet months later; afterward, the king charged a 52-member National Dialogue Committee to review both laws. Their initial recommendations turned heads by advising the adoption of party-list proportional representation in place of the existing one-person, one-vote system.

Yet there are two catches, both of which could sabotage this initiative. First, only 15 percent of seats would be distributed at the national level. The rest would be allocated to the governorates, an absurd ratio given the key goal of encouraging unifying party movements rather than perpetuating fragmented voting predicated along tribal, kinship, and service-oriented lines. Second, such changes must be ratified by a current parliament whose members would not likely return under the new system. Many observers do not believe that the legislature will endorse these reforms. Such low confidence may account for the puzzling fact that more than 70 percent of Jordanians desire constitutional reform — but 40 percent disdain the idea that their legislature should take responsibility for creating competent governments.

Second, public anger persists around widespread corruption, which concerns not only the letter but the implementation of law. Few personalities ignite as much outrage as Khalid Shaheen, an imprisoned businessman who secured government permission to seek medical care abroad in late February. Though his subsequent flight triggered the resignation of two ministers, for many Shahin-Gate represented the ultimate failure of state accountability: one of the kingdom's wealthiest businessmen had exploited his cobweb of political capital, including rumored connections with the queen, to escape punishment for massive bribery. Jordanian officials secured Shahin's return from Germany this week, but perpetual stories of official corruption involving sordid deals between parliamentarians, ministers, and financiers continue to alienate the urban public, whether Palestinian or East Bank. Casino-Gate is another case in point, and involves alleged payoffs and legal violations committed by Prime Minister Bakhit's first government in 2007 for a cancelled casino project on the Dead Sea. Though many Jordanians hold Bakhit responsible for the scandal — including, notably, many of his fellow tribal Jordanians — the sole result of a June parliamentary inquiry was the indictment of the Minister of Tourism. The Anti-Corruption Commission and other state agencies must make more progress in uncovering and prosecuting such cases, lest the remainder of their credibility fade — and by implication, drag the King's image with it.

Third, a new protest movement is emerging in the southern towns of Jordan, far from the Amman spotlight and with very different demands. While the Western press has documented the weekly marches involving thousands of Islamists, leftist parties, and professional syndicates in the capital, a different kind of dissatisfaction has rumbled elsewhere in the country. From tribal towns like Tafileh and Karak to the 32 nationally designated "poverty pockets," Palestinians and East Bankers alike evince little patience for constitutional deliberation.

Concrete reform in these communities means bread and jobs, but headlines of grotesque corruption — and new multi-billion dollar Star Trek amusement parks built to please wealthy tourists — painfully display their marginal status in the privatizing economy.

Unrest in tribal communities has far more resonance than within Amman given their historic affinity with the monarchy. Since February, the palace has blithely ignored weekly demonstrations in the capital, in which thousands have demanded the resignation of the Bakhit government, new parliamentary elections, and new anti-corruption measures. By contrast, a few weeks of small-scale protests in Tafileh provoked a royal visit in June, in which the king announced free health care for all residents, the recruitment of 1,000 locals for new police and security jobs, and the establishment of a new development fund. Regime efforts to mobilize the perennial resentments of Transjordanian nationalists against the Palestinians will have less traction when the heavily Transjordanian communities of the south are themselves in movement. Indeed, the underground campaign to portray all the opposition as "Palestinian" rather than Jordanian, an old tactic that exploits the most enduring cleavage in Jordanian society, has become increasingly hollow. The majority of the youth activists that organized the March 24 Shabab movement were not Palestinian, and many share strong ties with the very southern areas now chafing under the false promise of development.

Despite the Ministry of Planning's inflated optimism, the economy simply cannot generate enough viable private-sector jobs, leaving 70 percent of the unemployed under the age of 30 — a problem especially prevalent in rural areas. Yet the regime cannot cover every future quandary with money, as price subsidies and public salaries consume most of the national budget. Indeed, it would have reported a record deficit this year had not Saudi Arabia transferred $1.4 billion in budgetary aid over the past two months. This may serve as prelude to future support if Jordan joins the Gulf Cooperation Council as announced in May, but aid is not oil — a lesson learned in the mid-1980s, when declining fiscal subsidies from the Gulf due to the global oil bust precipitated a disastrous economic downturn. That official talk of political change has lacked any accompanying national dialogue about sustainable development outside the metropole reflects stunning ignorance, but one that can be easily ameliorated.

Despite these problems, Jordan is far from a revolutionary crisis. Even the most ardent critics frame their goal as changing the *system*, not overturning the monarchy. Many still believe that the regime will pursue the right reforms; but their patience is wearing thin. Above all, those reforms will need to encompass far more than constitutional alterations. Executing the proposed amendments is important, but they alone will not make elections more competitive, political parties any stronger, corruption less rampant or rural development more equitable. The constitutional revisions need to be a starting point, not a final gambit, if the king hopes to move off the dangerous track on which Jordan has been running.

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Fragile hopes for Jordan's new prime minister

By Christina Satkowski, October 24, 2011

AMMAN—Hundreds of activists filled the streets of downtown Amman on Friday, reiterating their weekly demands for the Jordanian government to implement political and economic reforms. But this week, the chants ringing from the crowd carried a more optimistic tone, as demonstrators and Jordanian lawmakers are cautiously welcoming King Abdullah's appointment last week of a new prime minister, Awn Shawkat al-Khasawneh.

Khasawneh is a man unknown to most Jordanians. He has spent most of his long career in public service away from the limelight, as a legal adviser to the late King Hussein and senior official in the foreign ministry. Since 2000 he has served on the International Court of Justice in The Hague, including three years as the ICJ's vice president from 2006-09. Yet many Jordanians believe Khasawneh represents the best chance since the Arab Spring began for Jordan to achieve meaningful reform. With his legal talents and lack of political entanglements, many hope that he will be able to bridge the kingdom's deep political divides and tackle the corruption that is pervasive throughout the Jordanian government.

But such visions of a more productive and inclusive government are already fading. Upon accepting his new post, Khasawneh invited the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, to participate in discussions about the formation of his new cabinet. The IAF, which for months had boycotted dialogue with the outgoing prime minister, Marouf al-Bakhi, met with Khasawneh for several hours last week. The meeting fueled hope that the IAF would accept a position in the new government, a historic move which would have strengthened the credibility and agenda-setting power of the Khasawneh govenrment. But on Saturday, IAF leaders announced that they had turned down positions in the new government, saying that they could better push for their cause from the outside, rather than from the cabinet table.

Khasawneh's appointment brings temporary break in tension that has been building since Bakhit took office last February. King Abdullah had presented Bakhit as a reformer who would address the demands of demonstrators, emboldened by protests in Tunisia and Egypt, for reform and an end to corruption. But Bakhit failed to win the confidence of the Jordanian people. Bakhit's critics charged that he had been ineffective during his previous term as prime minister, from 2005 to 2007. They were further enraged when it later emerged, during a corruption investigation known as "Casinogate," that as prime minister in 2007 Bakhit had personally authorized a secret deal to build a casino on the Dead Sea. On Sunday, following several weeks of demonstrations in Amman and around the country, 70 members of Jordan's Parliament signed a letter to the King Abdullah demanding that Bakhit and his cabinet be replaced.

Though bolstered by his refreshingly untarnished image, Khasawneh will face critical challenges in the weeks ahead. This week he introduced his new cabinet. Observers are anxiously waiting to see if he will be able to truly lead it.

As Dr. Hassan Barari, a professor at the University of Jordan and columnist for the daily *al-Ra'i* newspaper, pointed out, Khasawneh may have an impressive background but he has never held executive office and is untested as a national leader. Critically, Barari said, the new premier must demonstrate that his agenda will not be overshadowed by inter-agency competition, including on the part of the Jordanian intelligence service, the GID, and the Royal Court. "We need to see if he will be the one to call the shots," Barari told me last week.

This sentiment has not been lost on King Abdullah or his new premier. As a part of last week's cabinet reshuffle, the king also replaced the director of intelligence. The new GID director, Faisal al-Shobaki, has spent less time in the shadows and in more public positions, most recently as

ambassador to Morocco. In public remarks following initial cabinet discussions on Wednesday, Khasawneh went to great lengths to stress that he has full control over the composition of the new government and that "there will be no shadow governments."

The next challenge will be to deliver the promised reforms, and the clock is ticking. Political reforms are the stated priority, including changes to laws that govern participation of political parties, and the introduction of new measures to guarantee transparency of local and national elections. Khasawneh will have to work quickly to satisfy the demands of the growing number of political groups seeking greater participation in Jordan's government. But the slow, judicious process of legal reform will undoubtedly challenge their patience. Earlier this month one group blocked the airport road for several hours to demand their own municipal government. Already Khasawneh has announced that he may have to postpone the scheduled December 27 municipal elections in order to have more time to make the necessary changes.

Khasawneh may enjoy a grace period of a month or so. But if last Friday's demonstrations are any indication, they Jordanians stand ready to quickly increase the pressure on the new government if it does not deliver tangible reforms. And while political reforms may be the focus right now, economic reforms are as important — if not more important — among the Jordanian public. More than 30 percent of young Jordanians are unemployed and many families are slipping into poverty. Economic grievances are particularly acute in the kingdom's southern cities and rural governorates, which have also seen some of the most frequent and vocal protests. Ongoing projects to decentralize government and state expenditures are intended to address these issues, but it is unclear how far and how quickly the new government must go to fully satisfy these restive communities.

If Awn al-Khasawneh is able to capitalize on the rare amount of confidence placed in him and make positive steps toward change, his appointment last week will mark a quiet milestone in Jordan's reform process. But the stakes are higher than ever: Khasawneh's footing is precarious and dependent upon the patience of a country with little tolerance for the political stumbles of the past.

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