

# Jordan: Negotiating Political, Economic, and Social Minefields

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More than a decade ago, Schirin Fathi (2005) began an article by noting how “Jordan has often been characterized as being in a perennial state of uncertainty.” Jordan, an oasis of political stability surrounded by volatility, remains for the most part, unscathed six years after the Arab Spring shook – and even overthrew in some cases – its neighbours. Yet, the same question lingers on the lips of observers today: “For how long can the monarchy hold on?” The regime is constantly engaged in a game of brinksmanship in the political, economic, and social realms. Mounting political frustration and economic distress among the population has led to a burgeoning of radical sentiment bubbling underneath the seemingly smooth surface of Jordanian society.

## Elections as a Political Pressure Release Valve

Maintaining an atmosphere of controlled liberalization, the regime held parliamentary elections in September of last year (2016), initiated the formation of popularly elected governorate councils, and called for elections at both the municipal and governorate levels to be held later this year (2017). But will these initiatives amount to meaningful change? It is doubtful. Analysts of the region’s political environment have long portrayed elections as amounting to nothing more than a quick release valve for mounting political pressure (Schirin, 2005; Buehler, 2012), allowing the regime to distract the public’s attention

from their everyday hardships and focusing it on electoral competition among tribes, while garnering incentives in the form of promises of future favours or even outright cash payments from local elites for their votes.

Yet, such elections can be expected to have little effect on shifting the power balance within the kingdom. In Jordan, a layer of central government appointees similarly restrains each level of government that is popularly elected. For instance, although voters determine who occupies the seats of the lower house of Parliament, the institution is kept weak, unable to enact meaningful national policies of its own accord and serving simply as a rubber stamp on legislation sent to it from above. Legislation initiated by members of the lower house must make it through the government-appointed upper house and cabinet as well as survive the King’s veto. Since parliamentarians are unable to provide legislative outcomes for their constituents, they concentrate on more tangible goals – the predominant one being the redistribution of state resources through clientelistic channels (Lust-Okar, 2009).

Constant amendments to the electoral law keep voters and political elites befuddled by the shifting rules of the game, representing another means by which the regime prevents Parliament from becoming a serious check on its power. Since elections were re-initiated in 1989 following a 20-year hiatus, major reforms to the electoral law were implemented for the polls in 1993, 2003, 2010, and 2013. In contrast to the majoritarian systems of the past, the 2016 electoral law introduced proportional representation for the first time in the kingdom, requiring the formation of electoral lists of three or more candidates. The law reduced both the number of electoral districts and seats in the Parliament from 45 to 23 and from 150 to 130, respectively. The new sys-

tem was likely confusing for voters and parties or lists competing for seats, with just 37% of Jordan's 4 million eligible voters casting a ballot. Moreover, despite the regime's attempts to move to a more party-based system, only about 18% of the candidates who ran were affiliated with a formal political party (Al Hayat Centre, 2016).

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In response to long awaited electoral reform, the Muslim Brotherhood decided to participate in the elections. Yet, after recent regime crackdowns on the organization's activities including the raiding and closure of its offices in Amman and refusal to renew its license under the political parties law adopted in 2014, the list supported by the Brotherhood won just 16 of the 130 seats (Sweiss, 2016). Their poor performance in the elections may also have been partly due to internal splintering within the group. A number of its offshoots, such as Zamzam, also participated in the elections. Despite all this, the largest and most powerful bloc in Parliament is the one led by the Muslim Brotherhood.

More recently, the regime set about adding an extra layer of semi-elected bureaucracy between municipal councils and the Parliament in the form of governorate councils. Elections for both municipalities and these new governorate councils are expected to be held simultaneously later this year. Although the decentralization law is not yet finalized, the preliminary plans in place for the governorate councils mimic the weak power structure accorded to municipalities. Decisions concerning the law are made using a "secretive process" and the current draft lacks clarity, assigning the governorate councils roles and responsibilities that overlap with those already accorded to other governmental departments and institutions (SOFRECO, 2017). Furthermore, it is a costly measure for an already overstretched budget. The creation of these councils may help the regime release some political tension by creating new jobs and allow them to hold more elections to make the citizenry feel as though they have some

amount of power over and stake in their government. However, in reality, the regime will appoint 25% of their members and the entire institution will likely lack independence from the central government as well as meaningful power. For instance, elected sections of the governorate and municipal councils will lack control over their own funding, due to their inability to directly tax the population. Instead, they will receive budgets, agendas, and recommendations from the central government for amendment only, with final decision-making power remaining in the hands of appointed figures such as ministers and governors.

## Reliance on a Virtual Foreign-Funded Credit Card

From its founding, the nation-state of Jordan and its rulers have relied on a virtual credit card to finance the government. The only difference over time is which creditors are funding the card's expenses, having shifted over time from the British Empire to the United States and Europe, to currently including additional funding from the Arab Gulf oil states, aid from international organizations like the United Nations, as well as bailouts from the International Monetary Fund. Even with all this financial help, the Jordanian economy continues to struggle.

In 2016, the King created an Economic Policies Council in an attempt to find ways to stimulate the economy. At about the same time, in view of its expectations for the Jordanian public debt to reach 95%, the International Monetary Fund signed an extended fund facility for the country of \$723 million (Oxford Business Group 2016). Unemployment hovers at around 16% of active job seekers, with the labour force participation rate remaining dismally low with about 59% of males and just 13% of women participating (World Bank, 2016).

The reasons for the glum economic outlook in Jordan are plentiful. With oil prices sinking, aid from Gulf oil states as well as trade with them have substantially decreased. The tourism industry continues to suffer from fear among tourists generated by instability in the region as well as attacks within the kingdom (further discussed below). Moreover, the cost of hosting over a million Syrian refugees has surpassed \$2.5 billion in recent

years according to the World Bank, equivalent to 6% of Jordan's Gross Domestic Product, and has not been fully covered by donors.

## The tourism industry continues to suffer from fear among tourists generated by instability in the region as well as attacks within the kingdom

To solve an impending energy crisis stemming from the blockage of the Egyptian oil upon which the kingdom used to rely, the National Electric Power Company entered into a politically fraught deal with Israel to purchase gas in 2016. Currently, the kingdom survives on liquefied natural gas arriving from the Gulf to the port in Aqaba in shipping tankers, but this solution was only ever meant to be temporary. Many citizens were against the deal with Israel though, and thousands demonstrated in protest of it. In order to complete the deal, a pipeline from Israel will have to be built that will likely require funding from international donors, demonstrating once again, the regime's reliance on outsiders for its survival.

### Survival in a Threatening Environment

Beyond economic concerns, fears over radicalization and support for terrorism spurred by recent outbreaks of violence in the kingdom continue to mount. These fears stem from two major sources, the first originating from within the Jordanian host population and the second from the scores of Syrian refugees currently residing within the kingdom. Among the local population, widespread corruption, a severe lack of jobs for youth and the educated, and a lack of social cohesion inflame tendencies towards radicalization. Jordan has the highest number of foreign fighters per capita in Syria and Iraq. The country experienced about half a dozen terrorist attacks within the last year, including the assassination of a Christian journalist by a local extremist imam and a shooting spree by supporters of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) in the south of the country, which left more than a dozen dead, including a Canadian

tourist. The youth unemployment rate is more than double that of the overall rate for the country, and it is close to 40% among those with a college degree (World Bank, 2014). Recent work on the ground in Jordan links corrupt, ineffective local governance with an increased attachment to an identity of rebellion, which radical groups offer young people (Yom & Sammour, 2017). The recent regime crackdowns on the more moderate Muslim Brotherhood movement could potentially allow more space for extremist groups, such as Jordan's underground Salafist movement, whose attachment to Islamist ideology is stronger than most others (Larzillière, 2012).

Jordan has long been host to fleeing populations of the region and beyond. During the numerous Palestinian-Israeli clashes over the years, Jordan accepted waves of Palestinian refugees and even offered many of them full citizenship, to the extent that, today, they make up a majority of the population (Fathi, 2005). Iraqis flowed into the country, particularly after the breakout of sectarian violence in 2006. And now, an estimated 1.4 million Syrians, equivalent to about 10-13%, of the country's population have flowed into the country. Although the regime originally pursued a formal encampment system for Syrian refugees, four of every five Syrian refugees currently live outside of camps (Amnesty International, 2016). Less than 50% of the refugees are registered with the UNHCR, meaning that many face substantial barriers to obtaining access to public services such as healthcare and education. If the past can provide lessons for the future, concerns over refugees as sources for recruitment in cross-border attacks should be taken seriously (Sude, Stebbins & Weiland, 2015). Things may be looking up though. A trade agreement with the European Union in July of last year encouraged Jordan to allow permits for 200,000 Syrians over the next five years, and by last month (April 2017) 40,000 permits had been issued.

### Conclusion: Moving Forward through the Minefield

Among Arab leaders, Jordan's King Abdullah II was the first to meet with the newly-elected American President, Donald Trump. Trump's recent statements in support of moving the US embassy in Is-

rael to Jerusalem and reported debates within his administration of designating the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization were likely among top priority items for the Jordanian monarch in their meeting. Such moves would be expected to spur widespread protests across the region, risking instability as well as a rise in support for Islamist movements that are more radical than the Brotherhood movement. Additionally, the movement is currently a participating partner in Jordan's Parliament, seriously complicating US-Jordanian relations if it should become a terrorist organization. For now, the Trump Administration seems to be backing away from these threatening manoeuvres, but one can only hope that Jordan will be able to continue to successfully negotiate the political minefield.

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