

Geographical Overview | **Middle East and Turkey**

Jordan – Disquiet at the Island of Stability

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Despite a series of Arab Spring-inspired political protests and its precarious environment, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, a country of 7 million inhabitants, has been hitherto remarkably successful in weathering the political storm and maintaining stability. Even though widespread public discontent with climbing prices, unemployment, and government corruption continues, the protesters have not openly challenged the Hashemite monarchical rule. Yet, the ostensible quiet may be deceptive. The year 2015 started with the gruesome execution of the captured Jordanian pilot, Muath al-Kasasbeh, in February 2015 by the so called Islamic State (IS). The growing external and internal security threats add to the challenges that Jordan has already been facing while attempting to cope with an economic crisis and the influx of almost one million Syrian refugees. The alarming rise in homegrown extremism and the recent bombing attacks have made clear that a lot is rumbling under the surface of an ostensible stability in Jordan.

Growing Political Cleavages

On 14 April 2016, in a surprise move, the governor of Amman ordered the shutdown of the city's Muslim Brotherhood headquarters. The Jordanian authorities justified the decision as a legal consequence due to the Brotherhood's failure to renew licenses for its activities in accordance with the political party law in 2014. The Brotherhood has operated legally in Jordan for decades and its political arm, the Islam-

ic Action Front, is the kingdom's largest opposition party. Therefore, the Muslim Brotherhood views the crackdown as a politically motivated action in order to influence the parliamentary elections expected to be held in September 2016.

The closure of the Muslim Brotherhood's offices in Amman, Mafrq, Aqaba, and Madaba is only one measure in a series of actions taken by Jordanian authorities, which has increased tensions between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jordanian government. In February 2015, the movement's deputy leader Zaki Bani Rushaid was sentenced to 18 months in jail for criticizing the United Arab Emirates for its crackdown on Islamists in social media. In March 2015, the Jordanian government approved an application from an offshoot group, including some of those affiliated with the Zamzam Initiative, to form a licensed charity known as the Muslim Brotherhood Society. In response to a legal complaint by the newly established society, the 'older' Muslim Brotherhood was prohibited from holding internal elections to select Shura Council members. In contrast to the 'old' Muslim Brotherhood that had boycotted the 2010 and 2013 elections, the new Brotherhood Society plans to establish a political party to participate in the upcoming legislative elections. The boycott of elections and the rejection of the 'old' Muslim Brotherhood to sever its close ties with outside parties such as Hamas were amongst the reasons for the movement's split.

Claiming Decentralization – Practicing Re-centralization

The government's shutdown of the Muslim Brotherhood's offices followed the Parliament's adoption of a new electoral law in March 2016. The new law

abolished the controversial one-person, one-vote electoral system which was introduced in 1993 and that significantly disadvantaged political parties. However, despite the abolishment of the single non-transferable vote, the new law extends numerous historical problems while at the same time introducing new ones. First, the new law defers the distribution of the seats among electoral districts to a by-law. Critics of the new law claim that the bylaw will maintain the boundaries of electoral districts to ensure that regions loyal to the palace remain overrepresented and those deemed 'oppositional' underrepresented in Parliament. Second, the most prominent criticism voiced by political parties has been the elimination of the 25 nationwide proportional seats, which were introduced under the 2012 electoral law. The proportional list system in the 2015 law is circumscribed at the district level, which means that political parties will compete within each district and not on a national level. Moreover, voters are expected to cast a ballot for a list and to vote for individuals within that list, which may result in a different form of tribal electoral competition.

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The electoral law is one of four governance laws that were endorsed by the Lower House in 2015/2016. In January 2015, a new Political Parties Law was passed, tightening funding regulations for political parties, restricting organizational affiliation with non-Jordanian organizations, and removing women and youth membership quotas. On 16 August, the Lower House endorsed a new Municipalities Law and on 23 August a Decentralization Law. Promoted by the government as a step forward for Jordan's democracy, the bills have been criticized by civil society, local elected officials, and political parties as a move to re-centralize power at the na-

tional level. In particular, the laws on Municipalities and Decentralization cause the most concern since the laws call for the establishment of two additional institutions- a 'Local Council' and a 'Governorate Council' led by a governor appointed by the Prime Minister. Indeed, the new Decentralization Law grants local governors power over elected councils and maintains the final decision-making power with the Prime Minister's office. Furthermore, the law allows the government to appoint 25% of the new councils, and states that the Prime Minister's office holds the power to dismantle elected councils and call for new elections. The new law has also added a precedent in Jordan whereby the government can send the military to restore order, if deemed that the local police are no longer able to do so. The new provisions in the law do not only create more bureaucracy, but also introduce an expensive system in a country that is already struggling economically. Shortly after endorsing the electoral law and within a few days, the cabinet introduced numerous constitutional amendments on 18 April 2016, giving the King the right to make key appointments by royal decree without any nomination process by the government or signatures from the Council of Ministers. This includes the right of the King to appoint the head and members of the constitutional court and members of the senate, as well as the power to appoint the regent and crown prince. In 2015 already, the Parliament passed a previous constitutional amendment granting King Abdullah II the power to hire and fire the commander of the army, the head of Gendarmerie and the General Directorate of Intelligence. With these amendments, Jillian Schwedler argues, Jordan finally "drops the pretense of democratic reform." Indeed, these recent revisions represent the persistence of authoritarian rule, says Ziad Abu-Rish. Proclamations of progress and reform, therefore, cannot be taken at face value.

Today, the Jordanian regime views security as its top priority. The most recent constitutional amendments and the four new governance laws, therefore, reflect a major legal and institutional response to deemed external and internal security threats. The civil war in neighbouring Syria and Iraq, the alarming rise in homegrown extremism, foiled bombing attempts and the recent attacks have led to a near lockdown of the country. The constitutional amendments and recent changes made to laws dealing with the press, publi-

cations and terrorism illustrate that the Jordanian regime is heightening its punitive measures as a response to deepening public dissent.

The Challenge of Homegrown Extremism

On the first day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan five people were killed in what the State called a “terror attack” on Jordanian intelligence officers at the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, north of Amman. By the end of the same month, on 21 June, a suicide car bombing killed at least six members of Jordan’s security forces in the Rukban border area. The attack caused the worst loss of life for Jordan since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Some Jordanian analysts see the attack on the Rukban military base as a strike on the outpost established by the American, British and Jordanian Special Forces to support the New Syrian Army, a Pentagon-trained Syrian rebel group operating in southeast Syria. Others, however, link the Rukban bombings to

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the March 2016 killing of seven suspected jihadist insurgents in the northern city of Irbid. King Abdullah’s vow that Jordan will respond with an “iron fist” had led to the bombing of IS-affiliated targets in southern Syria on June 25, as reported by the London-based al-Hayat newspaper. In addition, immediately after the bombing, Jordan declared the hitherto demilitarized Rukban area a military zone and froze all refugee admissions. Indeed, given that Rukban consisted of both a military outpost and a humanitarian aid delivery point for refugees, militarizing the area means that aid agencies are no longer able to enter the Rukban area to provide food and medical aid to the more than 60,000 trapped refugees.

The recent Rukban attacks seem to confirm the worst fears of Jordanian authorities, which had continuous-

ly warned against the growing security threat among Syrians at their borders. But the raid of March 2016, the bombing in the Palestinian Baq’aa Camp, as well as the shooting of three security contractors – two American and one South African – and two Jordanians by police Captain Anwar Abu Zaid in November 2015 at the Jordan International Police Training Center also shifted attention to Jordan’s problem with homegrown extremism. There are conflicting reports about the number of Jordanians who crossed the border to Syria. According to the Washington Institute, approximately 2,500 Jordanians are fighting in the ranks of IS and the al-Nusra Front, making Jordan the third-largest contributor of foreign fighters after Tunisia and Saudi Arabia. The majority of these fighters belong to the Salafi jihadi movement in Jordan, estimated at having 10,000 members according to Mohammed Abu Rumman, an expert on Islamist movements at the Jordanian Centre for Strategic Studies. In an article titled “What after the Baq’aa attacks” in the daily al-Ghad, Abu Rumman warns that radical Islamist ideology is reaching Jordan’s middle class in an unprecedented way. Indeed, the defection of a Jordanian army captain from a prominent Jordanian tribe and the death of the sons of two parliamentarians after joining extremists groups in Syria illustrate that jihadist networks are continuing to reach into Jordanian society. If the appeal of IS ideas among Transjordanians, who are usually described as the backbone of the monarchy, continues and if the Jordanian security forces are vulnerable to penetration, two of the most reliable anchors of Jordan’s stability will be seriously threatened.

Outlook: Jordan at ‘Boiling Point’

Ahead of the Supporting Syria donor conference in February 2016, King Abdullah II expressed his concerns about the enormous pressure on his country saying that Jordan is at ‘boiling point.’ In total, there are about 1.3 million Syrians in Jordan today, making up nearly 20% of the population. In order to cope with these challenges, Jordan announced it would spend \$11 billion on projects to create jobs for Syrian refugees but also on projects to assist local hosting communities and infrastructure projects. In a February 2016 report, the World Bank claimed that the influx of more than 630,000 registered Syr-

ian refugees is estimated to cost Jordan over \$2.5 billion a year. Thus, part of the donor funding will also be used to boost Jordan's coffers. The approved 2016 budget law confirms Jordan's precarious economic situation that is increasingly dependent on public debt and foreign aid to prop up its spending. With its debt-to-GDP ratio at over 93%,

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Jordan is moving towards insolvency, economists claim. Since the beginning of 2011, the country's debt has increased to about 50% and is still increasing. Against this background, King Abdullah II's appointment of a technocratic government on 29 May is not a coincidence. By appointing Hani al-Mulqi, head of the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority, as Prime Minister, the palace has delegated the responsibility of the unpopular task of implementing the anticipated fiscal austerity programme, turning al-Mulqi into the public face of a painful process of cutting fuel and electricity subsidies. The implementation of the IMF agreement reached in June 2016 will put Jordan's ostensible calm to

the test. In November 2012 already, an increase in fuel prices and the price of other basic goods triggered protests across the kingdom. Whether or not the Jordanian street will stay quiet, remains to be seen.

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