

Jordan: A Centenary in Sombre Mood, with Cautious Hope for Reform

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The year 2021 should be one of celebration for Jordan. Roundabouts and public buildings all over the country are strewn with banners commemorating the centenary of the founding of the State. In April 1921, the Hashemite Prince Abdullah – son of the Sharif of Mecca and great-grandfather of Jordan's current King – was appointed Emir of Transjordan by the British mandatory power. The development, against all odds, of this provisional arrangement into one of the most stable countries in the Middle East can indeed be a source of pride. However, the anniversary is overshadowed by an economic crisis that is being gravely exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and a political reform deadlock that the November 2020 parliamentary elections could not resolve. In addition, Jordan has to adapt to changing regional dynamics. It successfully lobbied against the annexation plans in the West Bank, which Israel's Prime Minister Netanyahu put forward at the beginning of 2020. Still, the rapprochement of some Arab Gulf states with Israel, enshrined in the Abraham Accords, threatened to sideline Jordan, which remains committed to the Palestinians' right to statehood and to its own custodianship of holy sites in Jerusalem. Amidst these domestic and international dynamics, some are hoping for reform – genuine this time.

Economic Crisis and Covid-19

Jordan has been hard hit by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whereas infections were kept

low during the first wave of the spring of 2020, partly due to strict lockdown and entry regulations, the country suffered from very high case numbers a year later (up to 10,000 positive tests daily out of 10 million inhabitants), which pushed the health system to its limits. The economic fallout will be felt for some time to come. Jordan's tourism sector, which was growing before the pandemic and contributed to almost a fifth of the country's GDP and job market, has almost come to a standstill. Remittances from the several hundred thousand Jordanians working in the Gulf states dropped, as these countries also had to cope with economic turbulences and imposed travel restrictions. Finally, daily labourers and small entrepreneurs, from cab drivers to shop owners, suffered from the Covid-19-induced mobility restrictions, such as the weekly Friday and daily overnight curfews, which were in place for large parts of 2020 and continued into 2021. Unemployment has risen to 23 percent and is much higher for youth and women. Covid-19 has shaken an economy already facing structural challenges. The neoliberal reforms and privatization of the last two decades have brought fresh foreign investment into the country and stimulated business activity. However, social inequalities have risen and anger about crony capitalism and corruption has become widespread. At the same time, the public sector, which already employs more than a quarter of the labour force, cannot be further expanded, given the strained finances of the State. Jordan, which hosts a large refugee community, including more than one million Syrians (according to Jordanian authorities), is dependent on international assistance. Donor pledges for 2020 added up to \$3.73 billion and included direct budget support.¹ With the United States still being Jordan's biggest

¹ "Foreign aid pledged to Kingdom stands at \$3.73b – Planning Ministry," *Jordan Times*, 31 December 2020, see <http://jordantimes.com/news/local/foreign-aid-pledged-kingdom-stands-373b-%E2%80%94-planning-ministry>, accessed 1 May 2021.

donor (with \$1.5 billion yearly, civil and military combined), the EU and Member States such as Germany have also increased their financial assistance over the last decade. However, although the strategic value of the Hashemite Kingdom will remain relevant for its Western partners, their international development aid might come under more scrutiny in light of the financial fallouts of the pandemic and ensuing domestic imperatives.

Political Deadlock and Calls for Reform

While Jordan has seen a prudent strengthening of its democratic framework in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, as with the establishment of the Independent Electoral Commission and a Constitutional Court, political reform has come to a halt over the last few years, and critical voices fear that their space for expression is continuing to shrink. In July 2020, the Teachers Syndicate was closed down after it led protests and strikes the previous year over a salary increase. At the end of 2020, the government brought legal charges against the Partnership and Salvation Party, an Islamist opposition party that boycotted the last parliamentary elections. The Defence Law enacted at the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic to allow for swift implementation of measures to fight the spread of the virus is also limiting possibilities to gather and to protest. In its latest report, Freedom House downgraded Jordan from “partly free” to “not free.”²

In an effort to display democratic routine, the Royal Court insisted on holding parliamentary elections, as scheduled, in November 2020, despite a spike in Covid-19 cases at the time. The virus and the curfew planned right after the elections undoubtedly contributed to the low turnout of 29%. But pre-election polls also indicated little interest in participating in elections seen by many as ineffective.³ Although 99 of the 130 deputies are newcomers to the Parliament, its politico-social composition has

not changed much. It is dominated by businessmen and personalities from prominent families and tribal backgrounds, who are more focused on service provision to their constituencies than on government legislation and supervision. On the other hand, political parties, traditionally weak in Jordan, lost seats. The strongest party, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Action Front, barely received 6% of the votes. While the state apparatus has always exerted some control over elections in Jordan, several parties and candidates complained about increased interference by the security services in the run-up to this election.

Jordan's rapprochement with Egypt and Iraq, is part of the effort to re-position the country in the region and develop new economic opportunities with its neighbours

In February 2021, in an open letter, Abdullah II himself requested the General Intelligence Department (GID) to focus more on its core business of security. The King also called for a reform of the electoral and political party laws to guarantee better representation in the future.⁴ However, as long as the institutional power of the Parliament remains limited, it will be difficult to convince Jordanians to go to the polls and vote for political views rather than for service-providing individuals. Meanwhile, the royal family itself was shaken on 3 April 2021, when Prince Hamza, a half-brother of the King and former crown prince, was put under house arrest because of allegations of sedition. He then leaked a video and several audio tapes, accusing the country's “governing structure” of corruption, incompetence and harassing critics. The incident, whose background remains blurred, never threatened the stability of the regime,

² FREEDOM HOUSE, “Freedom in the World 2021 - Jordan,” March 2021, see <https://freedomhouse.org/country/jordan/freedom-world/2021>, accessed 1 May 2021.

³ SWAIS, Rana and MAAYEH, Suha, “Jordan's 2020 Parliamentary Election: Settling for the Status Quo,” *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Amman*, February 2021, see www.kas.de/en/web/jordanien/single-title/-/content/jordan-s-2020-parliamentary-election-settling-for-the-status-quo, accessed 1 May 2021.

⁴ ABU RUMMAN, Muhammed, “Democratic reform in Jordan? Expectations after the king's recent call to review political life,” *Friedrich-Eberst-Stiftung Amman*, March 2021, see <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/17642.pdf>, accessed 1 May 2021.

but illustrates its nervousness, as well as underlying socio-political tensions in the country. Nonetheless, the Hashemite monarchy is still widely seen – and appreciated – as the guarantor of stability and national unity, even by detractors of the ruling elite.

Re-Positioning Jordan in the Changing Middle East

External relations have always played a crucial role for Jordan. The resource-poor country is caught between major regional powers and adjacent conflicts, such as in Syria or Palestine, which threaten to spill over into the country. Usually well connected to Washington, Jordan struggled with the Trump Administration and its one-sided policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While Amman contributed to putting a halt to Israeli annexation plans in the West Bank in 2020, it felt sidelined, at least initially, by the Abraham Accords. Being excluded from Middle Eastern diplomacy is a foreign policy nightmare for Jordan, which has long feared that the Palestinian question will be “resolved” to its detriment. Jordan’s rapprochement with Egypt and Iraq, illustrated by a series of tripartite summits in 2020 and 2021, is part of the effort to re-position the country in the region and develop new economic opportunities with its neighbours.

Joe Biden’s election as President of the United States has therefore been received with much relief in Amman. The nomination of William Burns, a former US Ambassador to Jordan, as director of the CIA has further raised hopes for a decisive improvement of US-Jordan relations. However, the new ad-

ministration apparently bringing back a normative accent to American foreign policy also constitutes a challenge to Jordan. Coddled in Washington as a moderate and democracy-leaning ally, the Hashemite Kingdom has come under closer scrutiny for its authoritarian tendencies, even before the royal quarrels between Abdullah and Hamza moved it into the international spotlight. Getting back on the path of reform while maintaining stability could thus become a bargaining chip in Jordan’s relations with its American and European partners.

The March Continues - but Where to?

Like many other countries in the region, Jordan has to redefine both its political and economic models. Considering its history of statehood, including a commonly accepted monarchic framework, its diplomatic tradition of forging regional and international partnerships, and the human potential of its young and educated population, Jordan has some basic assets to succeed in this endeavour. However, despite all the talk – and some steps – of reform in the last decade, the country’s politics seem to be locked and its economy is not sustainable enough, socially as well as environmentally. It remains to be seen whether King Abdullah II’s recent encouragement for political reform will finally lead to a more representative and participatory system of governance. “The march continues,” (*wa-tastamir al-masirah*) reads the slogan of the government’s 100-year campaign. But where to go in the second century of their nation’s existence, is still a matter for debate for Jordanians.