Jordan: General Overview of the Country

Economic Crisis and Anger in the Streets

The Hashemite Kingdom is currently experiencing an economic crisis that directly affects the Jordanian population. In addition to a public debt that now represents 111% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the unemployment rate is over 22%, rising to nearly 50% among young people under 30. Jordanians are also affected by high inflation, particularly in the food, energy and housing sectors. The increase in prices, as on several occasions in Jordanian history (1989, 1996, 2011, 2018), gave rise to major protest movements in 2022. At the beginning of December, taxi, lorry and public transport drivers demonstrated against fuel price hikes, first in Ma’an and Al-Karak, before the mobilization spread to the capital as well as to Zarqa and Irbid. Fuel prices had nearly doubled over the course of the year after the government raised them to match international prices and limit the share of subsidies – which normally compensate for rising international fuel prices – in the annual state budget. The demonstrations and strikes by drivers and transport workers were supported by other elements of Jordanian society, such as merchants, who closed their shops in solidarity. As in previous years (2012, 2018), some slogans directly targeted King Abdullah II and, more unusually, the mobilizations also led to violent confrontations with the police. On 15 December, protesters in the city of Ma’an fired shots at security forces, killing the town’s deputy police chief, Abdul Razzaq Al-Dalabeh. On 19 December, three more police officers were killed while arresting the suspects of the shooting. They were found to be in possession of a large number of weapons and ammunition and later qualified as a “takfiri,” i.e., a “terrorist cell,” allowing the authorities to discredit the social movement at the same time (Ryan, 2023).

Limiting Protest Movements: Between Repression and Concessions

The Jordanian political authorities reacted to this massive social movement by first choosing to crack down hard on the demonstrations. Security forces arrested dozens of people, including the former mayor of the city of Ma’an, Majed al-Sharari, and activist Khaled Turki al-Majali. They also suspended the use of certain social networks (TikTok) in the south of the country. At the same time, however, at the end of December the authorities announced a temporary freeze on the announced increase. While the repression of protest movements is a frequent practice in Jordan – as evidenced by the case of the teachers’ union, where nearly a thousand of its members were arrested after the union was closed down in the summer of 2020 – the 2022 demonstrations once again show the propensity of the government to appease social anger through economic concessions. The unemployed who marched from the south of the country to the capital during 2019 had also been awarded, after several weeks of negotiations, 350 jobs in the large yet privatized industrial enterprises in the south of the country (potash, phosphate) (Schwedler, 2022).

Reform and Greater Concentration of Political Power

In Jordan, political reform is also one of the government’s strategies to try to appease social anger.
However, the successive reform announcements are most often received with little enthusiasm by citizens who consider the main political institutions, such as Parliament, as powerless anyway. At the beginning of 2022, less than two years after the last legislative elections, a new electoral law was submitted to the House of Representatives by the Royal Committee for the Modernization of Political Life, which was formed by order of the King in 2021. Since then, the electoral system has been mixed: 97 seats represent 18 local constituencies, within which candidates compete through open list proportional representation, and 41 seats are distributed through closed list proportional representation at the national constituency level. In contrast to the former, these lists must consist exclusively of candidates affiliated with political parties. The number of seats reserved for parties is also set to increase over time, from 41 seats to 69 and then 90 seats. This reform is thus in line with the electoral reforms enacted since 2011 (2013, 2016), which are supposed to lead to the strengthening of political parties in Parliament and make the formation of a parliamentary government possible. This official will, explicitly formulated by the King in his working documents published since 2012,1 is nevertheless counterbalanced by the nature of the electoral reforms implemented (Abu Rumman, 2016) and by the repression still exercised against certain parties at the time of elections, such as the Islamic Action Front, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Moreover, these new laws come against a backdrop of greater concentration of political power in the hands of the King and a reduction in the powers of the House of Representatives. Since 2016, the King has had the power to appoint various senior officials, such as the President of the Constitutional Court, the Chief of the Armed Forces, or the Head of Intelligence, without the endorsement of the Prime Minister. In early 2022, new constitutional amendments further expanded his powers of appointment. These amendments also created a National Security Council, which has been strongly criticized by the opposition for its potential to further weaken the government and the parliamentary institution. The council is composed of the Prime Minister, the Ministers of the Interior and Foreign Affairs, the Chief of the Army, the Directors of Intelligence and Security Services, and two other members appointed by the King. It is to meet by decision of the monarch to discuss matters of high importance in terms of internal security and foreign policy. Finally, other amendments have further reduced the powers of the House of Representatives. For example, whereas previously only 10 signatures were required for a motion of no confidence to be admissible, it now requires the support of 25% of the members of the House (composed of 130 members). These various amendments reinforce the feeling among citizens and outside observers of a tightening of authoritarianism, which had already been fuelled in previous years by the decline in freedom of the press, the dissolution of the Muslim Brotherhood, the closure of the teachers’ union, the undermining of the freedom to demonstrate, and the much-publicized case of Prince Hamzah.2

Regional Diplomatic Co-operation and Tension

Jordan’s priorities (economic, political and security) are also linked to its relations with several other states on the international and regional political scene. Here we choose to focus on Jordan’s relations with Syria, Iraq and Egypt, as well as with Israel.

Syria

After a break in diplomatic relations starting in 2014, when Jordan provided effective support to the political opposition (Roussel, 2015), the Hashemite Kingdom is now one of the Arab countries leading reconciliation negotiations with Syria. Nevertheless, relations between the two states remain highly strained, particularly because of their shared border. Indeed, Jordan is a transit country for the circulation of Captagon, a synthetic drug of the amphetamine family, between Syria and the Gulf states, leading to regular clashes at the Jordanian border between police and traffickers. In just a few years, dozens of

1 These documents are available online at https://kingabdullah.jo/en/vision/discussion-papers.
2 Former Crown Prince Hamza Ben Hussein, half-brother of Abdullah II, was placed under house arrest in 2021 after being accused of leading a plot against the King.
smugglers have been killed and millions of tablets seized. The Jordanian government has repeatedly criticized the Syrian authorities for their lack of cooperation in curbing drug trafficking, which it blames on Iranian militias in southern Syria. However, in February 2023, after the earthquake that killed more than 50,000 people in Turkey and Syria, Jordan’s Foreign Minister visited Damascus for the first time since the war began – Abdullah himself having met Bashar al-Assad for the first time in 2021. Jordan would now like to make Syria’s return to the Arab League conditional on the adoption of a “peace plan,” which would include addressing the issue of Syrian refugees and Captagon trafficking (Farhat, 2023). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 660,000 Syrian refugees live in Jordan today, 1.3 million according to the Jordanian authorities.

Egypt and Iraq

In a context of weakening relations with Saudi Arabia, Jordan is now seeking to diversify its regional geopolitical and economic alliances. Since 2019, Jordan has namely been part of a trilateral co-operation mechanism with Egypt and Iraq, whose main objective is to strengthen economic co-operation between the three states, as well as to fight against terrorism. This new regional bloc that the three countries are seeking to create is sometimes compared to the Arab Cooperation Council (1989-1990), which was formed by the same three countries and North Yemen to counterbalance the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The foreign ministers of the three countries met again in December 2022 at the Baghdad Conference in Amman.

Israel

Relations between Abdullah II and Benyamin Netanyahu have always been particularly tense. They have become even more so since the formation of the new Israeli government, which now includes the far-right supremacist Itamar Ben-Gvir, Minister of National Security. King Abdullah II and the Israeli Prime Minister met in Amman in January 2023 for the first time in four years. They addressed the issue of the Esplanade of the Mosques, which Ben-Gvir had recently visited, in a more general context in which successive Israeli governments and Jewish religious supremacists are trying to challenge the status quo, according to which non-Muslims are only allowed to access the esplanade as “tourists,” without any religious (prayers) or political (Israeli flags) demonstrations. Ben-Gvir’s gesture, seen as a provocation by the Palestinians, has also provoked strong criticism in Jordan. The meeting of King Abdullah II, guarantor of the holy places in Jerusalem, with Netanyahu, and his participation in the Aqaba and Sharm al-Sheikh summits in February and March 2023, can be read as a sign of his desire to assuage tensions.

Bilateral security and energy co-operation between the two countries is also a source of significant contention in Jordan. In particular, a strong mobilization, led by activists of the Jordanian National Campaign for the Abandonment of the Gas Agreement with the Zionist Entity (hamla al-wataniya al-urduniya li-issatat-titaqiyiya al-ghaz ma’ al-kiyan al-suyuni), took place against the gas agreement signed in 2016 by Jordan’s National Electricity Company (NEPCO) with the American company Noble Energy, which manages Israel’s Leviathan gas field. More recently, a new energy memorandum of understanding, involving an exchange of solar energy for desalinated water, has also drawn strong opposition in the country.

Bibliography


