

Jordan: An Uneasy Stability

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In reference to the map of the Middle East region, it may be observed that there exists a small state whose population is not in excess of 11.377 million, a third of whom are foreigners, who inhabit an area of 89,213 km², which enjoys “relative” stability and tranquillity compared to neighbouring countries that are larger and stronger militarily and economically. In reality, this “Western-allied” country was able to safely pass through the “Cold War” conflicts, only to return to prove its ability to overcome the “Arab Spring” in 2011, which transformed many countries in the region, namely Libya, Yemen and Syria, from fragile states to failed states.

Hence, the year 2023 represented a “point” of convergence of Jordanian national celebrations with a set of serious challenges and threats, beclouding the tranquillity of the small State, and destabilizing its general political mood, politically, economically and in terms of security. Thus the Jordanian State celebrated on 10 June 2016 the centenary of the Great Arab Revolt against Ottoman rule. And in 2021, Jordan again celebrated the centenary of its establishment on 11 April 1921

Currently, the various institutions of the State, as of 7 February 2024, are in the midst of a one-year celebration of the “Silver Jubilee,” 25 years since King Abdullah II assumed his constitutional powers. Despite the celebratory atmosphere in the Jordanian State, it is

also facing a set of challenges and threats represented by political modernization, economic contexts and the Al-Aqsa flood process, and the impact of all of this on the present and future of the Jordanian State.

Political Modernization: Find a Way out

In spite of the apparently genuine desire on the part of the Jordanian monarch to build a modern state based on institutions, laws and democratic values that will help address the current and future challenges and risks, a series of social and legal challenges have hindered the achievement of this objective. The political parties and election laws continue to constitute a just cause for some political actors to abstain from participating in legislative and municipal elections, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood and its political wing, the Islamic Action Front, as was evidenced in 2007 and 2020, and in the municipal elections of 2022.¹

In the period between 2003 and 2020, Jordan witnessed six legislative elections, and is presently preparing for new elections scheduled for 10 September 2024, in the shadow of the challenging conditions resulting from the conflict in Gaza between Israel and Hamas. These elections will take place in accordance with a new electoral law, under which the number of members of the House of Deputies has been raised from 130 to 138, of which 41 seats were allocated to political parties.

Nonetheless, Jordan and its leadership continue to probe the path in search of the best democratic practices, in order to deal with the mounting challenges and threats facing the State.

¹ “The Islamic Action Party boycotts municipal elections and decentralization.” *Al-Ghad Newspaper*, 26 January 2022: <https://alghad.com/Section-137>.

King Abdullah II presented his ideas related to democracy, parliamentary government and the rule of law (2012-2017), through seven Papers titled the Royal Discussion Papers, “constituting a recognition” by the Jordanian monarch of the existence of a “serious crisis” that is threatening to undermine the Jordanian State at the political, economic and security levels.²

Moreover, these Discussion Papers came one year after the Arab Spring, which raises an important question: were those Papers a “reaction” to the difficult reality witnessed by Jordan or are they “strategic planning” for the building of democracy through the formation of “parliamentary governments” capable of facing future challenges and threats?

Thus, to transform the vision of the monarch into a tangible programme of action, the “Royal Commission to Modernize the Political System”³ was formed on 10 June 2021, with a view to opening a “new horizon” for political modernization, which the Jordanian King is serious about achieving. In reality, it would not be possible to implement the “modernization” policies the King would like in the absence of the legislative amendments to the structure of the Jordanian State and its institutions, which are necessary to achieve balance, stability and flexibility, locally and internationally.

It is true that Article 1 of the Jordanian Constitution of 1952 stipulates that the political system is “parliamentary, monarchical and hereditary”; however, the size and nature of the constitutional amendments are indicative of a “certain tension” between the legislative and executive branches, which must be properly resolved constitutionally.

In fact, since 2011 until now Jordan has witnessed four amendments, with those that were enacted in 2011 standing as the most substantial and expansive, including changes to 42 articles with the aim of bolstering the powers of the legislative branch.⁴ In 2014, there were two amendments, particularly Arti-

cle 40, which grants the King the power to appoint the commander of the army and the director of General Intelligence unilaterally, while the six amendments of 2016 expanded the King’s authority to make unilateral appointments in relation to new categories and persons without requiring the endorsement of the Prime Minister⁵; choosing the Crown Prince, appointing the King’s deputy,... etc. As regards the 2022 amendment, this is considered the 14th amendment since the promulgation of the Constitution in 1952, and the fourth in the shadow of King Abdullah II, in which 25 articles were amended.⁶

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Those amendments stirred up criticism among certain elements of the opposition concerning the expansion of the powers of the King, and the curtailment of the role of governments, in addition to the criticism of the amendments of 2016 concerning the establishment of the “National Security Council” headed by the King, which handles national security and foreign policy issues. This amendment is perceived as a direct interference in governmental responsibilities.⁷

The government justifies the amendments on the grounds that it moves important positions away from the competition of political parties and ensures their neutrality.⁸ Notwithstanding this justification, all the constitutional amendments, the enhanced restrictions on the freedom to assembly and expression and the

² Ibid.

³ “Document of the Royal Commission to Modernize the Political System: Proposed Legislation, Findings and Recommendations.” Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs, September 2021: www.moppa.gov.jo/AR/Pages/.

⁴ NASRAWIN, Laith, “Constitutional reforms in Jordan after the (Arab Spring).” *Kuwait International Law School Journal*, N 42, March 2023, p. 380.

⁵ Ibid, p. 435.

⁶ ALHABAHBEH, Waleed, “Inclusion of 25 articles in the draft amendment to the Jordanian constitution.” PETRA, 18 January 2022, <https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=201247&lang=ar&name=news>.

⁷ AL NAIMAT, Tareq, “Constitutional Amendments in Jordan.” The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, 1 March 2022, <https://carnegie-mec.org/sada/2022/03/constitutional-amendments-in-jordan?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

⁸ Ibid.

enactment of the Electronic Crimes Law have had a negative impact on the international freedom index overseen by Freedom House. In 2021, this organization downgraded the classification of Jordan from “partially free” to “not free,” a decision that will be harmful to Jordan’s image among Western countries, who provide the country with annual aid. It is important to remember here that Jordan depends on grants, espouses Western liberal values and is considered an important ally of the USA.⁹

Uncertain Economy

Due to Jordan’s poverty insofar as natural resources such as water and energy are concerned, its substantial dependence on foreign assistance and the many wars in the region, the Jordanian economy has, since the onset of the 21st century, been exposed to a number of convulsions and crises, such as: the Arab Spring of 2011, the Corona crisis of 2019, the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022, which affected the food supply chains, in addition to the recent war between Israel and Hamas, which began on 7 October 2023. In general, the Jordanian economy is small and liberal, and relies on foreign aid from, primarily, the US, secondly, the Gulf states and, thirdly, the European Union. American aid to Jordan from 1951 to 2020 amounted to around 26.4 billion dollars,¹⁰ and, moreover, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed in 2022 pertaining to a period of seven years under which Jordan avails of American financial assistance to the value of around 1.45 billion dollars annually, i.e. a total of 10.15 billion dollars by the year 2029.¹¹ Hence, Jordan is the second biggest recipient of American foreign aid in the Middle East after Israel, and, since 2021, the third at a global level after Afghanistan and Israel.¹² For

another example of foreign aid, we could consider the Gulf Cooperation Council’s assistance to Jordan, which amounted to 2.5 billion dollars over a period of five years, to help face the popular protests of 2018 in the face of the austerity measures imposed by the World Bank.¹³ Moreover, the European Union supported Jordan with the sum of 841 million euros to help it address the Corona pandemic in 2019.¹⁴

All the constitutional amendments have had a negative impact on the international freedom index

Perhaps due to this “absolute reliance” of the Jordanian economy on foreign aid, the former Deputy Prime Minister and current director of the office of King Abdullah II, Jaafar Hassan stated, in his book titled “The Jordanian Political Economy is Building in the Womb of Crises,” that “throughout the period 1967-1982, foreign aid sometimes surpassed the volume of domestic revenues. Thus, in 1975 the amount of foreign grants was more than 100 million JOD, as opposed to 82 million JOD in domestic revenues.”¹⁵ And in 1979, Hassan adds, “foreign aid reached 112% of the Jordanian national income, while in 2018, it did not surpass 12% of the budget of 2018.”¹⁶ This means – if we are to understand Hassan’s viewpoint – that Jordan will be self-reliant, which is something “positive” in the long term, but it will have “negative” consequences in the short and medium term, which is presently the condition witnessed by the Jordanian economy. In reality, the rate of unemployment reached in 2023 stood at 22.3%,¹⁷ while the size of the public debt for the

⁹ DILAWANI, Tariq, “Declining freedoms and instability in Jordan worry donor countries and Israel.” *Independent Arabia Newspaper*, October 17 2021, www.independentarabia.com/node.

¹⁰ “Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations.” Congressional Research Service, Washington, June 23 2023. p. 18.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ AL-KHALIDI, Suleiman, “Gulf countries deposit more than a billion dollars in Jordan as part of an aid package.” Amman, 5 October 2018: www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN1ME0XL/.

¹⁴ AL-KHAWALDEH, Saleh, “841 million euros, the volume of European support to Jordan to confront Corona.” Petra, 1 March 2021, https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=169859&lang=ar&name=news_

¹⁵ HASSAN, Jafar, *Jordanian Political Economy: Building Amidst Crises*, Alaam Publishers, Amman, 2020.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Press Release: “Statistics: 22.3% unemployment rate during the third quarter of 2023.” https://dosweb.dos.gov.jo/databank/news/unemployment/2023/unemp_Q3_2023.pdf.

same year amounted to \$46.51 billion. In 2024, it will be \$51.9 billion, and by 2029 it will stand at \$54.17 billion, according to the estimations of German financial institution “Statista.”¹⁸

In this context, we should avoid doing an injustice to the economic and fiscal policy of the Jordanian State, but rather actually give consideration to the political and military contexts witnessed by the Middle East region in terms of wars and crises. Thus, as a consequence of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Jordan opened its borders to five to six hundred thousand refugees,¹⁹ and in the wake of the “Arab Spring” uprisings in 2011, Jordan was forced to host around one million four hundred thousand Syrians, including 675,433 Syrian refugees registered with the UNHCR.²⁰ This placed a heavy burden on Jordan’s infrastructure in terms of roads, schools, hospitals etc.

Certainly, the war on Gaza in 2023 affected the Jordanian economy, not least its tourist industry, which saw 5.1 million tourist arrivals in the first nine months of 2023, providing an income of up to 4.8 billion JOD.²¹ In fact, the tourism sector accounted for around 18.3% of the domestic product in the first nine months of the same year.²²

Jordan is the second biggest recipient of American foreign aid in the Middle East after Israel

The World Economic Forum stated in an opinion survey conducted and published in 2024 that the Jordanian economy will be exposed to five risks and dangers in 2025 and 2026: unemployment, public debt, inflation, recession and contagious diseases.²³

Of course, this survey did not take into consideration the war in Gaza which erupted on 7 October.

The essential question which perennially presents itself is: how long will the Jordanian economy remain hostage to regional events and conflicts without the capability of developing the inherent immunity that would save it from sudden and rapid political transformations?

Al-Aqsa Flood War: The Continuing Danger

The “Al-Aqsa Flood” perpetrated by Hamas suddenly on 7 October 2023, and the “disproportionate” Israeli reaction, is part of the risks of the Palestine issue which constitutes a perpetual threat to the Jordanian State. There are reasons and factors which explain Jordan’s unavoidable connection with the Palestine issue:

1. A shared border measuring 450 km on the western side, in addition to the fact that the West Bank was a part of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan from 1951 until 1967.
2. It is possible for this war to have a negative effect on Jordan’s very existence, in the event that Israel implements a forced expulsion of the Palestinian people from the West Bank to Jordan, around half of whose population have Palestinian roots, and, in the final analysis, “the liquidation of the Palestine issue” at the expense of Jordan and its vital interests, which would lead to regional and global destabilization.

The Jordanian position vis-à-vis this war proceeded based on the formula of “cessation of escalation,” and the imperative of the “two-state solution.” However, in the wake of the announcement by Israel of

¹⁸ “Jordan: National debt from 2019 to 2029.” Statista, Hamburg, www.statista.com/statistics/531645/national-debt-of-jordan/.

¹⁹ BARNES, Anne Evans, “Realizing protection space for Iraqi refugees: UNHCR in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.” UNHCR, Research Paper No. 167, Geneva, 2009, p. 1.

²⁰ AL HUSSEINI, Jala, “Towards Durable and Inclusive Social Protection Policies for Syrian Refugees in Jordan.” Civil Society Knowledge Centre, Beirut, December 2022, p. 2.

²¹ “Tourism in Jordan between the beginning of recovery and unrest in the region.” Jordan Strategy Forum, Amman, 13 February 2024, <https://jsf.org/uploads.pdf>.

²² Ibid.

²³ “Jordan’s risks after the war on Gaza: Have they changed or remained the same?” Jordan Strategy Forum, Amman, 11 February 2024: <https://jsf.org/en/latest-research?slug=jordans-risks-after-the-war-on-gaza-have-they-changed-or-remained-the-same>.

its intention to exile the inhabitants of Gaza from the north to the south, Jordan joined the other Arab states in underscoring its “rejection of forcible displacement,” and calling for “ceasefire” in the Arab ministerial conference of the Arab League on 11 October.²⁴ In fact, the King made it very clear to the decision-makers of the influential states of the European Union, including the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz: “No refugees in Jordan, no refugees in Egypt; that is a red line.”²⁵

The King had advanced his viewpoint of the war in an article published in the Washington Post on 14 October 2023: “The two-state solution is the only means to achieve peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Moreover, it is not possible for the Israelis to think that security solutions alone would guarantee their safety and their continued normal life, whilst the Palestinians live in misery and injustice.”²⁶

It would be entirely unthinkable for Jordan to reconsider its peace strategy with Israel or deep alliance with the United States

In any case, it may be stated that Jordan relied on three strategies to confront this grave threat to its security and existence:

“Rapid De-escalation Strategy”

This targeted the Jordanian street, given that Jordan took a constellation of measures, most importantly, the cancellation of the quadrennial summit which was planned to be held in Amman with the presence of the American President on 18 October 2023, in

protest of the Israeli massacre in the Baptist Hospital in Gaza. Moreover, he announced the freezing of the signing of the water-for-energy deal with the Israelis. And on 1 November, Jordan recalled its ambassador in Israel.²⁷

Strategy of “Dynamic Diplomacy”

This includes shuttle diplomacy to the centres of decision-making in Europe: Paris, London, Berlin and the capitals of the Arab Gulf: Doha, Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, in addition to the United States, and not to mention participating in several conferences such as: the Cairo international peace summit on 21 October 2023, and the Arab and Islamic summit in Riyadh on 11 November 2023, as well as participation in all the General Assembly meetings of the United Nations.

Strategy of Humanitarian and Relief Activity

This strategy is based on the Jordanian Air Force implementing airdrops of humanitarian and food aid to Gaza, whereby 93 Jordanian air drops were implemented, and 242 airdrops in cooperation with Arab and Western states since the start of the war until May 2024,²⁸ in addition to sending field hospitals to assist the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza.

Politically, while it is true that Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in Wadi Araba in 1994, the relationship remained official rather than popular and was marred by numerous tensions and crises due to Israel’s rejection of a settlement of the Palestine issue on the basis of “land for peace.” The relations worsened upon the arrival of the extremist government of Mr Benjamin Netanyahu in November 2022, where the Jordanian monarch described the Jorda-

²⁴ RIDA, Mais, “Arab League: Immediate cessation of the Israeli war on Gaza.” *Addustour Newspaper*, Amman, 19 October 2023, www.addustour.com/articles/1373086.

²⁵ “The Jordanian king warns: The Middle East is on the verge of flames, and the displacement of Palestinians is a red line.” Euronews, 17 October 2023: https://arabic.euronews.com/2023/10/17/germany-jordan-king-conflict-israel-refugees-palestine-amas-displacement-war_.

²⁶ HM KING ABDULLAH II, “A two-state solution would be a victory for our common humanity.” *The Washington Post*, Washington, 14 October 2023, www.kingabdullah.jo/en/op-eds/two-state-solution-would-be-victory-our-common-humanity.

²⁷ “Foreign Affairs Summons Jordanian Ambassador to Tel Aviv Immediately.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Amman, 1 November 2023, www.mfa.gov.jo/news/81309.

²⁸ “The Jordanian Armed Forces carry out 7 airdrops of aid to northern Gaza.” PETRA, 9 May 2024, <https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.js?p?ID=279622&lang=ar&name=news&cat=news>.

nian-Israeli relationship since 2019 as being “at its lowest ebb possible.”²⁹

In any case, notwithstanding the tough Jordanian political discourse of the King, who characterized the Israeli war as a “barbaric” or “genocidal” assault on the Palestinian people, as also termed by the Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, it would be entirely unthinkable for Jordan to reconsider its peace strategy with Israel or deep alliance with the United States, where Jordan will likely follow a policy that strikes a balance between its alliance with the United States and an adoption of a position that rejects a liquidation of the Palestine issue and espouses a revival of the peace efforts in accordance with a two-state solution.

Conclusion

The experience of Jordan as a small state in a hot region that is rife with wars and conflicts highlights the fact that the “political wisdom” practised by the Hashemite leadership is capable of facing the “solid power” possessed by other actors from among the neighbouring states of the region. In reality, Jordan does not possess the luxury of being able to make mistakes or being extreme in its decisions and relations with other stronger actors. Accordingly, Jordanian foreign policy has been characterized by moderation, realism and rationality, enabling it to deal effectively with the totality of threats and crises over the past one hundred years.

Undoubtedly, the image of Jordan in the international arena in general, and the Western countries in particular is “bright” to a great extent. Jordan is politically open domestically and externally and strives for achieving peace in the Middle East through establishing peace with Israel. It should be mentioned that Jordan is the setting of an exemplary model of Muslim-Christian coexistence.

Notwithstanding this “positive view” of Jordan’s position, its role and image, one must be cautious of falling into the trap of excessive optimism, given that Jordan also lives in a difficult region that is politically and culturally complex and entails the strong possibility of rapid and serious transformation, particularly since the Jordanian State has so far been incapable of building a firm and solid democracy, despite repeated attempts. Moreover, the economic issue continues to be a source of anxiety to the Jordanian leadership. Certainly, the Palestine issue will remain the foremost threat to the Jordanian State unless a just and comprehensive solution is achieved, given that Jordan cannot be certain of Israel’s intentions and those of some of the major powers supporting it, which seek to “liquidate” the Palestine issue (such as the American deal of the century) at its expense, through the establishment of the so-called “alternative homeland.” Inescapably, Jordan would be the victim of such a decision and those positions.

And whilst waiting to see what the future holds and the intentions of the protagonists, the tranquil kingdom will live in a condition of stability surrounded by all manner of painful hardship and daunting challenges.

²⁹ “King of Jordan: Our relations with Israel are at their worst.” CNN Arabic, 22 November 2019, <https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2019/11/22/jordan-king-abdullah-israel-peace-talks-middle-east>.