

NOREF Expert Analysis

Jordan, the Syrian factor and street discontent

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Executive summary

Since its outbreak almost two years ago, King Abdullah of Jordan has struggled to keep the Arab Awakening at bay. Demonstrations, while angry and vociferous, have been largely small and passed the majority of the urban population by. And a series of moves by King Abdullah – headlined as reforms – have helped mollify some of the more disgruntled elements of the indigenous Bedouin population, who have long considered the kingdom theirs, but feel alienated and impoverished by the King's programme of privatisation and preference for an urban elite. However, there are increasing signs that Jordan's seeming immunity from regional tensions could

be fraying. A biting economic crisis has combined with the fallout from Syria's civil war to trigger a series of protests against the King, threatening to derail his economic and political roadmap. Emboldened by the regional rise to power of its sister movements, the Muslim Brotherhood is calling for a boycott of parliamentary elections, after the King endorsed an election law which leaves the in-built majority of Bedouin tribes in place. Protests have erupted countrywide over austerity measures designed to balance the budget, and the Syrian and regional struggles for regime change loom over all.

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Introduction

When Syrians rebelled against their leader in March 2011, King Abdullah of Jordan was the first Arab leader to publicly call on President Bashar al-Assad to quit. “If I were in his shoes, I’d step down,” he told the BBC in August 2011, confident that similar protests could never reach milder, more tolerant Jordan.

For over a year, his assessment seemed undisputed. However, a series of recent jolts have shaken his confidence. Faced with rising pockets of anger and demands for a redistribution of power on the streets, the King has sought to buy quiescence, borrowing beyond his means, driving Jordan’s budget deficit to \$3 billion and \$21 billion public debt, Jordan’s largest ever. In doing so he won time, but exacerbated his economic woes. In an exchange for a \$2.1 billion bail-out from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), he has – after initial backtracking – had to comply with their demands that he cut subsidies on fuel and electricity by October. On November 14th, he increased the cost of cooking gas by 14 percent, precipitating protests countrywide. An estimated 2,000 occupied the main intersection in Amman, chanting “revolution”; and, across the south and north, protestors derided the King.

The protests mark a rare convergence of interests and cause between the urbanised, predominantly Palestinian centre, where the Brotherhood has its strongholds, and the rural, predominantly Bedouin periphery. While it could be an exception, the common cries heard in both are likely to worry the king. He has repeatedly refused to concede to Brotherhood demands that he delay his plans for elections in January, which under the country’s electoral law will return a Bedouin-dominated tribal parliament to power.

The fallout from Syria

Added to his woes, the crisis in Syria is exacting an increasing economic, security and above all political cost, as opposition forces coalesce against the Assad regime. Fearing a day of reckoning in which the region’s Islamists notch up another victory, the king has reined back, sounding increasingly equivocal about the

wisdom of pursuing regime change in Syria. Some 200,000 Syrians have streamed into Jordan, says the government, twice as many as into Turkey – whose economy is 20 times the size of Jordan’s – to the north, straining basic infrastructure in what are already Jordan’s most populous provinces.

In contrast to Turkey, King Abdullah has endeavoured to subdue tensions, with considerable success. His forces have held fire when Syrian government forces shot at fleeing refugees or lobbed mortars that landed on the Jordanian side of the border. While concerned that Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile could fall into al-Qaeda or Hizbullah hands, reinforcements at the border backed by Western military advisors have so far maintained a defensive posture. Jordan has resisted pressure from Arab Gulf states to supply the rebels with arms. It plays host to Syria’s defecting former prime minister, Riad Hijab, whose ties to the Syrian establishment it prefers to the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Syrian National Council. And its forces have guarded the kingdom against the most ostensible signs of fallout, such as car-bombs, which have racked another neighbour, Lebanon.

However, the influx has brought security risks of its own. Thousands of rebel fighters have crossed into Jordan, seeking a place to recuperate and a launchpad for fresh attacks. Officials highlight the risk that their presence could provoke Syrian government agents to pursue them, activate what officials refer to as sleeper cells or precipitate a far larger rush of refugees southwards, particularly of Palestinians, further unsettling the kingdom’s East Bank/West Bank divide. Jordan has also pinned the blame for repeated protests and riots in Zaatari, its bleak desert internment camp housing 40,000 refugees near Mafraq, on Syrian *agents provocateurs*. Above all, it fears that the rise to power of Islamist movements in Egypt and the militarisation of Islamist movements in Syria and Iraq will further empower its own Islamist opposition, which is already flexing its muscles.

Domestic media attention of late has highlighted the growth of Jordan’s Salafi Jihadi groups. Dozens of Jordanians – particularly from Palestinian refugee camps – have rallied

to preachers seeking to enlist them in the jihad against “Allawite apostasy” ruling Syria. Funerals for the handful of Jordanians killed in martyrdom operations – a jihadi euphemism for suicide bombings – inside Syria are attended by hundreds of jubilant supporters. In a sign of their growing visibility, one of Jordan’s most prominent Salafis, Abu Sayyaf (also known as Mohammed al-Shalabi) led a rally outside the Prime Minister’s office in central Amman. Abu Sayyaf, who triggered a southern uprising after a failed attempt to detain him following the killing of a U.S. diplomat in Amman in 2002, denounced government inaction in Syria, and vowed to spearhead his own “deadly attacks” inside Syria. (The authorities have since railed off the roundabout where he demonstrated.) The passage of an estimated 250 Jordanians to Syria has been linked to a rise in suicide bombings in Dera’a, the birthplace of Syria’s revolt just across the border from Jordan, and Damascus. Officials voice concerns that some could also be honing skills in Syria for subsequent deployment in the kingdom. In October a Jordanian soldier was also killed seeking to prevent eight armed militants trying to cross into Syria.

Concerned by the rising capabilities of Jordan’s jihadi groups, they are shaken by the degree to which Syria’s uprising is galvanising Jordan’s Muslim Brotherhood. Buoyed by its ascendancy elsewhere in the region, the Brotherhood’s demands for reform inside Jordan have grown increasingly strident and its stance on the half-measures the King has adopted in response to the Arab Awakening ever more rejectionist. It declined his invitation to join a national dialogue, dismissed as “cosmetic” amendments to the constitution which left in place the King’s powers to appoint and dismiss a Prime Minister, and, as noted, is boycotting elections slated for January 23rd in protest at the amended electoral law. (The law assigns over 80 percent of the seats to local constituencies, gerrymandered to weaken urban representation, and the remainder to national party lists and appointees.) Opting for the streets over the parliamentary process, in October it staged the largest protest of the Arab Awakening, dwarfing hitherto vociferous and angry but largely ill-attended protests, which the authorities number at some 7,000. While officials dispute the size of the protest (estimates range upwards of 10,000),

Brotherhood leaders claim they have achieved a critical mass and say they are only a move away from organising a permanent protest on the model of Egypt’s Tahrir Square.

Girding up for a showdown

The King has so far refused to budge. Although officials acknowledge that the Brotherhood is the kingdom’s largest organised movement, they argue that it has overplayed its hand and, with what the King claims to be 12 percent of public support, lacks the mass support required for such tactics to succeed. As evidence of the King’s own standing, they point to the registration of over 2 million of a potential 3.4 million electorate for the January elections.

In other times, the Brotherhood’s stance might not have unnerved the King. Established in Jordan in the mid-1940s, the Brotherhood was for decades the kingdom’s only legal and loyal opposition. Under King Hussein, it functioned as a pillar of the establishment, grateful for and acknowledging of Hashemite tolerance at a time when the movement in neighbouring Egypt and Syria was banned. King Hussein licensed an office for Hamas, the Brotherhood’s Palestinian offshoot, and intervened with Israel to secure the release of Hamas’s leader Ahmed Yassin, after a botched operation by Mossad in Amman to kill the then head of its Jordan office.

However, under King Abdullah, relations have noticeably worsened. Indicative of his view of the Brotherhood in a kingdom he wanted to westernise, within months of his succession in February 1999, he closed Hamas’s office and expelled Meshal. In 2006, his intelligence officers rigged elections Mubarak-style, reducing the Brotherhood’s share of parliamentary seats – which had reached 33 percent under King Hussein – to 6 percent, and confiscated its welfare arm, the Islamic Centre, Jordan’s largest charity. In an initial attempt to ride the wave of Brotherhood victories in North Africa, he briefly toyed with engagement. Arousing East Bank protests, among inhabitants who feared the growing clout of the Brotherhood’s West Bank rank-and-file, he gave Meshal a royal audience (alongside the Qatari emir) and appointed a

Prime Minister, Aoun Khasawneh, who advocated a rapprochement with the Brotherhood and termed Meshal's expulsion a mistake. However, within seven months, Khasawneh was out of a job.

As the mood turns increasingly confrontational, the King has pursued a foreign policy which further sidelines their influence. Not only has the Brotherhood's weight in official politics substantially diminished from the King Hussein era, but in the wake of the Arab Awakening it is markedly less than that in neighbouring states. Indicative of his gnawing fear of an Islamist-dominated post-Assad era, in early November, to the chagrin of the Muslim Brotherhood, he received the Assad regime's prime foreign supporter, the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov. At the same time his officials have played up the regional dangers posed by rebels. On October 21st, Jordanian state television reported that security officials had foiled two plots instigated by jihadis in Syria to bomb shopping centres and U.S. targets in Jordan. Semi-official commentators present the threat as greater than that of al-Qaeda-backed insurgents in Iraq, who in 2005 bombed landmark hotels in Amman, killing 60. While Jordan was insulated from Iraq by a 1,000-kilometre desert, they noted, Syria's battlefields were less than 100 kilometres away.

The King's change of heart dovetails with a wider reassessment of Syrian policy, particularly in the U.S., following the killing in Benghazi of the U.S. ambassador to Libya by jihadi militants. Fearful that regime change will leave Syria under the sway of jihadis, as it has in Libya and Afghanistan, the U.S. has sought to define the post-Assad order before endorsing an armed overthrow of Syria's regime. It has renounced the Syrian National Council, the opposition body dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood, and engineered the creation of a more pluralist front. In a harkback to a pre-Arab Awakening era, it has also moved to prop up the King, militarily and economically heavily backing the IMF package.

The King's realignment won plaudits from some East Bankers, but cries of anguish from Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood. "Lavrov, you are not welcome," read the headline in the Brotherhood's newspaper, *Al-Sabil*. It voiced its

"deep reservations" about the King's decision to receive the "murderer of Syrian children". And it has upped the ante by vowing to accelerate its support for Syrian refugees and rebels (the two are often merged into one). As for Jordan's domestic political process, the deputy head of the Islamic Action Front, Zaki Beni Irshad, warned that, if the King persisted with elections in January, "it would be close to political suicide."

What hope for a deal?

The King and the Islamists have both held back from a total break. Brotherhood leaders still hang portraits of the King (with a beard) in their offices, and preach reform, not revolution (though some younger hot-heads go further). For its part, the palace has neither sought to ban the Brotherhood nor ruled out a deal once the elections are over. In a recent overture, the King's men appointed a Brotherhood member to run the Islamic Centre, perhaps as a first step to restoring the Brotherhood's ownership.

Looking to maximise their leverage, the Islamists see both an opportunity to harness the discontent across the political divide and rouse Jordan's historically docile middle class, and conversely an enhanced position from which to negotiate terms. Given its domestic clout and regional connections, the Brotherhood has much to offer the King. Not only can it bring the King much-needed political buy-in to implement the IMF's austerity measures, it can use its connections with its sister movement empowered in Egypt to revive the deal on supplying Egyptian gas, whose collapse Jordan blames for its spiralling deficit.

Yet, with both the Brotherhood and the King girding for a showdown, such a deal is by no means certain. As the oldest legalised movement in the region, Jordan's Brotherhood is unlikely to shy from its struggle for power, which far less established movements elsewhere in the region have won. At the same time, at a time of regional turmoil the King is unwilling to gamble away his East Bank support, and appears enmeshed within the political fray rather than governing above it. Should the protests escalate, he may no longer have the luxury of postponing negotiations until after elections.