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EUROPE AND JORDAN: REFORM BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

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SUMMARY

Although many in Europe perceive Jordan as a beacon of stability in a volatile region, it is in fact experiencing its own slow-burning awakening. Despite King Abdullah's promise of rapid reform in early 2011, he has resisted meaningful change that would loosen his hold on power. Even so, it is hard to see how the king will be able to turn back the forces of change sweeping the region. While it is, therefore, tempting for the European Union to continue with its current "hug and hold" approach, this threatens to increase popular disenchantment and fuel wider instability. This would be bad for the king, bad for Jordan and bad for Europe.

While reform will clearly have to be home-grown, the EU should take a more assertive approach to Jordan. The EU is Jordan's second-largest trading partner and has committed nearly €300 million in EU funding and approximately €1.2 billion in bilateral loans and grants over the next three years. This gives it significant influence with Jordan at a time of growing economic challenges. The EU should use this leverage in an ongoing effort to press King Abdullah to reform before it is too late. It should reinforce its policy towards Jordan by making support more conditional on real progress rather than simply the promise of reform.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has long been regarded as an island of stability in a tumultuous region. However, in the wake of the Arab Awakening it too is now beginning to feel tremors of unrest. To be sure, signs of revolutionary change remain far off and King Abdullah continues to enjoy broad legitimacy. Yet Jordanians across the political spectrum are increasingly frustrated and the king is facing unprecedented criticism as he becomes more directly associated with the exercise of power, eroding the mystique that has long protected him from criticism directed at his government.

In early 2011 Abdullah quickly responded to regional unrest by promising to initiate rapid reform. However, the country has not yet witnessed any meaningful political opening. Although there have been some adjustments to the legislative framework, the king appears to be forestalling any change that would dilute his own absolute powers. Meanwhile, he is doing as his father always did: showing how valuable an asset he and his country is to the outside world, whether as a supporter of the Middle East Peace Process or a confidante in the fight against extremism. For example, Jordan played an active role in the campaign against Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, and earlier this year hosted talks between Israelis and Palestinians.

Nonetheless, despite this internal and external manoeuvring, it is hard to see how Abdullah can turn back the forces of change now sweeping the region. Moreover, a failure to grasp the magnitude of the crisis and embark on a

transparent reform programme that results in a meaningful diminution of his absolute powers threatens to increase popular disenchantment and fuel wider instability, bringing uncertainty to the country's future.

Europe should therefore take a more assertive stand to persuade King Abdullah to liberalise before it is too late. The February 2012 EU–Jordanian task force, co-chaired by High Representative Catherine Ashton and supported by Bernardino Leon, the European Union Special Representative (EUSR) for the Southern Mediterranean, marks an important statement of intent. It highlights Brussels' desire to devote real time and effort to the reform process in one of its key southerly allies. The task force, aimed at strengthening co-operation and providing greater support for Jordan's reform process, offered the king enhanced political and economic assistance in exchange for a commitment to reform.¹ This is what has been called a "hug and hold" approach: the EU aims to hug the monarch close and hold him to promises of change. However, while such an approach is particularly tempting now, not least to spare the king's blushes at a time of regional upheaval, it could prove detrimental to all parties if it does not result in meaningful reform and fails to prevent wider unrest.

Europe is Jordan's second-largest trading partner and has committed nearly €300 million in EU funding over the coming three years, in addition to approximately €1.2 billion which member states will provide in bilateral loans and grants over the same period. As such it has significant leverage, particularly at a time when Jordan faces considerable economic challenges. While Europe will need to hold off from making all assistance conditional, it should follow through on its designation of 2012 as the year of delivery, particularly if it wants to maintain the credibility of its new European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), which commits it to renewed support for "deep democracy" in its southern neighbourhood.

Simmering discontent

Following the eruption of revolutionary unrest in North Africa it did not take long for the Arab Awakening to reach Jordan. While only a few hundred people took part in the first demonstrations in Amman in January 2011, which focused on dissatisfaction over high prices and taxation, it nonetheless marked an important moment. The Muslim Brotherhood, long the dominant voice of the political opposition, was quick to join the protests and numbers increased to 10,000 in February when its political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), joined forces with a coalition of opposition parties. The (temporary) united front voiced demands for political reform including a new government and the transfer of increased powers to the hitherto toothless

parliament. These urban protests were accompanied by small-scale demonstrations in towns and villages right across the country.

Protests continued on a weekly basis for the rest of the year. Although some included only a few hundred people, Muslim Brotherhood participation (which has ebbed and flowed) regularly brought the numbers up into the thousands. Small-scale clashes with security forces also periodically broke out, with police occasionally using teargas. On 25 March 2011 one protestor was killed following clashes with alleged pro-regime thugs (baltagiya). However, by and large, the demonstrations have remained peaceful, with security forces refraining from an armed response. In February 2011, a legislative change was made that legalised public demonstrations.

One year on, simmering discontent continues. A number of incidents in the early months of 2012 have served to highlight the sense of uncertainty hanging over the kingdom. On 26 January, 18-year-old Odai Abu-Issa was sentenced by a security court to two years in prison for burning a picture of the king (a further nineteen activists were charged with insulting the king in March and April).² On 29 January, security forces clashed with youth demonstrators in Tafileh. On 3 February, violent clashes broke out in Amman following the arrest of Ahmad Oweidi Abbadi, a former MP, after he called for the establishment of a republican system. Protests have also expanded to the public sector: demonstrations by teachers in Amman in early 2012 drew thousands. Of symbolic importance, a 24 February protest in Amman was led by the former premier and intelligence chief Ahmad Obeidat, who in mid-2011 established the National Front for Reform.

The nature of this burgeoning opposition reveals a complex and diverse challenge facing the king. On one side, he faces pressure from established political bodies, notably the IAF, the Muslim Brotherhood's political arm. Empowered by the Arab Awakening, it is calling for a clear democratic opening. Zaki Bani Irshad, head of the IAF, says: "The king cannot have ultimate power. We want a real democracy where the people choose the government."³ Having long represented the most significant political force in the country, the IAF is nonetheless itself excluded from real power.

The IAF's goal is political liberalisation that empowers it and its constituents, many of whom are Palestinian refugees long settled in Jordan but face significant marginalisation as a result of gerrymandering in favour of tribal constituencies, and wider restrictions on citizenship rights.⁴ The IAF

¹ For the task force conclusions see http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/128114.pdf

² Abu-Issa was eventually given a royal pardon and freed on 8 March.

³ Unless stated otherwise, quotes are from interviews with the author in Amman in January and February 2012.

⁴ The current electoral system is based on the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system ("one man, one vote") and the distribution of seats is heavily balanced in favour of tribal areas. The use of this system is justified by the claim that the largely Palestinian population in urban centres are not Jordanians and that once a Palestinian state is created they will leave, even if this is clearly unlikely.

calls for fair elections and for the king to give up his right to appoint prime ministers and cabinets to parliament; effectively it wants a meaningful parliamentary democracy. Nonetheless, it also makes clear that it is willing to play by the rules of the game. Thus Irshad calls for “reform of the regime rather than the fall of the regime” and the IAF has shown a willingness to accept less than extensive changes to the electoral balance that would boost its parliamentary standing while not challenging tribal dominance. One political analyst in Amman says that “the Islamists see unrest as an opportunity to fully integrate into the political system, not to bring it down.”

Meanwhile – and very importantly – the past year has seen the emergence of powerful forces of discontent from the country’s East Bank tribes (Transjordanians who lived in the country prior to the arrival of Palestinian refugees) that have long represented the regime’s power base. This group traditionally exchanged its support for privileged access to jobs in the state bureaucracy, including the security services, as well as broader economic reward. However, the tribes increasingly feel that they are being abandoned in favour of the Palestinian-dominated urban elite, with the state no longer able to meet the demands of new jobs, higher salaries and rural development.⁵ Over the past two decades East Bankers have seen their interests shrink as a result of privatisations, cuts in public spending and the decline of the country’s agricultural sector. For the tribal base, the primary goal of their discontent is to ensure that their historic privileges are guaranteed – aims that necessitate a reassertion of networks of patronage, but also political reform as a means of asserting their rights in the face of perceived marginalisation. The East Bankers no longer trust the existing system to work to their advantage.

The signs of tribal discontentment have been notable, serving more than anything else to highlight the evolving dynamic of unrest. In February 2011, a number of prominent tribespersons wrote an open statement demanding reform and directly criticised Queen Rania, accusing her (Palestinian) family of stealing tribal land for their own financial gain. The public letter and the direct criticism of the king’s family broke a major taboo. In June 2011, meanwhile, a convoy of cars carrying the king near Tafileh was reported by some media outlets to have been pelted with stones, though the royal court denied the story.

Meeting these two competing demands will clearly be very difficult for the king. Any move to empower the IAF and its constituents through a fair political system will not only directly challenge his powers but will also threaten the hold of East Bankers. As a result, many Palestinians, fearful that absolutist demands will provoke a fierce tribal backlash, have not mobilised or refrain from calling for full electoral equality. Conversely, a consolidation of East Bank

domination will serve to stunt any move towards political liberalisation. While there is common cause among some activists on both sides – seen most clearly in Obeidat’s National Front for Reform, which unites differ parties from across the political and communal spectrum – the divisive question of state identity and the rights of Palestinians who now account for as much as 50 percent of the population is once again rearing its head.

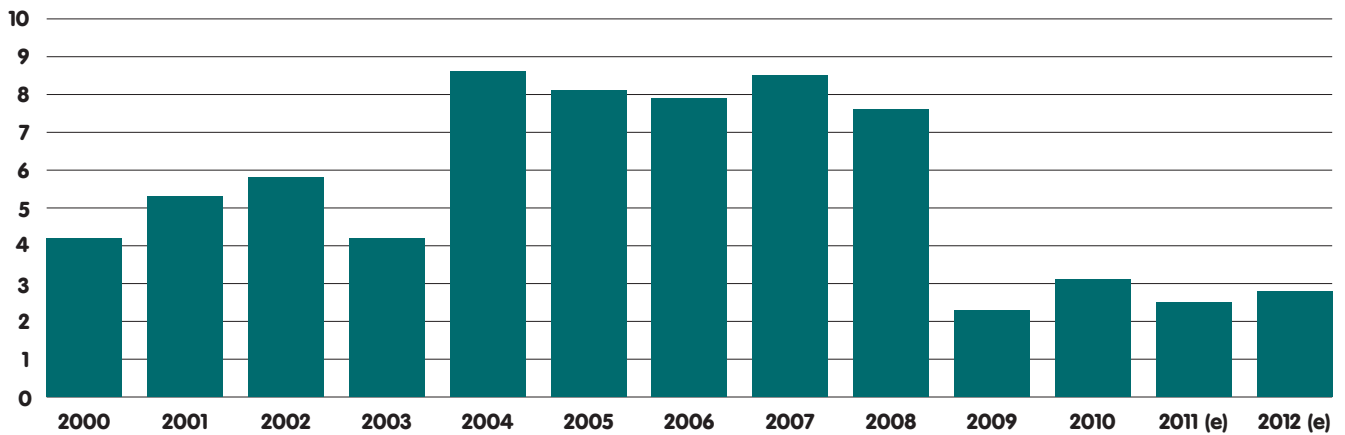
Many East Bankers view Palestinians as a fifth column and fear that granting them greater rights raises the prospect of Jordan emerging as the alternative Palestinian homeland periodically broached as a means of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Fearful of empowering Palestinians at their own expense, they continue to limit the extent of their desired political reforms. The powerful security apparatus, in particular, remains opposed to any reform that would empower Islamists and Palestinians and is reported to have blocked political outreach efforts to the IAF over the past year.⁶ In January, military veterans created a new political party, the Jordanian National Conference, with nationalism a central focus of its platform. Though still a nascent political vehicle, the party points to the desire of some East Bankers to mobilise around a narrow agenda that focuses on their own interests.

The king is not, of course, without options. Division can also play to his advantage, and he has long used the threat of communal competition to paint himself as the country’s indispensable unifier, a message that holds traction for many. Over the past year the regime has appeared to play off this divide with regime-sanctioned voices blaming Palestinians and Islamists for the violence of 25 March 2011. Meanwhile, the failure of the urban and tribal opposition to unite around a common cause has weakened its ability to impose meaningful pressure on the king. Violent clashes between tribal groups and the IAF in the town of Mafraq in December 2011 illustrated their competing ambitions (security forces allegedly held back as the violence unfolded leading some critics to accuse the regime of fanning communal tensions). “Everyone needs the king to balance other groups,” says one journalist in Amman. “The different groups have no common agenda and are afraid of each other.”

⁵ Privatisations of state (and patronage-rich) companies and the sale of tribal lands have been particularly contentious.

⁶ The security services are reported to have blocked outreach efforts to the IAF by the current Jordanian government of Awn Khasawneh.

Figure 1
Annual GDP Growth (World Bank/IMF) 2000-2012



Economic challenges

As challenging for the king as the growing political unease is the distressing economic outlook in Jordan, which has few natural resources and a weak manufacturing sector. In 2011, the economy grew by 2.5 percent, compared to 8 percent between 2004 and 2007. According to official figures, unemployment rose to 13 percent, though some observers believe it is as high as 30 percent.⁷ To keep pace with population growth, the government needs to create at least 100,000 jobs every year – a very difficult task with the current weak state of the economy and poor immediate growth prospects. In addition, repeated attacks on Egyptian gas pipelines in the Sinai have forced Jordan to use more expensive fuel to maintain domestic electricity supplies.⁸ Despite structural reforms including privatisation, the budget deficit was estimated at \$2 billion, or 10.4 percent of GDP in 2011. It is exacerbated by a large defence budget, which according to the World Bank accounted for 19.6 percent of total government spending in 2009 (a clear sign of the powerful hold of the East Bank dominated security apparatus over the country).

The government sustains itself through foreign support. In 2011, Saudi Arabia provided Jordan with direct aid worth \$1.4 billion, while also selling the country discounted crude oil. Meanwhile, in December, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) set up a \$2.5 billion development fund for

the country. Jordanian membership of the GCC was mooted in 2011 but an association agreement now seems more likely. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Gulf will continue to offer the country important financial backing (even if the concrete deliverable may in fact ultimately be lower than the amount promised). For the predominantly authoritarian monarchies that make up the Gulf, shoring up Abdullah's position has gained new urgency as a means of preventing revolutionary unrest from seeping from regional republics into its monarchies, a trend that could ultimately threaten their own domestic stability. The GCC narrative is that unlike the "coupist republics", the monarchies of the region have deep legitimacy and the loyalty of their citizenry. As a result they are confident that – aided by state largesse – they will not experience the revolutionary wave, but also that their reform process can and should be more gradual and calibrated. If Jordan were to pop, however, this narrative would instantly be undermined, threatening the spread of unrest into monarchical regimes.

The United States government also provided more than \$800 million in financial and military aid in 2011. Like Gulf support, American aid is premised on an external motivator: maintaining stability within Jordan so as to protect the country's peace treaty with Israel. For its part, the EU plays a much smaller role. Over the next three years Brussels will provide a total of nearly €300 million, in addition to approximately €1.2 billion from all the member states in the form of bilateral loans and grants.

However, even with this all this support, the government is still under economic pressure to cut spending. One of the king's first acts in response to growing unrest last year was to increase state sector salaries and subsidies, but since then he has attempted to make cuts. The proposed 2012 budget envisages cuts to universal subsidies (fuel and food) as well as cuts in public sector hiring. The government has also

⁷ According to the World Bank, tourism income has fallen by 16 percent and foreign direct investment by 32 percent over the past year due to regional unrest and with levels of inflation hovering at about 5 percent, levels of poverty are increasing. See IMF, "Statement at the Conclusion of the 2012 Article IV Mission to Jordan", press release, 7 February 2012, available at <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2012/pr1240.htm>; and M. Tayseer, "Jordanian Economy to Grow 3% to 4% This Year, World Bank Says", *Bloomberg*, 7 February 2012, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-02-07/jordanian-economy-to-grow-3-to-4-this-year-world-bank-says.html>

⁸ According to officials, the attacks have cost Jordan more than \$1.5 billion in 2011. See <http://asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=6&id=28301>

said it will raise taxes and it increased electricity prices by between 9 and 17 percent at the beginning of 2012. However, this provoked an “energy crisis”, with 44 MPs calling for the resignation of the minister of electricity in March. With economic discontent lying at the heart of the protest movement, it remains to be seen whether the king truly has the stomach to embark on painful cost-cutting and he may well try and kick the issue into the long grass. Cuts to government spending are particularly likely to provoke popular anger among East Bankers who are more likely to work in the public sector or live in rural areas. According to one political analyst in Amman, “weathering the current storm will be completely dependent on how much money they can get coming in to pay people off.”

The king’s response

Despite these political and economic challenges, there is no revolutionary situation in Jordan. King Abdullah continues to enjoy broad support and voices of discontent are not calling for regime change. For a country only created in 1921 and deeply divided along the East and West Banks as a result of the unresolved presence of its Palestinian population, the monarch maintains legitimacy as a much-needed symbol of national unity. Even so, it is clear that Jordan has been impacted by the regional paradigm shift. The barrier of silence, if not fear, has been broken and demands for political reform have grown stronger as the year has progressed. Economic problems have exacerbated these tensions.

Increasingly, the king is himself being criticised for his mismanagement of the political environment, personal involvement in corruption and wider personnel choices. There are now calls for sweeping change, including the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. The king’s response to the events of the past year has been lacklustre at best. Despite an early burst of enthusiasm, during which he promised accelerated reform, subsequent months have left observers sceptical. While he knows that he has to stay ahead of the game if he is to keep unrest in check, he has resisted weakening his absolute hold on power in the last year.

When protests first began in early 2011, the incumbent government of Samir Rifai quickly reversed some its fiscal tightening measures by increasing subsidies on energy and basic food goods, hoping that a loosening of the purse strings might be sufficient to fend off dissent. However, as protests assumed a political edge, Abdullah also moved on that front, sacking Rifai on 1 February and appointing Marouf al-Bakhit to “undertake quick and tangible steps for real political reforms.”⁹ In March 2011, the king established a National Dialogue Committee (NDC) to draft new

electoral and political parties laws and in April he created the Royal Committee for Constitutional Reforms (RCCR) to look at amending the constitution. The king appointed the members of both bodies; the Muslim Brotherhood refused to participate, demanding the formation of a government led by the parliamentary majority before reform could advance.¹⁰ Nonetheless the king appeared to be making the right noises and in June acknowledged that parliamentary majorities should choose the prime minister rather than the king, albeit cautioning that the process would take several years before it could be implemented.¹¹

In the first tangible results of the reform process, the RCCR returned proposals for 42 constitutional amendments, 40 of which were approved by parliament and subsequently passed into law by the king in September. The changes, the first significant amendments to the constitution since it was adopted in 1952, included the establishment of a constitutional court and an independent election commission to oversee elections in place of the interior ministry. In and of themselves the measures were significant and an important mark that the constitution remains a living document that can be amended in line with reform needs.

However, significant reforms to the political parties and electoral laws (which currently make it hard to form new parties and discriminate against the urban, predominantly-Palestinian, population) have been slow to materialise.¹² The NDC submitted draft amendments to these laws in late 2011, but the process, which was originally tasked with completion by June 2011, has moved forward at a snail’s pace. It was further delayed by the king’s decision in October 2011 to appoint a new prime minister, Awn Khasawneh, who subsequently delayed their passage into law.¹³ Furthermore, the proposed amendments remain insufficient. The draft electoral law proposes a proportional representation system to replace the current system but does not redraw district boundaries, ensuring that tribal areas will continue to secure a vastly disproportionate number of parliamentary seats.

Many, including the IAF, see the reform measures as less than the fundamental overhaul that they demand. Other than limiting the king’s ability to postpone elections, the new measures do not place any new restrictions on the monarchy’s right to appoint and dismiss prime ministers and their cabinets. While reforms to the legislative and electoral environment are to be welcomed, they remain hollow if not accompanied by a corresponding weakening of the king’s hold on executive power, restrictions on the remit of the security services and the establishment of an independent judiciary.

⁹ “Jordan’s king sacks government, appoints new PM amid street protests”, the *Globe and Mail*, 1 February 2011, available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/africa-mideast/jordans-king-sacks-government-appoints-new-pm-amid-street-protests/article1889831>

¹⁰ This point is accepted by some palace advisors. “At the moment the government has no legitimacy to make decisions,” says one. “You need a clear and fair election to create a legitimate government that can then start a broader reform process.”

¹¹ D. Gavlak, “Jordan’s King Abdullah vows to allow elected cabinets”, BBC News, 12 June 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13744640>

¹² A draft political parties law was finally submitted to parliament in January 2012; the draft electoral law should be submitted in March 2012.

¹³ To his credit, Khasawneh, a well-respected former ICJ judge, is said to be insisting on the quality of new legislation rather than the speed with which it is passed. However, in many circles he is viewed as an outsider, and according to one Western diplomat in Amman, he faces strong opposition from the security services.

Corruption trials

Increasingly, the central focus of the king's reforms efforts appears to be a campaign against corruption and a number of senior level figures have been arrested. Chief among them was Muhammad Dahabi, who ran the powerful General Intelligence Directorate from 2005 to 2008 and was arrested in February 2012. However, the strategy has been widely criticised as the scapegoating of a few rather than a systematic attempt to root out corruption, which would entail a more widespread campaign that could implicate very senior-level figures including members of the royal family itself. "People are scared," said one royal advisor. "You need institutional reform." Insiders claim that the anti-corruption committee has not been given a powerful mandate and has been barred from prosecuting certain high-level figures. Meanwhile, street protestors appear to have not bought the ruse, with demonstrators in early 2012 calling for the "real thieves" to be brought to justice.

Meanwhile, the king is also playing other cards to slow any advance. Since unrest began, the kingdom has been led by three different governments, highlighting the Hashemite monarchy's longstanding policy of defusing popular pressure through government changes. With each new government bringing in new personnel and ideas, the rapidly revolving doors of government are a sure way to slow the pace of change and in some cases even reverse change. The first reshuffle saw a return to office of al-Bakhit, a former security official widely accused of rigging the 1997 election during his previous tenure as premier – hardly a credible implementer of a meaningful reform strategy.¹⁴ Worryingly for the king, it nonetheless appears that this tactic is slowly losing traction: increasingly Abdullah is becoming associated in the popular imagination with the direct exercise of power, making him more vulnerable than ever to political discontentment.

In defence of the slow pace of reform, officials are quick to cite the lack of a sufficiently mature democratic political culture, including responsible issues-based political parties, as well as the perennial threat of an Islamist takeover. "Political development is what is needed, not reform," explained one senior level government official. "At the moment there is only one mature political party, that of the Muslim Brotherhood, and it is not fair that it is the only choice open to the Jordanian people." The case of Egypt, which has seen the Muslim Brotherhood dominate alongside the Salafists, has bolstered this view, both among the Jordanian elite around the King, but also with foreign governments. However, it begs the

question: what have the authorities done over the past year to overcome these weaknesses and allow the development of a more engaged political civil society? The answer is very little. Moreover, Jordan's progress over the past year stands in contrast to that of Morocco, which – though still problematic – has witnessed much quicker reform including constitutional changes increasing government and parliamentary powers and a November election resulting in an Islamist government.

Like other regional leaders, Abdullah also uses the bogeyman of regional instability to reject calls for a more rapid political opening, claiming that internal weakness associated with reform will be exploited by external forces. Neighbouring a still volatile Iraq, and with potential civil war in Syria likely to provoke refugee inflows and potential regional instability, the king's message resonates powerfully. Nonetheless, the regime will have to tread very carefully. In a somewhat provocative move, the king's uncle Prince Hassan went on the airwaves in March to condemn protestors and say that they were being driven by external hands. The remarks, which sounded eerily similar to those made by Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Gaddafi and Bashar al-Assad, do not bode well for the regime's sensitivity towards the protest movement.¹⁵

A decade of inaction

To understand King Abdullah's reaction to the Arab Awakening, it is necessary to place the last year within the broader context of his 13 years in power. Since ascending to the throne in 1999, Abdullah has succeeded in crafting an international image as a reforming moderniser. Thus the EU task force "emphasised the progress achieved after His Majesty King Abdullah assumed his power in 1999, where Jordan had witnessed its first steps towards a path to greater democracy."¹⁶ But, if anything, there has been a consolidation of authoritarian rule, with analysts referring to the emergence of a presidential palace more directly involved in executive decision-making than ever before. While Jordan is certainly not a brutal security state along the lines of its northern neighbour, and citizens do not suffer from pervasive petty corruption visible elsewhere in the region, Freedom House has downgraded Jordan from "partly free" in 2001 to "not free" now.¹⁷ According to Human Rights Watch, "Jordanian officials pride themselves on a better rights record than their neighbors, but the kingdom has barely advanced rights protections over the past decade."¹⁸

Since coming to power, the king has launched a number of reform programmes, and has introduced each new government with a clear focus on reform. However, none of

¹⁴ One Jordanian journalist commented: "The king says he wants reform but then brings a corrupt person back into office." However, as one foreign diplomat in Amman noted, the new prime minister would have appealed to the regime's traditional base and particularly the large security apparatus.

¹⁵ N. Noe and W. Raad, "Does 'Friday of Sieve' Show Jordan Royals Slipping?", *Bloomberg*, 28 February 2012, available at <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-02-28/does-friday-of-sieve-show-jordan-royals-slipping-noe-raad.html>

¹⁶ See the task force conclusions, available at http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/128114.pdf

¹⁷ See Freedom House country report, available at <http://www.freedomhouse.org/country/jordan>

¹⁸ Human Rights in Jordan, Human Rights Watch, available at <http://www.hrw.org/middle-eastn-africa/jordan>

these new governments or reform programmes has resulted in any meaningful change. The first reform programme, the Jordan First Initiative, which began after the king dissolved parliament in June 2001, was geared towards political and economic reform. Despite consultation on the need for wider political liberalisation and the establishment of a new “contract” between the state and the people, there were few tangible deliverables except the establishment of a parliamentary quota for women. Concurrent measures to liberalise the economy are widely believed to have helped enrich the urban coterie around the monarch and thus exacerbate the wealth gap with the rest of the country.

The second reform initiative was preceded by the establishment of a ministry of political development, which was ostensibly aimed at strengthening public freedoms and political parties but which has hitherto failed to deliver on its mandate. In 2005, the king commissioned a National Agenda committee, which included opposition voices from the Muslim Brotherhood, to draft political, economic and social reforms. According to the head of the committee, Marwan Muasher, the National Agenda proposed “moving away from tribal-based politics and transitioning to a stronger, party-based parliament.” However, “armed with support from most of the state’s political and military institutions, the elite once again invoked the argument of stability versus reform and painted the entire plan as premature and dangerous.”¹⁹ The proposed reforms were quickly shelved.

The king then appointed a new prime minister, al-Bakhit, who at the time was widely believed to oppose reform efforts. His “We are all Jordan” initiative was launched in 2006 but effectively pushed the key political questions off the table. Instead, the new government turned towards anti-corruption legislation as a means of diverting public pressures – a process that has come to full fruition today (see box above). The subsequent 2007 parliamentary election was widely perceived to have been rigged by the al-Bakhit government, with the IAF winning just six seats.

If anything, Jordan has actually regressed over recent years. In 2007, a new law transferred control of political parties away from the ministry of political development to the ministry of interior, effectively giving the security services, which already control the electoral process, greater control over political life. A second law, the Charitable Societies Law of 2008 severely restricted the ability of NGOs to register or receive foreign funding.²⁰ In 2010, a law on Information System Crimes restricted online expression. As a result, the political and public mood has slowly – but surely – soured. The lack of political progress and the rigged 2007 election pushed the IAF towards an electoral boycott, while widening

The king vs. the elite?

Some in the royal palace say that the king’s attempts to reform are blocked by intransigent elites in parliament and the security services, who fear losing their privileged status within the system. But while there may be internal opposition to reform, few doubt the absolute power of the king, who appoints and dissolves governments and security chiefs and is the ultimate arbiter between different factions. “If the king wanted reform there would be reform,” says one former high-level government official. The king has not yet publicly committed himself to a wide-ranging reform agenda or followed up on his June statement expressing support for parliamentary democracy, which has left many doubting his true intentions. “The king has tremendous powers,” says one official. “Why would he change that without substantial pressure?”

economic difficulties provoked growing anger across the governates, resulting in the emergence of periodic protests even before 2011.

Thus, despite King Abdullah’s reputation, it is hard to point to any meaningful reform over the course of his time in power. Despite paying frequent lip service to the idea of reform, and establishing successive governments and committees with the express purpose of advancing political liberalisation, no significant change occurred. The past year should be viewed within this context.

The risks for Europe

As a key long-term regional ally, what happens in Jordan matters to Europe. The ramifications of widening unrest on both the domestic and regional environment, as well as broader European regional interests – whether they be material, security- or value-driven – could be considerable.

Against a backdrop of failure to deliver on promised reform, there are growing risks of political and economic instability in Jordan. The lesson of the past year shows that even the apparently most stable of authoritarian systems can be fatally shaken by a sudden eruption of popular pressure. In a country with a deep divide between East Bankers and its Palestinian population, unrest could provoke deeply destabilising communal unrest and even violence. While conflict represents an unlikely scenario, heightened tension centred on the question of identity and nationalism, could serve to create a highly disruptive political environment. Equally, the failure of the political reform process could encourage political extremism. As has been seen elsewhere in the region, longstanding discrimination and frustrated political ambitions serve to push marginalised groups

¹⁹ M. Muasher, “A Decade of Struggling Reform Efforts in Jordan: The Resilience of the Rentier System”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2011, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/05/11/decade-of-struggling-reform-efforts-in-jordan-resilience-of-rentier-system/1gf>

²⁰ In interviews in Amman in January, several NGOs noted that the registration process had been made considerably harder over recent years and that the security services were playing an increasingly dominant role in obstructing their activities.

towards extremities. Moreover, any internal instability risks wide regional implications at a moment of heightened unrest in Jordan's immediate neighbourhood, raising worries of an arc of instability running across Syria, Iraq and Jordan (and potentially into the Sinai). Amman has on previous occasions borne witness to militant extremism and a wider unrest could make it vulnerable to new attacks. For Europe, these must be concerns of great urgency.

Meanwhile, any instability or radical change to the Jordanian political scene could also undermine Jordan's peace treaty with Israel, a cornerstone of Europe's regional strategy. The strength of this peace could well be negatively impacted by intensified unrest within Jordan, particularly within the context of a discredited peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians and the potential for increased hostility towards the Jewish state by other regional actors. In its relationship towards Israel, as well as other broader strategic concerns, whether it be fighting the war on terror or maintaining committed Arab allies in a region that increasingly distrusts the West, Europe has long looked to Jordan as the ideal. Yet in the context of uncertain change this strategic relationship could well be threatened, leaving Europe ever more marginalised in the region.

Europe should therefore use all its influence to press the king to undertake a consensus-driven and all-encompassing reform programme as the best way to counter the diverse political and economic challenges now threatening the country. This must begin with a clear commitment by the king to genuinely tackling the political and economic challenges at hand – a step many observers believe he has yet to make. "I think the government can introduce reform and can get the country out of the current crisis at a low cost and without threatening the king," commented the former high-level government official. "But it needs an acknowledgment of the problem and a commitment to action."

The revised EU policy for its southern neighbourhood proposed last year, which focused on the idea of "deep democracy", could be the basis for such a new approach to Jordan. The new policy made clear "the need for the EU to support wholeheartedly the demand for political participation, dignity, freedom and employment opportunities" and affirmed "the 'more for more' principle, under which increased support in terms of financial assistance, enhanced mobility, and access to the EU Single Market is to be made available, on the basis of mutual accountability, to those partner countries most advanced in the consolidation of reforms."²¹ While clearly not as influential a player as the US or Saudi Arabia, the EU should be more forward leaning in using what influence it does have with Jordan along these lines.

In 2010, the EU was Jordan's second-largest trading partner, accounting for 15.5 percent of total trade (behind Saudi Arabia, which accounted for 17.4 percent). With its geographical proximity, the Jordanians see the European market as key to their economy and have already entered into an "advanced status" partnership. There are wide hopes in Amman that greater access through a proposed Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA) will contribute towards much-needed economic growth (though in truth the short-term result of the DCFTA would likely be pain: Jordanian industry will struggle to compete with European industry on both price and the quality standards required for access to European markets). Meanwhile, European powers such as France, Germany and above all the UK, which has historic ties with the kingdom, have meaningful political influence with the king. However, European policy over the past year has left many wondering how committed it really is to "deep democracy" in Jordan. Less than one year after the announcement of the new policy, the EU has already held out the prospect of considerable new support in exchange for only baby steps towards reform. In December 2011, the EU announced its intention to begin the preparatory process for negotiations for the DCFTA – hardly "more for more."²² In addition, the EU announced funding aid for 2011–13 of an average of €74.3 million a year, a 12 percent increase from 2007–10. The EU–Jordanian task force, which met in February 2012, stated its desire "to send a strong message of support" for the reform process rather than pressure for greater deliverables.

EU member states have for the moment decided to place their bets on Abdullah. "We believe the king is genuine about wanting reform," says one European diplomat. "We are trusting him." By increasing political and economic support in anticipation of expected reforms, member states appear to have decided that heightening external pressure would provoke a more defensive posture from the king and therefore be self-defeating. This may be correct. But such a "hug and hold" strategy can only have a very short shelf life. According to the report of the EU–Jordanian task force, "2012 will be the year of delivery" and the EU will need to be bold in sticking to its own stated timetable.²³

Thus, if the king fails to implement meaningful steps towards a separation of powers and the creation of an empowered parliamentary democracy over the course of the year ahead, Europe should reconsider the nature of its support. While Europe must stay realistic and acknowledge the limits of its own ability to advance domestic change in Jordan, and will of course wish to preserve its key alliance with Amman, it could nonetheless act as a greater source of external pressure. Europe will need to assume a position far closer to reality – and by necessity critical of the king – if it is to play a constructive and forward looking function.

²¹ European Union, "The EU's response to the 'Arab Spring'", press release, Brussels, 16 December 2011, available at <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/11/918&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

²² European Commission, "EU agrees to start trade negotiations with Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia", press release, Brussels, 14 December 2011, available at <http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/11/1545&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en>

²³ See the task force conclusions, available at http://www.consiliium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/128114.pdf

Without internal accountability, European policy towards Jordan will risk becoming an indictment of a wider failure to heed the lesson of the Arab Awakening. This will critically undermine the credibility of Europe's regional position, betraying the democracy narrative it has advanced in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Syria and reinforcing a view already prevalent among some that pre-2011 norms are being re-embraced and that the new ENP was empty talk. Equally, by failing to press home the message of reform and choosing to bolster the king's position through renewed support, Europe risks contributing towards increased instability in Jordan – a dangerous move for a strategically important and geographically close ally.

Reinforcing European policy towards Jordan

Increased political pressure

While offering firm support in the face of multiple challenges, Europe must also publicly make clear its firm commitment to the process of democratic reform. It should clearly be conveyed to the king that legislative and electoral tinkering of the system is insufficient. While free and fair elections are important, the EU should press the king to relinquish some of his power in order to create governments chosen by parliamentary majorities and holding real executive power. By taking such a position, Europe will re-inject the issue of “deep democracy” back into its relationship with Amman. Moreover, if, as some argue, the king is battling with Jordan's own “deep state” to get these reforms advanced (see box), European pressure may strengthen him.

As part of this dialogue, Europe should explain more clearly the benefits of the reform process. Jordan could become a positive model for the wider region – but only if it acts soon. Accordingly, the EU's basket of carrots, notably the DCFTA – which Amman desperately wants – should be made contingent on positive progress on the political reform agenda. Negotiations should not begin within weeks as the task force stated but rather pushed back until there are tangible signs of progress on political reform. European conditionality is currently not taken seriously in Amman. Europe must change this perception, not only for the sake of its interests in Jordan but also for the wider credibility of its new regional approach, which will be quickly undermined if it offers an enhanced partnership to Jordan without meaningful reform. At a minimum, Europe should avoid giving the king unmerited praise.

On previous occasions, the king has talked of a timeline for reform. While Europe should certainly not be the arbiter of Jordanian reform, it may be worth establishing a progress report for intended changes. With municipal and parliamentary elections due later this year or in early 2013, clear signposts already exist to assess how serious the king is about reform. Europe should not be hesitant in using the electoral process and results of these elections as means of gauging his commitment.

In the short term, Europe should focus on two deliverables that could give meaning to “more for more” and avoid otherwise vague notions of general progress:

Freedom of expression

Jordan continues to severely limit free expression, including criminalising criticism of the king. A number of activists have been arrested and tried on this charge over the past year. According to Human Right Watch, a 2010 “revision of the penal code increased penalties for some speech offenses, and the 2010 Law on Information System Crimes extended these provisions to online expression.”²⁴ It also says that attacks on journalists increased in 2011.²⁵ The EU and member states should make widening expression freedoms a key plank of their relations with Amman, pressing the king to advance changes to the legal system that decriminalise expression crimes, while also taking up the case of Jordanians arrested on these charges and advocating strongly for their immediate release. Europe should be clear that freedom of expression is an absolute prerequisite for a meaningful reform process.

Greater freedoms for local civil society

The Charitable Societies Law of 2008 puts severe constraints on local civil society organisations including a more complicated registration process, the right to dissolve NGOs, interfere in internal appointments and block foreign funding. In dealings with European governments, Amman makes a point of limiting discussion on the issue, while trying to ensure that European interaction is limited to government-approved NGOs. Europe should actively press for a loosening of restrictions on local civil society and should make this a prominent and public issue in bilateral relations. For a country that deems the lack of a sufficiently mature political culture a key reason to slow reform, the development of an engaged civil society should be a key priority.

Increased coordination with the US and Gulf States

European policy towards Amman stands to be far more effective if it is coordinated with other key external actors. Europe should engage in close dialogue with the US government to ensure that the two sides are advancing a common message. It may also be beneficial to engage with the US government over the nature of Jordan's role in the Middle East peace process. King Abdullah's current attempts to assume a role in a clearly discredited process between Israelis and Palestinians – filling the Hosni Mubarak void – may go down well in Washington and Brussels but will not be beneficial to the king's domestic and regional credibility.

²⁴ Jordan Country Summary, Human Rights Watch, January 2012, available at <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012>

²⁵ Ibid.

There may be wisdom in acknowledging this truth and not encouraging Abdullah to attach himself to a process that in its current format is doomed to failure and will only discredit him by association.

More counter-intuitively, Europe should engage with the Gulf on the importance of the Jordanian reform process. While increased financial support to Jordan is apparently premised on the desire to prop up the regime and ensure that revolutionary unrest does not spill into monarchical Arab states, European governments should stress that support for a managed process of meaningful reform is in fact the better way to ensure stability. A failure on the part of King Abdullah to respond to cries for change is more likely to provoke wider tensions, that could in turn make Arab monarchical regimes at large more vulnerable. Moreover, Europe should make clear that in the possibility of unrest in Jordan it will firmly position itself alongside democratic forces, potentially complicating its relationship with Gulf states that prefer to prop up authoritarianism. It is therefore in the interest of broader EU-Gulf ties to support real change now.

Increased economic and financial support

Based firmly upon the idea of “more for more”, Brussels and member states should continue to offer Jordan direct aid to assist it through difficult economic times. This financial assistance should have a specific focus on assistance to regional governors (where the lack of development is most acute, but which is also key to ensuring that East Bank Jordanians do not see reform as a process of diluting their privileges) and SMEs. All aid should be project-specific – budget support has proven to be considerably less effective, particularly in a context of corruption, inefficiencies and a significant channelling of funds to military purposes. The aim of selected projects must be to develop the country's sustainable economic infrastructure.

The EU has already made a positive start on this front, increasing bilateral aid for 2011–13 to an average of €74.33 million a year, a 12 percent increase from 2007–10 (extra inputs will actually bring the final amount up to close to €300 million). The European Investment Bank (EIB) is also doubling current lending levels to €400 million over the coming two years, while Jordan will also shortly be eligible for assistance from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) – a success for High Representative Catherine Ashton, who made EBRD involvement a priority. This increased support is important, but remains insufficient if Europe is intent on showing that it is a serious regional player in its own backyard – and that it is prepared to back up its pressure with concurrent support. However, increased aid should only be offered once the Jordanians take tangible steps forward in their reform agenda.

On the economic side, a DCFTA would be a powerful symbol. However, it is not a panacea and will not necessarily enhance

the EU's influence nor popular support for the government within Jordan. The uncompetitive nature of Jordanian goods means that it will likely be European rather than Jordanian companies that benefit in the short term. In fact, a DCFTA could actually exacerbate some of the country's economic problems. Europe should therefore carefully consider whether it should be seen as a medium-term rather than short-term solution. In the meantime, the business-to-business forum established by the task force is a good way of developing commercial relationships and opening up new possibilities for Jordanian entrepreneurs.

Technical assistance

Jordanians often explain the delayed pace of reform by pointing to the lack of expertise in drafting new reform legislation and the lack of a democratic political culture. Whether or not this explanation is accurate, Europe should offer proactive support in these areas. In particular, it should offer funding for support in developing technical expertise on the electoral and political parties law. While Europe should not be seen to be driving the drafting of these measures, it can offer important expertise, particularly on the complicated electoral law. Member states should also continue bilateral support on the creation of the new constitutional court, an independent electoral commission and subsidy replacement schemes.

Wider political engagement

Europe should establish a forum for regular engagement with representatives from across the political spectrum, most notably the IAF, which is regarded as one of the more moderate Islamist parties. In light of the IAF's strong domestic base and the high probability that it would gain power in any free electoral system, Europe should ensure that it develops strong lines of direct communication with the party. Both the EU and member states should seize the IAF's recent suggestion of a dialogue with the US and European governments. The EU could then offer technical and capacity-building support to political parties, particularly in economic management.

Enhanced security co-operation

The security apparatus remains a fundamental pillar of the Jordanian state, so any meaningful move towards reform will have to entail security-sector reform. Although the US clearly takes the lead on international partnership with the Jordanian military, the EU should consider meetings between EU military staff and Jordanian senior military officers, perhaps designating a European Union Military Staff (EUMS) member to work with Ambassador Leon to ensure that security-related issues are part of the EU's engagement (or alternatively this could be a British government-led initiative on the basis of historic ties between the two

countries' armed forces). Over time, a European–Jordanian military committee could be established that, at a minimum, would establish better channels of communication and give the EU a greater voice to contribute towards the debate on security-sector reform.

Support in containing Syrian contagion

The wider Levant may soon face a looming humanitarian crisis as the situation in Syria continues to deteriorate. In the increasingly likely prospect of a prolonged civil war, Jordan could face a considerable burden as tens of thousands of Syrians – if not more – flee the violence. Jordan has long faced significant refugee inflows, most notably from Palestine and also more recently from Iraq, and will be hard-pressed in the current economic environment to deal with a new wave. Brussels has made an initial commitment of €10 million to assisting refugees who have taken shelter in neighbouring countries, but it may need to offer further assistance as the situation develops. Europe could also establish an international co-ordination committee to advise the Jordanians on how to prepare for greater inflows and to provide active support if necessary. This will be particularly important as Abdullah may well cite regional instability as an excuse to delay reform.

In the context of unprecedented regional change, Jordan's future is more uncertain than ever. It is now imperative that EU member states use their influence to encourage King Abdullah to lead from the front and advance democratic reforms before it is too late. The year ahead will be crucial and, while imposing full conditionality on the relationship is unrealistic, Europe must be willing to back up the new prioritisation of its southern neighbourhood with more meaningful action.

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