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JORDANIAN TREMORS: ELUSIVE CONSENSUS, DEEPENING DISCONTENT

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SUMMARY

November's surge of nationwide protests over rising fuel prices serves as a stark reminder of the immediate challenges facing the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. While King Abdullah has largely succeeded in navigating the challenges imposed by the Arab uprisings in the face of two years of low-level unrest, the coming months promise renewed tests. Faced with contentious parliamentary elections and IMF-mandated price increases, there is a very real prospect of widening discontent, particularly given ongoing regional uncertainties. Yet, the king, prodded by an assertive security service, continues to resist substantive reform aimed at cementing his government's legitimacy, increasing the risk of instability in the kingdom.

While it remains important that Europe maintains solid public support for the kingdom in this period of uncertainty, it is high time for a more critical dialogue in private, which would bolster the legitimacy and stability of the royal system - an altogether realistic aim given the moderate tone of the opposition and the deep legitimacy of the Hashemite system. Ahead of parliamentary elections scheduled for January, Europe should press for more immediate progress in creating an inclusive political system that will be better equipped to deal with the economic difficulties that Jordan now faces. Europe should also raise concerns over the expansive political role of the security service and press for more meaningful action against corruption.

Two years after the outbreak of the rebellion that has shaken the Middle East, and despite the wave of protests that broke out in November following an increase in fuel prices, the Jordanian authorities appear to believe that they have averted the threat of popular unrest in the kingdom. Despite thousands of nationwide demonstrations and the political paralysis caused by a rapid succession of governments (five prime ministers in two years), the royal court exudes surprising confidence. The court's reading of domestic and regional dynamics lead it to believe that it has regained the initiative. The mood in Amman stands in stark contrast to that of one year ago, when the palace expressed real concern about the potential for dangerous instability and the king had indicated a willingness to embrace a measure of genuine reform to avert the prospect of turmoil.

The soundness of the palace's political judgement is likely to be severely tested in the coming months. The controversy surrounding upcoming parliamentary elections, which are likely to set the political tone for the coming years, as well as mounting economic concerns that are being exacerbated by price increases, suggest that Jordan is by no means out of the woods. Indeed, the lack of substantial progress on reform, the widening political polarisation, and the dangers posed by spillover effects of the deadly conflict in neighbouring Syria suggest that the royal system faces a very real threat of instability. It is instructive that while the palace projects confidence, the consensus among analysts and diplomats in Amman remains one of concern.

Europe also faces sobering questions about the nature of its relationship with a key strategic ally long accustomed to unquestioned public and private support. Although the challenging regional situation has highlighted the importance of a stable Jordan, failure to secure a more inclusive political system rooted in popular legitimacy risks hastening the arrival of instability. It behoves friends of the Hashemite monarchy to engage in a more critical dialogue.¹

Renewed royal confidence

The royal court's current confidence is based on two key calculations. First, the palace believes that its reform programme has rallied domestic popular support. Since 2011, the king has publicly embraced the mantra of reform and has pushed through amendments to one third of the provisions of Jordan's constitution. Having also established an independent electoral commission and constitutional court, the palace presents itself, domestically and internationally, as the driver of the country's reform process. It has pledged itself to the eventual establishment of a constitutional democracy, though cautioning that this is a longer-term aim given the country's lack of political maturity. The palace highlights voter registration numbers of 2.28 million (approximately 70 percent of eligible voters) for January's parliamentary elections as a symbol of sweeping popular support. At the same time, it points to the Muslim Brotherhood's inability – through its political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) – to mobilise more than 15,000 people during much-heralded recent protest marches as a sign of the movement's minority status. Similarly, November's nationwide fuel price protests are blamed on an unrepresentative fringe. Praise for the king's reform agenda by the US and Europe has cemented royal confidence in its political strategy.

Second, the palace believes regional volatility has reinforced support for the perceived stability of Jordan's status quo. The civil war raging in Syria and the political turmoil of the transitions in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia have amplified the appeal of Jordan's stability. Domestically, there is growing concern that political conflict could embroil the country in instability, particularly given longstanding divisions between the native East Bank minority and the ethnically Palestinian majority. Elements of the population are also wary of regional Islamisation, and the October arrest of 11 militants allegedly connected to al-Qaeda has raised fears of terrorist attacks emanating from Syria. Regional turmoil has also underscored the importance of maintaining Jordan's stability in the eyes of the kingdom's strategic allies and the king now feels more assured than ever that he will face no external pressure for reform. The US government is firmly backing the king, making it difficult for Europe to take a more critical position. For its part, Israel, citing national security concerns, is placing a premium on the stability of Jordan's status quo: in conversations with European counterparts,

¹ This memo is based on October 2012 interviews in Amman and Europe with senior royal court and government figures, the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, and other opposition forces as well as youth activists, independent analysts, and European diplomats. The memo is a follow-up to our April 2012 report, "Jordan: Reform before it's too late", available at http://www.ecfr.eu/content/entry/jordan_reform_before_its_too_late.

Israeli officials describe Jordan as "a red line" in their case for caution on the part of Western governments promoting a democratisation agenda that has seen Islamist gains and uncertain transitions across region – the like of which in Jordan could dramatically alter the tranquil relations between the two countries.

Europe has, by and large, accepted the royal narrative. The EU, led by foreign-policy chief Catherine Ashton, has placed implicit trust in the king, praising his reform agenda and cautioning against any moves that might endanger stability.² On one level, the logic behind this position is self-evident: Jordan is a key strategic ally and, at a moment of significant regional volatility, the preservation of calm in the kingdom is clearly an important aim. Moreover, despite thousands of opposition protests, there has been no large-scale government security crackdown, highlighting the kingdom's willingness to permit a measure of open dissent – an approach that rightfully deserves to be lauded, given regional comparisons. Officials can credibly remind interlocutors that there has been "no bloodshed" in Jordan (though reports that one protester may have been killed by security forces during November's fuel price protests point to the potential for escalation). Over the past year, the EU has offered increased economic backing, allocating €220 million in neighbourhood support for 2011–2013, an additional €70 million from the SPRING (Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth) programme, and €40 million to finance the Good Governance and Development Contract. Member states, led by the UK, France, and Germany, have committed approximately €1.2 billion over the coming three years in the form of bilateral loans and grants.

All not as it seems

Despite Jordanian and European confidence, the appearance of stability in the kingdom may be deceptive. Indeed, popular frustration and widening economic challenges continue to threaten an outbreak of turmoil, as made clear by November's fuel price protests. While the Brotherhood's much-vaunted October protest did not draw the 50,000 promised demonstrators, it was still the largest opposition gathering in two years of anti-government demonstrations. Nor is opposition sentiment confined to the Brotherhood (or to Jordan's urban Palestinian population). East Bank discontent, fuelled by economic frustration resulting from dwindling state finances, widespread corruption, and a sense that the political system is no longer working to their favour, is bubbling up across the country, slowly making common cause with broader forces, including the Brotherhood. Perhaps surprisingly, it is East Bank tribal elements rather than Brotherhood agitators who are today making the more radical demands, including on occasion calling for Abdullah to step down.

The economic challenges facing Jordan risk a further erosion of support from among the king's East Bank base, which now

² For the latest European comments, see "Written Statement by President Barroso after his meeting with H.M. King Abdullah II of Jordan", European Commission press release, Brussels, 7 October 2012, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-12-748_en.htm.

bears the greatest burden of poverty and unemployment. Disruptions to natural-gas supplies from Egypt have forced Jordan to rely on expensive oil imports from Iraq. Tourism revenues and foreign remittances are also down, while government spending has increased because of new measures aimed at cementing domestic stability such as salary increases for state employees, as well as the needs of a growing Syrian refugee population (which now numbers more than 200,000, according to Jordanian authorities). The country's budget deficit has surged to more than 10 percent and unemployment levels could be as high as 30 percent, with the country's youth population most affected.

The August acceptance of a \$2.05 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) highlights the growing challenges. The loan will have been made conditional on, among other things, politically explosive commodity price increases and cuts to public subsidies.³ The November decision to cut subsidies on fuel, resulting in price increases of more than 50 percent for cooking gas and 30 percent for transport and heating fuel, provoked a wave of nationwide protests. For the first time, demonstrators called for the fall of the regime rather than just reform. With employment in the bloated public sector and security service – long an East Bank prerogative in the agreement governing their relations with the king – also likely to come under IMF pressure, tensions stand to be exacerbated further.

Indeed, were it not for foreign economic support in 2011, particularly from Saudi Arabia, which provided \$1.4 billion in aid, Jordan would already be in dire straits. However, such support is no longer as forthcoming as previously assumed. It is reported that Jordan has only received \$250 million this year, transferred in October, out of a promised five-year \$5 billion Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) grant agreed in December 2011.⁴ (There are some claims that Jordan was forced to turn to the IMF after GCC money failed to materialise.) Moreover, much of the GCC support is project-specific, and thus unable to plug the government's significant budget shortfall.

The pressing need for structural reforms in Jordan's economy underscores the need for political reform to broaden government legitimacy as it imposes necessary austerity measures. However, two years after the king's initial promise to accelerate the pace of change, the results remain disappointing. Despite changes to the constitution, few restrictions have been placed on the king's direct political authority. Abdullah retains the power to unilaterally appoint and summarily dismiss the government, and while he promises to consult with parliament over the choice of the next prime minister, this remains at his discretion. (The Brotherhood demands that the leader of the largest parliamentary party be appointed prime minister.)

³ The loan conditions have not been made public, but the following IMF article gives a sense of some of the necessary reforms: "Jordan Gets \$2.0 Billion IMF Loan to Support Economy", *IMF Survey*, 3 August 2012, available at <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2012/INT080312A.htm>.

⁴ "Jordan is banking on Kuwait", *Al Bawaba*, 7 October 2012, available at <http://www.albawaba.com/business/jordan-banking-kuwait-445094>.

Although the creation of an independent electoral commission is a positive step, it is tasked with monitoring implementation of a controversial electoral law passed by the king in July. Urban voters continue to be discriminated against through gerrymandering in favour of tribal districts and only 27 out of 150 seats (18 percent) are elected by party lists.⁵ Widespread fraud has also been reported during the voter registration process, raising serious doubts about the claimed registration of 70 percent of eligible voters and portending negatively for the legitimacy of the vote.⁶

In the face of criticism, the palace says that the new parliament will be a launch pad for more intensive change. However, the rules of the game make that an unlikely outcome. While the king blames parliament for the slow pace of reform – a questionable assertion given parliamentary compliance with palace and security-service diktats – the electoral law's allocation of seats all but ensures that the makeup of the new parliament will be virtually the same as the current body. That reality also undermines the palace's argument that the king is held accountable through parliament (such as when his choice of prime minister is put before a parliamentary vote of confidence). As a result, opposition parties, including the IAF and the National Reform Front, led by Ahmad Obeidat, a former prime minister and intelligence chief, have announced that they will boycott the January vote. The new parliament is likely to be neither representative nor empowered to advance meaningful reform, let alone deal with the pressing economic challenges.

According to one very senior Jordanian political figure, until recently intimately involved in the reform process at the highest level, the king – pushed by an increasingly assertive intelligence service – has grown in confidence since the outbreak of regional unrest and is now less inclined to initiate substantive reform. The role of the security service is widely viewed as a key obstacle to reform, given its influence over the king and parliament. While Jordan has largely eluded the violent turmoil of some of its neighbours, it shares their habit of allowing the mukhabarat, or security service, to play a central role in politics.

The power of the unaccountable, corruption-prone, and resented security service could provoke an unravelling of the kingdom's capacity to build consensus around a reformed system. While the November sentencing of former head of intelligence Mohammed al-Dahabi to 13 years in prison on corruption charges was significant, the palace has shown no desire to loosen the grip of the security service. On the corruption front, many Jordanians are sceptical of al-Dahabi's sentencing, which they believe reflects a selective scapegoating of a small number of former officials aimed at deflecting public criticism rather than a wholehearted attempt to tackle the issue. The subject is gaining wider

⁵ When criticised over the small number of seats given to political parties, the palace says that party candidates can still run as independents for individual seats. However, again, seat-to-district ratios discriminate considerably against urban centres where party candidates are more likely to run.

⁶ While conducting research in Jordan over the registration period, we heard numerous anecdotal stories of whole families being registered when only one family member was doing so and of families surreptitiously being registered when conducting non-related business in government offices.

traction given the austerity measures now being imposed on the wider population.

Dangerous hubris?

Given the still precarious situation in Jordan, the king and his backers are playing a dangerous game. In the face of growing political and economic challenges, stability in Jordan cannot be guaranteed. This environment risks being worsened, given ongoing violence in Syria and Gaza (Jordan is now the only Arab country with a resident ambassador in Israel and, given Jordan's large Palestinian population, the conflict could inflame domestic opinion). However, the king's continued preference for policies that sideline the political opposition, and his apparent unwillingness to fully embrace the fight against corruption, risk radicalising the mainstream opposition. East Bankers are already becoming more confrontational in their demands, while the Brotherhood perceives a regional shift in its favour. Without swifter and more inclusive change to draw critics into the system and establish a national consensus, the political balance that has safeguarded stability until now could well come unstuck. This will be particularly true if external financial bailouts from the GCC fail to materialise, forcing painful public-sector cuts upon the kingdom. November's fuel price protests serve as a warning of what may lie ahead.

The king's continued popularity and the historic legitimacy imbued in the Hashemite monarchy give Abdullah ample room for manoeuvre. Most of the opposition is still demanding reform rather than regime change, and the IAF – the object of most royal ire (and politically advantageous fear-mongering) – has softened its tone over recent months (it is notable that it did not actively take part in protests in mid-November, though it did use them to pressure the king for reform).⁷ Brotherhood leaders now cite Morocco, whose king continues to enjoy vast powers, as the model that Jordan should follow. The movement has also signalled its desire to cut a deal that would see it end its parliamentary boycott on the basis of a compromise agreement over a reformed election law and an empowered parliament. But the opposition reject engagement on terms solely set by the king, which appear designed to sideline them and prevent real change. The unwillingness of the king and the security service to countenance a deal that opens the door to wider inclusivity points to intransigence at a moment of potential opportunity.

The argument that the Brotherhood would irreversibly hijack the political system is contentious. A move to a more inclusive system in which the king retains some executive powers would provide constraints while giving other political parties time to mature in controlled circumstances. While the Brotherhood may be moderating their tone as a tactical ploy to gain wider favour – and while it is clear that

⁷ In meetings with the senior leadership of the IAF in February 2012, the movement presented a significantly more hawkish face than in October 2012. It also now makes a point of laying blame for the slow progress in reform on the security service and not the king.

they do not hold the popular support of the majority of the country – continued exclusion will only hasten a hardening of their position. The king claims he wants to create political parties based on left, right, and centre platforms as opposed to parties centred on religious or identity politics. However, with limits on political party life in parliament remaining in place, it remains difficult to see how parties of any stripe can develop and mature. A failure to engage with the country's existing political contours, and the king's patronising attitude on the political maturity of the population, risks fuelling polarisation rather than the moderation that he intends.

A European response

There is growing consensus among European diplomats in Amman that the reform process lacks meaningful substance. Indeed, European heads of missions (HoMs) have, on occasion, wanted to engage in a more critical dialogue, and there has been some discontent about the entirely supportive position taken by Brussels. Prior to the October visit to Amman by José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, the HoMs had been considering pushing for the introduction of a greater degree of conditionality – only to be undermined by Barroso's announcement of a further €40 million in financial assistance. The EU mission in Amman has also failed to deliver strong messages agreed upon by European HoMs, in part because it has been hamstrung by the line set in Brussels.

Europe – so keen to make Jordan a success story for reform in the MENA region – risks repeating the mistakes that marked its relationship with North African states prior to the 2011 uprisings. Its unquestioning support for Abdullah and unwillingness to engage in a critical dialogue is positioning it on the wrong side of history – and, as in North Africa, helping to feed a complacency that could breed destabilising results. November's unrest should be rapidly sharpening European minds.

In this context, and based on a desire to preserve the stability of Jordan and its monarchy, Europe should recalibrate elements of its relationship with the kingdom. Public support for Amman remains understandable, given regional uncertainties and the kingdom's role as a strategic ally; however, a more critical dialogue, even if only in private, is growing ever more essential. At present, European praise is reported to be as vocal in private as it is in public. While the kingdom does face threats associated with regional volatility and terrorism – which the king will adeptly use to leverage international support – deferring action on domestic challenges invites growing political risk.

As the lead European actor, Ashton – backed by key member states, the UK, France, and Germany – should challenge the king on the lack of substantive reform and press for real change to allow for wider political inclusion, ideally ahead of the upcoming parliamentary election. Failure to secure

an inclusive parliament will condemn the country to further political stagnation and tension. It will also leave the palace and government politically vulnerable when making painful economic decisions. Successful political reform that broadens popular engagement will, in contrast, bolster stability and the king's ability to steer the country through stormy waters. The role of the security service in politics should also be raised as a serious issue of concern, and Ashton should press the king for meaningful action against corruption, a source of deep resentment for many Jordanians.

The EU's election observer mission must not be used to whitewash January's parliamentary vote. The preference would be for a large presence that can offer active monitoring and a credible assessment. However, given the small number of monitors likely to be involved and the difficulty they will face in providing an absolute judgment on transparency, post-election language should remain measured (particularly given issues concerning the legitimacy of the broader process and voter registration fraud).

European states, and particularly those that channel most support into the country – the UK, France, and Germany – should focus enhanced practical and public support on the country's independent media sector as well as pro-reform civil society activists, both of which have come under intensified government pressure over the past year. The September passage of a restrictive press law included restraints on online outlets which were widely perceived as an attempt to shackle critical commentary rather than simply prevent unwarranted defamation as authorities claim.

The financial burden of supporting the Syrian refugee population must be shared by all EU member states. While critical dialogue is needed on issues relating to internal reform, Europe should be fulsome in offering financial support to help the country deal with the consequences of a crisis for which it bears no responsibility and that appears likely to further deteriorate.

Some claim that pushing reform in Jordan threatens the country's stability and may open the door to a hostile Muslim Brotherhood takeover. However, in the midst of deep challenges, the need for political inclusivity is more urgent than ever – and, contrary to some claims, national consensus may in fact be attainable; certainly, a range of government and opposition figures from across the country's demographic divide share a vision of moderate yet substantial reforms that could help steer the country through its current challenges. The royal court has laid out an admirable end-goal of a true constitutional system with an empowered government and a mature political life. Europe should use its influence to press for the realisation of that goal.

About the author

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