

# Jordan on Schedule for Elections, But Concerns Persist

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Sep 29, 2020

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

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## New royal decrees amount to business as usual on the kingdom's political landscape, but heightening tensions over COVID-19, economic contraction, and other factors call for careful attention from Washington.

On September 27, King Abdullah II of Jordan issued a royal decree dissolving the kingdom's parliament one day before its term was set to formally expire. The move has two immediate implications: ending the uncertainty over whether elections will be held on schedule this year, and constitutionally forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Omar Razzaz and his cabinet. Neither of these outcomes signals significant policy shifts—they should rather be seen as part of the kingdom's routine domestic political management. Yet given the complex challenges currently facing this close Middle Eastern ally, the United States should keep a close eye on these developments and work with Amman to maintain stability.

## IMPACT ON ELECTIONS

On July 29, the palace issued a royal decree calling for elections, prompting the Independent Election Commission to specify November 10 as the target date for the polls. Even so, uncertainty persisted as commentators argued that the country's resurgence of COVID-19 cases and other circumstances called for a postponement. The likeliest vehicle for postponement would have been Article 68(2) of the constitution, which provides for automatic extension of the sitting parliament if its term expires and no elections have been held. With Sunday's decree, this option was rendered moot and the elections are set to take place on schedule.

The coming vote is unlikely to produce a legislature significantly different from the current one. Such predictability has characterized much of Jordanian parliamentary life since elections were reinstated in 1989. On the one hand, this trait has added to the kingdom's sense of stability at a time when surrounding countries succumbed to chaos during the Arab Spring and its aftermath. On the other hand, it has undermined the legislature's credibility. A

March-April 2019 poll by the International Republican Institute found that only 33 percent of Jordanian respondents trust parliament “to a large degree” or “to some degree,” while a September 2020 poll by the University of Jordan’s Center for Strategic Studies found that only 25 percent intend to vote in November.

In procedural terms, the next elections will follow the same law used for the 2016 vote. Although that law was intended to strengthen political parties, in reality no significant changes have taken place in the Jordanian political landscape since then. The country now has around fifty registered parties, but they remain weak, and local considerations rather than party affiliation continue to dominate electoral list formation.

The one exception is the Islamic Action Front—the political arm of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood—which announced on September 21 that it will participate in the elections. Despite the recent weakening of Islamists in Jordan, the IAF remains a notable political force. Its participation was not a foregone conclusion given recent tensions between the Brotherhood and the government. The question now is whether the Islamists will abide by traditional unwritten understandings and limit the number of viable candidates they field, or instead escalate tensions by fielding many contenders and/or adopting confrontational messaging.

## FROM RAZZAZ TO THE NEXT PRIME MINISTER

**A**rticle 74(2) of the constitution stipulates that “the government in the tenure of which the House of Representatives is dissolved shall resign within a week from the date of dissolution; and its head may not be designated to form the government that follows.” Accordingly, Prime Minister Razzaz will have to tender his resignation, and the king will appoint a new premier to form the next government, perhaps as early as this week.

Razzaz was appointed in June 2018, making his cabinet the third-longest-serving of the thirteen formed since King Abdullah was crowned in 1999. His tenure saw the passing of several controversial measures, including an amended version of the unpopular tax law that had previously helped trigger public protests and spur the resignation of his predecessor Hani al-Mulki. He also oversaw notable reforms aimed at addressing some of the kingdom’s **structural impediments to economic development** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/recent-aid-agreements-provide-opportunity-to-support-women-in-jordan>).

Yet his term was dominated by the coronavirus pandemic. Initially, the government’s successful handling of the crisis boosted his approval ratings, but a recent spike in cases—coupled with conflicting messages from ministers and lack of clarity on how the new surge will be handled—quickly eroded his standing. In addition to the political and economic impact of COVID-19, the kingdom has had to manage tensions with the United States and Israel over Palestinian developments, as well as **fallout from Israel’s publicly unpopular normalization agreement** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/uae-israel-peace-is-revealing-the-middle-east-faultlines>) with the United Arab Emirates—one of Jordan’s key backers and its closest Gulf ally. Taken together, these factors exposed the cabinet’s lack of internal harmony and led it to pursue an increasingly securitized approach to dissent.

The next prime minister will have to contend with the same challenges—particularly the economy (which the IMF has forecast will contract for the first time in decades) and the election process (which will be conducted under the unprecedented conditions of a pandemic). And all of this hard work will have to be done in a context of a negative public sentiment. According to the previously mentioned Center for Strategic Studies poll, only 10 percent of Jordanian respondents believe that the country is heading in the right direction, a dramatic dip from the 91 percent tallied in March. The choice of new prime minister and the composition of his cabinet will indicate how the king intends to address these challenges, including whether Jordan’s next phase will be characterized by a more conservative and securitized approach to domestic political challenges.

## CONCLUSION

Jordan's latest political moves have no direct bearing on its foreign policy or other aspects that directly affect U.S. interests in the region. These policies are set by the king, not the cabinet. But U.S. policies do have an impact on Jordan. Washington is still the kingdom's main financial supporter, and bilateral military, intelligence, and diplomatic relations are very strong. Yet Amman believes that U.S. policies regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict are indifferent to Jordan's interests and sensitivities and have contributed to its sense of anxiety.

Therefore, Washington should avoid any action that may remotely be construed as interference. New American ambassador Henry Wooster has just assumed his post in Amman and will be closely scrutinized, particularly since accusations of interference were leveled against his predecessor. Given how important the kingdom's stability is to U.S. regional goals, Washington should quietly engage with Jordanian authorities on efforts to keep a steady hand during the upcoming transitional period. They should also work together on strategies for addressing both preexisting structural impediments to development and the larger economic challenges created by COVID-19.

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