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The Hamzah Affair: Context and Implications of Jordan's Royal Crisis

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Brief Analysis

The immediate crisis seems to have ended for now, but the stunningly public Hashemite feud is a reminder that Jordan's stability needs tending and is not something to be taken for granted by Washington or Amman's regional friends.

The news emerging out of Amman—with former crown prince Hamzah bin Hussein ultimately vowing allegiance to his half-brother King Abdullah II after being placed at the center of coup rumors, and other former senior officials being arrested—is highly unusual in the traditionally quiet Middle Eastern kingdom that is approaching its centennial in a few weeks. While the full picture is unlikely to emerge soon, if ever, these developments focus attention on the country's internal situation and highlight the need to bolster the stability of a key U.S. ally after a period of relative uninterest from Washington.

Potential Royal Showdown Amid Public Unrest

The visible security actions against Prince Hamzah—stripping him of his security detail and restricting his movement and access to communication—differ sharply from the kingdom’s typical means of handling its internal business. News of tensions within the Hashemite royal family occasionally surface, yet they tend to be resolved quickly and quietly away from the public eye.

For example, in 2017, King Abdullah relieved two of his siblings—full-brother Faisal and half-brother Hashim—of their military commands, fueling rumors of family discord. Yet both princes fell in line, quashing further rumors. A similar dynamic occurred in 1999 when King Hussein [reshuffled the line of succession](#) just weeks before his death from cancer, replacing his brother Hassan, who had served as crown prince since 1965, with his eldest son Abdullah, a military officer. Despite the shock and deep, personal blow, Hassan did not protest the shift and has always expressed public support for his nephew as king. Indeed, one needs to go back to the tense days following the 1951 assassination of the kingdom’s founder, Abdullah I, to find any precedent for Jordanian princes taking their feuds public—and even then, there was no talk of coup plotting.

Prince Hamzah is half-brother to the current monarch and the eldest son from King Hussein’s marriage to his fourth wife, Queen Noor. Upon ascending to the throne in 1999, Abdullah appointed Hamzah as crown prince pursuant to their father’s dying wish; Hussein was said to dote on Hamzah, who has a reputation for piety, modesty, and connection with Jordan’s tribes. Five years later, Abdullah relieved Hamzah of this title in favor of his own eldest son, Hussein—not an unusual act given that the late King Hussein named three different crown princes during his reign. Hamzah did not publicly object to the decision at the time, yet he subsequently positioned himself as a sympathetic figure and avatar of reform among Jordanians discontented with the country’s socioeconomic situation, especially disaffected tribal elements.

Initially, officials sought to play down Hamzah’s latest actions, which from afar seemed to fall somewhere in the gray zone between open criticism and operational moves to execute a coup. But this changed when he issued two video messages on April 3, one in Arabic, one in English. The videos described restrictions placed on his movement and communications by the chief of the Jordanian general staff, then criticized corruption and poor governance in the kingdom, which he claimed have gone on for “fifteen to twenty years”—around the duration of Abdullah’s reign and the decision to remove him as crown prince. Following these messages, the government adopted a harsher tone toward Hamzah, with Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi accusing him of “activities...targeting the country’s security and stability” during an April 4 press conference. Hamzah then further escalated by publicly vowing to “disobey” orders that he refrain from communication with the outside world.

To avoid a head-on clash that could have tarnished the monarchy, the king offered Hamzah an alternative path of reconciliation in the Bedouin tradition of *sulha*, entrusting his well-respected uncle Hassan to handle the sensitive discussions. This resulted in a meeting of senior princes at Hassan’s home, where Hamzah signed an extraordinary letter vowing fealty to Abdullah and current crown prince Hussein, stating, “In light of the developments of the past two days, I place myself in the hands of His Majesty the King.” This climb-down appears to mark the end of the current episode, though it is unlikely to be the final chapter of the conflict between the half-brothers. An eventual faceoff is not out of the question, but even that is more likely to end with Hamzah leaving the country rather than being jailed and turned into a martyr for the opposition.

Officials also announced the arrest of Bassem Awadallah and Hassan bin Zaid along with “sixteen to eighteen” other individuals, mainly Hamzah’s aides and security detail. Awadallah, a former minister and chief of the Royal Court, is a controversial figure whom many Jordanians identify with corruption. He and bin Zaid—great-grandson of the first King Abdullah and grandson to a former prime minister—have extensive regional ties and served at various times as the current king’s private envoys to Saudi Arabia. These connections, coupled with repeated official assertions about contacts with “external quarters,” have fueled rumors that other regional states may be involved in the crisis.

These events come at a tense time for the kingdom domestically. COVID-19 is running rampant there with 633,000 infections and 7,201 deaths among a total population of 10 million, making the government's initial successes in containment a distant memory. The economy, already suffering, has been [hit hard by the pandemic](#), with record unemployment at the end of 2020 and poverty rates increasing by 39 percent over the past year. Trust in public institutions—with the notable exceptions of the monarchy and the military/security sector—is very low due to widespread perceptions of inefficiency and corruption. These views have been amplified by a series of tragic accidents attributable to dereliction of public duty in recent years, especially after several COVID-19 patients died in a new government hospital last month because of failures in supplying oxygen. Calls for demonstrations over the past few weeks did not garner wide participation—due in no small part to preemptive security measures—but they nevertheless raised concerns about [simmering public dissatisfaction](#). Throughout, Hamzah was perceived to have positioned himself as sympathetic to these concerns and a foil to the king.

Domestic and Regional Implications

Although it is too early to reach definitive conclusions, some familiar patterns are starting to take shape. Traditionally, serious domestic threats in the kingdom have tended to produce a “rally round the flag” dynamic. Similar to the 2005 al-Qaeda hotel bombings in Amman and the more recent Islamic State attacks against Jordanians, the Hamzah affair is being used to draw a sharp contrast between two realities: the less-than-ideal yet stable circumstances that currently characterize life in the kingdom, and the chaos that has defined neighboring countries since the Arab Spring. Official messaging also highlighted Hamzah's alleged links with Jordanian dissidents abroad, many of whom are publicly discredited.

Anecdotal evidence indicates that these messages are resonating with many in the public; indeed, virtually no prominent, mainstream public figures have spoken out in support of Hamzah apart from his mother. And despite laying bare a long-simmering Hashemite feud, the situation may wind up easing domestic pressure on the palace in the short term by shifting attention away from COVID and other socioeconomic challenges.

Yet the underlying sources of dissatisfaction that Hamzah tapped into are real and will inevitably manifest themselves again in the future if Amman does not address them. These include emergency issues like the pandemic, as well as more structural issues like broader economic, political, and governance reform. As in the past, the immediate aftermath of the Hamzah affair will probably see a strengthening of the security sector at the expense of reform, as suggested by the central role that top military officer Maj. Gen. Yousef al-Huneiti played in isolating the prince. The situation could even reverse the impact of the king's highly publicized February 17 letter to the head of the General Intelligence Directorate about curtailing the powerful institution's role in certain economic and political arenas. Even before this weekend's crisis, the government had already shut down the popular chat platform Clubhouse to prevent unwelcome online criticism.

Externally, Jordanian officials have often complained about being taken for granted by neighboring states and Washington. This feeling turned to dread during the Trump administration, which maintained substantial aid to the kingdom but was perceived as being uninterested in Amman's views on regional policies, especially regarding the Palestinian issue. This weekend's events seem to have reminded many capitals that domestic developments in Jordan can play a central role in regional security. Saudi Arabia quickly expressed support for the king and commitment to the kingdom's stability, followed by other Arab states. Similarly, State Department spokesman Ned Price described King Abdullah as a “key partner” who has the Biden administration's “full support.” If the past is any guide, this political backing will be a prelude to renewed and even expanded financial support from Jordan's friends, especially in the Gulf—a major potential lifeline amid the country's COVID-induced recession.

In this context, Amman needs to tread delicately with its so-far-unsubstantiated accusations of significant foreign connections to the alleged conspiracy. Among the countries whose names have been bandied about—Saudi Arabia,

the United Arab Emirates, Israel—none have an interest in stoking instability in Jordan or could have believed that an amateurish plot built around a disaffected prince and a handful of acolytes might possibly have overthrown the well-entrenched Abdullah. If the specific allegations about Awadallah and bin Zaid lead to compelling evidence that Saudi officials are complicit in such plotting, that could be damning for U.S. relations with Riyadh. Yet short of such proof, Jordan needs to avoid turning a checkered relationship between the Saudi and Hashemite royal houses into a full-blown diplomatic blowup, particularly given Riyadh’s crucial financial and political support to its much poorer neighbor.

U.S. Policy Implications

Jordan’s stability has always been a valuable asset in advancing American regional interests, from expanding Arab-Israeli peace to countering the Islamic State. In the immediate term, then, the United States needs to continue expressing its firm support for Jordan and urging its allies—Arab states, Israel, and others—to give tangible expression to that support. A phone call between President Biden and King Abdullah would send a powerful message toward that end. Washington should also work with Amman on ascertaining any substantive foreign dimensions to the crisis, either clarifying them or laying to rest potentially damaging rumors. In this regard, CIA director William Burns—a former ambassador to Jordan—could play a helpful role.

For now, the priority should be helping Amman navigate this episode so as to ensure stability. But parallel to this—and even more so once initial anxiety over the Hamzah affair subsides—Washington should quietly engage Amman on accelerating its pursuit of economic, political, and governance reform, while still keeping substantive change at an incremental, digestible pace. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen reportedly conveyed such advice in a conversation with Finance Minister Mohamad Al-Ississ on April 1, and other U.S. officials should do the same. Only with high-level attention from Washington and proper support from other friends does Amman stand a chance of undertaking the deeper reforms needed to protect the kingdom from recurring bouts of instability, which could negatively impact U.S. interests throughout the region over time.

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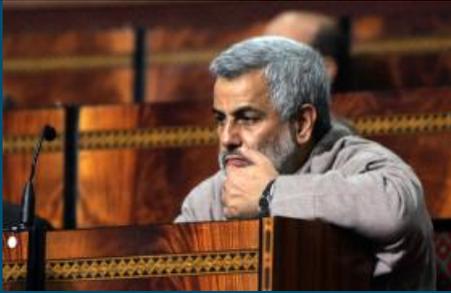


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