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Jordan's Public Internally Focused, but Shares U.S. View on Iran and Regional Peace

by [David Pollock](#)

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Brief Analysis

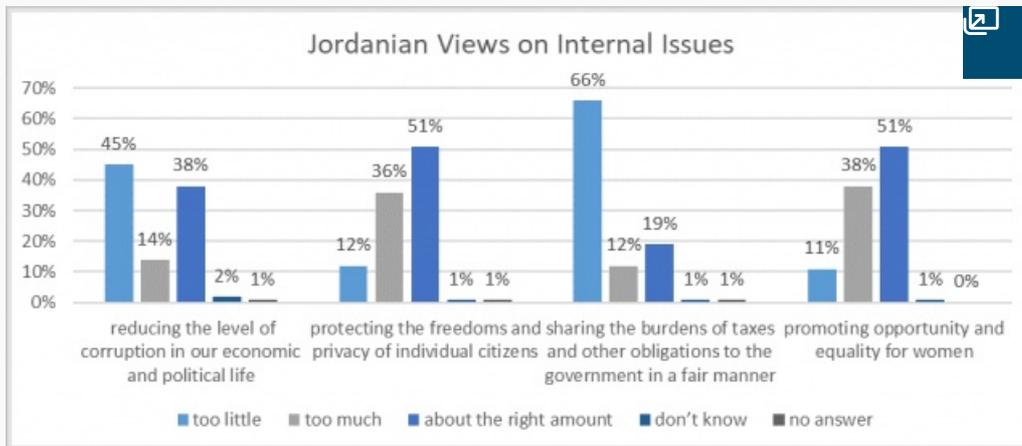
Jordan was the first stop on U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's Mideast diplomatic tour last month, and it joined the American-led Warsaw conference on Mideast security last week. On both occasions, Jordanian and American officials publicly hailed their common stand against terrorism and against Iran's interventions in the region. Regarding the latter, more controversial point, a new public opinion poll reveals that the Jordanian "street" is indeed solidly in line with official opposition to Iran. On another key regional issue—Arab support for an Israeli-Palestinian compromise—the Jordanian public is also surprisingly favorable, at least in principle. Fully three-quarters want Arab governments to incentivize both sides toward a compromise.

At the same time, the poll demonstrates that Jordanians are primarily concerned with domestic issues such as corruption and economic inequality. Yet popular support for the main organized opposition party—the Muslim Brotherhood affiliate Islamic Action Front—remains a minority position, stuck at just around 25 percent. A somewhat larger percentage of Jordanians favor a moderate interpretation of Islam. These figures suggest that, despite Jordan's perennially troubled economic prospects and sporadic demonstrations, the monarchy faces no immediate crisis as King Abdullah marks two decades on the throne this month.

Two-Thirds Say Government Doing Too Little to Ensure Fairness

In a striking new finding, 66 percent of Jordanians say their government is doing too little in "sharing the burden of taxes and other obligations to the government in a fair manner." Nearly half (45 percent) also say Amman is not doing enough to reduce "the level of corruption in our economic and political life." Lately, such sentiments are visibly reflected in street protests and on social media. More broadly, three-quarters of Jordanians agree that "right now, internal political and economic reform is more important for our country than any foreign policy issue."

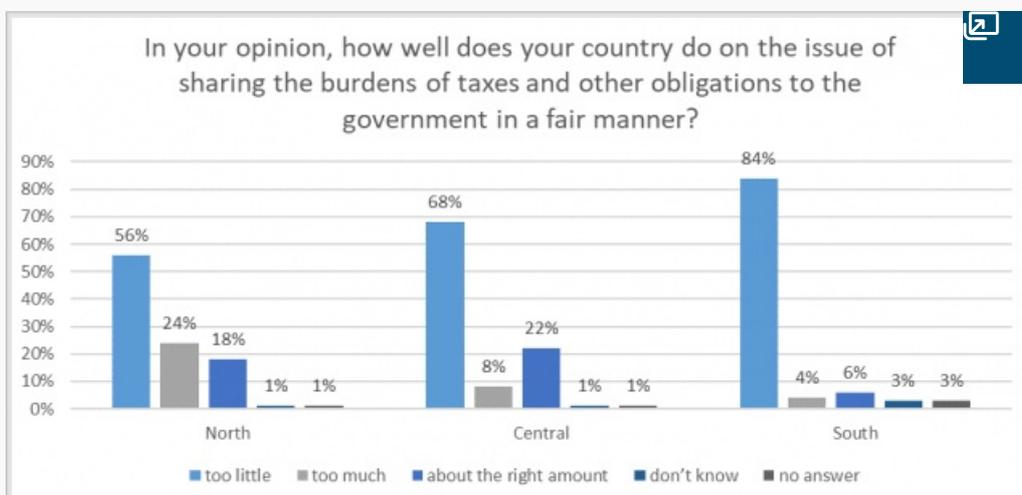
On a more positive note, half of the Jordanian public believes its government is doing about the right amount in “protecting the freedoms and privacy of individual citizens.” Remarkably, however, 36 percent say the authorities are actually doing “too much” in this regard. That view almost certainly represents a conservative Islamist mindset against social liberties, as other poll responses detailed below reveal.



Discontent on Corruption and Economic Gaps Strongest in Southern Region

Nevertheless, Jordan’s southern region, often viewed as the monarchy’s staunchest stronghold, is now precisely where dissatisfaction with some government efforts is most prevalent. On the issue of economic fairness in particular, this regional divide is more starkly evident today than in many previous polls. Fully 84 percent of southern region citizens say government efforts to tackle that issue are inadequate—compared with 68 percent in the central region and just 56 percent in the north. The differences are smaller but still noticeable on the corruption question: 51 percent in the south, compared with 37 percent in the north, say official efforts to confront that problem are insufficient.

To be sure, the southern region is by far the least populated of the three. But given its traditional role as a bastion of royal backing, this lopsided perception of neglect (or worse) in that region should be disconcerting. How Amman can address or at least acknowledge this emerging wave of popular disillusionment will be an important test of its political agility in the coming period.



Mixed Views on Women’s Rights, Islamic Reform

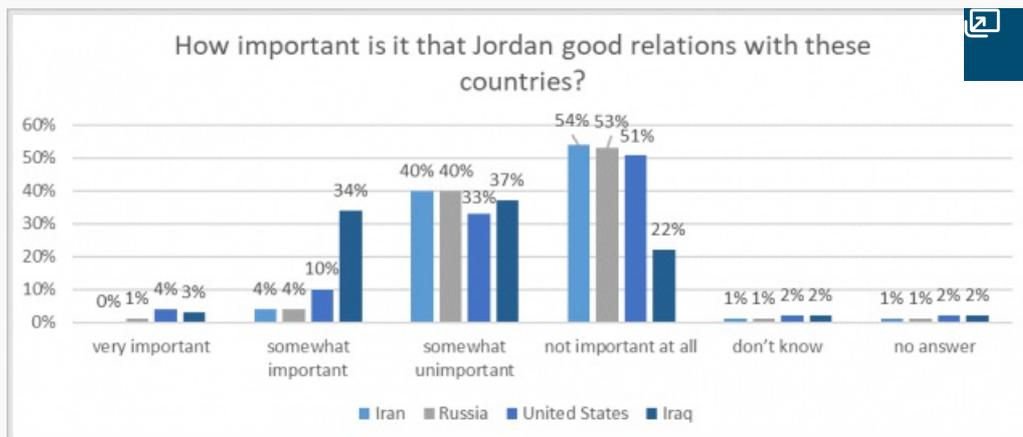
Asked to rate official efforts at “promoting opportunity and equality for women,” half the public consider government policy “about right.” Yet 38 percent of Jordanians say their government is doing “too much.” A much smaller number, only 11 percent, say Jordan is doing “too little” in this area.

Conversely, asked about “interpreting Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction,” 35 percent of Jordanians, about the same as last year, express some support for that idea. But only 3 percent say they “strongly” agree with such changes. And 60 percent disagree – including 22 percent who say they disagree “strongly.” These findings show that social and religious reforms remain somewhat divisive in Jordan society, with a substantial segment of the population staunchly opposed.

Large Drop in Perceived Importance of U.S. Ties; Palestinian Issue Still Top Foreign Policy Priority

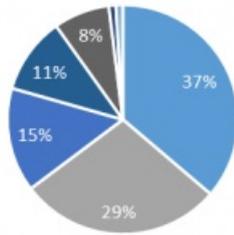
Among the most startling findings of this poll is an unprecedented slide in Jordanian popular opinion on the value of good relations with the United States. Today a mere 14 percent say those relations are even “somewhat important” to their country; last year, the corresponding figure was 58 percent. This precipitous decline is probably due to two background factors: further disappointment with Washington’s policy on Palestinian issues, including Jerusalem; and a more general perception that the U.S. is losing interest and influence in the Middle East as a whole.

By comparison, the proportion who now consider it important to have good ties with Iraq is significantly higher at 37 percent. Meanwhile, U.S. President Donald Trump scores an approval rating in Jordan of just 2 percent, compared with a stunning 72 percent for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Russian President Vladimir Putin is also in the cellar at 5 percent approval. Chinese President Xi Jinping rests in the middle, with 36 percent rating his policies as at least “fairly good.”



Asked more specifically to pick their top priority for U.S. policy in the region, a plurality of Jordanians (37 percent) predictably continue to choose “push harder to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.” But close behind, as in last year’s poll, is “expand its role in fighting against Daesh, al-Qaidah, and similar terrorist groups” (29 percent). Much smaller proportions select other priorities for U.S. policy: either “increase its practical opposition to Iran’s regional influence” (11 percent), or “do more to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Yemen” (8 percent).

What do you think is the most useful thing the United States could do in our region right now?



- push harder to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict
- expand its role in fighting against Daesh, Al-Qaeda, and similar terrorist groups
- reduce its interference in the region
- increase its practical opposition to Iran's regional influence and activities
- do more to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Yemen
- don't know
- no answer

Support for Regional Peacemaking with Israel Still Substantial, Although Down Slightly

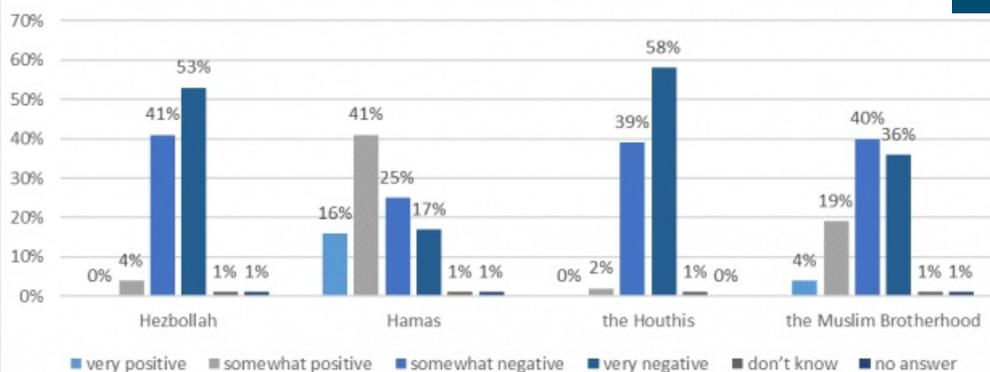
Popular backing for Arab contributions to peacemaking with Israel, while still solidly in the majority, is a bit lower today than a year ago. Seventy-six percent agree that “Arab states should play a new role in Palestinian-Israeli peacemaking, offering both sides incentives to take more moderate positions;” in late 2017, this figure was 85 percent. Since this concept is reportedly at the center of the Trump Administration’s peace plan, even that modest decline should be cause for some concern.

Similarly, the minority who favor cooperation with Israel even before an agreement with the Palestinians has also shrunk modestly. Today, just 26 percent agree that “Arab states should work with Israel on other issues, like technology, counter-terrorism, and containing Iran,” while the number was at 33 percent last year.

Narrow Majority Continue to Support Hamas; One-Quarter Still Back Muslim Brotherhood

On a related issue, 57 percent of Jordanians voice a favorable opinion of Hamas, which rejects peace with Israel. This number is virtually unchanged since last year—although down somewhat from the high of 72 percent in 2014, shortly after the last Gaza war. By contrast, the parent organization Muslim Brotherhood, which operates openly and legally in Jordan, is viewed favorably by just one-quarter of the public. This proportion has remained stable over the past five years.

Jordanian Views on Regional Organizations



But Animosity to Iran, Hezbollah, Houthis Remains Nearly Unanimous

In sharp contrast to such differences, one area of clear consensus between U.S. policy and Jordanian public opinion concerns Iran and its regional allies. A mere 4 percent of Jordanians think good relations with Iran are even “somewhat important” for their country. Moreover, both Hezbollah and the Houthis, two of Iran’s major clients in the region, suffer 95 percent disapproval rating among the Jordanian public. These highly one-sided figures have been exceedingly stable over the past several years, and there is no sign of change on the horizon.

Policy Implications

Based on the preceding analysis, the emphasis of U.S. concern about Jordanian public attitudes should shift from foreign policy to domestic issues, as attention to perceived inequities, corruption, and contentious social issues is clearly warranted. On the foreign policy front, Jordanians offer unexpected popular approval of Arab incentives for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. Nevertheless, expectations of any controversial Jordanian initiatives on that front must be tempered by an understanding of the limits imposed by the Jordanian “street.”

Popular antagonism toward Iran and its regional proxies could also offer fertile ground for closer policy coordination. But a new warning sign is simply how little the Jordanian public today cares at all about keeping on Washington’s good side. Perhaps a concerted attempt to reinforce American credibility as an effective regional ally could help reverse this new trend.

These findings are from a reliable commercial survey conducted by a regional firm in November 2018. The survey consisted of face-to-face interviews with a representative national sample of 1,000 Jordanians, using standard geographic probability techniques. The statistical margin of error is approximately 3 percentage points. Full methodological details are available on request. ❖



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