

# Jordan’s Election Is a Positive Sign Amid Gaza War Tensions

by [Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](#)

Sep 6, 2024

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ghaith al-Omari \(/experts/ghaith-al-omari\)](#)

Ghaith al-Omari is the Rosalinde and Arthur Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow in The Washington Institute’s Irwin Levy Family Program on the U.S.-Israel Strategic Relationship.



**Despite wartime security and economic challenges, the kingdom is holding its first election since a modernization plan was formulated in 2021.**

On September 10, Jordanians will go to the polls to elect the kingdom’s twentieth parliament. Held in the shadow of the Gaza war, the election is the first to take place under the plan formulated by the 2021 Royal Committee to Modernize the Political System. Indeed, a key feature of this election is the inherent tension between the traditionally cautious, security-minded Jordanian approach to crisis management and the king’s political investment in the modernization plan.

## Unsettled Reality

The war has had a significant impact on Jordan. From the outset, many citizens took to the streets, and protesters often displayed Hamas symbols and expressed support for the group, reflecting the fact that [66 percent of Jordanian respondents \(https://jcsw.org/5949/%d9%86%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%a6%d8%ac-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d8%b7%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%b9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d8%a3%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%ad%d8%b1%d8%a8-%d8%a5%d8%b3%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%a6%d9%8a%d9%84/?fbclid=IwAR0VH8cJbJISxwhcQhf5iSbdg6tz6nk3J5WA0b8hW3\\_AiRzbKUUnLABQMBJs\)](https://jcsw.org/5949/%d9%86%d8%aa%d8%a7%d8%a6%d8%ac-%d8%a7%d8%b3%d8%aa%d8%b7%d9%84%d8%a7%d8%b9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d8%a3%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%a7%d9%85-%d8%ad%d8%b1%d8%a8-%d8%a5%d8%b3%d8%b1%d8%a7%d8%a6%d9%8a%d9%84/?fbclid=IwAR0VH8cJbJISxwhcQhf5iSbdg6tz6nk3J5WA0b8hW3_AiRzbKUUnLABQMBJs) endorsed the October 7 attack in a poll conducted late last year. These protests provided a platform for opposition parties—most notably Islamist factions—to voice anti-government messages targeting the kingdom’s peace treaty and economic ties with Israel, and to call for the resumption of official contacts with Hamas, which has been effectively banned since the kingdom expelled the group’s leaders in 1999. The government’s decision to allow these protests has created unease among conservative establishment circles. While the protests have largely abated, they still flare up occasionally in response to developments in Gaza.

The war has also exacerbated security challenges, with Iran emerging as a [significant threat \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-targets-jordan-kingdom-joins-theocracys-list-enemies\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-targets-jordan-kingdom-joins-theocracys-list-enemies) to the kingdom’s stability. Long seen as a challenge by Jordan’s military and security establishment, Iran [and its proxies \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-options-iraqs-axis-resistance-players-part-2-opening-jordan-front\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-options-iraqs-axis-resistance-players-part-2-opening-jordan-front) have redoubled their efforts at destabilization, primarily through the large-scale smuggling of drugs and military-grade weapons from Syria, but also through media campaigns aimed at delegitimizing the kingdom.

The war has affected Jordan’s economy as well. Already suffering from structural weaknesses and not fully recovered from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, key sectors were hit by the crisis in Gaza. For example, the number of tourists decreased by 10 percent in the first quarter of this year, while the number of containers handled in Aqaba, Jordan’s only port, dropped by 20 percent due to Houthi targeting of Red Sea shipping.

Young people have been particularly affected by the economic conditions, with youth unemployment reaching [46.1 percent \(https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jordan/overview#:~:text=However%2C%20there%20is%20room%20for.tightening%20and%20lower%20commodity%20prices\)](https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/jordan/overview#:~:text=However%2C%20there%20is%20room%20for.tightening%20and%20lower%20commodity%20prices) in 2023. This is significant given that [some 45 percent \(https://jordantimes.com/news/local/45-jordanian-voters-under-35-upcoming-elections\)](https://jordantimes.com/news/local/45-jordanian-voters-under-35-upcoming-elections) of voters are under age thirty-five, and of these, around 600,000 are first-time voters.

## Ambitious Plans

This election was envisioned as showcasing the seriousness of Jordan’s political modernization, particularly amid lingering doubts stemming from the kingdom’s history of abortive political reform efforts. Yet the challenges posed by the Gaza war led to public discussions about delaying the election. The decision to proceed was in part meant to project a sense of confidence and stability, but it primarily reflects the investment in the political modernization process by King Abdullah II, who described the election as a “major episode  [\(https://www.petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=249638&lang=ar&name=news\)](https://www.petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=249638&lang=ar&name=news) in the history of Jordanian parliamentary life.”

The political modernization plan was formulated by the ninety-two-member, largely inclusive Royal Committee, tasked with proposing “ [a legislative framework \(https://tahdeeth.jo/Home/HMMessage\)](https://tahdeeth.jo/Home/HMMessage) that lays the foundations for an active party-political life,” ultimately leading to parliament-based governments. In a country beset by economic challenges and surrounded by regional instability, the plan sees a strong parliamentary life as an anchor of stability.

Specifically, the plan envisions a gradual process over three election cycles culminating in a parliament comprising at least 65 percent political party members. It additionally proposes measures to increase participation by youths, women, and minorities and makes suggestions pertaining to local government. The outgoing parliament’s rapid passage of new election and political party laws in 2022 reflects the priority accorded to these changes by the royal court. Some of the [key changes include \(https://jordantimes.com/news/local/lower-house-passes-draft-2022-elections-law\)](https://jordantimes.com/news/local/lower-house-passes-draft-2022-elections-law) creating a hybrid system that combines a national list with district lists, lowering the minimum age for candidates to twenty-five, and adding mandatory slots for women and youths in party lists.

Next week’s election represents the first phase of the plan, with 30 percent of the seats (41 out of 138) dedicated to parties. Indeed, a central pillar of this vision is to energize political parties.

## A Crowded Party Scene

Jordan banned political parties in 1957 after the previous year's election produced a parliament and cabinet that were closely affiliated with Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser and adopted policies that directly challenged the king's authority. While parties continued to operate underground, their membership and influence was limited. The Muslim Brotherhood, which operated as a charity rather than a party, was not covered by the ban. The ban was lifted in 1992, but parties remained a weak, marginal actor in Jordanian political life.

The 2021 political modernization plan triggered a proliferation of new factions, and thirty-one of the thirty-eight registered parties are fielding candidates in this election. These parties can be roughly grouped into three categories:

- The Islamists are dominated by the Islamic Action Front, established as the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1992. Despite splinters and defections, the IAF remains Jordan's most established, best-organized party and has dominated the political scene since elections resumed in 1989, though its strength has waned in recent years.
- Leftist parties—an amalgam of socialist and Arab nationalist factions, many of them extensions of transnational pan-Arab parties and movements seen in other countries—benefit from being familiar fixtures in Jordanian politics but espouse ideologies largely seen as archaic.
- Conservative, establishmentarian parties are not new in Jordanian politics; previous attempts to create them were made in the 1990s. In the past, however, most members of this grouping—who tend to be former government officials and tribal figures—usually ran as independents. Since the new party and election laws were passed, such candidates have created political parties, and these factions now comprise the majority of the newly registered parties. Many of them remain personality-driven and are still struggling to attract members and create effective party machines and distinct political identities.

All of these parties are competing for the votes of a highly skeptical electorate. In [a poll \(https://www.iri.org/resources/state-of-the-state-nationwide-survey-of-jordan-wave4/\)](https://www.iri.org/resources/state-of-the-state-nationwide-survey-of-jordan-wave4/) conducted this February, only 34 percent expressed high or moderate confidence in parliament, and only 31 percent in political parties.

## What to Watch For

In addition to the traditional indicators relevant in any election—such as turnout (an anemic 29.9 percent in 2020) and voting irregularities—there are variables unique to this election. The main question relates to the IAF. Some officials privately contend that the Gaza war has not significantly increased the party's popularity, yet it is also clear that the IAF has been more visible and emboldened by the war. A strong showing by the Islamists would likely presage future tensions, indicating not only increased popular support for the IAF, but also a party decision to flex its muscles. Such a result would probably strengthen conservative voices that call for a less permissive approach to political modernization.

In contrast, a modest Islamist showing could indicate either that the war has not altered Jordan's political map or that the IAF has chosen not to confront the establishment. In either case, this would give the establishment more confidence to proceed with reforms.

Another important question relates to the performance of establishmentarian parties. Of all the political blocs, this is the newest and least defined in terms of its strength and internal dynamics. The bloc's ability to garner votes and coalesce into a manageable number of parties will help clarify the Jordanian political map and reassure skeptics—primarily power centers in the bureaucracy, the security establishment, and the tribes—who have voiced concerns regarding the pace and direction of political modernization.

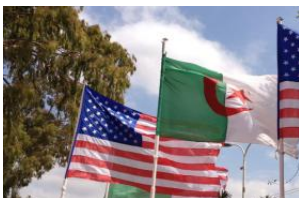
## Implications for U.S. Policy

Although it is important to emphasize the need for fair and free elections, it is equally important for Washington to acknowledge that holding elections at such a tense moment is a positive step. The results will not alter Jordan's foreign policy or security posture, which are outside the legislature's domain. But they will provide an important indicator of the state of domestic politics in this important regional ally.

While some official statements about the Gaza war have tended strongly toward populism, Jordan has largely managed to balance public anger—and political exploitation of this anger—with its foreign policy commitments to the United States and key allies. The most visible (but by no means only) manifestation of this commitment was the kingdom's role in assisting the U.S.-led effort to intercept Iranian projectiles fired at Israel in April, a defensive operation conducted within the U.S. Central Command umbrella. If next week's vote reveals signs of deeper public discontent, Washington and its allies may need to examine additional political, military, and economic tools to help preserve Jordan's stability and security.

*Ghaith al-Omari is the Gilbert Foundation Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ♦

## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [What Would Another Tebboune Victory Mean for U.S.-Algeria Relations?](#)

Sep 6, 2024

♦  
Sabina Henneberg,  
Souhira Medini

[\(/policy-analysis/what-would-another-tebboune-victory-mean-us-algeria-relations\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

East Med Politics May Further Delay Cyprus Gas

Sep 5, 2024

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/east-med-politics-may-further-delay-cyprus-gas)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iraq's Watergate and the Fallout for U.S. Relations

Sep 5, 2024

Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/iraqs-watergate-and-fallout-us-relations)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Jordan (/policy-analysis/jordan)