

# Jordan Between Regional Threats and Internal Pressures: The Economic Key

by [Shehab Al-Makahleh \(/experts/shehab-al-makahleh\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Shehab Al-Makahleh \(/experts/shehab-al-makahleh\)](#)

Shehab Al-Makahleh is a senior media and policy consultant in Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. Al-Makahleh has been working for several Middle Eastern countries as a political, military and security expert.



Brief Analysis

Jordan's King Abdullah II came to power in February 1999 in the aftermath of King Hussein. For the past nineteen years of his rule, he has kept the kingdom stable, despite the hardships and challenges that the whole Middle East region is undergoing, ranging from radicalism to terrorism. He has made Jordan a model for others in terms of security and stability. Tensions persist -- but as this analysis will demonstrate, the main ones in Jordan have shifted from political, ethnic, or Islamic issues to economic ones, which are more amenable to gradualist reforms and compromises.

In 2011, Jordanians witnessed the dire ramifications of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. They tried to fend off external intervention in their domestic affairs, benefitting from the country's geostrategic location in the turbulent Middle East to enhance and their national security and armed forces to counter any foreign threats. However, Jordan remains vulnerable to internal threats from parties unsettled by the current political turbulence, with economic hardships and heavy financial debts as points of contention.

Over the past two decades, since the king succeeded to the throne, he has proclaimed a value-based political environment centered on pluralism, social solidarity, modernity, and moderation. King Abdullah's character and intellectual and social background played a major role in Jordan's stance vis-à-vis a number of thorny regional issues: the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the war on terrorism, and pan-Arab causes -- all in addition to the domestic concerns of economic hardship the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and governance issues. Despite the king's lack of previous government experience, he has tried to address his people's concerns and problems, investing in the young generation that forms 75 percent of Jordan's population.

At the same time, ever since 1999, the new king has adopted a heavy military defense to control the country's borders and engaged the General Intelligence Department to tackle emerging regional threats such as extremism and terrorism. When the 2011 Arab Spring erupted in the region, the king had to manage the internal conflict with the Islamic and other opposition parties. An internal conflict between the old generation of political elites, known as the old guard, and the new generation of neo-liberal elites began to emerge in Jordan's political life.

Focusing more specifically on Jordan's Islamist opposition, King Abdullah's response to such cross-currents clearly

influences his relationship with the Islamic Action Front, the Muslim Brotherhood's political wing in Jordan. Like his father before him, he has considered these Islamists part of the Jordanian social and political fabric. This stance places him in direct conflict with other regional heads of state, who have demonized the Muslim Brotherhood and blacklisted its leaders.

On the Palestinian issue, the king calls for a two-state solution. Jordan's stability heavily depends on it as 65 percent of Jordanians have Palestinian roots. However, due to regional pressures on Jordan, including new U.S. rhetoric about an Israeli-Palestinian "deal of the century," the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime began to shift negatively from a state of alliance or coexistence - as the Islamists prefer to call it - to a state of confrontation. In the past, the Muslim Brotherhood strongly opposed peace talks between Jordan and Israel and opposed the Wadi Araba peace treaty in 1994.

On domestic issues, the Islamists opposed the International Monetary Fund's plans for Jordan. They also refused the structural transformation policies in the Jordanian economy and the privatization of some state-owned corporations and establishments. The Muslim Brotherhood-led the leftist and nationalist political parties to oppose these transformations as well. Currently, they are blaming all the troubles in Jordan on the agreement with Israel, placing pressure on the government to reject the American decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, which they claim will ignite a third Intifada.

But to better understand the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood today, one must study its history, as divided into three eras. The first era was from 1946 to 1989, marked by a complex combination of mutual caution and prudence between the Brotherhood and the palace. Abdullatif Abu Qoora had founded the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood in 1945, and ratified its legal status as an association in a governmental decree.

During the late King Hussein's reign, shifts in the region prompted him to strengthen his legitimacy by strengthening ties with the Jordanian tribes-- the backbone of Jordanian security and armed forces. The goal was to contain the Muslim Brotherhood instead of directly fighting them since he still considered them part of the Jordanian fabric. King Hussein allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to pursue their charitable activities. The relationship between the government and the Muslim Brotherhood was proper and in line with both parties' declared agendas to serve Jordanian national interests – including common opposition to Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) threats against the government.

However, this began to change in the 1980s with the deportation of the (PLO) from Lebanon and the outbreak of the first Intifada in the West Bank in 1987. This complicated the Jordanian scene and introduced a new player, Hamas, which has become a major Islamic factor affecting the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's decisions.

Thus, the second era was from 1989 to 2011, when the Islamic Action Front became a central player in the Jordanian political arena after winning twenty-two seats in the 1989 legislative elections. This result falls within a regional context, characterized by the strengthening of political Islamist movements in different countries and the Islamic revolution in Iran. However, in 1993, King Hussein decided to change the electoral law and adopted the "one man one vote" system in order to decrease the number of Islamist representatives in parliament. The Muslim Brotherhood called people to boycott the elections, denouncing the illegality of voting procedures and demanding a change in the mechanisms of political participation.

The beginning of the Arab Spring initiated the third era. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood emerged weak from the storm that hit the Arab world in 2011 because Jordan did not undergo demonstrations as in other countries. The sit-ins and demonstrations were not political but rather mere strikes calling for improved living conditions and transparency against corruption. Nevertheless, the emerging issue was that the Muslim Brotherhood called for a "constitutional monarchy". King Abdullah addressed his people and announced nation-wide reforms.

When the protests nevertheless spread across Jordan, the Muslim Brotherhood faced a multivariate equation: the relationship with the monarch of Jordan, the relationship with other Islamists who rose to power in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, the uprising in Syria to topple Bashar Al Assad, Jordanian public opinion, and the stability of the Jordanian community.

The Muslim Brotherhood leaders were aware of their ability to mobilize people. However, they were careful not to fuel too much anger in the kingdom. They gave assurances that demonstrations would remain peaceful, lest they lose to the government. In the end, the leadership of King Abdullah foiled the Muslim Brotherhood's endeavors to mobilize Jordanians in 2012. They managed to gather thousands but contrary to their expectations, the public simply demanded reforms that the king quickly adopted, thwarting the Muslim Brotherhood's influence. This is how the Muslim Brotherhood lost its impetus and started to play a "wait and see the game" with the government.

By the elections of 2016, Islamist representatives fell to a smaller minority in parliament. The rift between the Jordanian government and the Muslim Brotherhood, along with the Hamas leadership, grew wider after Hamas leader Khaled Masha'al and members of the Muslim Brotherhood visited Iran. As a result, the Jordanian authorities closed the Hamas office in Amman.

Most recently, from late 2017 until late March 2018, thousands of people demonstrated against the government, calling on the King to fight corruption that contributed to higher levels of debt, causing economic difficulties such as price hikes, high rates of unemployment, and new taxes. Reasons for these demonstrations varied. While poverty and unemployment drove many, opposing political parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood also mobilized more politically oriented demonstrations in governorates where they had relatively strong support.

In response, the king shuffled some cabinet portfolios to ease tensions. However, many Jordanians believe that this is a placebo rather than a remedy, asking for more steps by the government to improve living conditions. This explains why the Jordanian parliament speaker started talking, among other things, about reviving Jordanian-Syrian trade ties. Currently, some Jordanians perceive Syria as an escape from their hardships when borders reopen. Today, as in the recent past, the key to Jordan's stability is once again to be found mainly in economic factors, rather than in the drastic political, Islamic, or other cleavages so tragically evident elsewhere in the neighborhood with the key to Jerusalem in Jordan, which has always called for maintaining Jerusalem as the capital of the three monotheistic religions. ♦

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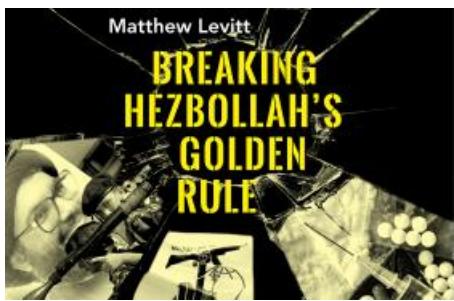
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