In Jordan, Problems and Politics Are Local

by David Schenker **(/experts/david-schenker)**

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Articles & Testimony

A visit with a Jordanian parliamentarian shows how some local representatives are trying to work around the governance gaps in Amman despite looming concerns about security threats and foreign policy.

In Jordan, times are tough. First, the Kingdom has had to contend with absorbing nearly a million Syrian refugees over the past four years, which has placed a huge burden on its infrastructure and public resources. In addition, it must deal with people traveling in the opposite direction: Since 2011, an estimated 2,500 Jordanians have made their way across the northern border to join Jebhat al Nusra and the Islamic State, also known as ISIS. In turn, Jordan has become a major target of these terrorist groups. In early March, citing a heightened security threat from terrorism, the Peace Corps evacuated its volunteers from the country. Despite all this, however, the average Jordanian does not consider security to be the country's principal challenge.

According to a recent poll conducted by the non-profit International Republican Institute, Jordanians are more concerned about the stumbling economy, high prices, and endemic corruption. And they feel that they have very limited means to redress these issues. According to the poll, 71 percent of Jordanians said that their elected parliament failed to accomplish anything particularly commendable in 2014. Not only is the legislature perennially stymied by a dominant Palace, legislators are seen as preoccupied with tertiary matters, such as relations with Israel and an unnecessary bill to protect the Arabic language.

Although Jordanians are not yet taking to the streets to protest, local concerns remain a persistent and widespread source of frustration. During a trip to Jordan in March 2015, I witnessed how one Jordanian deals with these issues in her home district. The experience shed light on the way Jordanian politicians view governance and why local politics can be so greatly divorced from the larger foreign policy and security problems that plague the country.

Rudaynah al Otti, 42, is a second-term parliamentarian from Rusayfeh, a poor, conservative, primarily Palestinian town in the Zarqa Governorate, just a short drive north of Amman. She hails from a prominent Palestinian family: Before stepping down this year, her father had served for decades as a senior official in Jordan's Arab Progressive Ba'ath Party, which supports the regime of Syrian President Bashar al Assad. In addition to a bachelor's degree in financial management and banking, Otti holds a master's in business management, and from 2007 to 2010 served as a member of the Municipal Council of Rusayfeh. Elected to parliament in 2010 and again in 2013 under Jordan's women's quota (15 of the 138 seats in parliament are reserved for female candidates that receive the highest percentage of votes), she serves on the parliament's committees for finance and Palestinian affairs.

Otti is perhaps best known in Jordan for her foreign policy views. She is a leading advocate in the Kingdom for the establishment of a Palestinian state that includes all of historic Palestine and has Jerusalem as its capital. She also calls for the "liberation" of Jordan from the "burden" of the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty. Otti's 2010 campaign posters featured herself in front of Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock Mosque flanked by three female Hamas suicide bombers. She has also offered full support -- both on television and in print interviews -- for the November 18, 2014 Palestinian terrorist attacks against a Jerusalem synagogue that killed five Israelis.

I met Otti in her office at the Jordan Nashmyat Charity society, which provides assistance to the district's most impoverished. She is the president of the organization and meets with her constituents at its headquarters twice a week, on Saturdays and Wednesdays, to listen to their problems regarding unemployment, welfare, and education, among a myriad of other social ills. When I arrived at noon on a Saturday, no fewer than 30 people were seated in an antechamber, waiting patiently. Like most of the women in her district, Otti is a conservative Muslim who wears a hijab and demurs from shaking hands with men. She is, however, no shrinking violet.

In the course of the two hours, Otti saw almost 20 of her constituents, both male and female. The brief meetings were evenly punctuated -- nearly every three minutes -- by a stream of calls on her mobile phone, which she quickly answered. She was courteous -- she always started by asking about her constituent's family -- but then got straight to business.

Not surprisingly, a majority of Otti's visitors were seeking assistance with government-funded aid programs. Poverty in Jordan is ubiquitous: According to the World Bank, nearly 15 percent of the Kingdom's residents fall below the poverty line, defined as those with household income of 366 dinars ($517) per month or below, and roughly 30 percent live in poverty for at least a quarter of the year.

Several individuals who met with Otti discussed the inadequacy of their pensions. One physically disabled man, unable to work to support his family of five, explained to Otti that he had been receiving just 136 dinars ($192) per month in government assistance. This amount, he said, was less than he was entitled to and was not even enough to cover the rent. In response, Otti instructed her secretary to write a letter to the Ministry of Social Development, asking the minister to review the man's case.

In another instance, Otti spoke with a young, recently married woman who asked for help in making ends meet. The newlywed's husband had just been sent to jail for writing a bad check -- a sum apparently so substantial that he was unable to repay it upon his arrest -- and would be incarcerated for two years. Otti informed the young bride that she was eligible for a monthly pension, and encouraged her to inquire at the Ministry of Social Development.

Otti wasn't able to help everyone, however. One Jordanian woman who had moved to Syria with her Syrian husband a few years ago came in to ask about her right to government assistance. Until a year ago, her family had been living in Homs, she said. Despite her Jordanian citizenship, her family was considered refugees in Jordan since the children's nationalities are based on their father's. As Syrians, the family receives only 39 dinars in support per month, or barely enough to purchase about 6 pounds of meat per month. (According to the World Food Program, 34 percent of

Jordanians under 5 years of age suffer from anemia, suggesting that consumption of red meat is an increasingly scarce element of the local diet). Her apartment, the woman said, cost 150 dinars a month, and her husband's salary as a tailor was not enough to support them. Otti told the woman that her options were limited, but suggested that she pursue additional funding through the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR).

In another case, a destitute divorcee who lived with her children at her sister's home, burst into tears as she explained her situation to Otti. She had not yet received any form of welfare from the government and had been forced to search for food in the garbage. Unable to provide any helpful advice, Otti reached into her pocketbook and pressed several dinars into her constituent's hand.

An apparently common problem that came up was the inconsistency of government-funded educational grants. Several of Otti's younger constituents complained to her that their university stipends -- available to students with jeyyid jeddan or "very good" grades -- had inexplicably vanished. A woman joined by her daughter explained that her tuition grant for the Hashemite University last year had been discontinued after the first semester this year despite excellent marks. Otti summoned her secretary again from the next room to record the details of the case and to write a letter from her office to the Minister of Higher Education.

With unemployment close to 30 percent in Jordan and perhaps higher in Rusayfeh, it wasn't surprising that many constituents sought out Otti's help to find work. Like most Jordanians, Rusayfeh residents appeared to favor public sector employment, which while low paying, offers job security and is considered less demanding work. One man asked for her assistance in enlisting his son into the army. A woman who was formerly an administrator in the Ministry of Education said she was looking to return to her old position. A teacher specializing in Islamic education who had come to see Otti six months ago seeking a public school job, was there as well. Otti told him that she had sent a letter to the minister on his behalf, but had not yet heard back. She agreed to follow up.

It was unclear how successful Otti was in resolving all of these cases. To be sure, judging from her familiarity with the teacher's issue -- and the sheer number of people waiting for an audience with her -- the bureaucratic wheels in Amman move slowly.

Nevertheless, after two hours, I left Otti's office impressed with her commitment, connection, and dedication to her constituents. I was also impressed by the efficiency of her operations, and her incredible attention to detail. Over the years, I have met many Jordanian politicians, but have heard surprisingly little about them routinely returning to their districts to interact with voters. With the exception of attending funerals and other social events that require them to make a public appearance back home, parliamentarians usually remain in Amman and require voters to travel to the capital to meet with them.

Otti's provision of a constituent service day was indeed impressive. At the same time, though, it's odd that Rusayfeh residents would need to petition their parliamentary representative to intercede on their behalf for seemingly routine matters that involve government agencies in Amman. The inability of Jordanians to successfully navigate state bureaucracies -- and the fact that Otti is writing letters to ministers inquiring about so many individuals -- suggests serious governance deficits in Jordan. While Otti's efforts are helpful at the micro level, they also represent an ad hoc workaround to the currently inadequate system of governance.

To be fair, the Jordanian government has made some efforts in recent years to improve elements of governance. Although corruption remains a principal complaint of average Jordanians, for example, last year, according to Transparency International, local perceptions of corruption in the Kingdom diminished significantly. Still, with security threats growing, it's clear that reform and systemic improvements in governance in Jordan remains a lower priority. For the time being at least, the services provided by Otti constitute a viable means of meeting some of Rusayfeh's needs.

For the average Jordanian, preoccupied by the wear and tear of the daily grind and worried about the deterioration in Syria and Iraq, the system -- while admittedly less than optimal -- is satisfactory. For Washington, however, Otti will remain a puzzle. For all her good work in governance, her foreign policy agenda may not be something the West can stomach. However, as Washington continues to support democratic development in Jordan and throughout the Middle East, it should remember that all politics are local.

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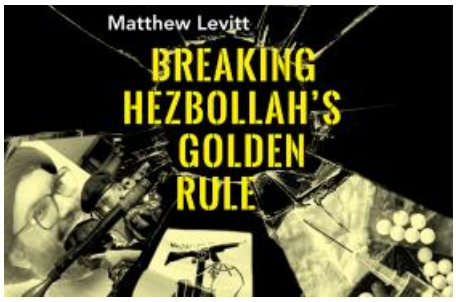

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