

Jordan's Web Policy Mistake

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

Jun 14, 2013

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Articles & Testimony

Jordan is in danger of associating its traditionally enlightened monarchy with the practices of its repressive neighbors.

Jordan's King Abdullah II has a lot on his plate. Not only is the kingdom hosting nearly 500,000 Syrian refugees, the economy is deteriorating, there's serious unrest in the southern town of Maan, plus persistent protests related to a widespread perception of officially sanctioned corruption and burgeoning domestic opposition to the U.S. deployment of troops and F-16s to protect Jordan from violent spillover from Syria.

The palace has pursued some savvy initiatives to insulate the nation from these challenges, including seeking U.S. loan guarantees to float a Eurobond, securing a \$2-billion IMF loan and taking very public preliminary measures to fight corruption. But not all of the king's stabilization efforts have been well conceived. This month, Jordan blocked local access to about 300 domestic websites.

Ironically, this action coincided with the rollout of Abdullah's "democratic empowerment" project. Putting aside the incongruous timing, the assault on Internet freedom had been legislated months ago.

Still, not surprisingly, publishers of these websites accused the palace of implementing the law now to silence dissent. After all, many of the blocked sites are critical of the government and focus reportage and commentary on anti-government demonstrations, news of the tribal opposition movement known as the Hirak and alleged corruption.

During a protest outside the journalists union headquarters June 3, Basil Okoor, the publisher of jo24.net -- whose site is among those blocked -- described the government measures as "political and not legal," and warned that "tomorrow, the state will extend its powers over print journalism."

Since 2009, Freedom House has characterized Jordan as "not free," and traditional newspapers in the kingdom have long faced pressures. Indeed, editors of Jordan's nongovernmental papers say the palace weighs in routinely when it

disapproves of stories. Until last September, however, online publications had by and large avoided these constraints. But then Parliament passed highly restrictive amendments to the "press and publications" law requiring online publications to pay a \$1,400 registration fee and apply for a license within 90 days.

Although many websites at the time registered, several opposition sites refused on principle to submit to a licensing process overseen by a judiciary widely perceived as not independent. Non-licensed websites were originally slated to be blocked before parliamentary elections in January. The reprieve ended this month.

Responding to the government's actions, several banned sites have coalesced to issue statements and conduct sit-ins. Jordan's Islamists -- whose websites ikhwanjo.com and albosala.com were also blocked, although access to ikhwanjo.com has since been restored -- have not joined the protests. But the Muslim Brotherhood issued a statement condemning the step as "a continuation of the harsh authoritarian procedures" of the government. Meanwhile, the banner headline on albosala.com encourages users to "participate in the national campaign to break the blocking of news sites" by clicking on a link to a proxy server.

Apparently, many in Jordan -- where Internet penetration reportedly is more than 50% -- are doing just that. According to Okoor of jo24.net, in recent days traffic to his site has spiked, increasing from 25,000 to more than 40,000 visitors a day.

While the size of the protests has not been large, the message appears to be resonating. So far, 85 of 150 Jordanian parliamentarians have signed a petition asking for a review of the controversial law. And Mohammad Momani, the minister of state for media affairs and communications, has since announced that the government might be willing to reconsider it.

Of course, the government maintains that Jordanian websites should be regulated to help curb slander, defamation and other forms of what it considers irresponsible reporting -- on matters such as corruption -- that incite citizens. These are legitimate concerns, but as in other states, publishers can be held accountable in civil courts.

Notably, the Obama administration has not commented on the blocking. No doubt Washington is not pleased. But given the broad range of threats to Jordanian stability, the curtailing of civil liberties ranks fairly low. However, it is all but certain that the administration is quietly conveying its concerns to the palace.

Given the ongoing turmoil in the region, it would be unwise to press for radical political reform in Jordan now. Indeed, the majority of Jordanians are not clamoring for such change. But rolling back the nation's already limited freedoms is not a recipe for enhanced stability. As Abdullah works to insulate Jordan from domestic and foreign threats, the last thing he needs -- at home and abroad -- is to associate his benign and traditionally enlightened monarchy with the region's most repressive regimes.

David Schenker is the Aufzien fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. ❖

Los Angeles Times

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Jordan \(/policy-analysis/jordan\)](#)

