

# Saving Jordan's King Abdullah Must Be a U.S. Priority

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Perhaps Washington's best Arab ally, the monarch increasingly lacks money and political stability.

**W**hen President Obama meets Jordan's King Abdullah on Friday, the agenda is likely to focus on the spillover from Syria's civil war (including 400,000 refugees on Jordanian soil) and efforts to jump-start the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Given recent developments in the kingdom, however, Mr. Obama would do well to make Jordanian domestic politics the centerpiece of the discussion.

Until recently, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan -- perhaps Washington's best Arab ally and Israel's last remaining reliable peace partner -- had weathered the region's political turbulence. Lately the tense calm has given way to what could be a prolonged period of unrest.

For decades, analysts have predicted the imminent demise of the insolvent monarchy. When the Arab Spring began in 2011 Jordanians warily joined the movement, launching limited but persistent protests over corruption, political reform and economic stagnation. Then demonstrations spiked last year, spurred by a government decision to decrease oil and food subsidies.

King Abdullah had little choice but to take those steps. In 2012, disruptions in Egypt's natural-gas pipeline contributed to a \$3 billion Jordanian deficit -- out of a \$9.7 billion budget. Yet with nearly 30 percent unemployed and commodity prices rising, the king's decision was predictably unpopular. Protests have subsided, but they will likely resume in April when the government plans to reduce its electricity subsidy.

Riots over food prices are nothing new in Jordan, but the recent demonstrations differed markedly from the bread riots of the past. Historically, Jordan's Islamists were the regime's chief critics. Over the past two years, however, the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood has been joined by Jordanians of tribal origin who have traditionally been considered the king's leading supporters.

Known as Al-Hirak or "The Movement," this disparate group of disaffected Jordanians numbers only in the hundreds, but its members have been brazen in criticizing the monarchy, routinely violating laws prohibiting defamation of the king and his family. During a demonstration I attended in January, Hirak protesters in Amman referred to King Abdullah as Ali Baba (of "40 thieves" fame). A widespread perception of palace corruption -- plus the arrests of protesters and a repressive new media law targeting Internet dissent -- continues to fuel outrage.

Washington has been concerned with Jordan's slow pace of political reform and the frustration it sows. Parliamentary elections in January were plagued by allegations of vote-buying, and malapportionment of representation remains a problem, but International Republican Institute monitors deemed the election "more transparent" than the last, in 2010, and "a step forward."

A significant number of Jordanians nonetheless remain frustrated with progress on political reform, but the pre-eminent threat to stability is indigenous discontent focused on corruption and the economy. If King Abdullah doesn't effectively address the growing unrest, a coalition of Islamist and tribal opposition -- bolstered by the kind of labor unions that forced Egypt's Hosni Mubarak from power -- could gain strength and undermine the monarchy.

At this point, there is little Washington can do to reverse the palace's diminished stature. It is possible that King Abdullah will be able to resurrect himself by enacting limited but real political reform and by licensing the operations of legitimate anticorruption organizations such as Transparency International. King Abdullah's father, King Hussein, engineered more than one comeback during a reign of nearly 50 years.

But Washington can't leave such a revival to chance. Given the deterioration of the U.S.-Egypt relationship and the likelihood that Islamists or irredentist Palestinians would capitalize on instability in Jordan, the survival of the Hashemite regime is a U.S. strategic imperative.

The most urgent challenge is to help Jordan avoid its own fiscal cliff. Last year, the U.S. granted the country \$460 million in economic assistance, including \$284 million in budget support. The U.S. also sent \$300 million in military aid. That is substantial help, but more is needed to insulate the embattled king. The Obama administration should grant Jordan the \$200 million in additional U.S. financial assistance it is requesting, back a loan guarantee enabling the kingdom to float a \$1 billion bond, and rally the international community to defray Jordan's cost of hosting Syrian refugees.

More important, the administration should press Jordan's friends in the Gulf Cooperation Council -- who committed to providing the kingdom with \$5 billion over the next five years -- to do more. Over the past few months, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates delivered more than \$1 billion for development projects. But cash is now crucial. Saudi Arabia once was a reliable benefactor -- in 2011, the Saudis granted \$1.45 billion to Jordan. They have not been as generous since, though last month Riyadh did finally cut a check for \$200 million. Given the immediacy of the crisis, the White House ought to prevail on Saudi Arabia to step up.

With Egypt now under Muslim Brotherhood control and Syria's Assad regime verging on collapse, the dire implications of instability in Jordan cannot be overstated. The importance of Jordan as an American ally can be seen in reports that the U.S. has dozens of Special Forces already deployed in the kingdom making contingency preparations, with the Jordanian armed forces, to corral Syria's chemical weapons if Assad falls.

Long a force for regional moderation and peace, Jordan under King Abdullah has been an excellent strategic partner for Washington. Should Jordan be destabilized, there is little doubt that, as with Egypt, the outcome would be decidedly less advantageous to U.S. interests.

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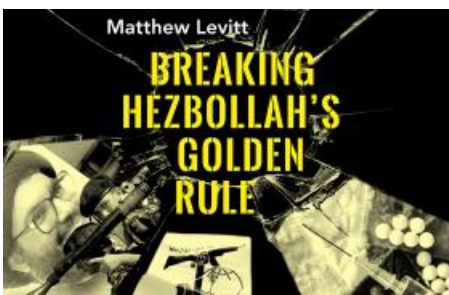
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