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As Jordan Stumbles, the U.S. Response Is Crucial

by [David Schenker](#)

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Brief Analysis

Washington should work closely with Amman, providing alternatives to rash changes that some will advocate as a way to stay ahead of the region's political tidal wave.

Yesterday, Jordan's King Abdullah approved a new and restrictive media law only two weeks after implementing -- and quickly canceling -- fuel price increases nationwide. The ill-advised price hike, the widespread protests it sparked, and the latest palace initiative to police the internet all come at a particularly sensitive time for the kingdom. In addition to the refugees and security pressures associated with the Syria crisis, Jordan has been racked by demonstrations since December 2011 due to the slow pace of political reform, endemic corruption, and the anemic economy. While reinstatement of the fuel subsidy may temporarily mollify the restive population, the media law will only add to the growing list of popular grievances, further complicating Abdullah's efforts to preserve stability.

BACKGROUND

Over the past year and a half, protests have become a ubiquitous feature of political life in Jordan. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, where demonstrators demanded an end to unpopular authoritarian regimes, Jordanian protests have largely focused on electoral reform, official accountability, and economic relief, albeit laced with criticism of the monarchy.

In the initial months of the region-wide Arab uprisings, Abdullah was able to attenuate the movement's momentum by firing his government, spending liberally, and initiating real constitutional reform. The changes to the kingdom's charter proved popular and were considered a positive first step. But when the king balked at electoral reform, the

protests spiked, and a nascent opposition coalition of historically disenfranchised Palestinian Jordanians, politically constrained Muslim Brotherhood Islamists, and traditionally pro-monarchy East Bank (Bedouin) Jordanians began to emerge.

POLITICAL REFORM INTERRUPTED

Fuel price controversies aside, the electoral law remains Jordan's major source of political foment today. Since 1993, the kingdom has employed a "one man, one vote" system in multi-candidate districts that impairs Islamist electoral performance. At the same time, the government's advanced system of gerrymandering -- which gives more representation to pro-monarchy districts -- has limited the number of Palestinians in parliament, retarded the development of political parties, and assured the palace of generally friendly legislatures.

This summer, the king responded to protests by directing parliament to pen a new electoral law promising to combine the current system with a national-list ballot. Initially, protestors seemed optimistic that new reform-minded prime minister Awn Khasawneh would deliver a compromise solution. Yet the measure passed in July was a disappointment: the national-list component added only twenty-seven members to an expanded 140-seat legislature, and members of the pro-monarchy military, intelligence, and security forces were permitted to vote for the first time. Apparently frustrated with such interference from the palace, Khasawneh tendered his resignation, publicly criticized the new law, and lamented to the Jordanian daily *al-Ghad* that when he became prime minister, he had "believed there was an opportunity for real reform."

As anticipated, the Muslim Brotherhood responded to the changes by announcing that it would boycott the parliamentary elections slated for December. Describing the decision to avoid real reform as a "miscalculation," MB deputy general guide Zaki Bani Irsheid told the pan-Arab daily *al-Sharq al-Awsat* that the king had essentially "put the country into a very real crisis." Subsequently, 400 prominent politicians and civil society personalities in Jordan sent Abdullah a petition urging him to postpone the December vote to prevent a "failed election" plagued by low turnout. Soon afterward, however, Khasawneh's successor, Fayez Tarawneh, announced on television that the elections would not be delayed, and that no further amendments to the electoral law would be forthcoming.

A PERFECT ECONOMIC STORM

The political discontent has been exacerbated by increased economic pressures. Syria's instability has resulted in nearly 100,000 refugees entering Jordan, posing heavy financial costs and taxing already-scarce natural resources -- particularly water in the parched city of Mafraq, near the burgeoning Syrian refugee camp of Zaatari. Meanwhile regional developments have scared tourists away from the kingdom, undermining an already-weak economy and adding to the high youth unemployment rate (currently around 30 percent).

Even more detrimental have been the repeated attacks on the Sinai natural gas pipeline, which have cut the supply of cheap gas to Jordan and forced Amman to purchase the expensive commodity on the open market. Making matters worse, Abdullah was compelled to raise monthly government salaries by \$28 last year just to keep up with rising commodity prices. In one recent survey, for example, 76 percent of Jordanians reported that their salaries had not kept pace with the cost of living.

With state revenues down and expenses up, Jordan's budget deficit this year is predicted to reach nearly \$3 billion. In 2011, a \$1.4 billion Saudi grant kept Amman solvent, but without regular largesse of that magnitude, Abdullah has little wiggle room -- more than 80 percent of this year's \$9.6 billion budget is allocated to government salaries. To help weather the storm, the king has secured a \$2 billion International Monetary Fund loan that is due to move forward in December. Initially, the IMF made the recent fuel price hike a precondition for the financing, viewing it as a necessary reform. Given international sympathy for Jordan, however, Abdullah's reinstatement of the subsidy is unlikely to impact the loan's disbursement.

UNFORCED ERRORS

Despite the quick reversal, the palace-approved fuel-price misstep could cost the king another prime minister: according to recent polls, Tarawneh's popularity is the lowest for a premier since the Kabariti government sixteen years ago. A loyal monarchist, Tarawneh has served as advisor to both Abdullah and his late father Hussein, with demonstrated experience in navigating through tumultuous times. If he is forced out, it would be a real -- and unnecessary -- loss.

Amman's handling of the electoral reform process has also aggravated the crisis. Instead of offering enough new national-list seats to placate the mainly Islamist opposition with a meaningful parliamentary bloc, the palace dug in its heels. Traditionally, the monarchy's opposition to electoral reform has prompted little popular blowback, but in the milieu of the Arab uprisings, this approach seems heavy handed.

The media legislation ratified by the king this week is sure to fuel resentment as well. Allegedly aimed at curbing online pornography, the law includes provisions designed to hold websites operated by Jordanian nationals to the same censorship standards as locally published and distributed newspapers, especially concerning the increasingly common "crime" of insulting the monarch. Taken together, these apparent palace missteps have spurred an unlikely rumor in Jordan: that Prince Hassan, the brother of and longtime heir apparent to King Hussein, will soon be appointed to succeed Tarawneh as prime minister.

WASHINGTON'S ROLE

Nearly two years into the wave of unrest that has swept the Middle East, reliable pro-American governments like Jordan's are increasingly scarce. And there is no guarantee that the kingdom's tenuous stability -- and pro-American strategic orientation -- will endure. Since 2010, Freedom House has characterized Jordan as "not free," a dangerous appellation given the new regional dynamics. With Jordanians publicly accusing the royal family of graft and demonstrating against the new electoral law in the monarchy's stronghold of Karak, Washington must find room on its full Middle East plate to focus on the pressing challenge of domestic stability within this key regional partner.

In terms of direct financial assistance, the administration is certainly doing its part. Earlier this month, Washington signed an agreement providing Amman with an additional \$100 million of aid, bringing total 2012 U.S. grants to \$477 million. Although this sum -- which includes \$284 million to bolster the kingdom's ailing budget -- is large for a country of just over six million people, it is not enough to help Jordanians weather the regional storm. Continued U.S. support for supplemental Saudi funding may help, but more should be done.

Aside from funding, perhaps the most important contribution the administration can make is a consistent message of clarity and commitment to incremental but forward-looking reform that leaves Jordan more open, representative, and transparent -- but not another domino tipping toward the Muslim Brotherhood. The ongoing changes in Syria and Egypt will likely have an enormous negative impact on Jordan and U.S. interests there. Accordingly, Washington should work closely and cooperatively with the kingdom's leaders, providing alternatives to rash changes that some will advocate as a way to stay ahead of the region's political tidal wave.

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