

# Jordanian Premier's Sudden Resignation Points to New Political Strategy

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**The resignation of Jordan's prime minister caps a process in which the kingdom turned away from wooing the largely Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood and instead opted to shore up traditional East Bank sources of support. Given the intense regional challenges Jordan faces, Washington should give Amman a wide berth to put its internal house in order.**

**J**ordanian politics took an unusual and unexpected turn yesterday when Prime Minister Awn Khasawneh tendered his resignation while in the middle of an official visit to Turkey. The Royal Palace swiftly announced his successor, former prime minister Fayez Tarawneh.

This surprise move capped a remarkably swift descent for Khasawneh and a U-turn on Jordan's recent efforts to deflect "Arab Spring"-type upheaval through managed reform. Last October, King Abdullah asked Khasawneh, a lawyer and jurist, to leave his position as a judge on the International Court of Justice and return home to lead Jordan's legislative, political, and electoral reform effort. Celebrated as a "Mr. Clean" in a political environment tainted by scandal and corruption, the onetime legal advisor to Jordan's peace delegation was widely viewed as having the king's full confidence to engage the broad range of domestic public opinion and civil society in a dialogue on reform.

## ENGAGING THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD

**T**he most notable aspect of his outreach was to the Islamic Action Front, the political arm of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. Given the shadow of Islamist ascendancy in Egypt and other "Arab Spring" states, Khasawneh reportedly viewed it as a top priority to ensure that the IAF participate in future elections and thereby bring them into the political tent, rather than face an electoral boycott and possible mass opposition movement. Therefore, upon taking over the premiership from retired army general Marouf Bakhit, Khasawneh launched an in-depth dialogue

with the IAF designed to reach agreement on new legislation covering political party formation and electoral reform.

This was risky business, however. In Jordan's political lexicon, opening to the Muslim Brotherhood means empowering Jordanians of Palestinian origin, who have flocked to the movement in recent decades as the only accepted outlet for political expression and activism. Traditionally, the Brotherhood has had a nonconfrontational relationship with the regime, but its East Bank-dominated leadership has been losing power and influence to what locals term the organization's " Hamas " wing, whose younger, more assertive, and largely (but not solely) Palestinian leadership is viewed as more willing to oppose the palace. Khasawneh's opening to the Brotherhood's political arm was therefore received with derision and even outrage by traditionalists, who feared that a " more equitable " electoral system would only strengthen Palestinians in Jordan at the expense of East Bankers.

To complicate matters, Khasawneh's tenure also saw the growth of political protest movements in normally sleepy East Bank towns and cities long considered the regime's bedrock -- places such as Tafileh, Kerak, Madaba, and Maan. To be sure, these protests were never certain to evolve from local demands for more government spending and social benefits into a truly national challenge to the regime. Nevertheless, the image of hundreds of men and women from the kingdom's most loyal elements chanting against the government raised the specter of a deep fissure in the royalist coalition precisely when the palace needed unity on that front to deal with the Islamists at home. Amman has also been concerned about what it sees as a profoundly unsettling regional environment, including the emergence of a brashly ambitious Islamist movement in Egypt, diplomatic deadlock between Palestinians and Israelis, a descent into Shiite authoritarianism in Iraq, and, in Syria, a nightmarish mix of mass atrocity, repression, sectarian violence, and, perhaps, an infusion of jihadism.

## CHANGING COURSE

U ntil a few weeks ago, the Jordanian leadership seemed ready to ride this tiger by seeking a modus vivendi with local Islamists, perhaps at the cost of upsetting some of its traditional supporters. Then, suddenly, everything changed. Rather than enticing the Islamists with an election law that would swell their party's ranks in parliament, the government proposed legislation that would only allot fifteen seats in an expanded, 138-seat parliament to party lists and cap official party representation at just five seats. (Islamists could still run for individual seats, as in the past.) Parliament also unexpectedly passed a law banning all religiously affiliated parties -- effectively targeting the IAF, the very faction whose favor the government was allegedly trying to curry. At about the same time, the Jordanian Interior Ministry took steps to strip certain Palestinian Authority officials of their Jordanian citizenship. Finally, the palace's decision, over Khasawneh's objection, to extend the current parliament's tenure in order to proceed with new legislation forced the prime minister's hand.

Taken together, these developments indicate that King Abdullah ultimately decided to implement his father's governing dictum: " Deal with today's problems today and tomorrow's problems tomorrow. " In this case, the palace felt it was more urgent to repair disaffection among its core East Bank supporters than to begin a risky tango with the Islamists cum Palestinians. Shoring up the traditional sources of Hashemite power is also a logical policy outcome of likely strategic assessments on two other critical issues: first, that prophecies of Bashar al-Assad's swift demise in Syria were unfounded, meaning that Jordan needs to prepare for a long, grinding battle within its northern neighbor that will probably produce a more radical outcome than originally thought; and second, that the paralysis in Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy is likely to persist, meaning that Amman must blunt efforts by any party to " Jordanize " that conflict. The appointment of Tarawneh -- a native of Kerak who served as King Hussein's last prime minister and his key peace negotiator with Israel -- aptly represents the idea that Abdullah is drawing on his father's model to deal with current challenges.

## BALANCING REFORM AND STABILITY

For Washington, which is widely viewed as reaching out to Islamists across the region, the Jordanian leadership's decision to turn against a prime minister who had a reputation of trying to encourage Islamist participation in the electoral process will pose an unusual challenge. In this instance, the Obama administration should take its cue from Amman, recognizing that the pace and content of reform differ not only from country to country, but also from group to group within a country.

Although the concept of reform is wildly popular in Jordan, the word means something very different to an impoverished East Bank army veteran in Mafraq (who wants a bigger government and less Palestinian control over the economy) than it does to a Palestinian businessman in Zarqa (who wants less government and more Palestinian political representation). In this context, the tilt against the Islamists does not solve Jordan's sharp economic dilemma -- how to divide a shrinking economic pie in such a way that nurtures prospects for growth (a nod to the Palestinians) while safeguarding the support of regime stalwarts (a nod to the East Bankers). Nor does this new political strategy deal with the possibility that the Brotherhood -- emboldened by success in Egypt and the potential downfall of Assad -- might press its own claims in Jordan by boycotting eventual elections and taking to the streets in protest. Khasawneh's resignation only puts these questions higher on the agenda; it doesn't provide answers.

Given the country's geostrategic centrality -- and King Abdullah's unabashedly un-Hussein-like backing of U.S. diplomatic and military initiatives across the region, which might extend to supporting opponents of the Assad regime -- Washington should give Jordan's leaders a wide berth to put their internal house in order. This is not so they can prevent substantive political and economic reform at home, but rather so they can address the implications of various strands of domestic reform while confronting the very real tides of instability that threaten to flow over their borders.

*Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute, is the author of two books on Jordanian politics. He traveled to Amman last month.* ❖

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