

A Full Agenda for King Abdullah of Jordan's White House Visit

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Brief Analysis

King Abdullah's trip to Washington will provide ample opportunity for crucial talks on Jordan's stability, the Syrian insurrection, and the state of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

President Obama will host Jordan's King Abdullah II this Tuesday for a meeting in the Oval Office. The visit -- King Abdullah's second since the onset of last year's Arab uprisings -- occurs amid a backdrop of increased tension in the kingdom. Not only is Abdullah facing a spike in domestic economic and political foment, but violence across the northern border in Syria threatens to deteriorate into civil war. Making matters worse, across the river to the west, Israeli-Palestinian relations are facing yet another crisis that could see the Palestinians resume their controversial unilateral drive for statehood at the UN later this month, notwithstanding Abdullah's laudable mediation efforts. These developments, along with the general regional trend toward political change, are once again raising concerns about Jordan's stability. Although neither leader is likely to mention these concerns publicly, such issues will shape the context of the discussion.

Domestic Unrest

In early 2011, like several other states in the region, Jordan was racked by mass demonstrations. Atypically for the kingdom, however, the protests were crowded with East Banker Jordanians, a constituency traditionally considered the most loyal to the monarchy. Topping the list of their demands was an end to corruption, a decrease in

food prices, and serious political reform. Abdullah responded by dismissing the cabinet, raising civil service salaries, reinstating subsidies, and setting in motion a real process of constitutional reform. To underwrite the subsidies, he increased deficit spending. These steps proved popular, enabling the monarchy to withstand the initial surge of the regional uprisings.

Still, the protests have continued across the country for the better part of the past year, occurring nearly every Friday. In addition to corruption, the economy has proven a key driver of the demonstrations. Indeed, today's demonstration in Amman was called "Ahmed Matarna Friday," a reference to a former municipal employee in the capital who, laid off during government restructuring, lit himself on fire on January 9. Matarna's tragic self-immolation was the second in Jordan since September. A third man died this week after setting himself alight. A week earlier, a large anticorruption demonstration led by Islamists in Mafraq was broken up by thugs widely believed to be working for the government's security services. The clashes culminated with the burning down of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's political offices in Mafraq.

Problems across the Jordan River

Another problem for the king (albeit a perennial one) is the Israeli-Palestinian situation, which appears headed for another crisis. The origins of the latest tension date back to September 23, when Palestinian Authority (PA) president Mahmoud Abbas addressed the UN to request recognition of a Palestinian state. In the aftermath of that speech, the Quartet for Middle East peace (comprising the United States, EU, Russia, and the UN secretary-general) called on Israelis and Palestinians to hold a preparatory meeting within one month, at which they would agree on an agenda and method of proceeding with unconditional talks aimed at putting forth final-status proposals on territory and security within three months. To move the parties toward an overall agreement on these issues by the end of 2012, the Quartet called for "negotiations without delay or preconditions," urging them to "refrain from provocative actions" -- interpreted as a call to avoid new Israeli settlement activity.

Israel welcomed the unconditional dimension of the Quartet proposal, but the PA would accept only exploratory talks, insisting instead that Israel accept the 1967 borders and a West Bank settlement freeze as prerequisites to negotiations. While discussions commenced in Amman on January 5, PA chief negotiator Saeb Erekat has since said that talks will not continue beyond January 26 -- a mere three weeks after they began -- if the Israelis do not provide a map of the future borders. Similarly, Abbas stated, "After that date, we will take new measures. These measures might be hard." In other words, if Israel does not comply with their demands, the Palestinians will return to the UN regardless of the call for unconditional talks. This week, the State Department publicly called for talks to continue and said not to view January 26 as a deadline.

Conciliatory King

Abdullah has taken a number of steps to alleviate Israeli-Palestinian tensions. Not only did he play host to the talks, he also tried to improve the atmosphere between the parties by negotiating with Israel in December to release the \$100 million per month of Palestinian taxes collected and held since November 2011.

He has been even more active on the home front. After the Mafraq incident, for example, he met with both Muslim Brotherhood Supreme Guide Hamam Said and Irhal Gharabah, head of the organization's political office. Afterward, Gharabah all but exonerated the king from responsibility for the clashes and instead blamed the security apparatus, claiming that the violence represented "a conflict within [the kingdom's] power centers."

At the same time, the king apparently gave the green light for the courts to try several high-profile corruption cases. The first casualty to date has been Omar Maani, who served as mayor of Amman from 2006 to 2011. The kingdom is also moving forward with a serious investigation of the 2007 Dead Sea casino scandal, in which the government made a deal with a foreign investor that was subsequently cancelled -- a breach of contract that cost the country \$1.4

billion.

More significant, the king has said in recent months that he is amenable to having the elected parliament select the cabinet, an unprecedented concession that could conceivably put Jordan on the path to constitutional monarchy. Perhaps most important, though, Jordanian security forces have been remarkably disciplined in the face of sometimes-intense demonstrations, killing not a single protestor to date.

Saudis to the Rescue

Abdullah's politically astute response to the agitation has been greatly facilitated by Saudi largess. With few natural resources, Jordan has been a debtor nation almost since its inception, counting on the generosity of neighbors -- particularly Iraq -- and Washington for financial assistance. After Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003, however, Jordan had to scramble to find patrons who could replace the lost grants from Baghdad. Intermittently over the past decade, at Washington's behest, Saudi Arabia has filled that gap, usually by providing discounted oil to Jordan.

More recently, though, concerned about the stability of regional monarchies, Riyadh has moved to provide Amman with significant cash infusions. Indeed, by June 2011 -- just six months into the Arab uprisings -- the Saudis had already donated some \$1.4 billion to Jordan, contributions that enabled Abdullah to continue substantial food and fuel subsidies while still decreasing the state's budget deficit. This donation is all the more impressive when one considers that Riyadh has yet to provide any of the nearly \$4 billion in aid it has promised to Egypt. The Saudis also helped secure Jordan's recent invitation to join the Gulf Cooperation Council, despite the country's location in the Levant. Membership clearly has its privileges: in September 2011, the council committed to providing \$2 billion per year to Jordan for the next five years.

Complementary Agendas

With Syria imploding and Jordan under pressure, King Abdullah will want to avert the potential implications of renewed diplomatic turmoil similar to last September's Palestinian confrontation with the United States and Europe at the UN. Having just narrowly avoided a diplomatically costly Security Council veto of Palestinian statehood in the fall, Washington hopes to prevent that scenario as well. Although significant progress on the peace front is unlikely this year, a statement from Abdullah at the White House could help end the manufactured crisis and return the parties to the negotiating table.

While the king would no doubt be pleased to defuse tensions next door, maintaining stability at home is a higher priority. To date, the combination of Saudi funding and proactive steps toward reform have insulated the monarchy from the sweeping and abrupt changes that are engulfing much of the region. But should reform stall, the economy further deteriorate, or Syria's Assad regime fall, Jordan could be shaken.

In the aftermath of Egypt's latest elections -- in which Islamists advocating the end of the peace treaty with Israel are poised to assume control of the parliament -- Jordan's stability has taken on added importance. Not only is the kingdom a peace partner and advocate of political and religious moderation, it is also a reliable strategic friend to the United States. If the past is any indication, Abdullah will likely seek additional financial support from Washington during his visit, even beyond the \$360 million in economic aid and \$300 million in annual military assistance Jordan already receives. Given the current U.S. political environment, such a request will no doubt be unpalatable. Yet when the administration contemplates a Middle East without King Abdullah's Jordan -- and, perhaps, with the pro-Hamas chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood at the helm in Amman -- it may find additional funding worth consideration.

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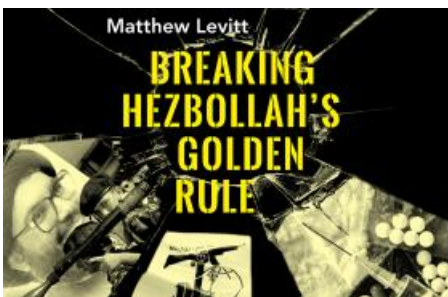
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