Jordan: Heightened Instability, But Not Yet a Major Crisis

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Brief Analysis

On February 1, after weeks of protests in the south and three days of larger protests in Amman focused largely on economics, unemployment, and corruption, Jordan's King Abdullah fired his government and appointed Marouf al-Bakhit as his new prime minister. Changing governments is a routine response to popular discontent in the kingdom: over the past ninety years, Amman has seen seventy-two different administrations. In the shadow of Tunisia and Egypt, however, the prospect of demonstrations gaining momentum in Jordan prompted especially swift action by King Abdullah. Although it is unclear whether the new cabinet will be sufficient to appease the protestors, the regime appears to be weathering the crisis so far.

Background

Since January, Jordan has seen unrest in the southern governorate of Maan. When the violence first erupted, many assumed a connection with developments in Tunisia, given the governorate's longstanding reputation as a hotbed of antigovernment agitation. In fact, the fighting in Maan -- which left two Bedouins dead -- was the product of intratribal conflict. At about the same time, however, protests erupted in the impoverished town of Dhiban (Madaba governorate) centering on unemployment and rising food and fuel prices, commodities that had until recently been supported by government subsidies. The protesters' principal demand was the removal of Prime Minister Samir Rifai. (Interestingly, in 1989 Samir's father, Zeid Rifai, was removed as prime minister by Jordan's late King Hussein in response to popular protests.) Demonstrations soon spread to other cities, including Kerak, Salt, and, most important, Amman.

The fact that these protests occurred in areas known to be populated by people of predominantly East Banker origin -- the Jordanians considered to be most supportive of the monarchy -- clearly raised concerns in the palace. In the aftermath of the demonstrations, the king made several impromptu visits to Maan to listen to grievances, bringing

with him pledges of financial assistance and improvements to local infrastructure. The government also announced a new package of subsidies and pay raises for the security apparatus and civil service, totaling over $500 million. These announcements did little to deflate the growing protests, which as of this week reportedly reached several thousand persons in the capital.

Economic Hardship

Like other states in the region, Jordan has been hit hard by the global financial crisis in recent years. The current situation is the tail end of an economic downturn that began with the fall of Saddam Hussein and the end of highly discounted oil sales from Baghdad to Amman. According to the International Monetary Fund, the kingdom's gross domestic product growth slowed from nearly 8 percent in 2008 to 2.3 percent in 2009. That year, Jordan ran a deficit of nearly $2 billion. Facing growing budgetary pressures, the state has taken steps to reduce subsidies on food and fuel staples, passing off sometimes-dramatic price increases to the public. Three years ago, for example, the price of gasoline increased up to 33 percent.

At the same time, like Egyptians and Tunisians, Jordanians have been subject to price increases in commodities, effectively lowering their standard of living, especially among the most vulnerable. To a great extent, the kingdom has attempted to ameliorate the situation by granting pay increases to government employees and cancelling taxes, but these measures apparently proved insufficient.

Developments in Tunisia and Egypt appear to have encouraged the protesters in Jordan. Unlike those countries, however, the demonstrations in Jordan have focused on primarily economic rather than political demands.

Popular Perceptions

A sense of economic hardship pervades the Jordanian public, according to a reliable November-December survey of 1,000 Jordanians conducted by a local market research firm in partnership with Pechter Middle East Polls. Asked to name the country's top priority, a solid majority (61 percent) cited various economic woes, with high prices and unemployment leading the pack. Interestingly, that high figure was exactly the same for Jordanians of East Bank and Palestinian origin. On a more encouraging note, only very small percentages in each group name corruption as the most important problem facing the country, or even the second most important.

At the same time, the king and the royal family remain reasonably popular among both major segments of the population. Asked to name their most admired national leader, 31 percent of East Bankers and 21 percent of Palestinian-origin respondents cited King Abdullah. Queen Rania, of Palestinian origin herself, garnered an additional 9 percent of East Banker and 13 percent of Palestinian votes. The royal family as a whole was named by fully 65 percent of East Bankers, and by an unexpectedly high 56 percent of Palestinians. By contrast, no other figure rated more than a few percentage points; just-sacked Prime Minister Rifai scored 3 percent among East Bankers but somewhat higher among Palestinians (8 percent). New prime minister al-Bakhit was named by even fewer East Bankers (2 percent) and by just one Palestinian among the 561 such individuals in the sample.

On domestic political issues, many Jordanians feel disenfranchised or uninvolved, according to a separate poll conducted by the University of Jordan last October. While 62 percent said they enjoyed freedom of expression, only about half felt free to join political parties or peaceful public gatherings, and only half said government jobs were awarded fairly. Even fewer (36 percent) reported any awareness of the Jordanian constitution.

Moving Forward

As in Egypt and Tunisia, Jordan's protests are apparently not being driven by Islamists. Indeed, according to reports from individuals who have attended the demonstrations, the majority of the protesters are actually East Bankers rather than Palestinians. More recently, though, Jordan's Islamists have been looking to capitalize on the

demonstrations. So far, none of the protesters have explicitly targeted the monarchy, and Islamic Action Front secretary-general Hamza Mansur even announced earlier this week that the Islamists "recognize and acknowledge the legitimacy of the Hashemites." Yet other Islamist leaders have been more circumspect in their support. Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood chief Hamam Said, for example, recently opined that unrest in Egypt would spread across the region, "toppling repressive leaders and regimes allied with the United States."

New prime minister Bakhit -- who held the post previously, in addition to serving as head of military intelligence and ambassador to Israel and Turkey -- hails from the prominent Abbadi tribe in central Jordan and is a palace loyalist with little record of promoting political reform or democratic change. His reputation for "cleanliness" will help silence accusations of corruption at high levels, but if history is any guide, the main message of his appointment is to remind Jordanians of the vital role the largely Transjordanian army still plays in domestic politics. This message is aimed at both the country's large and potentially restive Palestinian population (the regime's traditional bugbear) as well as malcontented Transjordanian tribal elements.

At the moment, the Jordanian regime appears to be weathering the crisis. Key variables ahead include popular reaction to events in Egypt and the demonstrators' willingness to take the risky route of confronting the king and security establishment head on. Inside the palace, the fear that most likely dominates attention is the possible spread of discontent among East Bankers, such as that seen in Madaba and Maan. Normally, economic concessions can defuse such complaints, but in today's combustible regional situation, further measures may be required to ensure that the Hashemites survive the turmoil.

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