

Terror Attacks Highlight Case for Reform in Jordan

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Brief Analysis

The November 9 hotel bombings in Amman occurred while King Abdullah II was out of the country, just as was the case when al-Qaeda operatives in Aqaba fired missiles at USS Ashland in August. As he rushed back to Amman, it was clear that he alone was in charge and that the executive branch of Jordan's government lacks the skills, strength, and authority to present Amman's case to the nation and the world. The king alone, and not the government ministers, appeared in interviews on international networks and briefings for the foreign press. The state-owned Jordan TV network did not air its first bulletin about the attacks for more than an hour, long after the news had broken on other networks; Jordan's mass-media editors are so strongly dependent on approval from the security establishment that they had to await permission even before broadcasting news that was already known to viewers of other satellite networks.

The regime is moving to strengthen antiterrorism legislation in the wake of the bombings. While that is to the good, the hotel attacks also highlighted the need for speedier and more thorough political, administrative, and media reform inside kingdom.

The National Agenda for Reform

Jordan's National Agenda Committee -- a twenty-six member commission chaired by Marwan Muasher, the deputy prime minister, established by the king earlier in 2005 to recommend guidelines for political, social, and economic reform for the coming decade -- is about to release its recommendations. The committee represents an extraparliamentary mode of governing, as no parliamentary involvement is required to approve the reform plan or oversee execution of its component parts. Once the panel's full recommendations are released, the king is expected to appoint an executive committee to follow up on the implementation procedures during the coming decade. What is expected to be a 2,400-page document is subject only to ratification by the king.

According to press reports, the committee's most provocative political reform proposal concerned a change in the electoral law. Evidently, some panel members were fearful that reforming the law would advantage Jordanians of Palestinian origin at the expense of traditional East Bank elites. In the end, after intense debate, the committee recommended a partial reform that creates a mixed format blending the current first-past-the-post system and proportional representation. However, parliamentary deputies and members of the appointed upper house are unlikely to agree to any modifications of the current electoral system should the recommendations come before

them for legislative approval.

On the economic front, the panel defined a set of ambitious targets that will guide Jordan's development and fiscal policies over the coming decade. These include creating 600,000 new jobs; instituting comprehensive health insurance by 2012; reducing the official unemployment rate from the current 14 percent to just 6.8 percent; raising per-capita income from its current level of \$2,100 to \$3,500; increasing the annual GDP growth rate to 7.2 percent; and reducing the debt-to-GDP ratio from its current 91 percent to a robust 36 percent. Precisely how these objectives will be achieved is not clear, although the report tackled technical ways to decrease tax impacts on the poorer classes while setting up procedures to avoid tax evasion from wealthy citizens.

One political question the committee did not even touch was the separation of powers, widely perceived as a red line by the regime's old guard. Though Jordan's parliament has in the past wielded considerable political power, in recent practice there has been little balance between the legislative and executive. Even bills that pass both chambers of parliament require royal ratification to become law. In addition, the monarch is empowered unilaterally to convene or dissolve ordinary parliamentary sessions.

Mandatory Memberships and Human Rights Violations

The reform committee did not flinch from taking on at least some of the most powerful and entrenched forces in the kingdom, the professional syndicates. To practice any profession in Jordan -- law, engineering, journalism, and so forth -- requires mandatory membership in the relevant professional association or syndicate. These associations have grown extremely powerful and operate in many ways like political parties, especially given the weak and immature status of political parties in Jordan. But associations also tend to reflect the more extreme views of the relatively small percentage of professionals who actually participate in internal elections. As a result, association leaders maintained strong and public ties with Saddam Hussein and his regime in the decade following the 1991 Gulf War and are at the forefront of barring members from engaging in normalized relations with Israel or Israelis.

The National Agenda Committee began to chip away at the power of the associations when it recommended that membership in the Jordan Press Association (JPA) no longer be a requirement to work as a journalist. Over the years, the JPA has proven to be a very effective guild, a safe haven for journalists and columnists who have for decades dominated top positions in the largely state-owned mass media. Indeed, one almost never sees a job posting for positions at Jordan's leading daily newspapers or television or radio stations, because jobs are parceled out through private connections and personal networks inside JPA. According to the national press law, ten years of active membership is a legal requirement for appointment as editor-in-chief of a daily newspaper.

The widespread practice of mandatory membership in professional associations in Jordan is a clear violation of Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states, "No one may be compelled to belong to an association."

New Politics, Old Politicians

The committee's courageous effort to limit the power of the JPA over journalism in Jordan revealed the depth of antimodernization and antiliberal sentiment within the Jordanian elite. The committee's recommendation provoked a powerful reaction from traditionalist politicians, with the speakers of both houses of parliament leading the antireform fight. Indeed, to protect the status of their retrograde association, some JPA members have worked to undermine the reform process.

Given the intense controversy swirling around a number of the committee's recommendations, Jordanian prime minister Adnan Badran, a former university president, has retreated somewhat from his early support for the reform agenda. In doing so, Badran closed ranks with traditionalist elites who oppose fundamental, if incremental, reform.

Badran's stance underscores the still powerful hold that traditionalist, often tribal, politicians have on the Jordanian political system. Yet the king made clear his disaffection with the prime minister, who has been in office only since May, by appointing Badran to the senate on November 16; Abdullah may soon change the government. In the wake of the Amman bombings, the royal court has already dismissed eleven security, political, and media officials, mostly royal appointees. The king promoted Marouf Bakhit by royal decree to be director of the National Security Council. Bakhit, a former ambassador to Israel, is expected to play a key role in the kingdom's future security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank as well as with Israel. It remains to be seen whether the executive branch will undergo a similar housecleaning. Jordan has a long pattern of weak and brief governments, which has worn on the popular credibility of civilian leaders among Jordanians and foreign investors.

The Hashemite kingdom's conundrum lies in the fact that the most effective reform process is top-down, meaning that the king will need to decide whether the palace's close connection with traditional elites is worth the price in terms of stunted reform, or whether the king will give his blessing to the development of a new system in which reformist politicians can emerge.

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