

## Jordan's War Worries:

### Saddamistan, Palestinians, and Islamism in the Hashemite Kingdom

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#### Brief Analysis

Last week's Jordanian government raid on the southern city of Maan was likely a tactic designed to insulate the kingdom from the possible repercussions of a U.S.-led war in Iraq. Indeed, the incident in Maan was a microcosm of larger Jordanian problems stemming from pro-Iraq, Palestinian, and Islamist opposition elements. Should war erupt, Jordan will almost certainly face challenges from these groups. It might also have to fend off a flood of Iraqi or Palestinian refugees, economic meltdown, or even military attack.

#### Jordan First

In late October, King Abdullah II launched a campaign called al-Urdun Awalan, or "Jordan First," stressing Jordanian nationalism among all citizens, regardless of origin, faith, or race. Abdullah's stated goal was to construct "a unified social fiber," promote "loyalty to [the] homeland," and cultivate "immunity against negative ideas." The campaign was apparently a response to brewing domestic tensions sparked by intensified violence in the West Bank and Gaza and a looming war in Iraq. These tensions underscore the deep societal divisions caused by partisans of Islamism as well as Arab, Iraqi, Palestinian, and Jordanian nationalisms.

"Jordan First" came on the heels of the October 28 assassination of U.S. Agency for International Development official Laurence Foley in Amman, which prompted the roundup of hundreds of the usual Islamist suspects. The arrests triggered a gunfight between Jordanian forces and wanted Islamist cleric Muhammed Chalabi. Chalabi escaped and found asylum with the tribes of Maan, one of Jordan's largest Islamist strongholds. This triggered last week's government siege of the city.

Maan notwithstanding, Islamism has long been a concern in Jordan. Although the local Muslim Brotherhood has historically sided with the monarchy in battles against Nasserists and radical Arab nationalists, it has also emerged as a scathing critic of the Jordanian establishment and a focal point for East Bank and Palestinian disaffection. In the 1989 and 1993 elections, Islamists emerged as the dominant bloc in Jordan's parliament and even held five ministerial portfolios during the 1990-91 Gulf crisis. In 1997, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) -- the Brotherhood's political arm -- boycotted elections to protest the slow pace of reform, Jordan's peace agreements with Israel, and election laws that were likely to reduce Islamist parliamentary representation. Today, the IAF is Jordan's only substantial political party; all others are little more than fronts for various notables and chieftains. Amman fears that these political Islamists -- in addition to militant groups like Jaysh Muhammad, Takfir wa'l Hijra, and the Jordanian

Islamic Jihad -- may attempt to exploit the instability that an Iraq crisis could bring. Officials have even noted that they may postpone elections (for a third time) to prevent sweeping Islamist victories.

#### Hashemite Palestine

Islamism is but one of Jordan's current complications. As one analyst has noted, Jordan has "the highest ratio of refugees to indigenous population of any country in the world." In fact, as many as 60 percent of Jordan's 5 million citizens are thought to be of Palestinian origin. Politically, few Jordanians have forgotten the various challenges posed by Palestinian nationalist movements, including the 1970 Black September crisis, the first Palestinian uprising (1988-1991), and the current Palestinian uprising. More recent confrontations include an April 2001 clash between Jordanian police and an estimated 15,000 Palestinian protestors, as well as sporadic face-offs between security forces and local Palestinians at Friday mosque sermons, at funerals for Palestinians killed in the West Bank and buried in Jordan, and at regular protests against "normalization" with Israel.

In the event of a U.S.-led attack against Iraq, officials fear that opposition factions would harness Palestinian frustrations to protest Jordan's close ties with Washington and the resilient peace with Israel. Another concern lies in the fact that more than 1 million refugees passed through Jordan during the previous Gulf War; more than 300,000 Palestinians with Jordanian passports stayed permanently. Although Israel did not instigate an exodus of Palestinians eastward a decade ago, Jordanian officials have recently expressed concern that Israel might exploit a new war in Iraq to deport large numbers of Palestinians to Jordan, setting off yet another demographic crisis. Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher noted that Israel "privately assured us this is contrary to their policies," but other officials have voiced concern that Israel has not issued an official statement to this effect. Accordingly, Jordan has adopted contingency plans to block Palestinian deportees.

#### Saddamistan

To complicate the situation further, a large number of Jordanians support Saddam Husayn, primarily due to their Islamist, Ba'athist, or Arab nationalist allegiance. In 1990-91, many Jordanians hailed Saddam, touting lapel pins, wristwatches, and ornaments in his image, and numerous large-scale pro-Saddam protests have been held throughout the past decade. Saddam's cult of personality continues to grow in Jordan as America's Iraq policies grow increasingly unpopular. In the event of war, Jordan fears a sharp upturn in popularity among pro-Saddam cadres whose provocations could turn public demonstrations violent.

Equally worrisome is the large Iraqi population inside Jordan. Following the influx of some 150,000 Iraqi refugees over the past decade, officials estimate that there are 300,000 Iraqis living there today, most illegally. In September 2002, authorities reportedly began blocking the entry of would-be Iraqi immigrants. Moreover, Jordan has insisted that, in the event of war, relief efforts be set up on the Iraqi side of the border in order to minimize the influx of refugees.

#### Economic/Military Fallout

A weak state surrounded by stronger neighbors, Jordan knows it cannot determine the outcome of a showdown with Iraq. Instead, it has sought a tenuous balance. Amman supports full Iraqi compliance with UN resolutions, yet calls for an end to economic sanctions. It opposes the use of its territory for American-led attacks, yet invites heightened cooperation with the U.S. military. A misstep in either direction could lead to a rebuke from the West (as was the case with the late King Hussein's attempt at neutrality in 1991) or an attack by Saddam (if he sees Jordan as a turncoat Arab neighbor). Economic fallout is another major concern. With official unemployment estimated at more than 15 percent, the Jordanian economy is already in crisis. As war looms, Amman is increasingly nervous about the status of its subsidized oil arrangement with Iraq, which saves the kingdom nearly \$500 million per year. Hence, Abdullah has called for "an international arrangement that ensures supplies to Jordan" in the event that war halts the flow of

Iraqi oil.

## Policy Implications

In contrast to King Hussein's diplomatic stumble in 1991 -- which temporarily cost Jordan the friendship of the United States and hundreds of millions of aid dollars from Washington and various Gulf states -- Abdullah's "Jordan First" campaign is meant to safeguard Jordan's recent gains. So far, the Bush administration has responded wisely, granting Jordan an extra \$85 million in assistance this year on top of the \$150 million earmarked annually, and asking Congress to increase the aid level to \$448 million in 2003. Washington could also contribute much by finding an alternative, as well as a spoative supply of oil for Jordan. This issue has been too low on the list of U.S. (or, more specifically, U.S.-Saudi) priorities for the past decade; it now deserves high-level attention.

Domestically, there is little Washington can do to further bolster the Hashemites against the array of challenges they face. The Bush administration can only help those who help themselves. Accordingly, "Jordan First" is a step in the right direction.

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