

Jordan under Abdullah:

A One-Year Review

by [Jeffrey Goldberg \(/experts/jeffrey-goldberg\)](/experts/jeffrey-goldberg), [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Feb 8, 2000

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Jeffrey Goldberg \(/experts/jeffrey-goldberg\)](/experts/jeffrey-goldberg)



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Brief Analysis

A key question regarding this half-British, largely American-reared monarch is how "Americanized" he is. He certainly has American tastes in entertainment (U.S. sitcoms) and pastimes (arcade video games). More importantly, he evinces more interest in 21st century issues like globalization and the need for sustained market reform than in 20th century issues like the Arab-Israeli conflict; he would much rather count as his friends high-tech moguls Bill Gates and Steve Case than aging Arab leaders Hafiz al-Asad and Yasir Arafat. Abdullah is clearly not as emotionally invested in or driven by the Arab-Israeli peace process as his father was. Instead, the new king seems more concerned with shaping the economic order that will emerge once all the pieces of the peace puzzle are put into place. Energizing the sagging Jordanian economy is his top priority, and Abdullah is looking to the U.S. model of economic reform as well as to hoped-for investment by American high-tech companies for the solution.

Yet, although Abdullah seems Americanized, he has the most non-American of jobs--the monarchy--and his populism should not be confused with a commitment to democracy. Indeed, there is little evidence that Abdullah's strong support for economic reform carries over to political reform, as illustrated by the still tight restrictions on the Jordanian media. Abdullah seems interested in pursuing the east Asian model of economic reform without significant political liberalization.

Jordan-Israeli Relations. While building closer relations with many Arab states, Abdullah has not seemed to invest personally in Jordan's relationship with Israel. Effectively, he has chosen the substantive measure of cracking down on Hamas rather than the more symbolic gesture of visiting Israel. Abdullah said that he hopes Israelis see that their interests are best served when Jordan improves its relations with Arab states, as Israel's gateway to the Arab world could be through Amman. While maintaining the peace treaty, the king seems to want to build his credentials in the Arab world so that he has room to maneuver in the future, rather than begin his reign with the label of "Arab Zionist," as his father was widely perceived in the Arab world.

Jordanian Politics. Abdullah clearly wishes to rule, not just reign, and he very quickly put his stamp on Jordanian

leadership and decision making. Over the past year, a major drama in Jordanian politics has unfolded in the conflict between Prime Minister Abdul Raouf al-Rawabdeh and Head of the Royal Court Abdul Karim al-Kabariti. Abdullah's recent removal of Kabariti, generally regarded as a political reformist and advocate of Palestinian "enfranchisement," was interpreted in Amman as a sign that the king had sided with traditionalist East Bank elite, represented by Rawabdeh. In an interview, however, Abdullah set the record straight: not only had Kabariti been fired because he was not doing his job properly, but the king also warned the prime minister that he would suffer the same fate if he did not implement the king's social and economic reform program. In so doing, Abdullah left no confusion about who was in charge. Similarly, he has clarified the new power structure within the royal family itself. The triumvirate "in the loop" consists of Abdullah, his wife Rania, and his younger half-brother, Crown Prince Hamza. Queen Noor, King Hussein's widow, and Prince Hassan, the former crown prince, must acclimate themselves to the fact that they are no longer in the inner circle, Abdullah said.

ROBERT SATLOFF

Overall, King Abdullah had a good "rookie" year; there was peace abroad and peace at home. There were no crises, no food riots, no terrorist acts or border clashes. Instead, he was feted from Washington to Tokyo to Davos. It was a year of peaceful transition--a major achievement in an often violent region.

A Break from His Father. In many ways, King Abdullah's reign is not the extension of his father's. It is startling to see how far Jordan's national agenda has come from the list of items highlighted in King Hussein's testamentary letter to then-Crown Prince Hassan. Abdullah has set his own agenda as king. On Jordanian-Palestinian relations in particular, Abdullah is not his father's son. Hussein battled his entire life over land and family honor regarding Palestine and Jerusalem. With his passing, Jordan has finally disengaged from the territorial component of the Palestine issue. That has permitted a more normal relationship to develop between Abdullah and his father's long-time nemesis, Palestinian Authority chairman Yasir Arafat.

Abdullah is a populist with the common touch--which should not be confused with being a democrat. In numerous ways, his populism has shown disdain for the institutions of state, ranging from undercover visits to Jordanian bureaucracies, which reveal that Jordanians cannot rely on their government for solutions; to the otherwise laudable creation of the Higher Economic Consultative Council, which implies that the king has little faith in his bloated bureaucracies to implement real economic reform; to the proposal for a "free media zone" to provide unfettered access to all Arab media--except local Jordanian media. This disdain for institutions of state may be popular, but it is not necessarily democratic--or even, in the long run, constructive.

Foreign Policy. Abdullah has adopted a policy of "peace abroad." He seems to have pursued strategy of "no allies, no enemies"--a series of relationships but without any strong national commitments. As such, Jordan has warmed relations with erstwhile adversaries (like Syria), former critics (like Kuwait), and even one-time pariahs (like Libya). On Israel, King Abdullah has maintained the peace but has permitted the relationship to degenerate into "pre-treaty plus"--a relationship that is more brittle, on both the political and popular levels. It is "pre-treaty" in the sense that it lacks the grand human and economic dimensions envisioned in the treaty, and "plus" in the sense that it has enhanced military and security levels. While Abdullah himself has not yet visited Israel, it is more telling that he has taken virtually no steps against the virulent anti-normalization campaign. The king may have unintentionally given rationale to the anti-normalizers by asking publicly whether "the culture of peace can ever come to fruition while the parties stand impotent in addressing the Jerusalem issue and the refugee issue." That is a far cry from Hussein's approach, which was to build a culture of peace so as to make the resolution of those problems more possible.

Overriding Challenges. King Abdullah faces several challenges:

Economic reform. To make market reform work, Abdullah must shrink the government and fight corruption. If he

wants to do the former, he needs the popular support that only the latter can provide. Also, if Abdullah truly wants to transform Jordan into the information technology hub of the Middle East, then he has to dispel the notion among Jordan's business leaders that the kingdom's economic future lies with Iraq.

Relations with Arab states. King Abdullah must choose to find security either by differentiating Jordan from other Arab states, or by joining the tide of other Arab states. In the past, Jordan courted disaster when it simply followed the tide of Arab politics; when Jordan pursued its own course, it survived. The pan-Arab policy Jordan has pursued over the past year has reaped easy profits. But it is unclear whether it will pay off in the long run. Syria has stopped terrorist infiltration, but Damascus did not offer Jordan much else. The Gulf States never came through with money, and access for Jordanian labor is still very difficult. What made Jordan special over the past five years and what helped pull the kingdom out of the isolation it suffered for its Gulf War policy was that it was different than other Arab parties, that its peace policy was different, and that it deserved to be supported for being different. Take that special quality away and Jordan looks more like another Arab state, albeit a more humane and liberal state. As just another Arab state, Jordan has no real future.

Character of the Monarchy. Abdullah has to choose between being the type of king that Hussein was and being the king that Hussein wanted his successor to be. Hussein was a shrewd, risk-taking, often-mercurial, lone decision maker. He wanted his successor to be a consultative family leader, counting on the support of the three generations of Hashemites through the Hashemite Council, which Hussein talked about in his last years, or through some other mechanism.

Palestinians and Jordanians. Abdullah must figure out how to manage a conflict that was formerly over Palestine, evolving to one that is over Palestinians--a particular challenge within the volatile demography of the Hashemite kingdom. Which is the real Abdullah--the one who claims not to have the word "confederation" in his vocabulary, or the one who employs a senior palace adviser who routinely extols all the great schemes of East and West Bank unity, including the confederation plan of 1985? When Hussein lost the battle of Palestine, Jordan survived; his kingdom will not be so lucky if Abdullah loses the battle of the Palestinians.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by David Honig.

Policy #438

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Facing Syria's Food Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ishtar Al Shami

[\(/policy-analysis/facing-syrias-food-crisis\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Jordan ([/policy-analysis/jordan](#))