

SUDDEN SUCCESSION

Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East



Preparing for Orderly Change in Jordan When the Time Comes

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Since its establishment as the Emirate of Transjordan in 1921, Jordan has undergone three successions, each of which was accompanied by its own potentially devastating set of domestic and regional challenges. Yet a combination of domestic and international dynamics, along with pragmatic leadership and policies, helped the small, resource-poor kingdom successfully navigate these challenges and emerge as one of the most stable countries in an otherwise turbulent region. The most recent of these successions occurred in 1999, when King Abdullah II was crowned the fourth monarch of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

U.S. president Joe Biden with Jordan's King Abdullah and Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah at the White House on July 19, 2021. REUTERS



Many of the dynamics underlying Jordan's stability still apply today, and there is nothing—political or otherwise—to suggest that King Abdullah will be departing the scene. Abdullah, who turns sixty in January 2022, retains an active lifestyle and by all accounts is in excellent health. Nor is there anything to indicate that Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah, who is now twenty-seven, will be impeded from assuming the throne when succession eventually takes place. Still, the focus the palace has given to Hussein's grooming suggests that preparing the young prince for eventual succession is a high priority, especially since the memory of King Hussein's early death at age sixty-three has not faded. Additionally, new sets of regional, security, and economic challenges have recently emerged. When Hussein eventually ascends the throne, the succession process will have to contend with these new challenges and the kingdom's resilience will once again be tested. The United States should therefore continue investing in its close regional ally to ensure that succession takes place within a stable environment.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Succession in Jordan is governed by Article 28 of the kingdom's 1952 constitution, wherein paragraph (a) stipulates:

The Royal title shall pass from the holder of the Throne to his eldest son, then to the eldest son of that eldest son, and in linear succession in a similar process thereafter. Should the eldest son die before the Throne devolves upon him, his eldest son shall inherit the Throne, even if the deceased has brothers. The King may, however, select one of his brothers as heir apparent. In this event, the

title to the Throne shall pass to him from the holder of the Throne.

Furthermore, paragraph (e) states:

It is a condition for the person who shall ascend the Throne to be a Moslem, mentally sound, born by a legitimate wife, and of Moslem parents.

The remainder of the article deals in detail with contingencies such as the king lacking an eligible son, the reigning monarch becoming incapacitated, and other modalities relating to the assumption of the throne.

Originally, the constitution did not give the king the authority to bypass his eldest son in the succession order. But in 1965, this article was modified to its present form to allow King Hussein to appoint his brother Prince Hassan as crown prince instead of his eldest son, Abdullah, who was then only three years old. The king may choose any of his brothers and is not bound to the eldest. Indeed, both Prince Hassan, who served as crown prince to King Hussein I, and Prince Hamzah, who served as crown prince to Abdullah II at the beginning of his reign, had older brothers.

With the exception of this amendment, however, the constitutional system does not give the king much leeway when it comes to choosing his successor. Unless the king opts for one of his brothers, or the heir is "excluded from succession by a Royal Decree on the ground of their unsuitability" (paragraph [f]), succession is bound to follow the constitutionally mandated order. Even this exception is limited, as "[such] Decree shall be countersigned by the Prime Minister and four Ministers at least, of whom shall be the Ministers of Interior and of Justice"—paragraph (f). No such royal decree has ever been issued throughout Jordan's history.

THE CURRENT LINE OF SUCCESSION

King Abdullah II has two sons, his eldest, Crown Prince Hussein, and Prince Hashem. He also has one full brother, Prince Faisal, and three half-brothers—Princes Ali, Hamzah, and Hashim.

In accordance with King Hussein's recommendation and his own constitutional prerogative, King Abdullah appointed his half-brother Prince Hamzah as crown prince upon his coronation on February 7, 1999. Abdullah then relieved Hamzah of his duties on November 28, 2004, and the line of succession moved automatically to Abdullah's eldest son, Prince Hussein. In July 2009, Abdullah affirmed this change by officially naming Hussein crown prince.

Prince Hussein bin Abdullah was born on June 28, 1994. While becoming heir apparent at age ten and crown prince at age fifteen, he largely maintained a low profile as he pursued his education in Jordan and the United States. Upon graduating from Georgetown University in 2016, he followed in the footsteps of his great-grandfather, grandfather, and father and enrolled in the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

While the title of crown prince does not entail significant official responsibilities, Hussein has taken on a progressively visible public role. As crown prince, he has made a number of high-level appearances since reaching the age of majority in 2012—for example, becoming the youngest person to chair a UN Security Council meeting in 2015 during Jordan's rotating chairmanship. He then assumed a much more prominent profile upon his return to Jordan after graduating from Sandhurst, increasing his public exposure, accustoming Jordanians to seeing him perform royal duties, and allowing him to develop networks within key constituencies.

The international exposure granted to Hussein reflects the importance of Jordan's international relations. Alongside his 2015 Security Council appearance, for example, he delivered Jordan's statement at the 2017 UN General Assembly, shortly after graduating from Sandhurst, and he regularly accompanies his father in international travel, including in July 2021 to meet with U.S. president Joe Biden. He also regularly attends meetings with visiting foreign officials.

But the main focus of building his profile has been domestic constituencies. Given the high priority Jordanian monarchs give to the armed forces, whose traditional loyalty to the crown and depoliticization have always been reinforced by direct, personal engagement by the king, Hussein's role as a military man is key to his public role. He was commissioned to the Jordanian Armed Forces as a lieutenant in the air force, where he earned his wings as a helicopter pilot in 2019; in November 2021, he was promoted to captain. He often stands in for the king in military ceremonies and is regularly seen in uniform during exercises and visits with the armed forces.

In addition to his military activities, Crown Prince Hussein has regularly visited tribal leaders, chaired cabinet meetings, inspected various government agencies, and engaged in technology and youth-related initiatives. He was likewise highly visible in Jordan's initial response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Parallel to raising Hussein's profile, other eligible heirs to the throne saw their roles and visibility reduced in the political and security spheres. For example, his two uncles who held command positions in the military, Hashim and Faisal, were relieved of their posts in 2017. To the extent that others in the line of succession retain public profiles, they tend to be nonpolitical and centered on sports, charity, and ceremonial activities. Former crown prince Hamzah stands out as a stark exception to this dynamic and will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

A SMOOTH BUT UNSETTLED HISTORY OF SUCCESSION

Crown Prince Hussein's preparation for the throne has proceeded under much more stable circumstances than Jordan's previous three successions. The kingdom's founding monarch, King Abdullah I, was assassinated by a Palestinian nationalist in 1951 as he entered Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque for Friday prayer. Besides the disruption inherent in the assassination of a reigning monarch, the murder took place at a particularly unsettled time, when Jordan was still reeling from the aftermath of the 1948 war with Israel and the controversy associated with the kingdom's unity with the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The flow of Palestinian refugees threatened to overwhelm the new kingdom, while Abdullah's claim over the West Bank was recognized by only a handful of states and even triggered an attempt to expel Jordan from the Arab League. At the same time, Abdullah's relations with the new state of Israel and reports of his exploration of possible peace with it generated domestic anxiety and ire. Meanwhile, Jordan faced tensions with its neighbors beyond the Palestinian issue. The branch of the Hashemite family ruling Iraq had designs on the kingdom, while relations with Ibn Saud on the Arabian Peninsula were fraught.

Abdullah's eldest son and heir apparent, Prince Talal, suffered from mental illness. Indeed, immediately upon his ascension to the throne on July 20, 1951, he traveled abroad for treatment, and his younger brother Nayef was appointed regent due to Talal's poor health. Yet Nayef had his own vulnerabilities, particularly a perceived weakness to influence from the Iraqi branch of the dynasty. Within less than two months, Talal reassumed his position. One of his first acts was to name as crown prince his eldest son, Hussein, who was still a minor. Talal's reign, however, was short-lived, and his deteriorating health led parliament, at the request of the cabinet, to vote to

strip him of the crown. He was deposed on August 11, 1952—less than a year after his return to Jordan.

Talal's removal came at another particularly sensitive moment for Jordan. His heir, Hussein, was proclaimed king, but Hussein was seventeen and not legally eligible to ascend the throne for another nine months—a period during which Jordan was ruled by a three-person regency council. At the time, a new wave of Middle East instability was taking form, with officers led by Gamal Abdul Nasser toppling the Egyptian monarchy on July 23, 1952—less than a month before Talal was forced to step down—and triggering a cascade of Arab coups that overthrew monarchies and ushered in what came to be known as the Arab Cold War. Jordan, given its strong relations with Britain—and later the United States—and its young, inexperienced king, soon became a prime target for Nasser's destabilization efforts. Yet thanks to a combination of domestic and external factors, and an effective leadership style, Hussein navigated these challenges to reign for close to five decades.

Unlike his father and grandfather, King Abdullah II was crowned during a period of relative external and domestic stability. In the wake of Jordan's 1994 peace treaty with Israel, relations with the United States and the Gulf states had recovered from King Hussein's decision years earlier not to join the coalition to liberate Kuwait. The kingdom's relations with Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process helped stabilize its western borders and held the promise of finally ending a conflict that had bedeviled Jordan since its inception. Domestically, the economic dividend of Jordan's foreign policy had led to relative prosperity, while politically the opposition to the peace with Israel was largely neutralized.

It bears mention that Abdullah was nevertheless a surprise king. As King Hussein's eldest son, he was the constitutionally mandated heir apparent upon his birth in 1962. Yet given the domestic and regional

uncertainties of that period, Hussein opted to change the constitution to allow him to appoint his youngest brother, Hassan, heir in 1965—bypassing Hussein’s middle brother, Muhammad, who previously served as crown prince but was deemed unsuitable for the post. Hassan fulfilled that function for more than three decades, during which period he developed a public profile and strong domestic and external networks and was universally expected to follow Hussein as monarch. It therefore came as a surprise to observers both at home and abroad when Hussein, mere weeks before his death from cancer, decided to reappoint his eldest son, Abdullah, crown prince after a thirty-four-year break. While there is evidence that Hussein had long considered returning succession to Abdullah,¹ he held these intentions close to himself and never made them public. Not an unknown figure, Abdullah nonetheless had a profile largely confined to his chosen military career. Yet, as with his father’s succession, key domestic actors—especially former crown prince Hassan—were committed to an orderly transition and rallied around Abdullah, while regional and international actors remained invested in Jordan’s stability and provided support to the kingdom.

CAN JORDAN MAINTAIN ITS TRACK RECORD OF RESILIENCE?

For all the challenges that confronted previous Jordanian successions, a number of elements coalesced to ensure that they proceeded with minimal disruption. Many of these stabilizing elements remain in place today.

The royal family itself showed discipline and cohesion in supporting the new kings. Talal’s wife and Hussein’s mother, Queen Zein al-Sharaf—herself a descendant of the Hashemite line—along with more junior but nevertheless influential members of the Hashemite

dynasty effectively rebuffed attempts by the family’s Iraqi branch to exert control during the unsettled periods of Talal’s rule, the nine-month regency period, and King Hussein’s early years. While Prince Nayef displayed some ambition, he never openly challenged Talal or Hussein. For Hassan’s part, when Hussein removed him from the succession line, the latter accepted the change with grace and deference, publicly supporting Abdullah II as king before assuming a lower public profile.

With the stark exception of former crown prince Hamzah,² this remains true today under Abdullah’s reign. Rumors of discord within the royal family occasionally pop up, particularly during moments of change such as when Princes Faisal and Hashim were relieved of their military commands. But in both cases, rumors faded as public signs of such tensions never materialized. In the case of Prince Hamzah, the rest of the royal family stood publicly united around the king.

Politically, despite the many potential demographic, economic, and political fault lines in Jordanian society, the monarchy has been stable. The monarchy has adopted a governing approach that addresses enough of the needs of its various constituencies to ensure they all have a stake in its continuity. And during times of unrest, domestic stability has been maintained by a loyal and effective army and intelligence apparatus. Furthermore, with the passage of time, many of the country’s social and political fault lines have become diminished. In particular, the division between Jordanians of Palestinian origin (often depicted as restive) and “East Bankers” (assumed to be conservative) has evolved. While some vestiges of the split remain—they can be observed, for example, in the election law and the process of cabinet formation—it is no longer the defining factor in Jordanian politics.³ Indeed, it is noteworthy that since the late 1980s most of Jordan’s major protests occurred in traditionally Transjordanian

areas such as Karak, Maan, and Ramtha. These dynamics were on full display during the Arab Spring and subsequent protests. While many of the Jordanian protestors shared similar socioeconomic and civil liberties grievances with their Arab counterparts in other countries, their demands—with very few and marginal exceptions—did not extend to challenging the institution of the monarchy.

Similarly, the often fractious political elites historically have shown a willingness to suspend their rivalries to support new monarchs during a transition. In none of the successions did significant power centers seek to undermine a chosen heir, instead coalescing around him. Even with the forced abdication of King Talal, the period's powerful prime minister Tawfiq Abu al-Huda vigorously supported King Hussein during the regency period, and Abu al-Huda's similarly formidable political rivals fell in line. A similar dynamic played out following Abdullah's ascension to the throne, when powerful political figures—including some closely associated with King Hussein—rallied around the new monarch.

For its part, the Jordanian military has played a supporting, stabilizing role during succession. Designed from the outset to be apolitical and largely conforming to this doctrine—with rare exceptions mainly during the 1950s—the Jordanian Armed Forces did not seek to exert political power to influence any of the previous successions.

Opposition parties have tried to utilize the uncertainties of past leadership transitions to promote their agendas. This was particularly the case during the period that followed King Hussein's crowning, when pan-Arabist parties of different stripes sought to limit the powers of the king and the executive. In

recent decades, however, political parties have not been a significant player in Jordan. They were banned in 1957 following a failed coup attempt and were only officially allowed after martial law was lifted in 1992. Since then, parties have struggled to gain a following. Pan-Arabist parties and ideologies have waned throughout the Arab world, and Jordan has been no exception. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood had traditionally been pliant and even served as a counterweight to Arabist and socialist parties, particularly during the latter's heydays in the 1950s and 1960s. While the Brotherhood did attempt to assert itself more forcefully in the mid-1990s, after the peace treaty with Israel, and then during the Arab Spring, the authorities successfully managed these attempts.⁴ Today, the Brotherhood is fragmented and operating under significant legal and political constraints, while also suffering from the movement's regional loss of credibility after the Arab Spring. Yet the Islamist group still remains the largest, best-organized political force in the country, and is seen by the authorities as the preeminent potential domestic political threat.

Internationally, Jordan has always anchored its stability in alliances with the main Western international powers of the time—first Britain and, since the mid-1950s, America. Regionally, Amman traditionally gravitated toward fellow conservative monarchies, even those—like Saudi Arabia—with which it might have had historic tensions. And despite deep differences and even conflict on the Palestinian issue, the kingdom developed mutually beneficial strategic relations with Israel. These alliances played important roles to stabilize the country, whether through providing Jordan with economic support or through deterring regional actors from exploiting the vulnerabilities inherent in the succession process.

CHANGING REALITIES, NEW CHALLENGES

In short, there is nothing in Jordan's history of succession, royal family dynamics and traditions, or the pace or manner of Crown Prince Hussein's preparation for his eventual role to suggest any complications. Yet while succession dynamics are largely settled, and Jordan continues to be stable in regional terms, it faces serious challenges. Although these challenges do not touch directly on succession, they create the context in which succession will take place and could—if not addressed—complicate the environment in which succession will take place.

A weak economy remains Jordan's primary challenge. In 2019, GDP grew 1.9 percent, unemployment reached 19 percent (and much higher among youth), and central government debt stood at 99.1 percent of GDP. The economy worsened further due to Covid-19, contracting by 1.6 percent in 2020. Unemployment today stands at 25 percent, including 48 percent youth unemployment.⁵ In recent years, economic challenges have been the primary drivers of protests in Jordan, and some had severe political implications, including forcing the resignation of Prime Minister Hani al-Mulki in 2018.⁶ Some reforms were implemented over the past two years with IMF assistance, mainly on tax and revenue collection.⁷ Yet these reforms only began addressing the depth of the challenges. For example, the kingdom placed among the top twenty performers in the World Bank's 2020 Doing Business report, yet despite this significant progress still ranked seventy-fifth in the report.⁸ While signs have emerged of recovery from the impact of Covid-19, there is no clear path out of the chronic economic problems facing the kingdom, and Jordan will remain dependent on foreign assistance and vulnerable to its vagaries.

Changes and instability in the region impact Jordan on a number of levels. The conflict in Syria, and before it Iraq, has left the kingdom inundated with refugees, stretching national resources and infrastructure. According to UN High Commissioner for Refugees, by the end of 2019 Jordan hosted 655,000 registered refugees from Syria, 67,000 from Iraq, and tens of thousands more from Yemen, Sudan, and fifty-two other countries. Jordanian authorities maintain that the country is hosting hundreds of thousands of additional refugees, mainly from Syria, who are not registered with UNHCR and reside outside refugee camps. According to some estimates, Syrian refugees constitute up to 10 percent of Jordan's population and are unlikely to return to Syria any time soon, straining not only the economy and infrastructure, but potentially also its social cohesion. And all these are on top of the more than two million registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan.⁹

Regional instability has economic implications, depriving Jordan of major trading partners, sources of subsidized energy in the case of Iraq and Egypt—though recent moves have aimed to restore these sources—and trade routes to Europe in the case of Syria. Efforts to deepen relations with Iraq and Egypt have produced diplomatic progress but little economic dividend.

While a decade ago King Abdullah was one of the first regional leaders to hint that Syrian president Bashar al-Assad should step down, the kingdom resisted pressure to involve itself in the Syrian civil war. In late 2021, significant progress has been made toward reestablishing economic ties with Syria, but the relationship remains complicated by the Syrian regime itself and the international sanctions regime surrounding the country.¹⁰ Moreover, while security spillover from regional crises has largely been contained, it has nevertheless stressed Jordan's

national security apparatuses and raised alarm about potential terrorist threats against the country, which have occasionally materialized in actual incidents.¹¹ Indeed, 2020 was the first year since 2011 when Jordan did not endure a successful terrorist attack, although some planned attacks were foiled.¹² In the case of Syria, the presence of Iran-affiliated forces on Jordan's northern borders will continue to be a cause for concern.

Less dramatic, perhaps, but equally concerning are larger shifting trends in the regional landscape. The Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, has traditionally been a major source of aid to Jordan, in large part due to the kingdom's role as a buffer against instability across the region and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. That dynamic, however, is changing as the Gulf deals with its own direct national security challenges and as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict loses its prominence, especially following the signing of the Abraham Accords, as Israel's normalization deals with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and then Sudan are known, along with the separate but parallel Israel-Morocco agreement. As a result, the kingdom's significance for the Gulf, while far from disappearing, is certainly reduced.

Further, the Gulf states are facing their own internal transformations and economic challenges as they seek to diversify their economies and invest more at home. The result means not only less budgetary support and direct investment in Jordan but also a potential decline in remittances from Jordanians working in the Gulf. This was on full display in 2018, when economic protests forced Prime Minister Mulki's resignation. Gulf assistance was slow to materialize thereafter, and when it did it largely took the form of central bank deposits and promises of investment, rather than direct budget support. While Jordan continues to be important to the Gulf, the nature of the relations, and the response to Jordan's economic hardships, is changing.

Developments in the Palestinian arena and the peace process are also raising alarm in Jordan. The erosion of the two-state solution raises strategic questions for the kingdom, which fears that the collapse of this paradigm could have a profound impact on its domestic and external stability. And Amman is closely watching internal Palestinian politics and is concerned about the ever-growing weakness of the Palestinian Authority. Jordan remains wary of any future role for Hamas in the West Bank, worried about how such a role may affect the security situation there and also about links between Hamas and Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood elements. The prospects of unrest in the West Bank—whether caused by Israeli-Palestinian dynamics or by internal Palestinian developments—are a source of concern since the Palestinian issue remains resonant among all segments of Jordanian society.

In the meantime, Jordan's relations with Israel are starting to recover after twelve years of tension. Under former prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu, bilateral relations—while remaining deep and strong on security issues—suffered tremendously in the civilian sphere as high-level political contacts were practically frozen. While the dynamic has been rapidly improving since Netanyahu's departure, deterioration on the Israeli-Palestinian front—particularly if triggered by major incidents in Jerusalem—could severely test Israel-Jordan ties and bring them perilously close to a breaking point.

Politically, there are also warning signs. Public trust in Jordanian national institutions is extremely low. A 2021 International Republican Institute poll showed that 67 percent of Jordanians trust the government to a "large degree" or to "some degree," but the number plummets to 38 percent when it comes to parliament and a paltry 25 percent for political parties.¹³ These numbers correspond to findings in other polls. Recent steps to address political reform through the creation of the "Royal Committee to Modernise the Political

System” show that the leadership is aware of this challenge, yet the muted—and sometimes cynical—public reaction indicates the depth of skepticism about political reform. Additionally, some of the old tools for managing internal dissent—such as public sector employment and government subsidies—are becoming harder to use due to Jordan’s economic constraints. While Jordan is no stranger to public protests, their frequency seems to be increasing in recent years as the economy continues to suffer—although notably, no protests to date have aimed to challenge the basic legitimacy of the constitutional order.

Security services constitute a striking exception to the low trust in public institutions, with 96 percent trusting the Jordanian Armed Forces and 93 percent the police, a level of approval undoubtedly linked to these institutions’ remove from daily politics. Yet if the economic situation worsens and public protests increase, even security services will inevitably be drawn into the fray. During protests by the Jordanian Teachers Syndicate in summer of 2020, there was vocal criticism of the conduct of the security services. This kind of criticism is typical in times of crisis, and the political capital expended by security services tends to be replenished during times of stability. Yet given the increasing frequency of protests in recent years due to worsening economic conditions, the ability to fix this reputational damage will be complicated.

THE HAMZAH AFFAIR

In April 2021, Jordanian authorities announced they had foiled a plot involving former crown prince Hamzah to “destabilize the country.” Hamzah, unlike others in the line of succession, had maintained a public profile following his removal as crown prince in

2004, occasionally making social media postings that implicitly criticized the state of affairs in the country and amplified issues of public discontent. In recent times, the pace of these postings increased, coupled with in-person meetings and appearances, focusing particularly on garnering support within tribal circles.

This announcement raised concern for both its unprecedented nature and the context in which it occurred. One has to go back to the 1950s to find anything even remotely resembling such a public crisis in the royal family. And the announcement came during a tense moment in Jordan, on the eve of demonstrations scheduled to commemorate the Arab Spring, while Covid-19 still disrupted the country’s public health, economic, and social spheres.

Yet some of the same traditional stabilizing factors emerged to defuse the crisis. The military—with its high level of public trust—took a visible role in managing the crisis in its early days. Direct engagement with Hamzah was delegated to the highly respected former crown prince Hassan, who ensured other members of the royal family showed a united front. There was no overt support for Hamzah, whether by the public or the elites. Externally, Jordan’s main allies and partners—the United States, along with Arab and European countries—were quick to express support for the king. In the end, the episode concluded with the jailing of two individuals and with Hamzah himself being moved out of the limelight.

The Hamzah affair undoubtedly dealt a blow to the image of stability within the Jordanian ruling family. It also highlighted how public discontent, whether over economic or governance issues, can be harnessed to further political agendas. Yet the swift and orderly manner in which the episode was brought to an end and its failure to trigger any popular unrest suggest that main elements of the kingdom’s stability held firm.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

There is not much that the United States can or should do to shape Jordan's succession itself, but Washington can play an important role in supporting a stable context that would facilitate a smooth succession once it comes to pass.

Here, history offers some guidance. Since the 1950s, the United States—under Democratic and Republican administrations alike—has played a pivotal role in supporting Jordan's stability. Signs of strain emerged during the Trump presidency, particularly regarding deep disagreements on the Palestinian issue and a sense in Amman that its regional significance for Washington was being downgraded. But even under President Trump, U.S.-Jordan bilateral relations remained solid. Despite differences, Jordan was often given more leeway than other countries to chart its own path on matters affecting its stability, even when such a path conflicted with U.S. policy. This was the case in Jordan's vocal opposition to the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the Trump administration's peace plan, on which the two countries "agreed to disagree," in the words of Vice President Mike Pence.

The election of Joe Biden—who has known Jordanian kings for nearly fifty years—was met with great relief in Amman. Under the Biden administration, relations are returning to their traditional strength. Indeed, King Abdullah was the first Arab leader to visit the new president in the White House, highlighting the special status the Jordanian monarch enjoys in the eyes of the new administration as a well-respected elder statesman, now more than twenty years on the throne.

Jordan receives \$1.275 billion a year in U.S. assistance based on a 2018 memorandum of understanding.

It is one of the few countries that saw an increase in U.S. aid under the Trump administration, thanks to the wide, bipartisan support for Jordan on Capitol Hill. As the expiration of the five-year MOU approaches, renewing this aid and potentially extending its duration is critical for maintaining stability in Jordan. But it is also clear that the country's current economic model is itself unsustainable, and the low public trust in institutions indicates a need for governance changes. Reforms are necessary to create more sustainable economic and public administration models.

This tension between reform and stability presents a genuine dilemma. Jordan's leaders, including King Abdullah, are aware of the need for change. Indeed, attempts were made to enact reforms during Abdullah's early years and again recently with the creation of the political modernization committee. Yet a deep conservative streak persists in the country. When faced with crises—such as the heinous attacks by al-Qaeda against Jordanian hotels in 2005—the kingdom closes ranks and reverts to the same aversion to change that saw it through so many previous challenges. Similar trends regarding lower tolerance for dissent have been observed in response to mounting challenges due to the economy, Covid-19, Gulf normalization with Israel, and tensions with the Trump and Netanyahu administrations. The United States can work with Jordan to balance these two impulses, urging meaningful reform at a pace that does not risk triggering instability. In this regard, Abdullah's November 2021 decision to pardon numerous Jordanians imprisoned for *lèse-majesté* is a welcome sign.¹⁴

Beyond bilateral relations, U.S. regional policies—whether on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Syria, Iraq, or other issues—have an impact on the kingdom. In some cases, namely those relating to the Palestinian issue and particularly Jerusalem, Jordanian interests should be considered as a key

factor. In other cases, such as Syria, the two countries can look for ways to reduce the negative impact of U.S. policies on Jordan.

Furthermore, the United States can help strengthen relations with regional actors. Saudi Arabia is going through profound changes, and it is not clear where Jordan is positioned in the new Saudi regional thinking, creating anxiety about relations between these two U.S. allies. The United States has a role to play to advocate for warmer Jordan-Saudi relations.

While Jordan and Israel have taken the initiative to improve their relations, the United States can play a supportive role in helping the process along. This could include exploring ways to integrate Jordan (and Egypt) within some aspects of the Abraham Accords. The recent agreement between Jordan, Israel, and the UAE provides a model of how such integration can proceed.¹⁵ In the meantime, the United States should remain vigilant—and ready to use its good offices—regarding steps related to the Palestinian issue, and particularly the very sensitive issue of Jerusalem.

CONCLUSION

As already mentioned, there is no reason to believe that succession in Jordan will present itself in the foreseeable future, nor is there any indication that it will proceed in a disorderly fashion. The matter is strictly regulated in the constitution. Crown Prince Hussein faces no challenges to his succession and is being steadily groomed for his eventual role. Jordan has successfully navigated challenging successions in the past, and many of the elements that allowed it to do so remain true. Yet the kingdom is also facing serious economic, regional, and political challenges. If left unaddressed, these may create a complicated context for the next succession.

Given King Abdullah's good health and strong political standing, there is time to address these challenges. The United States can play a significant role in supporting and shaping a stable domestic and regional context. Indeed, given the current trajectory and barring any major unexpected developments, the next succession in Jordan has the potential to be the most orderly and drama-free in the country's history.

NOTES

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