



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~
JORDAN'S QUANDARY OVER SYRIA

By Tally Helfont

Middle East Media Monitor is an FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.

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In recent weeks, a contentious debate has arisen in Jordan over what should be done about the country's troublesome northern neighbor, Syria. Though the Jordanians, like many others in the region, were mostly preoccupied with their own internal troubles over the past eight months, there has been a palpable change in the discourse on Syria in the kingdom. Indeed, the recent slew of activities by the Arab League has brought the Syrian troubles to the fore. However, it was two other major events that sparked the intensification of this debate in Jordan—namely, King Abdullah II's recent BBC interview in which he conceded that Bashar al-Assad had lost the legitimacy to rule and the subsequent attack on the Jordanian embassy in Damascus by pro-Assad, Syrian protesters.

The region specifically, and the international community more generally, have over time come to expect very little from the Arab League. However, during the past few weeks the league of 22 Arab members has produced a flurry of activity. To some, these activities are merely surprising and, to others, worthy of serious scrutiny. On November 2, 2011, the Arab League put forth "the Arab [Peace] Initiative"—a indigenous plan to end the violence in Syria that would prevent further loss of life, and more importantly to some, prevent the "internationalization of the conflict."¹ Though Syria initially agreed to terms of the Initiative, which called for, *inter alia*, a cessation of violence, withdrawal of troops from the cities, release of detainees, and acceptance of an Arab League observation mission to oversee the implementation of the plan, it quickly became clear that Assad's regime had no intention of truly complying.² In response to the more than 3,500 protestors killed and the procrastination by Syria's leadership, the Arab League announced on November 12 that it would suspend the Syrian delegation from Arab League meetings until its full implementation of the commitments that were agreed upon under the Arab Initiative.³ Jordan was among the countries that voted in support of Syria's suspension.

On November 14, Abdullah sat down with the BBC's Lyse Doucet for a one-on-one interview about the tenuous situation unfolding in the region.⁴ The conversation, however, focused primarily on one topic: whether Abdullah thought that it was time for Assad to go. Ms. Doucet posed the question to the Jordanian monarch numerous times and in different ways. The take-away from the sum of the king's responses was that, in his estimation, "we deceive ourselves if we think that things will change dramatically if the individual is gone ... the problem is deeper than that and it is the system, the political system that is set up in Syria." The king attempted to provide a nuanced response to the internal Syrian situation by saying that the Assad he knew "has reform in his blood," that "the [Syrian] system does not allow for reform," and that Assad wasn't the only one responsible for the events on the ground since "both his brother and brother-in-law are very active on the military side."

¹ For more on fears of internationalizing the conflict and preventing the "implementation of a foreign agenda," see: 'Uraib al-Rintawi, "Between the Scorching Heat of the Regime and the League's Fire (*Bayna Ramda' al-Nizam wa-l-Nar al-Jami'a*)," *al-Dustur* (Jordan), November 16, 2011, [Arabic] www.addustour.com and Yasir al-Za'atira, "The Syrian Revolution Following the Arab League Decision (*al-Thawra al-Surriya ba'ad Qirar al-Jami'a al-'Arabia*)," *al-Dustur* (Jordan), November 16, 2011, [Arabic] www.addustour.com

² "The Arab Solution is Syria's Rescue Ship (*al-Hal al-Arabi Safinat al-Naja li-Surya*)," *al-Dustur* (Jordan), November 16, 2011, [Arabic] www.addustour.com

³ "The Arab League Ministerial Council's Resolution Following up the Situation in Syria (*Qirar Majlis al-Jami'a al-'Arabia al-Wuzari bi-Shan Mutaba'a al-Wad'a fi Surya*)," *al-Jami'a al-'Arabia* (Jordan), November 12, 2011, [Arabic] www.arableagueonline.org

⁴ King Abdullah II, Interview by Lyse Doucet for BBC, November 14, 2011. www.kingabdullah.jo/index.php/en_US/interviews/view/id/479/videoDisplay/0.html

Nevertheless, Abdullah still conceded that “the decision taken overwhelmingly by the Arab League shows that we are extremely concerned about the future of Syria and the way the leadership is moving.” In the end, Doucet’s persistence was rewarded and she obtained her much sought-after sound bite. “He is now the first Arab leader to openly say President Bashar al-Assad should step down” said the article, though the statement was qualified with an additional assertion about the importance of making “sure whoever comes behind. . . has the ability to change the status quo.”⁵

No matter how diplomatic Abdullah thought he was being, the ill-fated sound bite made its way to the streets of the Syrian capital. The very next day, over a hundred protestors amassed outside the gates of the Jordanian embassy in Damascus, bearing Syrian flags as well as flags of the Lebanese Shi’i militant group, Hezbollah. Protestors vehemently denounced Jordan’s support for regional efforts to pressure the Syrian government, chanting anti-Jordanian slogans and throwing eggs at the compound. What’s more, according to, *al-Sabil*—a Jordanian political daily affiliated with the Islamic Action Front⁶—the Jordanian ambassador reported that the embassy’s flag had been torn down and replaced with Hezbollah’s flag. A spokesman for the Jordanian Foreign Ministry, Mohammed al-Kayed, quickly refuted the latter portion of the claim and added that none of the embassy staff was injured in the incident.⁷ Jordan’s embassy was not the only one to be targeted. The embassies of Morocco, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar were also attacked for their complicity in supporting the Arab League’s initiatives vis-à-vis Syria.

Though the Syrians issued an apology the next day, the damage had been done. Calls to remove the Jordanian ambassador from Syria and kick out the Syrian ambassador in Jordan were widespread. The secretary general of the Islamic Action Front, Hamza Mansour, penned a letter to Jordan’s new Prime Minister, Awn Khasawneh, requesting the withdrawal of the Jordanian Ambassador, and more importantly, the recognition of the Syrian National Council as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.⁸ Likewise, hundreds of Jordanians tried to storm the Syrian Embassy in Amman in retaliation for to the attack on their own embassy in Damascus, though they were prevented from doing any damage by a formidable contingent of the kingdom’s Gendarmerie. The assembled protestors called for the Syrian president to step down and for the expulsion of the Syrian ambassador from Amman.⁹ The Jordanian leadership has thus far held back from both measures and has made it clear that it intends to operate within the consensus of the Arab League.

However, not everyone in Jordan agrees that the kingdom should penalize its northern neighbor. The prospect of the Arab League initiating economic sanctions against the Syrian Arab Republic has some Jordanians up in arms. Representatives of key economic sectors predict that such measures will have a strongly negative impact on Jordan’s economy. In a recent *Jordan Times* article—a government owned daily—economist Jawad Anani, who has also served as chief of the Royal Court and held several ministerial posts, explained that implementing sanctions against Syria “will cause large losses to the Kingdom in terms of trade, transport and investments.”¹⁰ In a follow-up article in the *Times*, Nael Kabariti, president of the Jordan Chamber of Commerce, was quoted as saying, “Syria is not only a strategic market for the Kingdom, but also a gateway to the Turkish, Lebanese and European markets.”¹¹ Losing any key market for Jordanian exports may result in significant layoffs and further stifle job opportunities in the country. Jordan after all, is already in an economically vulnerable position. Anani summarized these concerns saying, “These issues will have great costs involved and it is important for Jordan to carefully calculate these costs and their repercussions in the long run.” Jordanians acutely remember the devastating economic affect that both wars in Iraq had on the kingdom, albeit for differing reasons, and are not eager to undergo them again. Though Syria is not Jordan’s biggest trade partner, the two countries enjoy extensive commercial and economic relations.

Other Jordanians are critical of the Arab League’s decision to suspend Syria—and as such, Jordan’s role in supporting this decision—based on the view that “the adoption of this escalatory stance will inevitably lead to an escalation” on the part of the Syrians.¹² Muhammad Ka’wash writes in independent newspaper, *al-‘Arab al-Yawm*, that the decision to suspend Syria’s Arab League membership has complicated the crisis rather than helped provide a solution to it. He cautioned that “this decision might further exacerbate the situation and lead to more clashes and further bloodshed.” Ka’wash also echoed the sentiment found throughout the Jordanian media that suspending and even sanctioning Syria will potentially “internationalize the crisis and allow external parties to interfere politically and militarily in Syria.” The prospect of Syria becoming another Libya is

⁵ Lyse Doucet, “Syria’s Assad Should Step Aside, Says Jordan’s Abdullah,” *BBC News*, November 14, 2011. On November 22, 2011, Turkish Prime Minister was quoted saying to Bashar al-Assad, “For the welfare of your own people and the region, just leave that seat.” This statement will likely not be the last made by leaders from the region and beyond.

⁶ *Jabhat al-‘Amal al-Islami*, or the Islamic Action Front (IAF), is the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan. [Arabic] www.jabha.info

⁷ “Indicators of Hostility between Amman and Damascus Rose (*Mu’ashirat al-‘Ada’ bayna ‘Amman wa Dimashq ‘Irtaf‘at*),” *al-Sabil* (Jordan), November 16 2011, [Arabic] www.assabeel.net

⁸ “Memorandum Calling on the Government to Recognize the Syrian National Council (*Mudhakkara Tatalib al-Hakuma al-I’tiraf bi al-Majlis al-Watani al-Suri*),” *Jabhat al-‘Amal al-Islami* (Jordan), November 16, 2011, [Arabic] www.jabha.info

⁹ “Damascus Apologizes for the Attack on the Jordanian Embassy (*Dimashq Ta’tadhiru ‘an al-I’tida’ ‘ala al-Safara al-‘Urduniyya*),” *al-Ra’i* (Jordan), November 16, 2011. [Arabic] <http://alrai.com/article/2596.html>

¹⁰ Omar Obediat, “Jordan Advised to Play it Carefully as Powers Seek more Sanctions on Damascus,” *The Jordan Times*, November 14, 2011.

¹¹ Omar Obediat, “Sector Leaders Concerned over Possible Economic Sanctions in Syria,” *The Jordan Times*, November 21, 2011.

¹² Muhammad Ka’wash, “The Arab League Decision between Escalation and Complication (*Qirar al-Jami’a bayna al-Tas’id wa-l-Ta’aqid*),” *al-‘Arab al-Yawm* (Jordan), November 16, 2011, [Arabic] www.alarabalyawm.net/pages.php?articles_id=17697

something that many in Jordan fear due to the devastating economic, security and humanitarian effect such a situation would have on the kingdom.

Despite the internal debate in Jordan over what to do about Syria, threatening events continue to unfold. On November 22, the Syrian National Council announced that it is organizing a conference with the Arab League in preparation for a “transitional period” following what they see as the imminent fall of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Jordan must, of course, weigh its own internal concerns as they relate to Syria. However, there are additional supranational concerns that contend with its internal affairs. There is U.S pressure to consider, since Jordan is the second largest recipient of per capita financial assistance in this region. There is also pressure to go along with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), since the Hashemite Kingdom has a bid to join the exclusive Council. Finally, there is pressure from the other Arab League states. Jordan must factor all these angles into this complicated equation. Jordan suffered greatly for sitting out the Gulf War and as Omar Obediat of the *Jordan Times* observed, though Jordan is but a small player in the issue of sanctions against Syria “it can [again] resist for too long.”¹³

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¹³ “Jordan Advised to Play it Carefully as Powers Seek more Sanctions on Damascus.”