

Jordan: Between the Arab Spring and the Gulf Cooperation Council

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***Abstract:** The Arab Spring has fundamentally shifted the strategic balance in the Middle East. As all sides rush to ensure that their interests will be secured, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has emerged as a key battleground between those who would like to see a more democratic region, and those who would like to maintain economic stability. On one side of this debate is the Gulf Cooperation Council, led by Saudi Arabia, that views democratic reform as a threat to economic stability. On the other side are the forces of the Arab Spring, which have called for political reform in states such as Egypt, Syria, and Libya, even if these reforms come at the expense of stability. This article examines the various forces, both domestic and international, that are attempting to influence Jordan, and through it, the balance of power in the Arab World.*

The uprisings in the Arab world have not only upended domestic politics in individual states where protests have taken place, they have also served as a catalyst for transforming international relations in the Middle East. The Arab Spring has sent policymakers on all sides scrambling to ensure that the new regional order will be in line with their interests. The regimes that fell in Egypt and Tunisia were pillars of a moderate Sunni bloc that was allied with the United States and felt threatened by both Iran's bid for regional hegemony as well as Islamist and/or democratic reform movements domestically. The leaders of this moderate Sunni bloc, which also includes Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Jordan, were alarmed by American support for the protest movements that ousted the Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes from Egypt and Tunisia respectively. The remaining states in this bloc have since circled their wagons, and are working to build a durable political/military

alliance that is capable of withstanding the destabilizing trends associated with the Arab Spring.

However, unlike the wealthy Gulf Arab states, which now form the core of this truncated bloc, Jordan is poor and has always been more culturally and politically tied to the states of the Mediterranean Basin. Thus, the pull of the Arab Spring, which engulfed Egypt, Syria, and other Mediterranean states, has been much stronger in Jordan than it has in most of the Gulf Arab States (the major exception being Bahrain). Jordan, therefore, finds itself caught between two competing forces. On one side are the Sunni Monarchies of the Gulf, which wish to maintain regional economic and political stability and have attempted to bolster the Jordanian regime by recently inviting it to join the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The other side presents pressures of political reform associated with the Arab Spring that have spread throughout the Mediterranean Basin. As an unexpected result, the small Arab Kingdom of Jordan has become a strategic battleground between those who want to see a more democratic region, and those who want to maintain the status quo. Nevertheless, the domestic politics of Jordan will undoubtedly decide in which direction Jordan heads. Political divisions inside Jordan have thus suddenly become very important to the future of the whole region.

Regional Fallout of the Arab Spring

Though the Arab world has long been one of the least free, most war-prone, and economically underdeveloped regions, it has not stopped the slow creep of globalization and modernity. Increased education and new technologies, such as the internet, have made Arab societies increasingly aware of the many plaguing economic and political deficiencies in their countries. Despite the existence of natural resources, such as oil, and some limited reforms, which have managed to modestly increase the general standard of living, these reforms have failed to meet the expectations of their ballooning, and mostly young populations.

Hindsight shows that this situation was unsustainable, yet when a Tunisian vegetable seller named Mohamed Bouazizi lit himself on fire in political protest, most analysts failed to predict the revolution that his action sparked. Pro-democratic and anti-regime protests rose up in solidarity with Bouazizi, quickly spread through Tunisia, and eventually toppled the 23-year Ben Ali regime. The protests then swept into neighboring Algeria, and broke out in Egypt and Jordan in January 2011. By February, violent clashes ended Hosni Mubarak's 30-year rule of Egypt, as the protest continued to swell throughout the region, eventually engulfing Bahrain, Syria, and Libya.

Not everyone was happy about what has become known as the Arab Spring. Saudi Arabia, an absolute monarchy, and one of the world's least free nations, has led what Princeton University Professor Bernard Haykel called a

“counter-revolution against the Arab Spring.”¹ The Saudi regime argued that the protest movements undermine stability, empower radicals, and threaten to further damage the region’s already volatile economy. Its response was to use billions of oil wealth dollars to prop up friendly regimes, and to intervene militarily to smother the uprising in Bahrain.

A further threat to the Saudis has been the position of the monarchy’s long-time ally, the United States. The Obama administration has largely supported the protest movements. When it called for President Mubarak to step down, the Saudis felt that the United States had abandoned a staunch ally and feared that the same could happen to them in the near future.² In response, Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf Arab States, made a strategic decision to reconsider its dependence on U.S. military power and began forging more independent policies. The Gulf Arab states have transformed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), from a mainly economic organization, to a political/military alliance that is not dependent on outside support.³ However, the GCC is doing more than propping up undemocratic regimes. It presents a social contract whereby the state ensures stability and economic success, but, in exchange, the people forego political rights.⁴

One key aspect of Saudi Arabia’s plan to strengthen the GCC was inviting Jordan to join the council. After flooding Jordan with economic aid, Saudi Arabia now hopes that Jordan will not only accept formal membership in the GCC, but will also adopt the GCC model of limited political rights in exchange for economic stability. But this push for Jordan has created further tension between Saudi Arabia and the United States. The Obama administration sees the events of the Arab Spring as demonstrating the long-term instability of undemocratic and illiberal regimes, thus it is pushing for increased political reform in Jordan. As the Los Angeles Times reported this past summer, “U.S. diplomats have been dropping by the royal palace in Amman almost every week,” attempting to convince King Abdullah II that “democratic reform is the best way to quell the protests against his rule.”⁵ In addition, the United States has increased its economic and military support for the small kingdom. Jordan, already the second largest per-capita recipient of

¹ Bernard Haykel, “Saudi Arabia vs. the Arab Spring,” *Project Syndicate*, August 16, 2011 <www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/haykel4/English>.

² See: Paul Richter and Neela Banerjee, “U.S.-Saudi Rivalry Intensifies,” *The Los Angeles Times*, June 19, 2011; And, “In the Shadow of Popular Revolutions in the Region, the American-Saudi Competition to Win Jordan (*Fi Zil al Thaurat al Sha’abiyah bil-Mantaqah Tnafus Amriki Sa’udi lil-Fuz bil-Urdun*),” *Al Jazeera*, June 20, 2011 <www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/266FFCF0-9DB3-4429-ADB7-8471A8D81069.htm> (in Arabic).

³ Brandon Freedman, “GCC RISING: Is There a New Order Emerging In the Persian Gulf?” Paper given at the 59th Pugwash Conference on Science and World Affairs, Berlin German, July 2011.

⁴ Interview by the Authors with Dr. Walid M. AlKhatib, a Researcher and Head of the Polling Unit at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, July 21, 2011.

⁵ “U.S.-Saudi Rivalry Intensifies.”

American economic aid, is slated to receive \$682.7 million in total military and economic aid in the 2012 fiscal year—substantially more than previous U.S. commitments.⁶

Neither the United States nor Saudi Arabia want to lose the Jordanian regime as a stable and valuable ally. Yet, each sees a different path toward ensuring the monarchy's survival. The United States envisions gradual political reforms in line with the demands of the Arab Spring as the way forward for Jordan. Saudi Arabia prefers that Jordan adopt the GCC model of limited political rights in exchange for economic advancement and stability. The path Jordan ultimately takes will likely depend more on its internal politics than on outside pressures.

The Politics of Jordan

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is nominally a constitutional monarchy. The lower house of parliament is elected by the people, but the upper house (which possesses most of the real power) is appointed by the king and then approved by the lower house. Over the past several decades, Jordan has enjoyed relative internal stability owing in part to the heritage-based legitimacy of its monarchy, and to the ability of its government to marginalize opposition parties, suppress dissent, and gerrymander electoral laws, which keeps its parliament weak. However, as the Arab Spring made evident, stability is a transient commodity. Jordan's King Abdullah II—who, until recently, has been the major force behind modernizing Jordan—has tended toward a “gradualist, evolutionary approach to reform.”⁷ Since acceding to the throne in 1999, he has ordered several major nation-wide reform programs, each tasked with strengthening democratic institutions, empowering civil society, and instituting durable economic improvements.⁸ However, these initiatives—among them “Jordan First – 2002,” “National Agenda – 2005,” “We are all Jordan – 2006,” and “National Dialogue Commission 2011”—have all failed to make a significant impact on Jordan's political and economic landscape.

The king's practice of compiling a list of reforms and handing them to the prime minister to implement has been ineffective, often because the head of government does not share the king's vision for reform and because

⁶ For example, in 2008 the U.S. and Jordanian governments reached an agreement whereby the United States agreed to provide a total of \$660 million in annual foreign assistance to Jordan over a five-year period. See: Jeremy M. Sharp, *Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2011), p. 20.

⁷ Asher Susser, “Jordan 2011: Uneasy Lies the Head,” Middle East Brief No. 52. *Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University*, June 2011, p. 2.

⁸ “Country Backgrounder Series: Jordan,” *Project on Middle East Democracy*, 2007, p. 3 <http://pomed.org/docs/Jordan_Backgrounder.pdf>.

Jordan's parliament is notoriously impotent, unable to enact the changes that the regent demands.⁹ More importantly, the nation-wide reform initiatives, which are formulated by royally appointed committees, only draw from a narrow base of elites and altogether exclude members of opposition movements. According to Jordan's former Foreign Minister, Marwan Muasher, "...efforts to open up the political system have been thwarted by a resilient class of political elites and bureaucrats who feared that such efforts would move the country away from a decades old rentier system to a merit-based one."¹⁰ An illustration of how status quo minded elites high-jack the process can be seen in the top two priorities to emerge from the 2006 "We Are All Jordan" initiative: "loyalty and nationalism" and "sovereignty of the state and the protection of national interests." Ultimately, the king's reform programs, which are meant to strike a balance between the liberal-minded reformers and the traditional, self-appointed guardians of the state more often than not result "in appeasing traditional elements at the expense of reform."¹¹

Additionally, ethnic and social cleavages play a major complicating role in the reform process. The crux of this issue can be seen through the divide between the so-called East Bankers (those with historical roots on the East Bank of the Jordan River) and the West Bankers, or Jordanians of Palestinian Descent (*Urduniyyin min Asil Filastin*). Comprising an estimated 55 percent to 70 percent of the population, Jordanians of Palestinian Descent have played a dominant role in the private sector while East Bankers have tended to dominate the country's political and security institutions, as well as the army.¹² On a most basic level, Jordanians of Palestinian Descent traditionally have been considered by indigenous Jordanians to be "less Jordanian" and, therefore, less loyal to the state and the monarchy. There is a tangible fear in Jordan that any truly democratic program will cause native Jordanians to cede their political power to Jordanians of Palestinian Descent (disrupting the traditional political balance of power, which favors the monarchy) and shift it in a potentially more radical, Palestine-centric direction.¹³ Despite these fears, West Bankers do not represent a unified bloc. Aside from the fact that there are different levels of residence/citizenship based on when and from where they came, Jordanians of Palestinian descent belong to various economic classes and hold a wide range of political persuasions. Since most West Bankers have been kept out of power through gerrymandering of electoral

⁹ Marwan Muasher, "A Decade of Struggling Reform Efforts: The Resilience of the Rentier System." Carnegie Papers, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2011, p. 22.

¹⁰ Muasher, p. vi.

¹¹ Muasher, p. 22.

¹² "Country Backgrounder Series: Jordan," p. 4.

¹³ *Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations*, p. 5. Jordanians of Palestinian origin also make up a significant part of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF). See: Nathan J. Brown and Amr Hamzawy, *Between Religion and Politics* (Washington D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010), p. 48.

districts and electoral fraud, in general most prefer an Arab Spring approach, which promises to yield democratic reforms and a truly representative constitutional monarchy. By contrast, again very generally, many of the staunchest opponents of the Arab Spring approach are East Bank elites, who fear losing their privileged position and government patronage. They favor the GCC model of economic growth and limited political reform.¹⁴

Ideological divisions in Jordanian society also shape the political landscape. Islamists are by far the most organized opposition, of whom the Muslim Brotherhood is the largest and most active faction. Unlike in most other Arab states, the Jordanian Brotherhood's political party, The Islamic Action Front (IAF) is not only tolerated, but indeed well integrated into the Jordanian political landscape. Though its leadership consists of upper class Jordanians from East Bank families, the championing of Palestinian issues (both in Jordan and in the West Bank) has been a major cause for the organization. Because of this campaign, much of the IAF's rank and file consists of Jordanians of Palestinian origin who live in refugee camps.¹⁵ This, combined with the fact that many of the electoral reforms over the past two decades sought to marginalize the Brotherhood and its Palestinian base, has made the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood one of the most forceful proponents of political reform, putting them at the center of the Arab Spring in the country. It is important to note, however, that even the Muslim Brotherhood has refrained from calling for revolutionary change or the downfall of the monarchy.

In addition to the Islamists, the other driving force behind the Arab Spring in Jordan, as in other Arab states, has been liberal youth activists. Though they are nowhere near as powerful (either in size or organization) as the Islamists, their views are disproportionately influential, often voiced in academia, the media, and other elite circles. There are substantial differences between the outlook of these liberal activists and the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, but the two groups have been able to largely put aside their differences, cooperating under a banner of political reform.

At the other end of the political spectrum are the conservative elements rooted in East Bank tribal politics. These tribes form much of the East Bank elite, which traditionally have been the supportive bedrock of the regime. Though there are now signs that this support is waning in some tribal areas,¹⁶ the East Bank tribal elites have been the most ardent opponents of political

¹⁴ It should be stated that these are very crude divisions. Over time, intermarriage has made it more difficult to discern distinct differences between the two communities, though divisions do persist. There are, of course, wealthy Jordanians of Palestinian origin that have a vested interest in the stability of the regime and oppose the Arab Spring. There are also East Bank elites that support the protest movement in Jordan. The king has attempted to play down sectarian differences (the king himself married a Jordanian of Palestinian origin) and made national unity a central pillar of all his successive reform initiatives and major national speeches.

¹⁵ Shmuel Bar, *The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan* (Tel Aviv: Dayan Center, 1998), p. 16.

¹⁶ See discussion below.

reform. These tribes view politics through the spectrum of tribal interests and have upheld a traditional Middle Eastern system of politics where tribal loyalty is given in exchange for land, money, and influence. Deeply conservative, these tribes fear that political reform will come at their expense. Consequently, they have produced what Tel Aviv University Professor Asher Susser has termed “a militant and influential ultranationalist movement” which is “devoted to the eradication of Palestinian influence and of real and perceived Palestinian economic advantage.”¹⁷ The conservative tribal populations see the GCC model as appropriate for Jordan and oppose all efforts to bring the Arab Spring to Jordan.

Arab Spring Comes to Jordan

Since the eruption of the Arab Spring, the dynamic between ruler and citizen has shifted in almost every country in the region. This shift has manifested itself first and foremost in changing expectations of the populace vis-à-vis their leaders. Jordan is no exception. On the heels of the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt, thousands of Jordanians began holding weekly sit-ins and protests following Friday prayers, demanding political and economic change.¹⁸ Like their Tunisians and Egyptians counterparts, the social problems that drove them to take to the streets—youth unemployment and under-employment, corruption, socio-economic immobility—plague Jordanians as well. In Jordan, these factors are exacerbated by the kingdom’s lack of natural resources and generally weak economy. At times, the mostly peaceful demonstrations reached a boiling point, as on March 24/25, 2011, when hundreds of protestors gathered in Amman’s Interior Circle. Calling for the prime minister’s ouster and for wider public freedoms, bloody clashes erupted among protestors, government security forces, and so-called regime loyalists. Public anger in Jordan then reached an all-time high because of how the government handled what the people viewed as legitimate public dissent. On July 15, around 2,000 Jordanians—youth activists and Islamists among them—gathered in downtown Amman, in what was to be an open-ended sit-in to demand political reform. Once again, the protest ended in bloodshed.¹⁹

These outbursts have rocked Jordan’s stability on levels that have not been seen for decades, reaching the more rural, tribal areas that have long been the backbone of support for the Hashemite monarchy. Violent demonstrations and confrontations between protestors and government forces have

¹⁷ Susser, “Jordan 2011: Uneasy Lies the Head,” p. 2.

¹⁸ Some 2,000 odd gatherings were held between January and July 2011 across Jordan. However, protests died down almost altogether in August due to the holy month of Ramadan.

¹⁹ For more on the July 15, 2011 protests, see: Samuel Helfont and Tally Helfont, “Jordan’s Protests: Arab Spring Lite? *FPRI E-Note*, July 2011 <www.fpri.org/enotes/2011/201107.helfont_helfont.jordan.html>.

even taken place outside Amman in the tribal strongholds of Ma'an, Karak, Irbid, and Tafilah.²⁰ Likewise, public criticism against the government and even the monarchy has reached unprecedented levels, shaking the kingdom's mostly quiet history. Two prominent examples typify these unparalleled manifestations of dissent. In May 2010, the National Committee of Military Retirees, an organization representing around 140,000 East Bank military veterans, issued a petition to the king calling for an end to corruption, a reversal of liberal economic policies, and, most notably, warning of the dangerous influence of Jordanians of Palestinian Descent on Jordan's indigenous character.²¹ Though this petition preceded the Arab Spring, it reflects a buried tension that is now becoming increasingly conspicuous. Similarly, in February 2011 (well into the Arab Spring), thirty-six tribal figures published a deeply critical statement against the monarchy. In the statement, the tribal leaders described a "crisis of governance" in Jordan stemming from pervasive corruption by certain "power centers." Asher Susser has explained that, contrary to the demands of Islamists and liberals who want to empower the Palestinian population in Jordan, the statement by the tribal leaders was "an oblique reference to the Queen, and to other Palestinians," who are seen as "plundering the country." The statement concluded with demands that governments be elected by the people rather than appointed by the king, and categorically rejected privatization of state assets, which they likened to looting the country. If the regime did not act quickly, the signatories warned, "The immunity enjoyed by the monarch might not be extended."²²

Youth activists and the Muslim Brotherhood have seized the opportunity presented by the new waves of protests in the region, to make their grievances heard even louder. The IAF has taken part in the weekly demonstrations and has issued a myriad of demands including: "the dissolution of the government, the dissolution of parliament, the holding of new elections under a revised electoral law, and the amending of the constitution to allow for the direct election of the prime minister."²³

²⁰ For example, see: Ethan Bronner, "Protests Spur Shuffle of Jordan Cabinet," *The New York Times*, July 2, 2011.

²¹ Assaf David, "The Revolt of Jordan's Military Veterans," *Foreign Policy – The Middle East Channel*, June 16, 2010 <http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/15/the_revolt_of_jordans_military_veterans>.

²² Susser, "Jordan 2011: Uneasy Lies the Head," pp. 3-5. "Statement by National Figures Warns of Dangers to Jordan if Reform Is Not Implemented Fast," *Ammon News*, February 6, 2011, <<http://en.ammonnews.net/print.aspx?Articleno=11523>>; "Tribesmen in Jordan Issue Urgent Call for Political Reform," *The New York Times*, February 7, 2011.

²³ "Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations," p. 2. According to IAF Secretary-General Hamzah Mansur, "There is no comparison between Egypt and Jordan. The people there demand a regime change, but here we ask for political reforms and an elected government." See: "The Infection of Egypt's Protests May Be Transmitted (*Adwa Ibtijajat Misr Qad Tantaqi*)," *Al Jazeera*, February 1, 2011 <www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/10B46B77-761D-4CDA-81B1-F1FCE7C94CFE.htm>.

Despite these destabilizing events, Jordan's former Ambassador to the United States, Karim Kawar, claimed that the system in Jordan is not as severe as the systems in Egypt or Syria, and that therefore the grievances of the people are not nearly as acute.²⁴ Somewhat surprisingly, this view is shared not only by elites with close ties to the monarchy such as Kawar, but also among the leaders of the protest movement themselves. As previously noted, the Muslim Brotherhood and the liberal youth activists have not called for toppling the regime, as in other Arab states—only for political reform. In fact, the IAF's governing council issued a statement reaffirming “the party's belief in the legitimacy of the Hashemites, noting that it was a religious duty to preserve the stability of the kingdom.”²⁵ This creates an entirely different dynamic for the Jordanian Arab Spring, and has caused some challenges for the protesters. As youth activist and popular Jordanian blogger, Nasim Tarawnah, suggested, the protest movement in Jordan is different because the demands are different. He argued, “It is more difficult to mobilize for reform than it is for toppling a regime. Reform is long-term, not immediate, and not as romantic.”²⁶ In addition to these challenges, which are unique to Jordan, he went on to explain that, as in other Arab States, the youth organizations, Islamists, leftists, and professional associations that take to the streets together in protest only share macro demands—namely, elected government—yet have not agreed about what that means or how it should be achieved.²⁷ Further damaging to the protest movement's strength are the bloody events in Syria and Yemen, which as many Jordanians have observed, are a strong deterrent and have taken people off the streets in Jordan. National surveys echo this sentiment. According to the Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the University of Jordan, 80 percent of the national population said that they do not support the protests; 55 percent of which argue that these events “lead to chaos and sabotage and undermine security and stability,” 15 percent of which said that they were unnecessary and useless, and 9 percent that said the country enjoys “security and stability and the situation does not require demonstration.”²⁸

So although many Jordanians are dissatisfied with the status quo and have begun to voice their desire for change, any meaningful reform will pit different groups against one another. Tarawnah pointed out that these groups do not trust each other, but they do trust the king.²⁹ Abdullah II is seen by

²⁴ Interview by the authors with Ambassador Karim Kawar, former Jordanian Ambassador to the United States, Amman, Jordan, July 4, 2011.

²⁵ Susser, “Jordan 2011: Uneasy Lies the Head,” p. 5.

²⁶ Interview by the authors with Naseem Tarawnah, activist, author of The Black Iris Blog and contributor to 7iber.com, Amman, Jordan, July 17, 2011.

²⁷ Naseem Tarawnah Interview.

²⁸ “2011 Al Bakhit Government after the Passage of 100 Days (*Hukumat Al Bakhit 2011 Ba'ad Murur 100 Yom*),” Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, May 2011, pp. 17-18 <www.jcss.org/UploadPolling/297.docx>.

²⁹ Naseem Tarawnah Interview.

most as an arbiter between various groups and a bulwark against the chaos that has engulfed neighboring countries. This trust in the king may subdue the Jordanian protest movement amidst the storm of regime change sweeping the region.

The Pull of the GCC

In addition to leadership of the king, Jordan has for the most part avoided the most destabilizing aspects of the Arab Spring because important segments of Jordanian society seek alternative models of reform—most notably, economic transformation associated with membership in the GCC. This is a widely held sentiment. As the recent CSS poll shows, a full 79 percent of Jordanians favor economic reforms before political and democratic reforms. To those ends, 95 percent of the population supports Jordan's entry into the GCC.³⁰ Of course, not all Jordanians who support Jordan's entry into the GCC see the issue as linked to the political situation. As activist Naseem Tarawnah told us, "For most people, the GCC simply means money; there is neither a political nor a military component."³¹ Yet it is clear that among Jordanian policymakers there is a direct link between economic issues, politics, and even national security. For example, Ambassador Kawar made clear that he believes the biggest threat to Jordan's national security is young, unemployed Jordanians. This, he continued, is why Jordan is interested in the GCC.³² Membership in the GCC is predicted not only to be a catalyst for investment in Jordan, but also to provide jobs for Jordan's unemployed young people. An increasingly politicized and militarized GCC will stoke a large demand for manpower, which the Gulf States are unable, or unwilling to meet. For example the GCC's military force, often referred to as "The Peninsula Shield," will certainly require more troops if the GCC is to become an independent military power in the region. Jordan's military is widely recognized as a professional and well-trained force. Unlike the Gulf States, which do not like to ask their citizens to serve in the military, Jordanians would jump at the opportunity. It is the ultimate win-win for Jordan: a beefed-up Peninsula Shield would provide a large number of well-paying jobs for able-bodied Jordanians with almost all of the salaries paid by the Gulf States. Similar scenarios could be imagined in other sectors as well. As Curtis Ryan of Appalachian State University has argued, "Jordan's main resource has been and remains its people. Jordanians tend to have very high levels of education, and have therefore been able to take advantage of skilled labor and service sector job opportunities in other countries in the region, and especially in the Gulf. Worker remittances are thus

³⁰ "2011 Al Bakhit Government after the Passage of 100 Days," pp. 21, 14.

³¹ Naseem Tarawnah Interview.

³² Amb. Karim Kawar Interview.

a major component of the Jordanian economy.”³³ If Jordan enters the GCC, these opportunities will only increase.

As the polling data and Ambassador Kawar’s comments make clear, this type of economic advancement is more important than political or democratic reform for many Jordanians. Furthermore, in the minds of some Jordanians, democracy has little to do with a country’s standard of living. Ambassador Kawar, while expressing his support for democracy, also underscored that he did not believe democracy is the key to economic success and that its implementation will not necessarily solve the unemployment and wage problems plaguing Jordan. He referenced Greece, which, though a democracy, is also in economic disarray.³⁴ Similarly, Walid M. Alkhatib, the head of polling at the University of Jordan’s Center for Strategic Studies, pointed out that the lowest voter turnout has been in Kuwait. A point which he argued demonstrates that if the economy is doing well, “nobody cares about politics.”³⁵

A Battle for the Essence of Jordan

Debates about the Arab Spring, the GCC, and the correct path toward reform in Jordan have become more than simple questions of policy. Often the discussions have transformed into debates about the very nature of the Jordanian state and its history. Those who would like to see the kingdom move toward the GCC have tried to depict Jordan’s past as more closely aligned with the Gulf States than it actually was. For example, in response to the GCC’s decision to extend Jordan an invitation to join, al Sharq al Awsat, a pan-Arab daily with pro-Saudi tendencies, ran an op-ed claiming that Jordan’s natural place was in the GCC because it had always been tied “geographically and demographically with the Arabian Peninsula.” The op-ed went on to argue that “Jordanians do not feel any separation geographically, culturally, or in terms of kinship with their brothers in the Arabian Peninsula and in the Gulf.” This is the case, the op-ed claimed, because “they share a common heritage” and maintain common “customs and temperament.”³⁶ Yet this would come as a surprise to the vast majority of Jordanians, who continue to view Gulf Arabs as foreigners. Jordan’s Levantine history is unmistakably distinct from the history of the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf in terms of culture, economics, politics, dress, language, and any number of other metrics. This is clear even to

³³ Curtis R. Ryan, “Working Paper 7: Civil Society and Democratization in Jordan,” Knowledge Programme Civil Society in West Asia, University of Amsterdam, June 2010, p. 13.

³⁴ Ambassador Karim Kawar Interview.

³⁵ Dr. Walid M. Alkhatib Interview.

³⁶ Salih Al Qilab, “Jordan and the Gulf Cooperation Council. . .What Are the Pros and Cons? (*Al Urdun wa Majles al Ta’awun al Khabiji. . . ma labu wa ma ‘alibi*),” *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, May 19, 2011 <www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&article=622315&issueno=11860>.

the casual observer. The attempt to break Jordan away from the Levant and tie it to Gulf is clearly more about a vision of the future, than it is about the past.

Conversely, those who would like to see political reform in Jordan (which in practical terms means opening up the system to Jordanians of Palestinians Descent) have tried to depict the history of Jordan as tied to the Levant and more particularly to Palestine. They describe the histories of Palestine and Jordan as being seamless and devoid of any tension between East Bankers and West Bankers. For instance, al Jazeera ran a documentary in June titled, *al Dafatan Tawaman* (Twin Banks) that depicted Jordan and Palestine's history as one in the same.³⁷ Focusing on their shared past, the film correctly stated that there was no difference between the people of the East and West Bank of the Jordan River until after WWI. Nevertheless, the documentary artfully brushed over significant events in the second half of the 20th century that have shaped Palestinian and Jordanian identities, including, most importantly, Black September.³⁸ The aftermath of these events resulted in Jordanians with roots on the West Bank being systematically excluded from important positions in the state. This situation largely persists today and is deeply embedded into the psyche of both populations. Yet the documentary's propagandistic depiction of a single people with a single identity serves the purpose of connecting Jordan's past with a vision of its future tied to the Arab Spring.

This documentary was well received by those in Jordan who share its reading of the past (and by extension the future). For example, one of the leading Jordanian dailies, al Ghad, ran an op-ed by the head of al Jazeera's Jordanian office, Yasser Abu Hilala, praising the documentary. Hilala, who has clear Islamist leanings and is therefore pushing for the Arab Spring model in Jordan, welcomed the documentary, claiming that it objectively represents the history of the region. He dismissed the critique that two separate identities emerged in the second half of the 20th century, arguing that "The unity [of the two peoples] did not end in 1967 with the occupation, not with the decision of the Rabat Summit in 1974 [which recognized the PLO as the leaders of the Palestinians], not with the disengagement in 1988 [in which Jordan renounced all rights to the West Bank], not with the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1993, and it [the unity] continues to exist today." This statement reflects Hilala's refusal to recognize the historical events that have shaped the region over the past 40 years. It also says a good deal about the direction he would like to see Jordan take—namely a Jordan that treats Palestinians as equals.³⁹

³⁷ "Twin Banks (*Al Dafatan Tawaman*)," *Al Jazeera – Documentary*, June 23, 2011; Available at this link: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=4q3UdHyaB0w) (in Arabic).

³⁸ During September 1970, or what became known as Black September (*aylul al aswad*), Palestinian forces located in Jordan and led by Yasser Arafat attempted to overthrow the Hashemite Monarchy.

³⁹ Yasser Abu Hilala, "Al Dafatan Tawaman?" *Al Ghad* (Jordan), June 24, 2011 (in Arabic).

These debates have begun to transform what was initially a policy question about which path toward reform best suited Jordan, into a deeper dispute over the essence of the Jordanian state. More existential questions about Jordan's past and what it means to be Jordanian have the potential to further complicate what is already a fairly heated debate and will undoubtedly further frustrate the efforts of all sides.

Looking Forward

The king's response to the competing demands of Jordanian society has been to play all sides by conceding enough to each party (both domestically and internationally) to keep them from threatening the regime. He has given two high-profile speeches in which he acknowledged many of the demands of the Arab Spring.⁴⁰ Yet, while he has promised unprecedented political reforms related to corruption and accountability (two of the main demands of the protesters) he has not, and shows no sign of accepting the most radical demand of the Arab Spring, that of a government elected by the people instead of appointed by the king. However, in the long term the king has spoken abstractly about his desire to see a constitutional monarchy based on the British model. The monarchy has also tried to play both sides of the debate over the GCC, accepting membership and financial aid, but playing down any talk of bringing the GCC's political model to Jordan. Thus far, the king has succeeded in the almost impossible task of not angering any domestic or international party. He remains a sought-after ally in the West, in the Arab Gulf, and among the Arab Spring protesters.

The United States shares many of the same goals as the Jordanian monarchy. Like the king, the United States strives to remain in everyone's favor. The hope is that when the dust of the Arab Spring settles, the United States will enjoy strong alliances and maintain influence no matter who succeeds. It is also in the interests of the United States to maintain and rebuild what remains of the alliance between the post-Arab Spring states such as Egypt and Tunisia and their former allies in the GCC. In a best case scenario, Libya and Syria could be added to that bloc. This would undoubtedly be the best result for the United States and the moderates in the region, though only by maintaining alliances with all sides is such an outcome possible.

⁴⁰Speech of His Majesty King Abdullah II, Amman, Jordan, June 14, 2011 <www.kingabdullah.jo/index.php/ar_JO/speeches/view/id/480/videoDisplay/0.html> (in Arabic); Speech of His Majesty King Abdullah II, Amman, Jordan, August 14, 2011 <www.kingabdullah.jo/index.php/ar_JO/speeches/view/id/483/videoDisplay/0.html> (in Arabic); For a detailed chart of the proposed constitutional amendments, see: "Recommendations made by the Royal Committee on Constitutional Review," *The Jordan Times*, August 15, 2011 <www.jordantimes.com/?news=40408>.

At the same time, the United States would like to see political reforms implemented throughout the region. As the Arab Spring has demonstrated, illiberal and undemocratic regimes are unstable and therefore cannot be counted upon as long-term allies. Yet the United States does not want the implementation of this reform to lead to further chaos. It appears that King Abdullah II shares this view of the region. In fact, the Jordanian monarchy might be the only force in the region working toward both reform and stability. The United States should continue to gently push Jordan in that direction. At the same time, U.S. policymakers should acknowledge their shared outlook with the Jordanian regime and continue to treat it as a strategic partner in the region. In the long term, this is the best way to advocate slow, stable reform in the region. To that end, a strong and stable Jordanian monarchy, allied with the West and the GCC, but also seen as a reform-minded regime by proponents of the Arab Spring, would be a valuable ally indeed.

