TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY
TEL AVIV NOTES
AN UPDATE ON MIDDLE EASTERN DEVELOPMENTS BY THE MOSHE DAYAN CENTER
Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman Assistant Editor: Teresa Harings

Volume 7, Number 9 May 9, 2013

Jordan and the Faltering Fortunes of the Arab Spring

Asher Susser

Jordan's politics have historically been deeply influenced by regional political trends, over which Jordan itself, as a relatively weak and small state, has usually had little or no influence. Ever since Jordan's active participation in the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, which resulted in the annexation of the West Bank to Jordan, the Hashemite Kingdom has been exposed to the vicissitudes of external Arab politics. The incorporation into Jordan of the West Bank's Palestinian population, who outnumbered the original Jordanians by two to one, revolutionized the domestic politics of what had previously been a rather sleepy desert kingdom.

The majority of Palestinians in Jordan, as opposed to the Hashemite regime, desired the undoing of Jordan's post-1948 status quo with Israel, and were receptive to Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir's quasi-messianic message of revolutionary liberation. Accordingly, they were easily mobilized by Egyptian propaganda against the regime, so much so that the very existence of the monarchy was seriously challenged at times, especially in the mid-1950s, when Nasir was at the zenith of his power. As Nasir's power declined in the early 1960s, so did the intensity of the domestic Palestinian pressure on the monarchy.

But the dynamics of regional Arab politics and Palestinian militancy soon reasserted themselves and pulled Jordan into the 1967 Six Day War, resulting in Jordan's catastrophic defeat and the loss of the West Bank to Israel. Jordan's King Husayn was so concerned about potential Arab censure of Jordan that he chose to fight the war with an Egyptian general in command of the Jordanian front. The consequences for Jordan were disastrous, as the Egyptian's mismanagement of

the Jordanian forces in the battlefield precluded more effective resistance to the Israeli onslaught.

In the aftermath of the war and the demise of Nasserist pan-Arabism, territorial nationalism became more legitimate, soon pitting the Palestinian national movement against Jordan. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its military forces created a state within a state on the East Bank of the Jordan River. The Hashemite Kingdom began to look like an empty shell until the regime regained its composure and crushed the PLO's armed units in the so called "Black September" Civil War of 1970-71. But even after the routing of the PLO, the potential Palestinian challenge to Jordan has never really disappeared, thanks to the country's Palestinian population of some 50 percent or more of the total in the East Bank. When the first Palestinian intifada broke out in late 1987 in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza, King Husayn's fear of a spillover effect into Jordan drove him to declare Jordan's final disengagement from the West Bank in July 1988.

Concurrently, Jordan's economy faced virtual collapse, and the country has yet to fully recover from that initial downturn. Moreover, Jordan's economic woes have had serious political ramifications. For decades, regime stability rested on an unwritten social contract between the monarchy and the non-Palestinian East Bankers, according to which the regime would enjoy their unswerving loyalty in exchange for jobs, salaries and other forms of government largesse. Ever since the 1970s, the East Bankers have held the bulk of government jobs and almost exclusively control the security services and the military, while Palestinians dominate the country's private sector. Tensions between Palestinians and East Bank Jordanians are currently high, as the former resent their exclusion from positions of political influence while the latter resent Palestinian affluence, which they increasingly feel has been gained unfairly at their expense.

Since the late 1980s, when Jordan sank into deep economic crisis, the IMF and the World Bank have urged Jordan to engage in neoliberal economic reforms—including the extensive privatization of state enterprises—so as to reduce government spending. These measures have mainly hurt the loyalist East Banker constituency—who, having lost government jobs, are forced into the swelling ranks of the unemployed while receiving ever-decreasing government support. At the same time, the privatization of state enterprises has tended to further enrich Palestinian entrepreneurs, generating a sense among East Bankers that the regime is not holding up its end of their historical bargain. In recent years,

well before the Arab Spring, condemnation of King Abdallah has regularly been heard from within the inner sanctums of the ultra-conservative East Bank elite. In a moment of impatient indiscretion, Abdallah recently disparaged some of his tribal critics as "the old dinosaurs" that he had to deal with when trying to push through reforms.[1]

The critical turning point in Jordan's recent history was not the advent of the Arab Spring, but the passing of King Husayn in 1999. Under the less capable King Abdallah, the monarchy has lost prestige and popularity, as he has failed to reproduce the monarchical presence of his father. But the opposition has yet to come up with any clear alternative. Even opponents tend to see the Hashemite regime as "the thing that holds [the country] all together."[2]

The Arab Spring initially emboldened the opposition in Jordan to demand sweeping reform. But just as the ebb and flow of Nasserism had alternating effects on the Jordanian domestic scene in the 1950s and 1960s, so does the ebb and flow of the Arab Spring. In the initial euphoric months, in early 2011, a seemingly unstoppable revolutionary tide was bowling over regimes one after the other, as people throughout the Arab world were losing their "fear of government." The western media passionately assumed the role of cheerleaders of the revolution, pressuring their governments to do likewise. Not surprisingly, the Jordanian opposition, both disaffected East Bankers as well as the mainly Palestinian-supported Muslim Brotherhood, confidently asserted their discontent, pushing the regime onto the defensive.

The success of the Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt was wind in the Brotherhood's sails. But the longer-term outcomes of the revolutions in countries like Egypt and Libya, and especially the sectarian bloodbath in Syria, were horrifying to most Jordanians. Events outside Jordan were having a mixed impact on the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's stature. On the one hand, the increasing prominence of radical Islamist forces in neighboring Syria was giving them "growing clout."[3] On the other hand, the poor performance of Egypt's President Muhammad Morsi

[1] Jeffrey Goldberg, "Monarch in the Middle," *The Atlantic*, April 2013.

[2] Shadi Hamid and Courtney Freer, "How Stable is Jordan? Abdullah's Half-hearted Reforms and the Challenge of the Arab Spring" (Brookings Doha Center, Policy Briefing, November 2011), p. 4.

[3] Nicolas Pelham, "Jordan's Syria Problem," *NYR Blog*, January 10, 2013, http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/jan/10/jordans-syria-problem/.

and his Muslim Brotherhood government had a negative effect on the Brotherhood's image in Jordan.

More than four hundred thousand Syrians are currently seeking refuge in Jordan, as did about five hundred thousand Iraqis before them. Spokespersons for the regime could ask with considerable justification what it was that Jordanians had to complain about in their oasis of stability which, moreover, did not share their neighboring regimes' reputation for brutal repression. Indeed, less than a handful of protesters have been killed by the security forces in over two years of demonstrations in Jordan, due to the strict orders of the king not to use excessive force.

While these demonstrations reflect the perseverance of the opposition and the depth of popular disaffection, they also indicate the staying power of the regime and the relative ineffectiveness of its fractious rivals. Protests still take place, but at less regular intervals and with dwindling participation, gradually turning them into a rather benign exercise. Overall, the Arab Spring has gone sour, losing its luster and revolutionary fervor. Things everywhere else seem to be a lot worse than in Jordan, and the initial hopes around the region for immediate and virtually miraculous change have been totally shattered.

The regime presently has the upper hand against a deflated opposition, not because of any brilliant crisis management or dramatic domestic change in the economy, nor because of any substantive political reform. For the great majority of Jordanians the most attractive option now seems to be more of the same – that is, the acceptance of King Abdallah and the status quo, by default. The regime's real immediate concern is to acquire the aid to pull through its economic troubles, and to find the ways and means of providing for the Syrian refugees before they become an unmanageable burden on Jordan's infrastructure. That, of course, could seriously threaten internal stability.

Asher Susser is a professor in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History at Tel Aviv University and a senior research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies.

The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

To republish an article in its entirety or as a derivative work, you must attribute it to the author and the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University, and include a reference and hyperlink to the original article on the Moshe Dayan Center's website http://www.dayan.org.

Previous editions of TEL AVIV NOTES can be accessed at http://www.dayan.org/tel-aviv-notes.

You are subscribed to the Moshe Dayan Center Electronic Mailing List. Should you wish to unsubscribe, please send an email to listserv@listserv.tau.ac.il, with the message "unsubscribe dayan-center."