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# Reform and the Dynamics of In/stability in Jordan during the Arab Uprisings

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## Abstract

*The argument that Jordan is a remarkably stable country in a volatile region has become axiomatic. Some contend that the Hashemite monarchy is indispensable for the country's stability. Nonetheless, an in-depth analysis of Jordan's political status quo reveals the deep-seated cleavages that- if left unattended- could jeopardize the stability of the country in years to come. The advent of a political awakening among Jordan's youth- who display unprecedented self-entitlement- and the eruption of the Arab uprisings have left the monarch with two options: either effect genuine reform to restore the public's trust in the regime or risk facing future instability. This paper identifies the shortcomings and imperfections of the current autocratic status quo and assesses the prospects of instability. My intent in this paper is to explain and contextualize the intricate dynamics of the regime's insistence on reproducing the non-democratic status quo during the Arab Spring and question whether this might lead to instability in the long term in a changing society.*

## Key Words

Political reform, instability, hirak, autocracy, Muslim Brotherhood, East Bankers, Jordan, Hashemite Monarchy.

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## Introduction

In present-day Jordan, the conditions required to support a thriving and genuine democracy are not yet existent. Over the last decade, however, Jordanians have become increasingly restive due to official policies embraced by the autocratic ruling elite, which have exacerbated the worsening living conditions of the population. Thus, the emergence of protest movements in early 2011 was hardly surprising. With the people's perception of themselves and their unelected leaders profoundly shifted since the start of the Arab Spring, a new pervasive sense of entitlement and empowerment poses an unprecedented challenge to the rule of King Abdullah II.

Of equal importance, the fast spread of protest groups in Jordan- henceforth known as *Hirak*- shattered many of the country's long-held, dominant taboos. Once docile and complicit, Jordanians now commonly criticize the monarch, accusing him and his closest advisors of corruption. By and large, the wall of fear- in the past, more than 75%

expressed their fear to publicly criticize the government let alone the monarch was brought down.<sup>1</sup> For the majority, taking the uncharted water of defiance and placing the blame squarely on official policies—something many would not have thought of a decade ago—proved to have no cost.

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With the trust gap between the ruler and the ruled widened to an alarming degree following the events of the past several years, the entrenched ruling elite's lip service to the issue of reform has run aground. Indeed, the decade-long attempts at half-hearted reform and unfulfilled promises of public empowerment have not only been exposed, but are now ridiculed, especially considering the teetering economy and pervasive corruption. This new popular activism and entitlement has thus compelled the monarch to be more attentive to his subjects and

address his country's challenges with a top-down package of reform.

Thus far, King Abdullah II has managed to weather the political storm that has swept across much of the region since 2011. And yet, long-time observers of Jordanian politics argue that barring genuine political reform, the autocratic status quo is untenable. Meanwhile, the country's economic problems are worsening. With such a fragile economy, it is hard to see how the regime will contend with the increasing numbers of disgruntled youth without genuine political participation and inclusion.

Lacking the essential financial windfall, the regime will not likely be able to afford its age-old rentier relationship with its East Banker constituency. Evidence suggests that the monarch's reliance on financial and economic support from some Gulf countries and the United States to underwrite the rentier relationship with his people cannot be counted on in the long term. To make matters worse, genuine economic development in Jordan's countryside, where citizens have become most accustomed to trading blind loyalty for personal gains, was neglected due to economic mismanagement by successive governments. In fact, East Bankers' growing dissatisfaction took a twist when demonstrations erupted in Ma'an— a city in the southern part of the

country - as early as 1989. Ever since, a growing number of East Bankers has suspected that the successive governments are turning their backs on these remote areas.<sup>2</sup>

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A thorough scrutiny of recent developments reveals that the traditionally revolution-adverse Jordanian political culture, which has long been nourished with the infusion of the patron-client relationship, can no longer be taken for granted. Hence, such severe transformations may pose serious challenges that have the potential to reach a tipping point, thus jeopardizing the stability of the country. In the global political awareness,<sup>3</sup> it seems that the only way to avert instability and address deep-seated political frustrations is through embarking on the trajectory of reform with a clear blueprint for transition from an autocratic state to one of democracy. Such a transition could offer Jordan's monarch a new social contract whereby he could continue his reign in a country with a society of changing needs.

Nonetheless, the regime's most recent package of reform- claimed by the ruling elite to be the most achievable option- has fallen short of reform-oriented groups' expectations. Key political forces have casted doubt on the trajectory of the reform process altogether and argue that a paradigm shift is necessary. Observers maintain that the package of reform was designed to stifle internal opposition and reproduce the much-loathed undemocratic political status quo. Meanwhile, most citizens do not trust the state institutions. Indeed, it is the growing trust gap between the state and most of its citizens that may be the country's Achilles heel for instability. If anything, the Jordanian protest movements of the past several years reveal and reinforce one idea: the ruling elite is broadly seen as being unresponsive, unaccountable, non-transparent, and dangerously untrustworthy.

This paper is composed of three sections: Section one presents a conceptual framework; section two examines the resilience of Jordan's autocracy, particularly since King Abdullah's ascendance to the throne; and section three identifies and scrutinizes the dynamics that have thus far secured the country's relative stability. In particular, the last section delves into the workings of the fractured protest groups and how they

worked at cross-purpose during the Jordan Spring. In the conclusion, the paper will foreshadow the potential dynamics of future instability.

## The Conceptual Approach

The argument that the Arab region is resistant to democracy has become a cliché. The democratic deficit has been an underlining feature of the Arab region since the Middle East state system emerged in the wake of World War I. Even the belated third wave of democracy has not seriously impacted Arab politics in any meaningful way.<sup>4</sup> According to Daniel Brumberg, the region has been caught in a trap of liberalized autocracies. Although some Arab regimes have responded positively to the push for democratization, they have done so in bad faith. Brumberg writes, “Over the past two decades, the Middle East has witnessed a ‘transition’ away from- and then back toward- authoritarianism. This dynamic began with tactical political openings whose goal was to sustain rather than transform autocracies.”<sup>5</sup>

Reasons for the perennial endurance of authoritarianism and the democratic deficit in Arab countries abound. Some ascribe this phenomenon to culture and Islam, others to socio-economic reasons and rentierism, while some place responsibility on colonial legacies. The modernization theory of the 1950s

identifies the prerequisite requirements and conditions of democratization in the developing world as certain thresholds of economic development. According to the theory, heightened levels of economic opportunity allow societies to have social mobility, which in essence defies autocracy. Therefore, the propensity to political activism and participation is the logical outcome of economic development, urbanization, and increased levels of literacy. In such a society, authoritarianism can hardly survive.<sup>6</sup>

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Other scholars attach monumental importance to the role of the socioeconomic variables in democratic transition. According to her theory of “developmental paradox,” Eva Bellin examines the role of socioeconomic factors on democratization. For democratization to take root, two factors should be available: a sizable middle class and a private sector, both of which are financially and politically independent from the state. The existence of rentierism in some parts of the Arab world has not helped

develop a society that is free of the state. For decades, oil has become the source of rent in a handful of Arab countries. Even in non-oil producing countries, such as Jordan, a semi-rentier economy has developed thanks to the considerable infusions of worker remittances and foreign aid. Others have observed that in the Middle East, civil society is either weak or, in some countries, absent altogether.<sup>7</sup>

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Yet, as democratization failed to take root in some Arab states even after they passed the so-called economic threshold that has generated democracy elsewhere, some scholars have fallen back to the notion of cultural exceptionalism that impedes the transition to a more democratic society. Explicit in this school of thought is the idea that the Arab region- with its culture of Islam, patrimonialism, patriarchalism, and Oriental despotism- is exceptionally adverse to democracy. Raphael Patai's book "The Arab Mind" is a key effort

to support this argument. According to Patai, the psychological profile of Arab personalities and Arab cultures are primitive, irrational, violent, and undemocratic.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, Ellie Kedourie argues that Oriental despotism and the Middle East are inseparable. Meanwhile, in his study on the "third wave" of democratization of the 1980s, Samuel Huntington makes the case that "conceivably Islamic and Confusion cultures pose insuperable obstacles to democratic development."<sup>9</sup> That said, there is no empirical evidence to support the above cultural arguments. Emerging bodies of literature based on opinion polls and surveys suggest that the belief in Islam as a religion and the acceptance of democracy as a political system are not incompatible. Notable scholars such as Ronald Inglehart and Mark Tessler subscribe to this paradigm.<sup>10</sup>

Key to understanding the topic of this paper is to explain the comparative resilience of undemocratic monarchies. In her gripping analysis of absolutism and the resilience of monarchy rather than republicans in the Middle East, Lisa Anderson does not see eye to eye with the cultural explanations of the adaptability of monarchy in the Arab region. She argues that the cultural explanations are "empirically unsatisfactory on two grounds. First, monarchy as currently understood in the Middle East is not more indigenous

than liberal democracy. Second, even if it were a traditional regime type, its alleged historical authenticity fails to explain the apparent ability of Middle Eastern monarchs to accommodate and even foster non-traditional- not to say modern- social and political change.”<sup>11</sup> She refers to vagaries of historical accidents to account for the prevalence of monarchies in the Middle East. In brief, she argues that a combination of the British imperial policy and the “imperatives of historical process – notably the formation of new states and the building of new nations in the realms until recently ruled by the Ottoman Empire and its neighbours” explain the resilience of monarchy in this part of the world.<sup>12</sup> To her, the affinity with the project of nation building and state formation is a key to understanding the survival of monarchies.

In Jordan, the lack of democratization is largely due to the fact that the entrenched ruling elite have little incentive to give up their power and privileged status for the sake of democracy. Samuel Huntington’s thesis of “the King’s dilemma” comes to mind: While the monarch in Jordan realizes that the autocratic status quo is unsustainable, he fears that any genuine concession would only expand the opposition’s appetite to ask for more. The King also fears losing altogether the privilege to rule with unchecked

power. To be sure, some in Jordan call for a constitutional monarchy in which the King would reign, but not rule.<sup>13</sup>

While the Jordanian people’s frustration with the lack of political reform is evident, many wonder whether the country would descend into violence in the process, as has been the case in other transitioning Arab countries. In fact, the Arab uprisings have made an impact on theoretical discourse on the nature of revolutions. The events of the Arab Uprisings have demonstrated that there is no general theory of revolution or social changes that applies to all societies.

This paper argues that Jordan’s stability is contingent upon seven factors. First, although the regime has been hard hit by the Arab uprisings, the opposition groups have not created enough of a critical mass of protesters required to exert pressure on the regime to reform. Second, given the tribal nature of Jordanian society and the Palestinian-Jordanian cleavage, it is difficult to foster enough trust between groups in order to unify political activism to such a critical level. It was hardly possible for various groups to trust each other. They never had a record of working together to bring about change in the country. Moreover, the internal Palestinian-Jordanian divide has been exploited by the regime to prevent a unified opposition.<sup>14</sup> Many Trans-Jordanians were made to

believe that any change in the country would only favor the Jordanians of Palestinian decent. Third, the Jordanian regime enjoys the support of the West and the financial support of key Gulf countries. The internal opposition has not succeeded in cultivating such alliances with important external players. Fourth, despite grappling with economic woes, Jordan's economy is still functioning. Certainly, though, an economic collapse would lay the groundwork for instability. Fifth, though the trust gap between state institutions and the people is growing at an alarming rate, Jordanians on the whole do not envisage an alternative to the Hashemite monarchy. Nevertheless, the regime's legitimacy could be undermined if the discrepancy between reform rhetoric and actual policies continues unchecked. The tactic of merely talking about reform while politically and practically undermining its realization is unsustainable. Sixth, the regime's policy of "soft co-optation" and tolerance in dealing with protesters helped contribute to its stability. To the King's credit, he never sanctioned the use of force, which indeed helps keep the people's demands within a certain affordable limit. Finally, due to the official policies of the 1950s onward, the public space in Jordan remains both Islamic and tribal. The late King Hussein's decision to ban political parties in 1957 nearly eliminated all

secular political forces, while politically empowering two main constituents: the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the tribes. Neither the Muslim Brotherhood nor the tribes were democratic. Their alliance with the regime helped them work publicly at the expense of other political forces. Currently, the Muslim Brotherhood and its political wing, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), are the best-organized political force, but they are by no means the only one. The regime has been instrumental in using this fact as a bogeyman to elicit Western support of its autocratic policies. In the same vein, such fear-mongering tactics have proven successful even inside Jordan, where tribes are poised to stand against the Islamists in support of the regime.

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To be sure, the absence of violent turmoil in Jordan, while striking, should not come as a surprise to long-time observers. Such is the difference between "revolutionary situation" and "revolutionary outcome."<sup>15</sup> In 2011, it

seemed as though the rift and mistrust between the state and society reached a low point. But while Jordan was on the verge of entering a revolutionary situation, the revolutionary outcome seemed far from certain. Although the protest movements kept the momentum for more than two years, they never enjoyed the backing of a significant portion of the public. It may have helped that neither the government nor the security apparatus were in the mood or had the option to violently crack down on demonstrators.

Thus far, this model has secured Jordan's stability even with minimum reform. There is no guarantee, however, that the aforementioned conditions supporting this stability will continue. There is a good chance that any of the seven or so factors could collapse, allowing for Jordan to descend into disorder. Considering this logical possibility to a conclusion, Jordan may experience serious instability in the future.

## The Resilience of Limited Reform

In a recent article published in the online *World Policy Journal*, King Abdullah II wrote, "When I had the honor to ascend to the Throne of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, nearly 15 years ago, I took an oath

upon myself to contribute all I could to making Jordan more prosperous. And it has always been crystal clear to me that this means more democratic, too."<sup>16</sup>Explicit in this statement is the King's deep understanding that the only way to prop up his regime for decades to come is to push forward a genuine plan for political reform and democratization. That said, the King has yet to make good on this undertaking. This recurring statement begs the question: why, after almost a decade and a half, is Jordan still so far from being a democracy?

A glance at the not so distant past reveals why, even today, genuine democratic reform is still a far-fetched objective. Some key external actors believe that stability is better anchored by upholding the autocratic political status quo. For many important regional and international powers, the stability of Jordan serves the region a whole. In the words of the renowned historian Asher Susser, "owing to the Kingdom's geopolitical centrality, the regime and the state have been constantly supported by an array of external allies, for whom the Kingdom's destabilization would be a nightmare. Those regional and international powers have always been willing to assist in bailing out the regime in time of need."<sup>17</sup>

The continuous external financial and economic support has historically

provided the regime with resources, thus transforming Jordan into a semi-rentier state.<sup>18</sup> As a corollary, the Jordanian monarch has long maintained his position at the apex of power without having to defer to any domestic impetus for genuine reform. The lopsided pattern of this patron-client relationship between the regime and a considerable and politically important faction of the population has helped undercut any momentum for change. On the whole, Jordanians have little access to finances independent of the state. The 1970s oil flow boosted the regime as resources continued to flow unremitted. For decades, the main point of contention between the regime and the active opposition was over the Palestinian cause, which is rooted in foreign policy rather than democratic reform.

The 1980s brought change to the regional and domestic environments. During this time, it became obvious that there were limits beyond which the tight control and manipulations exercised by the regime ceased to be effective. With Iraq bogged down in eight years of war, the sharp drop in the region's oil revenues, and the sudden eruption of the first Palestinian Intifada, the 1980s proved to be so detrimental that the regime nearly reached a point of collapse in 1988. In response to this dire situation, the government resorted to the International Monetary Fund

(IMF) for help. The IMF-prescribed austerity program and the restructuring of the Jordanian economy were antithetical to the previously dominant rentier philosophy.

By the end of the 1980s, Jordan's economic woes began to have grave political consequences. Slowly but surely, the regime retreated from the unwritten social contract whereby the state offered jobs in exchange for loyalty and apolitical activism. The state was no longer in a position to underwrite the increasing burden of this rentier relationship. Prices skyrocketed and, as a consequence, riots broke out in East Banker strongholds in the South. In an attempt to pre-empt the situation, the King swiftly responded by firing his government in April 1989 and announcing parliamentary elections to be held in the Fall.

Interestingly, the elections catapulted the political opposition groups -- mainly Islamists -- into prominence. The Muslim Brotherhood won just over 25 percent of parliamentary seats, thus proving that it was a force to be reckoned with. To observers, Jordan was on the path of political liberalization and democratization. In April 1990, the King commissioned a representative committee to draft a National Charter as a blueprint for future pluralism in the country. Amid fanfare and enthusiasm, the charter was signed. Soon after, all remaining effects

of martial law were declared null and void.

This era has often been touted as one of tremendous progress in terms of Jordan's path to full-fledged democracy. For all of its deficiencies and imperfections, Jordan was momentarily on the right track. Additionally, the King stood tall particularly after his people were united behind his position vis-à-vis the war in Iraq. Having projected a pro-Iraq stance in the war, the King's traditional leftist and pan-Arabist opponents in Jordan could no longer outbid him. Nonetheless, his popular pro-Iraq position- though in line with the people- was not without cost. Jordan became isolated regionally and, to some extent, internationally.

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Hence, the enthusiasm over democratization proved to be short-lived. Determined to break the regional and international isolation, the King had to maneuver to get back into the good graces of his external adversaries.

The peace process that was launched in Madrid at the end of 1991 provided the King with an opportunity to make his country relevant again. However, Jordan's position in the peace talks once again rekindled differences between the regime and the Islamists and leftists alike. Anticipating a deal with the Israelis, the King realized that he was walking a tight rope. For all intents and purposes, it was as if the democratization process had to give way to another paramount objective. Therefore, the King took a second look at the democratic process altogether and resorted to a political gambit. He took advantage of his constitutional powers, dissolved the parliament, and called for new elections to be conducted along with a new provisional electoral law.

At this juncture, a number of factors were at work. First, the monarch was apprehensive of the unmanageable momentum of reform. He realized that there was a need to put a cap on the process. Second and most important, the King sought to restructure a parliament that would not defy him on the issue of peace with Israel. There also came the realization that there was no need for political liberalization as the King did not need the process to reinforce his legitimacy. Against this backdrop, the government adopted a provisional electoral law that included the *single non-transferable vote* (SNTV). This new electoral law was designed to

limit the influence of Islamists and to keep the liberalization process under control.

The peace process was thus utilized by the regime to change the internal political equation in a way that would allow for a concentration of power in the hands of the very few.<sup>19</sup> Ever since, the internal political process has been designed to prevent the emergence of a credible political force that could challenge the peace treaty, and to secure the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of a few.

Whether by design or default, the official policy of political exclusion coupled with on-going economic hardship led to growing discontent among the Jordanian people, and the parliament lost its relevance in the process. Since 1993, there has been a steady and persistent erosion of the parliament's legitimacy in the eyes of the Jordanian public. A series of polls conducted by Jordanian research centers reveals the institution's declining status.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, political power was kept concentrated in the hands of the unelected as the parliament continued to work on the margins of the political process. When the grossly rigged 2007 parliament was dissolved in 2009, some 67% of participants responded that they were not affected, while 20% stated that they were positively affected.<sup>21</sup> A clear majority of respondents said that members of the parliament voted for

their personal parochial interest rather than the wider national one. For this reason, citizens feel that they have long been politically disempowered. There has been a pervasive sense that the ruling political elite - whether elected to parliament or appointed - do not represent them or defend their interests.

Twelve years into the rule of King Abdullah II, hundreds, if not thousands, of people took to the street calling for change. The massive popular uprisings that broke out in Tunisia and immediately after in Egypt in January 2011 generated a wave of change that few politicians or pundits could have foreseen even a few days earlier. The state was so centralized, so strong, and so confident to the extent that Mubarak was grooming his son to succeed him. The well-known Egyptian sociologist and activist Saad Eddin Ibrahim said that the Arabs had come up with a new, heretofore unknown form of government. He says that this new form adds the republic (*jumburiyay*) with the monarchy (*malakiyya*) thus creating *jumlukiyya*, which can be translated into "monarpublicanism."<sup>22</sup> Saad Eddin Ibrahim jokingly used this phrase to refer to the strength of presidents in the Arab world such that they were becoming like monarchies. A British renowned historian Roger Owen referred to them as "President for life."<sup>23</sup>

The sudden outbreak of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and then in Egypt inspired Jordanian youth in January 2011 to take to the street demanding genuine political reform and the elimination of pervasive corruption. The regime in Jordan was caught off guard, and only weeks into the back-to-back demonstrations, the King caved in to the people and dissolved the government only 40 days after being sworn in. The more pessimistic analysts were quick to argue that the regime might not hold.

Despite some pockets of instability, Jordan's monarch has on the whole skillfully weathered the regional storm of the Arab Spring. For some, the country's stability is nothing short of a puzzle or even a paradox. The prestigious British journal *the Economist* wrote:

“At the outbreak of the Arab spring few thrones looked as precarious as that of Jordan's King Abdullah II. Squeezed between bigger, beefier and more turbulent neighbours, his resource-poor kingdom faced mounting friction at home. Trouble brewed between the numerical minority of native “East Bankers” and the relatively disenfranchised majority of Jordanians who are of Palestinian descent. Government critics, both Islamist and secular, jockeyed to exploit street-level discontent. The king's traditional immunity from criticism had worn dangerously thin, his talk of reform belied by such enduring woes as a yawning wealth gap, corruption, an intrusive security apparatus and heavily stage-managed politics.”<sup>24</sup>

In the next section, the paper delves into the dynamics of in/stability in Jordan amid the sudden outbreak of the Arab Spring.

## The Battle Over Reform: The Road not Taken

Like other Arab states, Jordan has never been ruled by a democratically elected government. Interestingly, during the Arab uprisings, Jordan was neither embroiled in revolutionary turmoil, nor were domestic actors locked in an ideological struggle. Yet, the domestic discontent took on a new twist when a majority of Jordanians reached the conclusion that the ruling elite had been mismanaging the country for a long time. In an opinion poll conducted by the International Republican Institute, more Jordanians (45%) said that the country was heading in the wrong direction as opposed to those who said otherwise (43%).<sup>25</sup> Such a statistic supports the contention that Jordan may be on the brink of instability.

Over the years, political reform in Jordan has been slow in coming and the reform package presented thus far has been a mere drop in the bucket. To be sure, the package of reforms presented in 2012 was intended to please Western countries while stifling any internal momentum for more

substantial reform. And yet Jordan did not experience chaos or instability. This begs the question of how Jordan has managed to keep its head above water when many expected mayhem. At the heart of Jordan's resilient stability is the failure of the protest groups to convince a critical mass of people to take to the street. This section identifies and examines the elements that have contributed to the country's stability over the course of the Arab Spring and to the weakness of the protest movement.

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For starters, the Palestinian-Jordanian divide and the society's tribal nature have stymied the *Hirak* and stripped it of the ability to articulate an agreed upon blueprint for change. Due to these serious societal divisions, it was simply not possible to generate enough trust necessary to mobilize people of differing affiliations behind a unified *Hirak*.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, the fear of catastrophic consequences of clashes between those of Palestinian and Jordanian descent has long helped

to keep internal differences at bay.<sup>27</sup> Despite the common complaint articulated by some in Jordan that the gerrymandered electoral law benefits the East Bankers at the expense of Jordanians of Palestinian descent, the latter did not join the protest movement. Perhaps this is due to the identity-based slogans raised at some of the East Banker protests. Palestinians were discouraged from taking to the street as some felt that they were targeted by these slogans.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, this divide was fully exploited by the regime to exacerbate tensions and undermine the push for change.

By and large, East Bankers have no agreed upon concept of reform. A prominent Jordanian sociologist and a former cabinet member, Sabri Rbeihat, argues that reform means different things to different groups in Jordan.<sup>29</sup> As Rbeihat accurately articulates, "differences persist, as do mutual suspicions. Pro-status quo forces in particular suspect that any genuine change would privilege the Palestinian-Islamist elements in the society."<sup>30</sup> After all, what set the region ablaze during the Arab Spring were issues such as sheer hopelessness, youth unemployment, and the alarming rates of poverty. Hence, the urge for democracy was not the primary concern that triggered the Arab Spring.

Jordan's East Bankers have grappled with the issue of democratic reform.

While a majority seeks to change the distribution of power and wealth, few have a serious interest in proper reform that would equally empower both the Palestinians and the Islamists. This reality served as a mitigating factor and helped weaken the *Hirak's* momentum. Despite the weekly demonstrations and sit-ins across the country, the vast majority of people were not mobilized to take to the street, and the opposition ultimately failed to present a serious challenge to the regime.

Key to the failure of the *Hirak* is the fact that it was fraught with dissonance and fragmentation. The Muslim Brotherhood was the only organized and influential group in Jordan that pressed for radical changes and could potentially contend with the regime politically. While the street was brewing in Jordan and the regime felt compelled to act, the Muslim Brotherhood opted for a procrastination tactic, thus further weakening the *Hirak*. The dominant argument among observers and politicians is that the Brotherhood was never interested in actual reform; rather, it was waiting for what it saw as a looming victory for the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated Syrian opposition. Therefore, key figures within the Brotherhood bet on time to cut an optimal deal with the Jordanian regime.<sup>31</sup>

Senior figures within the Brotherhood have dismissed this argument. Zaki

Bany Rsheid, the second in command of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, argues that a change in Syria would have facilitated their task, but it would not have changed their demand of fixing rather than toppling the regime.<sup>32</sup> The problem, Bany Rsheid insists, is that the regime lacked the political will to effect changes. Another important figure in the Brotherhood's dovish camp, Nabil al-Khofahi, argues the situation in Syria would not have changed their basic demands and that they "felt that the state was trying to use the MB to undermine the protest movement."<sup>33</sup>

In March 2011, Jordan's Prime Minister established a 52 person National Dialogue Committee (NDC), which was assigned with drafting an electoral law and apolitical parties law. The MB dismissed this initiative as "an ineffective stalling tactic."<sup>34</sup> But, according to the head of the NDC, former Prime Minister and current speaker of parliament Taher al-Masri, Jordan's Islamists sought two things: a royal committee appointed by the King rather than the Prime Minister, and an amended constitution.<sup>35</sup> Masri took the issue to the King, who replied, "don't touch the constitution."<sup>36</sup>

In response, the reform-averse ruling regime advanced two arguments via state-run media outlets in order to discredit the MB: First, they argued that the MB is not a national Jordanian

movement to promote a national agenda, but rather an organization with external links to the MB's Guidance Office in Egypt (*Maktab al-Irshad*) and Hamas in order to advance transnational agendas. Second, state media characterized the MB as a power-seeking organization with no plans for reform.<sup>37</sup> These accusations were further deepened after the MB's fiasco in Egypt. In fact, the military coup and "the unfolding crisis in Egypt...further revealed the depth of the Jordanian monarch's antipathy toward the Muslim Brotherhood."<sup>38</sup>

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The dissonance of the groups within the larger HIRAK and the disparity between their shifting demands made it almost impossible for them to unify or at least reach an agreement over the minimum demands that could unify them.

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Contrary to the King's statements describing his reign as "inclusive" and all of the country's political actors as "trustworthy," the monarch is known to dislike the MB, and harbors deep suspicion of the group's underlying motives. The King's true feelings surfaced when he dubbed them as "wolves in sheep clothing."<sup>39</sup>

Meanwhile, the anti-reform elites have attempted to provoke dormant internal ethnic divisions within the MB between the East Bankers and the Jordanians of Palestinian descent by portraying the movement as one with Palestinian leanings. Such rhetoric has resonated well with some of the East Bankers who are wary of the increasing political role of Jordanians of Palestinian descent.

Interestingly enough, there is a perennial internal rivalry between the MB and its political wing, the Islamic Action Front (IAF). This division came to the fore when the groups' dovish wing, led by Irhail Gharaibeh and Nabil al-Kofahi, joined a broader national initiative called Zamzam.<sup>40</sup> The active roles of moderate MB-affiliated figures in the new initiative generated significant backlash within the organization, which was not officially part of *Hirak*. Leader Zaki Bany Rshaid reacted by accusing Zamzam of being backed by the security apparatus, arguing that the initiative was "suspicious and designed to cause a rift within the Brotherhood's ranks in collaboration with official parties."<sup>41</sup> In August 2013, the group's differences reached the press in the wake of the Egyptian military coup, when Irhail Gharaibeh implicitly accused his hawkish rival of creating unnecessary tension with the regime. Such infighting was not lost on the part

of observers and the regime exploited these differences in full.<sup>42</sup>

Another significant faction within the *Hirak* is the disgruntled youth protest groups that are scattered across the country. While this amorphous group generated significant momentum and broke down many of the country's taboos,<sup>43</sup> they nonetheless remained localized, fragmented, and without genuine democratic discourse.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, these groups were primarily composed of East Bankers, the historic bedrock of regime loyalists; therefore, the regime was able to manage them by using a strategy of co-optation and detention until they eventually ran out of steam. The third category is the emergence of groups with tribal demands. These groups only sought to realize parochial interests and some political gains rather than genuine democracy. Some specifically called for the reversal of privatization, which for many Jordanians is a euphemism for looting the country.

The dissonance of the groups within the larger *Hirak* and the disparity between their shifting demands made it almost impossible for them to unify or at least reach an agreement over the minimum demands that could unify them. While they agreed on the need to quell corruption, they remained highly divided on political issues.<sup>45</sup> To their dismay, all attempts to join forces were either short-lived or met with mutual

suspicion. The regime succeeded in cultivating the perception that the MB was using the other groups in order to reach a deal with the state. These groups ultimately failed to join forces to create enough political pressure, which in part explains why the *Hirak* failed to sustain momentum and instead grew progressively weaker.

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The geostrategic centrality of Jordan generated policies of support for the monarchy out of fear that chaos could lead to broader regional instability in the United States, European countries, and Saudi Arabia.

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The internal opposition to the regime was then further debilitated by the essential role of external forces in Jordanian politics. The geostrategic centrality of Jordan generated policies of support for the monarchy out of fear that chaos could lead to broader regional instability in the United States, European countries, and Saudi Arabia. Particularly in Saudi Arabia, the threat perception was heightened as MB movements swept elections in both Tunisia and Egypt. Indeed, Saudi Arabia felt threatened by the Arab uprisings and therefore waged a counter-revolution to prop up like-minded monarchies. Its financial

support to Jordan was thus intended to enhance the power of the King so that he would not have to give in to the MB.

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**A possible economic collapse would certainly deprive the regime of its East Banker support and would lay the groundwork for instability.**

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With the onset of the Arab Spring, Riyadh framed a new strategic outlook portraying the protests movements as negative trends that undermine stability, weaken the region's economy, and empower radicals.<sup>46</sup> Equally important, many Jordanian politicians believe that the dynamic of change in Jordan is by and large shaped by external influences.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, absent external support or pressure, radical changes in Jordan would hardly be possible. The United States and Saudi Arabia are considered the two external players to most heavily impact the scope of reform in Jordan. For the United States, the tumultuous regional developments following the ascendance of Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia and the disheartening conflict in Syria have further discouraged a policy of pressuring the monarch on reforms. Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, the same factors have compelled the royal family to embolden the monarch to forgo reform altogether.

At the start of the Arab Spring, U.S. calculations were drastically different from Saudi objectives. President Obama and his administration adopted the logic that undemocratic regimes are unsustainable in the long term; therefore, a country such as Jordan should embark on the path to reform before it is too late. In the case that these regimes could effectively make the transition to democracy, Washington would benefit; however, the U.S. would find itself in a bad position if the implementation of reform were to destabilize its allies. Jordanian anti-reform forces were quick to play on the Americans' fear of possible instability in Jordan. In the King's interview with Jeffery Goldberg, the King dubbed the U.S. naïve in believing that the region's Islamists could serve as an engine for change.<sup>48</sup> The King used the MB as a bogeyman to scare the West. He presented the situation in Jordan as a zero-sum struggle between the regime and Islamists. The Saudis and the Americans clearly differed in strategy on how the Jordanian monarch could survive, and to some extent, the kingdom became a battleground for these two diverse perspectives. Washington pushed for gradual, top-down political reform, while Riyadh favored limited reform in exchange for economic development and stability. Riyadh provided Amman with the necessary financial aid to help the

government stabilize the country and address the public's economic needs. Accordingly, such external factors have been detrimental to Jordan's internal opposition forces calling for reform.

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The task of fear-mongering and sowing suspicions between groups was made possible when various political forces in the opposition seemed to be working for different goals during much of Jordan's political uprisings.

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Lastly, grievances aside, the overwhelming majority of East Bankers still want to see the continued rule of the monarchy under the Hashemites. Few, if any, ever thought of an alternative to the Hashemite monarchy. Nonetheless, their support for the monarchy is not a foregone conclusion. Though Jordan's economy is still functioning, successive governments have been grappling with destabilizing, though perhaps necessary, structural reforms. A possible economic collapse would certainly deprive the regime of its East Banker support and would lay the groundwork for instability. As Robert Satloff and David Schenker from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy argue, this could lead to a defection of the East Bankers, a

scenario that could pose a fatal threat to the regime. In their view, the most threatening factor to the country's stability is by far financial.<sup>49</sup> All of my interviewees for the sake of this paper see eye to eye with the statement that a likely deterioration of the national economy would motivate the Jordanian people to take to the street. The result of such a scenario is unpredictable, but certainly the combination of discontent and hopelessness is a recipe for future mayhem in the country.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion: Will Stability Endure?

A quick glance at the internal situation in Jordan during the Arab Spring shows that the society was at one point on the verge of a civil war.<sup>51</sup> If carried out to the extreme, unfolding events could have triggered a bloody confrontation between the security apparatus and the *Hirak*. But all in all, stability persists.

Indeed, Jordan survived the otherwise strategic nightmare caused by the eruption of the Arab Spring. As of writing this paper, the protest groups have lost momentum and the regime has effectively steered the country away from instability. Indeed, the King's statecraft and his restrained, balanced foreign policy have helped insulate Jordan from the fallout from

its conflict-ridden neighbors. Despite regional turmoil, Jordan has remained immune to revolution.

Arguments have been made that the Hashemite regime could survive with only limited reforms for the foreseeable future, as Jordanians have no alternative whatsoever to this regime. This line of thinking revolves around several factors: the lack of alternative; the fissure of the pro-reform groups and their lack of both a unified endgame and a vision; the demographic makeup of Jordan and societal divisions, ensuring the Hashemite as a safety valve; and the historical legitimacy of the regime.

Furthermore, significant external forces (namely the U.S. and Saudi Arabia) were complicit in the country's sustained autocratic nature. Washington propped up the regime by offering aid and political support to the King, who used the Islamists as a scarecrow to secure continued Western support for his regime. The Jordanian regime also exploited regional instability-- from Saudi paranoia of spreading opposition movements, to the American fear of short-term instability -- in order to get away with a reform package that only reinforced its autocratic grip. With the *Hirak* remaining fragmented and

lacking in a unified strategy or vision, it will be unable to amass enough force to pressure the regime to change course.

More often than not, the issues of political reform and stability in as divided a society as Jordan is fraught with paradoxes, risks, and opportunities. Jordan's ruling elite has thus played on fears and employed deception in order to maintain the never-ending presumption of being reformers when they are not. The task of fear-mongering and sowing suspicions between groups was made possible when various political forces in the opposition seemed to be working for different goals during much of Jordan's political uprisings.

And yet, barring a genuine effort to restore the centrality of the regime, the monarch runs the risk of having difficulty surviving future instability and turmoil. Many Jordanians ceased to believe that the state respects the rule of law. In fact, the trust gap in state institutions is still widening, making it difficult for the regime to circumvent its negative consequences. In an article entitled "A Dying Society," Fahd Khitan, a prominent Jordanian columnist, argues that people no longer have respect for the law.<sup>52</sup> He also argues that the disparity between the

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With a teetering economy, pervasive corruption, a lack of accountability, and a lack of checks and balances, conditions for instability in Jordan will be ripe.

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positions of the ruling elite and the broader public remain wide.

With a teetering economy, pervasive corruption, a lack of accountability, and a lack of checks and balances, conditions for instability in Jordan will be ripe. Certainly, if the economy ceases to function and the state continues with its unbearable levels of taxation, more people will be forced to change their views of the current status quo. The regime's inability to create jobs to ease the effects of demographic changes and pervasive youth unemployment could lead to a devastating combination

of frustration and hopelessness. This in turn could set in motion an unpredictable level of instability.

The regime has not yet seized the opportunity to bring about proper democratic reform, let alone restore the trust of people. As Robert Satloff and David Schenker argue, there is an inherent instability in Jordan that could conceivably become serious though it may seem far-fetched at present.<sup>53</sup> This prognosis does not rule out possible internal developments that could affect stability in dramatic ways in years to come.

## Endnotes

- 1 The Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan conducted a series of polls over the last decade and a half in which a clear majority of Jordanians expressed their fear to publicly criticize the government. For instance, in January 2012, the Center for Strategic Studies published a study on the “The State of Democracy in Jordan.” In this report, 59% of Jordanians fear criticizing government policies in the public spheres. For more details see, <http://www.jcss.org/ShowNews.aspx?NewsId=317> (last visited 24 September 2015).
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- 3 Expression coined in David Ignatius, Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski, *America and the World: Conversations on the Future of American Foreign Policy*, New York, Basic Books, 2009.
- 4 The surge of the third wave of democracy is a term coined by Samuel Huntington. In his book, Huntington argues that the third wave of democracy started in Portugal in 1974 until the end of the Cold War and the democratization of Eastern Europe. For more details see, Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.
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- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Juan Cole, "Saad's Revolution", at [http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/saads\\_revolution\\_20110131](http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/saads_revolution_20110131) (last visited 10 May 2015).
- 23 Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*, The United States of America, Harvard University Press, 2012.
- 24 "Jordan: Surprisingly Stale for the Moment", *The Economist*, 9 November 2013.
- 25 The International Republican Institute, "Jordanians Split over the Direction of the Country, Economy and Corruption Cited as Top Concerns", <http://www.iri.org/news-events-press-center/news/iri-poll-jordanians-split-over-direction-country-economy-and-corruptio> (last visited 24 September 2014).
- 26 Interview with Musa Maiteh, Amman, 11 June 2013.
- 27 Interview with Orieb Rantawi, Amman, 12 July 2013.
- 28 Interview with Lamis Andoni, Amman, 23 June 2013.
- 29 Interview with Sabri Rbeihat, Amman, 25 June 2013.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Interview with Mamdouh al-Abbadi, former member to the parliament and former cabinet member, Amman, Jordan, 10 June 2013. This argument was advanced by many of my interviewees, including Taher al-Masri and Musa Ma'aitah, the former minister for political development, whom I interviewed in Amman on 11 June 2013.
- 32 Interview with Zaki Bany Rshaid, Amman, 21 June 2013.
- 33 Interview with Nabil al-Kofahi, Amman, 30 July 2013.
- 34 Ibid.
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