

Jordan Amid Diverse Challenges and Comprehensive Counter Strategies

Dr. Amer Al Sabaileh¹

Non-Resident Fellow for Middle East and North Africa
Stimson Center

Jordan has been countering various challenges in recent years. Since the war on Iraq in 2003, Jordan's security challenges have emerged due to an increase in terrorism and instability in Iraq. Then, in 2011, the Arab Spring took Jordan to a new phase of instability with the spread of internal demonstrations calling for domestic changes. In addition, the Syrian crisis and the waves of refugees have generated new challenges for Jordan on socioeconomic, security and military levels. A decade later and Jordan is still witnessing increasingly diverse and complex challenges, especially in 2021, with these challenges evolving within Jordan itself.

Regional Challenges

The strategic location of Jordan represents one of the country's most important leverages. In recent years, Jordan has continued to suffer from a non-active status with its neighbours: Syria, Iraq, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Recently, Jordan has made attempts towards re-engagement with these countries.

Syria

After a decade of turmoil in Syria, there was no clear international or regional attempt to deal with the on-

going crisis there. Jordan started to adopt a new approach leading to a noticeable acceleration in attempts on both sides to restore relations.

The promising gas pipeline project was the platform for re-engagement, given it warranted security and political engagement. This led to high level visits from Syrian officials to Jordan, which included the Syrian Minister of Defence, the Minister of Energy and the Minister of Transportation. The new channels of communication between the two countries are a prerequisite for the progress of the project. Greater political engagement is needed to secure stability in Syria.

Israel

Although Jordan and Israel signed a peace treaty in 1994, relations at the people's level did not prosper. And in recent years, Jordanian-Israeli relations on the political and diplomatic levels have deteriorated. However, with the departure of Netanyahu, Jordan adopted a new approach of engagement with Israel, especially with the Israeli Minister of Defence Gantz who often appeared in public meetings in Jordan. Today, avoiding any form of havoc, destabilization and escalation of violence in the West Bank is one of Jordan's main challenges. Jordan's top priority is to prevent the deterioration of the situation in the West Bank and its ramifications for Jordan. This well explains Jordan's focus on its relationship with the Israeli Minister of Defence Benny Gantz. Security-related officials are best positioned to perceive the critical, if not dangerous, repercussions of increasing tensions in the West Bank.

¹ Amer Al Sabaileh is a Jordanian university professor and geopolitical expert. He is a leading columnist in national, regional, and international media, offers consultancies to think tanks and speaks at international conferences on Middle East politics and developments. Al Sabaileh received his PhD from the University of Pisa, Italy in 2006 in intercultural conflict management, and Master's degree from the University of Rome III in Education for Peace, Conflict Management, International Cooperation, Human Rights and Politics of the European Union. Al Sabaileh is a recognized expert on terrorism, de-radicalization and security studies.

The challenges for Jordan are serious, given the difficulties involved in containing the security situation. Hence, there needs to be an open channel of dialogue with all concerned both in Israel and Palestine. Limiting the dialogue to certain figures will limit Jordan's role and capacity to influence this tense situation.

Iraq and "The New Levant"

Since the arrival of Mustafa Kadimi as Iraq's Prime Minister, Jordan's political approach towards Iraq has become more proactive. This development triggered the launching of the project that connects Egypt to Iraq through Jordan, thus giving birth to a new triangle alliance known as "The New Levant." The ambitious Jordan-Egypt-Iraq trio pact is an appealing project with many advantages for the three partners involved. Security cooperation is the cornerstone of such an alliance, considering the high number of challenges in this area, which if unresolved could undermine the efficacy of such a collaboration. While building solid political relations with Egypt does not seem to be difficult for Jordan, the real challenge is to successfully develop fruitful relations with today's Iraq. Recognizing and acknowledging the positive outcomes of this cooperation by both parties, Iraq and Jordan, is fundamental for a mutual willingness to work together.

For Jordan, it is vital to adopt a strategic approach towards engaging with its neighbours based on mutual interests. This is specifically crucial for Jordan's relationship with Iraq and Egypt, and at a later stage with Syria. Therefore, problems pertinent to Jordanian-Iraqi relations need to be tackled courageously. Jordan is a country where Saddam Hussein's regime still enjoys wide popularity. In addition, there is wide anti-Shiite sentiment among the people of Jordan. All these factors hinder Jordanian-Iraqi bilateral relations moving ahead towards achieving the strategic objectives of "The New Levant."

Saudi Arabia

Since the arrival of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, popularly known as MBS, Jordanian-Saudi relations have had little in the way of significant aspects. In recent years, Jordanian-Saudi relations have been somewhat restrained. This might be due to the Saudi list of priorities which emphasize

domestic issues, primarily the ambitious plan of a futuristic city in Tabuk province known as "NEOM."

Jordan's top priority is to prevent the deterioration of the situation in the West Bank and its ramifications for Jordan

A key development in 2021 deteriorated relations between the two countries. Saudi Arabia was implicitly accused of being involved in the so-called "Schism plot" case in Jordan, in which Bassem Awadallah, former Chief of the Hashemite Royal Court and advisor to MBS, was accused of preparing a coup in Jordan in coordination with Prince Hamzah, half brother of King Abdullah II. The Saudi government disclaimed any involvement and responded with a letter of support for King Abdullah II once the plot was publicized.

Jordan's Domestic Challenges

Family Rift: "Prince Hamzah Case"

Last year, Jordan was in the spotlight of international media due to an extraordinary incident. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan witnessed intra royal family conflict triggered by an explicit accusation made against Prince Hamzah, half-brother of the King and former Crown Prince of Jordan during 1999-2004, that he was part of a plot targeting King Abdullah II. In April 2021, Prince Hamzah sent a video to the BBC in which he openly and fiercely criticized the Jordanian system, accusing it of inefficiency, bad governance, lack of freedom of expression, repression and, above all, corruption.

This is the first time in Jordan's history that the Jordanian people have openly witnessed such a conflict within the Hashemite family. While the problem was perceived as being resolved within the family. In April 2022, Prince Hamzah echoed his voice anew through his personal Twitter account, where he posted a letter stating that he was abandoning his title as a prince and re-voicing criticism of the system and its policies.

This incident further complicated the already complex situation within the Royal Family specifically concerning King Abdullah II and his direct family, through the so-called Pandora leaks, leading the system towards adopting reforms.

Attempts at Political Reforms

In June 2021, King Abdullah sent a letter to former Prime Minister Samir Rifai, entrusting him with chairing a Royal Committee to modernize the political system.

The committee was entrusted with introducing new election and political party laws, considering any necessary constitutional amendments relevant to the two laws and the mechanisms of parliamentary work, in addition to providing recommendations on developing the legislations regulating local administration, expanding participation in decision-making, and creating a political and legislative environment conducive to the active engagement of youth and women in public life.

Governments and the political system in Jordan at large is suffering from a lack of trust in their policies and performance amid the negative atmosphere that dominates the relations between the citizens and the political establishment

However these attempts at political reform still lack credibility among the people, a sentiment very apparent in relations today between the citizens and the political establishments worldwide. It is a big and demanding challenge for a system to gain positive popular responses to their policies, and restore hope and confidence in the system.

Governments and the political system in Jordan at large is suffering from a lack of trust in their policies and performance amid the negative atmosphere that dominates the relations between the citizens and the political establishment. So, it is a very demanding and tough assignment to rebuild trust-based relations and achieve concrete steps towards reform.

It is, therefore, paramount to focus on the real goal of these initiatives, which is political and social inclusion; and which cannot be achieved without guaranteeing human rights, liberties and fostering hope for a decent life for all.

For the process of reforms to succeed, concrete steps must be adopted which require political will and determination, in addition to a continuous follow-up of the implementation process amid serious accountability and justice in tackling public corruption.

Constitutional Amendment/National Security Council

Apart from the above-mentioned committee, other amendments were approved by the Parliament that gave the King “*Carte Blanche*” to make significant appointments through royal decrees without consulting the Council of Ministers, thus making de facto practices constitutional. Even prior to these amendments, the King could appoint and dismiss the Chief of Justice, the head of the Sharia Judicial Council known as the Grand Mufti, the Chief of the Royal Court, the Minister of the Court, and the King’s advisors.

Another amendment that provoked widespread criticism due to the powers it grants is the formation of the National Security Council, to be headed by the King, which deals with all internal and external affairs of the Kingdom.

Security Challenges

Terrorism

With regard to security challenges, Jordan is facing two major risks. The continuous presence of the terrorist groups in Syria and in Iraq, which has a major impact on the level of radicalism and terrorism inside Jordan, and the return of terrorist operations by Daesh (ISIS) in Syria and in Iraq starting in January 2021, when an attack was launched on a prison housing mercenaries in Syria and on a military base in Iraq.

Drug Smuggling

Jordan’s most challenging issue today remains the war on drug smuggling across its borders. Continuous clashes on its borders have resulted in Jordani-

an victims and casualties. In January 2022, a Jordanian army officer was killed during a clash with drug smugglers trying to enter Jordanian territory.

Jordan's efforts to counter drug smuggling is one of a series of major regional challenges with a direct impact on Jordan's domestic scene. Advanced tactics, networks and operations, therefore, are required to upgrade Jordan's professionalism in this fight. For drug smugglers, Jordan could easily develop from being a mere transit point towards becoming a solid market, resulting in much higher risks and further complicating the problem.

Recommendations

Each country's current preoccupation with its domestic challenges might push them in the coming period to reconsider their priorities, focus more internally and consider projects of immediate, short-term economic impact. However, working towards a project with long-term advantages is likely to gain momentum. So, it is important to start building solid bases for such a future project, while remaining aware of the surrounding major, yet surmountable, challenges.

Concrete examples of transnational cooperation, as underlined during public briefings, include Jordan's role in developing regional railways, energy projects and ports. Jordan can also reactivate the Port of Aqaba to support Saudi Arabia's plans to build NEOM, a cross-border city in the Tabuk province that would combine smart city technologies and tourism. Furthermore, Jordan could also provide aid to its neighbours to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic. This would further secure continued EU interest in and financial support for Jordan, as underlined by a Jordanian speaker.

This said, there can be no positive atmosphere without guaranteeing human rights and liberties, as well as generating hope for a decent life for people. It is essential to create a positive perception among the people and dispel the feelings of marginalization and exclusion that many are suffering from today.

For any reform process to be successful, it requires political will and determination, continuous follow-up of implementation that should include the public punishment of public corruption and the impeachment of public officials who obstruct the process of reform and change. One of the most important issues is to respect and guarantee civil liberties, freedom of speech and expression, as well as ensure the freedom of political practices by criminalizing efforts to distort the law.

Integrating this new concept of national strategy should be part of the State's strategic vision. Its role is to accurately diagnose the underlying issues and deliver effective and efficient solutions. It does not necessarily require a new organ in the state body or a new institution. It can be achieved through a small unit that coordinates the work among the state institutions and enlightens others to think differently.

A reform process requires political will and determination, and continuous follow-up of implementation, which should include the public punishment of public corruption and the impeachment of public officials who obstruct the process of reform and change

Cross border criminality is currently one of the greatest challenges for the security apparatus, especially as these criminal groups increasingly interact with and facilitate terrorist groups. But it is also important to address the underlying factors leading to criminality through maintaining social stability. These groups are nurtured within society and recruit the marginalized. Therefore, it is important to remember that the more people are marginalized through economic hardship, the more they will resort to crime and terrorism.