

DEMOCRATIC REFORM IN JORDAN

Breaking the Impasse



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Cover photo: Jordan's King Abdullah II listens to parliament's response to the speech from the throne at the Royal Hashemite Court, November 28, 2021. Credit: Royal Hashemite Court/Flicker

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Jordan is currently wrestling with a bold timeline of democratic reforms introduced by a royal commission in October 2021 and ratified by parliament in January. These changes could potentially transform the authoritarian kingdom into a constitutional monarchy over the next decade, and they represent the country's most momentous reform program since martial law ended in 1989.

There are two primary obstacles. One is that the government has mitigated some of the democratic reforms by introducing its own constitutional amendments to keep significant power vested within the monarchy. Another is that widespread public apathy borne from the failure of past democratic initiatives by the palace will be difficult to overcome. Issues of inclusive representation and identity politics—not among the current reforms—need to be addressed in order to secure popular confidence in the process.

Youth activism driven by repressive abuses, economic difficulties, and political demands is a potent factor in propelling democratic changes forward and overcoming resistance from royal powerholders. Many young Jordanians, however, fear that a backlash from security agencies will sabotage the reform process and that the government will ignore the promised timeline of democratization.

The United States has an opportunity to encourage the potential democratization of one of its closest Arab allies. Yet traditional U.S. geopolitical concerns about Jordanian stability and regional crises and the close U.S. relationship with Jordan's monarchy and intelligence agencies threaten to preclude any robust encouragement for change. The United States needs to adopt a more proactive stance by pressuring Jordan to honor its democratic commitments and realize its promise of a constitutional monarchy.



Jordan's King Abdullah II delivers a speech during the inauguration of the 19th Parliament's first ordinary session on November 15, 2021. Photo: Royal Hashemite Court/Flickr

I. INTRODUCTION

Jordan has weathered an unusually trying decade. The 2011 Arab Uprisings spawned thousands of protests for economic justice and democratic accountability in the kingdom. In the years that followed the uprisings, popular dissent churned even as the kingdom struggled to absorb more than seven hundred thousand Syrian refugees and fend off Islamic State militants. The past two years have proved especially unsettling. The coronavirus pandemic immobilized an already limping economy, with official unemployment reaching 25 percent last summer, its highest rate since the early 1990s.¹ Political troubles also consumed the first nine months of 2021. In April, palace intrigue ensnared King Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein's half-brother Prince Hamzah and other political figures in a convoluted plot of suspected coup-mongering, marking a rare episode of intrafamilial conflicts within the Hashemite dynasty spilling into the open.² In May, widespread anger over Israel's displacement of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, dispersal of protests around Al-Aqsa Mosque, and massive bombardment of Gaza instigated a new cycle of popular protest. In October, the Pandora Papers leak ignited another round of public chatter about the extent of corruption among ruling political elites, despite the best efforts of authorities to suppress its reporting.³

Into this tumultuous milieu came a political lightning bolt in October, when the 92-member Royal Committee to Modernize the Political System unveiled an ambitious framework of political reforms. The committee, formed by the king last June, proposed a 10-year roadmap of gradual democratization. After several months of deliberation, on October 4, the committee unveiled potential constitutional

amendments regarding fairer elections, party mobilization, women's rights, youth participation, and corruption. The government, in turn, deliberated over the findings. It allowed the most important changes, such as the call for future prime ministers to be selected by parliament, to move forward, while controversially proposing its own amendments that strengthened certain monarchical powers, such as the king's ironclad control over foreign policy and security matters. In January, both the elected lower house of parliament and the royally appointed upper house ratified the constitutional amendments. The final step will be promulgation by the king.

“When economic or political crises inflame public unrest, authorities seek to regain mass confidence by apologizing for the government's errors and by appointing committees to formulate seemingly dramatic reforms that ultimately turn out to be cosmetic.”

Yet while the kingdom's official media heralded this process as game-changing news, many Jordanians shrugged their shoulders. They have seen this cycle of events before: When economic or political crises inflame public unrest, authorities seek to regain mass confidence by

1. “Unemployment Rate Hits 25 Percent – DoS,” *Jordan Times*, June 21, 2021, <http://jordantimes.com/news/local/unemployment-rate-hits-25-%E2%80%94-dos>

2. Arwa Shobaki, “Jordan: What Happened, Why, and What's Next?” Project on Middle East Democracy, April 9, 2021, <https://pomed.org/jordan-what-happened-why-and-whats-next/>

3. Daoud Kuttab, “How Jordan Censors Journalists,” *Foreign Policy*, October 29, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/29/jordan-abdullah-pandora-papers-journalism-censorship-press-freedom/>



Crowds of protesters in the Jordanian capital, Amman, demonstrate in solidarity with Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah, Jerusalem, May 9, 2021. Photo: Raya Sharbain/Wikimedia Commons

apologizing for the government's errors and by appointing committees to formulate seemingly dramatic reforms that ultimately turn out to be cosmetic.

Both sides have a point. Jordanian authorities understand that old survival strategies, from reshuffling governments to pontificating about future reforms, are no longer satisfying the legions of citizens that animate an ever-growing opposition, which often manifests in strident dissent through social media and grassroots protests. Conversely, youth movements and other opposition forces are right to be cynical. Every political reform campaign in the past has flopped badly, never delivering what was originally promised. Moreover, with the current episode of democratic reforms, the government has not only flanked the reform commission's findings with its own pro-monarchical amendments, but it also has yet to discuss issues of inclusive representation and basic freedoms. These are central

to democratic change but have long eluded serious treatment by the government. Jordanians of Palestinian origin—the majority of the population—must be able to feel that they wield a political voice consonant with their demographic weight, while hopeful citizens must be convinced that they can exercise a full range of political opinions without fearing arbitrary arrest or other repression.

Jordan now stands at an impasse. The core reforms endorsed by the royal committee may indeed catalyze an astonishing trajectory of democratization, or resistance from the government may entrench the existing autocratic system. How Jordan's prospects for democracy proceed will depend upon three forces: political will from the state to honor its timeline for democratization, popular pressures from below to ensure that powerholders do not diverge from their promises, and renewed encouragement from the United States, Jordan's biggest ally and aid donor.

II. AN UNEXPECTED COMMITTEE

Jordan's authoritarian structure revolves around its ruling monarchy. The parliament has little authority, governments are appointed by the king rather than formed from legislative parties, and many kinds of dissent suffer repressive curbs. To be sure, violence is rare and protests are peaceful. Still, Jordan is no democracy given the vast powers held by unelected powerholders, including the monarchy and security sector, and the limited scope of civil liberties.

King Abdullah is fond of calling for more democratization in Jordan. In June 2011, as protests simmered across the country in solidarity with the Arab Uprisings, he delivered a nationally televised speech promising a constitutional monarchy. Yet official efforts toward reform during his tenure have been unimpressive. In 2005, the king installed a 27-member National Agenda committee to propose significant political changes, only to ignore most of its findings. In 2011, a 52-member National Dialogue committee convened upon his request, but it did little beyond imputing minor changes to the judiciary and election laws. The king has also frequently championed democratic rights in his writings, including public discussion papers posted on the official royal website.⁴ The fact that Jordan now needs yet another reform project suggests how badly these past efforts failed, resulting in a serious credibility deficit. A September 2021 poll by the Center for Strategic Studies at Jordan University showed that 68 percent of the citizenry did not trust the latest royal reform commission, and only 17 percent believed it would achieve desirable political change.⁵

But two features make the current episode distinctive. First, the committee was born in es-

pecially dire circumstances, assembling in the tense months following the April controversy with Prince Hamzah and amidst the worsening economic crisis. The Hamzah controversy elicited fears within the palace due to the perception that his criticisms of political corruption and economic mishandling by the national leadership were becoming too popular. It therefore juxtaposed internal palace disagreements with rising levels of public anger over worsening authoritarian abuses and economic inequality. The crisis paradoxically became the most censored issue in the national press but also the most talked-about topic in private quarters. It plucked a raw nerve and, more than any protest since the Arab Uprisings, hinted at the urgency of reform within the royal establishment.

“The fact that Jordan now needs yet another reform project suggests how badly these past efforts failed, resulting in a serious credibility deficit.”

Second, the committee itself recognized the enormity of its task. Its very title, the Royal Committee to Modernize (in Arabic, *tahdeeth*) the Political System, is potent, for the term “modernize” signaled a begrudging concession that Jordan's political order had become dangerously disconnected from society. Its 92-person-strong membership also represented one of the largest royal committees ever formed and included dozens of oppositionists from most ideologi-

4. All the discussion papers were posted on the king's website: “Discussion Papers,” His Majesty King Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein, accessed February 4, 2022, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/vision/discussion-papers>

5. “Istitla’ – 68% min al-urduniyin la yathiqun bi-lajnatin malakiyyatin tabhath al-islam [Poll: 68% of Jordanians do not trust a royal committee discussing reform],” Arabi21, September 19, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3urDvdi>



Former Prime Minister Samir Al-Rifai chairs a meeting of the Royal Committee to Modernize the Political System, June 2021. Photo: Royal Committee to Modernize the Political System/Official Website

cal currents.⁶ Certainly, these “oppositionists” were not revolutionaries; there were no advocates of ridding Jordan of the Hashemites. Still, unlike past royal reform commissions, this one included members of social and political movements that had loudly criticized the government in the past, such as the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamic Action Front (IAF) party as well as members of leftist and liberal movements.

Also unlike past iterations, it was no closed-door exercise. The committee held numerous dialogues with civil society stakeholders, such as the professional syndicates, and showed a surprising degree of transparency in its deliberations.⁷ Finally, in contrast to previously vague reform talk, the committee attached a measurable timeline to its vision: Democracy would come in a decade.

6. “Al-malik ya’had li-samir al-rifa’i bi-ri’aasati al-lajnah al-malakiyyah li-tahdeeth al-mandumah al-siyasiyyah [The King entrusts Samir Al-Rifai with the chairmanship of the Royal Committee for the Modernization of the Political System],” Al-Mamlaka News, June 11, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3LaXRgB>

7. The committee’s website contains all of its proposals and internal documentation: <https://tahdeeth.jo/>.

III. WEIGHING THE REFORMS

Split into six subcommittees on elections, parties, constitutional amendments, local administration, youth, and women, the committee delivered a mountain of recommendations.⁸ As mentioned, the government ignored some of the proposed constitutional amendments. For instance, it rejected ideas to include health care, economic opportunity, and environmental protections as fundamental rights. Nonetheless, a core set of nearly two dozen proposed amendments survived the governmental review process and were ultimately ratified by parliament.

The most important reforms involved overhauling the framework for parliamentary elections with the goal of gradually transforming Jordan's political system into a constitutional democracy. The plan is to gradually increase, over the next few election cycles, the number of legislative seats awarded to a national party list. This change is expected to reduce the number of independent (that is, non-party affiliated) members of parliament, who currently dominate the lower house and often are conservatives, such as tribal notables and businesspersons who generally align with government positions. The idea is that, eventually, parliament should be filled with nothing but lawmakers from political parties—and in turn, those parties would gain the long-awaited power to form a government, to select a prime minister, and to undertake all the other desiderata of parliamentary democracy.⁹ This is the endgame. Theoretically, this means that the Hashemite monarchy would retain only symbolic authority, and the political system would resemble what exists in countries like Sweden or the United Kingdom.

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These changes, in turn, require stronger political parties, which—with the exception of the Muslim Brotherhood's IAF—have been chronically weak in Jordanian politics. Hoping to inspire more public involvement in party organizations, the royal committee recommended reducing current financial and political restrictions on party mobilization while stipulating that youth and women should each constitute 20 percent of parties' memberships. It also recommended lowering the age of candidacy for elected office from 30 to 25 years and increasing or creating various female quotas, among a dizzying litany of other changes. On other fronts, the committee recommended that judicial bodies such as the Integrity and Anti-Corruption Committee be tasked with scrutinizing the financial affairs of government officials in a bid to reduce endemic graft and corruption, that the judiciary's capacity be enhanced to uphold electoral transparency, and that power be decentralized to locally elected municipal councils more rapidly.

8. "Al-lajna al-malakiyyah li-tahdeeth al-mandhumah al-siyasiyyah tanshur abraz al-nataa'ij wal-tawsiyyat [The Royal Committee for the Modernization of the Political System publishes the most prominent findings and recommendations]," Petra News, October 3, 2021, <https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=190951&lang=ar&name=news>

9. Curtis Ryan, "A New Cycle of Reform in Jordan," Arab Center Washington DC, October 21, 2021, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/a-new-cycle-of-reform-in-jordan/>



One of the royal committee's recommendations was to increase female participation in parliament. Above, women participate in a 2020 campaign training program in Irbid, September 28, 2020. Photo: Jordanian National Commission for Women's Affairs Facebook page

From October through January, political salons across the capital, Amman, furiously debated the proposed changes. Reasons for doubt were self-evident since, historically, few autocratic regimes concede power gracefully. The last time that Jordan's parliament picked the prime minister and formed the cabinet was the mid-1950s, and that democratic glimmer ended with a draconian crackdown that resulted in a 30-year ban on political parties. In light of that experience, some Jordanians doubted that their ruling elites could stomach the idea of transferring all their prerogatives, from foreign policy to budgetary priorities, to a fully elected government.¹⁰

Some of those fears have already come true. Before parliament convened throughout December and January to mull over the royal com-

mittee's proposals, the government inserted several of its own amendments onto the legislative agenda. Those government-backed amendments were ratified by parliament at the same time as the committee's recommendations, but they pulled in the opposite direction. One such amendment, for example, reinforced the king's sole authority to appoint the senior ranks of the royal court, security services, and judiciary—the coercive and legal pillars of authoritarian rule. Another established a “national security and foreign policy council” to be convened exclusively by the king and consisting of the prime minister, foreign minister, and interior minister, along with the heads of the military, intelligence directorate, and civil police. This astonished observers, as the new body would oversee Jordan's military affairs, internal security matters, and all foreign relations. As Oraib Rantawi, a member

10. Sufian Obeidat, “Modernizing Jordan's Political System: The Unspoken Motivations,” ConstitutionNet, July 29, 2021, <https://constitutionnet.org/news/modernizing-jordans-political-system-unspoken-motivations>

of the royal committee, complained, “What’s left for the government? To collect the garbage?”¹¹

Cynics see the move as more of the same: Jordan’s royal autocracy seems unwilling to fully commit to constitutional monarchism and so acted to sabotage the process.¹² Still, there are reasons for prudent optimism. While previous royal commissions suffered from internal disagreements and isolation from the state, this one remained unified and coherent, giving it more prominence in political discussions.¹³ Every ministry and key civil society voices (including the Muslim Brotherhood, one vanguard of traditional opposition) embraced its work rather than lambasting it as a showcase for empty rhetoric. King Abdullah, in his capacity as head of state, guaranteed from the start that he would swiftly promulgate all the constitutional amendments. These include the royal committee’s core proposal to make the government more accountable to parliament, rather than to the palace, as is currently the case. Even politi-

“There are reasons for prudent optimism.”

cal parties, most of which have never trusted the regime, astounded observers by buying into the process.¹⁴ So too did some veteran political critics, who noted that the committee also provided some of the most scathing critiques about many problems, such as gender inequality and women’s rights, ever witnessed in a public body.¹⁵ An unapologetically authoritarian state would have watered down all the proposed amendments or ignored most of them; the fact that this government has conceded some ground to those calling for democratic accountability marks a significant development.

11. William Christou, “Jordan Creates ‘National Security Council’ with New Constitutional Amendment,” *The New Arab*, January 7, 2022, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/jordan-passes-new-constitutional-amendment>

12. Jomaa Al-Mesmari, “Jordan: ‘Abdullah, You Are Responsible,’” *Daraj*, November 23, 2021, <https://daraj.com/en/83227/>

13. Daoud Kuttub, “Jordan’s Decade-long Path to Democracy Might Have Just Begun,” Arab Center Washington DC, September 3, 2021, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/jordans-decade-long-path-to-democracy-might-have-just-begun/>

14. “Masaaraat al-urduniyyah tunaqish mashru’ qaanun al-ahzaab wal-tawsiyyaat al-muta’lliqah bi-hi [‘Jordanian Paths’ discusses the draft political parties law and its recommendations],” *Masarat*, November 8, 2021, <https://masarat.jo/2021/11/08/>

15. See, for instance, Marwan Muasher, “Al-mar’ah wal-muwatanah al-mutasaawiyah fi mukhrajah al-lajnah al-malakiyyah li-tahdeeth al-mandhumah al-siyasiyyah [Women and equal citizenship in the outcomes of the Royal Committee for the Modernization of the Political System],” *Diwan*, Carnegie Middle East Center blog, November 15, 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/85775>

IV. OVERCOMING APATHY AND SKEPTICISM

Given the mixed results of the royal committee's work, Jordan's regime now bears the responsibility of clawing back its credibility after decades of overpromising and underdelivering on democracy. Following through with the latest reforms therefore requires a steady push to overcome public apathy.

No issue encapsulates public apathy more than elections, the conduit through which the promised constitutional monarchy is to crystallize. For decades, every election for the lower house in the bicameral legislature has been marred by confusing electoral procedures and voting mechanisms. Turnout plummeted to 36.1 percent in the 2016 vote and to 29.9 percent in 2020. Citizens retain little confidence in either parliament or parties, which are seen as glorified talk-shops or hotbeds of corruption rather than as bearers of the popular will. The 2019 Arab Barometer poll showed that only 14 percent of Jordanians held any trust in parliament, and just 7 percent trusted parties.¹⁶

Since October, Jordan's state-run media has broadcast constant appeals for citizens to overcome indifference and embrace the royal committee.¹⁷ After all, elections mean little if most people do not vote. Yet such exhortations confuse symptoms for causes. Mass apathy is not the cause of the political system's doldrums, but rather its sharpest indicator—the perverse result of deeply entrenched barriers to representation that erode the idea that citizens' participation can change the composition of their government and result in new policies.

One such barrier is electoral malapportionment—the practice of systematically giving one social or political group more weight in

elections—which is a sensitive topic wrapped in the unspoken identity politics that divide Jordanian society. Since the end of martial law and the resumption of elections in 1989, malapportionment has structured the electoral framework by which Jordanians elect representatives to the lower house of parliament. Rural districts populated by tribal communities receive far more seats per voter than urban, Palestinian-dominated areas such as the cities of Amman, Irbid, and Zarqa. The southern tribal district of Ma'an, for instance, receives a lower house seat for every 11,000 voters, whereas Amman's densely populated second district receives a seat for every 67,000 voters.

“No issue encapsulates public apathy more than elections, the conduit through which the promised constitutional monarchy is to crystallize.”

Such malapportionment is closely related to the tribal-Palestinian divide, which has long been the third rail in Jordanian politics. While the Jordanian constitution theoretically guarantees equality for all citizens, in practice—such as through the electoral law—the state abides by old prejudices that favor tribes as the social foundation of Hashemite rule.¹⁸ Since the 1970s, tribal Jordanians have almost exclusively staffed the civil service, armed forces, and security agencies, while those of Palestinian origin have had relatively little access to the po-

16. *Arab Barometer V: Jordan Country Report*, Arab Barometer, 2019, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABV_Jordan_Report_Public-Opinion_2019.pdf

17. See, for example, Lena Aloul, “The Youth Era,” *Jordan Times*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.jordantimes.com/opinion/lena-aloul/youth-era>

18. Sean Yom, “Bread, Fear, and Coalitional Politics in Jordan: From Tribal Origins to Neoliberal Narrowing,” in *Economic Shocks and Authoritarian Stability: Duration, Financial Control, and Institutions*, ed. Victor Shih (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 210-235.



King Abdullah, accompanied by Crown Prince Al Hussein ibn Abdullah II, meets with representatives from the Abbad tribes on January 6, 2020, as part of the Basman Forum meetings. Photo: Royal Hashemite Court website

litical system, despite making up the majority of the population. Some conservative voices in Jordan also continue to stoke anti-Palestinian xenophobia, warning that regional actors like Israel plan to turn Jordan into an “alternative homeland” for all Palestinians—which, in turn, would eviscerate the standing of tribal Jordanians, who would be made an even smaller minority.

Tellingly, the royal committee did not touch this sensitive issue at all.¹⁹ Yet no democratic process can unfold without addressing this inequality. As critics pointed out in social media discussions, simply pledging to replace malapportioned districting with party-based voting will not rectify the problem of underrepresentation or convince Palestinian-Jordanians to

participate in elections.²⁰ Nor will it assuage the concerns of some tribal groups, who fear their marginalization if a parliamentary government were to accurately reflect Jordan’s mostly Palestinian demography. Such tensions can only be addressed by the monarchy, and this requires more than engineering better elections. It necessitates redefining the meaning of Jordanian citizenship as a vessel of equality. It also requires delicately tackling unsettled historical memories regarding the 1970 Black September civil conflict, which was waged between the Jordanian army and Palestinian militant groups, as well as existing political inequalities in the electoral system that make many Jordanians of Palestinian origin feel that they are, at best, second-class citizens. In short, these issues need more engagement from the king.

19. “Al-khilaafaat la tazaar mustimirrah wa-tawaafuqaat ghayr mustaqirrah... [Disagreements are still ongoing, consensus is unstable...];” Rai al-Youm, September 6, 2021, bit.ly/3J4PuRY

20. “Huwiyyah al-wataniyyah al-jaami’ah: tawsiyyaat malakiyyah taqsim al-urduniyyin hawla fikrah ‘watan badil’ [Inclusive National Identity: Royal Recommendations Divide Jordanians Over the Idea of an “Alternative Homeland” for the Palestinians];” BBC News Arabic, October 6, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/trending-58819551>

V. ENGAGING YOUTH

If surmounting public apathy requires steady commitments and delivery from the monarchy, then defending the current reforms requires continual bottom-up mobilization by youth. Jordan has an extremely young society: Two-thirds of the populace falls under the age of 30. Since the Arab Uprisings, this millennial generation has been the cutting edge of grassroots opposition to the regime. The popular movements they have organized and led, called *hirak*, have shown significant mobilizational power and, in their quest for dignity and democracy, break the traditional rules of politics in Jordan. They reject elections, shun parties, have no ideological labels, resist repression, and draw support from Jordanians of both Palestinian and tribal backgrounds.²¹ Yet, in a telling snub, no *hirak* activist was invited to join the royal committee, demonstrating the regime's disdain for their politics.

These activists fear that for all its liberal veneer, the current push for democracy could be soon scuttled or abandoned due to interference from Jordan's coercive guardians, who loom over this reform process as potential spoilers. This is a delicate point, but a vital one. National security agencies play a dual-headed role in the kingdom. On the one hand, certain institutions like the military, police, and the intelligence service fulfill their public charge by mitigating regional conflicts and stopping terrorist threats. Citizens support them in this regard. One 2018 poll showed that the Jordanian armed forces and police commanded impressive 90 percent and 82 percent public approval ratings, respectively, compared to the 21 percent held by parliament.²²

“Fear of arrest all but assures that most journalists, writers, and artists self-censor, while threats of prosecution continue to hamper oppositionists and even digital platforms that feature too much government criticism.”

On the other hand, these security institutions also wield enormous influence over domestic politics. Accountable only to the palace, they generally frown upon drastic changes that would devolve power away from the monarchy and toward elected bodies like parliament. They also regularly repress peaceful civic activity that does not represent an actual threat to public safety. Their work has been quite effective. Fear of arrest all but assures that most journalists, writers, and artists self-censor, while threats of prosecution continue to hamper oppositionists and even digital platforms that feature too much government criticism. The pandemic exacerbated this pattern. In July 2020, for instance, security authorities shuttered the one-hundred-thousand-strong teachers' union in response to its frequent criticism of the government, and in March 2021, the police arrested hundreds of youth activists who defied the pandemic curfew to organize protests marking the decennial of Jordan's most prominent Arab Uprisings demonstration.

21. Sean Yom and Wael Al-Khatib, “Youth Revolts and Political Opposition in Jordan,” *Washington Post*, December 20, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/12/20/youth-revolts-and-political-opposition-in-jordan/>

22. Ana V. Ibáñez Prieto, “Jordanians Overwhelmingly Have More Trust in Army, Police over Other Agencies,” *Jordan Times*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/jordanians-overwhelmingly-have-more-trust-army-police-over-other-agencies>



Members of the Teachers' Syndicate participate in a demonstration. In July 2020, security authorities shuttered the one-hundred-thousand-strong union in response to its frequent criticism of the government. Photo: Jordan Teachers' Syndicate Facebook page

The security institutions stand to lose considerably in a constitutional monarchy, since a parliamentary government resulting from popular elections could theoretically rein them in. For instance, it might undo the Byzantine maze of national security laws that currently restrict many civil liberties. Many young Jordanians thus believe that it was pressure from these institutions that induced the government to introduce its own amendment calling for the royally appointed national security and foreign policy council. For this reason, youth activists question whether high-level political changes will trickle down to make an impact within their lives. For many in the *hirak*, it suggests that the reform process is a Trojan horse, not the turning of an authoritarian page. They view it as a calculated effort to gut their activism by keeping intact existing restrictions on civic freedoms, while encouraging them to join official par-

ties whose actual influence may prove far less than promised.

Justifiably, young people's worries extend as much into the economy as politics. Last summer, overall youth unemployment reached a staggering 50 percent, with the figure for young women reaching almost 75 percent.²³ With the Jordanian state suffering perennial fiscal emergencies mitigated only by massive foreign aid, authorities have no solutions for job scarcity, rising living costs, and shrinking social safety nets. The regime's reformist gamble hence might be interpreted as offering political rights in lieu of economic relief. The gamble assumes that the promise of constitutional monarchism will be enough to mollify their demands. But that bargain will fail if young Jordanians believe that political rights on paper do not translate into more breathing room to create, mobilize, and dissent in their day-to-day lives.

23. World Bank, *Jordan Economic Monitor: Uncertain and Long Trail Ahead* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2021).

VI. THE AMERICAN FACTOR

Combined with top-down commitments from the regime and bottom-up pressures from society, Jordan's reformist prospects can benefit from American nudging. While the United States cannot, and should not, single-handedly implant democracies in foreign lands, it also cannot stay silent when new political openings appear. In the current situation, the United States should more strongly pressure Jordanian powerholders to honor the promise of constitutional monarchy—not because it is what Washington may wish, but because it is what the king himself has pledged through the reform process.

Foreign policy in Jordan—a small, resource-poor, and nearly landlocked state—has always been oriented around regime survival by crafting strategic alliances that seek to minimize immediate threats. The singular goal is not creating enduring friendships with any country (excepting the United States and other aid donors) but rather opportunistically ensuring that it seldom picks the losing side in a major conflict or dispute. That instinct underlies most major foreign policy decisions, such as the 1994 peace treaty with Israel. It also explains the recent normalization of ties with Syria—despite calling for Bashar al-Assad to step down during the Syrian civil war, Jordan now sees an Assad-run Syria as a viable partner for trade, border issues, and the eventual repatriation of Jordan's Syrian refugees.²⁴ And, above all, it explains Jordan's reliance upon the United States.

Since the late 1950s, the United States has been Jordan's leading Western patron. While the U.S.-Jordanian relationship has waxed and waned,

the decades since the Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty have been marked by strategic intimacy and massive U.S. backing for the regime. King Abdullah enjoys bipartisan support in the U.S. Congress and was the first Arab head of state to visit Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden after each took office. Amman receives record high levels of annual aid from Washington—currently \$425 million in military assistance and nearly \$1.1 billion in economic support, much of the latter through cash grants (a rare form of U.S. foreign aid), that ensure the perennially insolvent Jordanian treasury stays afloat.²⁵ The 2021 U.S.-Jordanian Defense Cooperation Agreement also guarantees that America's current military presence will expand further, with the ancillary benefit of giving the kingdom strong protection from external threats.

“Since the late 1950s, the United States has been Jordan's leading Western patron.”

Jordanian officials greeted the Biden administration enthusiastically after falling out with President Donald Trump's White House over its provocative “deal of the century” project. That project eviscerated the prospects for a viable and sovereign Palestinian state centered upon the West Bank, which is a non-negotiable objective for the Jordanian regime. It triggered old fears that the deal's backers, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, would see Jordan as an alternative

24. On the controversial move to normalize ties with Syria, see Laith Al-Ajlouni, “Jordan is Pushing for Rapprochement with Syria,” *MENASource*, Atlantic Council, October 19, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/jordan-is-pushing-for-rapprochement-with-syria-but-is-it-to-reinforce-artificial-stability-in-the-region/>

25. See Jeremy M. Sharp, “Jordan: Background and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, July 15, 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33546.pdf#page=17>; and “Back to Business as Usual: President Biden's First Foreign Affairs Budget For the Middle East and North Africa,” Project on Middle East Democracy, September 2021, https://pomed.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/POMED_BudgetReport_FY22_final.pdf#page=52



President Joe Biden meets with King Abdullah II and Crown Prince Al Hussein ibn Abdullah II on July 19, 2021, in the Oval Office of the White House. Photo: Adam Schultz/Flickr

homeland for all Palestinians. Even so, Biden's early declaration to "center" human rights and democracy in his foreign policy, including in the Middle East, raised eyebrows in Jordan. Some Jordanians predicted that their leadership would respond to Biden's pro-democratic rhetoric by pledging new political changes, which may partly explain the creation of the royal reform committee.²⁶ The Biden administration, however, never directed its lofty rhetoric toward Jordan, at least in public; instead, during the Prince Hamzah affair it doubled down on its rhetorical support for the regime. By the time King Abdullah visited the White House in July 2021, the Biden administration's official line was

continuing the familiar policy of maintaining full political support, close-knit diplomacy, and generous aid flows to shore up Hashemite stability in a chaotic region.²⁷ Since then, the U.S. administration has not publicly commented on the royal reform committee or on the constitutional amendments that resulted from it. When Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi visited Washington in January 2022, the purpose was to hammer out a new multi-year foreign aid package, not to discuss the kingdom's internal politics and democratic reforms.²⁸

This public silence about Jordanian political reforms follows past patterns. Democratic

26. "Washington muhtimmah bi-wadh' al-islah al-siyasi fil-urdun 'ala sikkati al-tanfeedh [Washington is interested in putting political reform in Jordan on the track]," *Al-Arab*, February 23, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3schRXE>

27. "Readout of President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. Meeting with King Abdullah II of Jordan," The White House, July 19, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/07/19/readout-of-president-joseph-r-biden-jr-meeting-with-king-abdullah-ii-of-jordan/>

28. "Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi before Their Meeting," U.S. Department of State, January 13, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-jordanian-foreign-minister-ayman-safadi-before-their-meeting-2/>

reform efforts in Jordan have seldom garnered much enthusiasm in Washington, because regional crises like the Iraq War, the global war on terrorism, and the Syrian civil war always took precedence. The U.S. priority has been ensuring stability and security in Jordan with a reliably pro-Western regime in power. The inherent uncertainty of democratization, where an elected government with meaningful powers could question that alliance, endangers that position.

Jordanian activists and reformists alike, however, see a role for modest and consistent American pressure in the coming years. Rather than staying silent about the prospects for Jordanian democracy, the United States can prod along successful reforms with positive—and public—reinforcement and follow-through to make clear that democratization is a priority in the relationship. Frequent engagements, from set-piece diplomacy to attaching aid-based incentives, can help keep the regime honest on this reform agenda, oppositionists encouraged, and the reform issue central in Jordan’s public sphere.

“Jordanian activists and reformists alike . . . see a role for modest and consistent American pressure in the coming years.”

These engagements need not be drastic, but they must be visible. For instance, the Biden administration can make Jordanian democratization a public talking point in its next meetings with King Abdullah. It can also begin by conditioning economic assistance on political reforms, such as promising to increase its financial grants if the regime meets the democratic benchmarks set by its own constitutional amendments. Such pressures alone will not transform the kingdom. Yet they might serve as a tipping point, or at least an amplifying factor that may encourage many Jordanians, including youth activists, to continue protesting and pressuring their power-holders to follow through.



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken meets with Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi at the Department of State in Washington, D.C., on January 13, 2022. Photo: Freddie Everett/Flickr

VII. CONCLUSION

Jordan faces two diverging pathways. The first is the most familiar: As in the past, democratic promises might lose steam in the coming years due to a combination of public and U.S. apathy and regime backtracking and be either denuded or completely forgotten, thereby instigating another cycle of crisis and reform. The second pathway is more monumental, but also far more difficult. Top-down commitments from the regime, bottom-up mobilization from

a youthful society, and strong U.S. encouragement may break the impasse and help inaugurate the democratic future invoked by the royal committee and promised by the king himself. Unless the kingdom moves forward on this second pathway, the next generation of Jordanian activists and critics will look back upon this period not as a milestone of political change, but as just another red herring in the unending struggle against authoritarianism.

