
Middle East Research and Information Project

Jordan's King Abdallah in Washington

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King Abdallah of Jordan came to his May 8 White House meeting with George W. Bush painfully aware of the pressures and contradictions threatening his regime's delicate position. After gambling more heavily than any other Arab state on peace with Israel and the liberalization of the Middle East, Jordan now finds itself trapped between the demands of an aggressively unilateralist and pro-Israel Bush administration and an increasingly radicalized and mobilized public opinion. Abdallah has maneuvered to bridge the gap, speaking eloquently—to both Western and Arab audiences—of the need for peace through the creation of a Palestinian state. But Israel's ongoing military actions in Palestinian areas, expected to intensify after a suicide bombing killed 15 Israelis in a pool hall on May 7, and dangerously unbalanced American rhetoric have rendered his stance increasingly difficult. Jordanians from all political trends have come to view the US as not only biased toward Israel but as a virtual partner with Israel in its aggression against the Palestinian people.

Moderate and pro-American Jordanians furiously complain that the US has abandoned its friends, making it impossible for them to continue to defend Amman's alliance with Washington. Over the last few months, the Bush administration has belatedly admitted its mistake in dismissing the importance of Arab public opinion, but its actions suggest that it still has not grasped the depth or the meaning of the alienation and frustration of the moderate Arab elites upon which any coalition against extremism must rely.

Leaders of both opposition and centrist political parties, leaders of the professional associations, journalists, academics, civil society activists and ordinary citizens make it clear that Jordanian public opinion has reached an unprecedented state. Many of the fierce debates which used to animate Jordanians, such as whether or not to normalize relations with Israel, have ended. Instead, Jordanians from all walks of life have converged on a near consensus regarding the major foreign policy issues affecting the Kingdom. Almost everyone considers the Israeli operation in the West Bank to be an unjustifiable attack on the Palestinian people and is appalled at what appears to be unlimited US support for the Israeli war. Almost all Jordanians fiercely oppose any US attack on Iraq. Reluctantly, Jordanians across the political spectrum have come to see the US as an enemy.

Powerful Public Consensus

While few Jordanians support al-Qaeda or Osama bin Laden's ideology or tactics, many continue to doubt the Saudi Arabian dissident's responsibility for the events of September 11, and few will publicly condemn him out of a resistance to appearing to support the US. This consensus, it must be stressed, is new: in the past, Jordanians disagreed and argued openly about such issues. Hostility to the US does not reflect some inevitable reaction by an Arab street conditioned to despise the West. On the contrary, the emerging Jordanian consensus reflects an articulate and reasoned, as well as impassioned, response to political developments. Even moderate, pro-American Jordanians have reversed their positions, some very publicly recanting their past support for the US-sponsored peace process. Political parties have benefited from the angry popular mood, though most remain too weak and disorganized to exploit it. Even the Islamic movement now finds itself acting to restrain rather than mobilize public opinion.

The most recent manifestation of this powerful public consensus has been the rapidly spreading popular boycott of American products. While few expect this boycott to have a direct impact on American interests, they see the boycott as allowing people to take affirmative action to express their anger at the US. Switching from American to French cigarettes has become a popular fad, while local McDonald's and Burger King franchises, once bustling with the young and affluent, stand empty at lunchtime. One local restaurateur has achieved great popularity by ostentatiously transforming his American fast food franchise into a falafel shop. The popular boycott has spread in an unorganized, popular fashion rather than being led from above. Coordinated through e-mail and instant messaging and by word of mouth, reported and endorsed in the more independent newspapers, and then backed by the major opposition parties and professional associations, the boycott is taken by many as an indicator of deepening popular willingness to act upon their convictions. One veteran Arab nationalist political figure openly marveled that the younger generation is not willing to accept what his generation had accepted, and that it was the best educated and most Westernized youth who were leading the popular boycott.

"Occupied Amman"

The government keenly feels the danger of such popular movements and has taken a series of repressive measures to prevent the expression of public anger. Heavy deployment of the army and police around major mosques, the professional associations complex and other traditional rallying points on May 3 has prompted opposition figures to refer caustically to "occupied Amman." A major confrontation between police and protesters seeking to march on the Israeli embassy, and another violent clash in the Baqaa refugee camp, have left both the regime and the opposition scarred and wary. Political party leaders canceled scheduled protests after a blunt meeting with the interior minister, and the professional associations called off their demonstration to avoid a confrontation with security forces.

A series of repressive temporary laws have imposed sharp restrictions on the right to public assembly and protest, and the controversial Article 150 of the recently amended penal code threatens journalists with up to three years in prison for articles which the government deems to be harmful to national unity or to be incitement to protests. The trial of Toujan Faisal, a prominent regime critic, over an article alleging government corruption became a dramatic political spectacle, as former Prime Minister Abd al-Karim al-Kabariti surprised many observers with his testimony defending Faisal's right to criticize public figures. Local human rights activists allege widespread detentions and the use of torture in the administrative detention center al-Juwayda.

It has not helped matters that these events have taken place in a political vacuum caused by the absence of a sitting Parliament. After the dissolution of the 1997 Parliament, the government postponed the constitutionally mandated elections for a new body because of the "extraordinary circumstances" posed by the events in Palestine and the possible events in Iraq. The regime has yet to announce a date for elections to be held. A new electoral law which increases the number of seats in Parliament while retaining the unpopular "one vote for multi-seat districts" law is widely seen as expertly designed to minimize the success of the opposition. Nevertheless, the regime worries that in the highly charged political atmosphere, the opposition might score impressive gains. Regardless of the outcome, many in the regime dread the spirited political rallies which would necessarily accompany an electoral campaign. Jordanians are divided about the question of postponing elections. These differences extend even to the Islamist movement. The Muslim Brotherhood recently announced its agreement with the decision to postpone, in order to focus popular attention on Palestine, while its political offshoot the Islamic Action Front insisted on holding the elections as scheduled.

Doing What Washington Asks

Overall, the political mood in the country is marked by growing distrust and hostility between the government and society. Persistent cleavages in Jordanian society—veiled by the public consensus vis-a-vis Palestine and Iraq—threaten to burst into the open as pressures escalate. Relations between citizens of Jordanian and Palestinian origin, always tense, are greatly inflamed by the events in Palestine and the radicalization of citizens of Palestinian origin. The impact of the events on the Jordanian economy has further strained the social fabric. The impressive facade of rapidly developing West Amman conceals a stagnant economy; the beautiful new hotels are mostly empty and deeply in debt. Pro-Western Jordanians feel that they have done everything the US could ask—making peace with Israel, implementing a difficult International Monetary Fund "structural adjustment" program and joining the World Trade Organization. They resent that their sacrifices do not seem to be rewarded with any palpable US sympathy for their predicament.

Aware of these pressures, King Abdallah has adopted positions as far in line with popular sentiment as he dares, aggressively warning against any attack on Iraq and passionately advocating the Saudi peace plan. The king has sought the cover of a united Arab position, in order to urgently press the Bush administration to adopt a more balanced approach. Recent Israeli discussions of a renewed "Jordan option" or the mass expulsion ("transfer") of Palestinians from the West Bank, and the endorsement of the idea by House Majority Leader Dick Armey, shocked Jordanians who had thought that their peace treaty with Israel had finally ended such talk. Jordanians note the peace treaty with Israel expressly forbids the forced movement of peoples, and consider these ideas to be veiled threats to the Jordanian regime itself.

The overwhelming Congressional expressions of support for the Israel invasion of the West Bank, and Bush's baffling description of Ariel Sharon as a "man of peace," have exasperated even the most moderate Jordanian officials. Israel's ability to frustrate the UN Security Council's fact-finding mission in Jenin without penalty, compared with the forceful US actions in support of UN inspectors in Iraq, seems the ultimate expression of American double standards. Jordanian officials see the current Congress as the most difficult in memory in its treatment of the conflict, and Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher reportedly warned the government on his return from Washington that Jordan should not expect any assistance from that quarter. Still, Jordanians hope desperately for a forceful US intervention to impose a reasonable peace settlement.

Striking Unanimity

With striking unanimity, Jordanians say that the anti-American sentiment in the country and in the region is like nothing they have seen before. Before the slow descent of the Palestinian uprising into war, many Jordanians endorsed the regime's vision of a new Jordan defined by its modern, pro-Western political, economic and cultural agenda. It is these Jordanians who are most disappointed by US policy. They say, somewhat forlornly, that if the US would change its policies towards Palestine and Iraq, popular views of the US would change. Meanwhile, American public relations efforts meet with their scorn. Jordanians, they argue, are not so stupid as to be persuaded by better advertising. Jordanians reject the "civilizational" explanation for hostility towards the US, and insist that the hostility emanates from American policies, not American culture. But they also warn overwhelmingly that anti-American hostility is becoming consolidated and time is running out to reverse it. If the US attacks Iraq, they caution, there is no limit to the potential response from the no longer mythical Jordanian street.

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