



JORDAN: RECENT SURGE IN POLITICAL PROTESTS

The following report is based on open source reporting.

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With the recent events in Tunisia and Egypt, OSAC constituents are concerned about opposition groups in other Middle Eastern countries attempting to stage similar uprisings. Many countries in the region, including Jordan, suffer from similar economic and demographic problems, which put them at increased risk of civil unrest. The recent series of Friday protests and subsequent conciliatory measures by King Abdullah has only increased these concerns. Nevertheless, Jordan is a unique country with significant differences, and its potential for civil unrest needs to be judged based on its own internal dynamics, even if that includes accounting for recent regional changes.

Review of Recent Protest Activity

Jordan remains one of the U.S.'s closest strategic allies in the Middle East. Its stability is of key importance to U.S. private sector organizations operating in the country and throughout the region. However, the country is faced with its worst economic situation in recent memory, shouldering a \$2 billion deficit and a 12 percent unemployment rate, while its income gap between rich and poor continues to widen. Although significant economic and political concerns do exist, the ongoing protests in Amman were catalyzed by the grassroots demonstrations that led to the overthrow of the Ben-Ali regime in Tunisia. Islamists, opposition groups, and retired army generals have been some of the key leaders in organizing protests and demonstrations following Friday's noon prayers in downtown Amman.

Demonstrations began on January 14, when protesters called for Prime Minister Samir Rafai's dismissal in addition to economic reforms to address the rising food costs that have affected much of the region. Despite these protests, the cost of food has continued to increase every Friday since. On January 21, approximately 5,000 protestors gathered for a "Day of Rage" against free market reforms and high unemployment. On January 28, some 3,000 people conducted a second round of protests. Protestors also renewed their demand for the sacking of Prime Minister Rifai and called for freer elections and parliamentary reforms. Thus far, protests have been peaceful and have not required police intervention.

King Abdullah's Political Concessions

In a move intended to quell additional civil unrest, King Abdullah II dismissed Prime Minister Samir Rifai and his cabinet on February 1. Unlike similar moves by Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, Abdullah has likely garnered some favor with protestors who view Rifai's replacement, Marouf al-Bakhit, as a moderate and stable prime minister. King Abdullah has turned to al-Bakhit during previous challenging times for the country. In November 2005, Abdullah appointed al-Bakhit prime minister following a series of terrorist attacks on three Amman hotels. al-Bakhit is viewed by many Jordanians as a mature leader who exudes confidence.

In addition, King Abdullah recently announced pay raises for civil servants and \$125 million in subsidies to counter the high cost of food and fuel, which may go far in dampening national outrage. The country's poor, however, still struggle with a high cost of living, specifically food and fuel prices, as well as low salary levels, and these moves may not be enough to satisfy their concerns. The Islamic Action Front, the local political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood and some trade unions and leftists have expressed their belief that the King's moves are cosmetic. Up until now, recent protests have focused their disapproval at the former prime minister, but have not explicitly stated any objection to King Abdullah or the ruling family. If opposition groups began explicitly calling for the removal of King Abdullah, as occurred in Tunisia with

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Ben-Ali and Mubarak in Egypt, it is possible that these calls may provoke a harsher reaction from the security forces. Thus far, however, dissent has focused on general government transparency issues and economic reforms, and protests have remained peaceful with no police intervention.

Potential for Additional Protests

King Abdullah's conciliatory measures will not likely result in an immediate end to the protests, but may cause some of the popular discontent to lose momentum. Unlike in Tunisia or Egypt, demonstrators have only called for the dismissal of the prime minister, and the King has already acquiesced to that demand. Nevertheless, while King Abdullah has stated his intention to implement economic and political reforms to address the population's complaints, actual implementation of any reforms will take some time. In addition, mass dismissals in the Jordanian government are not uncommon, and replacements typically do not deviate from the Abdullah's wishes. Since Abdullah became King in 1999, he has dismissed eight cabinets. However, al-Bakhit seems to be accepted by the general populace and has stated his intention to include opposition groups in a new cabinet. Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, however, has already rejected an offer to participate.

Although most Jordanians view al-Bakhit as an improvement over Rifai, some opposition voices say he is too close to the establishment and unable to enact their desired reforms. al-Bakhit is an ex-army general and was deeply involved in the peace agreement with Israel. As an ethnic Jordanian—as opposed to the large (approximately 70 percent) ethnically Palestinian population—he comes from a class that generally has enjoyed better state jobs and has suffered less from the national economic downturn. al-Bakhit could become a polarizing figure if political reforms are perceived as favoring this class or promises of reform are not actuated. His appointment could potentially generate support for further demonstrations from Jordan's large ethnic Palestinian population, but this outcome seems less likely than an overall decrease in protest strength in response to King Abdullah's quick dismissal of Rifai.

Security Outlook

The mass demonstrations witnessed throughout the Middle East in recent weeks—namely in Tunisia, Egypt, and even Yemen—demonstrate a growing boldness by the population to express their demands toward vis-à-vis the state. With national leaders already having taken measures to address popular demands in some of these countries, additional opposition groups are likely to attempt to ride this momentum in order to push for whatever concessions they view as achievable. In Jordan, King Abdullah appears to have preempted much of this unrest by removing the unpopular prime minister and implementing economic measures to quell popular unrest. However, if protest leaders decide that King Abdullah's reforms efforts are deficient or moving too slowly, additional street demonstrations could be organized.

At this time, U.S. private sector organizations operating in Jordan have not been targeted by anti-government protestors. While there is no indication that U.S. citizens will be targeted in future protests, American citizens are advised to avoid all protest activity because even peaceful protests can quickly become violent.

For further information on the security situation in Jordan please contact [OSAC's Middle East and North Africa Coordinator](#).