

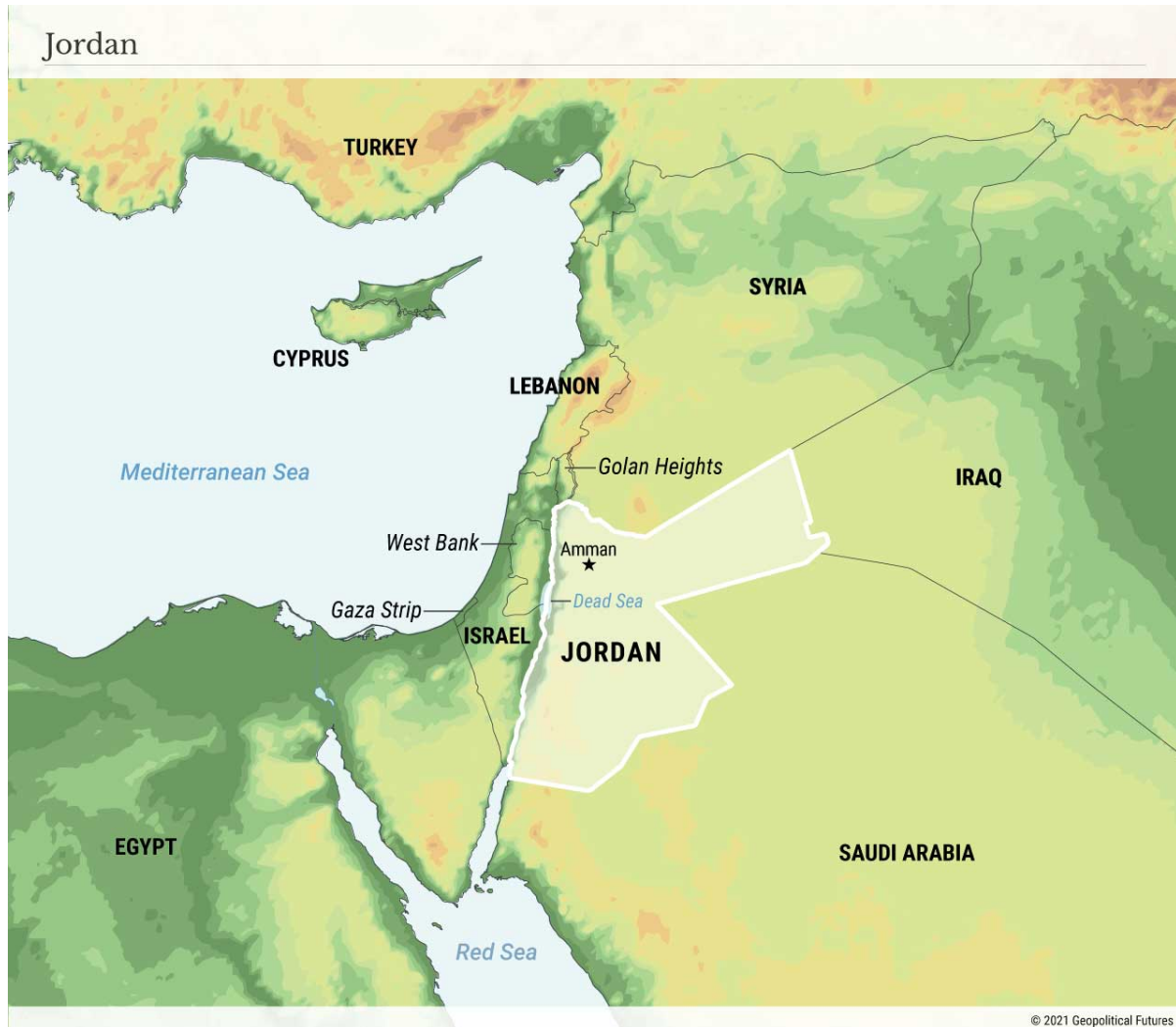
# Jordan's Existential Dilemma

by Hilal Khashan - April 8, 2021

Jordan will celebrate its centennial anniversary on April 11. The milestone coincides with a rift within the Hashemite monarchy that the government unexpectedly brought to the public's attention. The monarchy survived the assassination of King Abdullah I in 1951, the attempted Arab nationalist coup in 1957, the demise of its Hashemite cousins in Iraq in 1958, the loss of the West Bank in 1967, and the 2011 Arab uprisings. This time is different in that it exposes the Hashemites' political decay, mounting domestic demands for democratization, administrative transparency, economic reforms and regional pressure to accept the "deal of the century" to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It suggests a feud between two Hashemite royals, King Abdullah II and his half-brother Prince Hamzah. It is not about stopping a foreign conspiracy, as argued by the former, or fighting corruption, embezzlement and restricting political freedoms, as argued by the latter. It's about a rivalry over political dominance and enjoying the economic spoils of power.

## Tribal Support

Historically, Jordan's monarchs owe much to the support of the country's tribes. They joined Abdullah's great-grandfather, Hussein bin Ali, in his rebellion against the Ottoman Empire in 1916. In 1957, Bedouin units of the Jordanian military defeated the coup executed by the Palestinian units of the military and secured Hussein's rule. To this day, the Hashemites are still suspicious of pan-Arab Palestinians, who account for roughly 70 percent of Jordan's population, and so depend heavily on tribal support. (Small groups of Chechen and Circassian minorities control the intelligence apparatus and palace guards.)



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Abdullah's predecessors did not centralize state authority because they knew the tribes would buck. Instead, they bought their loyalty, allowing them to apply their tribal codes in civil and criminal matters. This arrangement worked until Abdullah began to rely more heavily on the armed forces to maintain law and order.

For their part, the Hashemites have consistently shown strong solidarity, usually presenting themselves to the Jordanian people as a cohesive ruling family. Just before he died in 1999, King Hussein removed the crown prince title from his brother Hassan, who had held it for 34 years, and gave it to his son Abdullah II. Abdullah appointed Hamzah crown prince but revoked the title five years later and gave it to his son, Hussein. Neither Hassan nor Hamzah publicly criticized their ouster, choosing instead to put the family first.

Which makes the current rift all the more curious. Last Saturday, the government detained more than a dozen people for planning a foreign-backed coup – allegedly led by Hamzah. It was reportedly the result of an extensive investigation carried out by the intelligence apparatus and internal security forces. Hamzah, who is now under house arrest, has denied any wrongdoing and has criticized the government's inability to govern, its corruption and its incompetence. Hamzah's U.S.-born mother, Queen Noor, dismissed the charges as unfounded allegations. This is nothing less than an existential crisis for the royal family.

There have long been tensions between Abdullah and Hamzah. Hamzah certainly doesn't trust the king, who violated his promise to keep him next in line to the throne, but the differences between them are more fundamental. The secular-minded Abdullah, who was born to a British mother and whose native language is English, depends on his articulate Palestinian wife in public appearances. On the other hand, Hamzah is fluent in Arabic, has a Transjordanian wife, understands Bedouin culture and presents himself as a pious man. He is approachable, evinces a charismatic demeanor that endears him to the tribal heads and security establishment whose rank and file are predominantly Bedouin. Hamzah could never dethrone Abdullah, of course, because he does not influence the army or the powerful intelligence apparatus.

Even so, the rise of such a towering opposition figure is a threat to Abdullah. In a country where the royal family members are above public criticism, the local media could not avoid noting his continuous spate of public appearances and timidly commending him on his enthusiasm and altruism without judging his intentions. Hamzah's vociferous criticism of Jordan's crackdowns on freedom of expression, its rampant corruption and the squandering of public funds made him the subject of allegations of conspiracy and collaboration with foreign countries – a thinly veiled allusion to Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. (Apart from the perfunctory expression of solidarity with the Jordanian king, the Saudi foreign minister's visit to Amman immediately after the break-up between Abdullah and Hamzah attests to the regional dimension of the Hashemite crisis.)

## More Than Palace Intrigue

There are real-world implications to the palace intrigue. Jordan's economic situation is dire. The average per capita income in 2019 was about \$4,400, with an unemployment rate exceeding 30 percent. The COVID-19 pandemic has added to the suffering of a people who are already heavily taxed. Extravagant royal spending contrasts starkly with Jordan's population, the majority of whom live under the poverty line or just above it. Queen Rania, for example, has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on her wardrobe. Her claim that her dresses are gifts or bought at discount is unconvincing to most of her subjects. A former member of the royal court financial affairs department says the queen spends \$2 million every year on shoes, bags and briefcases. He adds that the king earns more than \$2 billion every year from his investments in the U.S., Japan and the United Kingdom, in addition to his alleged illicit revenues in Jordan.

Hamzah has naturally focused on this aspect of his family's extravagance. He has meanwhile begun to talk more with leading tribes that predominate in the security apparatus, without whose loyalty the king cannot secure his regime. It was his half-brother's suspicious behavior that drove Abdullah to act preemptively. He has since stepped back somewhat. He commissioned his uncle, Prince Hassan, to defuse the family crisis. He banned public discussion of the matter, pledging to resolve it internally. Hamzah supposedly signed a letter pledging loyalty and support for the king and crown prince, including a phrase about working in the best interests of the Jordanian people. It demonstrates that the crisis is far from over. By inserting a note next to his signature stating that he was at his uncle's residence, Hamzah wanted to make it clear that he would not abide by the king's decision to put him under house arrest.

There is no easy way to fight corruption in Jordan, especially among the Bedouins, who constitute Hamzah's support base. They are somewhat insulated from reproach because many officials share blood relations and marriage with them. Hamzah champions the fight against corruption with the full knowledge that doing so lies beyond his competence and charisma. Jordan never legislated, let alone implemented, anti-corruption and democratization measures. If anything, corruption has been rising thanks to constitutional clauses that give the prime minister and Cabinet members immunity from prosecution. The law also allows members of parliament to engage in business as commercial partners. Jordan's political institutions function more like a business corporation than agencies of public well-being.

Jordan does not foster real political processes, even though it recognizes 30 political parties, because its absolute monarchy does not tolerate dissent and opposition. The kingdom is held

together by the army and the intelligence apparatus. During most of King Hussein's reign (1952-1999), the Muslim Brotherhood fully supported the Hashemites, and commentators often labeled it as the loyal opposition. Repression increased with the Arab uprisings, and the government arrested many activists and silenced demands for transitioning the kingdom into a constitutional monarchy.

It is therefore unlikely that Hamzah's ideals are the driving force behind his opposition to Abdullah. He understands the workings of Jordanian society and knows how polarized the country is. And though he may well be sincere in his calls for reforms, there's little doubt that he wants recognition and direct political involvement in Jordan's politics.

Abdullah's options for dealing with him are limited because he opposes the so-called "deal of the century" forged under the Trump administration. After all, it would ruin the Hashemite monarchy and transform it into a Palestinian state. Working with Hamzah could avert this eventuality. The Saudis, keen on completing the deal, took advantage of Jordan's flagging economy and low military pay to buy some Jordanian soldiers. The survival of Jordan is at stake, and the key to preserving it is royal cohesion. The ball is in Abdullah's court.

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