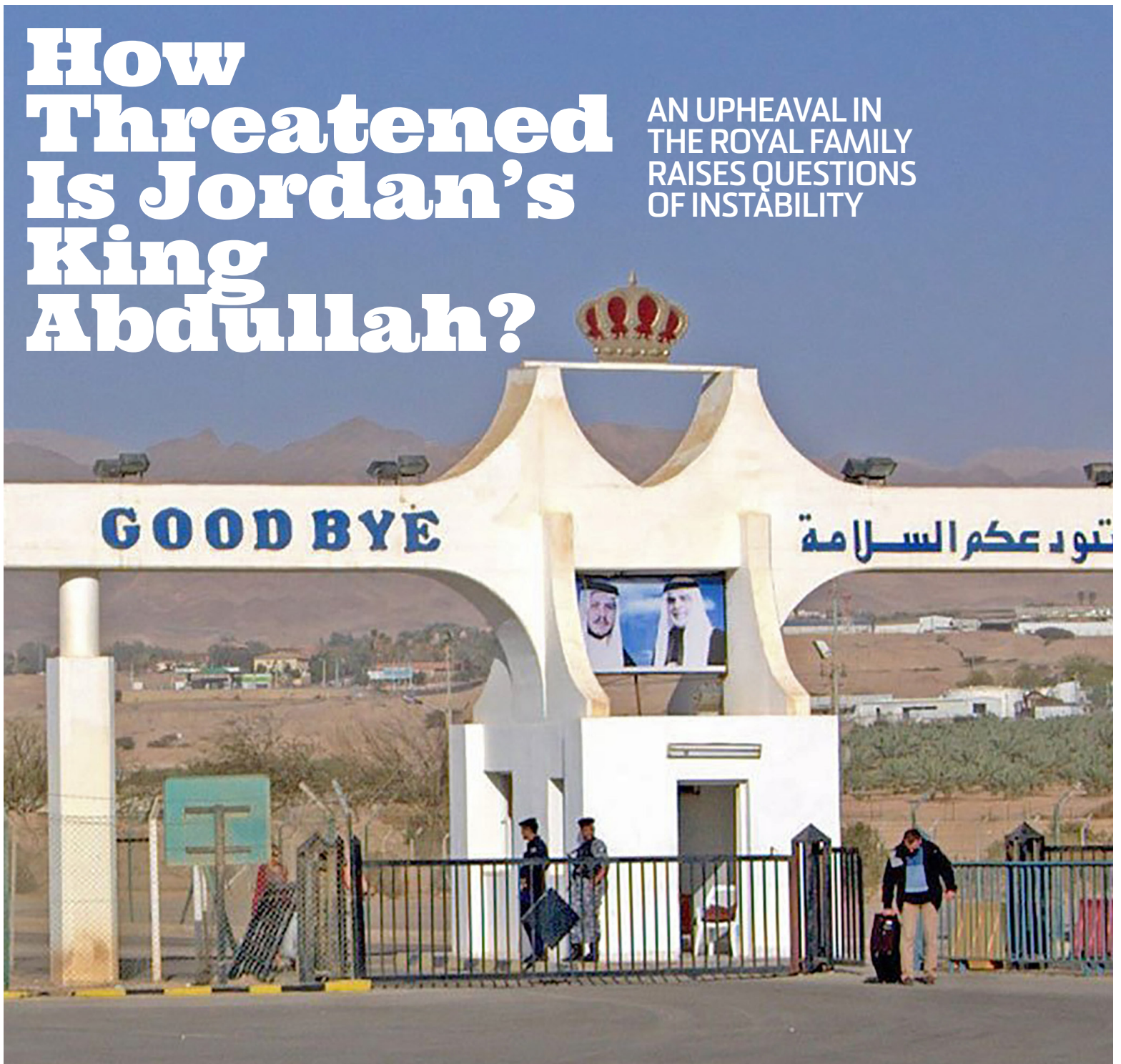


How Threatened Is Jordan's King Abdullah?

AN UPHEAVAL IN THE ROYAL FAMILY RAISES QUESTIONS OF INSTABILITY





For some people, when their neighbors have a domestic dispute next door, muffled through their apartment walls, they may listen in to find out how everyone there is faring and whether there is any need to intercede. They may also listen to find out if the conflict is going to spill over into their own living quarters.

That was likely the attitude of Israeli officials last week, as an event termed by some as a coup attempt and others as simply a family squabble went on in the Jordanian royal family. King Abdullah II took swift action against his half-brother, Prince Hamzah, as well as a number of the prince's advisers, and it appeared that the conflict resolved quickly. But the episode highlighted the twisty lineage of the Hashemite royalty, the concerns that the king has about a popular prince, and the different pressures that a leader already under pressure can come under.

It also came at a strange time in Israeli-Jordanian relations, with the two supposed peace partners at loggerheads over a number of issues. Do any of the threats to the Jordanian king suggest a threat to the Israel-Jordan relationship?

A vague coup-like thing

Two Saturdays ago, Jordanian authorities arrested a number of high-ranking government officials and put Prince Hamzah, the popular half-brother of King Abdullah, under house arrest. They were accused, in vague terms, of attempting to undermine the Jordanian government. Over the next few days, a drama played out, in part online. Prince Hamzah released a video in which he denounced the government and claiming that his brother's regime was corrupt. He said that he had not been involved with any foreign governments—which was apparently something he felt he had been accused of. (Jordanian government officials had accused him of communicating with opposition figures, including some abroad.)

That led to him being cut off from

the outside world, with his phone and Internet curtailed and the house arrest made more severe. Soon after, Prince Hamzah wrote a letter in which he stated his support for the king.

That apparently came after a session of intra-family mediation, taken on by five senior princes. One member of Prince Hamzah's inner circle, Malik R. Dahlan, who is also a professional mediator, told *The Wall Street Journal* that the publicity around the rift was a mistake. "This regrettable incident was the result of the clumsy actions of a senior security official and misrepresentation by a government official," he added. "It should have remained a family matter."

Exactly who those officials were was unclear. But some of the officials who were involved on Prince Hamzah's side are known; about 18 remain in custody. The most interesting is Bassem Awadallah, a Jordanian who

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previously served in the Jordanian government and now advises Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Awadallah's involvement suggests the possibility that the Saudis were mixing into the turmoil themselves.

Popular dissent and a non-coup

If there was a plot—the details of which have not yet been revealed by the Jordanians—it appears to have been an attempt to harness public unhappiness with the state of affairs in the country.

Dr. Joshua Krasna is a research fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center in Tel Aviv University and a professor at the NYU Center for Global Affairs. He served as a diplomat in Jordan.

He told *Ami*: “The domestic situation in Jordan is very difficult right now: The coronavirus public health measures have been very onerous, and after a good start, seem to not be working (they have 4,000+ new cases and close to 100 deaths each day; total deaths so far are 7,500+). The economic blow from the pandemic has been very difficult, coming on the baseline of an economy already not doing well, and the public is frustrated by what it sees as moves by the regime to use the pandemic as an excuse to increase regime power and further restrict civil liberties, especially freedom of expression.

“There has been a kind of ‘background noise’ of popular dissent since 2011, peaking in 2018 and last year, which doesn’t threaten the regime but shows that the situation is not good. Much of it is con-

Awadallah’s involvement suggests the possibility that the Saudis were mixing into the turmoil themselves.



Dr. Joshua Krasna

centrated in the East Banker (Transjordanian) communities, which are disaffected with government policies (which they see as threatening their preferred position in the kingdom) and continued economic hardship.

“The deaths of nine COVID patients in a government hospital in Salt after its oxygen supply ran out, in March, led to several days of street protests in Amman and other cities, defying curfews and fueled by economic grievances and complaints of corruption and government incompetence.”

According to a report by *The Wall Street Journal*, King Abdullah and Prince Hamzah played very different roles when they came to visit Salt. Abdullah spent his time criticizing local officials, while Hamzah sat with mourning families. That itself may have

been the inciting incident that led to the initial arrest of the prince.

“It appears that Prince Hamzah had been reaching out to disaffected groups and tribal elements and trying to beef up his image,” Dr. Krasna said. “He has been unhappy since being replaced by the king as crown prince in 2004 (in favor of King Abdullah II’s own son). In the current situation, this appears to have been a red line for the king, leading to the recent crackdown. There has been no talk of a coup in Jordan, but rather of ‘sedition.’”

Prince Hamzah is the son of King Hussein of Jordan’s fourth wife, American-born Queen Noor. King Abdullah II, on the other hand, is the son of his father’s second wife, Princess Muna, who was born in Britain.

Should Israel worry?

Instability in Jordan is a real concern for Israel and for the US, both of which have strategic interests in the country, which acts as a bulwark against extremists. Jordan’s Palestinian population, as well, is pacified by its Hashemite rulers, to some extent; a Palestinian uprising on Israel’s border with Jordan would be a disaster.

But Dr. Oded Eran, a former Israeli ambassador to Jordan and a senior research fellow at INSS, said that the conflict between the king and his half-brother itself isn’t one in which relations with Israel really figure.

“I don’t think that there is any difference between them on Israel or Jordan’s relationships overall,” he said.



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There have been recent conflicts between Jordan and Israel. At the beginning of March, Israel blocked a planned visit by Jordanian Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah to the Al-Aqsa Mosque. The next day, Jordan refused for several hours to grant overflight permission to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's helicopter, for a planned visit to the UAE. (Netanyahu ended up canceling the visit, in any case.)

But Dr. Eran said that those are more about the individual personalities involved, in a sense, than the two countries' relations.

"This is more or less a reflection of personal relations between the prime minister and the Jordanian king," he said. "There is no love lost between the two."

He also said that Jordan hasn't pressed Israel on Palestinian issues in a substantive way in recent years.

Dr. Eran said, as Dr. Krasna had suggested, that external affairs are much less an issue for Jordanian politics than internal discontent.

Will Jordan fall?

The concern that the international community has about Jordan's stability was clear in pronouncements of support—and calls to express that support—that occurred after the dust-up between the half-brothers. King Abdullah clearly appears to have people supporting his rule.

"Support of the US is very important to the royal family and the king," Dr. Eran said. "The calls made by President Biden and Secretary of State Blinken were important, and they came at a very appropriate time from the king's point of view."

Netanyahu didn't rush to make such a statement, perhaps because of the personality conflicts that Dr. Eran mentioned. But a rival of his did. Blue and White leader Benny Gantz said last Sunday, "A strong and flourishing Jordan is a security and economic interest for us, and we need to do what we can to help them." He also made it clear that the actual conflict is an internal Jordanian matter and one that Israel shouldn't get involved in.

"The population is still patriotic and largely loyal to the ruling family."



Dr. Oded Eran

And whatever the possible Saudi involvement, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was also quick to express their support for the Jordanian king.

"The kingdom stresses its full support for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan... and for the decisions and measures taken by King Abdullah II and Crown Prince Hussein to safeguard security and stability," the Saudis said in a statement.

Still, Dr. Krasna said that King Abdullah faces real difficulties, no matter the amount of international support he gets from phone calls.

"It is difficult to see a clear way out of the current, wider crisis," he said. "It will be difficult for the government to implement policies to significantly alleviate the social and economic distress caused by the pandemic—especially job creation and raising living standards. This is due to the anticipated continued global slowdown, to budgetary challenges, and the fiscal deficit (donors have long been pressing Jordan to make structural changes and impose austerity steps—especially reduction of subsidies). Given these conditions, Jordan is in for a prolonged period of suffering, dissent and repression."

Still, that doesn't necessarily threaten King Abdullah's reign, even with the latest

episode suggesting threats from inside his family, he said:

"The current situation does not seem to pose a significant threat to the stability of the Hashemite monarchy, because the population is still patriotic and largely loyal to the ruling family, although not necessarily to its bureaucracy and policies. Jordanians also recognize that the region is rife with instructive examples of the negative results of popular uprisings, and they fear the chaos they saw in Iraq and Syria. But perhaps most importantly, dissatisfaction with the government is diffuse, and there is no competing, alternative power center.

"This may be the significance of the Prince Hamzah episode: His contacts with various tribal leaders and open criticism of the government and indirectly, of the king, led to the perceived need to nip in the bud any sign of a challenge from within the ruling elites (this would be unprecedented in Jordan, but certainly not in other Arab monarchies)."

William Wechsler, director of the Rafik Hariri Center and Middle East Programs at the Atlantic Council, told Ami:

"I don't believe that King Abdullah is specifically vulnerable to a coup driven by internal royal family disputes—and what happened recently was far from a coup attempt.

"But more generally I think those in the West and indeed some also in Israel systematically understate the potential for instability in Jordan, preferring to believe that it will always remain an 'island of stability.' Jordanian stability, which is vitally important to US interests and Israeli security, has been far more a product of effective Jordanian leadership than any inherent advantages that that country possesses. Without such leadership the inherent drivers of instability will likely emerge.

"Unfortunately, tribal dynamics compounded by a weak economy and the continuing pandemic, along with perceptions of widespread corruption and crackdowns on legitimate dissent, serve to increase the risk of instability and thus raise the requirements for even more wise, strategic leadership from the top." ●