



COUNTRY
BACKGROUND
SERIES

Jordan

Jordan's ruling Hashemite family has enjoyed relative political stability since the country's independence in 1946. The monarchy has managed to weather several regional wars and political crises, while developing robust relations with the West. The increasingly close U.S.-Jordan relationship is grounded in substantial American aid, and Jordan's support of U.S. regional objectives, including securing Arab-Israeli peace. Jordan was one of the first Arab countries to make significant strides toward democracy when it held free parliamentary elections in 1989. Since then, however, there has been little progress, as parliament remains weak and ineffectual, and the monarchy continues to dominate all aspects of politics. The post-

9/11 political environment in the country has been characterized by a marginalization of opposition groups, regime electoral manipulation, and a general closing of political space. Despite this, American officials have hailed Jordan as a model of reform in the region.

I. General Interest

Since its refusal to become directly engaged in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, Jordan has adopted an increasingly pro-Western orientation and regularly cooperates with the U.S. on regional security and economic initiatives. Jordan's position astride the Levant, Israel, and Iraq makes it a critical player in the Middle East. Furthermore, the country's large Palestinian population and former claim to the West Bank have made Jordan an important partner in Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts.

Jordan's ties with the West have grown stronger since signing a [peace treaty](#)¹ with Israel in 1994. Relations were further buoyed by U.S.-educated King Abdullah II's accession to the throne. Although he promised to continue the political reform process initiated by his father, King Hussein, democratization has stagnated. Even as Abdullah announces major reform initiatives every several years, opposition parties are increasingly marginalized, electoral laws manipulated, and dissent quashed. Despite the Bush administration's emphasis on democracy promotion after the September 11 attacks, Abdullah's nominal commitment to reform and contribution to U.S. regional security goals has insulated the kingdom against American pressure for change.

II. Overview of U.S.-Jordan Relations

Jordan is the [second largest recipient](#)² of U.S. foreign assistance per capita, receiving an average of \$556 million annually in aid from 2004 to 2006. In recognition of the spill-over effects of the Iraq war, Jordan [received \\$950 million in economic aid and \\$604 million in military aid in 2003 alone](#).³ In 2006, the U.S. and Jordan signed a \$25 million Millennium Challenge Corporation grant despite [Freedom House's warning](#)⁴ that Jordan's lack of political

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reform should disqualify it for assistance, and [MCC's own data](#)⁵ showing that Jordan was falling behind on political rights and civil liberties.

In the past, the U.S. has attempted to use foreign assistance to influence Jordanian policy, as when the administration of George H. W. Bush [temporarily froze](#)⁶ \$55 million in aid to admonish King Hussein for refusing to join the American coalition against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War. A turning point in relations with the U.S. came in 1994 when Jordan made peace with Israel, despite strong domestic opposition.

Jordan has since become one of America's closest allies in the region. [Even before the September 11 attacks](#),⁷ the kingdom had provided crucial support to U.S. counterterrorism programs. Jordan has also been vital to American-brokered regional peace initiatives. In an effort to increase Arab-Israeli economic cooperation, the United States in 1998 designated several Jordanian manufacturing regions as "[Qualifying Industrial Zones](#)"⁸, from where goods with Israeli inputs were granted [tariff-free access](#)⁹ to American markets. In 2000, the U.S. and Jordan

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concluded a [free trade agreement](#)¹⁰ further deepening economic ties between the two countries.

III. Major Opposition Groups

Islamist Groups

The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, the largest opposition grouping in the country, has traditionally enjoyed a working relationship with the Hashemite monarchy, although tensions have increased since the early 1990s. In exchange for supporting King Hussein against the predominantly leftist opposition in the 1950s and 60s, the Brotherhood was among the few organizations granted legal status and allowed to operate freely during an otherwise repressive period of martial law. Prominent Brotherhood leader Ishaq Farhan became the first Islamist cabinet member in the Arab world, when he was appointed Education Minister in 1970.

In the 1989 parliamentary elections, the Brotherhood won a plurality of the vote, taking 22 out of 80 seats. In 1991, in another first for the region, the group joined the government of Prime Minister Mudar Badran with five ministers (Education, Health, Justice, Social Development, and Religious Affairs). In an effort to reduce Islamist electoral gains, King Abdullah [instituted the "one-vote" electoral law](#)¹¹ in 1993, which has had the effect of producing largely tribal, pro-government parliaments.

Founded in 1992 as the political arm of the Brotherhood, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) remains the largest party in the kingdom, though it currently holds only 6 seats in parliament. In 1993, it won 16 out of 80 seats, boycotted the 1997 elections, and won 17 (out of 110) in 2003. However, these results do not convey the full weight of the IAF's power, since it purposely runs a limited number of candidates in elections, so as to avoid upsetting the regime. The most recent election result was the worst in the group's history and [has been attributed](#)¹² to electoral fraud, paralyzing internal divisions between moderates and hardliners, and the party's inability to adapt to a changing political environment.

IAF Representation in Parliament (# of seats)

1993	1997	2003	2007
16	0 <i>Boycott</i>	17	6

Like other Islamist parties in the region, the IAF has increasingly focused on anti-corruption efforts and political reform, although due to the large number of Jordanians of Palestinian origin, it continues to direct much of its attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The IAF is one of the most democratically run parties in the Middle East. Nathan Brown [notes](#)¹³ that "[the group] has built an impressive set of democratic structures internally. Party leaders are elected by the membership, and there is a regular turnover in top positions."

The IAF's strong opposition to Jordan's peace treaty with Israel and support for Hamas have been cause for concern in Western circles. The party is known for its internal divisions between "doves," "centrists," "hawks," and "Hamasis," which have [intensified of late](#).¹⁴ In the lead-up to the 2007 legislative elections, the doves reportedly reached an understanding with Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit, agreeing to contest a limited number of seats and avoid running explicitly pro-Hamas candidates.

In 2001, a number of IAF members broke away from the party and, with other independent Islamists, formed the al-Wasat or "Islamic Centrist" party in 2001. Fashioning itself as a more moderate alternative to the IAF, al-Wasat has attracted some attention but remains a tiny party, having failed to win any seats in the most recent parliamentary elections. U.S. democracy promotion organizations such as the National Democratic Institute and the International Republic Institute have [worked closely](#)¹⁵ with al-Wasat members on platform development and message training.

Secular Groups

Secular opposition parties – mostly socialist or Arab nationalist – were a powerful force in the early post-independence era. Their influence grew incrementally in the 1950s, eventually leading King Hussein to appoint a Socialist prime minister, Sulayman al-Nabulsi, in 1956. Threatened by Nabulsi's growing popularity, Hussein forced his resignation a year later, banned all political parties, and instituted martial law. Since the reemergence of parliamentary life in 1989, secular parties have failed to gain much traction. Though several, including the Communist Party and the center-right National Constitutional Party, have held seats in parliament in the past, their influence has waned. Secular parties do not currently hold any seats in the current Jordanian parliament.

IV. Political Reform

Perceptions of Political Reform and U.S. Democracy Promotion

Jordanians view U.S. efforts to promote democracy with skepticism. According to a [2006 Zogby International poll](#),¹⁶ only 10 percent of Jordanians said that American democracy promotion efforts had a positive impact on their opinion of the United States, compared to 72 percent who said the impact was negative. It is worth noting, however, that this trend diverges somewhat from Jordanian attitudes toward American political culture and system of government: the same poll found that American freedom and democracy had a positive impact on 27 percent of Jordanians' impression of the United States, versus 43 percent negative. This discrepancy is likely due to the perceived association between U.S. democracy promotion efforts and the Iraq war and, more generally, the war on terror, both of which remain extremely unpopular in Jordan.

Meanwhile, attitudes toward democracy are overwhelmingly positive. According to the [World Values Survey](#),¹⁷ 90% of Jordanians agree or strongly agree that "democracy may have problems, but it's better than any other form of government." As for how Jordanians interpret "democracy," 57% of respondents in a [2006 University of Jordan poll](#)¹⁸ named "civil rights and political liberties" as one of the top three things that democracy means to them.

The reign of King Abdullah II, however, has been marked by grandiose promises for reform contrasted by little meaningful change. Since acceding to the throne in 1999, Abdullah has announced four major nation-wide reform programs aimed at enriching civil society and democratic institutions, but none has had a significant impact on political participation. By promising reform, Abdullah has sought to portray Jordan as a bellwether of democracy in the region, preempting U.S. calls for change.

Political Institutions

[The Jordanian constitution](#),¹⁹ adopted in 1952, enshrines near-absolute power in the monarchy. Article 30 asserts that the king is "immune from any liability and responsibility." The constitution grants significant powers to the legislature and courts, but both are subject to executive oversight.

Chapter five of the constitution gives both houses of parliament the ability to propose legislation (Article 95)

and amend or reject legislation presented by the executive (Article 92). However, the king has the right to dissolve parliament, and can rule by decree when parliament is not in session. Perhaps more importantly, the king directly appoints the cabinet, giving him direct access to government ministries. Meanwhile, Jordan's parliament is notoriously ineffectual, making the bureaucracy the focal point of most Jordanians' interaction with the state. The king's authority over ministers allows him to circumvent the legislature altogether in governing the country.

The constitution guarantees independence of the judiciary. However, the fact that "judicial appointments are generally under the [effective control](#)"²⁰ of the executive-branch" means that judges often find themselves under pressure to toe the government line.

In addition to the constitution, the [National Charter of 1991](#),²¹ formulated by an appointed commission, set guidelines for political participation after the resumption of parliamentary life in 1989. While it paved the way for the re-legalization of political parties, it also set clear boundaries for political contestation. The participation of political groups in drafting the charter was contingent on accepting the institutional prerogatives and legitimacy of the monarchy. The charter is therefore seen by some observers as an attempt by ruling elites to de-legitimize any forces intent on opposing the monarchy. Since the institution of the charter, the red lines of publicly criticizing the king or questioning royal prerogatives have remained in place, as a punishable offense.

Prospects for Reform

King Abdullah announced three major reform programs in recent years: "[Jordan First](#)"²² in 2002, the "[National Agenda](#)"²³ in 2005, and "[We Are all Jordan](#)"²⁴ in 2006. They have had [little impact](#)²⁵ on political and civil rights in Jordan.

The country's electoral process has become less free over the past five election cycles, with particularly [widespread allegations](#)²⁶ of [voter fraud](#)²⁷ during the 2007 municipal and national elections. Electoral districts have been increasingly gerrymandered so that pro-government regions are represented by one parliamentarian per two-to-three thousand constituents, whereas generally pro-IAF areas are represented by as little as [one parliamentarian per 90,000 people](#).²⁸

At a basic level, democracy in Jordan will require that the monarchy give up some of its vast powers and allow for the legislature to play a more independent role. How-

ever, major constitutional reforms are not on the agenda of political parties or civil society. Questioning the king's prerogatives is still considered a "red line" that few dare to cross. However, it is the line that will have to be eventually crossed, if Jordan wishes to become a constitutional monarchy where the executive branch is both responsible and accountable.

In addition, ethnic and social cleavages complicate efforts at reform. Indigenous Jordanians, despite being the minority, dominate the country's political and security institutions, as well as the army. Any movement toward democracy will mean that native Jordanians lose their grip on political power, while Jordanians of Palestinian origin, who number around 60% of the population, translate their demographic presence into greater political say.

V. Congressional Policy and Foreign Assistance

Key Legislation

In light of Jordan's strategic importance in the region and its general support of U.S. foreign policy objectives, maintaining strong ties with the kingdom has been a priority of the Bush administration. Considering the \$363 million in economic aid and \$300 million in military aid promised unconditionally to Jordan in the 2008 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill ([H.R. 2764 \[110th\]](#)),²⁹ the relationship is unlikely to change in the near future.

In September 2007, the House of Representatives passed a resolution ([H. Res 575 \[110th\]](#)),³⁰ commending Jordan's monarchy and citizens "for their continued commitment to holding elections and broadening political participation." The resolution makes no mention of the closing of democratic space in recent years. The timing of the legislation was questionable, coming less than two months after the widely condemned July municipal elections.

Policy Outlook

The Jordanian regime has shown its resilience over time, weathering various internal and external challenges. Because of its strategic importance, Western nations, and particularly the U.S., have been willing to "lend Jordan political, military, and economic support in its hours of need lest its collapse result in a regional conflagration."³¹ More than ever, Jordan is seen by American policymakers as an indispensable ally and a bulwark of stability in a troubled region.

However, others point out that the perception of a reform-minded monarchy bears little resemblance³² to the reality on the ground. Since the 2005 Amman hotel bombings, Jordan's rulers have adopted a security-first approach to governing, with political reform being relegated to the background. The most recent parliamentary elections – with less than 6% of seats going to the opposition – were seen by many observers³³ as evidence that Jordan is becoming increasingly authoritarian. Jordanian commentator Ayman al-Safadi, in an August 2007 column, warned that the country was entering the era of "broken bones,"³⁴ with an increasing threat of open confrontation between the ruling establishment and Islamists. The deterioration of the political situation coincides with a difficult economic environment, with oil, electricity, and food prices having risen significantly.

This does not necessarily translate into future political instability. However, the U.S. and its allies should keep in mind that Jordan's increasing resort to authoritarian measures, while seemingly effective in the short-run, leaves unaddressed the growing level of domestic frustration at the failure of the government to deliver on its promises of real reform. If the legal opposition continues to be marginalized, more Jordanians may lend their support to extremist groups, an outcome that would not bode well for American regional security interests.

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The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining the impact of American policy on political reform and democratization in the Middle East.

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