

JORDAN

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Jordan's cabinet re-(re-)-shuffled

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR REFORMS IN JORDAN?

At a time of deteriorating economic conditions and security challenges Prime Minister Hani Mulki, appointed by HM King Abdullah in May last year, conducted a re-shuffle to his cabinet on 15 January 2017. The changes were approved by a Royal decree and are affecting major portfolios. It is the second re-shuffle to Mulki's cabinet after less than seven months in office and includes six new ministers: The Ministry of State for Prime Ministry Affairs, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry for Legal Affairs and the Ministry of Youth.

Changes to the Jordanian political landscape are not uncommon and happen regularly. However, Jordan's economic situation is reaching a tipping point, home-grown radicalization and terror are peaking. Will the new government be able to tackle Jordan's economic challenges, address the threat of terrorism and safeguard the Kingdom's role as platform of stability in the Middle East? Jordanian political analysts doubt that the new cabinet will be able to deliver on its own expectations.

The politics of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan take place in a framework of a constitutional monarchy with representative government, based on the constitution promulgated in 1952. Since the death of his father King Hussein I in 1999, King Abdullah II is the reigning monarch and head of state. He is the chief executive, commander-in-chief of the armed forces and appoints and may dismiss judges by decree. His executive authority is executed through Prime Minister Al-Mulki, and his cabinet. Legislative power rests in the bicameral parliament which consists of the 65-seat Chamber of

Notables/Senate, whose members are appointed by the monarch, and the 130-seat House of Deputies, whose members are popularly elected. However, the House of Deputies has little power to initiate laws alone, as the Senate needs to pass any proposals made by the Deputies. The King has the power to dissolve the House of Deputies at any time. An independent judicial branch is guaranteed by the Jordanian constitution and consists of civil, religious and special courts, with informal tribal courts still being used, primarily in rural areas.

Internal rivalries and the repercussions of Karak

According to official statements, the recent re-shuffle in the cabinet aimed at achieving more efficient cooperation and coordination between the individual ministries. Mohammad Hussainy, the head of Identity Centre, a civil society organisation that works on electoral issues, argues that "the re-shuffle was needed as a result of the lack of harmony among ministers and the disputes that erupted which hampered the government's work"¹. Another reading among analysts is that the re-shuffle was driven by personal disputes, primarily aiming at ending internal rivalries between the ministers involved. In a similar vein, observers cite the wider political scope of action for Prime Minister Mulki who got "rid of those who might have been opposing the way he was

¹Hussainy, Mohammad cited in Maayeh, Suha, „Jordan interior minister moved aside in cabinet reshuffle" in: *The National*, 15.01.2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/jordan-interior-minister-moved-aside-in-cabinet-reshuffle> (Accessed on 04.02.17).

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handling the state files"², as the Secretary General of the National Congress Party Rheil Gharaibeh proposes.

Among the members of cabinet, particularly former Minister of Interior Salameh Ham-mad had become the target of heavy criticism, for his perceived ill handling of the terrorist attacks in Karak claimed by ISIS in December. A group of 48 members of the House of Deputies signed a memorandum and submitted it to the House speaker's office in December, requesting that the House would move with a vote of no confidence against the minister. According to the Jordanian constitution, the requirement to withdraw confidence from a minister is a total of 66 votes out of 130 in the House of Deputies. As the interior minister was expected to survive the vote, the Prime Minister came up with the re-shuffle at the end of the 10-day constitutional deadline for the submission of the no-confidence vote. "The Prime Minister is aware that the interior minister is powerful and that he was expected to pass the no-confidence vote, which would have made it difficult to oust him in the re-shuffle"³, says Hussainy. Furthermore, the relationship between Prime Minister and Minister of Interior had already been tense before and the vote represented a good opportunity to get rid of the unwanted minister⁴.

²Gharaibeh, Rheil cited in Azzeh, Laila, "Gov't has 'golden opportunity' to carry out reforms after reshuffle" in: *The Jordan Times*, 17.01.17,

<http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/gov%E2%80%99t-has-golden-opportunity%E2%80%99-carry-out-reforms-after-reshuffle-%E2%80%94-analysts> (Accessed on 04.02.17).

³Hussainy, Mohammad cited in Maayeh, Suha, "Jordan interior minister moved aside in cabinet reshuffle" in: *The National*, 15.01.2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/jordan-interior-minister-moved-aside-in-cabinet-reshuffle> (Accessed on 04.02.17).

⁴Interview with Oraib Al-Rantawi, Director Al-Quds Centre for Political Studies, conducted on 04.02.17 in Amman, Jordan.

New faces, old concepts

The overall reaction in political circles and among the Jordanian population to the changes in the cabinet has remained rather reserved and pessimistic. The government is perceived as a "government lacking visionary politicians and as isolated from its population"⁵. The re-shuffle has been perceived as a fig leaf, a 'change of faces' rather than a real change in policy and no big expectations towards the new ministers have been formulated. An overall concern regarding the lack of vision by the government for the future of the country has been raised by many voices, in particular regarding the economic crisis Jordan is facing and the tense security situation.

The newly appointed ministers are all well known in the Jordanian political landscape and have either already served the country as ministers, advisers to the king or in the diplomatic service. Ghaleb Zu'bi, the Minister of Interior since January 15th, has already been Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs, Minister of Justice and Minister of Interior and looks back at a long-political career. In line with his new colleagues in the cabinet, he is described as conservative and expected to show strong loyalty towards Mulki. Ayman Safadi, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, has served as deputy prime minister, holds strong ties to the Gulf States and is a critic of Syria's president Bashar Assad. Enjoying popularity among East Bank Jordanians and West Bankers (Jordanians of Palestinian origin who have emigrated to Jordan in several waves) alike, Mamdouh Abbadi, new Minister of State for Prime Ministry Affairs, has been member of the 14th, 15th and 16th House of Deputies. Hadithah Khreisha serves as the new Minister of Youth and Bisher Khasawneh, previously Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, received a new portfolio and serves the government now in his new position as Minister of State for Legal Affairs. Diverging from the previously described political es-

⁵Interview with Oraib Al-Rantawi, Director Al-Quds Centre for Political Studies, conducted on 04.02.17 in Amman, Jordan.

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establishment is the new Minister of Education, Omar Razzaz. He previously worked as the Manager of the World Bank's Lebanon Country Office, "a man with a vision and a critical mind whose ability to 'think out of the box' could serve Jordan in transforming its educational policy towards a more economy-based system"⁶, as Omar Kollab, political analyst at the Jordanian newspaper "Ad-Dustour", hopes. In the context of the reform towards more secular school curriculum, which sparked massive protests especially among Jordanian teachers, the Ministry of Education had been going through a time of rupture. Razzaz' appointment can be interpreted as a signal to both parties involved – an Islamists and secularist stream – to return back to the table and enable a fresh start to negotiations. Nonetheless, other analysts consider Razzaz' consensual leadership attitude to be even impedimental to reconciliation in the protracted dispute on Jordan's educational policy.

A tactical move to prevent unrest following tax rises and the cut of subsidies?

Jordan's fragile economy has traditionally been the blind spot of the country and has additionally been pressurized since the start of the conflict in Syria, by the influx of refugees and price fluctuations of volatile resources such as oil, gas and water. In the past years Jordan suffered under the decrease in trade and a significant reduction in tourism while, on the other hand, military expenditures and subsidization peaked - all in all negatively affecting the country's overall resilience. The latest budget confirms that Jordan is increasingly dependent on public debt and foreign aid to prop up continued spending. As part of a three-year deal with the International Monetary Fund the government is obliged to take measures to cut public debt from almost 95% of GDP currently to 77% by 2021. Already suffering under constantly increasing prices while wages are stagnating, and affordable housing in particular in the capital Amman be-

⁶Interview with Omar Kollab, Political Analyst at Ad-Dustour, conducted on 31.01.17 in Amman, Jordan.

coming rare, such measures are drawn to spark protests. The recent changes in the government are widely seen as mere cosmetics, a tactical move to appease the public ahead of tax-hikes and cutting subsidies. On February 1st the government raised the prices of gasoline, kerosene and diesel by 3 to 8 per cent, with more price and tax-rises being expected in the next months.

At the same time the re-shuffle in the cabinet resulted in a loss of economic expertise with two experts - Yusuf Mansur, minister of state for economic affairs and Jawad Anani, deputy prime minister for economic affairs and minister of state for investment affairs – out of the government. Political analyst Omar Kollab argues "It would have been better for him [*Mulk*] to focus on bringing ministers with different economic visions, because the crisis in Jordan is an economic one and even political challenges are caused by the failure to come up with sound economic policies. The country is in urgent need of foreign investments and the government needs to work on improving the conditions for those"⁷, he continues. Oraib Al-Rantawi, director of the Al-Quds Centre for Political Studies, describes the current economic strategy of the Jordanian government as based on two pillars: attracting additional foreign aid and increasing taxation. Both are risky and insufficient in addressing root causes, with the former being difficult to influence, while the latter, in a state of already low wages and high prices and no social safety networks, risking to push more and more Jordanians into poverty"⁸.

⁷Interview with Omar Kollab, Political Analyst at Ad-Dustour, conducted on 31.01.17 in Amman, Jordan.

⁸Interview with Oraib Al-Rantawi, Director Al-Quds Centre for Political Studies, conducted on 04.02.17 in Amman, Jordan.

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Domestic stability and the threat of violent extremism

Beside the tense economic situation, Jordan is also facing severe challenges in domestic security, first and foremost the threat of radicalization and terrorism. Several worrying security incidents in 2016, including attacks in and around refugee camps, the shooting of three members of the US special forces at an airbase and the recent attacks in Karak, have weakened the confidence of Western backers in Jordan's ability to handle its external and internal security threats and raised concerns over the possible radicalization of some members of Jordan's military and security apparatus. There is much at stake for Jordan and its Allies. Within the two-way relationship Jordan is dependent on the support it receives in form of aid grants and loans from its Western Allies and at the same time Jordan is amongst the US's closest Allies in the region and is in Europe often perceived as the last 'safe haven' in a region challenged by growing insecurity and violent conflict. The Hashemite Kingdom provides valuable support to the U.S.-led military campaign against ISIS, and with the situation in Turkey becoming increasingly tense, might play an even more prominent role in the future by hosting Allied forces.

Being aware of the severity of the country's situation, observers assume that the appointment of Ayman Safadi, former adviser to King Abdullah II, as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates has been designed to enable a more direct role in diplomacy to be played by the Royal Court and to strengthen the King's control⁹. Internally, the resignation of former Minister of Interior, Salameh Hammad, is not the only repercussion of the recent terrorist attacks. In the aftermath of Karak, the head of the

⁹Alabbasi, Mamoon, „Jordan cabinet reshuffle strengthens king's control" in *The Arab Weekly*, 22.01.17, <http://www.thearabweekly.com/News-&-Analysis/7616/Jordan-cabinet-reshuffle-strengthens-king%E2%80%99s-control> (Accessed on 04.02.17).

Public Security Directorate, Major-General Atef al-Saudi, also lost his position and mosque preachers nationwide were dismissed or disciplined if they refused to take part in the memorial prayer for the victims of the attacks. The new Minister of Interior, Ghaleb Zu'ib, has served the post before and, as former police chief, brings broad political experience coupled with expertise in the security sector. Is his appointment a reaction to the increasingly tense security situation and the growing terrorist threat in the country? In the last months stronger action by the security services and its enforcement agencies in the fight against terrorism has been observed in the country. However, much of Jordan's strategy to counter violent extremism, announced in 2014, has yet to be implemented. Resources are lacking and coordination between the different stakeholders in Jordan is missing. With the tougher security measures, international human rights groups complain that there has been an erosion in public liberties and a limited scope of action for civil society organisations, and warn of further developments¹⁰. Dr. Amer Al-Sabaileh, director of the Amman-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies MEMPSI, doubts that the new minister will bring the change which is needed. He states that "Cooperation and coordination between the different stakeholders in the security sector seemed to be missing. The government needs to acknowledge the threat of terrorism and radicalization"¹¹.

A critical outlook to the future

Jordan's societal peace is crumbling. Various studies report that general dissatisfaction rises, wide parts of the population feel

¹⁰Al-Khalidi, Suleiman, „Jordan's king reshuffles cabinet amid growing security, economic challenges", in *Reuters*, 15.01.17, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-jordan-government-reshuffle-idUSKBN14Z0CB> (Accessed on 04.02.17).

¹¹Interview with Dr. Amer Al-Sabaileh, Director of MEMPSI, conducted on 29.01.17 in Amman, Jordan.

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excluded and lost and hold the government responsible for the difficult socio-economic conditions they are living in. In particular the provinces in Jordan suffer under widespread poverty, and the feeling of being disadvantaged and neglected by their representatives in Amman, seem to create support for anti-government tendencies. Currently, the vast majority of the population is still valuing the relative stability and the peace they are living in enough to stay loyal to their government. "Whether the conflict in Syria and Iraq, the ongoing conflict in Palestine or the war in Yemen, Jordanians realize that the whole region is in turmoil and they still live in an oasis of relative tranquillity"¹², says Jordanian political analyst Omar Kollab. For the long-term this, however, does not give a blank check to the government. "If economic conditions continue to worsen, prices are rising and subsidies are cut, making it harder and harder for the average Jordanian to live a comfortable life, people will stand up against their representatives"¹³, fears Kollab.

Even before the re-shuffle Prime Minister Mulki did not enjoy wide popularity and his government is lacking confidence from the population. Kollab describes him as "a conservative leader, representing the establishment" and fears that he is "not equipped to lead the country to better economic prosperity."¹⁴ Appointed by the King to restructure Jordan's fragile economy and lift the country out of the crisis, the business-friendly Mulki has not yet managed to promote market reforms that stimulate growth on the micro-level. According to World Bank data, the Jordanian economy declined

slightly from a 2.2% expansion in 2015 to 2.1% in the first half of 2016.¹⁵

In addition, Mulki did not yet succeed in (re-) building the bridge between government and population and in promoting dialogue with civil society. On the other side, purely blaming Mulki is making matters too easy. Particularly in foreign, security and defence policy the mandate of the government is very limited and depends, to a great extent, on the Royal Court. Promising reform initiatives have been introduced by the King both in the political and the economic field. Fruitful implementation now depends on in how far the government succeeds in combining those initiatives into a comprehensive approach involving all relevant stakeholders and addressing Jordan's immense security and economic threats.

¹²Interview with Omar Kollab, Political Analyst at Ad-Dustour, conducted on 31.01.17 in Amman, Jordan.

¹³Interview with Omar Kollab, Political Analyst at Ad-Dustour, conducted on 31.01.17 in Amman, Jordan.

¹⁴Interview with Omar Kollab, Political Analyst at Ad-Dustour, conducted on 31.01.17 in Amman, Jordan.

¹⁵Hussainy, Mohammad cited in Maayeh, Suha, „Jordan interior minister moved aside in cabinet reshuffle" in: *The National*, 15.01.2017, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/jordan-interior-minister-moved-aside-in-cabinet-reshuffle> (Accessed on 04.02.17).