

INTERVIEW WITH KING ABDULLAH II*

In an exclusive interview with TPQ, His Majesty King Abdullah II reflects on how Jordan is living the Arab Spring and how the historic changes of the past year are impacting regional dynamics. To Jordan, King Abdullah explains, the Arab Spring was a much-awaited opportunity to overcome internal resistance to change and embark on an unprecedented political reform process. On the regional scene, the on-going Syrian crisis, and its potential consequences for Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and Iraq, remain the biggest question mark. Jordan's King, who recently hosted the first Palestinian-Israeli talks in more than 16 months, also warns that the window of opportunity for Mideast peace is quickly narrowing.



*This written interview, with His Majesty King Abdullah II Ibn Al Hussein, King of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, was conducted in February 2012.

W

hat dangers do you see ahead in the region resulting from the Arab Spring and what is critical to this end in terms of European and American policies?

I see a period of uncertainty and instability, which is a natural consequence of the historic changes that we have been witnessing and which will persist until new political systems and institutions take root.

In the short-term, some countries may be passing through an Arab winter before their Arab spring blossoms into an Arab summer. History is full of such temporary set-backs even in what are now the strongest and greatest democracies. But what counts is that we have crossed the turning point, there's no going back on the legitimate aspiration of the people to have a larger say in the way their societies are organized.

In the long term, I'm confident we will all look back at the Arab Spring and agree that it was a good thing and that it made life better for many Arabs. I trust we will eventually see the emergence of vibrant and engaged civil societies, more pluralism, democracy, justice, and equality in the Arab world.

The EU and the U.S. have a moral duty to assist and support nascent Arab democracies. What is required



of Europe and the U.S. at this stage is to judge the new emerging governments by the same standards as they will be judged by their own voters: their ability to deliver stability, security, democratic reforms, civil rights, jobs, and economic growth. So far, signs are encouraging that the political forces and governments emerging from the Arab Spring want a healthy relationship and open dialogue with the West, and vice versa. The EU's task-force for the Southern Mediterranean set up by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton last year and the U.S.' Middle East Incentive Fund recently proposed by President Barack Obama are very positive steps.

Where do you stand vis-à-vis the assumption that democracy in most of your neighboring countries would inevitably spell the end of secularism? Will individual freedoms be restricted further before they improve?

The Arab Spring is a call for dignity, justice, and freedom. It is a call for change directed to all forces in the old regimes, whether in government or at the opposition. The groups that emerged from the first round of post-uprisings elections won on platforms based on moderation, pluralism and respect of liberties. These are the values that people want to see upheld and translated into policies by those in power, regardless of their political color. If truly accountable systems are set in place, failure to uphold freedoms will mean that these political parties will not get re-elected next time around. Remember, there is always a “next election,” and candidates will be judged on the basis of their commitment to individual freedoms and democratic values.

You have recently met with Hamas leader Khalid Mishaal. The official goal announced of the meeting was to “turn a new leaf in the relationship between Jordan and Hamas.” Why, at this juncture, is Amman re-opening ties with Hamas? Is Jordan’s strategy towards Islamic groups changing in light of the Arab spring?

Jordan has always been at the forefront of efforts to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and this entails that we speak to all Palestinian factions, and Hamas is part of the Palestinian political fabric. With Hamas specifically, we have long had regular contacts on the ground, through the Jordanian field hospital in Gaza. Hamas will not reopen offices in Jordan and there is no change in this policy.

As for the late January meeting between myself, Khalid Mishaal and the Crown Prince of Qatar, it was in the framework of Jordanian support for peace efforts, Palestinian reconciliation, and the Palestinian National Authority’s efforts to realize the aspirations of the Palestinian people. I reiterated Jordan’s stance that

“What is required of Europe and the U.S. at this stage is to judge the new emerging governments by the same standards as they will be judged by their own voters: their ability to deliver stability, security, democratic reforms, civil rights, jobs, and economic growth.”

negotiations, with the support of the international community, are the only way to restore Palestinian rights. So, no change in strategy there either.

How have the Arab uprisings affected geopolitical balances in the region and how have Turkey's shifts played into these new fault-lines?

Turkey has always been a key regional player, and started raising its regional profile well before the Arab Spring, thanks to positive stands and timely policies. But it is still early to predict the new geopolitical balances, as regional changes continue to unfold around us.

The Arab uprisings have obviously increased Israel's isolation, as was immediately made evident by the storming of the Israeli embassy in Cairo last year.

Another new geopolitical factor is that Egypt is now looking inwards and more preoccupied with its own transition. This means that others, including Jordan, have had to step up and step in, especially in terms of moving the peace process forward and advocating the rights of the Palestinian people and their legitimate goal of establishing a Palestinian state living side by side with a secure Israel. A strong Egypt has always been a tremendous asset to Arab diplomacy and inter-Arab coordination, and we are confident it's only a matter of time before Egypt returns to play its traditional regional and international role.

Syria is the biggest question mark at the moment. It is impossible to predict how the Syria situation will evolve and fully and comprehensively assess its ramifications on Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, Iraq and all other players and countries in the Middle East. The only certain thing is that the Syrian crisis is placing new burdens and responsibilities on the neighbors, namely both Turkey and Jordan, starting with looming prospects of a humanitarian emergency.

How does Jordan try to position itself amidst the shifting regional dynamics?

We try to be proactive rather than reactive, affect the direction of change in the interest of peace and security as well as closer and wider regional cooperation, always keeping true to our long-established principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

As I mentioned, the peace process remains front and center to us. The achievement of a permanent peace that restores all Palestinian legitimate rights is not only a regional policy objective, but a paramount national interest of Jordan. On the

other hand, the window of opportunity for peace is quickly narrowing, and we are all – Palestinians, Israelis, and the international community – running out of options. This is why we stepped up our efforts, and, earlier this year, managed to bring together, in Amman, Israeli and Palestinian negotiators for the first time in 16 months. They were only exploratory talks but no conflict has ever been resolved by not talking.

You warned, almost a decade ago, about the Shi'a crescent – how worried are you about Iran's influence in the region? In Iraq? Could we see a larger scale sectarian conflict in the region? Given how polarized the region is becoming – what sort of solution is there to avert the worst case scenario?

Reviving the peace process is key to defusing any present or future standoff with Iran. We need to shift the focus back on resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This unresolved conflict offers a rallying point for any entity wishing to gain the emotional support of over one billion Muslims around the world.

Jordan, on our part, remains firm on its position that while Iran must show genuine will to fulfill its international obligations, any military action against Iran would aggravate instability in the Middle East, and have greatly negative repercussions for the U.S., Europe, and Israel. The region does not need yet another crisis at this stage.

"...reform in Jordan had been, until last year, 'two steps forward, one step backward'."

As for Iraq, it is a crucial neighbor, and Jordan is obviously watching closely the situation there after the U.S.' withdrawal. Reconciliation and nation-building are key for Iraq at this stage. We stand ready to support all dialogue and coalition-building efforts for the sake of the stability, security, economic development, and the overall prosperity of the Iraqi people.

Would you assess the Arab spring to have empowered the more progressive wing of your government and as such aided Jordan's evolution?

The Arab Spring has been a wonderful opportunity for Jordan.

We had been talking about reform and had managed to implement very important economic reforms over the past 12 years: from liberalization of key economic

sectors, including telecom and IT, to free trade, becoming the first Arab country to sign a free trade agreement with the U.S., in 2000. We signed a free trade agreement with Turkey in 2009 and have similar agreements with many other countries, in addition to our association agreement with the EU.

All these changes were aimed at fostering the emergence of a secure, productive, and confident middle class that could be the cornerstone of Jordan's development and the back-bone of political and economic life. The middle class can only thrive in a democracy, and it has always been clear to me, as well as to the many Jordanian men and women who have been championing change over the past several years, that our wide-ranging and comprehensive economic reform had to be complemented by equally wide-ranging and equally comprehensive political reform.

"I am optimistic about 2012, I am confident this will be Jordan's year of key reform. We have a clear roadmap and an agreed end-goal: parliamentary government."

But whenever it came to substantial political reform, resistance from within had always been fierce. Some called it – I myself called it – “old guard”, others spoke of entrenched interests, others yet spoke of fear of change. This is why, as I myself have said, reform in Jordan had been, until last year, “two steps forward, one step backward.”

Then, the Arab Spring came, and it allowed us to overcome this resistance to change and forge ahead with accelerated, more comprehensive and ambitious reform.

Could you describe the democratic reforms carried out in your country in the past year and their impact thus far? How do you see the remainder of 2012 ideally unfolding in terms of Jordan's elections and political reforms?

I am optimistic about 2012, I am confident this will be Jordan's year of key reform. We have a clear roadmap and an agreed end-goal: parliamentary government. The time-line is also set, the government and parliament have a daunting task ahead of them, with dozens of key political laws requiring drafting and promulgation, but they are on track so far. And, I will not tire to repeat, these changes are the beginning, not the end.

We started in early 2011 by setting up a National Dialogue Committee, which was mandated with issuing recommendations on new elections and political parties laws. Almost in parallel, a group of highly regarded Jordanian statesmen, as part of a Royal Committee, drafted amendments to the Constitution. These amendments were discussed and promulgated by Parliament and ratified in September 2011. We are talking about 42 amendments out of 131 total articles, basically one third of the entire Constitution was amended. A constitutional court and an independent elections commission are being created; stronger human rights guarantees were introduced; limitations to the government's ability to issue temporary laws and new check-and-balance mechanisms were set.

These constitutional amendments were a first important milestone. Another milestone was the political parties draft law, which was submitted to Parliament in January. One of the main pillars of our reform strategy is strengthening political parties, with the objective of developing partisan life and a mature and efficient party system.

The next major milestone will be the new elections law, expected to be submitted to parliament in March. This and other laws will pave the way for holding more transparent, freer and fairer municipal and parliamentary elections.



Is the impatience on the part of the people, about the slow pace of reforms, justified?

I am impatient myself. But we must recognize that the government and parliament have a tough job – they need to fast-track reform while at the same time keeping the process inclusive. I fully appreciate that a truly inclusive, open and comprehensive national reform effort takes time. But I also urge the government and parliament

“There is no contradiction whatsoever between true Islam and development, modernization, social justice, democracy, respect for the other, or other values that societies generally considered secular uphold. The premise that Islam could be incompatible or may need “reconciling” with modern life is false.”

is a unique model of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity, a mosaic of Arabs, Circassians and Chechens, Muslims and Christians, all enjoying the same rights and freedoms.

There is no contradiction whatsoever between true Islam and development, modernization, social justice, democracy, respect for the other, or other values that societies generally considered secular uphold. The premise that Islam could be incompatible or may need “reconciling” with modern life is false.

In 2004, I launched the Amman Message, with the main goal to clarify to the modern world the true nature of Islam and the nature of true Islam. For the first time

to move as fast as possible, especially on parliamentary elections, because we must maintain the momentum: We can not disappoint the people and risk the credibility of the reform process. We also stand an unprecedented opportunity to set a regional model of peaceful and consensual democratic transformation, and we do not want to miss this chance.

How has Jordan reconciled Islam with secularism and how has this affected its nation building efforts?

Since its foundation, Jordan, as a country and as a people, has always embraced the true message of Islam – a message of peace, tolerance and respect. Precisely because of its Islamic heritage and identity, Jordan

in history, consensus amongst over 500 of the Islamic world's leading scholars, including scholars from Turkey, succeeded in declaring what Islam is and what it is not, what actions represent it and what actions do not.

Where are women in the Arab uprisings and in Jordan's current and future public and political life?

I am grateful for this question. The role of women in the Arab Spring has yet to be given the credit it deserves. I do not think the movement of Tahrir Square, and all other movements across the region, would have been as compelling and as successful had it not been for the active and courageous participation of women. No lasting positive change can ever be achieved unless women are an integral part of it.

Unfortunately, the number of Jordanian women in public and political life is still below our aspirations. Several legal barriers to gender equality have been removed, and progress has been impressive over the past years. We doubled the quota for female deputies in the Lower House of Parliament ahead of the last elections, in 2010. We have long had women serving as senators and cabinet ministers, and the number of female judges is rising steadily. But the road ahead is still long. I will not belittle the obstacles, but I will not hide my confidence in the future either: fifty-five percent of Jordan's secondary student population is female. This is one statistic that bodes well for our country's future.

If Jordan can manage evolution (as opposed to revolution), this could empower other leaders who aim to improve human rights and living standards gradually. Do you think Jordan could be a model also for countries beyond the Arab world?

Allow me to quote my father, His Majesty the late King Hussein, and say that we strive to set an example – not one that others will necessarily follow, but one that will inspire them to build a better future within their own borders. No country can pretend to have a magic formula for others to follow, especially when it comes to democracy and governance. Each country, in the Arab world and beyond, will set its own course, at its own pace. Change must be home-grown in order to be lasting. Having said that, of course, we hope that others will look at the Jordan story and draw from it whatever lesson they find useful and applicable.

If I was to describe all the efforts and components in Jordan's reform process in one word, perhaps "dialogue" would be it. Our own accelerated, consensual,

evolutionary reform process started with a National Dialogue Committee. And national dialogue to us is not a one-off committee. We want to ingrain it in our political life.

Could Turkey and Jordan – acting more in tandem – have steered developments in the region in the last year more effectively, and do you see a missed opportunity in this sense?

I am pleased with the level of Turkish-Jordanian cooperation, we maintain close relations and coordination.

Uncertainty has been prevailing in the region over the past year. In such an unpredictable environment, Jordan continues to coordinate with all its neighbors and to act within the framework of Arab consensus.

“The Arab Spring is a call for dignity, justice, and freedom. It is a call for change directed to all forces in the old regimes, whether in government or at the opposition.”

Has the deterioration of Turkey-Israel relations affected the likelihood for a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian question positively or negatively?

A few years back, President Clinton told me that the Israelis will only negotiate from a position of strength. And a position of strength is not where they are today, reportedly breaking ranks with the U.S. on Iran, having damaged their relations with Turkey, and facing growing popular resentment and increasing isolation from their Arab neighbors, including the very moderate ones.

But the Israeli government has a choice. It can see, in a changing, region a compelling reason to seriously engage in meaningful peace negotiations to solve all final status issues and realize a two-state solution, or it can continue to dig its heels in on the false pretext that regional change precludes peace negotiations, which could entail serious implications for Israel and its future place in a post-Arab Spring region.

In a previous interview, you referred to Jordan as “the last man standing” in terms of still having a relationship with Israel in the region. What is Jordan’s regional and global role in reaching peace between Israel and the Palestinians? What pressures do you face within your country with regards to relations with Israel?

Solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and achieving the two-state solution is a national interest for Jordan, and it is in the best interest of the entire region and the world. Jordan has never spared any efforts to achieve peace and will always continue to work for a just solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

I often say that the benefit of peace is peace. To us, peace always was and remains a strategic choice. But popular frustration at Israeli policies is at a peak across the region, and even traditionally moderate parties and groups are starting to question whether seeking or keeping peace with Israel makes sense any more.

Without Middle East Peace, can the Arab Spring bring about regimes that are accountable to their people on the basis of good governance?

Peace is a pre-requisite for stability and development, and these two are essential to democracy and good governance. Without peace, the region’s full potential will not be realised. Our modern history is a testament to this fact.