

Jordan hit by protests against fuel hikes and Abdullah's rule

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4 December 2012

For weeks, thousands of people in towns and cities throughout Jordan have taken to the streets in protest against the government's decision to end fuel subsidies. They demanded the sacking of Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour, the fifth appointed by King Abdullah in less than two years, with some calling for Abdullah to go.

Jordan's security forces said they would crack down on protesters with an "iron fist". They beat up protesters and fired water cannon, tear gas and rubber bullets, killing one and injuring scores more. They arrested and detained 130 people, who are to be charged with threatening the state after calling for Abdullah to go, an offence that carries a 10-year prison sentence.

The arrests sparked further demonstrations in which protesters set fire to government buildings, attacked police stations and blocked major roads. There were rallies in Amman calling for the detainees' release last week.

The ending of fuel subsidies has led to a 54 percent increase in the cost of household gas, while diesel and kerosene have risen by a third and public transport fares by 11 percent—in a country that is the fourth poorest in the Arab world and one of the most expensive to live in.

Wages are no more than \$3,000 a year. Official unemployment is 13 percent and is much higher in reality. Poverty and inflation, especially the price of (mostly imported) food, are soaring, while importers and distributors rake in massive profits. Many families are only able to manage as a result of remittances from Jordanians working in the Gulf.

The measure comes on top of a hike in electricity and fuel taxes announced last summer, which, along with cuts in public expenditure and privatisation, is part of a

package of austerity measures demanded by the International Monetary Fund in return for a \$2 billion loan. The government faces a \$5 billion deficit, equal to 12 percent of Jordan's gross domestic product, bringing its total debt to more than 72 percent of GDP.

The cuts mean slashing public sector jobs, particularly affecting Jordan's East Bankers who form the core of Abdullah's army, security services and the state bureaucracy, and are the monarchy's traditional source of support.

Jordan's economy has been devastated by the civil war in Syria, a major trading partner, the influx of 240,000 Syrians escaping the fighting, and the 15 armed attacks on Egypt's gas pipelines that have severely disrupted gas shipments to both Jordan and Israel and are costing Jordan an extra \$7 million a day. Always dependent upon foreign aid, it has seen overseas grants and revenue from tourism fall.

Last year saw a major increase in labour protests, with Jordan's Labor Watch documenting more than 800 strikes and other such actions in 2011 by teachers, bank tellers, potassium and phosphate workers, taxi drivers, nurses and doctors. The number in 2010 was 140, a rise on previous years. The first six months of this year has seen 560 labour protests.

Workers in the Qualified Industrial Zones, mainly poorly paid expatriates from South and South East Asia who are paid a pittance and vulnerable to arrest and deportation, have also organised protests.

Jordan was carved out of the former Ottoman Empire by the British in the aftermath of World War I as a client state to promote its interests in the oil-rich region and was never a viable state. It was dependent from the beginning on external aid, first from Britain and more recently from the United States. It is ruled by a monarch, the scion of a sheikh from the Arabian

Peninsula, who appoints and dismisses prime ministers at will as a means of deflecting criticism away from his own corrupt rule. Without a semblance of democratic norms, and with censorship and surveillance widespread, Jordan rests on a system of military patronage.

With fear of the country's instability growing, last year Saudi Arabia gave Jordan \$1.4 billion, but has refused direct budget support this year. It has, however, agreed to provide \$487 million to finance development projects under a \$5 billion fund the Gulf Cooperation Council established last year to support Jordan. As yet, only Kuwait has delivered on the GCC promise to provide \$250 million a year for five years. But this would all still be a drop in the ocean.

The protests are rooted in deep-seated social grievances, but they are led by bourgeois groups and former regime supporters seeking to use the rising social anger to secure a greater share for themselves in the exploitation of Jordanian urban and rural workers.

Various umbrella groups have formed, including the National Front for Reform (NFR), a coalition of 40 parties, professional associations and protest groups, headed by former prime minister and intelligence chief Ahmed Obeidat. The NFR has stressed that its manifesto is restricted to "regime reform" and "fighting corruption".

Hirak, the Jordanian Reform movement, made up of diverse protests groups, also seeks to drum up support around opposition to corruption, nepotism and government bureaucracy.

Jordan's most organised political party is the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood. It has held sparsely attended Friday rallies in downtown Amman every week since February 2011, focusing on government corruption and constitutional reform.

The IAF is an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, which has played a key role in promoting Washington's criminal ventures in Tunisia, Libya and Syria and is now seeking to establish a de facto dictatorship in Egypt itself. Though led by upper-class Jordanians from East Bank families, the championing of Palestinian issues means that much of the IAF's rank and file consists of Jordanians of Palestinian origin in refugee camps.

Numerous opposition groups, including Arab nationalists, the Jordanian Communist party, the Social Left Movement and the Jordanian Women's Union, many which support the Assad regime, have formed a coalition with the IAF with the stated aim of establishing a constitutional monarchy. Both the IAF and NFR have rejected Abdullah's reforms such as establishing an elected prime minister, while retaining the power to dissolve parliament and rule by decree.

The IAF has called on Abdullah to dismiss Ensour and form a "national salvation government" of Islamists and other opposition figures. They plan to boycott the elections set for January 23 unless the proposed new electoral system is changed, which favours the king's support base in the former Bedouin tribes at the expense of Jordanians of Palestinian origin. So far, only 70 percent of those eligible to vote have been registered.

To this point Washington is seeking to preserve the status quo in its client state, along with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. But, some new arrangement with the Brotherhood is a distinct possibility. Jordan has served the US loyally, ranking third internationally for participating in US-approved UN-peace keeping missions. In return Washington has provided Jordan with \$2.4 billion in military and economic aid over the last five years.

The US, along with Britain, maintains troops at Jordan's King Hussein Air Base at al-Mafraq and villages adjacent to its northern border with Syria, training and preparing Jordan's military for a possible invasion. Jordanian and Israeli military intelligence trained and armed the military wing of the Muslim Brotherhood during their attempt to overthrow the Syrian regime during the late 1970s and early 1980s.



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