

Does Jordan Seem Stable? A Century Since An Establishment

Abdallah Samed Alzawahreh^{[a],*}

^[a]Humanities & Social Sciences Department, Faculty of Arts, Hashemite University, Zarqa, Jordan.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This paper attempts to address the question of Jordan's stability. The country, considered an ally to the United States, is suffering huge challenges economically, politically, and socially. The economy of Jordan is facing huge drawbacks and is unable to achieve positive change in the lives of the Jordanians. The underlying issue is that the economy is affected by other aspects; this leads to political challenges in the country. In addition, Jordanians have lost trust in their governments due to numerous unfavorable experiences that have taken place over the years. Furthermore, situations in the region are negatively affecting Jordan. This paper argues that the stability in Jordan is fragile, and the only way for the country to be strong and stable is through political reforms.

Key words: Jordan; political reform; stability of Jordan; Middle East

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INTRODUCTION

For the last 100 years, Jordan has been considered one of the most stable countries in the Middle East. This stability has motivated politicians and researchers to ask an interesting question about the factors that have led to it and if it is real or not. The country shares a long border with Israel and signed a peace agreement with the rival after decades of

conflict. The agreement resulted in a strong relationship with the West, especially the US; this led to Jordan becoming more stable than its neighbors.

Although Jordan faced considerable obstacles in politics, economy, security, and other aspects, these drawbacks reflected on the country's stability and made it a model in the region even during the era of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The situation in Jordan seems as stable as it is in the West, while in contrast; other countries in the region suffer from instability. During the last 75 years, Jordan's stability was a demand for not only the Jordanians and the Arabs but it was also a Western interest since Jordan was a crucial country for the relation between Arabs and the West, including Israel.

However, locally, many drawbacks affected Jordanians' lives, for example, the economic situation in the country led to a high rate of poverty and unemployment. From time to time, the Jordanian government has tried to achieve a balance between the demands of the citizens and the challenges that have appeared. During the last century, political challenges have been more of a concern for Jordan than any other issues. If the government is able to solve the political challenges, other aspects will also present positive outcomes.

BRIEF HISTORY

In 1921, Prince Abdullah bin Al-Hussein¹ established principality in Jordan. The country had been part of the Ottoman Empire for 400 years, from 1516 to 1916 (Robins, 2004). Since that time until present, Jordan is considered one of the most stable countries in the Middle East. However, at the same time, Jordan has been facing many challenges in its politics, economy, and other aspects. When Jordan was established a century ago, it was under the mandate of the British Kingdom, until 1957, after

¹ He established principality of Jordan in 1921 and later became the king, from 1946-1951.

which the British Kingdom canceled the treaty between the two countries (Oren, 1990). Prince Abdullah faced strong challenge from local Jordanian tribes; this was considered one of the factors that affected the stability in Jordan. These tribes did not fall under anyone's control, and the new government had to undermine its authority in the country. Civil disobedience and revolutions affected the relationship between these tribes and the prince (Alon, 2005). The Arab–Israeli conflict also had a strong influence on Jordan's foreign policy (Barari, 2014). Additionally, Jordan faced many challenges with its neighbors, whether they were Israel or other Arab countries, especially the political regimes in Egypt and Syria. The relationships between Jordan and these countries were full of animosity (Al-Fawwaz & others, 2012). However, through the '50s, '60s, and '70s, Jordan had dealt with its neighbors wisely. After Eisenhower's Doctrine, which was issued in 1957, King Hussein decided to be a part of the US campaign and became one of its allies in the Middle East; thus, a new era began (Hahn, 2006). Nevertheless, before and after that decision, hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees crossed the border toward Jordan; they now comprise around 50% of the Jordanian population² (Human Rights Watch, 2010). The Second Gulf War, which was a result of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, caused Jordan to cut relations with the West, especially the US, in addition to other Arab countries. This led to an economic crisis because thousands of Jordanians backed after the Second Gulf War (Van Hear, 1995).

Peace negotiations between the Arabs and Israel that began in Madrid led to stronger relations with the US, especially after the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel in 1994 (Riedel, 2019). Jordan faced more challenges such as the war in Iraq in 2003, which exacerbated the economic and security issues in Jordan, as thousands of Iraqi refugees came to Jordan during this war. The Arab Spring also negatively affected Jordan, bringing for the further challenges (Ryan, 2018). In addition, waves of refugees have crossed over to Jordan since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011. The Syrian refugees now comprise around 14% of the Jordan population (CIA FactBook, 2021). Moreover, security challenges have increased with the threat of terrorist groups such as ISIS, which has resulted in further instability in the region in the last 8 years (Barakat, 2014).

Along with the a aforementioned problems, Jordan is also severely affected by the spread of corruption. The country's economy, which has depended on aid from the West, especially the USA, did not make any positive changes in the people's lives, making many believe that the situation is getting worse. After decades, Jordan still faces the same problems that it did after its independence in the mid-40s of the last century.

² There is no official data about the Palestinian refugees in Jordan, but it estimated with some recourses around 50%

THE ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Continuous increase in goods' prices, inflation, decreasing economic growth, and rising external debt are some of the issues plaguing the Jordanian economy. The problem is that governments are trying to resolve these issues by increasing taxes and prices, which is only exacerbating the economic situation (Schenker, 2017).

The following points are some indicators regarding the economic problems in Jordan: (The World Bank, 2019)

- The unemployment ratio in 2019 was 16.81%.
- The GDP per capita was around \$3,127 in 2019.
- The GDP growth has decreased each year.
- The budget deficit has increased over time.

The Jordanians believe that that the government did not make anything better. In addition, the situation of the neighbors, especially Syria and Iraq, have made them more pessimistic due to the waves of refugees who have crossed over into Jordan in the last two decades. The economic situations reflect on the social situations, and since poverty and unemployment are increasing in Jordanian society, crimes and violence will also increase to a dangerous level.

Unemployment rate

Figure 1 illustrates the unemployment rate in Jordan from 2005 to 2019. The number of people who are seeking employment has increased over the years during this period, accounting for about 17% of the people. This drawback reflects the fragility of the economy in Jordan. Additionally, an increase in the unemployment rate has resulted in instability and is reflective of the failed efforts of the government to achieve basic needs for the people (OECD,2020). Many Jordanians think that their government is not eager to solve this problem; this point of view is spreading among the people. On the other hand, people think their economic conditions are worse than last year; this means that situation is worsening each year (Report, 2021).

The governments' failures to make any positive changes has resulted in people losing trust. Jordanians believe the government strategies will not succeed in the poor country, especially due to other adverse indicators in the economy and other sectors.

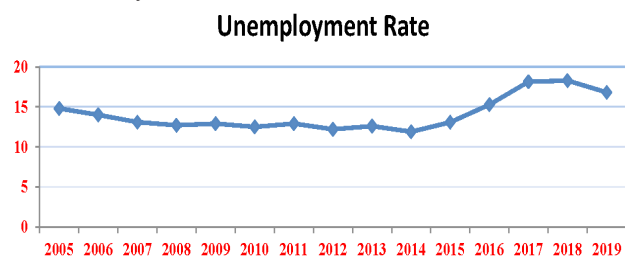


Figure 1
Unemployment rate in Jordan in 2005–2019

Source: The World Bank, 2019

GDP per capita

One of the most effective indicators that is reflective of people's lives is their share of GDP. This indicator shows individuals' ability to access basic goods and services, and reflects the social and economic luxury for the citizens. An increase in this indicator shows that the economy is moving towards growth; this is positive achievement for the country (Report, 2020).

Based on the data in Figure 2, the GDP per capita in Jordan increased in the period of 2005–2019. While the GDP per capita was \$1,500 in 2005, it doubled to just over \$3,000 in 2019. However, despite the increase in GDP, Jordan is still considered a low-income country based on the World Bank Rankings (World Bank Blog, 2021). Jordan's economy is weak, and making positive changes in the lives of Jordanians is the main challenge for the government. The government's stance is that "Jordan live in dangerous region, and the situation around the country did not allow to build a strong economy. If the governments do not think out of box, these challenges will lead to further instability in the country."

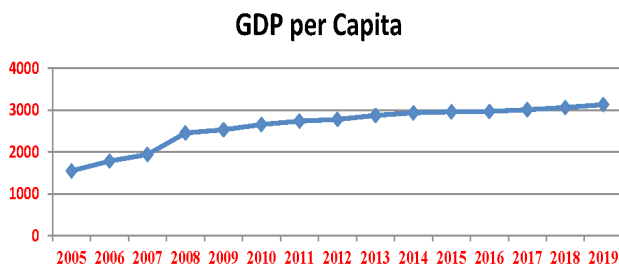


Figure 2
GDP per capita in Jordan 2005–2019
 Source: The World Bank, 2019

GDP growth

GDP growth is considered a deductive indicator for a strong economy. An increase in GDP growth reflects positively on other economic sectors in the country. In addition, countries are eager to increase their GDP through a rise in business activities. It leads to an increase in investment in the economy and decrease in the unemployment rate, thus resulting in a rise in the demand for goods and services. All of these indicators build a strong economy and result in a stable country (Roser, 2021).

Figure 3 represents the rate of growth in GDP of Jordan. The main result of the data is that GDP growth decreased over the period of time under examination. While it was around 8% in 2005, it became 2% in 2019. This means that the economy of Jordan is causing the negative situation in the country, and the economic life of people is worsening each year. In addition, the efforts of governments have failed to resolve the economic issues.

With these situations, the stability of the country is on the edge of collapse, unless the government takes steps to bring investments in the country, hence decreasing unemployment and increasing GDP growth.

GDP Growth

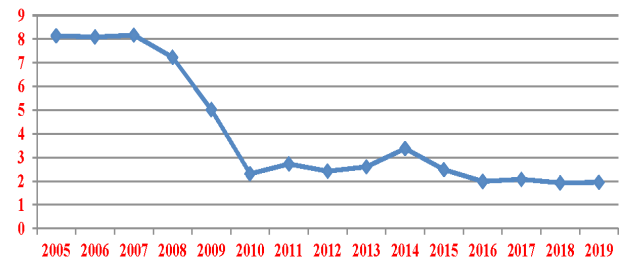


Figure 3
GDP Growth in Jordan 2005–2019
 Source: The World Bank, 2019.

Budget deficit

Budget deficit is considered a main obstacle in the road to progress in Jordan. Every year, the government finds itself unable to achieve what the country needs. Figure 4 shows that budget deficit based on GDP; it is very clear that the budget deficit records high numbers every year. It reached just under 40% of the GDP in 2011; this indicates a negative future for the working government. In 2019, the budget deficit recorded 20% of the GDP. It is obvious that the COVID-19 pandemic will negatively affect the budget deficit in the coming years (at least in 2020 and 2021).

The data shows that the budget is incredibly weak. This has affected the relationship between the people and the government. The problem is that the government of Jordan has only two solutions for this problem: increasing taxes and borrowing from external institutions.

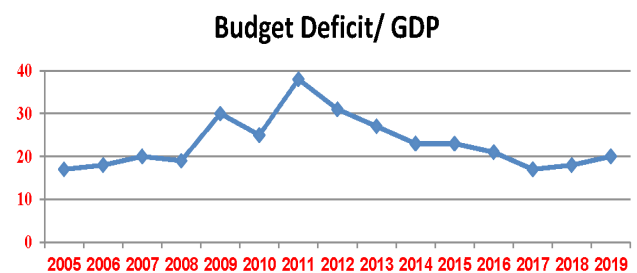


Figure 4
Budget Deficit/GDP in Jordan in 2005–2019
 Source: The World Bank, 2019.

Based on these indicators, we can note that the Jordanian economy is fragile and weak. It is highly unlikely that the country will be able to overcome future challenges, especially with those issues facing the country in other sectors. The government should plan to achieve more success in the economy. It needs to be clear and more realistic when planning its budget. The economy needs reforms in its basic principles because the current situation will logically lead to more problems, which will further affect the stability of Jordan.

POLITICAL REFORM, DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM

Many believe that the problems in Jordan could be solved if the government tries to be serious in developing political life in Jordan. Political reforms are crucial to achieve huge development in the country. The economic issues will be dealt better when political reform stake place. Throughout the last two decades, the king and the government of Jordan have talked more about political reforms in Jordan as a priority, but, in reality, there was no positive change in this way. Despite all the work of the government, the program, and discussion regarding this issue, Jordanians have not seen the changes that they need in the political reforms, especially the election law, which will improve parliament employment.

Many Jordanians believe that the governments of Jordan are not serious about its claims of political reform in the country. They agree that the main solution in Jordan is seeking political reforms as a goal. Unfortunately, all government policies are considered threats to reform in the country.

The first step in political reform in Jordan should be developing an election law that can reflect Jordanian people's vision; this law must play an effective role in government formation. King Abdullah II wrote his first "Discussion Papers" 9 years ago; these papers talk about democracy and political reforms in Jordan. The governments did not follow even a single idea mentioned in these papers despite these papers stating various positive changes in the political reform. The king illustrated his vision regarding parliamentary governments in the coming years. The formation of a Jordanian government should be based on the parliament that is elected by the modern election law.

In order to achieve political reform, the country needs more freedom for its political parties. In 1989, Jordan decided to revert back to democracy; this was a result of regional and global pressures (Robinson, 1998). After that, the government released the political party's law in 1992; this law allowed parties to participate in elections. Jordan now has more than 49 political parties. However, most of these parties have not achieved any positive change in the political life of Jordan. Because of the elections law (*based on one vote*), these parties will not be able to win the more than 10% of the members (Newspaper Report, 2020). The government should allow these parties in the negotiations for political reform, especially the election law, in order to achieve positive changes politically.

From time to time, Jordan's governments talk about political reform in the country; however, Jordanians can sense that the governments are not eager to resolve this issue. Jordanians believe that a good and suitable election law will be a great achievement in Jordan, as the law will form a strong parliament, and this reflects positively on the government's performance.

In the past months, the government has talked about its strategy to form a strong parliament; there have been new meetings with parties and people (politicians, academics, opinion leaders, etc.) regarding government's strategy for political reform.

Political reform in Jordan is a vital for the country to overcome the drawbacks in Jordanians' lives, especially economic issues. Other issues will be easier to change if the country gets achieves a stable economy.

Many countries in the Middle East lack democracy and freedom. Despite the stability, some of these countries are autocracy regimes, and there is no legitimacy for these systems. Arab people tried to make changes, but they have faced numerous drawbacks.

Jordan was indexed as not a free country in the Freedom House Index despite it being partly free in the last year after a crackdown on the teacher's union (Freedom House, 2021). The parliament of Jordan did not play a big enough role in the country; hence, the government is left unchecked. In addition, the constitution let the king play a crucial role in all issues of the country.

The problem here is that the election law did not allow the opposition to reach the parliament and fill majority of the seats. Because of this control, there is no positive opposition in the country, and this make the issues worse in the country. Despite a movement towards democracy since the Arab Spring, Jordan still needs additional political reforms to achieve freedom and democracy (Bani Salamah, 2017)

Moreover, corruption in Jordan has reached a large number of sectors, and there is a belief in Jordan that elimination of corruption will not be easy. Corruption has become a culture of Jordanian lifestyle. Jordanians believe there is no institution in the country devoid of corruption. Jordan's rate on corruption index in 2020 was 60 among 180 countries³ (Transparency International Report, 2020).

If the government wants to achieve political reform in the country, it needs to be serious and make some changes in the laws. The common belief among Jordanians is that political reforms are a strong method to change economic and social situations for all Jordanians, which is why the government should start incorporating political reforms.

THE NEIGHBORS

The situations in the region have reflected on the security demand in Jordan. Terrorist groups such as ISIS, which have spread in Syria and Iraq, are considered serious threats for Jordan. In addition, a large amount of the budget was consumed by Jordan's military; accounting for more than 2 billion dollars of the budget in 2017 (SIPRI, 2020). The crisis in Syria has posed adverse security challenges in the region, especially for Jordan, as it shares

³ Based on this index, the country in rate of 200 is the most corrupted country in the world.

about 375-kilometer border with Syria. Besides, more than a million Syrian refugees have crossed into Jordan since 2011, when the Syrian people ignited the revolution against Bashar al-Assad's regime. The refugees have put immense pressure on the infrastructure in Jordan, especially in the northern areas, such as Mafraq and Irbid. Because of the revolution in Syria, the security demands have forced Jordan to increase its expenditures to protect the border; these needs have negatively affected the country's economy (Young, 2014)

Eighteen years after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, Iraq still faces political and economic instability, which reflects on its neighbors, including Jordan (Hiltermann, 2016). However, Jordan has tried to build strong relations with Iraq as it is considered an oil-rich country, by making some agreements and importing the oil for prices less than the global price.

The major issue in the Middle East that has reflected on Jordan is the Palestinian conflict. Jordan suffers more than any other country in the world because of this issue. Millions of Jordanian people are refugees who arrived from Palestine in 1948 and 1967; they comprise more than 40% of the Jordanian population (Human Rights Watch, Ibid). Although Jordan signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1994, the relations between both countries have been sour.

In addition, the Trump administration contributed to this crisis when it released the "Deal of the Century" in 2017. Jordan is worried about this deal, as it will damage any hope of peace in the region (Alahmad, 2019). Additionally, Jordan is concerned about this deal since it threatens the guardianship of the holy places in Jerusalem; the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel confirmed Jordan's guardianship of these places (Treaty of Peace, 1994).

If the Palestinian issue continues, Jordan will keep suffering, and this will not help the government in Jordan to make developments and political reform. Many politicians argue that resolving the Palestinian issue could bring an end to the issues in the region, especially in Jordan. King Abdullah II has discussed it many times in his meetings and speeches (King Abdullah II Interview, 2009).

FINALLY, WHAT SHOULD JORDAN DO?

Jordan is currently economically and politically fragile. The current political, economic, and social situations in Jordan are considered to be the main factors for the instability of the country. Despite Jordanians revolting against the system as had happened in the Arab Spring, this should not be a guarantee for the government as situations can quickly worsen, especially with the pressures on Jordan to accept some points of the American plan, the "Deal of the Century", for peace in the region.

As mentioned earlier, political reform in the country guaranteed to develop the country and make it stable. The citizens think that their country would be in a better position to handle economic and social issues if the government incorporates political reforms regarding the issues of the region, such as Palestine, as a priority in its policy-making.

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