



## LEVANT & EASTERN MED November 2019

### **Boiling Civil Unrest – Jordan Next?**

Since mid-2018 Jordan is witnessing an enduring chain of protests and strikes in which diverse social groups are participating, among them young jobless, popular protest movements, former regime officials as well as the Muslim Brotherhood alongside tribal leaders and retired military officers that represent the traditional support base of the monarchical regime. The protesters are calling for restricting the power of King Abdullah II or even chant for the deposition of the kingdom.

Jordan's fragile stability is nothing new. Up until today, rentierism and external alliances, especially with the US and the Gulf-Cooperation-Council (GCC) states were a stabilising factor for Jordan. For the US and Israel, but also for the whole region, Jordanian stability is considered pivotal as the country enjoys a geo-strategic position and is key mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Through a balanced foreign policy within a geopolitical environment in-between three regional axes, Jordan managed to secure the steady inflow of external rent from its allies to maintain a patronage and co-optation relationship with Jordanians. However, at the backdrop of high unemployment rates, particularly among its young population (~40%), persistent refugee absorption, a large government debt (95% of GDP) and recent IMF-imposed austerity measures that triggered widespread public protest, the situation exacerbated during the last two years.

Alerted by the protests in neighbouring Iraq and Lebanon and after Amman's regression on the list of priorities of the donor countries, the cabinet of Prime Minister Omar Razzaz is pursuing a two-fold strategy. First, it shifted its focus to looking for solutions on the local arena by denouncing corruption and proceeding with the implementation of austerity measures. The last step in this regard consisted of seeking to merge 75 institutions and independent bodies that have grown to constitute a heavy burden for the state treasury last month.

Second, Amman is changing partners in the regional diplomatic parquet by seeking a rapprochement with the Qatar-Turkey axis in expectation for financial aid and revenues. In July top Turkish officials visited Jordan "to expand economic cooperation and deepen coordination on regional issues," [Top Turkish

officials visit Jordan in move to deepen ties: officials, *Reuters*, July 23, 2019] attempting to restore the free trade agreement which Amman had suspended over Gulf pressure in 2018.

This move came only a few days after Amman restored diplomatic ties with Doha from where it had withdrawn its ambassador two years ago, again in solidarity with Gulf allies that accuse Qatar of supporting terrorism. While the realignment with Qatar and Turkey is in line with Amman's traditional foreign policy that is driven by economic interests for foreign financial aid to secure the highly volatile state survival and preserve the monarchical regime, Amman is trying to balance domestic with regional demands and curb economic pressures.

Most noteworthy, tribes as the traditional support base of the King are getting increasingly frustrated with the worsening economic situation that they directly trace back to the King's corrupted state policy. In fact, the tribal grassroots protest movement started with the Arab Spring in 2011 and began an alteration process of the tribes towards the Hashemite royal dynasty. With the imploding economy not only did rents for tribal members decrease. Tribal leaders are accusing King Abdullah of marginalizing their social status by undermining the tribal representation within the state apparatus by exchanging tribal members with other civil figures. This is the political volatility that remains to be closely observed since it targets the fundamentals of the system.

**Nuray Atmaca** – *Political scientist and consultant at BwConsulting, the inhouse consultancy of the German Armed Forces. Nuray Atmaca is a Major (res.) at the German Armed Forces Centre for Operational Communication.*