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# Prince Hamzah's Crisis and the Governing Impasse in Jordan

Unit for Political Studies

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### Unit for Political Studies

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On Saturday, 3 April, the Jordan News Agency announced that the security services had arrested several people, including Sharif Hassan bin Zaid, Bassem Awadallah, the former Chief of the Royal Hashemite court, and the director of the office of the former Crown Prince, Hamzah bin Al Hussein, for reasons related to national security. US media reported that Prince Hamzah was placed under house arrest, as news of a coup attempt spread. Although the royal court published a statement signed by Prince Hamzah in which he puts himself at the king's disposal and declares his commitment to the country's constitution, the publication of an audio clip of a stormy meeting between Hamzah and the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff of the Jordanian Army prompted skepticism about the end of the crisis. Yet, a statement issued by the king later stated that the prince is under his care.

## Background

It is difficult to separate the current royal crisis from the general situation in the country. Jordan has been suffering from fundamental political, economic and social problems that have overlapped with the Prince Hamzah crisis. In this sense, it is difficult to separate the public and private dimensions of the current affair. The internal political crisis has developed publicly in recent years and in 2018, tens of thousands of demonstrators protested against amendments to the income tax law, staging a sit-in in Amman near the Prime Ministry's offices at the 4th Circle. Their demands evolved to become linked to political reform, which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Hani Al-Mulki's, to be replaced by Omar Razzaz, who came to office with promises of political reform and the establishment of a new social contract.

However, the Razzaz government soon came under fire from conservatives in state institutions, which prompted it to abandon its reformist discourse in the political sector while continuing to implement fiscal reforms. Razzaz's opponents took advantage of the teachers' union crisis to accuse the government of complacency and weakness vis-a-vis the union.

Razzaz was replaced with the more conservative Bisher Al-Khasawneh,. Neither the king's call to review legislation governing political reform and amend electoral law, nor his letter to the Director of Intelligence suggesting to limit the role of the security apparatus to security issues, led to change or improve the state of public freedoms. On the contrary, these royal messages coincided with the dissolution of the Partnership and Salvation Party,<sup>(1)</sup> and a continued security-centric approach to the management of political crises.<sup>(2)</sup>

Meanwhile, a group of opposition media began to emerge abroad, who moved from a reformist discourse to adopt a more radical one in which they directly criticized King Abdullah II. They sought

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1 The Partnership and Salvation Party, a political organization established in late 2017, includes a number Islamic movement leaders and personalities from various backgrounds, some of which are non-partisan, who participated in many of the recent protest movements. It was the only party to boycott the most recent elections out of the 48 Jordanian parties. In late 2020, the Party Affairs Committee at the Jordanian Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs decided to refer the party to the Amman Court of Appeal after violations it committed during 2018 and 2019 that were not corrected during the notice period, contrary to the political parties law. See: "Party Affairs' Attributed to Dissolution of 'Partnership and Salvation' and It Is Referred to the Court," *Alghad*, 17/2/2021, accessed on 8/4/2021, at: <https://cutt.us/DQDU1>.

2 Hussein al-Majali and Muhammad Abu Rumman, "In Developing a Jordanian Democratic Model: How Do We Ensure that We are on the Right Path?" Policy Paper, Politics and Society Institute, 2/3/2021, accessed on 8/4/2021, at: <https://cutt.us/azTT2>.



to reformulate the rules of the political game by bypassing governments and focusing their attack on the security services, who pull the political strings in Jordan.

This group gained an unprecedented domestic audience, and thousands of Jordanians began following its social media programs, with some videos exceeding one hundred thousand views. During the current royal crisis, the discourse of the external opposition intersected with the internal protest movement linked to the high rates of unemployment and poverty, especially among Eastern Jordanians who historically formed the social base of the state apparatus in Jordan, and who have greater expectations from the state in terms of providing services, jobs, etc. There seemed to be sympathy for Prince Hamzah, who apparently became more politically active.<sup>(3)</sup>

As King Abdullah's half brother, his movement seemed to be linked to the circumstances of his marginalization and exclusion. He was crown prince from 1999-2004, before being stripped of his title in preparation to name the king's son as crown prince in 2009. Prince Hamzah did not appear in the political scene during the first decade of King Abdullah II's reign, but his critical discourse through Twitter began to appear in the past three years, after he was forced to retire from the armed forces with the rank of brigadier general. His commentary and tweets, in addition to his visits and social relations, and his rhetorical likeness to his father, clearly became the focus of public attention.

Although he never presented himself as an alternative or hinted at such a suggestion, the attitude of Prince Hamzah gave legitimacy to opposing or critical voices, unusual given that he was the brother of the king. This led to comparisons between him and other members of the ruling family, and prompted the opposition group to hint that he could be an alternative. As such, Hamzah seemed to be a stumbling block in the way of the crown prince, whose popularity among the Eastern Jordanians is questionable, fueled by those who translated their discontent with the regime into references to the queen and the crown prince's origins as her son. It is a dangerous discourse that is rejected by Jordanian public opinion as it affects the unity of the Kingdom. There is no doubt that this language weakened Prince Hamzah's own position.

## The Crisis Explodes

The incident at Asalt Hospital, where many Covid-19 patients died following an oxygen failure due to administrative negligence, sparked the crisis. The king hurried to visit the hospital and meet families of the victims, the Minister of Health was dismissed, and officials in the Ministry of Health were referred to the judiciary. The incident led to the revival of the "24 March Movement,"<sup>(4)</sup> and the opposition abroad mobilized online to swell the protests. When Prince Hamzah visited the families of the victims in Asalt, the royal palace considered this a provocation, as he went immediately after the king, and after the protesters expelled the head of the royal court. This prompted the king to send the crown prince to visit families of the victims.

<sup>3</sup> More than 30 visits were made by Prince Hamzah during 2020 and 2021; That is, in the period in which Covid-19 spread, and these visits focused on specific destinations.

<sup>4</sup> Established in March 2011, the 24 March Movement called for political reform and took on a broad social dimension.

The tension reached a peak when demonstrators chanted Hamzeh's name during the commemoration of the 24 March 2011 protests in Ajloun, a first for the Jordanian popular and political movement. The decision was taken to end the challenge posed by the prince before the crisis took root.<sup>(5)</sup>

The leaks about Prince Hamzah's house arrest and his communication restrictions were broadcast on Saturday morning (3 April) by "the "exiled" opposition. The next day, Ayman Safadi, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs held a press conference, in which he talked about thwarting an attempt to destabilize Jordan's security, about having a circle around Prince Hamzah communicating with the exiled opposition, about foreign agendas, about monitoring phone calls and setting times and dates for the implementation of a plan the armed forces described as "long-range and complex."<sup>(6)</sup> This conference highlighted the mismanagement of the crisis. People asked why the foreign minister? What is meant by foreign forces? Why address the Jordanian people through the Minister of Foreign Affairs? It is clear that the regime understood that a mistake had occurred and tried to correct it, and the king sent a message to the people. Perhaps he would not have needed that without this press conference.

On the other hand, Prince Hamzah released video recordings in English and Arabic confirming placing him under house arrest and cutting off his communications. The crisis ended with the intervention of the king's uncle, Prince AL Hassan bin Talal, at the request of the king. The prince agreed to issue a statement confirming his loyalty to the king and the crown prince.<sup>(7)</sup> However, the release of this statement was followed by leaked audio of a dialogue that took place at Prince Hamzah's home with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in which the Prince appeared to be rebuking the army commander before kicking him out. That raised doubts that the crisis was over.

## Repercussions of the Crisis

The crisis will likely end with Prince Hamzah's exit from the political stage, and perhaps public life (temporarily or permanently), but the confusion with which the state and media institutions managed the crisis and the exaggeration of the issue were two factors that boosted the prince's popularity and inflated his presence. It is clear that the king will not allow one of his brothers to become a symbol of political opposition in any future protests in difficult economic and financial conditions, exacerbated by the ongoing pandemic and a political crisis created by the loss of confidence between the government and the public.<sup>(8)</sup>

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5 "The Jordanian Movement Chants for Prince Hamzah," YouTube, 15/3/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3cYTc2n>.

6 "The Government Clarifies the Reasons behind the Movements and Activities Seeking to Destabilize the Security of Jordan," Jordan News Agency (Petra), 4/4/2021, accessed on 8/4/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3fRsKJT>.

7 Ibid.

8 Survey results indicate that there is a trust gap between citizens and state institutions. For example, during the past four years, rates of mistrust ranged between 51 and 58% of the Jordanian public. The rate of respondents who reported a lack of confidence in Parliament also exceeded 7%. See: The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The Arab Opinion Index, Interactive Portal, accessed on 8/4/2021, at: <https://bit.ly/2Q4sBlN>.



Although the armed forces, security services, and state institutions are rallying around the king, and although the prince does not have any real direct presence in these circles, he scored many points on the street. Even though the crown is hereditary, the street has dared to criticize official policies, and these events have highlighted the increasing role of exiled opposition groups in domestic affairs.

Given international support for the measures taken by the king, the said involvement of foreign parties tampering with Jordan's stability appears to be a mere political propaganda. Ambiguity remains surrounding the role of Bassem Awadallah, the former head of the royal court and envoy to Saudi Arabia. If it is true that there is a relationship and contact between Prince Hamzah and Bassem Awadallah, then this will dent the prince's credibility with a section of the Jordanian public who believe Awadallah to be one of the pillars of corruption in Jordan.

The king addressed an open letter to the Jordanians on 7 April, in which he asserted that the prince's "sedition has been nipped in the bud", adding that "Hamzah today is with his family, in his palace, under my care."<sup>9</sup> However, the judicial process will continue for the rest of the detainees, which means that while part of the crisis has ended, another part continues. This may lead to important changes affecting political and security positions following the negative popular reactions to the management of the crisis. If the king is to regain the upper hand, then he must seriously think about initiating a path to political reform, expanding popular participation in decision-making, addressing the public perception of rampant corruption, and responding to calls for the establishment of a new social contract to address challenges currently facing Jordan. Parts of the Jordanian opposition must also abandon the identity politics discourse that harms the unity of the Kingdom and the Jordanian people, and impedes the development of any real and constructive democratic opposition.

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<sup>9</sup> Patrick Kingsley and Rana F. Sweis, "Breaking Silence, Jordan's King Says Royal Family Rift Is Over," *New York Times*, 7/4/2021, accessed 4/8/2021, at: <https://nyti.ms/3uARaeU>.