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TURKEY-JORDAN RELATIONS REVISITED WITHIN THE CONTINUING TRANSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Turkey and Jordan represent two key actors and allies in the Middle East politics, having established longstanding ties dating back to the onset of the Cold War. The pro-Western stance of both countries and their common interests in maintaining the regional stability led both Turkey and Jordan to pursue identical foreign policy preferences towards the issues and predicaments in the region. The rise of a new era in Turkish foreign policy under the AKP government, based on the zero problems with neighbors principles, gave a new momentum to boost Turkey's relations with the Kingdom. Today, both countries are confronted with the same regional challenges, particularly the sectarian cleavage in Iraq, the influx of Syrian refugees along with the instability in Syria, and the ongoing Palestine-Israeli dispute. The changing regional environment has recently alarmed Turkey and Jordan to sustain the stability and order in the Middle East which have also encouraged both countries to strengthen their deeply-rooted partnership.

Turkey's relations with the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan trace back to the 1947 friendship agreement. Both countries representing the most democratic political systems in the region have historically built cordial and relatively stable relations. Turkey shifted towards multi-party politics by mid-1940s and today stands for the best model of party politics and pluralism in the region. Jordan offers a case in the Arab world where Kingdom's efforts in building democratization have reached far beyond the other countries in the Middle East. With the re-opening of the Lower Chamber and the legalization of political parties in 1989 and 1992 respectively led Jordan to embark on a political reform process hitherto.

As far as Jordan's relationship with Turkey is concerned, it has always been constructed on the basis of regional predicaments that urged both countries to share the common goals and expectations in bringing stability and restoring order in the region. Given the Kingdom's pro-Western stand during the Cold War years and its balanced policy during the heydays of Pan-Arabism, Jordan occupied a central place for the stability of the Middle East for Turkey. Likewise, it has been always a foreign policy priority for Jordan to maintain its balance policy with the neighboring countries in the Middle Eastern subsystem and across the international system. The Arab-Israeli conflict, as well as Jordan's peacemaking



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Jordan has been considered as one of the most stable regimes of the Arab world since its independence in 1946. Jordan has also occupied a crucial place in the eyes of Western countries, as a result of the Arab-Israeli wars and the flow of Palestinians across the Kingdom's borders since 1949. On the one hand, Jordan has been the only Arab country to grant citizenship to Palestinians; on the other, its limited resources and economic dependence on Western aid has led Jordan to build cordial ties with the United Kingdom and the United States. Since the Kingdom's normalization of ties with Israel in 1994, Jordan has had the role of a 'corridor state' between Israel and the Arab world.

It is imperative to indicate that the domestic aspects and issues have led both countries to, momentarily, have different foreign policy strategies. In other words, the external

policy making of Jordan has been largely intertwined with the domestic necessities and domestic issues, such as complex demographic structure and economic dependency on the West. The numerical majority of Palestinian origin Jordanians has always been one of the key determinants affecting Jordanian foreign policy-making. Secondly, Jordan has limited sources and this necessity led the country to be dependent on external economic aid; the USA being the largest donor.

Hence, Jordanian foreign policy can primarily be examined as an extension of its domestic affairs. More precisely, domestic stability and the economic steadiness are central in shaping Jordan's foreign relations. Although the domestic dynamics of Jordan and Turkey might have occasionally led them to adopt divergent positions since the 1950s, for the most part, the regional challenges alarmed both countries to have identical *threat perceptions*.

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Key Issues and Moments in Bilateral Relations

The bilateral relations between the two countries reached to the highest level during the early 2000s. The rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkish politics since 2002 has been central in rebuilding Turkey's position and relations across the Middle East. The regional developments, such as the US intervention in Iraq in 2003, the ongoing situation with Palestine and the unsettled status of the Arab-Israeli dispute, and the Arab upheavals since 2011, are the key issues that led both countries to pursue similar patterns of foreign policy in the last decade.

It was a foreign policy priority for the AKP government to build strong relations with the Arab world. The Hashemite Kingdom, thus, represents one of the key partners of Turkey during this period of time. When King Abdullah II paid a visit to Ankara on May 12, 2014, he indicated a similar perspective saying that “the Jordanian-Turkish relationship is an example of the strong ties in the Middle East region that serve the common interests of people of both countries.”¹

The AKP's vision of ‘zero problems with the neighbors’ were instrumental in rebuilding political, economic and cultural relations with the Arab world. The long standing conflict in Palestine, prolonged sectarian

tension in Iraq, the instability in Lebanon and recently the conflict in Syria led Turkey to enhance its role in the Middle East. Turkey primarily has pursued a similar stand with the Arab countries during the US war in Iraq, particularly with the Kingdom of Jordan. Turkish Prime Minister Abdullah Gül's series of visits to Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran regarding the situation in Iraq in January 2003 was an active foreign policy strategy to discuss and identify common fears and concerns. In this regard, one key outcome that resulted from the inter-state discussions was to work toward the maintenance of 'Iraqi territorial integrity' and prevention of 'the radical groups operating in Iraq.'

The then prime minister of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid a visit to Amman in 2006, and the year after Foreign Minister Ali Babacan visited Jordan, which culminated in the launch of the talks on free trade agreement between the two countries. In 2007, King Abdullah's visit to Ankara was

followed by the Foreign Minister of Jordan Salahaddin Bashir in February 2008. The high level talks and visits continued in 2009, 2013 and recently in May 2014.

Within this context, the crucial issues in enhancing the bilateral talks between the two countries have been centered on the Palestinian-Israeli dispute and the situation in Iraq. Both Turkey and Jordan explicitly stated that they have common goals regarding the regional issues in the Middle East and agreed on building a political consultation group. Both countries aim to reach a just and lasting settlement that leads to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, based on the 'two-state solution.' For the Kingdom, the two state solution policy also refers to the idea that 'Jordan is not *al-watan al-badil*' – an alternative homeland for Palestinians.

The regional predicaments led both Jordan and Turkey to foresee common interests and expectations in the changing regional environment. In other words, the crisis in Syria,

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Lebanon, Iraq and Palestine urged both states to reinforce cooperation toward stability in the Middle East. In this respect, both Turkey and Jordan emphasize that finding a just and comprehensive solution for the Palestine question is the key step in bringing regional stability.

In regards to Iraq, both Turkey and Jordan pursue a policy of integrating the Sunni groups into the Iraqi political system since the 2003 war. The reason behind this policy is the Sunni-Shiite cleavage in the region that has resurfaced with the US intervention in Iraq. From the perspective of the two countries, exclusion of Sunni groups from Iraq's political structure is unsustainable and would cause more problems.

Within the context of the war in Syria, Turkey and Jordan have been the main host countries for the Syrian refugees in the region. In addition to the Palestinians, there have been around 450,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan since the US intervention. Moreover, the crisis in Syria, which has

gone beyond the limits of the earlier Arab popular uprisings, has resulted in a new influx of refugees to Jordan, which now hosts one of the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world. In their latest meeting in May 2014, King Abdullah reiterated the role of Turkey as one of the Middle East's main players and indicated that the Syrian crisis has brought to both Turkey and Jordan new and escalating commitments.

As compared to Turkey's active involvement in the Syrian crisis, the Kingdom's pursuance of a 'watch and see' foreign policy, rather than embarking on a critical course of action vis-à-vis, is rooted in the slippery balance of power in the Middle East in the post-Arab Spring period. Jordan has given its full support to all Arab League resolutions regarding human rights violations in Syria and backed the strategy of granting a seat in the League to the Syrian opposition.² At the same time, the Kingdom has allowed public rallies in favor of Bashar Assad's rule, as well as against it.

Changing Environment of the Middle East after Arab Uprisings

The outbreak of the Arab Spring has engulfed most of the Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa since 2011. The Arab upheavals have caused different effects on each country in the region. The public rallies and their demands for political and economic change have depicted the fact that the Arab world is not monolithic; each case has shown us that each country has its own dynamics. Jordan was neither engulfed by the Arab Spring, nor overlooked by it. In the case of Jordan, the public demonstrations reinforced the Kingdom to enhance and deepen the political reform process. In line with this strategy, the Kingdom reshuffled the government and appointed a new prime-minister. The early parliamentary elections were held in January 2013. After the uprisings, Jordan has launched new political reforms including the appointment of the prime minister directly by legislature.

Turkey's position before and after the Arab uprisings was to act as a 'soft power' in stimulating the democratization movements in the region. The stability of the Kingdom was one of the priorities for the Turkish government during this period. Turkey has welcomed the reopening of the Parliament and the parliamentary elections held in January 2013. For Turkey, Jordan represents one of the main stable and politically liberalized countries in the region which can foster bilateral cooperation in political and economic realms. The Arab Spring has depicted, once again, the pivotal role of the Kingdom in the eyes of Turkey in restoring the regional order which is in constant transition. Jordan and Turkey have represented the two key 'traditional allies' of the Middle East despite their divergent internal dynamics.

Although Jordan represents an exceptional case in the region where the monarchy established long standing ties with the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*), the regime's

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normalization of relations with Israel and the ascendancy of Abdullah II with new priorities in 1999 have opened a new era in reshaping the Kingdom's relations with *Ikhwan* today. The *Ikhwan* opposed to normalization of relations with Israel before finding a comprehensive and just solution to Palestine-Israeli dispute. Nevertheless *Ikhwan* and the monarchy have divergent ideas regarding the peace-making with Israel, *Ikhwan's* political wing the Islamic Action Front (IAF) still occupies a significant place in Jordan's political life.

The IAF's role as one of the key political parties of the country suggests that the monarchy has also chosen to enhance its relations with *Ikhwan*

as a 'safety valve' to contain the growing *militant/ radical* Islamist activism in the entire region. With the rise of the Salafi and *Jihadi* Islamist activism affiliated with al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria, urged the Kingdom as well in containing these groups. As one of those countries giving support to US war on terror campaign, Jordan attempts to control radical Islamist activism in the country and in the region at large. Indeed, restructuring ties with *Ikhwan* has become significant for the Kingdom after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. Due to IAF's decision to boycott both 2010 and 2013 elections and the call for more political pluralism, the Kingdom launched a series of political reforms

after the public rallies recently. Thus, the case of Jordan's *Ikhwan* represents an exception in the Middle East where it represents the key opposition group having longstanding ties with the Hashemite monarchy. In addition, Jordan's case is the only example in such a region where the *Ikhwan* movement has been historically banned from the political life.

The case of Jordan and its relations with *Ikhwan* clearly depicts a common ground with the case of Turkey. Both countries, having big Muslim populations, have established diplomatic, political, economic and military ties with Israel. On the one hand they build complex interdependency relations with Israel due to the regional and international predicaments and necessities, but also the perception of both Jordanian and Turkish societies regarding the relations with Israel is quite different from the regimes. The societies in both countries have 'pro-Palestinian stand' in approaching the situation in Palestine, Gaza in particular.

With the onset of the Arab Spring, the Islamist groups – basically the *Ikhwan* – have come to be seen as the main beneficiaries of the social uprisings. The presidential elections and Mohammed Mursi's victory in Egypt, as well as support from Islamist groups expressed in public rallies, symbolize the challenges faced by the incumbent regimes of this new era. Although it is too early to speak about a deep structural change in the region, the social upheavals have clearly shown the widespread nature of Islamist activism in most of the countries of the Middle East.

Repercussions of the social movements throughout the region include the growing tension between Jordan's *Ikhwan* and the monarchy, despite the fact that both *Ikhwan* and the IAF have long been an integral part of Jordanian politics. The main issue occupying Jordan's agenda today is avoiding an Islamist takeover in Syria. Regarding Syria's future, similar to Turkey's stand, Jordan would prefer to see the end of Bashar Assad's rule and at the

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same time “prevent the possibility that Syria will be split into a variety of extreme sectarian groups.” According to Mona Alami:

“Syria’s collapse and the resulting change in the balance of power between Sunnis and Shiites region-wide will undoubtedly have significant repercussions on the power structures of neighboring countries and on independent regional groups. The return of jihadists to their home countries will only exacerbate this tendency – particularly in countries facing their own domestic sectarian tensions.”

The 2006 victory of Hamas in Gaza, its subsequent rise in relation to *al-Fatah*, as well as the resurgence of *Ikhwan* activism in Egypt and elsewhere from 2011 onwards refers to Jordan playing the role of “an avenue for expanding [the Brotherhood’s] regional influence”.⁵ In fact, the rise in *Salafi* Islamist activism in Jordan, rather than an internal phenomenon, is largely rooted in regional dynamics, especially as a ‘spill-over effect’ of the Syrian crisis. In this regard, it should be stated that relations between Hamas and Jordan

are strengthened by Amman’s decision to not ban the Brotherhood, similar to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Jordan’s domestic balance does not allow for such a scenario today, which would harm its relations with the *Ikhwan* and make this sensitive stage even more difficult. It goes without mentioning that this is an important issue for Turkish government as well.

In the transitional era in the Middle East, Turkey and Jordan are surrounded by several regional conflicts. Given the unsteadiness of the situation in Syria and Iraq, any instability in Jordan or unrest will similarly produce another threat to Turkey. Turkey remained neutral during the uprisings in Jordan; in the aftermath of public riots in 2011, as well as during the electoral boycott of the Muslim Brotherhood in parliamentary elections held on 23 January 2013. The *Ikhwan*’s electoral boycott was due to the unjust election law that precludes them from winning sufficient seats in legislature. In line with the Muslim Brotherhood’s stand vis-à-vis, the elections,

the Islamic Action Front refused to participate in the elections on the same basis. After the elections, Turkey's Foreign Ministry released a statement on 25 January 2013, welcoming "the orderly completion of the Jordanian elections in an environment of peace." The statement also pays attention to the fact that the "new parliament's contributions are of the utmost importance for economic and political reform in Jordan and that Turkey's ready to support the country to that end".

Concluding remarks: Towards a new politics in the region?

Turkey and Jordan represent two significant allies of the Middle East since the outbreak of the Cold War politics. There have been several cases that created conflicting foreign policy behaviors since then. During the years of the bipolar international system, the Kingdom was willing to adhere to the Baghdad Pact (Turkey was one of the key members), but it was the Nasserist and Pan-Arabist forces in the country that

led King Hussein not to join. Nevertheless, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and Jordan's stance during the Gulf Crisis has been an exceptional case; both countries have established close ties and did not involve in their internal affairs. Basically, it is the domestic issues and pressures that created these exceptional occasions.

Since the onset of the Arab uprisings, from 2011 onwards, the regional politics has begun to fluctuate, due to the change in the incumbent regimes, some of whom were overthrown, while others were handed over to new actors. Nevertheless there has not been a radical transformation since the toppling of the regimes. For the time being, we can talk about the change in actors, not the overall structure

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is a corridor state for Turkey in the region and in building bridges between the West and the East; Israel on the West and the Arab world on the Eastern

part. In the post-2011 era, stability of the Kingdom is vital for Jordanians, as well as for Turkey in a changing regional environment.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *The Jordan Times*, 12 May 2014.
- 2 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13163870>
- 3 Robert Satloff and David Schenker, "Political Instability in Jordan", Contingency Planning Memorandum No: 19, *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2013, www.cfa.org.

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