

# **Autocracy Ten Years On: Change and Continuity in Morocco and Jordan**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In 1999, Morocco and Jordan experienced near-simultaneous royal successions, as new monarchs ascended to power for the first time in nearly a half-century. Their coronation captivated audiences in the West. King Mohammed VI of Morocco and King ‘Abdullah II of Jordan were Western-educated royals who had seldom dabbled in politics during the long, and often brutal, reign of their fathers. The two youthful rulers pledged a new era of democratic change upon their accession, promises that reverberated in countries that had experienced more than a decade of economic crisis and social unrest. Indeed, both monarchies had tolerated a promising period of political liberalization in the 1990s; during those years, the resurgence of civil society and the renewal of legal dissent gave some optimists faint hope for democratization.

Today such hopes are gone, as Mohammed VI of Morocco and ‘Abdullah II of Jordan have consolidated their regimes, defanged all opposition, and distanced themselves from the tentative liberalization of the 1990s. While inheriting the dynastic legitimacy and popular coalitions associated with the monarchical systems run by their fathers, they have also adapted authoritarian rule to flourish in a post-9/11 era in which even hard-nosed dictators must pay lip service to Western democracy. They have enacted political changes to support autocratic continuity. Unlike the past, they universally invoke the necessity of “reform” in public speeches and foreign engagements. Yet they usually mean issues of economic progress—such as free trade and privatization—or else marginal improvements to governance, such as reducing

corruption or enhancing transparency; never implied is any initiative that would strip the palace of its absolute authority and resources. Further, while these kings control the same repressive apparatus that protected their fathers, today they prefer to don velvet gloves when dealing with most forms of dissent. Officially committed to pluralism (*ta'addudiyyah*), the Moroccan and Jordanian regimes allow civic activists and political opposition some breathing room to question state policies. When their attacks grow too stringent, they are predictably silenced—but preferably through a legal web of bureaucratic restrictions and institutional cooptation, rather than the blunt hand of outright state violence as in past decades.

Apart from their shared durability, the 'Alaouite monarchy of Morocco and the Hashemite monarchy of Jordan are also extremely fascinating even within the context of the Middle East. In recent years, both have enjoyed frequent mention by Western observers as examples of “moderate” Arab states whose youthful kings can inaugurate democratic progress in the region. In reality, while they have long been pro-Western allies, Morocco and Jordan receive such praise largely because of their unflagging support for Western policies, such as America’s ongoing war on terror and the European Union’s Euro-Med Partnership. In doing so, have harvested large volumes of diplomatic praise, economic aid, and military assistance from Western powers. In practice, however, their political systems no more resemble electoral democracy than so-called “radical” states like Syria and Iran. Another similarity is that both Morocco and Jordan diverge from the experience of the other surviving Arab monarchies, which are all located in the Persian Gulf. Unlike those oil-rich kingdoms, Morocco and Jordan lack the bounty of hydrocarbon revenues to purchase mass acquiescence through universal welfare entitlements, an oft-cited mechanism for why those rentier states have maintained political order. Further, the Moroccan and Jordanian ruling families make religious and symbolic appeals to

legitimacy lacking in the Gulf except perhaps Saudi Arabia; grounded in their Sharifian legacy and reconstructed rituals, they are modern regimes shrouded in symbolic traditions.

In this essay, we lay out a framework for understanding the past and future of politics in Morocco and Jordan. In the first section, we review the historical mechanisms of durability that Mohammed VI and ‘Abdullah II inherited; this includes the traditional infrastructure of power exercised by each monarchy, as well as the popular coalitions and elite networks that each ruler inherited and adapted to new circumstances. In the second section, we highlight the economic and political shifts that have unfolded since 1999. We explore the institutional innovations made by these governments that have emasculated civil society and opposition forces, and also how such “soft” domestic strategies of control go hand-in-hand with strongly pro-Western foreign policies that transmit a public image of democratic reform to outside audiences. In the conclusion, we consider several avenues of political transition, and argue that all are highly implausible. Significant policy changes *have* occurred since 1999 in Morocco and Jordan; but their sum result will be authoritarian continuity.

## **II. HISTORICAL MECHANISMS OF DURABILITY**

Students of democratization often assume that dictatorships remain in power only through force. To be sure, authoritarian regimes like the ‘Alaouite and Hashemite monarchies indeed wield fearsome agencies of coercion, from the regular military forces to domestic intelligence services (*mukhabarat*). However, they have never ruled through violence alone. These leaderships situate their royal legitimacy as immune to the mundane practice of electoral

competition; drawing upon religious discourse and Sharifian justifications, they juxtapose modernity and tradition in strategic ways. Such symbolic power combines with relatively stable coalitions of popular support and elite loyalty, which were mobilized in the post-colonial era. Both variables make the landscape for radical opposition extremely difficult.

### ***Morocco***

Despite that the modern origins of its power, the ‘Alaouite regime of Morocco frames its authority today through a unique mix of sacred appeals and routines. On the former, the king enjoys legal standing as Commander of the Faithful (*amir al-mu’minin*), a divine title that confers upon the holder leadership over the Muslim community. For the monarchy, such religious claims anchor its place atop the political pyramid as the ultimate source of political authority within the nation.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the Gulf ruling families are often considered *primus inter pares* amongst the other elite families, merchant clans, and religious leaders that have dominated the smaller tribal societies dotting the eastern Arabian littoral, in Morocco the king holds inviolable legal status as the supreme arbitrator, legislator, and judge within society. He has no equal on earth; the shadow of God, the monarchy is a leviathan whose sovereign rulership cannot be contested or impugned. History is on its side: royal defenders note that when the ‘Alaouite house commenced its reign in the late seventeenth century, Morocco had already known nine centuries of dynastic governance—suggesting that divine royalism here is the only paradigm of governance that Morocco could ever have. Bolstering this heritage as well is the ruling family’s genealogical descent from the Prophet Mohammad, which cloaks its legitimacy with yet another layer of symbolic meaning squarely aimed at the pious.

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<sup>1</sup> Hind Arroub, Approach to the Foundations of Legitimacy of the Moroccan Political System, Dar Al-Amane, November 2009, *Book (in Arabic)*

Meanwhile, the Moroccan regime also claims temporal authenticity through the concept of its *bay'ah* contract with domestic society. The *bay'ah* carries classical meaning, within the context of Islamic history, of an oath of allegiance given by a Muslim community—in essence, an implicit social contract. In theory, the provision of *bay'ah* furnishes the ruler with rightful power and authority, as well as the loyalty of all subjects and citizens, in return for the promise of protecting the community's rights and prosperity. Here, however, it has been appropriated towards dictatorial ends under the monarchy's annual political routines. Robbed of its reciprocal connotations, it has become a ceremonial farce in which a predictable line of conservative officials—religious scholars, family notables, political figures, and other dignitaries—pledge their support for a closed political system that they would embrace regardless given their critical roles within it.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the *bay'ah* is little more than the ceremonial consecration of political inequality, a further justification for the extraction of complete obedience from below. The king presents himself as pastor over his flock of people, who are treated far more as subjects than citizens.<sup>3</sup>

While the divine foundations of Moroccan autocracy are propagated daily in classrooms, rituals, and other public forums, often forgotten is that the 'Alawite house seldom exercised ironclad control over indigenous society since its inception more than 300 years ago. The French severely limited their already brittle authority during the colonial era during the early twentieth century, and near the end of the occupation even exiled the royal incumbent (and grandfather of the current king) to Madagascar. Only after independence in 1956, with the construction of modern institutions and legal structures, could the monarchy expand and centralize its sovereign claims to authoritarian supremacy. The 1962 Moroccan constitution signifies this historical

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<sup>2</sup> Abdeslam Maghraoui, *Political Authority in Crisis: Mohammed VI's Morocco*, Middle East Report,

<sup>3</sup> Hind Arroub, "Culture of Citizenship in a Country of Subjects? Case: Moroccan Society", in *Sovereignty and Power in the Arab world*", Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2006 (Arabic)

rupture. On the one hand, parts of the document charade as a legal monument to the state's tolerance of liberal values and democratic norms: the protection of individual freedoms, the importance of an elected legislature, and the need for transparent judicial review. Yet when read closely, many of its statutes also enshrine monarchical control by limiting the influence of any common actor to direct state policies.<sup>4</sup> The system revolves around the singular body and office of the king, as he alone appoints governing cabinets, judges, and generals. Until the 1990s, parliament was frequently hobbled by either palace dissolutions or else manipulated elections that rewarded conservative and monarchist parties. Even now, it exercises limited oversight over the royally appointed cabinet, which as delegated by the king initiates most laws.

Certainly, these spiritual and symbolic overtures alone have not insulated the Moroccan regime from popular discord or concerted unrest. The first post-colonial decades were marked by coup attempts and underground opposition against the monarchy, and the resulting so-called "Years of Lead" (*sanawat al-rusaas*) which lasted until the 1980s were defined by unremitting state repression against leftist parties, labor unions, students and intellectuals, and other critics. Military purges following a failed army coup in 1972 and brutal treatment of ethnic minorities, namely the Berbers of the Rif region and the Sahrawis of Western Sahara, further betray assumptions that the Moroccan nation blindly saluted their Commander of the Faithful. As a result, the monarchy has also predicated its power by coopting a variety of political elites and economic actors. Today, its popular backing amongst key segments of Moroccan society reveals the success of this coalition-building strategy.

The keystone of the Moroccan political sphere is the *makhzen*, the informal name given to the networks of elites and loyalists that surround and serve the palace. While the makhzenian system has precolonial origins, in the contemporary era it has become synonymous with the

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<sup>4</sup> William Zartman, *Destiny of dynasty*, 1964, p:20.

Moroccan state itself by describing how a coterie of retainers—wealthy businessmen, military officers, political elites, and other notables—regularly play a game of musical chairs vis-à-vis the palace in order to gain royal appointments to official positions of influence. Essentially a vast system of clientelism, the ideal supplicant (*khadim*) must be both loyal and discreet: loyal, by seldom criticizing state policies in public, and by supporting the regime against its enemies; and discreet, in seldom amassing as much power as would not so much compete, but overshadow the king himself. Those elites that buy into the system, and gain the king's favor, acquire significant influence and wealth. Moreover, there is always a virtually inexhaustible supply of elite actors fed into the system; the pool of political and technocratic talent continually circulates.

Unsurprisingly, the makhzenian system tends to entrench tremendous levels of corruption across the government bureaucracy and its economic surrogates. Widespread fraud and embezzlement has been uncovered in both the private and public sectors, enriching government agents at the cost of public goods provision and other state functions. In virtually all cases, however, there is seldom enough evidence to prosecute those officials that profited greatly.<sup>5</sup> The other dimension of the makhzenian system is the cooptation regularly used to bribe and cajole moderate opposition. Few parties are truly independent of such pressures, with parliamentarians and other elite activists regularly lured by the regime with the promise of material rewards. The 2008 establishment of the Party of Authenticity and Modernization, a conservative monarchist faction funded by royal allies and which has been rapidly growing in prominence, further disillusioned Moroccan voters, who have been increasingly hard-pressed to find candidates untainted by the king's touch. For this reason, many Moroccans greet with suspicion the outcomes of general elections; though they are no longer as blatantly manipulated as in during the Years of Lead, legislative contests seldom produce clean victories for parties and candidates

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<sup>5</sup> Hind Arroub, The "Makhzan" in Moroccan Political Culture, Wijhat Nadar, April 2004, *Book in Arabic*.

who are independent of the regime. Turnout is typically low, and in the 2007 parliamentary contest only 37% of the electorate cast ballots.

Likewise, while Western scholars often embrace civil society as the panacea for authoritarian ills, the Moroccan case presents a more thorny case in which a deeply penetrated civic arena abounds with activity yet provides few real united political movements for change.<sup>6</sup> For certain arenas of decision-making—“sovereignty” issues involving foreign relations, economic projects, national security, and other vital policies—civil society groups ranging from NGOs and parties to media watchdogs and student movements gain little real input into government decision-making, as promulgated through the palace and its cabinet. Even for lesser issues, the most prominent actors deign to eschew maximalist politics for a variety of reasons, ranging from cooptation to self-moderation (strategic or otherwise). On this point, the Islamist trend deserves special attention. For instance, the regime regularly encourages the Party of Justice and Development, a mainstream Islamist party, to participate in elections; it is not considered an existential threat to the state and its sacred institutions, as it is unwilling to mobilize against either the king himself or else the makhzenian system that transmits his royal power. The Justice and Charity movement, another Islamist movement, is far more outspoken in its attacks against official corruption and the regime’s unwillingness to liberalize further. Their failure to provide a democratic agenda for change, however, has seeded worry in the minds of other opposition activists seeking natural allies. More radical Islamists, such as the Salafists, are heavily repressed, a security-oriented approach that deepened after the Casablanca terrorist attacks in May 2003. Reports of detention and torture against “extremists” are not uncommon.

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<sup>6</sup> Driss Ben Ali, *Civil Society and Economic Reform*, ZEF Projekt: „Verbesserung der Wirtschaftsgesetzgebung in arabischen Ländern“(überregionales Forschungsvorhaben), Januar 2005,p:5  
-Hind Arroub , “Moroccan Civil Society: Illusion of Efficiency or Effectiveness”, in *The State of Morocco 2004-2005*, Rabat: Wjhat Nadar, 2005 (Arabic).

In terms of class structures, outside the makhzenian elite, the regime has long relied upon the compliance of the poor. Stubbornly high levels of illiteracy (which, by some counts, encompass more than half the country) and poverty (which include at least one fifth of the population, in abject terms) are especially problematic in rural areas; but it is here that the monarchy found much of its earliest support. Yet with the scale of urbanization expanding and prosperity rising, however, in recent decades the regime has also attempted to engage increasingly mobile middle-class groups. While civil servants and other workers on public sector payrolls have long bolstered state policy, urban professionals and other highly skilled labor have emerged as an engine of growth in the new, sleeker Moroccan economy. The regime from the 1990s onwards accelerated the pace neoliberal reforms and developmental projects, with the palace's technocratic vanguard broadening free trade ties with the United States and European Union and soliciting unprecedented volumes of foreign investment, from both the EU and wealthy Gulf state. Privatization has been a fairly corrupt process, with the decentralization and spinning off of parastatal firms a tool to reward allied businesses and investors. More troubling, the past decade of reform has also enriched King Mohammed. The king has been personally involved in a wide range of business deals since his ascension, especially in the phosphate mining and export sector, leaving his family with unprecedented private wealth. By one estimate, Mohammed's net worth hovers around \$2.5 billion, making him one of the world's wealthiest royals, and his twelve palaces allegedly cost upwards of \$1 million a day to operate—a sum unfathomable to Moroccan wage-earners.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Jordan***

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.forbes.com/2009/06/17/king-morocco-phosphate-business-billionaires-royal-conflict.html>

The Hashemite monarchy was implanted into its kingdom by British imperialism, as founding ruler Emir ‘Abdullah was given the territory of Transjordan—the irregularly shaped hinterland on the East Bank of the Jordan River—by London in exchange for his family’s seminal role in fomenting the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire. Given the resource-poor nature of its new land, the regime would have not survived its first decades without large infusions of British economic aid and military protection, which continued for a decade after the kingdom’s independence in 1946. The constitution, ratified seven years later, celebrates royal supremacy to a similar degree as in Morocco. The king exercises untrammelled power to appoint governments, shape the judiciary, and head the military; and like Morocco’s “constitutional” monarchy, here the legislature reviews rather than initiates laws and budgets, making cabinets accountable to the palace’s pleasure rather than parliamentary oversight. Though much younger than the ‘Alaouite crown, the Hashemite House still brandishes distinctive cultural and symbolic tools to legitimate its regal domination, though here they also heavily reflect Jordan’s tumultuous history and geopolitical dilemmas,

Jordanian kings have seldom postulates any claim to religious leadership over their Muslim community. However, they have always burnished their Sharifian credentials, encompassing their descent from the Prophet’s family as well as their noble Qurayshi tribal heritage. The “Amman Message,” a 2006 campaign that decried extremist Islam and called for religious tolerance, provides a vivid demonstration of how such appeals have become deeply inculcated within royal pronouncements and official discourse.<sup>8</sup> This genealogical repertoire also overlaps with the king’s status as paramount chieftain over local Bedouin tribes, a symbolic position somewhat connoted by the Arabic title of *shaykh al-shuyukh*. Such authority is obviously invented; the royal family hails from the Hijaz region of the Arabian peninsula, and

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<sup>8</sup> See the Amman Message’s website <<http://www.ammanmessage.com>>.

upon arrival in 1921 had no organic ties to the tribal confederations that dominated the area. By positioning itself as head arbitrator and protector of this tribal community, however, especially following the influx of Palestinian immigrants due to the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, the monarchy learned to ensconce its cultural supplications in language amenable to this trustworthy social base. The regime's tribal bias manifested in a variety of arenas after independence—for instance, in special institutions like the Tribal Council of the royal court, which coordinated political consultations with key Bedouin communities; personal rewards and compensations given to the most loyal sheikhs, who often earned the privilege of personal audiences at the royal court; the king's public embrace of Bedouin customs and rituals in public ceremonies, ranging from military processions to national holidays; and special concessions given to conservative tribal communities, such as applying tribal law to settle local disputes—a practice that was banned in 1976 but is still informally practiced today.

For the outside world, however, perhaps the most recognizable “face” of the Hashemite crown is as custodian of Jerusalem and protector of the Palestinian people—a role that came to surface after the 1948 the annexation of the West Bank to the kingdom. By the 1960s, emphasizing Jerusalem's sovereignty and the Palestinian plight served as a pan-Arab (*qawmi*) petition to win over other regional audiences. This pan-Arabism also became a useful firewall against the Nasserist brand of Arab nationalism, which suspiciously viewed the artificial kingdom as a British (and later American) stooge. Today the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, one of the holiest sites in Islam, adorns Jordan's 20-dinar note. No less visible are the current king's calls to pursue a two-state solution. Though Jordan severed its administrative ties to the West Bank in 1988, and secured a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, King ‘Abdullah II knows well that two-third of his subjects are Palestinian rather than “native” (i.e., mostly tribal) East

Bankers. Few other proposals receive as much hostility from the palace as suggestions that Jordan could become an alternative homeland (*al-watan al-badil*) for all Palestinians; the Hashemite kingdom, according to the predominant strain of Jordanian nationalism, welcomes Palestinians but can *only* be ruled by “true” Jordanians—that is, by the Hashemite House and its loyal subjects.<sup>9</sup>

As in Morocco, the Jordanian monarchy’s appeals for legitimation have hardly generated unquestioned allegiance from all sectors of society. Various episodes of contentious politics punctuate Jordan’s post-colonial history; in 1957, liberal parliamentary opposition, drawing upon urban activists and helped by an ill-planned army coup, nearly dethroned a young King Hussein, and 13 years later an insurrection by Palestinian commandos precipitated into a short but bloody civil war, which the Jordanian army won but at heavy economic cost. As in Morocco under King Hassan II, Jordan under King Hussein was a security state that applied frequent coercion against official enemies, ranging from Palestinian activists to left-wing political parties. Following the parliamentary turmoil that characterized the early 1950s, the legislature was inactive or constrained for most of the 1960s to 1980s, and parties and other autonomous organizations were banned. Jordan’s feared intelligence directorate—the *mukhabarat*—effectively silenced the most conspicuous nodes of protest and criticism, such as the media, universities, and labor. Throughout this process, whereas the ‘Alaouite regime in Morocco ground itself firmly upon a variety of actors with a stake in royal continuity—business elites, the underclass, rural landowners, some bourgeoisie—the Jordanian palace secured its popular backing from a less diverse mix of East Bank communities, namely the large tribal community and smaller minorities of Christians and Circassians.

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<sup>9</sup> Adnan Abu Odeh, *Jordanians, Palestinians, and the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 1999), 190-236.

As in Jordan, elite support has been critical to Hashemite longevity. Like the makhzenian system of Morocco, in this kingdom the delegation and distribution of political power has been *neopatrimonial*. That is, the monarchy heads a highly centralized and deeply personalistic regime in which an elite oligarchy operates the machinery of the state at the king's pleasure. Rather than formal institutions and political parties, the Jordanian game of royal courtship revolved around a narrow covey of senior elites and personal confidantes who obtained tangible influence by virtue of appointments into key positions within the royal court or else within the cabinet government and security apparatus.<sup>10</sup> In English, the most opportunistic of these are called the "King's men;" in Arabic, many are (disparagingly) deemed *mustawzireen*, or those that seek cabinet positions by navigating the palace's clientelistic networks of supplication and reward. This reservoir of loyalists was historically drawn from prominent Transjordanian families and tribal clans, alongside a smattering of Christian and Circassian stalwarts. Only a handful of Palestinian elites were incorporated into this authoritarian system.

The monarchy's reliance upon East Bank lieutenants to staff the state was not the only marker dividing the privileged position of Jordanians against the fate of its Palestinian majority, which despite its economic wealth and urban status remained mostly frozen out of politics. Bedouin tribes have long been viewed by the Palestinian public as the monarchy's social foundation. They have always contributed much of the army's manpower; even during the era of conscription, the Hashemite palace preferred that the officer corps and crack units draw upon these communities while relegating Palestinian recruits to non-combat positions.<sup>11</sup> For another, Jordanians dominated the payroll of the public sector, from the civil service and bureaucracy to large parastatal firms and teaching positions. After the 1960s, the communal division of labor

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<sup>10</sup> Sami Mutawi, *Jordan and the 1967 War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2-18.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Day, *East Bank/West Bank: Jordan and the Prospects for Peace* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1986), 79-82.

between these two demographics became political fact. For the most part, the mostly urban Palestinian bourgeoisie were free to dominate the private-sector, and Palestinian capital often served as captains of industry in finance, banking, and other skilled sectors; but they had little access into Hashemite politics. Meanwhile, East Bank Jordanians (and especially the tribes, even after they sedentarized into urban lifestyles) remained dependent on the state; but they retained a closer political connection to the monarchy, which identified with their interests.

Finally, parliament itself is largely tilted to East Bankers. Tribal candidates tend to excel in general elections due to the single non-transferable vote method—an obscure system where because voters cast only a single ballot, candidates from political parties (with rare exceptions) invariably lose to independent competitors who rely upon extended kinship or tribal networks to generate votes. Christians and Circassians enjoy special quotas to ensure their representation. Further, electoral districts are grossly malapportioned; in urban and Palestinian-dominated constituencies, the ratio of voters-to-candidate is far less favorable than in rural and tribal districts. In that sense, all Jordanian citizens are equal as they only possess single ballot come election day. But some are more equal than others; and Palestinian electors living in Amman tend to suffer the most unequal representation of all.

Within civil society, segmentation between Islamist actors somewhat mirrors the Moroccan case. The mainstream Muslim Brotherhood has long been supportive of the Hashemite house's legitimacy and rulership, and during the era of state security was allowed to operate despite the draconian restrictions against labor unions, leftist parties, and other independent organizations. Their political party, the Islamic Action Front, has been the only opposition faction cohesive enough to compete for significant numbers of seats in most general elections since the restoration of parliament in 1989, which kicked off Jordan's tepid political

liberalization. While their longstanding consternation over the peace treaty with Israel and Jordan's close ties with America has since brought unwelcome heat onto the royal government, neither the Muslim Brotherhood leaders nor the IAF publicly demand any systemic change, preferring to work within the system. By contrast, Salafists and other "radical" Islamists are considered an existential security threat, especially after the November 2005 hotel bombings in Amman, which was followed by the realization that a number of Jordanians had joined jihadist networks operating at home and abroad, including the famous case of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi—a native son from one of the largest tribal communities in Jordan, the Bani Hassan.

That said, the last decade under King 'Abdullah has witnessed fascinating changes to the Hashemite palace's old ruling formula. While retaining loyalty from Jordan's tribal bedrock as well as the small Christian and Circassian communities, the new ruler has used economic reform projects to incorporate a new generation of technocratic elites and new urban businessmen into the system.<sup>12</sup> Though conservative loyalists from tribal families and military backgrounds remain crucial actors, these newer political operators have performed a valuable function for the palace. Starting in the early 2000s, they helped engineer the kingdom's rough transition into an export-oriented market economy while still preserving an overloaded public sector. Shrinking the latter is a taboo topic given its importance to the prosperity of many Jordanians, despite the enormous burden it places on the state's resources; one study estimated that civil wages devour 60 percent of recurrent government spending, while civil servants represent 43 percent of all employment.<sup>13</sup> The military, likewise, has not suffered any budget or manpower cuts; its

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<sup>12</sup> André Bank and Oliver Schlumberger, "Jordan: Between Regime Survival and Economic Reform," in *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change*, ed. Volker Perthes (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004), 40-43.

<sup>13</sup> Sufyan Alissa, "Rethinking Economic Reform in Jordan: Confronting Socioeconomic Realities," *Carnegie Papers No. 4*, Carnegie Middle East Center (July 2007), 10.

privileges reflect its historical role as both an institution to both absorb young tribal men, and defend the monarchy from all threats.

In navigating this haphazard field, ‘Abdullah’s technocrats were emplaced in key ministries, royal court, and other policymaking centers. One of their major achievements has been the strengthening of Jordan’s economic ties to the West while controlling the depth of economic privatization at home. The 2000 Free Trade Agreement with the US, and increasing trade agreements with the European Union, were framed as important boosts to Jordan’s export producers, while spin-offs of state firms were manipulated such that numerous clients of the palace—public employees, foreign investors, local capital—could reap the benefit. Another outcome has been a subtle weakening of the East Bank-Palestinian rift within the national political economy. While the cleavage between the two demographics was always fraught with some fuzziness, the growing economy has uncovered more prominent shifts in the regime’s political base. Like the technocratic class, many of the new elites benefiting from the explosion of construction, retail, tourism and other sectors are Palestinian entrepreneurs and investors. Conversely, the poorest tribal communities, located far from the bustling metropolis of Amman, have become increasingly disconnected from the king’s overtures; several riots and protests in these underdeveloped areas since the late 1990s signal tension around the royal margin. For the most part, however, the regime is content to frame its economic success as a predominant narrative over the past decade. Poverty and unemployment stand at about 15 percent each, and though even these figures underreport, economists concede that they mark a definite improvement over the impoverishment and joblessness that characterized the crisis-ridden 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> World Bank, *Country Assistance Strategy for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan FY 2006–2010* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006), 3.

### **III. THE PHANTOM OPENING: THE ILLUSION OF CHANGE SINCE 1999**

Despite inheriting the symbolic appeals for legitimacy and traditional bases of political support associated with their fathers, King Mohammed VI in Morocco and King ‘Abdullah II in Jordan faced a different international climate as they consolidated power. Whereas the Cold War decades were defined by each state’s use of heavy-handed repression and violent abuses against critics and dissenters, the post-Cold War era has forced authoritarian regimes to adjust to new international pressures for democracy. Since 1999, the Moroccan and Jordanian regimes have adopted new institutional policies and legal tools to manage opposition forces. Such strategies are tailored to complement pro-Western foreign policies; Morocco receives significant aid and support from France and the European Union, while Jordan since 2001 has ranked as one of the top US economic grant and military assistance recipients. The critical insight here is that while these regimes still possess the *capacity* to coerce, their winning strategy instead has shifted towards quieter forms of manipulations that receive little media fanfare, but still accomplish the goal of preserving domestic political order while foreclosing radical change. If political liberalization is still occurring in these countries, then it is a deadlocked process with no end-state—a holding pattern of sorts to allow these kings to protect their absolutist fiat while maintaining a cosmetic façade of gradual democratization.

## *Morocco*

In the era of King Mohammed VI, Moroccan politics remains, at heart, a one man show. When Mohammed succeeded his father Hassan II in July 1999, the new royal became a symbol of hope for many democratic activists in the kingdom. Indeed, in his earliest speeches, he applauded the increasingly critical media as a vocal advocate for the poor and dispossessed, demanded an end to corruption, and suggested the need for more accountability at all levels of government. Policies, too, gave a tantalizing hint of more change; among them the early initiatives were social programs to alleviate urban poverty and rural underdevelopment, state ventures to empower women and reduce gender inequality, and royal pronouncements that encouraged critics to publicly articulate their grievances through the press and civil society.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the decade, furthermore, Moroccan civil society exhibited promising signs usually associated with political liberalization in other transitional contexts. The press has wider latitude to examine government policies. Associational laws are more lax than before, and numerous NGOs and organizations exist across the country. Parliament remains open, political parties operate legally, and regular elections occur—signs, according to the regime, that the public enjoys full participatory rights under Moroccan democracy.

Since the early 2000's, however, the regime's commitment to tolerate real contestation has had more bark than bite. For instance, the palace ignored suggestions by civil society associations to enhance the institutional capacity of parliament to more strictly oversee executive policy, as promulgated the cabinet government, or appoint an independent reform commission to highlight areas of potential improvement. The press, parties, and other civic institutions still cannot cross red lines—questioning the royal family, criticisms of Moroccan foreign relations,

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<sup>15</sup> Hind Arroub, "The Sacred Monarchy and the Illusion of Change: The Case of Moroccan Kingship", Rabat: *Wijhat Nadar* N 42 / October 2009 (Arabic).

and any other issues involving national security—lest they invite the attention of the intelligence directorate and other Ministry of Interior monitors. Cynics further note that the new king has relied upon the same conservative makhzenian elites and conservative advisors that typified his father's royal troupe.

More disappointments for Moroccan democrats emerge from the work of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (*Instance Équité et Réconciliation*), which was founded by the king in 2004 to investigate the widespread human rights abuses perpetuated by the regime during the Years of Lead. However, external monitors complain that while this campaign for justice has indeed thrown the limelight on individual cases, the monarchy will never admit any official responsibility for the actions of its security forces. Information like the names of torturers and the conditions of disappearance are usually censored to prevent high-ranking officials and the palace itself from direct implication.<sup>16</sup> A number of ex-political prisoners, for that reason, have rebuffed the entreaties of the IER and refused any compensation from the state. Likewise, Moroccan writers are quick to note that another stated campaign for reform—making the judiciary more transparent—has been victimized by its own conflict of interests. Nominally independent, the court system is regularly used by the regime to harass critics and dissenters; few believe that the palace would knowingly seat trained judges willing to oppose royal instructions for the sake of legal objectivity.

While sham reform initiatives from above have dashed the hopes of optimists, more disturbing is the growing undercurrent of regime intolerance to stubborn opposition actors who have refused to imbibe this new discourse of change. Since the early 2000s, the independent media has been muzzled by government officials and security agents uncomfortable with how a new generation of journalists has exercised the marginal expressive freedoms promised during

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<sup>16</sup> Citation needed

the 1990s. A bellwether event occurred in January 2010, when security officials closed *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, a pioneering weekly that had long antagonized the regime for its stories about controversial issues like state corruption, political dissidents, and women's rights. Though sudden to many, its shutdown was actually the logical outcome of a long and systematic campaign to choke the newspaper into submission. The paper regularly suffered the wrath of censors; by the mid-2000s it suffered falling revenues caused by state pressures against advertisers, and then accumulated an over €1.3 million debt due to repeated fines levied by courts.

Beyond the media, independent organizations, political parties, and other political voices still toe certain red lines. While some have always existed—for instance, the prohibition against criticizing the monarchy or questioning Moroccan claims over Western Sahara—the past decade has witnessed the promulgation of new legal practices that criminalize such broad categories of speech and associational activity, and so render meaningless royal commitments to pluralism.<sup>17</sup> For instance, that anyone may be jailed for such crimes as insulting Islam, desecrating the nation, and spreading defamation essentially means that virtually all civil society actors, secular or Islamist, operate within an unpredictable environment dictated entirely by the whims of the government, and thus the palace. In the associational sphere, the state remains the final arbiter as to what sorts of protests and assemblies are legal; some, such as demonstrations against Israel and other distant issues, occur frequently, while others regarding the aforementioned taboo issues face the working end of state brutality. In Western Sahara, for instance, even peaceful gatherings are prohibited.

If many Moroccans do not buy into this charade of pluralism, and human rights monitors regularly expose the state's legal constrictions and repressive practices, then why the stubborn

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<sup>17</sup> Citation needed

reminders from the palace that the kingdom remains on the course towards greater democratic freedom? A central reason is that like Jordan and other autocratic allies of Western powers, the Moroccan regime must maintain a public veneer of being progressive and enlightened—an embattled state committed to democratization in the long-term, and so worthy of applause and assistance. Morocco has always been a staunch ally of the West since the 1960s, with both France/EU and the US serving as its main patrons in recent decades. This stance has always been insulated from public pressures, as foreign policy remains an issue of utmost importance to national security, and so is essentially decreed by the palace rather than submitted for debate in parliament, or even the council of ministers.<sup>18</sup>

The first hallmark of King Mohammed's foreign policy has been deepening Morocco's integration into the Euro-Med partnership, and thus closer ties to the EU core, through increased trade and coordinated investment. The second is intensifying Moroccan ties with the US, ranging from the 2004 free trade pact and integration into the Millennium Challenge Account to strategic cooperation on the global war on terror. The vast foreign aid receipts and development assistance such linkages have generated, combined with the export earnings generated by increased trade and rising remittances from Moroccan immigrants working in the EU and Gulf, has provided the Moroccan regime with substantial revenues. Lacking significant natural resources beyond phosphate, and stuck on the lower tier of middle-income development rankings, King Mohammed's regime has relied heavily on external economic support to plug its budgetary gaps and inaugurate neoliberal economic reforms. In return, many Western interlocutors present Morocco as a model for how to combine political liberalization with combating Islamic extremism. Echoing mainstream diplomatic opinion and the popular press in

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<sup>18</sup> Chaouki Serghini, les déterminations de la politique extérieure marocaine, in *Edification d'un Etat moderne, le Maroc de Hassan II*, P :434. – Rene Jean Dupy, la constitution marocaine et les relations internationales, in *trente années de vie constitutionnelle au Maroc*, pp : 229-239.

many Western capitals, one writer applauds King Mohammed for his “moderate and progressive world views” that can serve as a beacon of hope for other Arabs in more radical states.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Jordan***

As in Morocco, the glossy sheen of Jordanian “democracy” rubs off upon closer glance. Like Mohamed VI, King ‘Abdullah II pledged a new era of openness and reform upon his ascension to the throne, seeding hope amongst Jordanian activists who had emerged during the 1990s after several decades of hibernation. Scanning the ceremonial rollouts of reform initiatives alone, an observer may well think that the palace has ferociously pursued democratization. From the Jordan First (*al-urdun al-awwalan*) campaign in 2002, to the National Agenda of 2005, and the We Are All Jordan (*kulluna al-urdun*) project of 2006, the public has seen numerous royal programs that called for national dialogue, created some reform commission, and hosted numerous workshops on the need for greater transparency and participation. In the end, however, these grand ventures are quietly forgotten; suggestions for *fundamental* changes in the structure of executive power, such as making cabinet governments accountable to parliament rather than beholden to the king’s pleasure, are dropped. Meanwhile, the monarchy has also initiated a highly effective containment strategy that has eviscerated much of the opposition landscape with new legal regulations. In this framework of authoritarian rule, the royal state has leveraged its repressive capacity to squelch its most annoying gadflies, while boxing in mainstream actors through subtler legal instruments. Perhaps most galling

The media provides an obvious example of this. While Jordanian law, in theory, protects an impressive array of journalist freedoms, the reality is that independent reportage in the

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<sup>19</sup> S.E. Cupp, “Can Morocco Save the Middle East?” *TownHall.com*, 10 June 2009.

kingdom has become increasingly rare over the past decade—but not because official censorship or royal brutality has expanded. Rather, agents of the state prefer quieter methods. For instance, the kingdom's new press law ratified in 2007 prohibits an impossibly ambiguous range of journalistic misconduct, from inflaming foreign relations to spreading falsehoods. For writers singled out, courts are ever-ready to hand down steep financial penalties that far outstrip their salaries. This creates an uncertain climate in which much of the media practices self-censorship when reporting on sensitive issues, such as those concerning national security and foreign relations.<sup>20</sup> More disconcerting, in recent years electronic media, from local blogs to online news portals, are also being held accountable to these ambiguous press constraints, raising fears that utterances as innocuous as Twitter posts or Facebook comments can now be used as evidence to stifle young writers.

Political parties and civil society organizations, too, exist in a state of perpetual uncertainty. The palace has consistently refused calls to overturn the SNTV system, or redraw electoral districts such that tribal and rural districts no longer receive the same numbers of seats as urban and Palestinian constituencies that have far more voters. As a result, parliament remains dominated by independent tribal candidates, and few parties except the IAF regularly score more than one or two seats. More troubling, in 2007 the government promulgated new regulations that resulted in the revocation of licensing for nearly two-thirds of Jordan's 36 existing parties. While many of these factions were little more than wealthy individuals and a handful of sycophants, many critics see a serious disconnect between such sweeping demolitions and the palace's stated embrace of political pluralism.

Finally, civil society associations, which number over 2,000, have also faced increasing state pressures under the new monarch. Public gatherings usually require advance notice, saving

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<sup>20</sup> Hani Hazaimeh, "Majority of Journalists Practice Self-Censorship," *Jordan Times*, 3 May 2009.

the police the hassle of beatings since local authorities can always deny petitions to protest should it implicate any contentious issue that might embarrass the palace and king. Further, new rules passed in 2008 prohibit any NGO, including voluntary societies and charitable organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, from engaging in what the state considers “political” activity, and also enables government officials to audit their financing. While this imposition is ostensibly designed to enhance civic transparency, many feel that the real goal falls in line with the regime’s underlying strategy to constrict the breathing room of any autonomous actor that might mobilize dissent and discord against state policies from below—especially regarding contentious issues in which Hashemite preferences starkly diverge from popular opinion, such as debates over Jordan’s alliance with the US, and the normalization of ties with Israel. As in Morocco, foreign policy here is strictly a royal affair, with little tolerance for public input.

The increasing bureaucratization of civic life and political activism has gone hand-in-hand with sporadic acts of coercion against dissenters. While far less common than during the pre-1990s era, such visible performances of repression remind the public that even in this new era of liberalization, the infrastructure of repression that characterized the old security state still exists today, and the *mukhabarat* remains the Hashemite crown’s most tenacious guardian.<sup>21</sup> After the assassination of an American diplomat in 2002, and especially following the 2005 Amman hotel bombings, a number of Salafists and other outspoken Islamists deemed “extremist” were arrested and sometimes brutally interrogated. Encouraged by strict new anti-terrorism statutes, both state security courts and the *mukhabarat* have gained new authority to monitor civic life and prosecute suspected threats to political stability. Apart from conservative Islamists, more than a few other outspoken citizens have also fallen victim to state prosecution,

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<sup>21</sup> Fahd al-Khitan, “Al-mukhabarat al-‘aama... dour siyassi fii muwaajahat al-’azmaat” (The General Intelligence Directorate... Its Political Role in Confronting Crises), *Al-Arab al-Yawm*, 5 August 2008.

ranging from critical journalists who breached red lines to former parliamentarians and government officials unhappy with King ‘Abdullah’s vision of modernity. The point has been well-taken: in annual surveys taken since 2001, 75 to 80 percent of Jordanians have consistently reported being afraid criticize the government.<sup>22</sup>

As in Morocco, Jordan’s simulated practice of democratization has been carefully calibrated to support its foreign policy, which under ‘Abdullah’s watch has drawn the Hashemite kingdom into unprecedented ties with the US and Europe. The monarchy maintains an international image as a progressive and liberal leadership in the chaotic region; one analyst exhorted King Abdullah as the West’s “can-do guy” for inaugurating a new spirit of political reform in the Arab world.<sup>23</sup> Especially after Washington’s post-2003 push for democracy promotion, the Jordanian state has sought to separate itself from more isolated autocracies like Syria and Iran, and instead attract Western audiences with official commitments towards democratic reform and economic openness. Both are problematic, for the aforementioned reasons; royal rhetoric for political freedom falls far short of state actions, and economic development has left the gargantuan public sector intact while enriching a new political class of technocratic acolytes.

Less publicized within Jordan are the reciprocal elements of the kingdom’s intimate links with Western patrons. During the run-up to the Iraqi War, the government provided substantial logistical support to the American military, from hosting US Special Forces operators to ensuring close intelligence cooperation with the CIA. Indeed, the Jordanian *mukhabarat* is considered as one of the agency’s most reliable Middle East partners, and the kingdom became a critical nexus in the US transnational “renditions” network. Knowing well the popular outcry that would erupt

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<sup>22</sup> See the *Democracy in Jordan* poll series run by the Public Opinion Poll Unit at the Center for Strategic Studies at Jordan University, available at <http://www.jcss.org/subDefault.aspx?PageId=36&PollType=2>.

<sup>23</sup> Lee Smith, “The Arab World’s Can-Do Guy,” *Slate.com*, 7 May 2004.

from the American invasion, the palace and its cabinet government ruled by decree during 2001-2003, as parliament was temporarily suspended, and ordered new security edicts that limited public space for political demonstrations and activism. In return, the monarchical state has garnered extraordinary volumes of foreign aid, primarily from the US. Washington has given Amman nearly \$7 billion in economic grant and military assistance since 1999, with such exogenous support peaking in the mid-2000s. As a result, while the Hashemite kingdom is a middle-income country, it ranks today as one of the top three per capita recipients of American aid dollars.

On the flip side, the American embrace of ‘Abdullah’s regime has, if anything, grown tighter in recent years. The State Department intends to furnish more than \$650 million in annual aid payments during 2010-2014, thereby guaranteeing the kingdom’s budgetary solvency and much of its development projects for another half-decade. In 2006, Jordan also became eligible for the Millennium Challenge Account’s aid disbursements, joining Morocco. Finally, in March 2008, several Congressmen joined with King ‘Abdullah in Washington to found the Congressional Friends of Jordan Caucus, symbolizing the diplomatic bonds between the two states. It was not surprising, in this context, that the first Arab leader to visit President Barack Obama in Washington was King ‘Abdullah.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION: DURABLE AUTOCRACIES IN ACTION**

Karl Witffogel notes that successful autocracies must engage in effective social control regardless of what constitutional constraints are inscribed on paper; bare violence is not

sufficient.<sup>24</sup> In this paper, we have shown that the historical infrastructure of monarchical power, the coalitional networks of indigenous support, and new institutional techniques of regime maintenance have made the ‘Alaouite dynasty of Morocco and the Hashemite House of Jordan virtually impregnable to everyday dissent and opposition. What Georges Balandier once noted about the process of royal succession—that the ascension to power of new kings “gives the people, for the time, the feeling of a fresh start”<sup>25</sup>—rang true in these countries more than ten years ago. That such feelings have dissipated so quickly speaks to the impressive capacity of these regimes to adapt their autocratic imperatives to fit new domestic circumstances, and hone their strategic talents in capturing Western support to further reinforce their economic base.

In the current climate, we conclude that *systemic* political change in these kingdoms is unlikely. Propositions about gradual reform along the path of state-led liberalization dominate the political parlors of these countries for a reason; these regimes prefer that change be conceptualized in piecemeal terms rather than an “all or nothing” approach. Real democratization would, at some point, require an act of dynastic suicide that seems unlikely: that royal incumbents accept true parliamentary governance, in which cabinet governments would be drawn from freely elected legislatures filled with independent parties both secular and Islamist, and where the palace no longer can dictate policy prerogatives while exercising coercive monopolies over civil society. Monarchical continuity may also be interrupted by incumbent death, but both Mohammed and ‘Abdullah have anointed their sons as Crown Prince, ensuring that power remains in the agnatic line of succession. A coup d’état provides a more violent avenue of change, but there is little guarantee that military officers in these states would be any more sympathetic to democratic demands than the dynastic incumbents they would replace.

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<sup>24</sup> Karl Wittfogel, *le despotisme oriental*, Ed.Minuit, Paris 1977, p : 111-112

<sup>25</sup> Georges Balandier, *Anthropologie politique*, PUF 1984, P:134.

A final path to constitutional monarchy would be revolution from below, but this too requires improbable conditions—namely, mass unrest arising amongst multiple classes within domestic society that would prove uncontrollable, as well as intense geopolitical pressures imposed by international patrons, namely the United States and France/EU. The recent global economic crises buffeted both kingdoms, and their palaces proved more than capable of maintaining political order at home. Further, Western patrons are unwilling to promote democracy so strongly that they might catapult these authoritarian partners into a process that could result in the worst possible scenario: with the power of monarchy receding, an unelected government (secular or Islamist) might gain power, and then dismantling their kingdom's longstanding ties of cooperation and support to the West.