

# Jordan reshuffles cabinet as it faces economic, security challenges

The Arab Weekly staff

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Jordanian King Abdullah II has approved a cabinet reshuffle, replacing ministers in key domestic portfolios such as interior, labour and the economy at a time of continued economic downturn.

King Abdullah has the final say on key policies but frequent cabinet personnel changes are considered a way of deflecting frustration among Jordanians over rising prices and unemployment.

Jordanian Prime Minister Hani Mulki, who retained his post, appointed the king's chief of staff as special deputy for economic affairs in an apparent bid to soothe widespread anger over flagging growth.

Mulki's reshuffle, the sixth since he became prime minister in May 2016, comes three days after hundreds of protesters in Salt, 30km west of Amman, demanded his resignation and called for King Abdullah to force the government to roll back price increases and end high-level corruption.

King Abdullah issued a royal decree approving the appointment of Major-General Fadel al-Hamoud as police chief in a shake-up that two officials tied to events in Salt and recent law and order lapses.

Mulki avoided a vote of no-confidence in parliament after deputies sought to bring down the government over the price hikes that raised taxes on most consumer and food products and some fuel items. That was followed by a doubling of the prices of subsidised bread.

Jafar Hassan, chief of staff of the office of King Abdullah, was placed in the post of deputy prime minister for economic affairs, a role that had been vacant in Mulki's previous cabinet.

Hassan, a former planning minister, will be leading a ministerial team overseeing a tough 3-year programme agreed with the Inter-

national Monetary Fund (IMF) of long-delayed structural reforms to cut public debt to 77% of GDP by 2021 from 94% now.

Mulki imposed steep IMF-mandated tax hikes to cut rising public debt that has hit the incomes of ordinary Jordanians, causing his popularity to plummet.

Finance Minister Omar Malhas kept his position in the reshuffle.

Ayman Safadi, a long-time adviser to the royal family remained foreign minister. He has been leading the kingdom's talks with Washington over its Middle East policy.

Politicians and economists said tough fiscal consolidation plan and price hikes are worsening the plight of poorer Jordanians. Removing subsidies triggered civil unrest in the past. Unlike previous hikes, only a few scattered protests have taken place but slogans carried by demonstrators in the rally in Salt were the most critical so far.

"We will wage an intifada (uprising) until prices go down. There are limits to our patience," protesters chanted. Some indirectly blamed King Abdullah. Authorities sent gendarmerie reinforcements to Salt.

The government said cash transfers to low-income citizens have mitigated the effect of price rises.

Jordan's economic growth has been affected by regional conflicts weighing on investor sentiment and as consumer demand generated by Syrian refugees staying in Jordan has receded, the IMF said.

Real GDP growth was revised to 2% in 2017, about 1 percentage point lower than anticipated at the start of the IMF programme, and was expected to be approximately 3% this year, almost half the level it attained a decade ago.

Jordan is struggling with a heavy debt burden and is expected by international lenders to stick to an economic reform programme including subsidy cuts.

Mulki said the government achieved a "huge success" in its financial reform process over the past two years, the state's official



Final say. Jordanian King Abdullah II arriving for a meeting at the Jordanian Royal Palace in Amman, last year. (AP)

Petra news agency said.

The reshuffle is also meant to address issues other than the economy.

"The prime minister said that the second focus of the government will be enhancing the rule of law, noting that the cabinet finalised laws related to developing the judiciary," reported the Jordan Times.

"The government's agenda will also focus on youth as a main pillar of the Jordanian society's cohesion, as they comprise a majority of the population. This necessitates developing youth programmes that have to include political and economic education and not only sports," added the newspa-

per, citing Mulki.

The reshuffle involved security officials, highlighting the country's exposure to terror threats. Western allies view Jordan's stability as key to fighting extremism and the United States recently pledged more than \$6 billion in aid through 2022.

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Jordan, however, appears to be hoping for more aid from other countries.

"Many, especially the G20 countries, should follow suit and sign agreements like the Jordanian-US deal. Incidentally, the G20 accounts for 85% of the global GDP," wrote Khalid Dalal in an opinion article in the Jordan Times.

"If the world loves Jordan and admires its stances, as it says, it must prove it in deeds, not in words only," he added.

Critics of the cabinet reshuffle noted the absence of female ministers among the new appointees.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies.

## Viewpoint



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# Jordanians continue to struggle with jihadist threats

The defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq resulted in a decline of the jihadi threat across the region. In Jordan, where the jihadi scene has been shaped by the Syrian conflict, authorities will continue to struggle with the issue of low-level terrorism in the long run.

Since the 1980s, Jordanians have joined jihadist organisations around the world, first in Afghanistan with Abdullah Azzam, al-Qaeda's ideologue, and then in Iraq with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a former criminal turned zealot, and finally in Syria which, along with Iraq, has attracted more than 2,000 fighters since 2011, Jordanian Islamist expert Hassan Abu Haniya said.

A case in point is the former al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaeda affiliate whose leadership was dominated by Jordanians such as Abu Julaybib, Belal Khrisat and Sami Oraidi.

The Syrian war has been an important inflection point for Jordanian jihadists. Abu Haniya said there are about 10,000 jihadists in Jordan. The researcher noted a generational gap in terms of allegiance, with younger jihadis more likely to support the Islamic State (ISIS) and older figures being more drawn to al-Qaeda organisations. "Around 80% of jihadis in Jordan support ISIS," he pointed out.

Another trend marking the jihadi scene has been the appeal of terror organisations to Jordanians of Palestinian origin and increasingly to trans-Jordanians, with main flashpoints around Zarqa, Irbid, Salt and Maan.

The background of contemporary Jordanian jihadists has also changed. Most are believed to be under-employed and hailing from impoverished backgrounds, with exceptions including the sons of Jordanian parliamentarians and of army commanders.

Abu Haniya noted, nonetheless, that Jordan is witnessing a radicalisation of members of lower-middle-class families, a phenomenon that could be partially explained by the worsening economic conditions that have resulted in a change in status of members of that particular social class.

The changes have translated into several terror attacks on Jordanian soil. In March 2016, Jordan witnessed an extended battle in the city of Irbid, following an operation

to take down an ISIS cell plotting terror attacks.

In June 2016, five Jordanian intelligence officers were shot in another terrorist attack near the Al-Baqaa Palestinian refugee camp, the previous residence of jihadist Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi.

Also in June 2016, six Jordanian soldiers were killed and several others wounded when a car bomb exploded near the Syrian refugee camp of al-Rukban, an attack claimed by ISIS.

In December 2016, four gunmen attacked a police patrol and overtook the Crusaders castle in Karak, where several tourists were trapped during the attack, also claimed by ISIS.

In January this year, Jordan said it had foiled a massive terror plot

and dismantled an ISIS terror cell of 17 people.

"The cells that have been dismantled recently were not connected to one another," said Abu Haniya, who added that Jordan was not the "land of confrontation" for jihadist groups but more of "support."

Jordan has severely cracked down on people suspected of jihadist inclinations. Jordan forbids foreign fighters from returning and more than 300 of those who have returned have been prosecuted and imprisoned. This means those remaining in conflict zones could be significantly deterred from returning.

Despite this policy yielding successful results and a significant drop in attacks, Jordan will continue to struggle with the jihadist threat. Worsening economic conditions, unemployment and frustration all contribute to radicalisation.

More importantly, drivers such as community support and exposure are also present in Jordan. A 2016 study by Anne Speckhard, Fares Braizat, Ardian Shajkovci and Amer Sabaileh on Jordanian youth stated that 4.5% of young people in Zarqa said ISIS was close to their personal convictions and 2.7% said al-Qaeda represented their personal convictions. In Irbid 1.5% endorsed ISIS and another 1.5% al-Qaeda.

Like in other Arab countries, young marginalised Jordanians are facing an identity crisis that is exacerbated by perceived injustice and a lack of political life. These factors, combined with bad economic conditions and a conducive environment, mean that jihad will continue to appeal to a portion of young Jordanians.

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Uncompromising approach. A terror suspect stands behind a Jordanian security officer at the state security court in Amman, last December. (AFP)