Delegation for relations with the Mashreq countries

6th European Parliament – Jordan
Interparliamentary Meeting
27 April - 29 April 2011
Amman - Jordan

Draft report by Mário David, Chairman
# Table of contents

Objectives and political context of the visit ................................................................. 3

Demands of reform ........................................................................................................ 3

A Committee for National Dialogue to draft key reforms ........................................ 4

King Abdullah's reform agenda .................................................................................... 4

Expectations on the new Prime Minister ..................................................................... 5

Islamists and students - uneven forces of change ...................................................... 5

Economic development - key to the success of reforms ............................................ 6

Middle East Peace Process and Jordan–Palestinian relations .................................. 6

Jordan - an oasis of relative calm in a region in turmoil .......................................... 7

Impressions from the interparliamentary meeting ...................................................... 8

Environmental challenges in the Jordan Valley ....................................................... 9

Conclusions .................................................................................................................. 9
Objectives and political context of the visit

A Working Group of the Mashreq Delegation comprised of Chairman Mário David, Vice Chair Saïd el-Khadraoui, Elena Antonescu, Frieda Brepoels, and Boguslaw Sonik visited Jordan from 27 - 29 April 2011.

Similar to what recent EP ad-hoc Delegations to Tunisia and Egypt did, the Delegation focused on assessing the demands of reform in Jordan and the government's response in order to evaluate how the EU can best adapt its response strategy to the current challenges. An enhanced status under the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) had been granted to Jordan before the democratic uprisings in the Arab world began. The new ENP Action Plan foresees €75M per year for Jordan from 2011-2013 to which other European institutions add making over €100M available for Jordan per year.

Jordan still enjoys relative calm and stability compared to neighbouring Egypt and Syria. The latter stepped up repression of popular uprisings and closed borders with Jordan during the visit. Shortly before the Delegation's arrival, an important gas pipeline between Egypt and Jordan was blown up for the second time in a year. The day before the beginning of the visit, King Abdullah II surprisingly announced the setting up of a new Committee to review the Constitution. This move potentially broadened the scope of the reforms a National Dialogue Committee had been entrusted with on 13 March (drafting proposals for a new electoral law and a law on political parties).

During the visit, a reconciliation deal between Fatah and Hamas was announced and became a central topic in the discussions on the Middle East Peace Process.

Finally, the Delegation followed up on last year's EP resolution on the situation of the Jordan River and looked into the issue of water scarcity and rehabilitation of the Jordan River through visiting the EU-funded ECO Park project led by "Friends of the Earth".

Demands of reform

Unlike in other Arab countries, people in Jordan have neither asked for regime change so far nor has Jordan seen mass demonstrations comparable to Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Bahrain or Yemen. Unrests started in early January initially centred on economic demands. They were first driven by East Bankers, the traditional support base of the King, who had disproportionately suffered cuts in public sector employment. Spurred by events across the region, the protests broadened to encompass leftist groups, trade unions, professional organisations and Islamists. Lately Salafi-Jihadists have also entered the stage asking for the application of Sharia throughout the country. However, discourses of the Islamists and the reform protesters differ fundamentally.

Youth movements started in March with generally peaceful demonstrations claiming dignity and freedom, asking for greater political reform and decrying corruption. According to the Jordanian authorities, their approach is not to use violence against demonstrators. Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Judeh hints to over 1300 demonstrations in three months without any live ammunition fired. The only man killed during a demonstration on 24 March allegedly died from a heart attack. This version is not shared by all interlocutors the Delegation met. Some of the EU Member States Ambassadors hold, however, that the Jordanian authorities handle violence by Islamist-Salafi demonstrators tougher than they do with the reform protesters.

---

1 Resolution of 9 September 2010 on the situation of the Jordan River with special regard to the Lower Jordan River area, P7_TA-PROV(2010)0314.
A Committee for National Dialogue to draft key reforms

Rises of public expenditure announced by then-Prime Minister Samir Rifai in January did not satisfy protesters who asked for his resignation, a revision of the controversial electoral law, and improvement of economic conditions. On 1 February King Abdullah II replaced the Prime Minister with Marouf Bakhit whom he entrusted with forming a Committee for National Dialogue tasked with reviewing the electoral law and drafting a new law on political parties thus meeting some of the protestors' key demands. The Committee comprises 53 members including former ministers, human rights activists, writers and journalists, trade unionists, political leaders and Islamists. Only four women are members, and no member is younger than 30 years. The Committee is chaired by the President of the Senate, Taher Masri.

The introduction of a mixed electoral system that guarantees fairer representation of the cities and hence the Palestinian population has been a long-standing issue in Jordan. Political parties in Jordan are symptomatically weak with some of them being a mere one-man show leaving the Islamist Action Front (IAF) as the only well-organised opposition force. Taher Masri acknowledges that the present electoral system is part of Jordan's current weaknesses: "The one personal vote system doesn't fit Jordan". Elections should be supervised by an independent body, not by the Ministry of the Interior. Masri also confirms the intention to open up the political system and make it easier for parties to act and gain membership. Now, registered parties in Jordan receive public aid. According to its President, the National Dialogue Committee will recommend financial support to parties according to strength of representation coupled with incentives if they file Youth and women.

King Abdullah's reform agenda

Jordan is going through a still mainly top-down driven reform process led by King Abdullah II. Nasser Judeh, Minister of Foreign Affairs, explains the Monarch's role saying: "The King initiates reform and corrects its paths if it falters". King Abdullah shares with the Delegation his determination to push for comprehensive reform, part of which he had already announced in a visit to Brussels in December 2010, ahead of the popular uprisings in the region: "I am not pushed by the street. The best thing is to act now while it is relatively calm."

He explains that while Youth is represented in the National Dialogue Committee, Jordan's Constitutional Committee follows the Egyptian model relying on experts rather than on Youth. The former is supposed to deliver within weeks its proposals on a party law and an electoral law. The work of the new Committee to review the Constitution chaired by former Prime Minister Ahmed Louzy might take up to one year. The Constitutional Committee will apparently discuss the entire Constitution, not only the 29 amendments made since 1952 as requested by the population. These amendments had over time modified the originally Belgium-inspired Constitution at the expenses of Parliament. King Abdullah's goal is to have a Prime Minister elected by Parliament.

This, however, requires the existence of a political party scene with ideally two to three parties that represent the whole of Jordan. The King is conscious of the fact that the "actors of change" lack clear policy positions on important political, economic and social issues. He expects that a minimum of two years is needed for parties to evolve from bottom up. On the other hand, he refers to a 10-15 years period needed in the case of Romania to anchor democratic culture and mindsets. The King welcomes the scheduled meeting of the Delegation with University students: "We have to get the Youth interested in politics", and requests EU partners to help Jordan fostering debate on what it means belonging to a political party. He comments Jordan's future
political setup saying: "70 percent of this country's population is less than 30 years old. They don't want Islamists or Baathists. Jordan has the opportunity of creating a democracy without the Muslim Brotherhood and a proper democratic movement is the only way to destroy them."

European diplomats are less optimistic about the scope of constitutional reform. They argue that the very composition of the new Constitutional Committee doesn't let expect a revolutionary outcome and that the regime is unlikely to push reform further than really needed.

Asked whether the current reform efforts will culminate into a referendum, King Abdullah says a referendum could backfire if reforms look too liberal. However, he might resort to a referendum if his plans are pushed back by people who oppose reform.

### Expectations on the new Prime Minister

Overall expectations on the incumbent government are high: Prime Minister Marouf Bakhit describes his mandate as to take immediate and tangible steps to comprehensive reform. He refers to an already amended public gathering law which will be submitted to Parliament in an upcoming extraordinary session. Under this law no permit is needed to organise a gathering, authorities have only to be informed. Teachers are now allowed to set up a union. Work on a municipality law is ongoing which should also go to Parliament ahead of municipality elections to be held between July and September. Work on fighting corruption has started with the setting up of a new Higher Advisory Committee to follow up allegations of corruption. Again, EU diplomats temper this optimism arguing that the Committee on corruption is overloaded and only minor corruption cases are referred to Court.

### Islamists and students - uneven forces of change

Sheikh Hamza Mansour, Secretary General of the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood tells the Delegation that deep-rooted and radical reforms are necessary to address long standing social and political imbalances. He denounces the absence of political will to reform, a view which according to him is shared by many other political actors in the country. He justifies the IAF's boycott of the National Dialogue committee as "a democratic action we have resorted to by lack of alternatives: IAF doesn't want to be part of a decor. The Committee's President is not appointed by the government. Its agenda is too narrow and I doubt the Committee Members believe in reforms." Mansour interprets the widening of the scope of the current reforms as a success of the boycott and the setting up of the Constitutional Committee as a confirmation of the legitimacy of the IDF's requests. Mansour holds that the IAF will participate in upcoming elections if safeguards are given. Asked on the future role of Sharia in Jordan Mansour stresses the holistic character of Islam, but adds "we will respect the will of our people and stand with what they decide".

University students from different faculties who met with the Delegation confirm the assumption that respect of human dignity is a central request of the Youth next to job creation, fight against
corruption and better opportunities. Some wonder whether the Delegation considers the King's reform plans as genuine. Many students ask about the EU's future priorities for financial aid. The Delegation makes clear that the EU will not deliver blanco cheques for budgetary support. While pointing to the impact of the financial crisis on EU economies the Delegation indicates that the EU will stronger differentiate in future with priority to be given to well-performing countries. Members also convey the message that further opening of EU markets has internal implications. Said el-Khadraoui: "we need to convince our people back home". Related to Jordan's reform process towards more democracy Members remind the students that deception is a common feature at the beginning of transformation processes and that time is needed for democratic culture to blossom. As it becomes clear that most of the students lack a stance on concrete policy issues such as health, fiscal systems, foreign relations, environment, and nuclear energy, the Chair invites them to position themselves in the political spectrum and to further reflect on the role political parties should play. Concern about Islamic parties taking advantage of the current events is another issue for the students. Finally the Delegation has to answer tough questions on islamophobia in Europe and measures taken by several Member States to forbid the wearing of head scarfs and burkas.

**Economic development - key to the success of reforms**

In response to the regional events of January and February 2011 the Jordanian government adopted two emergency packages worth over €460M which put the country's budget under heavy strain and risk setting of the gains made during the austerity programme of the period November 2009-December 2010. The recent sabotage of the gas pipeline from Egypt to Jordan - for the second time in a year - adds around €1M a day to the energy bill of the country which imports 96 percent of its oil.

In order to be sustainable, the new State budget is relying increasingly on additional foreign grants. The Delegation had to face demands for more money from the EU by explaining that under the current circumstances, the EU cannot grant unconditional budgetary support. Comparing Jordan's approach to the reaction of some Gulf countries following recent protests, the Prime Minister says: "I don't believe in handouts to poor people. Only job creation will help". He also announces a new investment law. The Prime Minister explains that imitation of Europe with the setting up of independent regulatory bodies Jordan created income disparities for civil servants which will have to be addressed now. At the same time the government is increasing previously reduced public sector employment again to appease tensions.

Asked if flat government subsidies in Jordan shouldn't focus more to be sustainable, the Minister of Foreign Affairs recalls that subsidies on most of the fuel products were lifted in 2008, but underscores the psychological importance of bread subsidies: "We might end up with a smart card to handle entitlements to subsidies."

The Delegation understands that money is one of Jordan's most pressing demands, while fighting corruption and building up administrative capacities will be key factors for the success and sustainability of the current and planned reforms.

**Middle East Peace Process and Jordan-Palestinian relations**

There is a wide-spread feeling that urgent action is needed to reach a breakthrough towards the implementation of the two-state solution: "It is the moment of truth for a Palestinian State" (Nasser Judeh, Minister of Foreign Affairs).
A long-awaited reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas is announced during the visit. Both the Delegation and its interlocutors consider this move as very positive while sharing the concern that implementing the agreement will represent a major challenge. The Chair regrets Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's interpretation of the reconciliation deal as a choice against peace.

As in previous meetings in Jordan and throughout the region, the Delegation hears a unanimous call for a stronger EU involvement in the Middle East Peace Process. Many interlocutors reinforce this call by pointing to the absence of US leadership and the lack of credibility of the US, notably after having vetoed the UN Security Council draft resolution on condemning the Israeli settlement policy. Worse, there is a growing frustration over the lack of US commitment and awareness, that the US is caught by domestic challenges. King Abdullah who shares with the Delegation his intention to visit the US within two weeks to discuss re-launching the Peace Talks: "I keep on telling President Obama that things will get much worse if the US doesn't focus on the Peace Process. If there is no solution, we might see another war." The King describes the absence of peace based on a two-state solution as a "ticking time bomb" with the alternatives being either democracy (i.e. a one-state solution) or apartheid.

At many occasions the Delegation spells out the European Parliament's consensus on a two-state solution including its position on the 1967 borders, Jerusalem and refugees as well as its support for the Arab Peace initiative as a basis for negotiations. The Chair even trusts that the EU Member States would recognise a Palestinian State by September. His call for closer involvement of the Arab League to promote the Arab Peace Initiative is met with some scepticism. IAF Secretary General Mansour argues that the Arab Peace Initiative was launched by governments, not by the people. Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Judeh stresses that the Arab League follow up committee has become a mere umbrella for the Palestinian Authority.

While many neighbouring countries have to cope with the presence of Palestinian refugees, Jordan is in a unique situation. A majority of its population is of Palestinian origin and the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on domestic issues is high. Tensions between the Palestinian population and the East Bank tribes are a structural feature of the Jordanian society and closely intertwined with the current debate on reform. The Delegation raises the issue of citizenship and equal rights at different occasions. Yet, none of the interlocutors comes up with a clear idea on the future relationship between West and East Bankers after the eventual creation of a Palestinian State.

Jordan - an oasis of relative calm in a region in turmoil

The Delegation discusses the appraisal of the regional situation at various levels. "The Arab World is witnessing a political tsunami" is one of the catch phrases the King and the Foreign
Minister use to describe the situation. King Abdullah holds that "we are only in the early stages of what will happen in the Middle East".

The IAF interprets the current changes in the region as an initial sign for a development towards Arab unity which would represent 400 million people, similar to the EU.

The Polish Ambassador who briefed the Delegation on his recent trip to Syria portrays a rather chaotic situation with tough, but badly coordinated security controls and checkpoints on the main streets. He also relays a commonly shared opinion that Saudi Wahabists have entered the country to spread chaos.

The interlocutors are aware that the outcome of the crisis in Syria which is still entirely unpredictable to them will affect Jordan economically. Jordan might also experience yet another afflux of refugees. Asked on the capability of Bashar al-Assad to deliver on announced reforms, the Minister of Foreign Affairs holds that too much blood has been spilled and that is too late for dialogue. The King goes even further saying that Syrian denial of actual problems won't work: "It is the beginning of the end of the regime".

**Impressions from the interparliamentary meeting**

The Jordanian Parliament's ordinary sessions usually last four months. At the moment of our visit, Parliament is not in session, but expected to be convened soon for an extraordinary session to debate the reform proposals of the National Dialogue Committee.

The interparliamentary meeting is chaired by Atef Tarawneh, First Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives and attended by a large number of Members of the Committee on Arab and International Affairs and Members of the EP-Jordan Friendship Group. One of the 13 female Members of the Jordanian Parliament attends the meeting.

Parliament supports the King in political and constitutional reforms. Even more than the governmental interlocutors, parliamentarians put emphasis on the need to accompany political with economic reform fighting poverty, unemployment, and the budget deficit. They are also stronger in voicing the demand for the EU to help stabilising Jordan through increased financial support.

Criticism of the EU is equally stronger on the parliamentarian side. A deputy from Petra region wonders why visiting delegations are concerned with reforms whereas Jordan seems accepting tribal democracy: "We believe that we are fine and capable of tailoring our reforms without intervention from our friends. Support us, but not impose upon us."

Other criticism focuses on the EU's role in the Middle East Peace Process: "We feel that the EU let us down on the Palestinian issue whereas Israel is taking advantage of US inertia." "The EU should increase assistance to UNWRA and give a bigger share to Jordan for providing services to the Palestinian refugees."

The Delegation stresses that shared values are the basis for the enhanced ENP relationship with Jordan. It explains current domestic constraints in EU Member States linked to the precarious financial situations in Greece and Portugal. It also hints to differences in the positions of the European Parliament and the Member States government and assures EP support to emerging democracies including through additional funding. However, the Delegation makes clear that the EP cannot justify unconditional assistance. Thus a certain number of misperceptions could be clarified. Jordanian parliamentarians conclude that apparently they underestimate the EP's role looking only to the US and the UK, but remind the EU: "At grassroots level, you are not present enough".
Environmental challenges in the Jordan Valley

On 9 September 2010, the EP addressed the devastation of the Jordan River and the Lower Jordan in a resolution which pointed, inter alia, to overexploitation, pollution, mismanagement and lack of regional cooperation. The resolution called on the authorities of all riparian countries to cooperate and rehabilitate the Jordan River by elaborating and implementing policies focusing on tangible results in domestic and agricultural water demand management, water conservation, and the management of sewage and agricultural and industrial effluents as well as to ensure that an adequate quantity of fresh water flows into the Lower Jordan River.

On a visit to the EU-funded ECO Park project in the Jordan valley the Delegation finds that local stakeholders warmly welcome the EP resolution. Discussions with local communities and the project implementing NGO (Friends of the Earth - Middle East) focus on the challenges of water management, rehabilitating the Lower Jordan River and saving the Dead Sea. The Delegation understands that the different project components aiming at advocacy, awareness raising, changing consumer patterns, conservation of natural space and preventing pollution have already had a very positive impact. However, it appears that setting up sewage and water sanitation in the Jordan valley which is crucial to rehabilitate the Lower Jordan River is not a top priority for the Jordanian authorities who have to tackle major water related problems in Amman. Moreover, they seem to have a preference for the Red-Dead-Canal project to solve the water issues in the region, an approach which "Friends of the Earth" sees with scepticism. It proved all the more helpful that a Member of the Jordanian Parliament joined the meetings who promises support to the local stakeholders and help with fostering advocacy for the project within the Jordanian Parliament.

Conclusions

The announced reforms including a new electoral framework and a law on political parties seem to take the right direction and the Delegation trusts in the King's handling of the reform agenda. Reforms will hopefully yield a comprehensive overhaul of the constitution with a stronger parliament and increased participation. The respect of human dignity and of all freedoms is crucial. The Jordanian people need to engage, to take policy positions beyond protest.

However, anchoring democratic culture and growing a political party scene will neither take place over night nor will it be done by decree. Successful implementation of reform will depend on acceptance by a society split between a Palestinian majority and East Bank tribes, but above all on revamping the economy and creating employment against the backdrop of a high budgetary deficit which prevents Jordan e.g. from absorbing additional EIB loans.

The EU can and should help Jordan on this way thus consolidating the enhanced relationship the country was granted under the ENP. Yet, in the regional context of ongoing transformation processes and given the budgetary constraints within the EU, priority of future EU assistance has to be given to well-performing countries in terms of governance reform and respect of human rights, individual and collective freedoms. This was a key message delivered by the Delegation to the Jordanian counterparts.