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The Politics of Jordan

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Introduction

Jordan occupies a distinctive place in the political landscape of the Middle East. As a relatively young nation with deep historical roots, its political system represents a blend of ancient tradition and modern governance. The Hashemite monarchy, underpinned by a constitutional framework, has been central to the country's stability and identity since independence in the mid-twentieth century. With its strategic location and sociopolitical complexity, Jordan has often played an outsized role in regional affairs, navigating the turbulence and transformation that have marked the Middle East over the past hundred years.

The political system in Jordan is formally based on the separation of powers, yet it is unique in the elevated role the monarchy continues to play. The King of Jordan serves not only as head of state but also wields considerable authority over the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. Royal prerogatives include the appointment of the prime minister, the right to dissolve the parliament, and significant influence in the shaping of domestic and foreign policy. While the constitution envisions a parliamentary form of government, the monarch's guiding hand remains ever-present.

Throughout its history, Jordan has faced formidable internal and external pressures. The loss of the West Bank in 1967, the influxes of refugees, waves of martial law, and repeated reforms are testament to a political system constantly adapting to survive. The legalization of political parties in the early 1990s marked a new era for political participation, but the realities of factionalism, tribal influence, and government-imposed restrictions have continued to shape the contours of Jordanian politics. Even as recent reforms seek to expand the role of political parties and introduce greater legislative representation, significant power remains centered in the palace.

Civil society and the media, crucial pillars of political life, face a delicate balance in Jordan. While a range of organizations and press outlets do exist, both operate under close scrutiny and legal constraints. Freedom of expression remains circumscribed, especially where matters of monarchy, security, or religion are concerned. Yet, despite these limitations, public debate and activism persist, reflecting both the aspirations and frustrations of Jordan's populace.

The modern era has brought about a renewed push for political change. Constitutional amendments, shifts in electoral law, and high-profile public dialogue have signaled intent to modernize political life and increase the inclusivity of the system. However, skepticism endures, particularly amid economic challenges and lingering questions about judicial independence, political accountability, and genuine democratic practice.

This book offers a comprehensive guide to the politics and political system of Jordan. Through examining the country's historical trajectories, foundational institutions, political actors, and reform efforts, it aims to illuminate the unique dynamics that define Jordanian governance. In so doing, it provides readers with the context necessary to understand not only the structures of power but also the nuanced challenges and possibilities facing Jordan today.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Geographic and Sociopolitical Setting of Jordan

Jordan, officially the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, is a country situated in the heart of the Middle East, a region known for its complex tapestry of history, culture, and, indeed, politics. It occupies a strategic position at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, sharing borders with Syria to the north, Iraq to the east, Saudi Arabia to the south and southeast, and Israel and the Palestinian territories to the west. This location has profoundly shaped its history and continues to influence its political dynamics, often placing it at the center of regional events.

The country's geography is diverse, encompassing distinct regions that contribute to its varied character. From east to west, one can observe a shift from vast desert landscapes to fertile valleys. The majority of Jordan's land area is covered by the arid plateau of the eastern and southern deserts, which are extensions of the Arabian and Syrian Deserts. These areas are characterized by broad expanses of sand, dunes, and rocky outcrops, supporting only sparse vegetation that emerges after the limited winter rains.

Moving westward, the land rises to form the uplands east of the Jordan River. This region includes a series of ridges and valleys, offering more favorable conditions for agriculture and settlement. The climate here is more Mediterranean, with semi-dry summers and relatively cold winters. This is where the majority of Jordan's population resides, and it is home to the capital city, Amman. Amman, a bustling metropolis, sits atop rolling hills and serves as the political, economic, and cultural hub of the country.

The most prominent geographical feature in the west is the Jordan Valley, part of the Great Rift Valley that stretches from Turkey to Africa. This valley, through which the Jordan River flows, forms a significant portion of Jordan's western border and includes the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth. The northern part of the valley is the most fertile area in Jordan, suitable for intensive agriculture, while the southern part, the Wadi Araba, is more arid.

Jordan's natural resources are relatively limited, with insufficient supplies of water, oil, and other key resources. However, it does possess significant deposits of phosphates and potash, which are important exports. The scarcity of water is a major challenge, particularly in the context of a growing population and the need for agricultural irrigation. This environmental constraint adds another layer of complexity to the country's development and governance.

The population of Jordan is estimated to be around 11.5 million people as of mid-2025. While the vast majority, around 94%, are Arabs, the country is also home to smaller ethnic minorities, including Circassians, Chechens, Assyrians, Armenians, and Kurds. This demographic makeup, while predominantly Arab, reflects the country's historical role as a place of refuge and a crossroads of different cultures.

A significant aspect of Jordan's social landscape is the presence of a large refugee population. For decades, Jordan has provided refuge to people fleeing conflicts in neighboring countries, most notably Palestinians and, more recently, Syrians. These refugee communities, while integrated into Jordanian society to varying degrees, present considerable challenges related to resources, infrastructure, and social services, which in turn have political implications.

Jordanian culture is deeply rooted in Arab and Islamic traditions, blended with influences from its rich history and the diverse communities that call it home. Hospitality is a cornerstone of Jordanian society, a tradition stemming from Bedouin heritage. Family values are highly important, with strong emphasis on extended family ties and respect for elders. The official language is Arabic, while English is widely used in business and government.

The economy of Jordan is classified as an upper-middle income economy, though it is considered resource-poor. The service sector is the largest contributor to the economy, employing the majority of the workforce. Tourism is a vital industry, drawing visitors to historical sites like Petra, a UNESCO World Heritage site carved into rock, and the natural wonders of Wadi Rum and the Dead Sea.

Despite some economic diversification and efforts to attract foreign investment, Jordan faces persistent challenges, including high unemployment, particularly among youth and women, budget deficits, and public debt. The country's reliance on imports for energy and its vulnerability to regional instability also pose significant economic hurdles. These economic realities inevitably shape the political discourse and influence the government's priorities and policies.

The sociopolitical setting of Jordan is therefore a complex interplay of geography, demographics, culture, and economic factors. Its location has made it both a recipient of regional instability and a key player in diplomatic efforts. The presence of a large refugee population adds a layer of social and economic complexity that the government must constantly manage. The cultural emphasis on family and hospitality provides a strong social fabric, yet traditional structures can also influence political dynamics. Finally, economic constraints limit the government's ability to address social needs and can contribute to public discontent. Understanding this intricate backdrop is essential for appreciating the nuances of Jordan's political system and the challenges it faces in navigating a rapidly changing region.

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