Jordan: Trouble in the Kingdom?

A number of Arab media outlets were quick to write that a “highly sophisticated conspiracy” aimed at destabilizing the rule of Jordanian King Abdullah II was most likely thwarted. International and regional concerns about developments in Jordan appeared to have ended after the royal reconciliation ended with the former crown prince swearing allegiance to the king and the Constitution. This was mediated by the elder of the Hashemite family, Prince Hassan, the uncle of King Abdullah II and Prince Hamzah.

The attorney general in the Jordanian capital Amman has banned the publication of any information about the alleged conspiracy, which allegedly involved the king’s half-brother Prince Hamzah. In order to keep the investigation of the special services against Prince Hamzah and others secret, it was decided to prohibit the publication of everything related to this investigation at this stage, prosecutor Hassan al-Abdallat said in a statement. The publication ban applies to all audiovisual media and social networks, as well as the publication of all images or video clips related to the topic on pain of legal action, Amman TV said in a statement.

The order came after Prince Hamzah, who had been harshly critical of the government, swore allegiance to King Abdullah II two days after being placed under house arrest. At first, the prince adopted a defiant tone, insisting that he would not obey orders restricting his movements. But later, the 41-year-old prince pledged his support to King Abdullah II. “I will remain ... true to the legacy of my ancestors, following their path, true to their path, their
message and His Majesty,” he said in a signed letter quoted by the palace.

Hamzah, who was stripped of his crown prince title in 2004 by Abdullah, has recently become a fierce critic of the king, accusing the Jordanian leadership of corruption, nepotism and authoritarian rule. In a video he posted recently to the BBC, Hamzah lashed out at the “incompetence” that has been prevalent in Jordan’s governing body for the past 15-20 years and has gotten worse. No one can speak or express their opinion about anything without being intimidated, arrested, harassed and threatened, he said.

However, it is unclear what will now happen to the more than a dozen others arrested in connection with this conspiracy. The Washington Post reported that Riyadh is pushing for Amman to release the main figure among them, Bassem Awadallah, who is said to be close to the Saudi leadership and owns Tomoh in Dubai. The swift action and control of the media has led many Jordanians to question the official story of a “foreign-backed conspiracy” to destabilize the Kingdom.

So far, there has been very little information about what happened in Jordan. Rumors spread and international media increased coverage of the events. Moreover, there was a videotaped statement from Prince Hamzah, in which he sharply criticized the king and his government, did not deny that he shared this criticism with the country’s opposition. The video recorded in English and broadcasted by BBC and other media outlets, said that talk of a conspiracy backed by foreign players was a lie and argued that the official line did not always reflect what was really happening in Jordan.

The next day, Prince Hamzah’s mother, Queen Noor, indirectly accused the royal government of setting up her son. It is known that Queen Noor, nee American Lisa Halabi, the fourth wife of the former King Hussein, wanted her son to become King of Jordan and occupy the Hashemite throne. But when Hussein had to make an emergency visit to Amman in the United States shortly before his death in 1999 to remove his brother, Prince Hassan bin Talal, from the post of crown prince, he could not appoint Hamzah to this position, as he was still being in school. Instead, King Hussein made his older brother, the current King Abdullah, the crown prince and placed Hamzah second in line to the throne. Four years after Abdullah became king, he removed his half-brother from office and made his eldest son Hussein ibn Abdullah crown prince.

Meanwhile, it became clear that the special services had thwarted a serious operation that had been hatched for some time against the current tsarist rule. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Jordanian Armed Forces, Yousef Huneiti, issued a statement denying that the prince was under house arrest. The statement said that Prince Hamzah was not detained, but instead was “asked to cease movements and activities that were directed against the security and stability of Jordan,” adding that this was done as part of “comprehensive joint investigations by the security services.” Prince Hamzah attended various Jordanian tribal gatherings to criticize the government. This brought him popularity in some circles of society, but it is unclear whether this has found followers in government structures. The head of the Prince’s Chancellery, Yasser Al-Majali, was among those arrested by the authorities. He belonged to a Jordanian tribe, which, according to rumors, was among those whose support the prince sought in the fight against his half-brother, the king.

Jordanian Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Ayman Safadi presented the first official version of what happened so far, although his story was sparse in details, since this issue is very sensitive to national security. “The country’s intelligence services have intercepted a conspiracy that was supposed to be carried out,” Safadi said, adding that Prince Hamzah was in contact with a foreign government to destabilize the kingdom. A man with connections in the foreign intelligence service contacted Prince Hamzah’s wife to advise her to leave the country by plane, but all communications were tapped, he said. Although Safadi did not name the foreign country or the person who allegedly contacted Hamzah’s wife, the person’s identity quickly became the subject of speculation. Israeli journalist Barak Rav wrote that an Israeli businessman with ties to the US government was in contact with the former Crown Prince of Jordan, Hamzah bin Hussein, when he was placed under house arrest, and offered to send a private jet to take his wife and children to Europe.

Barak Rav informed that the unknown was Roy Shaposhnik, a politician of the Kadima Center Party in Israel and an adviser to the former Prime Minister of Israel, Ehud Olmert. Roy Shaposhnik said he had never been a Mossad officer, but confirmed that he offered to help Prince Hamzah and his family as part of their friendship. This friendship began even when Shaposhnik’s company provided assistance in the logistics of the prince’s company, which trained Iraqi soldiers in Jordan.

These remarks brought some clarity to the story and contradicted previous rumors linking the conspiracy to the Gulf states. One Jordanian source told the weekly Al-Ahram that the Gulf states, Egypt and other states, including the
United States, quickly issued statements in support of Jordan and expressed their full confidence in the leadership, promising to help keep Jordan stable and secure. Only the Netanyahu government did not. The only thing that many Jordanians agree on is the arrest of Bassem Awadallah. Whether it was his role in an attempted “foreign-backed” coup, or because of very “sensitive business relationships” that run counter to Jordan’s national interests, many Jordanians are glad he is now facing the law and will be held accountable.

A possible end to the latest events was afforded by Abdullah II, who, in the face of an unprecedented social division in the royal family, portrayed him as an attempted rebellion with the participation of his half-brother, which was “nipped in the bud”, but caused him anger, pain and shock. The monarch appeared to be doubling down on the charges against Prince Hamzah, the former crown prince, while trying to convince the Jordanians that the nation is returning to its business as usual. But even if the current crisis is ultimately defused completely, the monarchy allied with the West will face serious problems as it faces growing internal dissent.

Recently, Jordan has indeed been experiencing various economic difficulties, exacerbated by the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emigrant workers are returning from the Gulf countries to increase unemployment in the Kingdom, and the country’s scarce resources make it difficult to meet its needs. Financial and other support, especially from the rich countries of the Persian Gulf and Israel, has declined for many reasons, including because of Jordan’s position on regional issues. And apparently, any use of popular discontent and growing anger against the government can further cause certain unrest in the country. And in this situation, everything will depend on the position of the army and special services, which so far have traditionally been loyal to King Abdullah II.

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