

JORDAN'S PRINCE HAMZAH ACCUSED OF 'DESTABILISATION PLOT'

By Donnelly McClelland



Jordan has banned reporting about an alleged plot to destabilise the country, said to involve controversial ex-Crown Prince Hamzah bin Hussein. The prosecutor general said the ban extended to social media networks. Over the weekend, the government accused Prince Hamzah, 41, of conspiring against the kingdom. Details have now emerged of an apparent angry exchange between the prince and the military chief of staff about restrictions on the prince's freedom. Prince Hamzah denied the conspiracy allegation, but in an apparent easing of tensions late on Monday [5 April] the prince signed a letter confirming his loyalty to Jordan's King Abdullah. (*BBC News*)

Unprecedented royal rift and possible 'foreign' involvement

Palace intrigues and power plays between rival princes may be common in the Gulf region, and Saudi Arabia, but in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, it is a very rare thing. The country has a reputation for stability and peace-making. Therefore, it came as quite a shock to many within the country, and beyond its borders, when, over the weekend, King Abdullah II's half-brother Hamzah bin Hussein and others were accused of plotting with "foreign parties" to "destabilise Jordan's security." In a statement on Sunday (4 April) Deputy Prime Minister Ayman Safadi said the prince had been liaising with foreign parties about destabilising the country and had been monitored for some time. He did not identify the "foreign parties" allegedly involved in the plot. He went on to accuse the prince of seeking to mobilise "clan leaders against the government". Mr Safadi said officials had tried to discourage the prince rather than take legal action, but Prince Hamzah had "dealt with this request negatively". He added that at least 16 people had been arrested over the plot. But no members of the armed forces were said to have been involved. Among those detained was Bassem Awadallah, a former finance and planning minister and a long-time confidant of the king. He was also an adviser to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. According to an article in *DW*: "Awadallah, a proponent of economic reforms, resigned as chief of the royal court in 2008 amid allegations of interference in sensitive political and economic issues." It was also reported that security forces arrested the top official and member of the royal family Sharif Hassan Ben Zaid. According to local media reports, he was the king's envoy to Saudi Arabia, where he also held investments.

It was reported by the *BBC* that on Saturday (3 April), Prince Hamzah released two videos to the *BBC* in which he claimed he had been placed under house arrest. He stated that a senior government official had told him he was not allowed to go out or communicate with people because of criticisms of the government or king voiced at meetings where he had been present. On Tuesday (6 April), an English translation emerged on the *Middle East Eye* website of an apparent conversation between Prince Hamzah and Chief of Staff Maj-Gen Yousef Huneiti at Prince Hamzah's house. The chief of staff is quoted as saying that Prince Hamzah should not "mingle with any circles, internally or externally" or use social media. According to the report, he later says that the Prince has "crossed red lines". Labib Kamhawi, a Jordanian analyst, told the *Associated Press* that Hamzah likely crossed a line for the royal family by indicating he might be an alternative to the long-ruling king.

Who is Prince Hamzah, and why do his actions matter?

The prince is the oldest son of the late, beloved King Hussein bin Talal and his fourth (and favourite) wife, Queen Noor. He had been groomed for the throne by his mother. King Hussein I often publicly expressed his admiration for Hamzah, describing him as the "delight of my eye," and he had planned to name him as his successor. He is a graduate of the UK's Harrow School and the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. He also attended Harvard University in the US and served in the Jordanian armed forces. Shortly before King Hussein I died in 1999, he changed his mind, naming his first-

born son, Abdullah II, the heir to the throne since Hamzah was considered too young and inexperienced to take over from his father. In keeping with his father's wish, King Abdullah II made Hamzah crown prince of Jordan. In 2004, however, King Abdullah II surprisingly rescinded this position, instead conferring it to his eldest son: Hussein.

On Sunday 4 April, Prince Hamzah struck a defiant tone in an audio message shared on Twitter. He slammed Jordan's leadership for corruption, nepotism, and authoritarianism. He also criticised the government for "incompetence that has been prevalent in our governing structure for the last 15 to 20 years and has been getting worse." He went on: "No-one is able to speak or express opinion on anything without being bullied, arrested, harassed and threatened." He also said he would not abide by orders limiting his contact with the public, "Of course I'm not going to obey when they say you can't go out, you can't tweet, you can't communicate with people."

However, the crisis was rapidly de-escalated through mediation by the king's uncle, Prince Hassan, and other princes on Monday, and Prince Hamzah's tone changed. He signed a letter in which he pledged unfailing support to the king, the royal court, and the constitution of Jordan. "I place myself in the hands of His Majesty the King. ... I will remain committed to the constitution of the dear Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and I will always be of help and support to His Majesty the King and his Crown Prince," the letter, issued in a statement by the royal court, said. "The interests of the homeland must remain above every consideration. We must all stand behind the king in his efforts to protect Jordan and its national interests," the letter went on. A lawyer for the outspoken prince also confirmed that the mediation had been successful. Despite this quick resolution to a potentially damaging situation, many unanswered questions remain, the most prominent one being, which "foreign parties" were involved?

Jordan is a constitutional monarchy, but the royals play a major role in public life and King Abdullah has extensive powers. He can appoint governments, approve legislation, and dissolve parliament.

Jordan's strategic importance

Neighbouring countries and allies of Jordan were quick to express their support for King Abdullah on Sunday. The United States, the United Kingdom and Gulf allies rallied behind the king, highlighting Jordan's strategic importance in the region. Saudi Arabia was among the first to voice support for the king. The United Arab Emirates, Oman, Morocco, Lebanon, Egypt, Kuwait, Iraq, Turkey, Qatar, Iran, Yemen, Israel, Palestinian territories, Romania, Ukraine, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Arab League also issued statements in solidarity with Jordan's security measures. No country in the region appears to have tried to fan the flames of controversy (or dissent) or take advantage thereof, which should give some indication of the perceived importance of this small nation.

Jordan has long been a key Western ally and an island of stability in a turbulent region. *France 24* called Jordan a "linchpin" of stability. According to the media outlet: "Jordan has only 10 million people but outsized strategic importance in a turbulent region. It borders Israel, the Palestinian territories, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, and is the formal custodian of Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque." It may not have the oil-rich resources of the likes of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, but it has the rare quality of stability, and an internationally celebrated ability to 'build bridges.' Jordan was the second Arab country (after Egypt) to sign a peace deal with Israel (1994) long before any others. Recently, other Arab countries (UAE and Bahrain) have joined hands with Israel and aligned against Iran. Jordan is considered a stable partner by many countries, including the US, which has given Jordan access to military equipment and aid, while American forces regularly train with Jordanians. The kingdom is home to about 3,000 American troops.

Another important quality is that Jordan has withstood the impact of a 10-year-long Syrian war on its northern border and has been a key player in defeating the Islamic State group. However, Jordan's overstretched infrastructure has had to cope with a huge influx of refugees, most recently, from Iraq and Syria, but it also hosts over two million Palestinian refugees. The UNHCR, in coordination with the Government of Jordan, provides protection and humanitarian assistance to 750,000 refugees registered with UNHCR from Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, and 45 other nationalities, in addition to Palestinians. In line with the country's long-term hospitality, the Government of Jordan included refugees in the COVID-19 response since the onset of the crisis. Consequently, refugees have had the same access to COVID-19 healthcare as Jordanian citizens. But COVID-19 has temporarily killed off the tourist industry, dealing another blow to a weakened economy, and public resentment has been growing.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Jordan is not only an 'island of stability' in worldly terms, it also plays a vital spiritual role. It is home to some of the oldest Christian communities in the world, some dating back to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ early in the 1st Century AD. Christians today make up about 4% of the population, down from 20% in 1930, but their absolute numbers have increased. Christians consider themselves safe in Jordan, though there is an undercurrent of uncertainty as extremists wreak havoc in neighbouring countries. Atef Kawar, a Jordanian Christian parliamentarian, explained religious tolerance in Jordan: "The rules and laws here don't discriminate." Jordanian Christians also have strong ties to the royal family, are well represented in business, and have nine seats reserved for them in the 150 member House of Representatives. Historically Jordan has always been a pluralistic society, where tribalism has been a bedrock, which is another reason for Christian security, according to Dr Raouf Sa'd Abujaber, a Jordanian Christian writer and researcher. "The same tribes have lived in the area for thousands of years and Muslims and Christians are familiar with each other," he said. He went on to explain: "While the situation was similar in Syria and Iraq before the countries were torn apart by war, a key difference in Jordan is that the tribes still accept the monarchy's legitimacy." This is why this most recent, and unprecedented upheaval within the royal family caused some trepidation.

Open Doors states: "Compared to Christians living in other Middle Eastern countries, most Christians in Jordan live a safe and stable life, and enjoy a relatively high level of religious freedom." Church leaders in Jordan are not ignorant of the dangers faced by Christians in the Middle East, and despite their relative safety, are fully cognizant that they would face the same dangers of forced displacement and deprivation, should circumstances change for the worse in Jordan. However, according to a paper by Lucy Schouten, "Why Church Leaders Discourage Christians from Leaving Jordan: An Anti-Emigration Perspective," there is a strong argument among church leaders in Jordan that Christians (including refugees) need to remain in Jordan, and the larger Middle East region, for three very specific reasons: "Firstly, an emphasis on an active Christian presence in the land where the faith was founded; second, a functional unity among the various Christian groups in the Middle East, despite longstanding differences; and third, a sense that ongoing coexistence alongside a Muslim majority is a positive achievement of the Middle Eastern Christian experience."

Reverend Hanna, a priest at a large Anglican church in Amman holds the conviction that: "The Middle Eastern Christians are not merely victims of religious persecution, repressive governments, or economic stagnation, but rather they are the living—or present—elements within the long Christian history of the region." And as such, he is convinced that it is imperative that Christians remain, and not emigrate, despite the allure of 'greener pastures' elsewhere.

Jean Corbon, affirms this stance in his book, 'The Churches of the Middle East: Their Origins and Identity, from their Roots in the Past to their Openness to the Present,' where he argues that, "Middle Eastern church leaders are concerned about emigration because it weakens the already fragile presence of Christianity in the Middle East and further impoverishes the spiritual vitality of the churches, shaped through their unity amidst diversity, witness of Christ, and practise of Christian-Muslim relations."

Jordan is a vital 'cog' within Christ's Kingdom dynamics, both from its ancient roots to its role as a mission's hub in the region. As such, despite its small size, it plays a significant role and needs our prayers and support.

Please pray with us:

- For the stability and security of Jordan
- For the continued work of the Church in Jordan, and surrounding areas (and particularly among the many refugees)
- For believers to remain in Jordan, and to embrace the privilege they have to be 'salt and light', in a very turbulent region

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