Planning in Jordan: Coping with Uncertainty

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ABSTRACT: Jordan is an Islamic state with planning based on Islamic principles. The execution of plans, though, has been constrained by geopolitical realities. In the last decade Jordan has moved from strictly sectoral planning to a strongly focused system of regional planning in order to achieve more growth in less developed regions. The prospects for these regions and the country as a whole will turn on the success of the peace process in the region.

Jordan is a small country with powerful neighbors who have even more powerful friends. Hence, efforts to manage the growth and development of the country involve more than the people and government of Jordan. The people of Jordan are mostly Muslim, and planning there is definitely founded on Islamic principles. Those principles have to accommodate the geopolitical realities of life in the Middle East. Indeed, planning in Jordan requires consideration of vexing regional confrontations. Thus, Jordanian planners, in their efforts to be true to their faith, must pay attention to their uncertain geography: both the internal geography of population distribution and resource availability; and the external geography of a vulnerable location in a volatile region.

Three categories of factors influence Jordanian planning. One category, sometimes (but certainly not always) the most dominant, is events beyond Jordan's borders. These include not only the many wars of the region (the various Arab-Israeli wars, the Iran-Iraq War, and the 1990–91 Gulf War) but superpower diplomacy and the leverage of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.

A second category of influences is the monarchical system of both Jordanian society and its governing institutions. The monarchy is particularly patriarchal; it is a true monarchy with the king governing rather than just presiding. Many observers of the Jordanian scene credit King Hussein with providing a modicum of stability in a region convulsed by turmoil. This is to suggest neither that the King has been anything other than self-interested nor that the country has not had momentous problems. Rather, it is to distinguish Jordan from its neighbors with regard to instability and political violence.

The third category of influences on Jordanian planning is those stemming from Islam, the religion of over ninety per cent of the people, including, of course, the royal family. Jordan is officially an Islamic country with the rights of the Christian minority guaranteed. Life in Jordan is organized around the daily, weekly, and annual rhythms of Islam. Likewise, governmental policy serves the interests of a Muslim society.

Emergence of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

The names of the countries of the eastern Mediterranean echo with the ring of antiquity: Lebanon, Syria, Israel. Modern Jordan is a product of the geopolitical forces at play when the century was young. The empires of Europe, including the Ottoman Empire, were fading; nationalism was the vibrant force in the world.

In the eastern Mediterranean, the four hundred year old Ottoman control of Arab lands waned as the concept of nationalism gained adherents. The Ottoman imprint on what became Jordan was light. The Turks ruled their empire indirectly, collecting taxes and maintaining a modicum of law and order rather than transforming the peoples under their hegemony. The people maintained their traditional ways – most speaking Arabic and engaged in the agricultural and pastoral pursuits of their ancestors. World War I extinguished the age of empires in Europe, national states becoming the pre-eminent political structures (Tilly 1990). Indeed, the treaties following the war recognized national states, with their specified territories and new sense of sovereignty, as the appropriate form for players on the world stage (Giddens 1987,
With the rise of these national states, nationalism became the major political force in the Middle East. Nationalism among Arabs has taken two forms, one (gawmiyyah) covering all Arabs, the other (wataniiyah) the more parochial nationalism of individual countries.

With the Ottomans attempting to retain power, Arab nationalists joined together in armed resistance. Eventually the Arabic-speaking people of the Levant formed the Arab Army and fought with the British and French against the Turks. (For a romanticized contemporary account, see Lawrence 1935; for more recent historical scholarship, see Hourani 1991.) The Hashemite rulers of the Hejaz played a major role in The Great Arab Revolt, as the nationalist movement was known. The Hashemites lost their struggle with the House of Saud over the control of Mecca (and the bulk of the Arabian Peninsula). Hence, the Hashems moved north and became the leading force in the Arab Army. Participants in the Great Arab Revolt sought a Greater Arab Nation, uniting the Arabs between the Mediterranean and Iran. This was not to be.

The Versailles Treaty after World War I altered the path of Arab nationalism. Britain and France, under a League of Nations mandate, administered the Levant. They divided the region into five countries: Lebanon and Syria under French control in the north; and Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine under British control in the south (Drysdale and Blake 1985, 63–67). Britain rewarded its Hashemite allies by installing two branches of the family as monarchies in Iraq and Transjordan, both east of the Jordan River. In the new age of national states emerging from World War I, Transjordan became in effect a state in training, with full state status to come following a period of apprenticeship with Britain. Though his independent nationalist options were initially limited, Abdullah, the Hashemite Emir who eventually became King of Transjordan, directed his country’s political development from mandate to statehood (Salibi 1993, 92–119).

With the creation of Jordan and other new states, wataniiyah (the nationalism of the individual Arab countries) took root. Fortified by modern technology and external support (with the Cold War playing a significant role), each of these new countries became an important influence on the lives of the people living under its control. The Jordanian government, for example, has had profound influence over the social reproduction of Jordanian society, given its dominating role in education, communications, commerce, international relations, and the military.

The turn of the twentieth century marked the birth of a Zionist nationalism that profoundly affected the Middle East, and particularly Jordan. Zionism began in the 1890s as a political movement but grew into a formidable force within decades. Suffice it to say that Zionism gained international support after the horror of the Holocaust. Aided by Britain and the United States, Zionism established a Jewish State over most of what had been Palestine. Israel’s creation and subsequent successes have had a profound influence on Jordan.

Jordan dropped the “trans” from its name when it took control of part of Palestine (that part thereafter known as the West Bank) during the first Arab-Israeli War in 1948. That war and the later one in 1967 altered the social structure of Jordan by sending streams of Palestinian refugees into Jordanian territory. During each of those wars the Jordanian capital city of Amman doubled its population within a single year – ample evidence that planning in Jordan is often beyond the control of those living within its borders. The waves of refugees not only led to a series of sizable refugee camps within Jordan (and elsewhere in the region) but also altered the social structure of the country. For example, Palestinians actually came to out-number East Bank Jordanians, a fact that has had serious repercussions for support of the state.

The Arab-Israeli conflict has also had profound external impacts on Jordan, indeed on the entire region. Just as important as the many “hot” wars fought there was the fact that the Levant became a major area of contention during the Cold War as the superpowers jockeyed for advantage. US support strengthened and emboldened Israel. The Soviets tried several Middle Eastern surrogates without comparable success.

Jordan’s King Hussein, ideologically more attuned to Washington than Moscow, managed an international relations balancing act that fell apart when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. Until then Jordan had predicated its planning efforts on assistance from the Arab oil states and private sector investment from anyone willing to pay. Most Jordanians, for reasons too complicated to explain here, instantly sided with Iraq. Suffice it to say that most Jordanians (and Palestinians in Jordan) saw Iraq as a welcome challenge to what they saw as the excesses of Zionism and the exploitation by oil sheikdoms like Kuwait. The point for our present purposes is that outside events dominated the options for Jordanians, especially in 1948, 1967, and 1990–91, but throughout Jordanian history. Geography clearly influences Jordan’s relations with its neighbors – and its prospects in the world.

This Place Called Jordan

With a land area (96,000 km²) less than Hungary and a population (surpassing four million) less than Finland, Jordan is a small country. Worse, most of its land is virtually uninhabited (some would say uninhabitable) desert. Most of the people are crowded into the narrow strip of highlands that runs from Syria all the way to Saudi Arabia. Amman sits at 800 m elevation, guaranteeing pleasant summers and occasional snows in winter. The western edge of the country is the Jordan Valley which, with its sub-sea level elevation and irrigation, has a year round growing season.

Though the petroleum wealth of the gulf states so is near, Jordan has only a modest complement of natural resources. Phosphorous and potash are the main export earners. Until the Gulf War, agricultural exports, chiefly foodstuffs grown in the Jordan Valley, were an increasingly important export commodity.