Episode Transcript

Episode Title:
Jordan’s Royal Intrigue

Guest:
Bessma Momani
Jon Alterman:
Bessma Momani is a professor of political science at the University of Waterloo and one of Canada's leading experts on the Middle East. Bessma, welcome to Babel.

Bessma Momani:
Thank you.

Jon Alterman:
What's been going on in Jordan? Jordan hasn't been in the newspapers and suddenly it's all over the newspapers.

Bessma Momani:
It went from the kingdom of boring to suddenly having this inner palace intrigue. It's been very interesting. And as you said, it doesn't really get often covered in mainstream media. So what's happening in Jordan—I think what many have heard, and there's still a lot of mystery to the plot, if you will—is that there may have been an attempted coup d'état in some form, certainly there's been a lot of messaging that Prince Hamzah, a very popular prince, a half-brother to the king, may have been implicit in some sort of plot.

The part that becomes even more interesting is that perhaps there was also the involvement of Bassem Awadallah, who used to be a government insider and certainly an advisor to King Abdullah of Jordan. He has moved on to being an advisor now to the Saudis, Mohammed bin Salman specifically, and also has very much deep interests in the UAE. So you have this now new, interesting variable in this conversation about a potential coup d'état and it's certainly, I think, raised a lot of concerns that there's some regional meddling perhaps, and undermining Jordanian stability.

Jon Alterman:
Do you think there was a coup d'état that was underway?

Bessma Momani:
I have to say that as time goes on, there's more doubt than answers just because the plot literally thickens and there's more and more uncertainty about the objectives of every actor. But I don't see how the connection between Hamzah and Awadallah is made. That perhaps is the weakest link in the argument that's being presented in the narrative of the state. This is not to say that I don't think Mohammed bin Salman has ever been innocent and his foreign policies are quite literally disastrous. I mean, he chooses fights that he can't win. So, there's a pattern of behavior here where Mohammed bin Salman is very much a loose cannon.

I think we can't ignore that, but there's lots of mystery to this. Why would MBS want to undermine Jordan? That's a big question mark that has opened up a lot of avenues for conspiracy theories and grand design-type arguments that are not clear to me, or make sense, frankly, as an analyst. Is Mohammed bin Salman upset with King Abdullah because of other actions that preceded this particular situation? I don't understand why Mohammed bin Salman would want to do this now under Biden, when MBS is clearly on thin ice with Biden. Why would he want to initiate this now? Why not under Trump, when clearly there was a much cozier relationship? So, there's a lot of really peculiar things to the story or to the narrative that's been given to us by the state that just provide more questions than answers.
Jon Alterman:
And there’s of course, this divide in Jordan that has been there for decades, between the descendants of the East Bank tribes and the descendants of Palestinians who came from the West Bank of the Jordan. And one way that people have portrayed this is: this is a sign that the East Bank tribes are increasingly dissatisfied with King Abdullah. Does that resonate with you?

Bessma Momani:
I think that fissure—not to discount it and say that it’s not there—it's certainly there, but it's weakened over time, partly because of demographics, intermarriages are high. And that's a story that perhaps could explain everything in Jordanian politics in the 1980s, but it's less and less an explanatory. But to the question of today, Hamzah has popularity with the East Bank tribes. He visits them. He sits on the ground in Bedouin tents. He very much—let's just say he plays the part. He really does know how to charm them, engage with them, speak their dialect. I mean, even the slang words that he uses.

So, he is popular amongst East Bank tribes. You can't ignore that. I've often said that I could picture King Abdullah be more comfortable in Amman elite circles, whereby Hamzah is very comfortable sitting in the salon of tribal elders talking about life. That picture is one that one needs to think about in understanding why these two figures have different bases of support. But I would say Hamzah’s popularity has risen since his release of those videos. And in fact, it’s now become not about East Bank and Palestinian Jordanians, but also about class. I think he’s now appealed to also a significant number of middle-class, urbanites as well, professionals who are really fed up with the corruption. Again, an unintended consequence where the self-defeating measure that the government did was to enhance his popularity and expand it into new segments of the population.

Jon Alterman:
Jordan is a relatively young demographic. Where are young people in all of this? Are they supporting the king? We all remember when he became king and was young, there was a vigorous face. Does he retain support of young people or are young people supporting Hamzah—who used to be crown prince and is no longer crown prince—or are young people just disaffected with the whole system?

Bessma Momani:
Well, there's all of the above in some way, but I do think if there's a consensus in Jordan, it is that nobody wants "regime change." I think there is even those that may be very concerned about Hamzah's whereabouts today or certainly feel that Hamzah spoke to their interests and his messaging resonates with them. I don't think many of them want to see an overthrow of the monarchy or that kind of chaos that comes with moving Abdullah and his crown prince son out to bring in Hamzah. I think that's a non-starter—you have to really start with the point that nobody wants that.

But that’s not to mean that Hamzah’s not popular. He's very popular, and his popularity has gone up. To the question of youth: the youth found Hamzah's messaging to be very, very popular. It resonated with them. That wonderful BBC video that he leaked—which was the inflection point that increased his popularity—he spoke to their concerns. He really had a way of tone and being respectful, but blunt and basically saying, "Where's the corruption?" Stop telling us it's in the petty corruption or that the problem is that Jordanians don't want to work. It’s in the big league corruption, it’s in the crony capitalism, it’s in the lack of transparency. It's in the favoritism that the regime plays to basically play off different interests.

I think he really hit a nerve. And I think the class dimension now makes more sense than the East Bank and Palestinian dimension. And youth of course are very much disadvantaged in Jordan and as you said,
they’re the majority. But the reality is their unemployment was one of the lowest regionally speaking, they were the lowest, and now it’s doubled. The Jordanian government released a statistic that it went from approximately 12 or 13 percent unemployment to double that. That’s the official numbers. We know that that’s actually under-reporting the reality. Youth have always traditionally had double the unemployment rates of the national average. So you can see where, for young people who are increasingly educated, feel very confident about their intellect and their grasp of the situation, we recognize that meritocracy is not working in the country. There’s no appreciation for meritocracy. It’s all about wasa, it’s all about networks. It’s all about who’s your father. And they’re frustrated. They’re frustrated because their individualism is not being recognized. And so that’s a system of poor governance. It’s a system of corruption and nepotism that pervades the entire state structure. And at the end of the day, Hamzah spoke to that and that resonates.

Jon Alterman:
But Hamzah is the son of a king who looks like his father. It seems like an unlikely advocate of meritocracy and it’s about individualism and who you really are because everything Hamzah is, is because of who his father was and how much he resembles somebody else. Not how much he’s his own person.

Bessma Momani:
Well, I don’t know about that. Certainly, the resemblance and the reminder of the late King Hussein resonates. But no, I think that Hamzah—and it could be very much by design in terms of messaging. I’m not undermining the argument that this could be very much Hamzah is cultivating an image, right?—but what is out there are videos of him sitting with veterans—sitting on the floor, speaking to them, eating their food, quite literally sitting in their salons.

He looks humble. There’s this one interesting video of him with his daughter where he’s praying and his daughter comes behind him and hits him. If you look at the background of his living situation, it looks humble. It doesn’t look like very different than the average Amman home. The furniture didn’t look lavish, it didn’t look fancy. And again, you have to contrast that with the image of the king and his family, which again, look more regal, look more fancy, elegant, you name it. But Hamzah actually has this imagery of looking like a humble guy. And that’s the kind of image that the Jordanians have been seeing with these releases of videos and recollections of a lot of people.

Jon Alterman:
But again, as you think about what the tribes represent, it seems to be the tribes don’t represent individualism and meritocracy. The tribes represent “you belong, and the group will protect you.” And it’s all about the collective identity. And it strikes me as something of attention that somebody would be popular with the tribes and also be seen as the person who would meet aspirations of individualism.

Bessma Momani:
I agree 100 percent. It’s like he speaks to two audiences, right? On the individuals of meritocracy, it’s very much to the youth. It’s very much a class argument. But again, for the East Bankers, what he said, and the BBC video was very instructive of this too, by saying, “Where is the corruption that everybody talks about? Stop blaming the public sector. Stop blaming the little guy who is a teacher that gets a salary of $300 to $400. That’s not where the corruption is.” Because that’s what the messaging of the state is. The public sector is bloated. It’s bloated because of the tribes. It’s bloated because the public sector is absorbing all of this staff because of nepotism in the tribal community, because we know that
the public sector is bloated. We know that the public sector is more staffed by East Bank Jordanians than Palestinian Jordanians.

There is this argument that the state has said, and it's very much a neo-liberal argument, right? It's that the public sector is the problem. That's where the state budget is saddled. It's because of all of these expenses in the public sector. What we need is more private sector. We need more innovation here. We need more entrepreneurship, which suggest that the private sector is the rising star and the public sector is the dealer. And frankly, East Bank would say, "Wait a minute, that's not where the corruption is." And Hamzah said the exact same words, "Is that where the corruption is? Is the corruption in the petty corruption of the public sector, or is it in the big table of land deals and crony capitalism and importers who are friends of the political elite who are preventing true competition." He basically flipped it and questioned basically the state narrative of neoliberal arguments, but the public sector is not the problem. It's the problem of redistribution of wealth. It's the problem.

**Jon Alterman:**

I've spoken to Jordanians, especially in the military, which is almost entirely people descended from East Bank tribes who said, "Look, we built the state. Well, it's the Palestinian population that was busy making money." And they saw themselves as servants of building the state while the Palestinians were self-interested. That to me, highlights what you said was actually diminishing this sense of East Bank-West Bank division. But it sounds like that rift is still very much there with people blaming the public sector, which is seen as blaming the tribes, which is seen as reinforcing that division, because there is that lopsided representation of East Bank Jordanians in the public sector and West Bank Jordanians and the private sector.

**Bessma Momani:**

I agree with that analysis 100 percent. I think that, though, Hamzah's messaging now appeals to more than just the East Bank. That's my argument. My argument now is that he's captured a new constituency and that includes socioeconomic disadvantaged ones, again, more of a class analysis than a identity analysis.

**Jon Alterman:**

One thing I also want to touch on is the impact of Covid-19 on Jordan. Jordan seemed to have been doing an exemplary job through the summer and then has had an incredible spike, cases have gone up. Hospitals are overwhelmed. To what extent is this wave of Covid-19 hitting Jordan belatedly feeding into the politics in Jordan?

**Bessma Momani:**

Oh, I think it's very, very important because the economy is suffering, it's struggling. When you look at the prevalence rate of the virus is at some point, the government was saying it's at 20 percent. I mean, that's an incredible number. So I agree with you, where at the beginning they were effective in controlling it and having quite literally troops on the streets to prevent anybody going out. They even, I believe, arrested an MP for bypassing the stay at home orders. They were very, very effective at the beginning. But I think like many, many countries—particularly developing countries—when they recognized that this was going to take so long, they really realized that it was at a cost to the economy. It was the reality that they have a huge informal sector, probably under reported, which are effectively day laborers.
They have a choice of they go out and make money to eat, or they don't. And at the end of the day, they don't have that kind of social safety net, where they could—as we saw in the United States and Canada—dispense checks to individuals to sustain themselves. I mean, they don't have that kind of capacity, that fiscal room isn't there. So absolutely, I think it aggravated things.

They are still under an IMF arrangement, where at least the messaging coming from the IMF has been, "Don't worry about fiscal consolidation for now, spend what you can." And as the MD of the IMF said, "Just keep the receipts." But the government recognizes that it can't incur this much debt. And so I think it gave up on the levers of trying to control the virus. I mean, it puts in measures like wear a mask and the rest of it, and a lot of public health messaging. But in terms of stay at home orders, they can't afford what New Zealand or Australia did.

Jon Alterman:
Final question. Do you feel that this is the beginning of a long muddling through process, or do you think we have seen fault lines here, which are going to provoke a real change of some kind in Jordan?

Bessma Momani:
I do hope that the government and the monarchy take the frustrations seriously and address them with a real attempt at rooting out corruption, a real attempt at transparency of budgeting and transparency throughout. I think that's what the people need and want. You need to dispel the public sentiment that there's a redistribution challenge here, that there is corruption at the very top and be blunt about where the money is going, so that people feel comforted in the messaging coming from the government. I don't think there's going to be the kind of change and protest that we saw in the Arab Spring and the neighboring countries. Partly because one, they're living the reality of refugees coming to them. Jordanians are very conscious of saying very loud and clear, "We don't want to be Syria. We don't want to be Iraq." In fact, that trope, if you will, has kept the country away from protesting and asking for the kind of change it wants, because it really fears the consequences of disintegration of the state and what could happen.

And because of that fault line, as you said, there is an East Bank and Palestinian Jordanian fault line. I don't think it's nearly as aggravated as it was 20, 30 years ago, but it's there. And people fear that civil wars are not far away. Look what happened in Iraq. Baghdad had 30 percent of its population intermixed between Sunni and Shiite and still we saw that kind of civil war. So that's not far from the minds of most Jordanians. Nobody wants to see that. And so people are very mindful of where this could go if they continue to push for change, but I don't think they're satisfied. You can't look at the absence of street protests as somehow a satisfaction of the Jordanian people today. They're very unhappy. They very much don't have faith in their government to get them out of the economic mess.

And the economic crisis post Covid-19 is a disaster. I mean, it really is going to be a disaster. It's a disaster globally. And for a country like Jordan that is so dependent on external flows of capital, that is a recipe for even further disaster. So it needs to address it. And I hope it addresses it through the levers of political inclusion and good governance because that's going to keep the country together. But using levers of repression may be attractive to the state. It certainly isn't going to get them where they need to go.

Jon Alterman:
Bessma Momani, thanks for joining us on Babel.

Bessma Momani:
Pleasure.