



INTERVIEW WITH DR. MARWAN A. AL-SHAMMARI

JORDAN'S POLITICAL CHALLENGES

A Wikistrat Interview
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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE: **DR. MARWAN A. AL-SHAMMARI**

Dr. Al-Shammari is an assistant professor of strategy at the University of Texas at Tyler. He also served as an assistant professor of strategy at Savannah State University in Georgia and previously at the Hashemite University in Jordan. He has been writing on Jordan's major economic and social challenges for several years. His writings appeared in The Jordan Times, Alghad, Ammon, Jo24 and several other media outlets. He also published several pieces on Jordan in the Huffington Post and medium. His academic research focuses on governance, social responsibility of business organizations, psychological characteristics of organizational leaders and their business and social implications, international trade, and competitive dynamics. He has more than 14 peer reviewed journal articles on those topics. His work has been published in the Journal of Business Research, International Journal of Entrepreneurship, International Journal of Business and Management, International Review of Management and Marketing, International Journal of Economic and Finance, American Journal of Business and Management, European Journal of Business and Management.



INTERVIEW WITH DR. MARWAN A. AL-SHAMMARI:

Wikistrat: What do you see as the main political issue or political challenge facing Jordan today?

Al-Shammari: I believe the main, or focal challenge that has been facing Jordan for quite some time is not something new; but it has been the case where Jordan, for so long, is unable to come up with the right economic policy. Part of that is attributed to the lack of clear strategic orientation of the country's policymakers. That's one major reason.

The second reason is the country's strategic political orientation, which I would say is highly dependent on others. As long as you are contingent on others for your economic and political upsides, you wouldn't be able to draw the right economic policies that fit within your context. Now, given the fact that we are living in a highly turbulent environment in the Middle East, by depending on others you are putting yourself at high risk because the stakes are always high and there are always shifting preferences for the great powers and international powers; international forces are playing in the field of the Middle East and they have almost always some conflicting interests sometimes and sometimes they agree on things, sometimes they oppose each other depending of course on their interests. So, by depending on those powers in terms of financial aid, you're actually losing your sovereignty over the most important file which is the economy, your economy.

Wikistrat: You mean in terms of Jordan's foreign policy preferences, in terms of regional alliances?

Al-Shammari: Yes. The Jordanian foreign policy is also part of the problem because if your foreign policy depends largely on which countries provide you with the most financial aid, then you will have a problem in the long term.

Let me give you an example. We have long been taking the stand with the Saudis and the Emiratis regarding, you know, the Iranian problem, regarding several other problems in the Middle East, right?

Now once we started distancing ourselves from certain issues, including the war in Yemen, the Saudis started pressuring the Jordanian regime by cutting their financial aid or reducing their financial aid and sometimes putting complicated conditions and terms in those financial aid agreements. And now what can you do? Because you spend your whole life depending on them. Now you have a contingency. You have new emerging factors in the Middle East that stand at odds with the Saudis' foreign policies with the way they act in the Middle East. What do you do now? Do you stick with the Saudis or do you adjust your policies, or what do you do? And that is a major problem with Jordan.

Wikistrat: Yeah but, as you said yourself, this dependency on regional powers is not new. So, in your assessment, what has changed in the past year or the past six months which might have impacted Jordan's current situation?

Al-Shammari: The King has been trying very hard to take a different stand on regional issues including

Syria and Yemen, but apparently what is happening is that he's making public statements that would please the Saudis and, in the meantime, the Saudis are not convinced that Jordan is doing enough in order to deserve some, you know, additional financial aid, et cetera. That's one fact.

The other fact, the new guy in Saudi Arabia [Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman], he is taking a completely different stand on the Palestinian issue and that is causing so much trouble between the Jordanian King and him, Mohammad bin Salman, I mean. So that's another problem that the King is facing. He's trying to figure out what this guy is actually doing and what does he want in the Middle East in order to understand the best approach to interact with him or to deal with him. This guy has no idea what he wants. He's just going all over the place. I believe he's just acting weirdly in so many regards that it's making it difficult for the King as well as so many other leaders to understand what he wants. So that's a problem that the King is facing in regard to Jordan's relationship with Saudi Arabia.

But again, it's the country's dependency for so long on financial aid from them [the Saudis] as well as from several other countries that made it very difficult for the King to distance himself in regard to the Saudis' takes on certain regional problems that are facing the Middle East or, you know, our friends in the Middle East.

Wikistrat: Do you think there could be any kind of development in Jordan's domestic politics or private sector – you know, entrepreneurship or any other kind of domestic development which could change this calculus – which would somehow improve Jordan's situation?

AI-Shammari: Yes, definitely. You brought up a very important point. Let's admit the fact that our structure, our institutional structure, as well as institutional culture, is profoundly ill to the extent that it's making it difficult even for the aggregate to move in a productive manner. So, let's talk about how many public sector employees are out there in Jordan taking so much of the country's annual budget and let's talk about their productivity. Many, many Jordanians are working for the state. And they receive their monthly income from the state. Now, most of those are either unproductive or barely productive, meaning

the money they receive, if we compare it to their productivity... There is a huge gap between the productivity of the public sector employees and the allocated budget toward those employees, and they account for a large percentage of the working class in Jordan.

So, that is a major problem that the state has been unable to solve. You know why? Because the state wants to continue to please the tribes and the Jordanians from Jordanian origins. So, that's why they keep them pleased by continuously allowing them to be unproductive, although they receive a great amount of the budget, of the annual budget of the country, because they know the country's not doing enough to create an independent economy that can give everybody an equal opportunity to prove them useful and beneficial and to prosper even on their own by engaging in entrepreneurial activities, entrepreneurial businesses, small businesses. All these initiatives have failed because the culture of the individuals in Jordan, the citizens, the average citizens, they are blaming the state for so many mistakes and they are absolutely right, but they do not want to change unless the state begins a true reform. And that is what the country is unable to do because it's being controlled by the political elite that has long benefited from the structure as well as the existing laws, regulations, and norms.

So, this political elite ruling the country and the interrelated systems in the many domains, they are trying to maintain the status quo to maximize their own benefits at the expense of everybody else, so the greater good is the last concern of the political elite and also the last concern of the individuals. I mean of the people at the individual level, because everybody's saying, "Oh, why would I commit? Why would I be productive? The country is not doing enough. The state, the government is failing. Why would I do this? Why would I do that? Why would I comply? Nobody's complying but me." So, that's the dilemma.

So, it's a culture, and it's the reinforcement of this culture that is hindering the country and preventing the country from moving forward. But we cannot blame the people. We can only blame the state because it has been unable to be convincing and sound with its plans, and the King continues to use the same

people, the same public figures, who have failed over and over and over again and he has circulating them because he's basically tying himself to the same people. And that's why he's actually losing some of his publicity, I can assume. I am a lover of the King. I love him personally, but I totally disagree with him on so many things, including the way he's addressing so many issues locally as well as internationally and the way he has been committing himself to certain people as if there is something going on behind the scenes between him and those people. So, we do not know. He needs to start changing.

Wikistrat: But as I understand, since King Abdullah ascended the throne in 1999, he has been trying to promote several economic reforms and government reforms in more of a neoliberal direction.

Al-Shammari: Yes. Let me be clear here. When the King ascended the throne, he started with big ambitions. He wanted to change the country. He wanted to change the direction of the country. And let's be honest here, let's give him credit for the level of freedom that Jordan has seen in his era so far. So, during King Hussein's era, nobody was able to express their opinions as much as they are doing right now. So, that I can give him – he should have the credit for that.

But in terms of economic, macro-economic policy reforms and investments as well as the many regulations that he proposed in order to encourage the influx of foreign direct investment into the country, yes, he did propose [changes]. He did make some efforts at the beginning, but the problem, again, is that he delegated these tasks to either unqualified people or corrupt people.

Please look at the privatization issue in Jordan. He started, he delegated the privatization file to certain people, including his man, his first man at the time, Bassem Awadallah, who had failed miserably in this agenda. Privatization failed and didn't achieve what it intended to achieve, nobody could feel the difference it made in the lives of average Jordanians. So, again, he did propose certain reforms, but he delegated this task to unqualified people or corrupt people. And there are so many cases that were closed without even allowing an independent investigation of those cases. We have no idea who's managing the

energy sector from behind the scene.

Wikistrat: Has there been any change in that way under the new prime minister, Omar al-Razzaz? Or is that mainly more of the PR aspect of a new government and a new prime minister trying to show that he's actually working on resolving some issues?

Al-Shammari: I will agree with you that Omar Razzaz is a good guy honestly. He's an open-minded person. He received his education in one of the most prestigious schools in the world and he had ambitions and great plans. The problem is you should know in Jordan there are three states. There are three governments: the government which is the cabinet, the government of the intelligence community in Jordan, and the government of the Royal Court. Now, Omar Razzaz, when he started, he wanted to have the actual authority to develop certain plans and also to have the power to implement those plans. So far, he has been unable to initiate and implement so many of them because the deep state, the old guards, are trying very hard to prevent him from advancing with his plans.

That's one fact that we should all acknowledge and it's implicit. You know, if you don't live in Jordan, you wouldn't feel it. But it's a fact. Another thing about Omar Razzaz, he was selected as the prime minister – and I like him personally – but the cabinet he chose, the ministers of the economy-related ministries, were appointed by other parties. I actually have a strong belief that they were imposed on him by the Royal Court and also by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. So, basically, he has no power over the economy and he has no power over the other important sectors. So, what can he do? He does have plans but they are trying very hard not to let him proceed with his plans.

Wikistrat: And have there been any efforts in recent years, including under Razzaz's government, at economic reform, attempts to change the structure of the economy in Jordan and make a balance between the public and the private sector?

Al-Shammari: In terms of the investment environment in Jordan, there have been a few laws that were passed by the House which are good and I believe they should encourage more foreign direct investment because they

have reduced the bureaucratic procedures that used to exist under the previous laws. But those are not sufficient. They are not enough to attract an adequate level of foreign direct investment that would boost the economy and would create additional jobs and would make the people of Jordan, the average citizens, feel a difference. They are not enough because there is something, a profound implicit corruption within almost every entity, every governmental unit that handles the investment-related decisions.

So, this issue must be resolved and we all know that the influx of foreign direct investment depends largely on several factors. For example, the rule of law, the freedom of speech, the strength of the infrastructure. So, has the country been investing in infrastructure? Give me one mega-project that the previous governments, including the current one, has done so far in order to improve the environment, the infrastructure environment, so it can attract more investments. [There are] none. Not a single project!

So how can we talk about actual results of economic reforms when we are not seeing what needs to be done first? Before we change the regulation and the laws, we need to change the organizational culture of those employees who are handling important investment-related decisions.

Wikistrat: What would it take to change that organizational culture both in the government and the public sector, and maybe more broadly in Jordan itself?

Al-Shammari: First, the most important thing is to start by holding everybody accountable, holding some people accountable for either their negligence or corruption so that can be a strong signal to everybody inside the country that, if you do not do your job the right way, you are going to be held accountable. But continuing to tolerate those who make mistakes, those who deviate from the norms and the laws, that's not going to get the right signal to investors, and it is also going to give bad signals to other employees and public sector servants [suggesting] that even if they continue to deviate, nobody's going to hold them accountable.

So, first of all, we need to hold everybody

accountable for their actions, especially when it comes to the public servants. So we can send a strong signal to other public servants, but also we can send positive signals to foreign investors as well as local investors that their interests are going to be protected.

Wikistrat: In the case of similar attempts at economic reform in the next few years which will try to presumably fix Jordan's current economic situation, what do you see as the main obstacles to such reform? And also, who will most likely oppose such attempts at economic reform?

Al-Shammari: An actual economic reform can only take place if we have an elected government. That is the only way of initiating and implementing an actual long-term reform plan. When you have your government elected, they will feel that they are going to be held accountable at the next election, so you are actually giving the authority to the people to assign who they see as qualified people or persons to run the country's economic policies.

You might have some difficulties in the beginning because, in order for the people to improve their selection, they need to start experiencing what democracy feels like and over time they will start actually electing [politicians] based upon the best interests of the country rather than based upon their personal preferences. For example, instead of electing somebody to whom they are related or somebody with whom they have had some personal relationship, they will start electing somebody who they think is qualified because of their economic program, because of their agenda, because of their plans for the country. So, that's what we need. The first and most important step is to have an elected government. The second step is to amend the constitution and limit the power of the King and power of senior officials so they can feel that they are under the scrutiny of the public all the time, so they do not deviate.

Wikistrat: So, in your opinion, any structural change in Jordan's economy depends on a change of regime and of the political culture, in a sense?

Al-Shammari: It's not the change of the regime. It's the change of the local culture of the people but, more importantly, a change of the constitutional structure, meaning give the

right of selecting the government to your people and limit your power as a King. I'm not saying withdraw all the King's rights. I'm just saying we need to limit his power so he can feel that he does not have the right to run the country in whatever way he sees appropriate because that's not correct. Absolute power is the leading factor to corruption, and we need to limit this behavior.

Wikistrat: Do you think that the recent geopolitical challenges, with President Trump's so-called 'deal of the century' and pressures from the Gulf States and Jordan, could incentivize, in a sense, such a shift in the organizational culture, in a sense of the obligation or of the social contract between the government and the people, or is it more likely to reinforce the status quo instead?

Al-Shammari: I believe the United States has always played a positive role in Jordan and that's a fact we cannot deny. They have been one of our sincerest allies. But the problem is the King enjoys a highly significant position within the US ranks, both in Congress and the House and with the US administration as well. So, we need again to put an additional pressure on the King to start initiating actual change. That's one thing. I'm not calling for the US to intervene, but I'm just calling for the US to give him the right advice.

The other thing, I don't think the King himself is opposing real changes or actual reform. I think there are other powers within the Royal Court – they are opposing this, and I do not want to discuss this in detail because I believe the Queen is very powerful and has been very powerful for the last few years. So, I do not want to accuse her of being, you know, even more powerful than the King, but I believe she's very powerful to the extent that the King himself, on his own, he cannot initiate change. Because there are other things at stake here, including the future of the Crown Prince. That's my personal interpretation. I could be wrong.

Wikistrat: Do you think there's any need or any forecast to cut back on the size of the public sector, I mean the number of the employees in the public sector?

Al-Shammari: That's very much needed. The government has proposed several initiatives in order to cut back on public spending on public employees, but they have been unable to

initiate actual changes or take concrete steps because they are afraid of what the reactions might be.

So, one thing they did, they stopped public hiring. That's good. But the hiring continued and there are so many other categories and labels. Again, and this is another problem, as I said, the House is using their power to ingratiate and persuade the government to hire people to do them some favors so they can improve their public image in front of their constituencies. And that's what's taking place. So, the general take of the government is that they stopped hiring because they want to evaluate the government spending on the public sector and public spending. But, in reality, that is not the case. That's just an example of why the government has been unable to proceed with its plans to cut back on public sector employees as well as their productivity.

Wikistrat: Was this raised as a demand by the IMF in its negotiations with Jordan last year, in terms of the need to cut back on the size of the public sector?

Al-Shammari: Yes, actually that was... If you go back to all the agreements signed with the International Monetary Fund, you will find that this point has been brought up over and over and over again, and the government did not do anything to address it. You know, the government does not have the legitimacy or the credibility to convince the public that this step is very much needed. I strongly believe this step is very much needed. But if you ask me 'does the government have the ability to do it?' I would say no. Absolutely not. The government is afraid of the public reactions because of its many failures on all fronts, on all other fronts. So, it cannot do anything in this regard unless it has gained some legitimacy and credibility and it regains the trust with the public. The trust is profoundly damaged between the public and the government and almost every governmental organization in Jordan. So how can the government start, initiate, or take any reformative actions if it does not have the trust of its own people? Tell me.

Wikistrat: Yeah. This fear that you mentioned from the public's reaction, is this new since the mass demonstrations last year in June, or is this something which has been ongoing for years?

Al-Shammari: It has been going on for years, but it has become more salient and powerful in the last couple of years because the removal of Hani al-Mulki's government made the public voice stronger and has been a factor that contributed to the development of a social movement, a new social movement. It takes place on social media and you could tell from the last teachers' strike that took place in Jordan, the government tried to play the time card and it ended up accepting everything they asked for. So why didn't they accept it from the first day they announced that they were going to strike? It's because they mis-evaluated the public support for the Jordanian teachers' strike. When they realized that everybody's actually siding with the teachers' strike, then they received... I believe they received some executive orders from the King himself on the last day of negotiation to sign the deal, whatever it is.

Wikistrat: Is there anything else you'd like to add in terms of some kind of structural problem or issue facing Jordan today?

Al-Shammari: Jordan needs to invest in real education, quality education, through which the minds of the future generations can be reshaped in a totally different way than they were raised by the old generations. We need to start thinking in terms of what value we can add to our society, what value we can bring to the table, and in what manner, in which ways we can contribute. And that can only

take place through education. So, right now, if you bring up a kid, if you pick a kid from the street and ask him what do you want to be, he would immediately answer you, "Oh, I want to be a soldier in the army. I want to be a public employee." Because these things were instilled in their minds.

It's not their choice. And that's why we continuously reinforce fear and reinforce the autocracy in our generation. In order to have a future generation that can actually build a strong country, an independent country, a good economy, and a new social contract built upon the respect of others' opinions and agreeing to disagree and [accepting] that we all can contribute to the advancement of our country, that can only take place in good educational institutions. But if you look at the educational institutions and how they are being managed, how they are structured, how they are being socially structured, you will realize that right now we do not have any actual educational institutions. So, Jordan needs to rethink its education strategy in order to have a better future.

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