



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The King of Jordan's Upcoming Visit to Washington: Implications for Jerusalem

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,098, July 18, 2021

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** King Abdullah will be visiting President Joe Biden at the White House on July 19. By granting the Jordanian monarch the honor of being the first Arab leader to visit the new president, the US administration is putting wind in Jordan's sails as it seeks to fend off Saudi claims regarding custodianship of Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem.

President Joe Biden may have little appetite for Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, but he seems determined to prevent certain third parties from exploiting the regional stalemate to their advantage. That seems to be one of the messages contained in Washington's ensuring that [King Abdullah of Jordan will be the first Arab leader to visit the White House](#) since Biden took office.

This message takes on added significance in view of the recent opening of court proceedings in Amman against two senior Jordanians accused of sedition and plotting with former Crown Prince Hamza bin Hussein, Abdullah's half-brother, to destabilize the monarchy. The message's significance is further enhanced at a time when various Muslim-majority states are [competing for religious soft power](#) in the Muslim world.

The alleged plot involving Prince Hamza, together with Saudi efforts to protect one of the defendants, Bassam Awadallah, refocused attention on a low-key, longstanding Saudi effort to include the kingdom in the administration of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (known to Muslims as al-Haram ash-Sharif), which is considered the third-holiest site in Islam.

Awadallah, who is a close associate of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, is a former chief of the court of King Abdullah and also served as the Jordanian finance minister.

The Temple Mount, Judaism's holiest site, is also home to the al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock. According to Jewish belief, the Temple Mount is where God's divine presence is most fully manifested. For this reason, Jews around the world turn in the direction of the Temple Mount during prayer.

From the point of view of Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other interested Muslim parties, Jerusalem is the crown jewel in what amounts to a battle for the soul of Islam. For much of the past century, the administration of Jerusalem's Muslim holy sites has vested in a Jordanian government-controlled endowment.

Saudi Arabia bases its claim to leadership of the Muslim world on its custodianship of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. The Saudi claim, at a time when it is competing for religious soft power, would be significantly boosted by a stake in the administration of the Temple Mount.

The stakes in the struggle for control of Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem sites are high. For Riyadh's ruling Saud family, this is about bolstering its religious claim to leadership of the Muslim world. For Jordan and its Hashemite monarchs, who, unlike the Saudis, trace their ancestry back to the prophet Muhammad, this is about more than religious power. With Palestinians accounting for more than 40% of Jordan's population, maintaining the status quo in Jerusalem—which is expected by most Palestinians to be the capital of a future Palestinian state—is key to ensuring the regime's survival.

Although not charged, [Prince Hamza has been under house arrest since April](#). In that month, Awadallah and the second defendant, Sharif Hassan bin Zaid, a businessman and distant cousin of King Abdullah, were detained.

Riyadh fueled suspicion of a [Saudi connection to the plot](#) by allegedly mounting a concerted effort when the plot was first disclosed to persuade King Abdullah to allow Awadallah, a Jordanian, US, and Saudi national, to go into exile in the kingdom. Saudi Arabia sent its FM, Prince Faisal bin Farhan al-Saud, intelligence chief Khalid bin Ali al-Humaidan, and a senior official in Prince Muhammad's office to Jordan, apparently for the purpose of escorting Awadallah out of Jordan and into the kingdom.

Jordan rejected the kingdom's demand to release Awadallah into Saudi custody, a move that was supported by President Biden and CIA Director William Burns.

Riyadh has denied wanting Awadallah to go into exile in the kingdom. Saudi officials claim the visits to Jordan by senior officials were intended to express support for the Jordanian monarch.

Categorically denying any Saudi association with the Jordanian plot, Ali Shihabi, a Middle East analyst who often reflects Saudi positions, tweeted: "The only Saudi 'angle' is Awadallah who also has Saudi nationality and is immensely unpopular in Jordan. He is mentioned in the leaks as having been asked to secure Saudi help by Hamza. No help was extended in any form and not a shred of evidence supports such allegations."

Jordanian FM Ayman Safadi said during a visit to Washington in May that efforts to broaden administration of the Muslim holy sites on the Temple Mount constituted a red line. King Abdullah reiterated Jordan's rejection of any attempt to involve third parties in the administration during a subsequent visit to Amman by US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken.

Relations between Jordan and Saudi Arabia have ebbed and flowed. The Saudis were irked by King Abdullah's fierce rejection of former US president Donald Trump's recognition of all of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Jordan also refused to consider the president's Israeli-Palestinian peace plan.

King Abdullah suspected former Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu of favoring a Saudi role in the administration of the Muslim sites on the Temple Mount. He is uncertain about Netanyahu's successor, PM Naftali Bennett, who rejects the notion of an independent Palestinian state alongside Israel and supports Israeli settlement activity.

Jordanian officials denied reports last year in *Israel Hayom*, a pro-Netanyahu Israeli publication, quoting Saudi diplomats as saying that Jordan was willing to grant Saudi Arabia observer status in the endowment administering the Muslim holy sites on the Temple Mount.

Saudi Arabia has not officially declared its desire to wrest control of the Temple Mount from Jordan, but Saudi interest is evident in various moves by the country in recent years.

Flexing the kingdom's financial muscle, Saudi King Salman told an Arab summit in Dhahran in April 2018 that he was donating \$150 million to support Islam's holy places in Jerusalem. The donation was in part designed to counter bequests by Turkey, a rival contender for Muslim religious soft power, to Islamic organizations in Jerusalem as well as Turkish efforts to acquire real estate in the city.

Saudi Arabia has since clashed with Jordan in Arab fora over Jordan's exclusive control of the administration of the Jerusalem sites and is believed to have been wooing Palestinian religious dignitaries.

The risk for Saudi Arabia is that broadening the administration of the Jerusalem sites could invigorate latent suggestions that the custodianship of Mecca and Medina should also be internationalized. This proposition, often put forward by Iran, sends chills down Saudi spines.

Writing in *Haaretz* in 2019, Malik Dahlan, a Saudi-born international lawyer who is believed to be close to Prince Hamza, suggested that the Trump plan for Israel and the Palestinians could work if in the first phase "an agreement on the governance of Jerusalem" was achieved. "This Jerusalem-first approach would involve the idea of 'integrative internationalization,' which, incidentally, I also prescribe for Mecca and Medina," Malik wrote. There was no suggestion that Prince Hamza shared Malik's views on the holy Saudi sites.

*Dr. James M. Dorsey, a non-resident Senior Associate at the BESA Center, is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University and co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture.*