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**The Arab Spring and the Mediterranean
Basin: A Case Study of Jordan**

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The Arab Spring and the Mediterranean Basin: A Case Study of Jordan

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Abstract

My paper will look at the affect of the Arab spring on the countries surrounding the Mediterranean with a special reference the country of Jordan. The last five years have had a tremendous affect on the Mediterranean basin with protest and revolution beginning in North Africa and spreading to the Middle East. The repercussions of the Arab spring have been felt on the southern shores of the European continent. The toppling of dictators and military rulers , early attempts at instituting democracy and holding parliamentary elections, the lack of stability and consensus in a post revolutionary countries, the refugee crises and its overspill in the Mediterranean with many hundreds and thousands fleeing the civil unrest and making for the safe shores of Europe, the eruption of civil war in Syria and the involvement of regional and international countries and lastly the role of the European union and Mediterranean countries in helping in bringing peace and stability to the Arab countries affected by the Arab spring. My PhD research looks at Jordan and the evolution of national identity since the disengagement of 1988. National identity is a very important and hotly debated topic in countries affected by the Arab spring. Debates concerning national identity in Jordan are a microcosm of the larger debates taking place in the Mediterranean countries. Greece has recently been bedevilled by socio-economic disruptions and connected with these debates surrounding the future of Greece. This tells me that the political turmoil is not different from what a number of Arab countries are experiencing as the result of the unfolding Arab spring and debates about national identity.

Keywords:

Introduction

This article examines the protest movement in Jordan and how it has impacted the Mediterranean region. The last five years have been a tumultuous time for Arab countries surrounding the Mediterranean basin. The Mediterranean basin is home to countries of different socio economic and cultural backgrounds, varying political systems, and different civilizational and religious narratives and lastly crucial in international affairs and geo-political consideration.

This article sets out to show that Jordan is a full member of the Mediterranean family of nations, although not sharing a coast with other neo-eastern countries its intimate relations and shared histories with Palestine, Lebanon and Syria mark it out as an important country belonging to the Mediterranean Basin. This article will examine the Arab spring protests in Jordan and how the country's political development has in recent years paved the way for a very dynamic and exciting time in Mediterranean politics

Arab Spring Protests in Jordan

The Protest Movement in Contemporary Jordan: The Case of the Hirak

The Hirak movement received little of the media coverage that was saturated by the larger protests in Amman during 2011/2012. In the spirit of the Arab uprisings, the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamic Action front (IAF) party, secular leftist parties, professional syndicates and youth groups held weekly demonstrations calling for democratic reforms, some drawing thousands of marchers. Significantly, these protests brought new coalitions of reformists that overcame long-standing divisions, such as Islamic/secular division.¹ The vanguard of these rallies, the Brotherhood and professional syndicates, had dominated the opposition landscape since the early 1990s, when the end of martial law under King Hussein facilitated a renaissance of the civil service.²

Though they drew the attention of western analysts looking for revolutionary drama, this groundswell of urban protests did not pose a credible threat to the regime. For one, security officials understood well how to undermine mass mobilisation in Amman through non-violent means such as using bureaucratic restrictions and associational laws to limit the size of demonstrations.³ Furthermore, these demonstrations were more stage-managed exercises than spontaneous revolts, complete with fixed marching routes, pre-distributed slogans, frequent utterances of loyalties to the throne and cordial

¹Curtis R. Ryan (2011) Political Opposition and Reform Opposition Coalitions in Jordan, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 38(3), 2011: 367-90.

²Laurie Brand (1995) 'In the Beginning Was the State...: The Quest for Civil Service in Jordan', *Civil Society in the Middle East 1*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill: 148-85.

³Quintan Wiktorowicz (2000, October) 'Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan', *Comparative Politics Journal*, 33(1): 43-61.

relations with the police, many of whom infamously provided water bottles to thirsty protestors. These scripted rituals had long characterised the protest culture of Amman, and in that sense did not break new ground.¹

To give more analysis the protest movement in Jordan can be subdivided into three categories. The first category is made up of small groups of autonomous activists not connected to the old political parties, and frequently highlighted by a socialist leaning political direction. The second category is made up of numerous socialist and nationalist political groups, while the last and the most numerous are the Islamic revivalist connected with the Muslim brotherhood movement in Jordan as mentioned above.

The following paragraph will analyze the independent youth movement. The role of the independent political actors both in the working class protests and protests groups demanding democratic change are very fascinating. This significantly is the case given Jordan's historical context where for many years any political action was very severely curtailed and outlawed by military rule. As a consequence, being politically motivated often resulted in participating in underground activities and was very dangerous for the youth groups. In addition to this those being involved in legal politics were beholden to traditional master servant relation patterns, this necessitates money and resources to keep on track.²

Jordan's Segmented and Appeased Opposition

At present, the factionalised nature of Jordan's political opposition is unlikely to threaten the regime's supremacy. The challenges of the period 2012-2014 have come from disparate groups that generally share similar grievances but are nonetheless distinct in identity, bases of support, and aims. This has made it difficult to give the reform movement coherence or a common leadership³. In terms of national identity, this has meant that the opposition has not been able to capitalise on this unsteady and precarious position because the opposition parties have not been successful in the political realm, and they have been largely unable to lead the debate on national identity. Instead, the prime mover and most forceful exponents of Jordanian national identity have been the government and the monarchy, which has always sought to monopolise the construction of national identity in the country.

For example, support for the Islamist movement – led largely by the Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF) – comes principally from Palestinians in the urban centres of Amman and Irbid. Islamist demands have focused on political reform. These include a new electoral system that provides greater representation for urban areas; an elected government, including parliamentary selection of the prime minister; a

¹Jilian Shwedler (2002) 'The Political Geography of Protest in Neo-Liberal Jordan,' *Middle East Critique* 21(3): 259-270.

²Mona Chistopherson (2013) Protests and Reform in Jordan: Popular Demand And Government Response 2011to 2012, *Fafo-report*: 24.

³Asher Susser (2013) Jordan and the Faltering Fortunes of the Arab Spring. *Tel Aviv Notes - Middle East Analysis* 7(9) Available from <http://bit.ly/1brCXre>.

strengthening of ties with the Palestinian Territories; and a reduction of the internal security forces' political influence. The Islamist opposition, being heavily represented in the Palestinian urban areas, has sought to articulate a national identity that is more inclusive of Islamist and Palestinian discourses. What this has meant in real terms is that, given the growth of the Palestinian population over the preceding decades and the rise of political Islam in the Arab world since the 1970s, the formulation of national identity in the post-disengagement period has had to make greater reference to the concepts of 'Palestinian-ness' and 'Islamism'.

The Hirak (youth movement which includes members of the November 14 opposition party), by contrast, is a highly decentralised movement spread across Jordanian towns and villages. Its origins lie in the dissatisfaction among East Bank Jordanians with predominantly socio-economic issues, though it has broadened somewhat beyond this group over time. Hirak supporters are particularly frustrated by the lack of development efforts outside of Amman, and the neoliberal economic policies under King Abdullah that undermine the traditional patronage system of resource distribution. Hirak supporters want the rebalancing of the Jordanian socio-economic system and a greater attention paid to the needs of the East Bank youth and development projects outside of the urban centres. The Hirak group would like national identity to be less centralised, more inclusive of tribal and East Bank traditions and more mindful of the historic socio-economic patronage system than the present neoliberal stance of the monarchy.

The local committees of the Hirak movement are diverse in membership and orientation. What unites this group, however, is its tribal, Trans-Jordanian roots and the fact that those involved come from what has long been the monarchy's traditional base of support. They lament the perceived disregard for the Kingdom's tribal foundations, and the more nationalist elements of the Hirak are at sharp variance with the Islamists and leftist groups on Jordan's relationship with Palestine by advocating various levels of disengagement. They are similarly wary of what they consider to be the growing economic influence of Jordan's Palestinian population and would hesitate to advocate drastic political reform that might grant that group greater political power. The recent dissatisfaction of the Hirak youth has meant the monarchy and the authorities have had to rebalance and recalibrate the national identity narrative. More heed now needs to be paid to the aspirations and desires of those from the East Bank who wish to build on disengagement, pronounce a more nationalist agenda and limit the rising influence of the Palestinian middle class. If the East Bankers had their way, then Jordanian national identity would be firmly rooted in the monarchical and tribalist traditions of the country, and it would therefore be less accepting of Palestinian and socialist agendas.

Trade unions, professional associations, and leftist groups similarly contribute to the demand for reform. For example, journalists from newspapers, broadcast media, and online media have mobilised in opposition to state interference of the press. Topping their list of grievances is a new press and publications law that extends restrictions and registration requirements for

Jordan-based online news sites. Public teachers have likewise been emboldened, ultimately unionising, mobilising for higher wages, and striking temporarily against increases in fuel prices in November 2012. All this activity means matters in Jordan are in flux presently, the future seems uncertain, and the hope and expectations resting on King Abdullah II sadly did not materialise despite the King's best endeavours. The monarchy is much more in tune with the desires and aspirations of a growing population that is politically astute. The situation in Jordan will need to satisfy multiple demands as demonstrated above: there is a socially mobile, literate, petty bourgeoisie that is tired of political disfranchisement and wants a greater say in the national fortunes of the country. As for national identity, this is in a constant state of flux, and the younger generation wants to chart a future and an identity that is seen to be progressive and respectful of Jordan'

While this framework paints only a basic picture of the complex political field in Jordan, the challenges facing a sustained campaign of mass mobilisation are clear. The differences in the opposition groups' identities and political goals are divisions that reinforce one another. Without a unifying call to topple the monarchy, it is more appropriate to think of multiple oppositions instead of a single, unified movement against the regime.

Furthermore, the monarchy has taken advantage of these divisions in its long-employed divide-and-rule strategy. Increasing public sector wages, permitting teachers to unionise, and promising development funds for areas outside of the capital are some of the ways the regime has for now pacified key segments of the opposition.

The Islamic Action Front and constituencies that constitute the HIRAK have willingly participated in this pacification historically. The Islamic Action Front has thus far played the role of loyal opposition, which Jordanian politics expert Rather than replace the regime, moreover, the HIRAK movement in the south has merely sought to remind those in power of the need to be responsive to their traditional base of support. Tempered by these relations, as well as by the grim reminders from Syria and Egypt that wholesale regime change can be an uncertain and dangerous undertaking, there is little impetus for a full-scale revolutionary effort.¹

Government Response to the Protests in Jordan

In response to the Arab spring protests that took place in neighbouring Arab countries, King Abdullah II having been briefed moved on and dismissed his prime minister Rifai on February 1st 2011. Changing governments and moving cabinets is a very old established way used both King Abdullah II and the late king Hussein to appease the Jordanian public demand. In this way, Jordanian politics can be re-directed while the king remains immune from criticism. A new prime minister has been chosen by the king four times since the beginning of the demonstrations at the start of 2011. Furthermore King

¹Michael Makara, Andrew Spath (2013, February) Reform Not Revolution: The Arab Spring in Jordan, *Fair Observer Magazine*. Available from <http://bit.ly/1GUbCtd>.

Abdullah very speedily reiterated his promise of change by appointing committees with reform agendas.¹

The prime minister Samir Rifai was very unpopular and was himself implicated in the economic complaints which were at the heart of the demonstrations, he had previously presided over a number of neo-liberal reforms with a very heavy emphasis on privatisation of many government programs to deal with the countries increasing deficits. Himself of being of Palestinian descent he was also labelled by tribal chiefs in Jordan of looking after Palestinian businessmen at the cost of developing tribal regions, which have historically being more reliant on public sector investment and efforts.²

King Abdullah appointed Marouf al Bekheit to speed up the reform agenda as a result of the calls for change from the Arab street . Al Bakhiet , from a very strong tribe in Jordan appeared on the surface to be a sympathiser of the poor now protesting against low salaries and high food prices. He began by examining the salary scales in the public sector, promising better conditions, as well as starting the king demand for a national dialogue committee to discuss changes in election law and the political parties laws.³

Prime minister al Bakhiet was not popular with Jordanians of Palestinian background; he had served before as the prime minister assigned to safeguard the Jordanian interest after the hotel bombing in Amman which happened in November 2005, when he started a security orientated policy leading to confrontation with the muslim brotherhood. His re-appointment as prime minister in 2011 led to the first division of the protest movement. The tribal groups saw the time appropriate to give the new regime an opportunity, while the Muslim brotherhood and some the socialist parties wanted to continue the Friday demonstration (voght 2011)

During al Bakhiet time in office the Muslim brotherhood decided to lay emphasis on the protest movement, which disturbed the government. The experience from 24th march 2011 protest and the demonstrators change of focus towards resentment in tribal areas further diminished al Bakhiet ability to manoeuvre.

While he got mired in corruption charges and increasingly was seen to be apposed to the demands of the protestors, his governments came to an end.⁴

October 2011 saw a new government change in which the current prime minister marouf al bakhiet was replaced by Awwn al Khasawneh. In an effort to show that he was very committed to his reforms, the king this time did not appoint a “returnee” or what the demonstrators called the “ revolving door of

¹Julien Barnes-Dacey (2012) Europe and Jordan: Reform before its too late. *Policy Brief, European council on Foreign Relations*. Available from <http://bit.ly/1EKUBB1>.

²International Crises group (ICG) (2012, march 12) Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East(IX):Dallying with Reform in a Divided Jordan. *Middle East/North Africa report 118*.

³Achim Vogt (2011) A Jordan’s external promise of reform, *Internationale Politik and Gellschaft Online(IPG)* .Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Available from <http://bit.ly/1QexGDe>.

⁴H. Varulkar (2011, December) The Arab spring in Jordan:King compelled to make concessions to protest movement.. *Inquiry and Analysis series report, 771*. Washington: The Middle East Media research Institute. Available from <http://bit.ly/1Qey4S6>.

the prime minister industry”. Prime ministers have usually been chosen from a select few families. Some of them coming back and others following in the footsteps of their fathers. This time a very high profile judge, highly regarded for his integrity and without any suspicions of wrong doing was called back from his post as a judge in the international court of justice in Hague where he had served since 1999. The appointment was understood to be a nod towards the Muslim brotherhood. This was very soon confirmed when the new prime minister very quickly proclaimed his wish to hold a conversation with all groups in the country, including the opposition parties and the protest movements. The Muslim brotherhood turned out to be the focal point of these discussions.

Media experts on the other hand declared that the reshuffle of the government was a response to the former prime minister’s proposed election law that was opposed by the different opposition groups. Tribal members of the parliament felt that this has favored the Islamists while the Islamists felt angered because the suggested party list scheme in effect limited the number of parliamentary seats the opposing parties could muster all together under the revised election rules. The muslim brotherhood also refused to consider a suggested ban on political parties established on religious grounds claiming that both measures were aimed at restricting religions influence which they maintained otherwise to rapidly increase under open and fair elections.¹

Fayz al-Tarawneh, who was also prime minister in the late 1990’s, was appointed prime minister after Khasawneh. Reactions to the news of his appointment would suggest it was not seen as an important change. Conservatives from the political state dominated the new government. The king asked al Tarawneh to form a new government for “a limited transitional period to introduce reforms needed to hold elections before the end of the year 2012.”² In addition to Jordan’s increasing economic difficulties al Tarawneh also had to deal with the same problems as his predecessors namely: in changing elections and political party rules; getting ready for parliamentary and postponed regional election and drafting liberal rules for the media establishment.³ When he failed to finish the protests against economic regression and lack of political reforms, king Abdullah surprised the Jordanian public by once again appointing a new prime minister after dissolving the parliament in preparation for new parliamentary elections.

The current prime minister Abdullah Ensour a former minister and a strong advocate of democratic changes. Abdullah Ensour is an independent member of parliament and recognized for his many associates both in circles around the royal Hashemite court as well as with the Islamic action front, other opposition

¹Jordan Prime Minister Khasawneh resigns. *The Jerusaem Post*. Available from <http://bit.ly/1EKXQZ6> [Accessed on 14/11/2014]. Jordan Prime Minister Khasawneh resigns, *The Guardian*. Available from <http://bit.ly/1K78V7Q> [Accessed on 14/11/2014].

²Jordan’s king swears in new conservative-dominated cabinet, *Al Arabiya News* <http://bit.ly/1OTxtrT> [accessed on 20/11/2014].

³Jordan profile – Leaders, *BBC News*. Available from <http://bbc.in/1DOP4Fx> [Accessed on 21/11/2014].

groups and trade unions. His main task was to convince the Muslim brotherhood to forget the announced boycott of the coming elections, a rather difficult and complex job with an election law book which clearly favored tribal politicians known to be more supportive of the king.¹ This was a task in the end did not materialize as the Islamic action front kept with their boycott decision

Protests Gaining Little Traction in Jordan

A number of events over the period 2011-2013 years might support the idea that the survival of Jordan's monarchy has been jeopardised. For example, the Kingdom has witnessed many protests since early 2011, with demonstrators demanding substantive economic and political reforms. In November 2011, the government's decision to lift fuel subsidies angered many Jordanians, as it raised the cost of fuel and gas, resulting in widespread demonstrations that many believed the government would be unable to contain.² Moreover, King Abdullah's frequent cabinet reshuffling – Jordan has had five different prime ministers in the period 2011-2013 – might be considered a sign of desperation from a monarch who has no real vision for reform. This stigmatisation and characterisation of King Abdullah as slow on the reform front has meant that Jordan's national identity has become stymied and non-responsive to the changing situation engulfing the country. The King will need to deliver on his reform promises if his vision of a participatory and inclusive Jordan is to bear fruit. Jordan's national identity and King Abdullah's forthcoming measures, or a lack thereof, will prove very telling for the future.

Most recently, the country's new electoral law generated widespread dissent among citizens demanding fair political representation. The law fell far short of Jordanians' democratic aspirations, and consequently many wondered if the parliamentary elections held under that law in April 2012 would finally motivate citizens to demand a regime change. Demand for more open political representation feeds directly into the delineation of a national identity that is accepting of all identities in Jordan, whether one is Palestinian or from the East Bank.³

In each of these cases, however, popular dissatisfaction has failed to develop into the kind of widespread unrest that has prompted regime change elsewhere in the region. Jordan's protests have generally been scheduled events, hardly uncontrollable mass demonstrations. They have lacked the sustained occupation of public space seen elsewhere, and are remarkable more for their organized nature than for their revolutionary feel.⁴

¹Jordan profile – Leaders, *BBC News*. Available from <http://bbc.in/1DOP4Fx> [Accessed on 21/11/2014].

²Jordanians march against inflation, *Al Jazeera*, Available from <http://bit.ly/1OTy5h1> [accessed on 12/11/2014].

³Curtis R. Ryan (2012 April 13) The implications of Jordan's new electoral law. *Foreign Policy*. Available from <http://atfp.co/1zrKCLT> [accessed on 16/12/2014]

⁴Sarah A. Tobin (2013, Spring) Jordan's Arab Spring: The middle Class and anti- revolution. *Middle East Policy Council* 19(1). Available from <http://bit.ly/1bVV0qh> [accessed on 24/12/2014]

Even the protests and riots that followed the government's decision to remove fuel subsidies fizzled out after a week or two. This subdued nature of the protests and the lack of revolutionary fervour have meant that national identity creation in Jordan proceeds at an incremental pace, where the questioning of the monarchy and the country's tribal traditions have been kept to a minimum. This cautionary approach to political change, gradualist evolutionary change even, has meant Jordan has weathered the storm of the Arab spring relatively well and emerged unscathed. In terms of national identity, this has meant that the espousal of revolutionary causes has never been a marked feature of Jordanian political life; the country has always been represented by a national identity that has been relatively stable, slow to change and rooted in the country's nativist traditions.

The Issue of Identity in Jordanian Politics Today

There is no question that ethnic identity tensions within Jordan have dramatically increased over the decade. This is due in part to the severe economic hardships, but also to the Kingdom's extreme vulnerability to regional tensions: from Israeli discussions of Jordan as an alternative homeland for Palestinians, to war in Iraq and the massive Iraqi refugee flows into Jordan after the 2003 Iraq war, and

now fears of complete civil war and even the collapse of Syria to the north. These identity dynamics have been most clear in the strong nativist trend that has emerged to protect Jordan for real Jordanians. This has led to unprecedented levels of criticism of the regime and of the monarchy for allegedly selling Jordan to a Palestinian economic class and now an increasingly governmental elite. Tensions have abounded in the East Jordanian southern cities and towns, and within and among Jordanian tribes. These traumatic events that Jordan is currently experiencing open up two different scenarios for the country: 1) Jordan could be convulsed by the bloody changes taking place on its borders; recent events in Syria show that the brutal war there has now over-spilled into neighbouring Iraq and potentially harmed tribal and ethnic divisions in the north of Iraq. 2) The second option for Jordan is a measured response to the demands for change, greater acceptance of political reform, listening to legitimate dissent in the country and appeasing the nativist discourse of the East Bankers. The King has shown himself to be adept and skilful at handling criticism and calls for change. He has able and experienced advisers to guide him and forewarn him of any potential danger on the horizon.

High-profile criticism of the monarchy has emerged from tribal leaders and retired military officers, and the latter have now also formed their own political party. Recent alarmist accounts of Jordanian politics have indeed picked up on these tensions, but they too often mistake the more polarised views of specific Palestinian and East Jordanian political figures for the views of most Jordanians.

Jordan is actually a diverse country, and should not be confused with the ethnic caricatures that both Palestinian and East Jordanian chauvinists use for each other. It is not, in short, a country of tribal bigots and disloyal rich

Palestinians. Rather, it is predominantly an Arab state with a significant Circassian minority, and predominantly a Muslim country with a large Christian minority. Some have tribal backgrounds, but many do not, and regardless of the exclusivist nativist trend supported by some in Jordanian politics today, all Jordanians actually have ties across one or more of the Kingdom's borders. This more nuanced and more discerning analysis shows the picture to be less black and white and grey. Those who characterise Jordan as a country of disloyal rich Palestinians and disgruntled poor tribes hide more than they reveal in their analyses. Jordan is in reality a more complex, socially integrated and cohesive country than many political commentators would admit. The analysis that they present counters the narrative of the more alarmist commentators who believe the country to be on the brink of disaster. There is no such scenario for Jordan: identity politics in Jordan is in flux but the longer-term picture is far more encouraging and positive. Matters should therefore be treated with more caution without running headlines based on unconfirmed facts and subjective opinions.

While political tensions in Jordan frequently manifest themselves in ethnic, tribal, or identity terms, they are more often than not about class divisions between rich and poor, and between haves and have-nots. And these cut across ethnic lines. Nevertheless, the violence in Syria has exacerbated these tensions. Even as the regime remains deeply concerned about the implications of the Syrian imbroglio for Jordan's own security and stability, the Kingdom's broad-based reform movement has splintered in its responses.

Some of the latter parties, originally allied with the Islamists as part of a broad reform coalition in Jordan, now fear that the Arab uprisings have led only to Islamist empowerment and even charge that there is a new 'Islamist-American-Zionist' conspiracy to that effect. Yet, despite the various ethnic and ideological fault lines in Jordanian politics, pro-reform and pro-democracy demonstrators from the leftist, nationalist, and Islamist parties, and also from non-partisan youth movements across the country, have marched and protested against corruption and for reform almost every Friday for more than a year. The Arab uprisings have certainly helped inspire the reform movement, and have also spurred the regime to push through revisions in the constitution and soon in the electoral laws as well.¹

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that the Arab spring in Jordan has impacted on regional politics in a very significant way. The countries of the Mediterranean basin are less stable than what they were ten years ago, however these countries are a lot more dynamic and promise a new future for the coming generation.

¹Curtis Ryan (2012, February) Identity and Corruption in Jordanian Politics, *Foreign Policy Magazine*. Available from <http://atfp.co/1GKGzxs> [Accessed on 10 April 2014].

Social activism, political empowerment and twenty first century aspirations mean that identity politics in Jordan and the surrounding Arab countries will be an important political force of reckoning. Jordan is an important country that will continue to influence development in the wider Mediterranean region. Its population is predominantly young and its monarchy open to change and new ways of defining its role in a period of rapid political change.

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