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# Middle East Brief

## The New Jordanian Patriotism After the Arab Spring

Yazan Doughan

In March 2011, a few hundred activists gathered at the Ministry of Interior Circle in Amman, Jordan, to demand political reforms and denounce corruption. Inspired by the unfolding Arab uprisings, the activists chose to organize under a politically neutral name that simply reflected the date on which their sit-in started: March 24. Their protest borrowed directly from broadcast images of protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square: tents, sleeping bags, and food to allow for a round-the-clock presence; broomsticks to sweep the streets as a display of civic virtue; and exclusively national flags and symbols to signal non-partisan politics. In response, and as a show of popular allegiance to King Abdullah II, the state called for a counter-event, the Allegiance and Belonging Festival, to be held the next day at King Hussein Park, on the other side of Amman. In the buildup toward the two events, loyalists made threats on social media that they would break up the sit-in at the Ministry of Interior Circle, calling the activists there "Palestinian traitors." While the night of March 24 remained relatively peaceful, a group of loyalists returning from the state-sponsored event the following day attacked the protesters in the presence of police—who later joined in, violently breaking up the sit-in.

Most commentators mark this sit-in as a momentous event in the narrative of the Arab Spring protests in Jordan. It was the moment when a new mode of political organization and protest, known as the *Hirak* ("popular movement")

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in Arabic), emerged in the country. It was also when the security apparatus violently nipped a middle-class, civic-nationalist movement in the bud before it could escalate into a mass revolt.<sup>1</sup> Little remarked upon, however, is that the state's ability to conjure up royalist crowds started to wane from that point on and, to a large extent, ended a few months later. Even less remarked upon is the fact that many of the loyalists who helped break up the March 24 sit-in turned to activism in the following months, joined the *Hirak*, and repudiated their previous actions. How can we make sense of these developments? And how do they fit into the larger picture of political mobilization and national identity in Jordan, both historically and after the Arab Spring?

Contrary to analyses which dismiss Jordan's "Arab Spring" as having been ineffective in bringing about a significant change in the political scene there, this Brief argues that it marked the birth of a new form of Jordanian patriotism that signifies a significant departure from the ethnic-based Jordanian nationalism and partisan politics that had been dominant in the previous decades. This new patriotism informs the contentious politics in the country today, expressed in the language of economic and human rights and commitment to the homeland rather than allegiance to the person of the king. Its emergence was a product both of the state's liberalization of the economy and of the nationalization of politics since the 1980s. It represented a carefully crafted response on the part of activists seeking to claim popular sovereignty against a king whom they accused of corruption. Yet, given how most Jordanians fear that an uprising could bring about unforeseeable existential threats to the state and the homeland, Jordanian activists continue to demand reforms rather than call for a revolution.

### Transjordanians, Palestinians, and the Hashemite Monarchy

The Jordanian political regime is often described in terms of a native Transjordanian tribal population supporting the monarchy against a larger population of Palestinians—whether the latter were refugees displaced with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Jordanian citizens displaced by Israel's occupation of the West Bank in 1967, or even those who earlier had moved from Palestine to Transjordan during the British Mandate. This constellation of identities, however, was the product of a particular historical moment in the Kingdom's history: the period following Israel's occupation of the West Bank in 1967, the concomitant rise of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a representative of Palestinians, and the 1970 Black September civil war between the Jordanian army and Palestinian militias affiliated with the PLO.

Prior to that, Jordanian national identity was very much a local expression of a larger anti-colonial and Arab nationalist project. During this time, the Hashemites presented themselves as the dynastic bearers of Arab nationalism and had no trouble envisaging a Hashemite kingdom in Transjordan and the West Bank, when they annexed the latter in 1950. Similarly, the Jordanian National Movement, which opposed the Hashemites, saw itself as part of a larger Arab nationalist project and included Transjordanians and Palestinians among its ranks.<sup>2</sup>

With the loss of the West Bank and the rise of the PLO, the Jordanian state initiated a project to redefine Jordanian national identity away from the Palestinian national project and to anchor it more squarely within the boundaries of Transjordan. It did so by creating ethnic divisions. Starting with the efforts

of Prime Minister Wasfi al-Tal (1962–3, 1965–7, and 1970–71), a whole pallet of nationalist emblems—dialect, dress, music, folklore, cuisine—was selected and promoted to distinguish Jordanian national identity from the Palestinian one articulated by the PLO.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the 1970s saw a rapid expansion of the state bureaucracy and security apparatus. Between 1970 and 1985, Jordan’s civil service grew threefold (from 27,000 to 74,000), with the vast majority of recruits coming from the rural and bedouin Transjordanian population.<sup>4</sup> The same was true of the police and the army. Hence, the expansion of the public sector coincided with a “Jordanization” of the state, along with a wave of urbanization and rural-to-urban migration. This was particularly the case in the south of Jordan, where traditional modes of subsistence were almost completely destroyed owing to ever-dwindling water resources and land fragmentation, and where economic development had historically been least successful. For rural, nomadic, and semi-nomadic Transjordanians, public employment was a ticket out of poverty, and they came to see the state as their exclusive domain.

## The Nationalization of Jordanian Politics since 1989

Between the oil crisis of 1973 and up to the early 1980s, Jordan enjoyed economic growth unprecedented in its history, boosted by outside assistance and loans, increased exports to Gulf states, and remittances from Jordanians working abroad. The crash in oil prices in 1982 caused an economic slowdown in the region and reduced the flow of aid and remittances to Jordan. The government responded with extensive external borrowing to cover internal expenditures, which did not revive the economy but rather brought on a structural adjustment program—including the devaluation of the national currency, lifting of state subsidies and import and export restrictions, and reduction of public spending—that rendered life in provincial areas more precarious. In April 1989, six months after a financial crisis caused the value of the national currency to drop by 50 percent, mass protests spread from the south of Jordan, where livelihoods were most dependent on the state and most impoverished, to the capital, Amman—which came to be known as the “April Rising” (*Habbet Nisan*).

These economic developments coincided with the First Palestinian Intifada, Jordan’s subsequent “severance of political and administrative ties” with the West Bank,<sup>5</sup> and the denationalization of West Bank Jordanians.<sup>6</sup> This allowed for a harder line to be drawn between a Transjordanian identity—belonging to those who came to be defined as the “indigenous” population of Jordan—and a Palestinian one, whose aspirations for statehood should, it was argued, be realized outside Jordan and to the west of it. Fueled by Transjordanians’ anxiety over the dwindling public resources available to them and enabled by the subsequent “democratic opening,” which saw a lifting of the ban on political parties and the resumption of Parliament in 1989, an exclusivist Transjordanian nationalism took root in the country. In this regard, the liberalization of the economy and the nationalization of politics went hand in hand to produce this nationalist revival. Transjordanians misrecognized economic liberalization as “Palestinization” because they believed that liberalization was playing into the hands of Palestinians, whom they saw as capitalists controlling the private sector—a view that elided the fact that most Palestinians, like most Transjordanians, were slowly descending into poverty.

Transjordanian nationalists saw themselves as in a struggle with neoliberal elites around King Abdullah II but claimed the King as the emblem of national identity and equated him with the homeland (*al-watan*). To be patriotic meant to be aligned with the monarch—a form of patriotism summed up in the expression “*al-wala’ wa-l-intima*” (allegiance [to the King] and belonging [to the homeland]). Yet, within this understanding of patriotism, loyalty to the King—in the person of King Abdullah II—was accompanied by a suspicion of his Kuwaiti-born Palestinian wife, Queen Rania, who was the target of much populist wrath in the 2000s, when Transjordanian nationalists related neoliberal state policies to the Queen’s involvement in politics.<sup>7</sup>

The state’s response to these developments was to nationalize politics by shifting it away from the transnational concerns of pan-Arabist politics, which had dominated the political scene until then, and focusing on the nation-state and on national interests. The “Jordan First” (*al-Urdun ’Awlan*) campaign, created by the Royal Court in 2002, was both in line with and a response to the emphasis on ethnic identification. It sought to dampen Transjordanian nationalism by projecting a more inclusive image: Its signature poster depicted a Jordanian flag held by five arms representing Jordanians of diverse ethnic, class, age, and gender identities (Image 1).



Image 1: "Jordan First" poster

This inclusive gesture was also a nationalizing one. The campaign was essentially prioritizing economic and developmental concerns over transnational issues, such as Palestine, where the Second Intifada was unfolding, or Iraq, which was soon to be invaded by the United States. A video clip broadcast on public television as part of the campaign depicted protests in Amman where protesters did not carry placards with slogans related to the Palestinian cause, as was common at the time, but rather ones that decried poverty and unemployment.<sup>8</sup> The economic and social transformations of the past five decades along with the state's redefinition of the scope of politics along national-territorial lines had the cumulative effect of putting economic concerns at the center of politics and making economic patriotism the only legitimate position from which activists could make political claims upon the state. These changes created a language for national identity in the country which future generations of political activists, like today's youth, would take up for mobilizing around the problem of corruption—which, by the 2010s, had become a catch-all-word by which a disenfranchised populace explained economic disparities in society.

## Jordanian Patriotism in the Age of the Arab Spring

By December 2010, when the Tunisian uprising started, Jordan had already seen months of political activism borne out of economic grievances. Strikes by workers at the privatized port of Aqaba in September 2009 and by public school teachers in March 2010 succeeded in winning major concessions for workers and ushered in a new era of labor activism in the country. In May 2010, a group of retired army officers issued a fiery statement decrying privatization, corruption, and what they saw as the "Palestinization" of Jordan—a perfect expression of the royalist Transjordanian nationalism of the past decade.<sup>9</sup> Despite these early precursors, commentators

usually mark Friday, January 7, 2011, as the beginning of Jordan's Arab Spring. On that day, day-wage laborers at the Ministry of Agriculture organized a demonstration in Dhiban (45 miles south of Amman) demanding more stable employment and benefits while linking their dire conditions to larger national issues of corruption and mismanagement. Their action triggered weekly demonstrations in downtown Amman, with broader participation beginning the following Friday.

These early demonstrations followed a usual script, whereby the slogans and emblems of political parties dominated—particularly the green banners of the Islamic Action Front and the red banners of leftist parties—but a major shift took place on March 24 with the demonstration at the Ministry of Interior Circle, which was described in the introduction to this Brief. In contrast to earlier protests, that of March 24 drew not only activists from diverse political backgrounds, including Islamists and leftists, but also some who did not identify with party politics, such as new labor activists. As Hisham al-Hisah, an activist in the Dhiban movement and one of the organizers of the March 24 demonstration, put it, the idea was that "everyone [had] gathered under the Jordanian flag and abandoned the political and ideological backgrounds from which they came"<sup>10</sup>—a gesture that used the image of the Jordan First campaign poster to invoke popular sovereignty.

Additionally, March 24 brought to prominence a new (for Jordan) form of organization referred to as *hirak* (pl. *hirakat*). In contrast to other forms of political organization—such as political parties (*ahzab*, sing. *hizb*), political factions (*tayyarat*, sing. *tayyar*), or traditional political movements (*harakat*, sing. *haraka*)—the term *hirak* refers to forms of organization that are neither hierarchical nor based on explicit political ideologies but are instead based on relations of friendship, kinship, and locality. By the time of the March 24 demonstration, the word had already been used to describe the various labor movements that were emerging, including the one by day-wage laborers in Dhiban. But March 24 signified a new development. In contrast to these earlier mobilizations (now referred to as "the Demands Hirak" to indicate the concrete and particular nature of the demonstrators' socioeconomic demands, such as for better wages and working conditions), March 24 ushered in what came to be known as "the Political Hirak" to suggest the more structural nature of their demands, which now focused not so much on particular public resources and benefits to be distributed, but rather on the entire system and basis of distribution. Their demands linked curbing corruption to constitutional reforms, a new election law,

and an end to the security apparatus's involvement in politics.<sup>11</sup>

By contrast, the loyalists who attacked the March 24 demonstrators held older patriotic sentiments. Their misrecognition of the protesters as Palestinian usurpers reflected the Transjordanian nationalism of the previous decade: Their attack on the protesters came out of a sense of loyalty to country and King, which were construed as one and the same. So the fact that many of these loyalists later turned to activism and joined the Political Hirak (hereinafter the Hirak) was a historically significant development that went well beyond a simple change of heart on the part of individuals. And the state's increasing inability to produce loyalist crowds was a further indication that Jordan had witnessed a major shift in the dominant meaning of Jordanian patriotism itself.

This was precisely the shift I studied in my research in Hay al-Tafayleh, a poor tribal neighborhood of some 25,000 whose inhabitants largely hailed from the southern governorate of al-Tafileh, and where I conducted fieldwork between 2011 and 2013. Remarkably, the neighborhood both was the place where many of the so-called loyalist "thugs" came from and later became home to a thriving *hirak* whose slogans reverberated in other local *hirakat* between 2011 and 2013. The political transformations I witnessed in this neighborhood during that time thus reflected larger transformations on a national scale.

Central to this transformation was how a discourse on *dignity* started gaining traction in descriptions and evaluations of the relationship between citizens and the state, one that had undergone significant change over the previous decades. The expansion of the state bureaucracy in the 1970s and 80s, and the concomitant incorporation of large swaths of Transjordanians into it, came with a paternalistic language whereby Transjordanians understood themselves to be children of the state (*'abna' al-dawla*). With the structural adjustment policies of the late 1980s and 1990s, employment in the state bureaucracy became a less feasible option, even as anti-poverty programs conducted by the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Royal Court expanded. Under the banner of directing state subsidies to the "deserving" poor rather than to the whole population, the old logic of universal subsidies was gradually replaced by an expanded system of cash handouts to the poor, framed as "social protection," along with micro-credit financing, framed as "economic empowerment," and development projects executed directly by the Royal Court, framed as "generous royal gifts" to the poor (*makrumah malakiyyah*).

These changes in distribution policies, and the kind of transactional politics they made possible, were increasingly seen as forms of "begging" and "subservience" in ways that called into question what citizenship actually meant. They made the older paternalistic language of citizenship unacceptable to increasingly pauperized Transjordanians. When a group of unemployed youth from Hay al-Tafayleh protested at the gate of the Royal Court in March 2011 demanding jobs and university scholarships, they were handed checks of 200 Dinars (\$280) each. They responded by tearing up the checks and stepping on them, saying that they "had not come to beg!"

These changes in distribution policies had significant effects on the political structures of poor communities. The 2000s saw the rise of entrepreneurial politicians, often members of Parliament, who used their positions to become conduits for extending state and private welfare to their social networks. In Hay al-Tafayleh, one such Member of Parliament, Yehya al-Saud, used his access to networks for distributing humanitarian care packages and cash assistance to bolster his political standing while using the language of "allegiance and belonging," as if these were personal gifts from the King himself. The same MP was believed to have been the instigator behind the thugs' attack on the March 24 activists, as well as several other attacks on branches of the Islamic Action Front.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, when news reached Hay al-Tafayleh that the March 24 sit-in was broken up by people from the neighborhood, many in the neighborhood saw the attackers not as patriotic zealots, but as thugs who sold their might (and their souls!) in exchange for payments. As one member of the Hirak told me at the time to justify his subsequent turn to activism: "I was ashamed to say that I am a Tafili, because the word Tafili now meant 'regime thug,' to the extent that you had people posting comments on Facebook warning activists that any demonstrations taking place from then on would be dealt with by the Tafayleh. For us the issue was an issue of dignity. We have lost our dignity! We have become instruments; the striking fist of the regime."<sup>13</sup>

The Tafayleh's turn to activism was a way to reclaim their dignity in their own eyes and in the eyes of other Jordanians—to show that they were not, in fact, mere instruments. From a political perspective, this change marked a transformation of political outlook, from the older Transjordanian patriotism of "allegiance and belonging" to "civic patriotism," wherein one's allegiance was to the abstract idea of the homeland. Nowhere could this transformation be seen more starkly than in the lives of those so-called "thugs," who, with the

changing currents in the neighborhood, repudiated their previous actions and turned to activism themselves. It also was reflected in the neighborhood's attitude toward Palestinians. Though the neighborhood was historically known for anti-Palestinian sentiment, erupting in constant clashes with people from the Wihdat Refugee Camp (particularly around soccer matches between Faysali, the paramount Transjordanian soccer team, and the Palestinian-supported al-Wihdat team)—as well as for feuds with the neighboring area of Hay al-Mahasreh (an informal Palestinian refugee camp)—Hirak activists were now inclined to call upon their Palestinian neighbors to join them in their protests.<sup>14</sup>

Activists also rejected the usual *mukhabarat* (“intelligence service”) tactic of divide-and-rule that played on Transjordanian-Palestinian antagonisms. In one interrogation session conducted by the *mukhabarat*, an activist from Hay al-Tafayleh was asked if he wanted Palestinians to rule over him. He responded by saying that whoever holds a national identification number (i.e., held legal citizenship) was, in fact, Jordanian. In doing so, he was rejecting an ethnic understanding of the Jordanian nation in favor of one based on legal status. At the same time, activists were contending that Jordan's existential threat comes not from Palestinian citizens but rather from the Israeli right, which aims to make Jordan an alternative homeland for Palestinians.<sup>15</sup>

## Jordanian Politics Today: Public Order and the Legacy of the Hirak

Despite the waning of the “allegiance and belonging” understanding of patriotism, Jordanian activists have largely stayed clear of calls for toppling the regime of the sort that activists in other Arab countries have embraced.<sup>16</sup> Here, too, the debates around this topic among the Hay al-Tafayleh activists help explain larger dynamics on the national scale. During the Arab Spring, Hay al-Tafayleh activists were among the most inclined to directly accuse the king of corruption and to call for his ouster. This helped attract media attention to them and gave them significant visibility. Their accusations and daring slogans proved controversial, however, not only among the larger public but also within the Hirak itself, and were the main reason for its disintegration in 2013. While many agreed that the king was the source of all corruption, they thought that saying this in public could invite incalculable hazards: “What if the king packed his bag and decided to leave?” asked one leading activist rhetorically. For him, and for many others, the end of the monarchy meant the possibility of chaos.

The same issue resurfaced in June 2018, when mass protests caused the ouster of Prime Minister Hani al-Mulqi and the appointment of Omar al-Razzaz as his successor. When Hirak activists from provincial areas and Hay al-Tafayleh tried to up the ante with their chants, they were quickly silenced. Here again, the concern was public order. More than the fear of state repression or devotion to a sovereign, the fear of incalculable chaos has perhaps become the most salient emotion that binds Jordanians to the monarchy and the state today. This is, of course, in line with a larger regional pattern. But perhaps the widely held sense that Jordan was forever “on the brink”<sup>17</sup> has meant that fear for the homeland has played a larger role than hope for a better future in determining the actions of patriotic activists.

The current generation of activists stands in critical tension vis-à-vis the state, wanting to reclaim it without unraveling the public order. Despite its retrenchment, however, the Hirak's populist civic patriotism has had an unmistakable effect on political discourse in the country, and particularly on how claims for rights are now made upon the state. Transjordanians are less likely to think that their economic well-being is threatened by non-ethnic Jordanians, like Palestinians—or, more recently, by Syrian refugees—but, rather, to attribute their discontent to oligarchs who have captured the state. Their paramount demand is for a more equitable distribution of public resources, not for economic development as such.

## Endnotes

- 1 That response was in stark contrast to how the state had responded to protests in previous weeks—when, upon the Queen's suggestion, the police handed out water and juice bottles to protesters in a public spectacle of tolerance and civility.
- 2 For a study of the Jordanian National Movement, see Betty S. Anderson, *Nationalist Voices in Jordan: The Street and the State*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005).
- 3 For an in-depth review of this national identity project, see Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

- 4 As of December 2015, Jordan's domestic workforce was estimated at 1.4 million working inside and outside the country. Of this sum, 600,000 were employed in the public sector, divided evenly between the civil service and the security apparatus. See: [Jordan Department of Statistics, "Al-Taqrir al-Tahlili Li-Halat al-'Amalah Wa-l-Batalah Fi-l-'Urdun 2015" \(Analytic Report on the Employment and Unemployment Situation in Jordan 2015\), April 2016.](#)
- 5 See [Hussein Bin Talal, "Address to the Nation," July 31, 1988.](#)
- 6 Residents of the West Bank were given temporary (two-year) Jordanian passports, without national identification numbers, to facilitate their travel abroad, and they had no more claims to citizenship thereafter.
- 7 For a discussion of how these sentiments played out in soccer matches between al-Faysali, with its paradigmatic Transjordanian fan base, and al-Wihdat, with its Palestinian one, see [Dag Tuastad, "Al-Wihdat: The Pride of the Palestinians in Jordan," \*Middle East Institute\*, May 2, 2010.](#)
- 8 For more details on the Jordan First Campaign, see [Jillian Schwedler, "The Political Geography of Protest in Neoliberal Jordan," \*Middle East Critique\* 21, no.3 \(2012\): 259-270.](#)
- 9 For more details, and a different reading of this movement, see [Tariq Tell, "Early Spring in Jordan: The Revolt of the Military Veterans," \*Carnegie Middle East Center\*, November 4, 2015.](#)
- 10 See interview with [Hisham al-Hisah on Towana Mahmood, "Kuntu Hunak - l'tisam 24 'Adhar" \("I was there - The March 24 Sit-in"\), \*Alaraby TV\*, December 6, 2018.](#)
- 11 For the background of the March 24 movement and the emergence of the Political Hirak, see [Curtis R. Ryan, \*Jordan and the Arab Uprisings: Regime Survival and Politics beyond the State\* \(New York: Columbia University Press, 2018\), pp. 26–36.](#)
- 12 These historical shifts in distribution policies, as well as the social relations they give rise to, are often overlooked in the scholarship on Jordan, which frames the relationship between citizens (particularly Transjordanians) and the state as a social contract, wherein citizens' allegiance to the regime is exchanged for material benefits.
- 13 Khaled, a young activist from Hay al-Tafayleh, interviewed by the author in November 2012.
- 14 Despite these inclusive gestures, however, Palestinians' participation as Palestinians in the protests remained limited because of a widespread sense that they could easily be used by the state as scarecrows and as a justification for police violence. When an activist accused his Palestinian friend of cowardice for not joining the protests, the friend explained that, unlike the Transjordanian Tafayleh, Palestinians would be met with harsh repression if they protested.
- 15 One popular slogan at the time asked rhetorically: "*ma biddak watan badil, lesh b-tid'am Isra'il?*" ("If you [the King] reject the [idea of Jordan becoming an] alternative homeland [for Palestinians], why do you support Israel?")
- 16 Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, most activists in Jordan preferred the slogan "The people demand the reform of the system" (*al-sha'b yurid 'islah al-nizam*) over "The people demand the downfall of the system" (*al-sha'b yurid 'isqat al-nizam*).
- 17 [Marc Lynch, "Jordan, Forever on the Brink," \*Arab Uprisings: Jordan, Forever on the Brink\* \(Washington, DC: Project on Middle East Political Science, May 9, 2012\).](#)



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