

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

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The theme of this paper is the effect of the Arab Spring upon countries surrounding the Mediterranean, with a special reference to Jordan. The Mediterranean basin has witnessed protests and revolution over the last five years. The southern shores of Europe have felt repercussions of the Arab Spring following the fall of military rulers and dictators and attempts to hold parliamentary elections and to encourage democracy. The resulting chaos, lack of stability and agreement in post revolutionary countries has led to serious consequences for the region. My PhD research is focused upon Jordan and the evolution of its national identity since the disengagement of 1988. The Arab Spring has raised serious issues of national identity in those countries affected. National identity debates within Jordan may be viewed as a microcosm of larger debates taking place in the Mediterranean countries. Socio-economic disruptions have had a serious impact upon Greece, leading to serious debates about its future.

Keywords: *Arab spring, Identity, Jordan, Mediterranean basin.*

Introduction

The protest movement within Jordan, together with its impact upon the Mediterranean region, is the focus of this paper. The last five years have been a period of considerable turmoil for the Arab countries surrounding the Mediterranean basin. The Mediterranean basin consists of countries with very different cultural, political and socio economic backgrounds. There are varying political systems, different religious and civilizational backgrounds, international affairs and geo-political affiliations.

This article seeks to demonstrate that Jordan is a full member of the Mediterranean family of nations. Although the country does not share a coast with other neo-eastern countries, it is an important country within the Mediterranean Basin that has a shared history and intimate relations with Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. This article seeks to examine the protests of the Arab Spring within Jordan, demonstrating how the development of the country's political system in recent years has paved the way for a dynamic and exciting period in Mediterranean politics.

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Arab Spring Protests in Jordan

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

There was little media coverage of the Hirak movement, which was swamped by the larger protests in Amman during 2011/2012. The Muslim Brotherhood, its Islamic Action Front (IAF) party, secular leftist parties, professional syndicates and youth groups, demanding democratic reforms, called weekly demonstrations. Many of these demonstrations drew thousands of marchers and brought together new coalitions that overcame long-standing Islamic/secular divisions (Curtis 2011). The Brotherhood, which led these demonstrations, had dominated the opposition since the early 1990s, when martial law under King Hussein came to an end, leading to a review of the role of the civil service (Brand 1995).

This rise of urban protests did not pose a credible threat to the regime, despite Western reports to the contrary. Security officials were able to undermine mass protests in Amman through bureaucratic restrictions, laws to limit the size of demonstrations and other non-violent means (Wiktorowicz 2000). In addition, these demonstrations were more like stage-managed exercises than spontaneous revolts. They had fixed marching routes, frequent utterances of loyalties to the throne, pre-distributed slogans, together with cordial relations with the police, many of whom provided bottles of water to thirsty protestors. Scripted rituals such as these have been elements of the Amman protest culture for many years, and were not new (Shwedler 2002).

The protest movement in Jordan can be analysed further by subdividing it into three categories. Small groups of activists who are autonomous and unconnected to the old political parties, but with a socialist political leaning make up the first category; numerous socialist and nationalist political groups make up the second category; the most numerous grouping are the Islamic revivalist movement, who are connected with the Jordan Muslim Brotherhood movement.

This paragraph considers the independent youth movement within Jordan. Independent political players in the working class protests and protests groups demanding democratic change tell an interesting story, given Jordan's historical context. Political action was severely outlawed by military rule for many years. This often resulted in the participation of politically motivated youth groups in underground activities, which was very dangerous for them. In addition, both money and resources were required for those involved in legal politics following traditional master-servant relationship patterns (Christopherson 2013).

The Segmented and Appeased Opposition in Jordan

Jordan's political opposition is unlikely to threaten the regime's authority at the present time due to its factionalised nature. The period of 2012-2014 originated from a variety of opposition groups that shared similar grievances,

although very different in their bases of support, aims and identity. Differences such as these made it difficult to form a leadership that is sufficiently coherent to lead a reform movement (Susser 2013). In national identity terms, the opposition parties have been unsuccessful in leading the debate on national identity, because of its unsteady and precarious position. As a result, it is the government and the monarchy, who have always sought to monopolise national identity, who continue to be the most forceful exponents of Jordanian national identity.

One example of this is the support for the Islamist movement, which is led mainly by the Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), which originates mainly from Palestinians, living within Amman and Irbid. Political reform has been the main demand of the Islamists, which include a new electoral system that allows greater representation in urban areas; a government, which is elected and includes the parliamentary selection of the prime minister; strengthening the ties with the Palestinian Territories; and reduction of the political influence of the country's internal security forces. The Islamist opposition, which is largely represented in the Palestinian urban areas, attempts to articulate a national identity that is more inclusive of that of the Islamist and Palestinian agendas. Given the growth of the Palestinian population over the earlier decades, together with the increase of political Islam in the Arab world since the 1970s, national identity has to make greater reference to the concepts of "Palestinian-ness" and "Islamism".

In contrast, the HIRAK youth movement, which includes members of the November 14 opposition party, is a highly decentralised movement that spreads across Jordanian towns and villages. The origins of the movement stems mainly from the dissatisfaction with mainly socio-economic issues among East Bank Jordanians, although this agenda has broadened since then.

Supporters of HIRAK are frustrated by the lack of development outside of Amman, together with the neoliberal economic policies under King Abdullah, which undermines the traditional patronage resource distribution system. The rebalancing of the Jordanian socio-economic system, together with a greater attention given to the needs of the East Bank youth and development projects outside of the urban centres are one of the main demands of the HIRAK supporters. In addition, the group would like a less centralised national identity system, which is more inclusive of tribal and East Bank traditions and historic socio-economic patronage than is present under the current monarchy.

The HIRAK movement operates committees that are varied in orientation and membership, although the group is united through its tribal Trans-Jordanian roots, coming from the monarchy's traditional base of support. They are unhappy with what they see as disregard for the Kingdom's tribal roots. The nationalist elements of the HIRAK are in sharp contrast with the Islamists and leftist groups on Jordan's relationship with Palestine by encouraging disengagement. The HIRAK are also wary of what they believe to be the growing economic influence of Jordan's Palestinian population, and discourage any political reform that might give them more political power. The dissatisfaction of the HIRAK youth has meant that the authorities and the monarchy have to

adjust the narrative of the national identity narrative.

It is clear that greater attention needs to be given now, to the aspirations of those from the East Bank who wish to build on disengagement, and create a more nationalist agenda that limits the increasing influence of the Palestinian middle class. Jordanian national identity would be firmly rooted in the monarchical and tribalist traditions if the East Bankers had their way, and would therefore be less accommodating of socialist and Palestinian agendas.

This demand for reforms is also supported by the trade unions, professional associations, and groups representing the political left. Newspaper journalists and those from broadcast and online media also support the opposition to state the interference of the press. A new press and publications law, which extends its requirements for restrictions and registration for Jordan-based online news sites is heavily criticised by many. Teachers in public schools have also unionised, and come out in support of higher wages, and temporarily striking against increases in fuel prices in November 2012.

Activities such as those described means that many issues in Jordan continue to be fluid, and the future seems uncertain. The hope and expectations resting on King Abdullah II failed to materialise, despite the best endeavours of the King. The aspirations and desires of a growing population that is politically astute are recognised by the monarchy. The country will need to satisfy a wide variety of demands, since there is literate, socially mobile, petty bourgeoisie, which wants a greater say in the country's future and is resentful of disenfranchisement. National identity is in a constant state of flux, and the younger generation is seeking an identity that is seen to be progressive and respectful of the country's traditions.

The challenges facing a sustained campaign of mass mobilisation are clear, and the differences in the political goals and identities of opposition groups are divisions that reinforce one another. Without an overall agreement to topple the monarchy, the country consists of multiple oppositions rather than one single, unified movement acting against the current regime. The traditional divide and rule strategy usually deployed by the monarchy has taken advantage of these divisions by increasing the wages in the public sector, allowing teachers to unionise, and promising development funds for areas outside of the capital. Such techniques demonstrate ways in which the regime has temporarily pacified key sections of the opposition.

The HIRAK and Islamic Action Front and their constituencies have historically willingly participated in this pacification. Until recently, the Islamic Action Front has played the role of loyal opposition expected of Jordanian politics. The HIRAK movement in the south has sought to remind those in power to be aware of their traditional base of support, rather than forcing a change of regime. Regime change can be an uncertain and dangerous activity, with constant reminders of the problems faced by Egypt and Syria, and there is little impetus for a full-scale revolutionary effort (Makara and Spath 2013).

Protests in Jordan: Government Response

On 1 February 2011, Prime Minister Rifai was dismissed by King Abdullah II following the briefing meetings regarding the responses in nearby Arab countries to protests associated with the Arab Spring. Jordanian public expressions were often appeased by King Hussein and King Abdullah II by traditional methods, such as changing the members of the cabinet, as well as changing the government. These responses tended to protect the King from criticism by refocusing public attention on politicians in Jordan, and since the beginning of 2011, when demonstrations first started, the King appointed four different prime ministers. Change was promised by King Abdullah, as committees were appointed with agendas for reform (Barnes-Dacey 2012).

The main concerns of the demonstrators focused on economic complaints that were blamed on Prime Minister Rifai, as he had attempted to address the increasing economic deficit of the Jordan by encouraging the privatisation of various government programmes with reforms considered by some public opinion to be neo-liberal. Some tribal chiefs in Jordan had also accused the Prime Minister of protecting Palestinian businessmen, as he was descended from a Palestinian family, which prevented tribal regions being developed that had previously relied on public sector support and investment (ICG 2012).

These calls for change from the public resulted in accelerating the reform agenda, and Marouf Al Bakheit was appointed to be prime minister by King Abdullah to carry this out. Al Bakheit represented a tribe in Jordan that was very strong, and had sympathised with the problems faced by poorer people in the country faced with high food prices and low wages. He began his work by responding to the King's wishes for a National Dialogue Committee that would consider changes to political party laws and election laws, as well as supporting improved work conditions in the public sector and studying the existing salary scales (Vogt 2011).

However, those living in the country with a Palestinian background did not support the appointment Prime Minister Al Bakheit, as after the November 2005 hotel bombing in Amman, he had previously been appointed as prime minister to protect Jordanian interests, and his previous policies were security oriented, which led to confronting the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the protest movement divided when he was appointed in 2011 again as prime minister, as tribal groups wanted to give him an opportunity to make improvements, but socialist parties and the Muslim Brotherhood wanted the Friday demonstrations to continue (Vogt 2011).

The government was concerned by the emphasis placed on the protest movement by the Muslim Brotherhood when Prime Minister Al Bakheit was in office. His ability to carry out his plans for improvements were reduced following the protest of 24 March 2011 and a change of focus of the demonstrators that resulted in tribal areas showing resentment to his efforts. His role as prime minister ended when Al Bakheit appeared to reject the protestors' demands and became involved in charges of corruption (Varulkar 2011).

Awwn Al Khasawneh was appointed as prime minister of a new government in October 2011, but the King avoided appointing an individual who had previously served as prime minister of the country, as protestors claimed that the role of the prime minister was like a government organisation with a revolving door, and the King attempted to demonstrate his commitment to reforms. In Jordan, prime ministers had traditionally been appointed from a small number of families and with sons of previous prime ministers being appointed. However, Awwn Al Khasawneh had previously served since 1999 at The Hague International Court of Justice as a judge, so this very high profile figure carried no suspicions of corruption and demonstrated integrity that was highly regarded. The newly appointed prime minister quickly began meetings with all the relevant groups in Jordan, including protest groups and opposition parties, and these discussions focused on the Muslim Brotherhood.

This government reshuffle was described by media commentators as a response to various opposition groups to the proposed election law changes introduced by the previous prime minister. Islamist members of parliament were angry as the party list scheme suggested restricting the number of seats that could be taken by opposition parties with revised election rules, but tribal members were also angry as they perceived that Islamists were favoured in the changes. The Muslim Brotherhood rejected the suggestion that political parties could be banned for reasons of religion, as they considered that fair and open elections could lead to a rapid increase in the religious influence of government (The Jerusalem Post 2012, The Guardian 2012).

Prime Minister Khasawneh was then replaced by Fayz al-Tarawneh, who had previously served in the 1990s as a prime minister, and the new government was dominated by conservatives. This move was intended to be a period of transition, so that a government could be formed and carry out the required reforms before the end of 2012 when the new elections would be held (Al Arabiya News 2012). The problems faced by the newly appointed prime minister remained the same, as he had to draft liberal rules for establishing the media, prepare for postponed regional and parliamentary elections, change the rules of political parties and elections, and address the serious economic issues facing Jordan (BBC News 2015). However, the protests against insufficient political reforms and economic hardships faced by Jordanians continued and the King dissolved parliament and appointed a new prime minister to prepare for new elections.

Abdullah Ensour is the prime minister currently in post, who strongly supports democratic change and previously served as a minister in the government. His position in parliament is independent, and he maintains regular discussions with trade unions, opposition groups, including the Islamic Action Front and the Royal Hashemite Court. Prime Minister Ensour faced a boycott of the forthcoming elections by the Muslim Brotherhood, and attempted to encourage them to stop their boycott, but as the election law book favoured tribal politicians who supported the King, this job was complex and difficult (BBC News 2015). The Islamic Action Front maintained their boycott despite the interventions of the prime minister.

Jordanian Protests

From 2011 to 2013, various events suggest that the monarchy in Jordan is questioned by some people, as protestors who continued throughout this period to demand political reforms and economic reforms that were substantial. Many Jordanians were angry when fuel subsidies were stopped by the government, as this resulted in gas and fuel price increases, and there were concerns by government ministers that they would not be able to contain the widespread demonstrations that took place (Al Jazeera 2011). Some Jordanians thought that King Abdullah lacked a vision for reform, and that appointing five prime ministers from 2011 to 2013, as well as regular cabinet reshuffles, showed desperation. This gave the impression that the changing situation of the country appeared to engulf the state, and that the national identity of Jordan had been insufficiently responsive, because King Abdullah had been slow to recognise the demands for reforms. This suggests that for Jordan to achieve a vision of inclusivity and participation for its people, the King needs to carry out the reforms promised, and raise the national identity of the country.

The new electoral law introduced in Jordan was generally opposed by the general public, who demanded political representation that was not biased, and commentators suggested that a regime change could be demanded by Jordanians due to the law introduced in April 2012 that formed the basis of parliamentary elections, which did not meet the expectations of democracy. Therefore, national identity in Jordan needs to include those from the East Bank and Palestinians, and greater open political representation (Curtis 2012a).

However, although the regime change resulted from public dissatisfaction in other countries in the region, this failed to develop into unrest that was widespread across the Jordan. There have been a few large, responsive demonstrations, and events of protests that have been mostly organised and scheduled. These protests have been noted less for their spirit of revolution, but mostly for their nature of organisation, which contrasts to events of public space being occupied on a sustained basis in other countries (Tobin 2013).

After a few weeks, the removal of fuel subsidy protests gradually stopped and the nature of revolutionary demands and protests became more subdued, tribal traditions became less dominant and the monarchy was questioned less, so that the creation of a clear national identity in Jordan has slowly advanced. In terms of the effects of the Arab Spring, Jordan appears to be relatively stable and strong due to gradual change that has evolved and an approach to political change that has been cautious. The national identity of Jordan is based on the traditions of native tribes, changes slowly and demonstrates relative stability, so that the Jordanian political environment is not likely to be influenced by beliefs in revolutionary causes.

Current Jordanian Politics: The Issue of Identity

In the recent years, there has clearly been a dramatic increase of the tensions in Jordan in terms of ethnic identity due to regional tensions that

expose significant vulnerability for the country, such as concerns about the civil war that faces Syria on the northern border that could result in this country's collapse, including Syrian refugees fleeing to Jordan, the effects of refugees from Iraq fleeing this country since the war in 2003, discussions by Israeli politicians to provide a home for more Palestinians in Jordan, and to identify Jordan as their homeland, as well as severe economic problems within the country.

These tensions have contributed to calls from tribal groups to ensure Jordan is protected for ethnic Jordanians, so that the developing economic success of Palestinians and their increased involvement in government departments have been the basis for criticisms of the King and the government for selling out the country to the political and economic elite. Areas that have demonstrated the greatest concerns are focused within the tribes of Jordan, and in cities and towns in the southeast of the country. Two scenarios currently face Jordan, and the first relates to the war in Syria that has extended beyond its border and into Iraq, where ethnic and tribal divisions have been harmed in the north of Iraq. The second scenario could be to appease the tribal concerns about those living in the East Bank and to listen to dissent in the country that is legitimate, to demonstrate a greater willingness for reform of the political system, and to respond to demands for change by cautious measures. The King has advisers that are experienced and knowledgeable to predict future dangers and provide guidance, although the King also shows effective skills and adaptive responses when dealing with calls for change and when responding to criticisms.

Retired military officers have formed a political party that has criticised the King, and this condemnation has also been supported by some tribal leaders, but these tensions often lead to media reports of the political situation in Jordan that are pessimistic. However, these negative interpretations often confuse the opinions of most Jordanians with the opposing views of East Jordanian politicians and Palestinian politicians.

East Jordanian and Palestinian politicians often misrepresent the ethnic values and concerns of the opposing group, but Jordan is a country that is diverse in its culture, as rather than an image of wealthy Palestinians that lack loyalty and tribal leaders that lack trust in the motives of Palestinians living in the country, Jordan is represented as a Muslim country that has a significant minority of Christians, and an Arab country with a Circassian minority that is significant.

Political commentators tend to present Jordan negatively as a country that faces serious social, political and cultural issues, but they often fail to portray the country as cohesive, socially integrated and complex, which is a more realistic description. Many Jordanians do not have tribal backgrounds, although some do, and despite calls by some activists to ensure Jordan remains an exclusive country for Jordanians, most citizens of the country have family ties based in neighbouring countries in the region. Therefore, any analysis of the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of Jordanians cannot be represented as black and white contrasts, and some analyses reveal weaknesses when suggesting the

culture of people is only based on the dissatisfaction of tribal leaders and wealthy Palestinians that lack loyalty. The scenario for Jordan suggests that although political identity within the country is undergoing changes, there is a positive and encouraging long-term projection, so that media banners that often lack objective opinions and facts that are not confirmed need to be treated cautiously.

Conflicts in Jordan within the political scenario tend to be based in the division of poor and wealthy groups, which represent those that are disadvantaged and those that are advantaged that affect different ethnic groups, rather than conflicts defined in terms of identity, tribe or ethnicity in the country. However, these tensions have become worse as a result of the civil war currently taking place in Syria, as the stability and security of Jordan have become the main focus for the King and government, so that the reform movement has become weaker.

Some political groups that had supported reform and a coalition that included Islamists in Jordanian politics are now concerned about Islamist dominance as a result of the Arab spring, and some suggest that there are conspiracy theories involving Islamists, America and Israel. However, for more than one year, various demonstrators have marched every Friday to demand reform and to protest against corruption, which are represented by non-partisan youth movements, Islamist parties, nationalist parties and leftist parties that seek greater democracy. These groups appear to cross many different ideological and ethnic groups. Clearly, the reform movement in Jordan has been motivated by the Arab Spring and uprisings in other countries in the region, so that revised electoral laws and constitution have been discussed by the government (Curtis 2012b).

Conclusion

This analysis of the impact on Jordan from the Arab Spring demonstrations has shown that there has been a significant influence on regional politics. However, the impact on those countries in the Mediterranean basin influenced by this are likely to demonstrate societies and cultures that are more dynamic, and a better future for forthcoming generations of people in the area, but compared to periods prior to the Arab Spring, these countries are now less stable.

Therefore, Jordan and other countries in this region will increasingly need to recognise the political importance of identity politics due to 21st century aspirations, political empowerment and social activism for people in these countries. The population of Jordan is mostly made up of young people, and the monarchy accepts that the definition of its role is likely to change, so that politics in the country will change rapidly, and this country is also an important influence in the Mediterranean region and beyond this.

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