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To cite this article: Sean L. Yom (2015) The New Landscape of Jordanian Politics: Social Opposition, Fiscal Crisis, and the Arab Spring, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 42:3, 284-300, DOI: [10.1080/13530194.2014.932271](https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2014.932271)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2014.932271>



Published online: 10 Jul 2014.



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The New Landscape of Jordanian Politics: Social Opposition, Fiscal Crisis, and the Arab Spring

SEAN L. YOM*

ABSTRACT *The absence of regime change in Jordan during the Arab Spring obscured two critical trends transforming political order in this authoritarian kingdom. First, new opposition forces demanding democratic reform mobilized, within not only the youth population but also East Bank tribal communities long assumed to be citadels of loyalty. Second, worsening fiscal dysfunction and budgetary pressure have amplified the state's institutional weakness, and precluded the possibility that increased foreign aid could buy off dissent. Such possibilities require a serious reassessment about the foundations of stability in this kingdom. This double bind presents a nascent opportunity with profound ramifications: in the near future, the Hashemite monarchy may be forced to initiate credible political reform, because even a diminished autocracy is superior to a collapsing regime mired in mass insurrection.*

During 2011–12, one of the most popular debates amongst the Jordanian public concerned a topic that few had dared openly broach since the 1970 Black September civil war. Political salons, coffee houses, and diplomats buzzed with the question of whether King Abdullah, who had assumed power in 1999, should abdicate due to his unpopularity, and surrender the throne to his half-brother and former Crown Prince, Hamzah, or else his son and current Crown Prince, Hussein. Against the backdrop of the Arab Spring, this was the worst possible omen: an autocratic incumbent expected to reign for life was already cast as a political failure in language that, just a few years prior, would have elicited harsh repression.

Herein lays the precarious perch of the Hashemite monarchy, which has long been described by many political scientists as a durable authoritarian regime. While the absence of this regime's collapse led many scholars to conclude that the kingdom remains safe from instability, the protests and unrest that unfolded during the Arab Spring exposed two historically unprecedented trends regarding the social coalition supporting authoritarian rule as well as the regime's own institutional capacity to engage public grievances. These factors demand that the requirements for political regime stability be critically reassessed, and old assumptions about Jordanian society revised.

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Nearly 8000 protests, marches, and strikes calling for political reforms transpired across Jordan between January 2011 and August 2013.¹ Whereas most Western observers focused on established opposition like the Muslim Brotherhood, new sectors of opposition emerged through grass-roots tribal movements and youth activist networks. They revealed discord within East Bank communities long assumed to be bastions of loyalty, as well as rising political mobilization by Jordanian youths. Both traditional and new opposition forces converged upon three reforms as steps towards constitutional monarchy: limits on the king's autocratic powers, a fairer electoral system, and less corruption. The regime responded with half-hearted liberalizing measures designed to preserve its supremacy while foreclosing systemic change. In response, new opposition activists shattered the glass ceiling that historically protected the monarchy from radical discourse, attacking the legitimacy of King Abdullah and inaugurating a discourse of abdication.

As new types of opposition mobilize from below, fiscal dysfunction hobbles the Jordanian state from above. For much of its post-colonial development, the Hashemite monarchy redistributed foreign aid as rent to its East Bank social base, in particular public-sector employment and welfare programs aimed at tribal constituencies. During hard times, it simply expanded this practice. In the modern era, this dependent political economy is no longer sustainable. More government hiring means a generational obligation to cover unsustainable salaries and pensions, while blanket welfare benefits create unrealistic social expectations for artificially low living costs. Moreover, because the regime has exhausted its institutional capacity to extract more domestic revenues, and since foreign debt burdens and chronic budget deficits guarantee periodic fiscal crises, the inevitable withdrawal of new economic protections to deflect political unrest will create more social conflict in the future. Indeed, from the April 1989 riots to the November 2012 *habba*, the most spontaneous acts of violent protest in public life have stemmed from the state's sudden retraction of long-promised protections like subsidies.²

Based upon a combination of fieldwork and historical analysis, this essay explores the origins and implications of new social opposition and ongoing fiscal crisis, including the diminished degree of regime security that the Hashemite monarchy enjoys under King Abdullah. It argues that opposition is easier to ameliorate through credible political reform rather than correcting fiscal dysfunctions to distribute more economic benefits, because those dysfunctions are historically rooted in the institutional fabric of the Jordanian state. It also contends that while new socio-political opposition and economic pressures have not wrought revolutionary explosions in Jordan, such a dramatic benchmark misses the point. Specialists of Jordanian politics have long described its monarchical regime as sitting forever 'on the brink' of crisis, because it has always faced opposition and never enjoyed economic stability.³ However, what made the

¹ Author's count based upon Jordanian government documents, European observatories, and independent research.

² The Jordanian press uses *habba* to refer to this uprising, rather than the more conventional Arabic term *intifada*, due to the latter's association with the two Palestinian Intifadas.

³ Marc Lynch, *Jordan: Forever on the Brink* (Washington, DC: POMEPS, 2012). For older examples of such framing, see Sami Mutawi, *Jordan and the 1967 War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), Asher Susser, *Jordan: Case Study of a Pivotal State* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), and Curtis Ryan, *Jordan in Transition: From Hussein to Abdullah* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

Arab Spring in Jordan so unprecedented lay in showing how the *sources* of opposition had changed in unforeseen ways, while the *depth* of fiscal imbalance had broached record levels. While more evolutionary than revolutionary, such significant shifts push instability, uncertainty, and political change far closer to the realm of possibility than predicted by existing literature.

To that end, this essay proceeds in five parts: first, a review of Jordanian authoritarianism and policymaking, including failed reform efforts to date; second, discussion of the new *ḥirāk* tribal opposition movement, and the social trends it signified; third, insights from the burgeoning politicization of the large youth population; fourth, analysis of Jordan's fiscal weakness and institutional lethargy, including why increased foreign aid undermines stability; and finally, a conclusion outlining the increasing vulnerability of the monarchy.

The Jordanian 'Deep State'

Jordan's repute as the Arab world's kingdom of 'moderation' rather than a stubborn autocracy stems from two factors. The first is the regional neighbourhood. Jordan appears far more liberalized and tolerant than neighbouring Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, which over the past decade have ranked among the worst human rights violators in the region by global indices like Freedom House. Furthermore, after martial law ended in 1989, Jordanian civil society gave rise to thousands of new NGO's and advocacy groups, creating a vibrant opposition landscape already punctuated by professional syndicates, trade unions, and the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴ The second reason is King Abdullah's progressive credentials. After his 1999 ascent, admirers lauded the Western-educated monarch as a model leader in the Arab world.⁵ In economic terms, the new king pushed through neoliberal initiatives like privatization and free trade. His reign also touted transparency and democratization as long-term reform goals. A now-notorious March 2013 interview reinforced this narrative, as Abdullah insisted that Jordan's needed to become a constitutional monarchy, but that everyone else—the Muslim Brotherhood, tribal sheikhs, even his own family—seemed intent on obstructing him.⁶

These smokescreens cloak an irreducible fact. Jordan is a moderate autocracy, but it is an *autocracy* nonetheless, one where ordinary citizens have little political right to select their decision-makers or influence national policies. The myth of a reformist yet powerless king embattled by political enemies obscures the Jordanian 'deep state'—the institutional apparatus that, much like the Egyptian equivalent, constitutes the seat of regime power even if not always visible through public institutions.⁷ In Jordan, policymaking starts from the monarchical establishment and the General Intelligence Directorate (GID). The king wields the most individual power. While he appoints a Prime Minister and cabinet to execute policies as the 'government,' in reality the palace bureaucracy, including close advisers like the Chief of the Royal Hashemite Court and Director of the

⁴ Mustafa Hamarneh, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: Jordan's Case* (Cairo: Ibn Khaldoun Center, 1995).

⁵ See, for instance, Lee Smith, 'The Arab World's Can-Do Guy', *Slate*, 7 May 2004.

⁶ Jeffrey Goldberg, 'Monarch in the Middle', *The Atlantic*, 18 March 2013.

⁷ I am indebted to Bassam al-Badaarin for suggesting the use of this term. See further 'Risāla lil-dawla al-'amīqah fil-urdun', *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, 15 July 2013.

King's Office, exercises predominant influence. The Prime Minister is the public face of government but has the least authority. For instance, he lacks a Defence Ministry to control the military, which instead answers directly to the king. The premier instead serves as the fall-guy during crises, as the king often sacks cabinets as a show of policy change or in response to opposition resentment—something Abdullah did five times during 2011–12. Even more visible but least influential of all is the parliament, whose lower house is popularly elected. Lacking basic legislative capabilities, such as the ability to propose bills and prepare the national budget, its purpose is to ratify decisions already made from above.

At the king's command is the GID. With its budget off-the-books and personnel immune to prosecution, the GID serves as the throne's guardian. Whereas the military takes control during mass unrest, during ordinary times the GID deploys far-reaching powers of surveillance, investigation, and arrest to squash all perceived threats. In 2011–12, these included financing 'loyalist' rallies to counter opposition protests, bribing local journalists to write stories praising the regime, infiltrating new youth activist movements, spreading anti-Islamist rumours in loyal tribal communities, and paying parliamentarians to denounce opposition. Though it no longer openly tortures dissidents, the GID also continues to silence journalists and activists through subtler means, such as referrals to the notorious State Security Courts.

Why does this autocratic infrastructure warrant mention? Studies of the Jordanian 'regime' fundamentally mean palace-GID duopoly, rather than cabinet, parliament, and other institutional bodies usually associated with governance. This decision-making circle has singularly aligned Jordanian foreign policy with Anglo-American interests. The monarchy and GID assented to the 1994 peace treaty with Israel and incorporated Jordan into America's transnational renditions network during its pursuit of global terrorism. They also permit allied Western militaries to operate within its territory when circumstances of neighbouring conflict arise, from the build-up to the 2003 Iraqi invasion to the current stationing of over a thousand British and American troops near the Syrian border. And, likewise, it is this decision-making apparatus that must consent to political reform.

In this context, an extraordinary development occurred in June 2011, when King Abdullah shocked both the Jordanian public and Western audiences by promising a transition to constitutional monarchism in a national address, as well as sweeping anti-corruption measures. Hypothetically, a gradual shift towards constitutional monarchy would entail several steps. The first would carefully allocate governing power from the palace to parliament, such as the imperative to form governing cabinets, propose new laws, and introduce budgets. This requires the second step of revising a flawed electoral system to enhance popular representation. Current laws gerrymander districts such that sparsely populated tribal areas wield far more voting weight than dense Palestinian areas, as in Amman, which has left the kingdom's Palestinian majority with no more than 10–20 per cent of all seats.⁸ The use of the obscure single non-transferable voting method also weakens potential opposition by discouraging political party development: by giving each citizen only a single vote in multi-candidate districts,

⁸ Identity Center, *Tawaqq'at al-muwātinīn al-urdunīyyīn min majlis al-nuwāb al-sābī' 'ashar* (Amman, Jordan: 2013), pp. 17–24.

SNTV allows wealthy businessmen, tribal leaders, and conservative independents (often backed by the GID) to buy individual votes well in advance with bribes and promises.⁹ The third step entails reducing the bureaucratic reach of the palace by enhancing civilian government oversight, such as creating a Ministry of Defence to give the Prime Minister control over the military. The last is to transform the GID from an unspoken political force to its stated role as a domestic intelligence service—i.e. combating terrorism, organized crime, and foreign espionage. The resulting constitutional monarchist system need not mirror the British or Swedish model to the hilt, but would still cherish the kingship's symbolic authority as a way to stabilize the political arena regardless of the government in power.

Yet several years since that June 2011 speech, the regime's actions have left it bereft of any credibility. Constitutional amendments in 2011 created a Constitutional Court and an independent electoral commission to reduce voter fraud, but it also left untouched most royal prerogatives to dictate policy from above.¹⁰ The GID still operates without legal check, rebuffing inquiry from even cabinet ministers for information. Electoral law revisions were calibrated to please international monitors while perpetuating the gerrymandered status quo. The January 2013 elections were *procedurally* clean but parliamentary representation as a whole remains *systemically* flawed.¹¹ Despite the concession of a new 27-seat national list for party candidates, SNTV and malapportioned districting for the rest of the 150-member body ensured a parliament that appeared much like previous versions. It is filled with conservative independent elites bickering over patronage spoils (and often with firearms, providing easy fodder for public ridicule) rather than drafting legislation, questioning the government, or setting policy initiatives.¹²

Finally, anti-corruption measures were inconsistent. Prosecutors targeted notorious elites accused of fraudulently benefiting from privatization deals, such as businessman Khalid Shaheen, Akram Abu Hamdan, former head of state-owned Mawared investment firm, and even former GID director Mohammad Dahabi, who had fallen out of favour with the king. However, such infrequent prosecutions were the exception rather than norm. Ninety per cent of the public believes financial and administrative corruption to be systemic, such that gross misconduct operates at both the elite and mundane levels of governance, where bribery, graft, and kickbacks lubricate relations between bureaucrats and businessmen, ministers and investors, the GID and parliamentarians.¹³ A comprehensive dragnet would implicate an embarrassing legion of officials, some connected quite closely to the palace.

The failure of an entrenched autocratic regime to follow through with 'reform' promises was not surprising. By definition, authoritarianism is a political system that coercively enshrines vast inequality of power and resources between rulers and the ruled.¹⁴ On balance, rulers have little desire to commit political

⁹ Ellen Lust, Sami Hourani, and Mohammad Al-Momani, 'Jordan Votes: Election or Selection?', *Journal of Democracy*, 22(2) (2011), pp. 119–129.

¹⁰ Sean Yom, 'Jordan: The Ruse of Reform', *Journal of Democracy* 24 (2013), pp. 127–139.

¹¹ André Bank and Anna Sunik, 'Parliamentary Elections in Jordan, January 2013', *Electoral Studies* 30 (2013), pp. 1–4.

¹² Physical brawls between deputies are not uncommon. Jihaad Al-Mansi, 'Al-nuwāb yaḥḥil al-sharīf wa-yajmud 'ādawīyyah al-dmaysi', *Al-Ghad*, 10 September 2013.

¹³ 'Istiqlāl al-dirāsāt al-istrātijīyyah bil-jāmi' al-urduniyyah', *Al-Dustour*, 8 July 2013.

¹⁴ Amos Perlmutter, *Modern Authoritarianism: A Comparative Institutional Analysis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 24.

suicide by entertaining the demands of opposition; better to weather dissent than agree to the surrender of their long-term monopoly over politics. They grudgingly consent to a more democratic arrangement *only* if the alternative appears to be worse, such as the total destruction of their office or families.¹⁵ In Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, Presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak did not concede power until sustained uprisings, political defections, and military pressure made it clear that further refusal would result in large-scale destruction and even their personal demise. Inversely, when autocratic leaders perceive that they can crush opposition and outlast a crisis with their supremacy intact, they will seldom leave without a fight. Qaddafi's reticence resulting in the Libyan civil war is one example; the Assad regime's ongoing defiance in Syria is another.

Luckily, such blood-stained cases are rare. The comparative record of democratic transitions shows that most dictators leave office not in coffins, with their security forces having run out of bullets mowing down the populace, but rather through strategic bargains that provide a peaceful exit strategy, which is preferable to their own annihilation.¹⁶ The dilemma lays in the fact that in Jordan, the decision-makers with the most to lose still have the robust will and capacity to resist due to two assumptions—that social loyalties are permanent, and external aid can finance their policies indefinitely. Both suppositions have become highly questionable over the past several years, producing a heightened uncertainty that may enable the decision-making circle to begin believing that maintaining the status quo is worse off for everyone (including themselves) than consenting to their constitutional diminishment.

Ḥirāk Opposition

After the 'Jordanian Spring' commenced with peaceful protests in January 2011, many observers dismissed the possibility of regime breakdown. Existing opposition forces, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, old leftist parties, professional syndicates, and other civil society organizations, did mobilize thousands of weekly demonstrations in Amman.¹⁷ However, such protests were elite-oriented, in that they were driven by organizational leaders rather than everyday citizens. Further, they were not spontaneous. Islamists obeyed implicit rules of protest by announcing precise marching routes, keeping crowds nonviolent, and dispersing peacefully. They did not personally target King Abdullah or call for the regime's downfall. As it had long been accustomed to such self-contained protests, the regime tolerated these events with virtually no repression. Given more explosive events in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria, Western analysts saw Jordan as a case of 'anti-revolution,' and prevailing assessments deemed established opposition in Amman as posing no threat to regime security.¹⁸

¹⁵ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, Alastair Smith, Randolph Siverson, and James Morrow, *The Logic of Political Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

¹⁷ International Crisis Group, *Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East: Dallying with Reform in a Divided Jordan* (Brussels: ICG, 2012); and Jordan Reform Watch, *Al-islāh fit-urdun: 2012* (Amman, Jordan: Identity Center, 2013).

¹⁸ Sarah Tobin, 'Jordan's Arab Spring: The Middle-Class and Anti-Revolution', *Middle East Policy* 19 (2012), pp. 96–109.

These assessments were only half-correct. The Brotherhood and other conventional opposition indeed were no mutinous vanguard intent on storming the palace, but they also are no longer the most accurate bellwethers of public opinion. Two newer opposition trends emerged starting in 2011 embodying popular and more unpredictable vectors of political change—the grass-roots *ḥirāk* movement in tribal communities outside the capital, and the explosion of youth mobilization everywhere else.

Above all, it is critical to note that Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's revolutionary capacity has been exaggerated. Historically, the organization has been shaped as much by local politics than transnational fundamentalist ideas. The Jordanian Brotherhood arose in the 1950s as a staunch defender of monarchical order, and likewise adopted the same stance during the 1970 Black September civil war. While the organization became far more contentious during the political liberalization of the 1990s, it has also exercised considerable constraint. Its hardline wings regularly attack specific policies and cabinet governments. However, unlike in Egypt, legal political inclusion has moderated the Brotherhood's ideology, such that it never fronts itself as an alternative to monarchical rule.¹⁹ That the Hashemite dynasty claims genealogical descent from the Prophet has also shadowed their claims of religious authority.

Further, though its leadership comprises both East Bankers and Palestinians, the Brotherhood's support base of middle-class Palestinian professionals means that the movement has spent as much energy on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as domestic politics.²⁰ Moreover, the Jordanian Brotherhood suffers the same weakness the Egyptian Brotherhood developed during President Morsi's tenure: the cost of openly operating in the political arena is exposing its organizational infrastructure to all. Much as the Egyptian military instantly discovered which leaders and cadres it needed to arrest after Morsi's deposal, the Jordanian Brotherhood has relatively few secrets it could hide from a restive public or police. The regional context, too, militates against Islamist activism in Jordan. The July 2013 Egyptian coup was especially demoralizing. King Abdullah visited Cairo on July 20 to express support for Morsi's toppling, and afterwards officials in Amman began calling the Brotherhood a 'seditious' threat that should be dissolved if it threatened national unity.²¹

To understand the new landscape of opposition, consider the kingdom's paradoxical political geography. While Palestinian-dominated Amman with its nearly three million residents serves as the economic centre, it resides on the political periphery. Its bustling streets have long produced not only middle-class commerce but also open dissent, from the Arab Nationalist parties of the 1950s and the Palestinian commando groups of the 1970 Black September civil war to the Muslim Brotherhood today. For that reason, the regime has learned to expect regular protests in the capital—but accept them so long as they remain peaceful. Further, Amman's Palestinian residents had already faced mass political exclusion for decades thanks to the xenophobic strain of East Bank nationalism practiced by

¹⁹ For more on how political inclusion moderates behavior and ideology among Islamists, see Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁰ Janine Clark, *Islam, Charity, and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 84–91.

²¹ Mohammad Al-Da'ama, 'Mas'ul urduni: Imti'adh fil-jaw al-siyāsi bil-bilād min tasarrufāt qiyādat al-ikhwān', *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, 30 July 2013.

many officials, which frames Palestinians as alien to Jordanian society despite that most are citizens.

The Hashemite regime's historical base of support instead lies in the East Bank tribal communities located in rural governorates, a collective demographic that represents less than a fifth of the populace.²² East Bank tribal loyalty to the crown has been built on material relations since the 1920s and 1930s, when British officers and the nascent monarchy began mobilizing local tribal support through the strategic distribution of patronage like land, agrarian subsidies, and social services.²³ By the 1960s, economic protection and enrichment of these communities had virtually eliminated the indigenous tribal economy of pastoral herding and small-scale farming. Most East Bank tribes came to depend upon public-sector jobs, bureaucratic appointments, police and military recruitment, and development services like subsidized housing—costly interventions in the economy that required the constant influx of foreign economic aid.²⁴ At the elite level, the palace and GID retained the support of tribal sheikhs via patronage like cash payments, political positions, and royal visits. In sum, East Bank Jordanians have provided the manpower for authoritarian rule, with most scholarly observers framing them as the regime's 'bedrock.'

However, this bedrock has begun tectonically shifting away. During 2011–12, grass-roots tribal opposition mobilized in the form of the *ḥirāk*, which shredded stereotypes of tribal East Bank communities being unified citadels of unconditional loyalty. Appropriately meaning 'movement' in Arabic, the *ḥirāk* trend at its height encompassed over 40 protest groups anchored in rural towns and tribal areas across the kingdom. They organized thousands of small but raucous demonstrations. Cynical observers saw this opposition as old wine in new bottles: after all, unrest had spread among tribal communities before, as in the fuel riots of April 1989. However, whereas those episodes were driven primarily by economic grievances, *ḥirāk* protesters uniquely prioritized political concerns. These were not indigent tribesmen trying to extort jobs and other payoffs in return for quietism; the average *ḥirāk* member was an East Bank Jordanian male from his early 20s to late 30s, who was both employed and overeducated relative to the local mean.²⁵ Instead, they explicated an agenda to curtail the king's powers, revise the electoral law, and eliminate corruption—reforms that echoed from the Brotherhood and other urban opposition, but which coming from tribal voices in the countryside jarred many officials.²⁶ Whereas the regime could shrug off protests from Islamist outsiders, it could not ignore dissension from East Bank insiders.

The *ḥirāk* movement protested as much against their own conservative elders as the regime. By framing themselves as a secular movement desiring political rights rather than material patronage, they distinguished themselves from previous

²² By East Bank, I am referring to the mostly Muslim descendants of the nomadic Bedouin, semi-nomadic confederations, and settled peasantry found in the area upon the kingdom's imperial birth in 1921.

²³ For the colonial process of incorporating tribes into the Jordanian state, see Yoav Alon, *The Making of Jordan: Tribes, Colonialism, and the Modern State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), and Tariq Tell, *The Social and Economic Origins of Monarchy in Jordan* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

²⁴ Paul Jureidini and R.D. McLaurin, *The Impact of Social Change on the Role of the Tribes* (New York: Praeger, 1984).

²⁵ Muhammad Bani Salaameh, *Al-tawajjahāt al-siyāsiyyah li-nāshiqī al-ḥirāk al-shabābi fil-rdun fil-zill al-rabī' al-'arabī'* (Amman: Markaz al-badīl lil-dirāsāt wal-abhāth, 2013), pp. 30–37.

²⁶ These descriptions were based upon previous research into tribal opposition. See further Sean L. Yom, 'Tribal Politics in Modern Jordan: The Case of the Hiraq Movement', *Middle East Journal* 68 (2014), pp. 229–247.

waves of East Bank tribal dissent focusing on economic grievances. For instance, since the early 2000s, many tribal sheikhs had criticized King Abdullah's campaign for neoliberal economic modernization. Among their complaints was the diminished flow of government spending on rural areas, the inability of the public-sector to absorb more tribal labour, and the disruption of unspoken privileges, such as filling senior military posts based upon tribal affiliation.²⁷ However, these older critics could be appeased through financial means. For instance, the National Committee of the Retired Military Veterans Association representing 150,000 mostly tribal East Bankers spent much of 2011–12 calling for *'ḥuqūq wa-laysa makārim'* (rights, not payoffs). Yet as many ḥirāk activists pointed out, when these dissenters received a payoff—a large pension increase in March 2012—their protests ceased.²⁸

This new wave of tribal opposition diverged from political tradition in other ways. The debate over SNTV exposed one such fissure. No matter their other quarrels, tribal sheikhs had long sided with the regime in keeping the SNTV balloting system. They saw parliament as a mechanism to secure more personal power and patronage, and often manipulated local elections by organizing informal primaries to help trusted deputies win office and thus ultimately reinforce their hierarchical authority. However, in the late 2000s this practice began stymieing the ambitions of younger tribal Jordanians, such as lawyers and academics, who wished to campaign on substantive issues like corruption, privatization, and foreign policy rather than follow the dictates of their elders.²⁹ Those professionals lent their weight to ḥirāk groups, which partly due to the retention of SNTV boycotted the January 2013 elections.

At the same time, ḥirāk protests differed from those held by the Brotherhood, not least because they were largely secular. Their events were more spontaneous, ranging from street protests and strategic sit-ins to people's courts, mock parliaments, and the *dabke*, a traditional festive dance relyricized to insult the king. Indeed, of all protesters they were most radical in violating unspoken redlines of dissent. They openly attacked and insulted a Hashemite king in a manner not seen since the 1960s. Protesters shouted slogans that compared Abdullah to deposed autocrats Ben Ali, Mubarak, and Qaddafi, and as early as July 2011 began using the ominous chant heard elsewhere in the Arab Spring of *'al-sha'b yurīd isqāṭ al-niẓām,'* or 'The people want the downfall of the regime.' They mocked his perceived weaknesses, such as his poor Arabic skills, and threatened to deface his likeness on billboards and posters—a major reason why public celebrations of the king's birthday in January 2012 were muted. Finally, they led the way in debates about royal abdication and Hashemite succession. Such behaviour signals undeniable change within the social base underpinning the regime.

Ḥirāk mobilization faded during 2013, as the movement fell under siege by an armada of repressive initiatives. The efforts expended by the regime to extinguish this diffuse protest network indicate how threatening it appeared to officials long accustomed to the more moderate politics of urban opposition. During the

²⁷ Anne Marie Baylouny, 'Militarizing Welfare: Neo-liberalism and Jordanian Policy', *Middle East Journal* 62 (2008), pp. 277–303.

²⁸ Muhammad Al-Fadhilaat, 'Al-urdun: mamlakat al-makārim fii-zamān al-ḥuqūq', *Al-safir Al-Rabi*, 9 January 2013.

²⁹ Interview with Myassar Al-Sardiyyah (Member of Parliament), Amman, Jordan, 14 June 2012.

Jordanian Spring, virtually no Islamist-led demonstration instigated violent responses by security forces, and few urban protesters were detained or arrested. By contrast, the regime sought to smash *ḥirāk* groups through sweeping dragnets and coercive assaults. Starting in late 2011, the police and GID began arresting hundreds of tribal protesters; while detained, they were especially targeted for physical abuse due to their perceived disloyalty as fellow East Bank tribesmen. It was not unusual to find members of the same family in both *ḥirāk* protest crowds and the security forces cracking down on them.

Such clampdowns were costly, however, by bringing unwanted attention onto the *ḥirāk* movement. They alienated even more East Bankers, who were offended by such communal intrusions.³⁰ On the Jordanian blogosphere, numerous tribal observers criticized police and GID abuses, even comparing them to tribal betrayals.³¹ They also exposed the extent to which tribal dissent had spread within East Bank tribal communities, for some of those arrested included relatives of high-ranking officials. Perhaps the most notorious incident occurred in April 2013, when police detained the first cousin of General Mash'al al-Zabin, the Joint Chief of Staff for the Jordanian Armed Forces and one of the king's closest sentinels—an event that mainstream news media ignored due to fear of censorship.

The Youth Dynamic

The *ḥirāk* trend touches on a second, and broader, dynamic of change within Jordanian society: new political activism resulting from generational change. Among the two-thirds of Jordan's population that is aged 30 years or less, political mobilization rose sharply during the Arab Spring for several reasons. The first is the declining prospect for youth employment. The economy does not generate enough jobs for the 60,000 new entrants to the national labour force annually, and real unemployment is double the official rate of 14 per cent. The majority of Jordanians in their 20s have long been jobless, trapped between a weak private sector that prefers cheaper foreign workers like Egyptians and Syrians, and a bloated public-sector that has too few openings for bureaucracies already suffering from redundant operations. The growth of tertiary education, too, has played a role. Even in rural areas, spreading access to university education since the 1990s has gradually liberalized youth attitudes. To be sure, the expansion of the university system has had serious trade-offs: lowered admission standards have turned most schools into credential factories, as well as contributed to increased campus violence.³² Still, they have also exposed a greater share of Jordanians to far more progressive ideas than their parents experienced. A final reason is political disenchantment. Much as in pre-revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt, many Jordanian youths felt as though they did not matter in the policymaking process. They saw the 2012 royal rejection of a popular proposal to lower the eligibility age for parliament from 30 to 25 as a typical example of such disdain from the 'old guard.'³³

³⁰ Tamer Al-Samaadi, 'Urdun yuqallim 'aḥāfir al-ḥirāk wal-ikwān yatahāshun al-taḥīd', *Al-Hayat*, 22 October 2013.

³¹ 'Tadakhkhul lil-darak wa-faḍ masīrāt 'irbid bil-quwwa wa-wuqū' isābāt', *Khabarjo.net*, 12 April 2013.

³² Naseem Tarawneh, 'The Kids Are Not Alright', *Jordan Business* (June 2013), pp. 13–16.

³³ Interview with Amer Bani Amer (NGO director), Amman, Jordan, 19 June 2011.

In East Bank tribal communities, this youthful ferment helped catalyze the *ḥirāk*. In metropolitan Amman, however, it generated more informal and dispersed opposition networks like the March 24 Movement, Jayeen, and the 1952 Constitution Group. Like Islamists as well as their rural peers, these activists echoed a familiar triumvirate of reforms: limiting the monarchy's absolutist authority, revising the electoral law, and hammering down on corruption. However, whereas the *ḥirāk* did so by invoking the symbolic language of tribal politics, urban youth movements utilized a different vocabulary of protest. They lacked any overarching ideology, and though some were sympathetic to Islamist ideals rejected binding alliances with the Brotherhood. Neither did they wish to formalize as political parties, a logical step for many other opposition entrepreneurs. Many associated party politics with 'establishment' opposition, and prized their informality as a social movement that conveyed popular statements from the street to the palace.³⁴ Their events varied widely, ranging from formal protests to civic debates and even a mock youth parliament. They were also tech savvy, exploiting the blogosphere, social media like Facebook and Twitter, and online news sites like *Jo24.net* and *Khabarjo.net* to spread information, criticize the regime, and organize events. So effective was their avoidance of the semi-official media outlets that in June 2013, the government installed a new law that eliminated access to nearly 300 of the most popular websites, prompting further outcries from youth activists, university students, and journalists.

This youth trend has eroded the oldest and most contentious societal cleavage, the Palestinian-East Bank divide. For decades, the regime has exploited social tensions between the Palestinian majority and mostly tribal East Bank minority to prevent national opposition unity. For instance, the electoral system disenfranchised the former through biased voting and districting laws, while a xenophobic nationalism that celebrated the latter as 'authentic' Jordanians permeated the education system, political discourse, and hiring practices.³⁵ Such bias has also allowed police and security services, almost exclusively employing East Bankers, to frequently target Palestinians. For instance, since the 1988 disengagement from the West Bank, the Interior Ministry has arbitrarily revoked Jordanian citizenship from thousands of Palestinian-origin residents, most of who had resided in the kingdom for decades—a strategy designed to deter new demands for political voice amongst the Palestinian majority.³⁶

However, many new activists who emerged during 2011–12 believed that common needs for political change could overcome the demographic divide. Palestinian and East Bank youths worked in unison in urban movements, and ensconced their politics in broad principles of dignity rather than the localized language of identity politics.³⁷ Even *ḥirāk* youths ostensibly representing East Bank tribes exhibited the fading legacy of communal tensions. Older tribal criticism against the regime had been cloaked in anti-Palestinian rhetoric for years; in the late 2000s, for instance, many sheikhs blamed the king's Palestinian

³⁴ Interview with Labib Kamhawi (businessman and writer), Amman, Jordan, 25 July 2012.

³⁵ Adnan Abu-Odeh, *Jordanians, Palestinians, and the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999), pp. 237–252.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Stateless Again: Palestinian-Origin Jordanians Deprived of Their Nationality* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2010).

³⁷ Curtis Ryan, 'Identity Politics, Reform, and Protest in Jordan', *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 11 (2011), pp. 564–578.

wife, Queen Rania, and other Palestinian figures for spreading corruption across the kingdom. In contradistinction, ḥirāk activists avoided using anti-Palestinian language in their protests. After all, the decision-makers blocking reform—King Abdullah and the palace elite, alongside the GID—were not Palestinian at all, but the nucleus of a post-colonial state organized long ago as an East Bank enterprise.

The surge of youth activism caught regime officials by surprise. However, they gained a temporary respite in 2013. One reason was that much like with the ḥirāk, the GID made some inroads in demobilizing these networks through targeted arrests, political threats, and infiltration activities. Another was that the defining feature of the new opposition, informality and mobility, also made it difficult for many activist leaders to create a permanent organizational structure. However, the largest reason was that neighbouring Syria regressed into complete civil war, a reality hammered home by the entry of 750,000 Syrian refugees, the border presence of US troops, and new agreements to funnel CIA-financed arms shipments to the Syrian rebels through local territory. One activist explained this dampening effect in this climate of caution: ‘Everyone is nervous because of Syria. They are afraid that too much protest and tension will bring fighting in Jordan, too. We respect that. But we still want reform. And when the war in Syria is over, [the king] will not have any more excuses.’³⁸

Such a false sense of security propelled the popular argument that the Arab Spring bypassed Jordan. The lack of revolutionary turmoil, however, should not obscure irreversible shifts within state–society relations. Ḥirāk protest groups and urban youth movements claimed a unique space within the arena of opposition politics: they could neither be tainted by accusations of Islamic radicalism nor divided by the politics of social identity. This new generation came of age by fighting for constitutional monarchy and demanding the king’s abdication, representing growing fragmentation within a social force often assumed to be monolithically supportive of state imperatives. Such politics do not fit within the existing patterns of opposition and protest activity considered by Jordanian specialists as moderate, predictable, and hence posing no threat.³⁹

Foreign Aid and Institutional Weakness

Western responses to such social unrest during the Jordanian Spring congregated around the singular strategy of increasing foreign aid. For instance, many American analysts militated against persuading the palace-GID duopoly from satisfying popular reform demands; instead, the United States would ‘save’ its king through massive economic payments to lift the ailing economy. This would allow the regime to buy off opposition by providing new job and welfare measures, in the same way that oil-rich Arab kingdoms like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait did during 2011–12 thanks to their hydrocarbon gifts.⁴⁰

In historical perspective, such a strategy reproduced Jordan’s longstanding reliance upon external financing. As Laurie Brand argued 20 years ago, this

³⁸ Confidential interview with ḥirāk activist, Amman, Jordan, 21 June 2013.

³⁹ For more on rituals and habits of legal opposition, see Jillian Schwedler, ‘The Political Geography of Protest in Neoliberal Jordan’, *Middle East Critique*, 21(3) (2012), 259–270.

⁴⁰ Robert Satloff and David Schenker, *Political Instability in Jordan: Contingency Planning Memorandum No. 19* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2013), and David Schenker, ‘Saving Jordan’s King Abdullah Must Be a US Priority’, *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 2013.

structural dependency implicates the fundamental security of the Hashemite regime: simply put, bankrupt kings can pay no soldiers.⁴¹ Since the 1950s, when Britain ceded its imperial role, the United States has provided economic assistance during crises like the 1957 coup attempt and 1970 Black September civil war.⁴² That conduit of economic support has reached unparalleled levels since the 1990s. Since King Abdullah's 1999 ascension and through 2013, the United States has provided well over \$9 billion in annualized economic and military aid. Saudi Arabia has occasionally given vast sums, such as a \$1.4 billion cash injection in 2011 when Jordan seemed ready to join the Gulf Cooperation Council, but such aid is tied to the exogenous factor of global oil prices; American support is thus more consistent, as it is contingent on Jordanian foreign policy's continuing pro-Western orientation. Moreover, while Jordan also receives several hundred million dollars of annual assistance from Britain, the European Union, Canada, and Japan, most US aid uniquely consists of fiscal grants, including direct cash injections into the Jordanian treasury, rather than soft loans or development assistance linked to specific projects.

After protests spread throughout Jordan in 2011–12, the United States raised its support such that Jordan would receive over \$1 billion in 2014, including renewed economic grants and military credits—its highest historical level since 2004. However, the logic of aid-as-stability is self-defeating for countries with embedded fiscal dysfunctions like Jordan, which spends too much but collects too little taxes. Excluding the oil-rich Arab kingdoms (which have virtually no income-based taxation system for citizens), Jordan exhibits one of the lowest rates of income taxation in the region, even well below bureaucratically swollen states like Egypt and Syria. Of the \$10.5 billion budget for 2013, the state only received \$5.3 billion in taxes—and of this amount, just \$1.1 billion, or less than 20 per cent of the revenue haul, came from individual and business income returns, with the rest flowing from general sales, property, and other universal taxes. Indeed, Jordan has one of the lowest income taxation rates in the *entire world*, barely ahead of Benin and Cambodia.

Why does Jordan struggle to collect domestic income? The answer links institutional structure with historical development. Taxation is a political act, and so extracting revenues from the most personal of all properties—income—requires either large-scale repression or else political bargaining with society.⁴³ However, the historical availability of foreign aid since the 1950s has meant that the monarchy never had to swallow the political cost of imposing steep taxes upon citizens as it built the modern Jordanian state in the post-colonial era. Instead, it utilized external monies to underwrite major expenditures, including public employment and welfare programs targeting the East Bank tribal base.⁴⁴ This has wrought two consequences. The first is inadequate tax laws. Currently, Jordanian citizens enjoy a minimum 50 per cent tax exemption on annual salaries up to

⁴¹ Laurie Brand, *Jordan's Inter-Arab Relations: The Political Economy of Alliance-Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

⁴² Stephen Kaplan, 'United States Aid and Regime Maintenance in Jordan, 1957–1973', *Public Policy* 23 (1975), pp. 189–217.

⁴³ Isaac Martin, Ajay Mehrotra, and Monica Prasad (eds.), *The New Fiscal Sociology: Taxation in Comparative and Historical Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴⁴ Anne Peters and Pete Moore, 'Beyond Boom and Bust: External Rents, Durable Authoritarianism, and Institutional Adaptation in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan', *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 44(3) (2009), pp. 256–285.

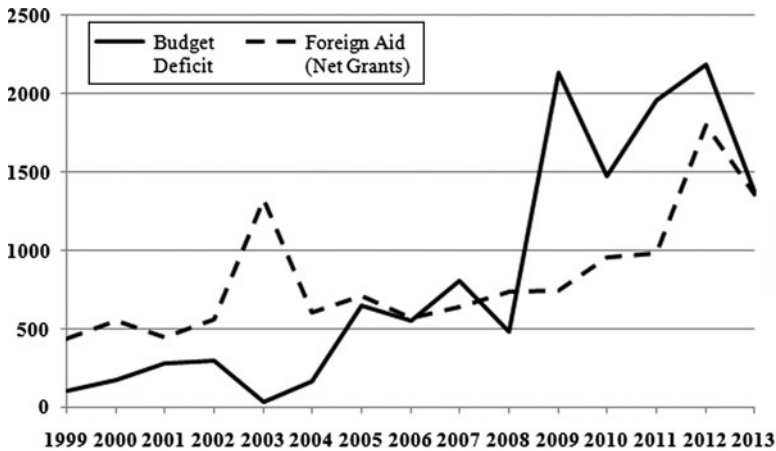


Figure 1. Jordan's Budget Deficit and Foreign Aid Compound, 1999–2013 (in Current US\$ Millions)

Source: Central Bank of Jordan; Department of Statistics; Ministry of Planning

12,000 Jordanian dinars, or roughly \$17,000—a high ceiling given the per capita GDP is barely \$5,000. The second is organizational weakness. Even if they wished to do so, today the Finance Ministry and other state agencies lack the physical resources—databases, accountants, skills—to pursue tax evasion among the majority that practices it, from businessmen and landowners to shopkeepers and cab drivers.

Most troublingly, even record-high levels of foreign aid have failed to close budget deficits, which have also reached unparalleled highs during King Abdullah's reign (Figure 1). In essence, external support has not reduced fiscal instability so much as encourage domestic overspending. In 2013, the deficit approached \$2 billion while total public and foreign debt hit \$25 billion, or nearly 75 per cent of GDP. That year, servicing interest on the debt principal alone consumed \$1.1 billion, or over 10 per cent of the budget. As a result, the sources of state borrowing have diversified in an unprecedented way. Because excessive loan withdrawals from local banks drove up interest rates, in 2010 Jordan entered the global bond market with a \$750 million issuance of Eurobonds, with plans to offer another \$2 billion of US-backed bonds on the international market. Whereas bilateral donors like the IMF control the terms of repayment when debtors stumble, sovereign bonds are beholden to market volatility. As a result, Jordan could lose money through its bond offering, given how currency exchange fluctuations and interest rate hikes often befall countries with low credit ratings.

Given these factors, replicating the old pattern of utilizing aid to reduce unemployment and living costs has reached the threshold of sustainability. Public-sector hiring in the immediate term creates unsustainable future costs because the regime already struggles to deal with existing commitments. Even after a decade of privatization, the government and armed forces still employ more than half the national labour force.⁴⁵ Of the \$10.5 billion budget for 2013, nearly \$5 billion

⁴⁵ United Nations Development Programme, *Jordan Human Development Report: Small Businesses and Human Development* (Amman: Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation, 2011), p. 10.

already underwrote existing public-sector salaries and the military payroll, with another \$1.4 billion reserved for civil pensions. Most of these employed are tribal East Bankers, and because their tenured income and benefits constituted the lifeline for many rural communities, mass layoffs due to budgetary deficits would be political suicide. Even small-scale firings are risky. For instance, the privatization of potash and phosphate factories since the mid 2000s left thousands jobless in the southern towns of Karak and Tafleeh. This caused such anger that government officials, including the King's own convoy in an infamous June 2011 visit, began receiving hostile receptions. Neither can salaries or pensions be reduced. In fact, the opposite happens, as the regime issues periodic across-the-board raises to maintain goodwill within its social foundations.

These political constraints mean that the true cost of increasing government employment—a few thousand policemen here, a few thousand civil servants there—should be measured in generations, not years. Even multilateral financial institutions have failed to change this situation. After the economy first crashed in 1989 under a mountain of debt, the World Bank and IMF attempted the standard structural adjustment program of shrinking the public sector in order to achieve fiscal balance. However, Jordan actually increased its civil and military payrolls while under international financial rescue, justifying that downsizing would create too much instability during a period of regional conflict and budding Israeli–Jordanian peace.⁴⁶ Moreover, state institutions are now saturated with surplus employees, such that in many cases there would not even be enough office spaces or training slots to accommodate new entrants. The military is staffed almost exclusively by East Bankers, and carries a reputation for absorbing tribal labour. In reality, across the armed forces, positions are scarce: 10,000 applicants vie for the less than 1000 spots that open annually due to retirements and discharges.⁴⁷

Neither could foreign aid improve the size or productivity of the private-sector economy in the short term. Though tribal Jordanians tend to work for the state and military, the majority of the labour force identified as Palestinian usually seeks private employment in urban centres like Amman, Irbid, and Zarqa. As in most developing countries, small and medium enterprises dominate the Jordanian economy; they count 432,000 workers, or a third of the labour force, on their payrolls.⁴⁸ However, a weak regulatory environment distorts the government incentives that would normally spur more hiring. Tax breaks to create more jobs would be ineffective because most businesses underreport income and less than half even pay taxes at all. Even direct payments to companies for increasing payrolls would fail, because many managers prefer to hire amongst the over 260,000 Egyptian, Asian, and other officially registered foreign workers.⁴⁹ They are cheaper, since the minimum monthly wage for foreigner is less than two-thirds the citizen rate of \$270. Unofficially, several hundred thousand more expatriates reside in the kingdom, thanks to lax immigration laws and the abundance of low-skilled positions.

⁴⁶ Jane Harrigan, Hamed al-Said and Chengang Wang, 'The IMF and the World Bank in Jordan: A Case of Overoptimism and Elusive Growth', *Review of International Organizations* 1 (2006), pp. 263–292.

⁴⁷ Interview with General Imad Saliba Maayah (retired military), Amman, Jordan, 16 June 2012.

⁴⁸ *Jordan Human Development Report*, 9.

⁴⁹ This is also why free-trade arrangements has not reduced joblessness: export-based industries either employ too few Jordanians (e.g. pharmaceuticals) or else hire foreign laborers, as in textiles.

Most of all, exogenous financial support could not guarantee subsidies for basic goods like food, fuel, and electricity, which would decrease the cost of living. Subsidies are periodic goods, in that they are installed during boom periods and withdrawn during busts. The latter has historically triggered social unrest. The IMF-backed retraction of fuel subsidies in April 1989 and bread subsidies in August 1996 caused rioting across southern tribal areas. During summer 2012, insufficient US and Saudi funds to compensate for spiking energy costs forced another IMF bailout of \$2.1 billion. The resulting subsidy cuts spurred the November *habba* riots, which spread farther than past riots. Disturbances hit not just East Bank communities but also Palestinian areas, among them the Baq‘a refugee camp and Amman. In the latter, the capital’s fleet of mostly Palestinian taxi drivers—the *jaysh ‘asfar*, or yellow army—besieged the home of Imad Fakhoury, Director of the King’s Office.

Such recoil reflects another legacy of Jordan’s historical development, the intensity of public expectations for state economic intervention. From the 1970s through 1990s, the Ministry of Supply and other government agencies regulated the price of foodstuffs, fuel, water, and electricity. Middle-income households, often reliant upon a single public-sector job, became accustomed to artificially low living costs. Many Jordanians thus see subsidy withdrawals as a regressive tax, disproportionately affecting the poor. Furthermore, government promises to compensate the poorest families with cash payouts prior to the *habba* riots did not resonate because the public had seldom experienced means-tested welfare programs, as opposed to the blanket protection of universal assistance programs. Many also evoked scepticism that a bureaucracy riddled with petty corruption could channel resources where most needed.

The Possibility of Political Reform

The Arab Spring did not generate revolution in Jordan, but it exposed slow-moving and influential socio-political and economic shifts. The unexpected surge of grass-roots demands for political reform demonstrates the changing dynamics of tribal politics and youth mobilization, while the self-defeating logic of economic intervention precludes the easy option of buying off opposition.

The notion of political reform, or even democratization, among some Western analysts conjures dark images of Islamists turning Jordan into a theocracy. However, the Brotherhood would only be one of many actors in a pluralizing kingdom, including tribal groups, political parties, youth movements, and liberal organizations. The Egyptian case is also misleading because whereas that transition produced an Islamist candidate capturing a winner-take-all presidency, political change in Jordan means a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system drawn from a coalition of forces. Further, because it originated from a revolution, Egypt’s transition was rapid and disorganized. A gradual program of reform in Jordan that could unfold over an entire decade to minimize uncertainty, and retain the symbolic unifying role of the Hashemite monarchy within the political arena.

Such a process would begin with the regime setting a binding timetable for the measured transfer of executive prerogatives to a parliamentary government. This requires revising the electoral system through close dialogue with opposition voices, and then constitutionally crafting a stronger legislative body through fairer

balloting and districting methods. The GID's political role can be slowly reduced through incremental restrictions, much as anti-corruption dragnets can weed out corrupt practices over time. The reform process can begin in various ways, but over time should entail measured transfers of power cemented through inclusion and compromise. Herein lays the ultimate goal of an increasing segment of the Jordanian public.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Marwan Kardoosh, Wael Al-Khatib, Riad Al-Khoury, and several anonymous reviewers for their advice and suggestions, and the Project on Middle East Political Science for its support.