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Identity Politics, Reform, And Protest In Jordan

By: **Curtis R. Ryan**

Abstract

In 2011, inspired in part by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, Jordanians too took to the streets calling for change. Their numbers varied from hundreds to thousands, but not to the tens and even hundreds of thousands that had, for example, poured into Tahrir Square to topple Egyptian President Husni Mubarak. Jordanian protesters in 2011 called for reform, but not regime change. But the protests also came at a time of resurgent identity politics within Jordan and, hence, of rising tensions between Palestinians and East Jordanians, and even between tribes within the East Jordanian community. They also came at a time of resurgent political activism, which had already seen protests in the streets over elections, electoral laws, and governance. This analysis provides a brief examination of the main ethnic and national fault lines within Jordanian politics, and how these affect — and are affected by — the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world.

Identity Politics, Reform, and Protest in Jordan

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In 2011, inspired in part by the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, Jordanians too took to the streets calling for change. Their numbers varied from hundreds to thousands, but not to the tens and even hundreds of thousands that had, for example, poured into Tahrir Square to topple Egyptian President Husni Mubarak. Jordanian protesters in 2011 called for reform, but not regime change. But the protests also came at a time of resurgent identity politics within Jordan and, hence, of rising tensions between Palestinians and East Jordanians, and even between tribes within the East Jordanian community. They also came at a time of resurgent political activism, which had already seen protests in the streets over elections, electoral laws, and governance. This analysis provides a brief examination of the main ethnic and national fault lines within Jordanian politics, and how these affect – and are affected by – the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world.

Jordanians had taken to the streets before, most recently in a series of demonstrations in 2010 calling for a new, more democratic, electoral law. In addition to demands for proportional representation to enhance the strength of political parties, many in the opposition called for major changes in Jordan's highly gerrymandered electoral districts (in which urban areas with Palestinian majorities are under-represented, while rural and mainly East Jordanian districts are comparatively over-represented) (Ryan 2010a; 2010b). When a new law did emerge, meeting virtually none of the opposition demands, demonstrators hit the streets again. Jordan's large Islamist movement then boycotted the 2010 elections, and hence soon found themselves not in parliament, but in the streets opposing the new government of re-appointed Prime Minister Samir al-Rifa'i. Yet while the Islamist movement and leftist opposition parties participated in many of the demonstrations in 2010 and 2011, they did not represent the majority of the pro-democracy street protesters. Rather, most protesters seemed to be non-partisan. Their main concerns were against perceived endemic corruption and for a return to democratisation. Most were East Jordanians. The 2011 protests, however, started not in

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Amman, but in the south of Jordan. Demonstrations began on 7 January 2011 in Theiban, and soon spread to other southern cities and to Amman itself.[1]

In a case of political déjà vu, many regime elites saw parallels to an even earlier round of protests, in April 1989, when demonstrations had begun in the south of Jordan and moved steadily northward to the capital. Those protests had led to the sacking of an earlier Rifa'i government (that of Samir's father, Zayd) and the initiation of a political and economic liberalisation programme that later came to include legalisation of political parties, the lifting of martial law, loosening of restrictions on the media, and several rounds of parliamentary elections (Brand 1992; Brynen 1992; Mufti 1999; Robinson 1998; Ryan 1998; Ryan 2002).

In some respects, the 2011 demonstrations not only echoed 1989, but also underscored the widespread belief in Jordan that one part of the liberalisation programme – economic privatisation – had gone too far, while the other part – political liberalisation – had not gone nearly far enough. With change sweeping much of the Arab world in 2011, these perceptions and grievances seemed to take on a new urgency. One Jordanian democracy activist I spoke with lamented both Jordan's comparatively glacial pace of change and also the troubling resilience of identity politics in the kingdom. 'Today we are still debating the same issues', he argued, 'Who is Jordanian? Who is Palestinian? It's amazing we are still debating this. The whole region is moving at high speed like a BMW while we are riding donkeys . . . *donkeys*, not even horses' (Rintawi 2011).

This essay examines the politics of ethnicity, nationalism, and identity in Jordan. In doing so, I will address in turn each of the following questions. What are the ethnic fault lines in Jordanian politics? Why, even before the Arab uprisings, has there been a clear upsurge in identity politics within Jordan? How has this affected, and been affected by, the Arab uprisings and Jordan's own demonstrations? Finally, what are the implications of this analysis for stability, reform, and change in Jordan?

Jordanians, Palestinians, and National Identity

Jordan as a country was named after the Jordan River, and that river remains in many ways the political symbol of the main ethnic dividing line within Jordanian politics: between those whose origins are traced to the West Bank of the river, i.e. Palestinians, and those whose origins lie in the East Bank of the river. The latter group are alternatively referred to as East Bankers, Transjordanians, or East Jordanians. Whether Palestinians are a minority or majority in Jordan remains a highly contentious issue. In the absence of clear statistics, most analysts assume that the Palestinian Jordanians comprise either half the Jordanian population or perhaps a majority.[2] There is general agreement in the literature on identity politics in the kingdom that this line – between Palestinians and East Jordanians – can at times be one of the deepest fissures in Jordanian politics, but that it is also but one of many levels of identity within the kingdom (Abu-Odeh 1999; Brand 1995; Hamarneh, Hollis, and Shikaki 1997; Lynch 1999; Massad 2001). Jordan is mostly Arab, but includes also Circassian and Chechen minorities; it is mostly Sunni Muslim, but includes also Christian and Druze minorities. Tribal politics continue

to matter profoundly within Jordanian politics, and many studies of identity in Jordan, in fact, focus extensively on the tribal aspects of the formation and maintenance of national identity within the East Jordanian community (Fathi 1994; Layne 1994; Massad 2001; Shryock 1997). Indeed, while tensions have risen between East Jordanians and Palestinians, there are also rising fissures within, for example, the East Jordanian community itself, especially between clans and tribes, as these too reassert their separate identities (Schwedler 2010; Tarawnah 2010). While I will mainly explore the Palestinian and East Jordanian identity issue in this essay, it is with the understanding that this is just one of several lines of identity within Jordan.

As Asher Susser (1999) has noted, both the modern Jordanian and Palestinian national identities emerged only in the twentieth century. Both refer to predominantly Arab peoples, with Sunni Muslim majorities, and significant Christian minorities. Even among the artificial constructs of national identities, this remains a very artificial 'ethnic' distinction. As Hisham Bustani (2011) argues, this insistence on separate identities limits both peoples' options and futures, hindering a united reform movement and playing into the hands of anti-reform regime elites. Yet like so many artificial constructs, these identities are vividly real and very meaningful to most actual Palestinians and Jordanians, and are even reinforced in the educational system (Marar 2009; Marar 2011; Nasser 2004).

While Palestinian national identity has been deeply affected by the struggle with Israel, Jordanian national identity has been more deeply intertwined with the creation of the state itself as a Hashemite Kingdom. As part of the League of Nations Mandate System, Britain created the Emirate of Transjordan in 1922, which, in 1946, became the independent Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. The Hashemites themselves hailed originally from neither west nor east of the Jordan River, but from the Hijaz in what is now western Saudi Arabia. The Hashemite family had ruled Mecca and its environs but were defeated and expelled by the rival al-Sa'ud family, as it consolidated its control over much of Arabia after World War I (leading to the creation of Saudi Arabia in 1932). As allies of Britain in the war, the Hashemites, having lost their original seat of power in Mecca, were rewarded by Britain with the newly established monarchies in both Transjordan and Iraq. The latter monarchy was overthrown in a bloody military coup in Baghdad in 1958, but the Hashemite family retained and strengthened its rule in Jordan, in large part due to the loyalty of the Jordanian army.

With the monarchy and armed forces as the foundational institutions of the state, Jordanian national identity has been deeply affected by the Hashemite alliance with the tribes of Jordan in creating the kingdom, and by royalist sentiment and service in the state security forces (Fathi 1994; Layne 1994; Massad 2001). Yet within Jordan, this has always been problematised by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, since Jordan absorbed waves of Palestinian refugees in the wars of 1948 and 1967. Unlike most Arab countries, Jordan in 1950 extended citizenship to Palestinian refugees. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan as it has developed since independence in 1946 is therefore a combined legacy of British imperial designs (establishing Jordan in the first place), regional wars, repeated refugee flows, and

of course, Hashemite rule. The tensions following the 1967 war led to perhaps the lowest point in Jordanian history: the civil war of 1970–71. That conflict, better known as 'Black September', saw the defeat of Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) guerrillas at the hands of King Hussein's Jordanian army. For Jordanians who remember that disastrous moment in the country's history, some bitterness remains, with dramatically polarised perceptions. Hence the event is remembered by many in Jordan either for Hashemite brutality in suppressing the PLO and the refugee camps, or for Palestinian disloyalty and subversion; but even more than four decades later, there is little middle ground (Barari 2008).

Today, despite a troubled history, both Palestinian Jordanians and East Jordanians can be found among the country's ruling elite. Jordan is a kingdom of both East Bank Jordanians and Palestinian Jordanians. Yet neither community is in any way unitary. While some Palestinians continue to live in destitute camps attached to major urban areas, for example, others live in plush villas in upscale neighbourhoods such as Abdun in Amman. Similarly, East Jordanians range in fortunes and circumstances from poor villages in the south of the country to the height of wealth and power in the kingdom. Some have Bedouin roots, but most actually do not. Still, even the many East Jordanians whose roots were in sedentary towns, villages, and in agricultural communities at the time of the state's founding in 1946, maintain tribal – if not necessarily Bedouin – links. Tribe and tribalism continue to matter in Jordanian politics, as many East Jordanians take very seriously the support network of family, clan, and tribe (Oudat and Alshboul 2010; Shryock 2000; Tarawnah 2010).

East Jordanians have historically dominated the civilian and military aspects of the public sector – the police, the armed forces, the government bureaucracy, and the intelligence services (*mukhabarat*). From the founding of the state to the present, the security forces have been recruited heavily among Bedouin tribes, East Jordanian villages and urban communities, and the Circassian and Chechen minorities. Indeed, many in the security forces (both military and civilian) see their role as not only the defence of the country from outside threats, but also defence of the regime against internal threats, and finally, protecting Jordanian nationalism itself (Tell 2004).

Presumably with the demographic balance in mind, the kingdom even abandoned national military conscription in 1992, maintaining thereafter a volunteer professional army – and one that is overwhelmingly East Jordanian. This actually completed a process than had begun much earlier. As Nawaf Tell has argued:

> The security sector in Jordan perceives itself as the guardian, protector, and stronghold of Jordanian nationalism in the face of a demographic or political Palestinian takeover of Jordan. The roots of this perception go back to the Jordanian-Palestinian confrontation of 1970–71. Due to mass desertions that took place at the beginning of the conflict, the security sector in Jordan underwent a process of Jordanisation after the crisis had ended, i.e. 'de-Palestinianisation' and from then onwards, the security sector has been dominated by Jordanians.
>
> (Tell 2004:16)

In contrast, Palestinian Jordanians correspondingly comprise much (but by no means all) of the private sector (Reiter 2004). There are, of course, exceptions, as more young East Jordanians forgo military or civilian government service to go into business themselves, especially in the current climate of economic privatisation. We find, in short, more and more sons and daughters of the government, military, and intelligence elite in private business and the professions, mirroring socially the shift in the Jordanian economy itself. But historically, Jordanian politics featured this de facto ethnic division of labour. Correspondingly, members of both communities can and often do claim that their group built the country, and each is partially right. One is referring to national military and civilian service and governing institutions, while the other is referring to developing the economy through private enterprise and entrepreneurship.

But the economic dimensions of identity politics also underscore the cross-cutting issue of social class. As Jordanian analyst Fares Braizat (2005) noted, 'The division here is not just Palestinian–Jordanian. Mainly the issue is rich–poor: the haves and have nots. Jordanians and Palestinians are on the inside, in the top elite, and on the outside too.' Despite the fact that each community has its rich and its poor, there remains a tendency for each to see the other group as the wealthy one. As another Jordanian analyst argued, 'Jordanian identity has a class conflict within it, especially among those who resent rich Palestinians and want them out, so that the wealth will be Jordanian. They even think that Palestinians living in camps are somehow hoarding wealth.'[3] Such conservative East Jordanian nationalists therefore resent what they see as Palestinian inroads in the state itself. Correspondingly, many Palestinians – regardless of income and class – see themselves as less empowered politically. 'Palestinians complain about being under-represented in the public sector or in high positions in government. They want *wasta*[4] and don't have it', noted one analyst, adding, 'But they don't want to change the regime or the state, they want to be in it. Jordanians want to get into the private sector for more money and wealth, but Palestinians want to get into the public sector for more influence.'[5]

Divide and Rule?

The Hashemite monarchy has insisted for decades that it has had enough of this emphasis on two distinct communities within one state. Historically, the regime has demonstrated no tolerance for displays of Palestinian nationalism (usually seen as at the expense of Jordanian nationalism). The latter, on the other hand, is strongly encouraged, but tends to be wrapped in royalist symbols that make Jordanian nationalism difficult to separate from Hashemite identity. Yet the regime has also shown little patience for ultra-conservative nativist Jordanian trends that tend to be overtly hostile to Palestinians.

The Hashemite monarchy has always presented itself as the unifying force bringing together multiple communities – Palestinians and East Jordanians, urbanites and Bedouins, Muslims and Christians, secularists and Islamists, and Arabs, as well as Circassian and Chechen minorities. Like his father before him, King Abdullah refers to Jordanian society as a family (with himself as head, of course),

and frequently calls for national unity in the face of numerous challenges. From the perspective of many elites within the regime, the Hashemite strategy is not a matter of divide and rule, but a deft royal policy of pluralism and inclusion. This can be seen in the appointment of prime ministers and cabinets, in which Palestinians will be included; however, East Jordanian majorities will usually be maintained. Royal cabinet appointments are also usually mindful of geographic differences, and tend to carefully include figures from different regions of the country and from various influential tribes. Similarly, Jordan's controlled elections tend to yield loyalist pro-regime parliaments with East Banker majorities, based on gerrymandered districts designed to maintain a power balance that does not match the demographics of a presumed Palestinian majority.

Some East Jordanian nationalists agree with this type of strategy. Many tie it to their fear that Israel will attempt to 'solve' the Palestinian problem by making Jordan the 'alternative homeland' (*al-watan al-badil*). As one such nationalist put it, 'There is a danger of Palestinian empowerment in Jordan making the Israeli "Jordan is Palestine" argument real. Of making it viable. Even having more Palestinian government ministers does this too. We can't let this get past or even to 50% representation – we lose Jordanian identity at that very moment.'[6]

While the monarchy sees itself as the bridge linking Palestinians and East Jordanians, many critics suggest that the opposite is often true. Opposition activists, for example, often argue that the regime offers intermittent cosmetic reforms simply to buy time, but, in the words of one activist, that it is really engaged in 'an agenda of permanent conflict resolution, with the regime as facilitator'. The same activist added, 'In Bahrain, the regime is forming its identity against an "other"; in Jordan, the regime is the barrier between identities.'[7] The regime does indeed talk at length (complete with extensive marketing and billboard campaigns) about national unity, but divide and rule strategies remain part of the state's tactics and strategies, especially when it is challenged. As a Jordanian diplomat noted in a recent conversation, 'The regime talks unity but opens fissures in response to any opposition.'[8]

So why now? Why do we now see such an upsurge in identity politics, in which many Jordanians actually identify with ever smaller units – not Jordan but East Jordanian or Palestinian, or even smaller units such as tribe, clan, and family? Part of the answer lies with the collapsed peace process and fears of Israel attempting to turn Jordan into the alternative Palestinian state (Andoni 2010). Part of the answer can also be found in the post-2003 surge of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees into Jordan, and nationalist fears that they may become a new permanent refugee community, perhaps further diluting the position of East Jordanians. Part of the answer is rooted in the more pervasive nature of electronic media, creating a kind of cyber public sphere in Jordan that has defied past state controls in print media, radio, and television. And part of the answer lies with the social (and hence political) disruptions caused by the regime's neoliberal economic policies.[9]

As privatisation has proceeded, state industries have been sold, and the possibility and reliability of government employment has declined. With limited economic opportunities, more and more Jordanians are also feeling physically and geographically displaced, as they migrate from the more rural south to the more

urban north. A member of the Jordanian senate noted the social tensions emerging from these changes: 'Palestinians dominate the cities, and the higher levels of Palestinian wealth are very clear', he noted. 'As East Jordanians migrate from villages to the cities, they see this, but then live in poorer neighbourhoods and even slums, and it only adds to their grudge.'[10]

East Jordanian nationalists argue that they are losing not only economically, but also politically. The de facto monopoly on state employment no longer seems secure, and hence they wish to prevent what they perceive as further Palestinian inroads upon the state itself. In short, in the view of conservative East Jordanian nationalists, the private sector is already lost, and the state is all they have left to protect.

Yet because of these extreme views, it is too often forgotten that East Jordanians as a whole are *not* synonymous with conservative or ultra-conservative East Jordanian nationalists. And in 2010 and 2011, East Jordanians appeared to comprise the majority of pro-democracy and pro-reform demonstrators. Some even complained of the absence of Palestinian demonstrators (aside from those in the traditional opposition such as the Islamist movement and many leftist parties). It is perhaps ironic that Palestinians, so long reviled for being too active and too likely to take to the streets, are now being accused of being too docile (Pelham 2011).

Despite all the economic, social, and political dislocations that have led to the current climate of heightened ethnic identity politics, and which have re-invigorated old debates about what it means to be an 'authentic' Jordanian, it is also important to note that most Palestinians and East Jordanians do not match the polarised and stereotypical images of their detractors. There are, to be sure, those with extreme views in each community. Some Palestinians, for example, are disdainful of East Jordanians, seeing them as less educated, tribalistic, backward, and chauvinistic. Similarly, some East Jordanian nationalists view Palestinians as one of two social class stereotypes: either poor, ungrateful, and perpetually complaining refugees draining state resources, or as rich business moguls with an eye on profit but never on the national good. The latter set of stereotypes actually, and ironically, mirrors old anti-Semitic stereotypes from Europe, in which Jews were so often victims of both ends of the class divide.

Yet contrary to these stereotypes, Jordanians of all backgrounds tend to be very well-educated and literate, and most would find these stereotypes insulting and offensive (as they of course are). Still, these ethnic rifts and sometimes polarised views matter, because they can be manipulated by cynical and even unscrupulous pro-regime elites – especially if they wish to break up demonstrations and prevent more meaningful reform.

Identity Politics and the 2011 Demonstrations

Despite all the ethnic and identity dynamics enumerated above, most demonstrators in 2010 and 2011 seemed to take to the streets without identity politics as their prime motivator. But most '*shabab*' (youth) movements of middle class and above Jordanians who marched in West Amman were of East Jordanian backgrounds, and included Muslims and Christians, Arabs and Circassians, men and women.

In contrast, demonstrations arranged by the Islamist movement and other opposition parties often started downtown, near the al-Hussein Mosque, and included many Palestinians of various social classes, in addition to East Jordanians. For that reason, some saw the first type of demonstration as non-partisan and national in focus, while the second was often seen as ideological and Palestinian rather than Jordanian.

As the demonstrations grew, however, and the numbers swelled with individuals joining the marches, there were de facto mergers of all the above groups. And in that broader and more inclusive capacity, they gathered numbers, strength, and momentum, and certainly caught the attention of the regime. Outside the capital, the make-up of protests and demonstrations varied considerably by location. Not surprisingly, East Jordanians made up the great majority of protesters in southern towns like Tafila, Kerak, Ma'an, and Dhiban, and see their movement as a southern revival, much like the 1989 movement that led to the political liberalisation process in the first place. In the north, in cities with large Palestinian populations like Irbid and Zarqa, Palestinians were more likely to join East Jordanians in the demonstrations. The most inclusive demonstrations, especially in terms of ethnicity, class, and gender, seemed to take place in Amman itself, including the ill-fated 24 March 2011 demonstration (discussed below).

In order to illustrate the various dimensions of identity politics embedded in Jordanian debates (and demonstrations) about political change, consider the following three brief vignettes regarding reform struggles in the kingdom.

Rifa'i versus Rifa'i

At the outset of this analysis, I noted the discussions in Jordan comparing the events of 2011 to those of 1989. It is a comparison worth pursuing a bit further since in April 1989 most Palestinians and East Jordanians I spoke with routinely described then Prime Minister Zayd al-Rifa'i as the consummate regime insider. He was seen by many as an anti-reform, anti-democratic, East Jordanian nationalist, and notoriously hostile to demands for greater Palestinian empowerment. Yet as the anti-International Monetary Fund (IMF) and anti-government riots spread across the southern Jordanian towns and cities, crowds called (successfully) for the fall of the Rifa'i government.

Many years later, in 2011, as demonstrations spread across the same southern towns and the capital, protesters once again called for the sacking of the prime minister and his cabinet. In 2011, the Prime Minister was Samir Rifa'i, son of Zayd, scion of a powerful pro-regime family and fourth in the family line to serve the Hashemites as prime minister. This time, however, he seemed to be viewed as the archetype of what many East Jordanians were complaining about: government ministers who were actually technocratic Palestinian businessmen. When the king complied with protesters' demands, firing the entire cabinet, he replaced them with an East Jordanian former career military officer from the influential Abbadi tribe, Marouf Bakhit. Ministerial portfolios changed, but little else did. Complaints about the nature of governance itself, in other words, were not addressed by the government shift. 'The reshuffle of the Rifa'i government did neutralise some

people for a short time', argued one democracy activist, continuing, 'Especially the generals and some of the tribal leaders. They wanted a government of tribal East Jordanians. They got them. But now? There is no real difference.'[11]

Still, the change in government was emblematic of several broader problems: first, the tendency for identity politics to be allowed to obscure more meaningful discussions of reform and change; second, the fluidity of identity itself. Had the Rifa'i family changed ethnicity between 1989 and 2011? Many people I spoke with in 1989 emphasised the roots of the Rifa'i family in northern Jordan near the Syrian border, and spoke (with suspicion) of the family's Syrian connections. In 2010 and 2011, in contrast, many noted (accurately) that the family also had roots West of the Jordan River as well. The Rifa'is see themselves as patriotic Jordanians, yet their experience illustrates the tendency in politics for detractors to use identity issues seemingly to 'change' an opponent's ethnicity in order to undermine that opponent's legitimacy in Jordanian public life. In 2010 and 2011, for example, many of his detractors saw Samir Rifa'i as the embodiment of Palestinian inroads into the levers of power within the government itself.

This is in contrast, of course, to the allegedly more pure roots of many East Jordanian families, especially those that proudly uphold their tribal backgrounds. Yet these tribal and clan lineages pre-date the Hashemite Kingdom itself, and most families have roots both within Jordan and across its various borders. This includes most obviously, and perhaps ironically, the Hashemites themselves, who migrated after World War I from Hijaz (in what is now Saudi Arabia) to Jordan, before assuming control there and establishing the British-backed monarchy. For that reason, while the regime has historically stressed the importance of the tribes in creating and building the state, the Hashemite kings have nonetheless simultaneously rejected the kinds of nativist, exclusivist, and inherently narrow visions of Jordanian nationalism associated with figures such as Ahmad 'Ubaydi al-'Abbadi (Shryock 2000:66–70). Yet similar arguments over identity can be found on the left in Jordan as well. 'Just a few years ago, talking identity was blasphemous in progressive circles. Now it's valid', noted one prominent leftist activist and analyst. 'But these are all fabrications. Jordan was a fabrication. All families have roots across borders.'[12]

The Queen

If some East Jordanians are feeling more and more displaced within their own country, a key political question is, of course, who do they blame for this turn of events? Some nationalists blame the Palestinians, some the regime, and some see the two as increasingly indistinguishable, arguing that part of the problem is the excessive influence of the (Palestinian) Queen Rania on the (East Jordanian) King Abdullah.

The queen, in fact, has become a kind of lightning rod of controversy for many East Bank nationalists. Some tribal leaders have even publicly denounced what they see as her too active role in Jordanian politics and policy. Retired military officers (while not attacking the queen directly) have gone on record warning the monarchy against selling the state off to presumably corrupt Palestinian business

people (David 2010; Fisk 2010). A high-ranking Palestinian Jordanian government official stressed the urgency of the rising tensions: 'I told his majesty the king, they are angry. They are your army. They are your security. You have to do something about it.'[13]

Perhaps oddly, the anger at the queen has actually crossed ethnic and identity lines, as the Islamist movement (with large numbers of Palestinian supporters) has joined the critiques (Pelham 2011). While all detractors insist that their critiques have nothing to do with the fact that the queen is a well-educated, multi-lingual, Palestinian woman, they each seem to find in her a fault emblematic of national level problems. She is criticised for shopping sprees in Europe and for alleged palace intrigues (much like Queen Noor before her). She drew torrents of criticism for a lavish fortieth birthday party in Wadi Rum (that some even compared to the shah's celebration of Persian monarchy at Persepolis). Some see her as playing a non-constitutional role in policymaking. Others complain that she is facilitating endemic corruption by selling Jordanian state assets to Palestinian business cronies.[14]

In short, a woman known outside Jordan for her YouTube and Twitter presence, and for her efforts in support of children and in eradicating global stereotypes against Arabs and Muslims, is seen by some in Jordan as something akin to Lady Macbeth. It is difficult to separate the lines of tension here – since the complaints draw on ethnic, class, and gender divisions. It is likely that all play key roles, and that the queen presents simply an easier target for regime critics without attacking directly King Abdullah himself, and therefore this mirrors in some respects the region-wide trend of 'first ladies' under ever closer public scrutiny (Brand, Kaki, and Stacher 2011). For ultra-conservative East Jordanian nationalists, however, the main complaint is the issue of Palestinian political influence in the palace itself.

Most Palestinians would of course find the argument about excessive Palestinian influence – not only on the part of the queen but of the Palestinian community in general – to be laughable. Rather, they see themselves as routinely disenfranchised, under-represented in government (and even more under-represented in the military, security, and intelligence services); and yet continually discriminated against in everyday life as they interact with the governing East Jordanian bureaucracy and these same institutional power centres on a daily basis. Regarding the queen herself, many Palestinian Jordanians have experienced a kind of role reversal, in which they sometimes find themselves defending the monarchy against hardline East Jordanian nationalist critiques.

Al-Shabab versus al-Bultajiyya

As I have argued above, Jordan's demonstrations and demonstrators have been many and diverse. Perhaps the most inspiring pro-reform, pro-democracy, and pro-national unity moment came in the form of the 24 March Shabab Movement, only to be broken up with violence by what are known throughout the region as *bultajiyya* – or pro-regime thugs.

Like their counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt, Jordanian youth activists organised extensively through social media, including a 24 March Shabab Facebook group.[15]

Through Facebook, Twitter, instant messaging, texting, phone calls, and direct discussions, they attempted to harness the momentum of weekly Friday protests to create a larger and broader exercise in direct democracy. The 24 March Shabab Movement established a sit-in at the Ministry of Interior Circle and successfully brought together Jordanians who spanned ethnic, class, gender, and religious divisions. The protest was part pro-democracy demonstration and part patriotic rally. As in Tunisia and Egypt, the demonstrators – most of whom happened to be East Jordanians – carried national flags, wore flag face paint, played nationalist and patriotic songs, and made clear in every possible way that they were calling for real reform, but not regime change.

For Jordanian democracy activists, as great a day as 24 March 2011 was, 25 March 2011 was a nightmare. On 25 March, groups of *bultajiyya* began taunting and insulting the pro-reform activists, and soon turned to pelting them with stones, before charging the demonstrations and breaking them up altogether. In the mayhem that followed, one man died reportedly of a heart attack, while scores were injured (Tarawnah 2011). But why? Most reform activists believe that these anti-reform youths were mobilised from rural tribal areas and brought to Amman. Despite all the clear Jordanian and Hashemite nationalist symbolism, the demonstrators were viewed by the *bultajiyya* as subversives, as revolutionaries, and as *Palestinians*. In that moment, in short, the issue of Palestinian versus East Jordanian turned not on ethnicity or background, but rather on perceived loyalty versus disloyalty. To protest or demonstrate at all seems to be read by the *bultajiyya* (and by whatever anti-reform part of the state apparatus that presumably sent them) as a sign of disloyalty.

As one veteran democracy activist noted, 'The March 25 incident was shocking. It was a dangerous response. They opened the door to a more dangerous threat by remobilising from the regime itself the Jordanian-Palestinian issue.'[16] The question then and now, however, remains who 'they' refers to. While few doubt that the *mukhabarat* and police were implicated in the violence, many Jordanians debate the role of the palace. And that has been, and remains, the question of the day. Is the king truly in favour of reform and being thwarted by a vast anti-reform establishment (including the assorted security forces) across the regime? Or is the monarchy engaging in the time-honoured practice of cosmetic reform, with brief and limited bouts of thuggery to keep people in line, but in a way that distances the palace from any such excesses on the part of others? Another Jordanian democracy advocate, however, cautioned that one should not read too much into the 25 March episode. While decrying the brutality of the incident, she also compared the levels of coercion to those of other Arab countries: 'Still, we don't have killings here', she noted. 'It's not like Syria, or Yemen, or Libya. We don't have snipers' (Kilani 2011).

Conclusions

The 25 March 2011 incident did seem to have a chilling effect on the Jordanian pro-democracy movement for perhaps a few months. But demonstrations continued, with temporarily reduced numbers, both in the capital and in towns and

cities across Jordan. Youth in particular responded by attempting to diversify their organisations, and to link groups, parties, unions, and professional associations in broader networks for activism, and to create a more consistent climate of active public debate on the issues of the day. These include not only debates in cyberspace but also more directly in open forums such as the youth-organised hashtag debates – all in an effort to preserve and expand the spirit of 24 March 2011.

That is an effort that the regime would be well advised to get behind, rather than to thwart, because the 24 March idea in many ways creates in real life the kinds of unifying slogans that the regime has been using for years – such as *Kullina al-Urdun* ('We Are All Jordan') and *al-Urdun Awalan* ('Jordan First'). On that day in the Ministry of Interior Circle, Jordanian youth and others made those slogans momentarily real, until pro-regime thugs destroyed them.

As this analysis has shown, the pervasive power of the politics of identity, ethnicity, and nationalism can be used – and on many occasions in Jordanian history, has been used – to divide and rule, or even to bludgeon the democratic opposition into submission. Yet, the pro-democracy movement remains, and it even continues to expand. Fortunately for the regime, the pro-reform (rather than revolutionary) sentiments of 24 March remain as well. There is variance, however, regarding what reforms are most essential. At the risk of broad generalisation, most East Jordanian activists from the many southern youth movements emphasise social justice in the form of more equitable state investment in economic development (to include the southern cities, and to be less Amman-centric). In short, they seek greater economic empowerment. Most Palestinian reform activists, in contrast, emphasise equal political rights and opportunities, and seek greater political empowerment. All agree, however, on curbing corruption and achieving greater democratisation.

What is missing is faith in the regime itself. Indeed, there is very little faith across Jordan that the regime will really embark on a path toward more meaningful change (Ryan 2011). This cynicism continues despite reform proposals emerging from the royal National Dialogue Committee, appointed by the regime to respond to the reform demonstrations, despite special parliamentary sessions to tackle new laws and reforms, despite a series of proposed amendments to the constitution, and despite royal insistence that this time political reform really will happen. Most Jordanian democracy activists remain supportive of democratisation, and while they are willing to march side by side with the Hashemite monarchy, they just want the monarchy to side with them too. For that to happen, however, pro-reform elements in both the opposition and the regime need to be careful not to fall into the traps of identity politics that have so long derailed prospects for greater liberalisation and change in the kingdom.

Notes

1 For a brief overview of the origins and expansion of the demonstrations and the various youth ('*shabab*') movements and other opposition groups, see the discussion by journalist Taylor Luck (2011).

[2] Jordanian population statistics do nothing to clarify the matter, since any census in the kingdom simply records the growing ethnically Arab population, and does not distinguish between Palestinian Jordanians and East Jordanians. In its statistics, the United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNWRA) put the total number of Palestinian refugees in Jordan in 2011 at 1,999,466 (UNRWA 2011). But many Palestinian Jordanians were not actually refugees and do not live in camps. While some Palestinians became Jordanian citizens as refugees of the 1948 and 1967 wars with Israel, others became Jordanian citizens through peacetime migration following the Jordanian annexation of the West Bank in 1950.

[3] Interview by the author, 1 May 2006, Amman, Jordan.

[4] *Wasta* refers to the use of family and clan influence and connections to get ahead in public life.

[5] Interview by the author, 1 May 2006, Amman, Jordan.

[6] Interview by the author, June 2010, Amman, Jordan.

[7] Interview by the author, June 2011, Amman, Jordan.

[8] Interview by the author, June 2011, Amman, Jordan.

[9] For a detailed discussion of these resurgent identity issues, see Ryan (2010c). See also the detailed analyses of identity issues and the past, present, and future of Jordanian-Palestinian relations in Abu-Odeh (1999); Brand (1995); Hamarneh, Hollis, and Shikaki (1997); and Lynch (1999).

[10] Interview by the author, June 2010, Amman, Jordan.

[11] Interview by the author, June 2011, Amman, Jordan.

[12] Interview by the author, 12 June 2011, Amman, Jordan.

[13] Interview by the author, June 2010, Amman, Jordan.

[14] In interviews in Jordan in June 2010, December 2010, and June 2011, I heard variations of these complaints from countless Jordanians, even though I never once asked about attitudes regarding the queen.

[15] See, e.g., http://www.facebook.com/shabab24march.

[16] Interview by the author, June 2011, Amman, Jordan.

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