

EARLY SPRING IN JORDAN: THE REVOLT OF THE MILITARY VETERANS

TARIQ TELL | NOVEMBER 4, 2015

The Jordanian *Hirak* grassroots movement of 2011–2013 is increasingly being recognized as a social and political protest movement born out of discontent in East Bank hinterlands long thought to be home to unflagging supporters of Jordan’s autocratic regime. The movement’s foundations were laid in the spring of 2010 by a revolt of Jordanian military veterans that combined an East Bank nationalism critical of the government’s approach to the Palestine question with an opposition to neoliberal economic reforms that had come to dominate policymaking under King Abdullah II.

Taken together, the two strands reflected a rising tide of political contention in Hashemite Jordan that had built up steadily over the preceding two decades. Starting with riots triggered by subsidy cuts imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1989, tribal Transjordanians—rather than the largely urban Jordanians of Palestinian origin who had been the mainstay of opposition in the 1950s and 1960s—protested against economic liberalization, the monarchy’s U.S.-aligned foreign policy, and Jordan’s attempt to normalize relations with Israel.

The rise in East Bank discontent since 1989 sits uneasily with traditional views of Hashemite Jordan as a modernist monarchy protected by an army of East Bank tribesmen in uniform, whose loyalty was culturally ordained or politically inevitable. Nonetheless, recent upheavals reflect a mounting tide of East Bank protest against the erosion of the social compact underpinning Hashemite rule. This was based on a militarized welfare regime that provided the East Bank population with

secure employment and social provision, ensuring the loyalty of the security establishment and cohesion of the Jordanian state.¹

Even after the IMF-enforced cutbacks during the last decade of King Hussein’s 1952–1999 rule, the military for all intents and purposes remained an “unflinching protector of the existing order,” in the words of Asher Susser of Tel Aviv University. But a militarized liberalization of the Jordanian state beginning in 1989 started to shift entitlements away from the East Bank population at large toward a strengthened military.

After King Abdullah II ascended the throne in 1999, more extensive neoliberal reforms were pursued. Driven by Abdullah’s conciliation of a largely Palestinian business elite, an ongoing struggle emerged within the upper levels of the monarchical regime. This coalition shuffling pitted the traditionally dominant and largely Transjordanian military-bureaucratic elite against an upstart coterie of younger, more

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entrepreneurial digitals—urban-based, globalized rivals with ties to capital networks in the Gulf.

The global financial crisis and commodity price spikes of 2007–2008 overlapped with rising discontent among public sector workers who hailed from the East Bank hinterlands. By spring 2010, military veterans politicized by the government's plans to restructure the armed forces and rationalize military spending had been drawn into the protest movement. The National Committee for Retired Servicemen (NCRS), egged on by dissident East Bank elites invested in Jordanian nationalism, joined protesting dockworkers and teachers unhappy with accelerating privatization schemes and educational reforms. The social movement launched by these protests morphed into the East Bank *Hirak* after a so-called jasmine wave of uprisings swept across the Arab world in 2011.

The Jordanian regime was able to ride out an essentially reformist protest movement by playing on communal fragmentation and by offering *makrumat* (royal dispensations in the form of material favors) funded by Gulf aid. These tactics ensured the loyalty of the veterans' movement while also blunting the challenge posed by the loose coalition of East Bank nationalists that coalesced around the NCRS.

As the Gulf-led counterrevolution against the Arab uprisings gathered pace from 2011 onward, the regime put on hold promises to move toward a constitutional monarchy. Instead, the government made largely cosmetic political and constitutional reforms that served to isolate and contain both the NCRS and the *Hirak*. This culminated in a decisive victory for the autocratic elements of the regime after the success of its supporters in the January 2013 parliamentary election.

RENTIER POLITICS AND THE JORDANIAN MILITARY

Jordan's militarized welfare regime was a child of the Cold War and of the rapid expansion of the Arab Legion established under British colonial rule from a corps d'elite to a mass army in the decade after Jordan's formal independence

in 1946. Buttressed by U.S. support after the departure of the British in 1957, and rationalized in the course of state building in the early 1960s, this sociopolitical pact allowed the Jordanian monarchy to survive the high tide of Arab radicalism and the rise of Palestinian nationalism after the loss of the West Bank to Israel in the Six-Day War of June 1967.

The expulsion of the Palestine Liberation Organization from Jordan after the country's 1970–1971 civil war coincided with the end of the 1954–1971 Arab Cold War and ushered in a new regional order built on *tharwa* (wealth) rather than *thawra* (revolution). Coupled with increased aid payments allocated to Jordan at the 1974 Rabat and 1978 Baghdad Arab League summits, King Hussein was able to consolidate a new ruling bargain in Amman that gave military and bureaucratic privileges to East Bankers while allowing the Palestinian domination of the private sector. Hussein's new coalition brought together Transjordanian peasant investors enriched by land sales, a newly educated rural middle class, and the traditionally dominant mercantile and military bureaucratic elite. As a result, the king was able to exert virtually unchallenged authority over Jordanian affairs.

Despite the veneer of prosperity brought by the inflow of new rents, martial law—imposed in 1967—remained in effect, and the power of the General Intelligence Department (GID), or *Mukhabarat*, was unchecked. Former heads of the GID held the premiership for most of the decade after 1976, overseeing the expansion and Transjordanization of the state apparatus, with the *Mukhabarat* in effect becoming the executive arm of a sultanistic palace. *Mukhabarat* allies came to dominate cabinet positions and the security forces, holding most of the crucial posts in a burgeoning bureaucracy.

A broad divide emerged between a public sector that catered to the interests of East Bankers and a private one largely under Palestinian control. Paradoxically, this communal division of labor went hand in hand with a pattern of uneven development in which the rural hinterlands lagged behind the urban areas, and in which the overwhelmingly Transjordanian south and east of the country were plagued by a higher incidence of poverty than the largely Palestinian cities.

By the early 1990s, the army and civil service employed some 47 percent of Jordanians of working age. Defense budgets supported hundreds of thousands of military pensioners and funded a widening array of ancillary services ranging from advanced medical treatment in the King Hussein Medical Center to university placement under a royal dispensation that ensured preferential admission for the children of military personnel. Special shops sold goods to soldiers' families at subsidized prices, blunting the impact of inflation and stretching the purchasing power of military pay packets.²

In the two decades after the 1970–1971 civil war, the efficacy of Jordan's militarized welfare regime was eroded by the uneven development of the East Bank and the rising expectations brought about by urbanization and migration to the Gulf. By the time King Hussein ended Amman's legal and administrative (although, importantly, not its constitutional) ties with the West Bank in July 1988, dependence on government-disbursed entitlements and more affluent lifestyles modeled on Gulf living standards had raised the fiscal burden of the military welfare regime to levels that Jordan could not sustain.

By 1989, the demands of a bloated public sector, combined with the drain of the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq War and arms imports of dubious necessity, had pushed Jordan into economic crisis and forced the government's resort to IMF-directed economic retrenchment.³

Once Jordan's economy came under IMF tutelage in the spring of 1989, high external debt levels ensured that government-disbursed entitlements would be in effect curtailed by the devaluation of the Jordanian dinar and donor-imposed structural adjustment policies. The anti-austerity riots that broke out in response to the cutbacks were concentrated in the Transjordanian hinterlands. Socioeconomic dependence on the state determined the geography of protest: over 90 percent of the employed labor force in the southern governorates of Maan, al-Karak, and Tafilah worked in the public sector, in contrast to only 50–60 percent in the populous and more prosperous urban centers of Amman, al-Zarqa, and Irbid.

TROUBLES IN THE EAST BANK HINTERLANDS

Faced with upheaval in areas long considered bastions of loyalty to the Hashemite monarchy, the regime resorted to parliamentary representation to defuse popular anger and redirect state patronage toward the East Bank hinterlands. Legislative elections, which had been suspended after the June 1967 war, were held regularly again as of 1989, but electoral districts were gerrymandered to over-represent East Bankers—and, in particular, the southern heartlands that had sparked the 1989 riots.

But the restoration of parliamentary life failed to compensate for decades of developmental bias toward the towns with mixed Palestinian-Transjordanian populations. As a result, the troubles in the East Bank hinterlands continued with bread riots in al-Karak in 1996 and demonstrations in support of the then Iraqi president Saddam Hussein in Maan in 1998.

Although East Bank discontent was a thorn in the monarchy's side, it posed a minimal threat due to its parochial origins and limited political aims. The signal revolts that this discontent generated were aimed at attracting the attention of the king and were easily contained by royal visits or GID manipulation of patronage-based politics in the parliament. Bereft of elite support, contentious politics in the East Bank hinterlands failed to generate organized political parties or cohesive social movements, degenerating instead into largely asocial corruption and noncompliance.

By 2009, mafias, smuggling, and protection rackets had created a slew of security black spots, which were often concentrated in tribal centers such as al-Lubban and al-Shunah or in East Bank urban quarters like Hayy al-Tafaylah in Central Amman. This went hand in hand with a quiet encroachment by Jordanians of tribal origins who sought positions on the lower rungs of the state bureaucracy and laid claim to public spaces they looked upon as clan property.

Once King Hussein signed the Wadi Arabah peace treaty with Israel in 1994, East Bankers became vocal critics because the

accord failed to expedite the return of Palestinian refugees from the kingdom. Hitherto loyal and eminently tribal members of the elite—most notably Ahmad Obeidat, a former prime minister and GID director between 1973 and 1984—cooperated with leftists and the Islamic Action Front, the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, to resist rapid normalization with Israel.

The more radical East Bank nationalists raised the specter of an alternative Palestinian homeland being established in Jordan. They argued that the monarchy's backpedaling on the issue of refugee returns and its failure to complete disengagement from the West Bank kept open the possibility of a future federal or confederal relationship with the Palestinian National Authority that had emerged in the West Bank after the 1993 Oslo Accord between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

The party political opposition that appeared after 1989, along with the coalition of activists that gathered around organizations such as the Association for Combating Zionism after the Wadi Arabah treaty, failed to tap into East Bank discontent. The Islamic Action Front—the only political party of any real sociopolitical weight and, with its parent body the Muslim Brotherhood, the most significant component of the antinormalization campaign—had always rejected Hussein's 1988 disengagement from the West Bank and retained strong ties with the Palestinian Islamist organization Hamas.

Together with other Islamist currents active in Jordan, the Brotherhood made little attempt to expand its support beyond the refugee camps of eastern Amman, al-Zarqa, and Irbid. Islamic Action Front politics—oriented toward political reformists and the pious middle class—focused increasingly on supporting Hamas's strategy in Palestine. This brought the movement into conflict with the Palestinian National Authority and its beneficiaries among the East Bank business elite, but posed little threat to Hussein.

POLITICS AND ECONOMICS UNDER ABDULLAH'S FOURTH KINGDOM

The overall thrust of King Abdullah II's governance was to reconfigure the social bases of Hashemite support while maintaining the monarchy's ties to the military. This seemed necessary “to secure [the] regime [after] the eruption of the second Intifada and the American invasion of Iraq,” to quote Columbia University's Joseph Massad, and because Abdullah faced a potential succession challenge from his younger half-brother Crown Prince Hamzah.

In response, Abdullah appointed former generals to such posts as prime minister and chief of the Royal Court, and he took special care to reward the upper echelons of the officer corps and the elite Special Operations Command, which was also assigned control of the palace guard. The new king consolidated his hold on the GID as well: in 2003, a televised trial on corruption charges ended the career of Samih al-Battikhi, the *Mukhabarat* kingpin who had overseen the succession process.

Abdullah also sought to shore up his internal base by launching a Jordan First campaign in October 2002 that had an explicitly East Bank orientation.⁴ These moves unfolded, however, against a backdrop of economic retrenchment that went hand in hand with a new liberal bargain and a greater role for the largely Palestinian private sector in Jordan's economy. Despite his military background and previous military service, as well as his tenure as head of the Special Operations Command, Abdullah's closest associates were in fact neoliberal technocrats or like-minded entrepreneurs recruited from a newly formed Economic Consultative Council.

The pace of neoliberal reform quickened under the influence of Bassem Awadallah, the most prominent adviser to the palace. Doubling as the regime's chief economic planner and its main interlocutor with the U.S. Agency for International Development and the IMF, Awadallah oversaw the dismembering of publicly owned mining, energy, and telecom firms. These sectors had been dominated by large public enterprises

whose entitlements had formed one of the main pillars of *Mukhabarat* patronage, binding the large class of educated East Bankers that had emerged in the oil era to the monarchy. Awadallah and his associates also oversaw the sale of fixed military assets. Army-owned real estate was placed under the aegis of a palace-controlled semipublic enterprise called Mawared, which then sold the new army headquarters and army lands that were needed for the massive Abdali urban development project. There were also plans for the divestment of the King Hussein Medical Center in 2008, but protest by East Bank tribal leaders managed to put the project on hold.

Many East Bankers viewed these neoliberal policies and proposals as empowering Palestinian-Jordanians at their own expense. While Awadallah was the politician most associated with Palestinian-Jordanians, the lightning rod for resentment was Queen Rania, herself a Palestinian-Jordanian raised in Kuwait. For many East Bankers, her rise (and the specter of her son Hussein II's eventual coronation) seemed to confirm the transformation of Hashemite Jordan from a regime based on a Transjordanian *assabiyyah* (group feeling) into an alternative Palestinian homeland.

THE RECONFIGURATION OF MILITARY POLITICS UNDER ABDULLAH

Given King Abdullah II's inheritance of a hefty \$450 million annual defense budget and large foreign debt levels totaling \$8 billion, cuts to the armed forces and their welfare regime were to be expected.⁵ Amid these fiscal circumstances, Abdullah adopted a strategy of militarized neoliberalism that called for restructuring the Jordanian army, reducing its dependence on heavy armor and artillery, and cutting down on the social services provided to military personnel. For the younger cohorts, austerity budgets precipitated plans for a merger of military pensions with the civilian benefits system administered by the Social Security Corporation. As these trends deepened, they affected the orientation of the members of the officially established Organization of Military Retirees and, more importantly, catalyzed the emergence of a new National

Committee of Retired Servicemen (NCRS) that would play a key role in the *Hirak*.

Plans for a smaller, leaner military used mainly for commercial security services, peacekeeping, and asymmetric warfare had been in the air under King Hussein.⁶ Indeed, some army veterans argued that secret clauses of the Wadi Arabah treaty allowed for drawing down the Jordanian military's deterrence capacity along the border with Israel. These trends seem to have accelerated under Abdullah, however, on some accounts leading to the de facto emergence of a two-tier military: a privileged tier comprising the uppermost levels of the officer corps and such units as the Special Operations Command; and a residual group comprising artillery, armor, and the bulk of the rank and file.

Particular attention was given to a new gendarmerie (*al-Darak*), a 30,000-strong constabulary distinct from the Public Security Directorate, the body historically responsible for the police and law enforcement agencies. The establishment of the gendarmerie marked a shift in the regime's ethnic security map on a scale that paralleled the changes that followed the 1970–1971 civil war. According to one of its longest-serving ex-officers, the gendarmerie's composition was supposed to be only one-third Transjordanian, with Palestinians and recruits from tribes that straddled Jordan's borders with Syria supplying the remainder. Abdullah clearly conceived the *Darak* as the regime's main internal strike force—the cutting edge of a muscular neoliberalism that could deal effectively with internal dissent.

Plans for a major Palestinian component in the *Darak* foundered because of the East Bank's parochial social networks, the source of enduring ties to the military institution still used to maintain Transjordanian access to employment. Anecdotal evidence indicates that Palestinian-Jordanians formed no more than 15 percent of the force in 2011. However, two trends were altering the profile of the military welfare regime as a whole: One was the steady shrinking of Jordan's active service personnel as a proportion of a young and growing population. The other was the extension of

royal dispensations—university scholarships and student aid schemes that were once the preserve of the monarchy’s military and the tribal base—to the Palestinian refugee camps.

The result was to galvanize the politics of military veterans and, in the process, upend the Organization of Military Retirees, which was formally charged with aiding Jordan’s 170,000-plus military pensioners. The NCRS emerged from the network of 80–100 cooperatives run by the organization, according to figures provided by Salim al-Ifat, the committee’s secretary general. A few years into King Abdullah II’s reign, the committee won royal endorsement for a more active role in development and national security. The NCRS’s leading activist, Ali al-Habashnah, marketed the veterans’ movement to the palace as a royalist phalanx that could help safeguard Hashemite rule. However, the NCRS proved peculiarly resistant to external manipulation due to its complex voting and decisionmaking procedures, which privileged the regular army over the security services and restricted retirees ranked at or above major general to an advisory role.

By the time the global commodity spike in 2008–2009 had begun impacting the real incomes of Jordanians, an organized, overwhelmingly Transjordanian pressure group had emerged from within the central power structures of the regime. The group’s base was drawn from those most affected by neoliberal economic restructuring and the Wadi Arabah accord. Moreover, this occurred at a time when the inflationary boom that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq was eroding the real income of Jordanians earning fixed salaries, and as regime initiatives to improve the financial lot of military pensioners were aligning the economic interests of army veterans more closely with the civilian mainstream.

THE REVOLT OF JORDAN'S MILITARY VETERANS

A fierce crackdown on Maan in 2002 deterred discontent in the East Bank hinterlands throughout the first decade of King Abdullah II’s reign, restricting popular protest to largely symbolic demonstrations in Amman during Israel’s assaults on the

West Bank city of Jenin, Lebanon, and Gaza between 2002 and 2009. Public protest was largely confined to the capital, while East Bank dissent was expressed mostly through chants hostile to Queen Rania during football matches between the Wehdat and Faisaly clubs, commonly viewed as Palestinian and Transjordanian respectively.⁷

For its part, the political mainstream was shackled by Abdullah’s shelving of the change agenda. Political reconfiguration was reduced to a game of musical chairs among elite factions, resulting in a series of short-lived cabinets. Intra-elite struggles reached their apogee in 2007 amid allegations—particularly strident on the part of the Islamists—of rigged parliamentary elections under the first government of retired general and former ambassador to Israel Maruf al-Bakhit.

Shifting political allegiances within the military went largely unnoticed by most oppositionists. By the end of Abdullah’s first decade in power in 2009, the impasse of oppositional Transjordanian politics was such that veteran activists of both the Left and East Bank nationalist camps were effectively withdrawing from active politics. This trend was abruptly reversed as labor agitation in Aqaba and among public sector teachers took an unexpected turn after the intervention of the NCRS in alliance with dissident members of the Jordanian elite. Over the next six months, the NCRS collaborated with a widening social movement that took on a distinctly East Bank nationalist coloring, playing a crucial role in precipitating Jordan’s version of the Arab Spring uprisings that began in 2010.

The process was sparked by the stymieing in early 2010 of the *Darak’s* assault on Aqaba port workers who were protesting the planned sale of the port to investors from the United Arab Emirates and the elimination of employee housing that was sure to follow. The army commander in Aqaba, who intervened directly to protect workers who had taken refuge in the nearby military hospital, played a crucial role in thwarting the repressive imposition of neoliberal directives supported by the palace. As a result, a corner was turned: Jordanian laborers had proved themselves able to challenge neoliberal policies,

and workers of East Bank origin realized that the support of kinsmen and sympathizers in the military mainstream could be used effectively to confront the regime.

The success of the Aqaba protests encouraged other dissidents, not least government day workers who had been agitating for more stable livelihoods for some time. Activists among Jordan's 105,000 public school teachers, who called for the reinstatement of the teachers' union, which had been banned in the 1950s, also escalated their protests. Their demand to reestablish public control of education policy directly challenged the palace and led former prime minister Samir Al-Rifai to reject offers of mediation. Together with the continuing neglect of popular movements by the Islamic Action Front, this pushed the teachers toward greater reliance on agitation in the street.

Thanks to the efforts of the *Alarab Alyawm* newspaper columnist Nahid Hattar, the NCRS began to take an active interest in the public sector workers' struggles in late April 2010. By then, the East Bank hinterlands were in turmoil as students joined their striking teachers and walked out of their schools in al-Karak, Ajlun, and al-Salt. Influenced by Hattar and like-minded Transjordanian radicals, the sloganeering of the teachers' committees in al-Karak and al-Salt took on an increasingly nationalistic coloring. Activists now combined protest over socioeconomic grievances with nationalistic rhetoric about the alternative Palestinian homeland.

The NCRS's statement of May 1, 2010, amounted to a political manifesto. Written in collaboration with radical East Bank nationalists and almost certainly in consultation with dissident elements within the Jordanian elite, it warned of a "Zionist scheme for liquidating the Palestinian Question at the expense of the Jordanian People" and published what it claimed were official figures that demonstrated a steady flow of Palestinians resident in the West Bank and Gaza across the Jordan River.

The document described this process as a soft transfer of Palestinians that was made all the more dangerous because

a "narrow and unrepresentative coterie" had "monopolized cabinet formation and decision making, while preventing the Jordanian people from determining their fate and defending Jordan's national interests." Although the statement was careful to express loyalty to King Abdullah II, it closed with an unprecedented attack on Queen Rania, asserting that "the Jordanian constitution grants legal powers to His Majesty the King, alone and that these powers are shared by no other party regardless of kinship or title."

The NCRS took care to argue that Palestinian-Jordanians resident in the East Bank before the 1988 disengagement were a basic component of Jordan's national makeup; and its leaders participated enthusiastically in Palestinian-centered events commemorating the 1948 exodus or highlighting the refugees' right of return. However, by combining a call for complete disengagement from the West Bank with a critique of the regime's neoliberal policies, the NCRS antagonized much of Amman's political elite.

A formidable—if ad hoc—alliance emerged that joined Palestinian-Jordanian businessmen with East Bank notables; anti-normalization activists and opposition parliamentarians with defenders of the Wadi Arabah peace treaty; and the left wing of the political opposition with the Islamic Action Front. This disparate coalition circulated a widely disseminated electronic petition in direct response to the veterans' manifesto, in effect recycling an article by Obeidat that asserted the inevitability of unity between Jordan and Palestine, reaffirmed the special and exceptional relationship that bound their peoples, and, in a clear echo of palace rhetoric, warned against untoward steps that threatened national unity.

Clashes between the NCRS and this new Pan-Jordanian coalition highlighted deep-seated disagreements over the boundaries of Jordan's political community as well as differences over the resolution of the Palestinian question and the refugees' right of return. Yet the popular agitation precipitated by the May 1 manifesto ensured that political momentum shifted toward various strands of radical Transjordanian nationalists. As a result, Obeidat and his allies—soon to be organized in a

National Salvation Front—gained little purchase on East Bank opinion. Instead, their intervention served to move the terms of the political opposition’s agenda in a more radical direction. By fall 2010, the idea of reestablishing Jordan’s 1952 constitution and enacting a constitutional monarchy had crept into mainstream political discourse.

JORDAN'S SPRING IN WINTER

The publication of the May 1 manifesto galvanized a militant strand of East Bank radicalism that coalesced around the NCRS, demanding that entitlements be awarded as rights rather than dispensations; that citizenship no longer be granted to Palestinian residents of the West Bank or to refugees from Gaza; and that a legal framework be created to govern disengagement from the West Bank.

Beyond vague apprehensions about the alternative Palestinian homeland, most East Bank demands focused on socioeconomic issues, to which the NCRS responded with two further memorandums. First, the NCRS’s economic memorandum detailed the buildup of public debt under King Abdullah II, arguing that a more transparent process of public sector divestment—one that ensured that the full proceeds of privatization went to the public purse—would have kept public debt in check. Second, a defense manifesto, which was privately circulated for reasons of national security, documented the waste and inefficiencies of defense procurement and called for the rebuilding of credible deterrence against Israel.

With the palace and its neoliberal proponents on the defensive, the military veterans seized the political high ground. The NCRS endorsed the Muslim Brotherhood’s boycott of the November 2010 parliamentary election, effectively stripping the incumbent Rifai government of any prospect of electoral legitimacy. While a cabinet reshuffle and the onset of electioneering slowed the momentum of popular mobilization during the fall months, the committee embarked on wide-ranging talks with diverse activists and tribal groupings

aimed at convening a sixth Jordanian National Congress. The NCRS and its radical allies viewed this as a means of broadening Jordan’s national identity to include the Pan-Arab politics of the pre-independence Congress movement, which existed from 1928 to 1933. However, this agenda was inevitably viewed—if somewhat unfairly—as exclusively Transjordanian by its opponents.

East Bank popular activism grew in the wake of the November 2010 election, against the backdrop of surging tribal violence in Maan, al-Karak, and al-Salt sparked by widespread perceptions of electoral fraud. The more radical members of the military veterans’ movement and the leaders of the al-Salt and al-Karak teachers’ committees joined with Hattar and other East Bank activists to launch the Progressive Jordanian Tendency. In effect, this formalized the grouping that had coordinated and publicized the popular upsurge accompanying the May 1 manifesto.

During the last quarter of 2010, the Progressive Jordanian Tendency spearheaded a new cycle of activism, with its younger members forging an effective alliance—eventually formalized as *Jayyin* (the ones who are coming) with young leftists, often of Palestinian origin, who were active in the Social Left nongovernmental organization, and with Islamist Transjordanians from the youth wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Irbid.

In contrast to earlier upheavals in the East Bank hinterlands, popular protest in 2010 bore rapid fruit as the military veterans added their organizational weight to the youth movement and the Islamic Action Front began to provide limited support. A demonstration in front of the Jordanian parliament in December forced the new deputies to distance themselves from the recently elected speaker of parliament and former prime minister Faysal al-Fayiz, who opposed a teachers’ union.

In the first week of January 2011, a series of demonstrations broke out in various cities and towns, bringing *Jayyin* together with teachers, government workers, and army veterans. On

January 14, a Day of Rage saw both the veterans' movement and the Islamists throw their full weight behind a major demonstration in Amman.

By now, the Arab Spring was in full swing. With the regime of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak tottering and the shadow of Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution spreading eastward, King Abdullah II capitulated and unceremoniously sacked the then prime minister Samir Al-Rifai. He was replaced by Maruf al-Bakhit, a former general who had been in dialogue with the NCRS and its allies for some months. Bakhit formed a new cabinet stacked with figures sympathetic to the East Bank nationalists.

FROM JORDANIAN SPRING TO EAST BANK HIRAK

The Bakhit government moved quickly to promise a teachers' union, an all-out assault on corruption, and genuine political reform. It also distanced itself from neoliberalism, advocating a third way based on a social market economy. King Abdullah II himself appeared to endorse Bakhit's pledges in a letter of appointment urging the new cabinet to combat corruption and reform economic governance.

In the months that followed, the palace endorsed a National Dialogue Committee headed by the Palestinian-Jordanian speaker of the Senate and former prime minister Tahir al-Masri. The committee was tasked with reforming Jordan's electoral system. A second committee was established to review constitutional amendments—in some cases stretching back to the first decade of King Hussein's reign in the 1950s—that had over the years greatly expanded the power of the executive at the expense of the parliament and the judiciary.

At first, these reforms seemed to have little impact on East Bank opinion. A February 5, 2011, statement issued by some three dozen notables from prominent East Bank clans was more radical than the May 1 manifesto. It accused the queen

and her family of financial improprieties, and warned once again of externally orchestrated campaigns aimed at naturalizing Palestinians and creating an alternative homeland for them in Jordan. It then gave notice that the compact between Jordanians and the Hashemite dynasty, once based on mutual partnership, was being violated.

The committee of 36 went on to criticize the regime's neo-liberal economic outlook, castigating the World Bank as the author of a program for Zionist-imperialist globalization and, in effect, linking Abdullah's chosen economic reform model with Israel. The group's statement concluded by affirming the need for liberty, equality, and democracy as the only way to deal with what it described as a revolutionary deluge that would reach Jordan sooner or later.

Despite the ratcheting up of radical Transjordanian rhetoric, both the teachers and the NCRS had taken a backseat in street mobilization efforts. Now that the new cabinet agreed to establish a union, the teachers' committees were keen to maintain cordial relations with the government. Habashnah was inducted into the National Dialogue Committee, and King Abdullah II was careful to hold a series of high-profile meetings with a wide spectrum of retired servicemen, during which activists were allowed to express popular grievances with unusual candor.

By early 2011, the veterans' movement had been reduced to a 30-strong rump (down from an original 70 members) due to defections and co-optation. The movement was beset by differences over strategy as well as rivalries between the NCRS and a coterie of retired major generals. However, Islamists had largely supplanted the retired servicemen and their East Bank allies in mass demonstrations in Amman. East Bank protest was largely confined to smaller outbursts in the East Bank hinterlands that came to be known as the Jordanian *Hirak*.

More than 8,000 protests, marches, and strikes occurred between January 2011 and August 2013. But the largely Transjordanian *Hirak* failed to generate a unified leadership or agree on a national program, taking its direction instead

from local coordination committees bound together by loose networks of mostly young activists using social media. At times, they were able to stir up spectacular anti-regime outbursts—including an assault on King Abdullah II’s motorcade in Tafilah in summer 2012 and during the vast outpouring of popular anger after IMF-imposed fuel hikes in November of the same year—but these eventually petered out.

Jordan’s communally divided political field, King Abdullah II’s and the security forces’ tact in handling demonstrations, and the practical difficulties of organizing large protests in a sprawling city such as Amman spared the kingdom from revolutionary upheaval. Abdullah was left free to undertake both coercive measures that weakened the *Hirak* and largely cosmetic reforms that defused popular discontent.

ABDULLAH RIDES OUT THE JASMINE WAVE

Bolstered by external support, the militarized welfare regime that still sustained most East Bankers continued to function at levels that made loyalty appear preferable to rebellion, and ensured that the prospect of revolutionary change seemed like a dangerous leap into the unknown. Nonetheless, King Abdullah II himself appeared in June 2011 to dangle the promise of an eventual transition to constitutional kingship.

However, the drive for reform soon came into conflict with his desire for more gradual change and the limitations this placed on the National Dialogue Committee and the Royal Committee for the Revision of the Constitution. The latter’s recommendations, which were adopted by parliamentary vote rather than popular referendum in August 2011, created a constitutional court and an independent electoral commission but otherwise kept the basic structures of Abdullah’s autocracy intact. Despite increasing the quota for female members of parliament and earmarking more seats for deputies elected on nationwide lists, the mixed electoral system advocated by the National Dialogue Committee was rejected in favor of an electoral law that fell far short of the reformers’ expectations.

The escalating influx of grants and other external aid encouraged King Abdullah II to backtrack on his reform pledges. This included sizable grants from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, continued annual U.S. economic and military assistance, and billion-dollar grants and soft loans from the European Union and IMF. Thanks to these renewed levels of strategic aid, the per capita levels of rent disbursed by the regime remained much higher than those available in Tunisia or Egypt (although lower than those in the Gulf Cooperation Council states). This allowed the government to paper over Jordan’s yawning budget deficit and to finance ad hoc salary increases for government pensioners and employees. This policy of royal dispensations—including a large pension increase for military retirees in March 2012—helped co-opt the rank and file of the military veterans’ movement and isolate the more radical members of the NCRS.

With parliamentary elections pending, Abdullah was nonetheless careful to reach out to the military veterans, the *Hirak* leadership, allied East Bank nationalists, and the non-Islamist party political opposition. In the wake of major popular protests in November 2012, East Bank notables such as Rajai al-Muashir arranged face-to-face meetings between the king and his East Bank critics. During these meetings, Abdullah reportedly listened patiently to unusually frank denunciations of regime policies, while offering vague promises of case-by-case reform in exchange for his pledges to publicly endorse the electoral process and to participate in the January 2013 poll.

The January 2013 parliamentary election was a triumph for the regime and an unmitigated disaster for the East Bank opposition that had emerged since 2010. For the regime’s foreign supporters, the result of the vote—a parliament of tribal loyalists and wealthy businessmen invested in the stability of the regime—appeared to confirm the wisdom of Jordan’s gradualist approach to democratic reform. Few of the leading military veterans or their allies took the risk of standing in the election, and those who did lacked the financial resources to support a nationwide parliamentary campaign or the social power to mount an effective bid for a local seat.

For the radical rump of the NCRS, matters were compounded by the fact that Habashnah allowed himself to be placed second on an electoral list headed by a tribal candidate; the latter abandoned the veterans' movement once his parliamentary seat was secured. With his internal support assured, Abdullah moved to enact additional constitutional amendments that effectively placed the military and GID under permanent monarchical control, and beyond the purview of the parliament.

CONCLUSION

By June 2015, the democratic promise of Jordan's early spring was a distant memory. When the red banner of the Hashemites was flown on Army Day on June 10, replacing the national flag that Jordan had inherited from Faysalite Syria, this appeared to advertise King Abdullah II's adherence to a dynastic nationalism very much at odds with the radical Transjordanian nationalism that had taken center stage in 2011–2013.

Despite the radicalism of its members, the Jordanian *Hirak* had failed to develop the organizational permanence or institutional capacity that would allow it to project its demands beyond the Transjordanian hinterlands where it was born. For its part, the military veterans' revolt was as much about struggles within the Jordanian state as about the politics of protest in the street. The entanglement of the NCRS in intra-elite intrigues, coupled with the abiding dependence of its followers on royal dispensations, prevented the committee from developing into a full-scale systemic challenge to the status quo.

Yet a focus solely on the *Hirak's* shortcomings, or on the military revolt's limited aims, would underestimate the new vistas opened up by the popular protests witnessed between 2010 and 2013. The NCRS May 1 manifesto politicized the intercommunal rivalry on which the monarchy had depended for so long, while shattering the glass ceiling that had long

protected the monarchy from popular censure. The effects on Jordanian politics promise to be long-term and far-reaching. As Habashnah aptly put it, "For Jordanians, the monarchy used to be a sacred issue, but now it is the issue. If there is no real political reform and no economic change, I think the people will explode one day."

Given Jordan's unresolved social and economic issues and the embedded fiscal dysfunctions that have steadily eroded the country's militarized welfare regime, there is every prospect of further unrest on the East Bank. But it remains to be seen whether Jordan's fragmented political field will allow for mass mobilization, and whether Habashneh and his fellow oppositionists can find the political means—both material and symbolic—needed to project popular discontent onto a still-fractured national stage.

NOTES

- 1 The argument on the centrality of a militarized sociopolitical contract in Jordan has been made in Ghassan Salameh, *Al-Mujtama wa al-Dawlah fi al-Mashriq al-Arabi* [Society and State in the Arab Levant] (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 1999), 157. A similar theme is taken up for more recent years in Anne Marie Baylouny, “Militarizing Welfare: Neo-liberalism and Jordanian Policy,” *Middle East Journal*, vol. 62, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 277–303, <http://faculty.nps.edu/ambaylou/Baylouny%20military%20welfare.pdf>.
- 2 NCRS members gave a figure of 700,000 military pensioners and their dependents (information received via the author’s personal communication with Salim al-Ifat, the secretary general of the NCRS). The quality of the services provided to military personnel is illustrated by the fact that over 600 open heart operations a year were being performed in the King Hussein Medical Center by the early 1980s. See Adil Awwad Ziyadat, *Al-Khadamat al-sihyiyah fi al-mamlakah al-urdunniyyah al-hashimiyyah* (Irbid: Yarmuk University, 1994), 185.
- 3 Baylouny, “Militarizing Welfare,” points out that the linkage between arms imports and growing public debt was made in the World Bank’s post mortems on the 1989 crisis. By then, apparently well-informed pamphleteers who penned various versions of a Black Dossier (*al-Malaff al-Aswad*) on corruption in high places had long since identified a number of palace favorites as key intermediaries of the various deals. Something of the scale of the sums involved was revealed by the contretemps that followed the UK’s cancellation of the sale of Tornado jet fighters to Jordan in 1989. According to one source from the *Observer* newspaper quoted by Mark Phythian in *The Politics of British Arms Sales Since 1964* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), “The basic price for a Tornado [was] around £22 million, the Jordanian price [was] in excess of £35 million” with the difference paid in “hidden commissions to middlemen and politicians.”
- 4 It is worth noting that the Jordan First campaign failed to please both of Jordan’s communal groups and was “viewed by some Palestinian Jordanians as meaning ‘Palestinians, last,’ and by some Transjordanians as ‘Jordanians, last,’” in the words of Joseph Massad, “Producing the Palestinian as Other: Jordan and the Palestinians,” in *Temps et espaces en Palestine: Flux et résistances identitaires*, edited by Roger Heacock (Beirut: Presses de l’Ifpo, 2008), 273–292, <http://books.openedition.org/ifpo/499?lang=en>.
- 5 Roland Dallas, King Hussein: *A Life on the Edge* (London: Profile Books, 1999), 260.
- 6 The logic of moving to a more compact security establishment by downsizing the army by one-third is set out in Alexander Bligh, “The Jordanian Army: Between Domestic and External Challenges,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Summer 2001): 13–20, <http://www.rubincenter.org/meria/2001/06/bligh.pdf>. For details of Jordan’s participation in peacekeeping operations and asymmetric warfare, see Anthony Cordesman, *Arab-Israeli Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric Wars* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006), 225–230, <http://csis.org/publication/arab-israeli-military-forces-era-asymmetric-wars>.
- 7 The pattern of the chants captures nicely the dilemma of monarchist Transjordanians: Wehdat fans sang “*Umm Husayn jibi awlad, khalina nubkam hal-bilad*,” to which the only possible response by Faysaly supporters was “*Talligha wa min janḡak ibnatayn minna*.”

This regional insight was prepared as part of the 2014–2015 Renegotiating Civil-Military Relations in Arab States: Political and Economic Governance in Transition Project run by the Carnegie Middle East Center. The project sought to promote research on armed forces in Arab states and on the challenges of democratic transition.

The Carnegie Middle East Center is grateful to International Development Research Center (IDRC) for their support of the Civil-Military Relations in Arab States project. The opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author.

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