



How Revolutionary Was Jordan's *Hirak*?

*What the Incognito Participation of Palestinian-Jordanians in
Hirak Tells Us About the Movements*

By E.J. Karmel
Head of Research, Identity Center

June, 2014
Amman, Jordan

Introduction

In the three years since the wave of “Arab Spring” unrest first swept across the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, analysis regarding the opposition movement’s main actors, *hirak*, has become increasingly nuanced.¹ The majority of the work on *hirak*, however, has focused on their rural East Bank Jordanian origins, relegating any Palestinian-Jordanian involvement in the movements to the analytical sidelines. The marginalization of Palestinian-Jordanians in these studies has meant that a crucial dynamic within the movements has not yet been widely noted: *Palestinian-Jordanian participation in hirak was intentionally underrepresented by the participants themselves.*²

To be sure, acknowledging this deliberate misrepresentation does not yield a vastly different understanding of the demographic composition of *hirak* than has previously been asserted. Regardless of the concealed participation of Palestinian-Jordanians, the movements remained East Bank Jordanian dominated (especially in rural areas of the Kingdom). However, recognizing that it was necessary for those Palestinian-Jordanians who did participate to hide their participation is beneficial not only for attaining a better understanding of the current political precariousness of Palestinian-Jordanians in the Kingdom, but also for identifying the ideologies driving *hirak* and determining how revolutionary they actually were.

Hirak As a Rural Phenomenon?

Well-informed works on *hirak*, such as Sean Yom’s recent article in the *Middle East Journal*, have very astutely connected the rural genesis of the movements to the deterioration of the Hashemite relationship with the East Bank tribes.³ The corrosion of the once symbiotic monarchy-tribe relationship has in large part been a function of Jordan’s compliance with international aid conditionality. In return for the financial

¹ See, e.g., Sarah A. Tobin, “Jordan’s Arab Spring: The Middle Class and Anti-Revolution,” *Middle East Policy* Vol. 19, No. 1 (Spring 2012): 96-109; Curtis R. Ryan, “Identity Politics, Reform, and Protest in Jordan,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 11 (2011): 564–578; Nicolas Pelham, “Jordan’s Balancing Act,” *MERIP*, 22 February 2011 <<<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero022211>>>; Asher Susser, “Jordan 2011: Uneasy Lies the Head, Middle East Brief,” Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, June 2011 <<<http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB52.pdf>>>; and Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Modern King in the Arab Spring,” *The Atlantic*, 2013 <<<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/print/2013/04/monarch-in-the-middle/309270/>>>; Sean L. Yom, “Jordan: The Ruse of Reform,” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 24, No. 3 (July 2013): 127-139; and Sean L. Yom, “Tribal Politics in Contemporary Jordan: The case of the Hirak Movement,” *The Middle East Journal* Vol. 68, No. 2 (Spring 2014): 229-247.

² The intentional misrepresentation of *hirak* movements by their founders was a phenomenon that was repeatedly brought up by prominent *hirak* members who participated in both interviews and focus groups that I conducted whilst working for the Identity Center on two projects: a map of the extant political parties and *hirak* in the Kingdom, as well as a policy paper regarding Palestinian-Jordanian political participation. See Identity Center, “Map of Political Parties and Movements in Jordan, 2013-2014,” January 2014 <<<http://www.identity-center.org/en/node/263>>>; and Identity Center, “Policy Paper: The 1988 Disengagement Regulations and Their Effects on Identity and Participation in Jordan,” February 2014. <<<http://www.identity-center.org/en/node/273>>> To my knowledge, the closest recognition of this misrepresentation was made by Sarah Tobin, who notes that Palestinian-Jordanians only became active when “ethnic [East Bank] Jordanians were already protesting.” See Tobin, “Jordan’s Arab Spring,” 98.

³ See Yom, “Tribal Politics in Contemporary Jordan.”

crutch with which they have provided Jordan since the early 1990s, international financial institutions and Western governments have required the monarchy to curtail its reliance on patronage: a key means of maintaining the longstanding support of East Bank Jordanians.⁴ The consequent decline in favouritism – specifically within the public sector – transformed the monarchy's key pillar of support into one of its opponents. The effects of this watershed decline of East Banker support for the monarchy was, as many have now noted, made overtly clear by the rural East Bank Jordanian launch of *hirak*. Emerging in January 2011, *hirak* first became active in regions once considered to be regime strongholds, such as Dhiban and Karak.

Hirak, however, did not remain a purely rural phenomenon. With opposition fervour spreading out beyond the almost homogeneously East Banker areas of rural Jordan, *hirak* emerged in urban centers where they were founded by both East Bank and Palestinian-Jordanian members. Yet, despite the pervasive participation of Palestinian-Jordanians in these more urban *hirak*, their presence was partially veiled under a façade of East Bank Jordanianness and the flood of red-and-white *keffiyas*. Their inconspicuousness was not serendipitous, but rather it represented a concerted effort to stage-manage the image of the movements. Along with their East Bank Jordanian counterparts, Palestinian-Jordanian participants in many of the urban *hirak* decided that keeping their involvement secret was expedient both for their own safety and for the success of the movements. It was collectively acknowledged that the visible presence of politically active Palestinian-Jordanians within the movements would only represent a liability, as their capacity to openly participate in Jordanian politics is extremely limited.

Palestinian-Jordanian Precariousness

The precarious political landscape upon which Palestinian-Jordanians are currently balancing is of course not a recent development. Since the 1970 civil war, their position has remained uncertain. The civil war led both to the exclusion of Palestinian-Jordanians from the public sector and to increased uncertainty regarding their future in the Kingdom. The holding of a Jordanian passport had previously constituted sufficient proof of one's fidelity to Jordan and also served as a guarantee of one's rights, but the war led to a reconceptualization of what it meant to be Jordanian. Accompanying the fruition of a latent East Bank Jordanian nationalism, the government began to articulate a new prescriptive Jordanian identity.⁵ Abandoning its former efforts to instill a "hybrid identity" through juridical inclusion, the government began increasingly to focus on socio-cultural expressions of "Jordanianness" after 1970.⁶ As such, one's holding of a Jordanian passport quickly became ancillary to his or her ability to identify with

⁴ See Warwick Knowles, *Jordan Since 1989: A Study in Political Economy* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2005); Rex Brynen, "Economic Crisis and Post-Rentier Democratization in the Arab World: The Case of Jordan," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* Vol. XXV No. 1 (March 1992): 69-97; and Glenn E. Robinson, "Defensive Democratization in Jordan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* Vol. 30, No. 3 (August 1998): 387-410.

⁵ Adnan Abu-Odeh, *Jordanians, Palestinians, & the Hashemite Kingdom in the Middle East Peace Process* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1999).

⁶ Laurie A. Brand, "Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Summer 1995): 50.

supposedly traditional, but often universalized or even invented, expressions of “Jordanian” heritage.⁷

The importance of a passport or citizenship ostensibly declined even further when Jordan unilaterally disengaged from the West Bank in 1988. Along with the 1.5 million West Bank Palestinian-Jordanians who lost their citizenship overnight, the Palestinian-Jordanian inhabitants of the East Bank who retained their citizenship were deprived of a sense of national confidence. This feeling of insecurity was reinforced by the subsequent revocations of citizenship from Palestinian-Jordanian that were undertaken by the Follow-Up and Inspections Department of the Ministry of the Interior. Although the exact number of these revocations is unknown (and has likely been frequently exaggerated), the fear of such revocations has permeated through the psyches of the Kingdom's Palestinian-Jordanian population.⁸ Anxiety regarding the seemingly sporadic nature of the revocations has encouraged Palestinian-Jordanians to avoid any action that might result in accusations of disloyalty. The potential consequences are simply too large. Indeed, without proper refugee laws in Jordan, the repercussions of losing citizenship for education, health, property ownership, as well as other state services and rights, are severe.

Rather Bear Those Ills They Have

Palestinian-Jordanian fear of political participation in the growing opposition has been reinforced (and convoluted) by the tandem concern that political engagement might only yield a worse situation. In comparison with other Palestinian diaspora communities in the region, the political position of Palestinian-Jordanians is relatively good, and compared with other regimes in the region, the Hashemites have treated Palestinians very well. In fact, many Palestinian-Jordanians regard the Hashemites as a guarantor of their rights, for it was the monarchy that uniquely bestowed citizenship upon them after *al Nakba* and it is the monarchy that continues to safeguard their interests against the pressures of East Bank nationalist forces within the government.

In the last quarter century, moreover, many Palestinian-Jordanians have benefitted financially from Hashemite economic policies. With their predominance in the private sector, Palestinian-Jordanians profited from Jordan's turn to the IMF and its consequent adoption of neo-liberal economic reform in the early 1990s. While many Palestinian-Jordanians may be unsatisfied with their political rights, most are unwilling to jeopardize their current financial positions to gain those rights. Caught between these political and economic forces, many have grown politically apathetic, choosing to enjoy what rights they have and to simultaneously tolerate the inequality that they face. The growth of apathy vis-à-vis the political situation in the Kingdom helps explain why most Palestinian-Jordanians chose not to participate in *hirak*.

⁷ Joseph A. Massad, *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

⁸ The most frequently cited figures for post-disengagement revocations are derived from a Human Rights Watch Report. See Human Rights Watch, “Stateless Again: Palestinian-Origin Jordanians Deprived of their Nationality,” February 2, 2010.

<<<http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/jordan0210webwcover.pdf>>>

The People Want the Fall of the Regime?

The small group of Palestinian-Jordanians who had not grown apathetic and was willing to engage in *hirak* certainly appreciated the risks of explicitly doing so. *Hirak* founders were painfully aware that advertising the existence of a Palestinian-Jordanian element within the movements would render them susceptible to accusations of disloyalty. In fact, even with the intentional self-(mis)representation of the movements as being purely East Bank Jordanian, the government still tried to discredit *hirak*, dismissing them as the machinations of a disloyal Palestinian-Jordanian element of the population. This dynamic highlights the divergent opportunities that are respectively available to Palestinian and East Bank Jordanians. While East Bank Jordanians can oppose specific government policies and simultaneously retain their loyalist status, Palestinian-Jordanians who criticize any policy are accused of infidelity to Jordan and of harbouring mixed loyalties.

With such an acute disparity between Palestinian and East Bank Jordanians, it is clear why the founders of *hirak* deliberately chose to represent themselves as being purely East Banker. The *hirak* movements exploited their East Bank Jordanian character to implicitly vouch for their continued loyalty to the monarchy so that they could criticize the government's policies and corruption and push for extensive reform without being immediately dismissed as traitors. And, in reality, what they were pushing for was hardly traitorous or revolutionary. No *hirak* pursued as a strategic goal the abolishment of the monarchy.⁹ On the contrary, the *hirak* asked the monarchy to help them address key problems in Jordan.

In a recent article published in the *Middle East Journal*, Sean Yom argues that *hirak* crossed a previously established red line because calls were made for the fall of the regime. Yom is correct; such demands were voiced, and they did indeed represent a significant departure from extant protest parameters. However, they did not reflect the long-term goals of any *hirak* movement.¹⁰ Aside from sporadic murmurs that were expressed by individuals participating in various *hirak* protests as early as spring 2011, anti-monarchical demands only really materialized at the peak of *hirak*'s activity during the 2012 November Uprising.¹¹ They emerged in the heat of the protests at a time when the movements were being encouraged by domestic economic developments and spurned on by events elsewhere in the region. The momentum of the November Uprising, however, quickly dissipated along with these more revolutionary slogans.

The *hirak* presented themselves as loyalist movements that were concerned with specific demands. Indeed, it was this delicate balance that attracted some Palestinian-Jordanians

⁹ See Identity Center, "Map of Political Parties and Movements in Jordan, 2013-2014."

¹⁰ The only real exceptions were the Amman-based Tafilah Quarter Movement (*Hirak Hai at Tafilah*) and, to a lesser extent, the Free People of Tefilah Hirak (*Hirak Ahrar at Tafilah*). They were among the earliest *hirak* to articulate the Arab Spring's rallying cry: "*ash shab yurid isqat an nizam*" (the people want to overthrow the regime) and essentially the only *hirak* to adopt anti-monarchical demands in a more systematic manner. That being said, such demands still only represented the views of specific portions of their members, not the movements as a whole.

¹¹ Even when urban and rural *hirak* congregated at Amman's Jamal Abdul Nasser Square ("*Duar Dakhalia*") on March 24 and 25, 2011 during the second most intense period of the protests, the organizers erected a large photo of the King to clearly demonstrate their continued loyalty to the Hashemites.

to the movements. Palestinian-Jordanians did not join *hirak* and then agree to conceal their participation because they wanted to push for the fall of the regime. They joined their East Bank Jordanian brethren – and then stood in their shadows during the subsequent protests – so that together they could ask the monarchy for reform. Extreme voices emerged within some *hirak*, but they did not reflect the long-term goals of any, and they certainly did not personify the movements as a vague amorphous whole.

Hirak did not focus on the fall of the regime. They followed a less well-known rally cry of the Arab Spring: “*ash shab yurid islah an nizam*” (the people want to reform the regime).



Picture of Jordanian note on which *Hirak ash Shababi* (Youth Hirak) has written “the people want to reform the regime.”¹²

*The views expressed in this article do not reflect the opinions of the Identity Center, but solely those of the author.

¹² “Youth Hirak... ‘The People Want to Reform the Regime’ on Banknotes.” *Jordan Zad*.
<<<http://www.jordanzad.com/index.php?page=article&id=49902>>>