

Case Study: Jordan

Welfare, Political Settlements, and Protest: Navigating Neoliberal Reforms and Social Tensions in Jordan

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Introduction

This research examines the intersection of social welfare and conflict in Jordan, providing a detailed analysis of the evolution of the country's social protection mechanisms and the nature of protests over the past decade, while also tracing longer-term patterns.

Jordan's political stability has historically hinged on a system of economic patronage, referred to as the "Hashemite Compact," through which state resources, such as public sector jobs and subsidies were allocated to secure the loyalty of key constituencies, particularly East Bank Jordanians. However, the introduction of neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s began to dismantle this social contract. The state gradually shifted from universal welfare provisions to targeted social programmes, including the National Aid Fund (NAF), leading to rising economic inequalities and weakening traditional loyalties, which in turn triggered increasing public dissatisfaction and sporadic protests.

The findings of this study reveal that the erosion of welfare entitlements has been central to the growing dissatisfaction, particularly among East Bank Jordanians, who have seen their economic advantages diminish. While Jordan has largely avoided violent unrest, this gradual rollback of state support has contributed to significant protests, most notably in 2018, which exposed widespread frustrations over socioeconomic inequality and government policies. In response, the state has employed tactical measures to contain these protests, including temporary economic concessions and reliance on external financial assistance, without addressing the deeper structural issues at play.

Furthermore, the paper addresses the Syrian refugee crisis and its impact on Jordan's social and economic infrastructure. The influx of refugees has placed additional strain on resources and exacerbated tensions between host communities and refugees. Despite efforts by the state to manage the crisis, these measures have been insufficient to alleviate the rising tensions or address the underlying socio-economic disparities that pervade Jordanian society.

Finally, the study explores how the Jordanian regime has managed protest movements through a combination of coercive tactics, such as the use of security forces, and non-coercive measures, including political liberalization and symbolic reforms. The regime's strategy of deepening societal divisions between East Bank Jordanians and Palestinians has effectively undermined unified opposition movements, allowing the state to maintain its grip on power despite ongoing economic challenges.

Methodology

This research draws on a comprehensive review of existing literature on Jordan's socioeconomic and political development, while also analysing conflict patterns within the Kingdom. The study integrates both qualitative and empirical approaches by incorporating interviews with key stakeholders from various sectors of Jordanian political and economic life. These interviews, for the most part, have supported existing analysis, while providing key insights that contribute to a deeper understanding of the country's evolving political settlement.

In addition to interviews, the research utilises primary sources and gray literature, including governmental reports and NGO publications, to expand findings and provide novel information. This body of data is further enriched by the author's extensive fieldwork in Jordan over the past decade, particularly in the capacity of an advisor to ARDD (Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development). This long-term engagement in Jordanian society allows for participant observation,

where firsthand experiences in meetings, project implementation, and discussions with local actors have informed the interpretation of social and political dynamics.

Background: Situating Welfare and Conflict in Jordan

A critical aspect of this imbalance lay in the monarchy's early incorporation of the Bedouin tribes of the East Bank into the state apparatus. In exchange for their loyalty, under King Abdullah I and his successors these tribes were integrated into the military and security services, providing them privileged access to public sector jobs, land, and other state resources. This arrangement ensured that the monarchy had the support of influential tribal leaders, while simultaneously creating a stable base of support within the country's power structures (Massad, 2001).

The Hashemite Compact and the Politics of Welfare Distribution:

Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the subsequent influx of Palestinian refugees posed a significant challenge for the Hashemite monarchy. Jordan suddenly found itself with a large Palestinian population, which required integration into the social and economic fabric of the country. The monarchy adopted a careful balancing act, ensuring that while Palestinians became economically influential, especially in urban areas and business sectors, however, key positions in the military and government remained dominated by East Bank Jordanians, primarily of tribal origin. (Massad, 2001; Shlaim, 2008).

Economic patronage in this settlement further reinforced this unequal balance. In the decades after independence, the state provided extensive public sector employment to East Bank Jordanians. Public sector jobs, particularly in the military and civil service, offered not only economic stability but also social benefits, such as healthcare and education, reinforcing loyalty to the regime. In order to keep a balance, the monarchy also implemented subsidies on essential goods like bread and fuel, which helped secure broader popular support. (Baylouni, 2008; Tell, 2015). This system has been defined as a "moral economy" in which employment and welfare was considered a right of citizenship and a vector for fair economic distribution (Lacouture, 2020)

The laws enacted during this early period reflect the state's efforts to address social protection, while entrenching the unequal distribution of resources. Although legislation aimed at subsidising essential commodities, such as wheat and sugar, alongside the creation of the Ministry of Social Affairs in 1956, sought to establish social safety nets and coordinate services for the broader population, other legislative initiatives, such as the Military Retirement Law No. 33 of 1959 and the Civil Retirement Law No. 34 of 1959, prioritised the welfare of public and military employees. These laws institutionalised comprehensive retirement mechanisms, health insurance, and social security benefits for public servants, particularly East Bank Jordanians, thus reinforcing the state's commitment to its core constituency. By solidifying their access to state resources and protections, these measures further privileged public employees within Jordanian society. In contrast, liberal professionals, such as doctors, dentists, and engineers, mostly of Palestinian origin, were excluded from this system and relied on their own systems of social protection, typically through professional associations.¹ These organizations took on the responsibility of offering basic benefits, such as pensions and disability coverage, underscoring the stark disparity between state-supported public servants and those outside the regime's primary patronage network. (Baylouni, 2010)

¹ The Doctors' Association was established in 1944 and as part of its mandate, it pledged to "defend the dignity of doctors and their families in cases of need and old age"; the Engineers Association formed in 1948 but was officially recognized in 1949; and the Dentists' Association was established in 1952

The military increased three-fold from 1961 to 1975, by 1975, with one-fourth of the domestic labour force in the security services (Baylouni, 2008). The 1970 Black September conflict, which saw the Jordanian military confront the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), led to a decisive shift in the regime's policies. In the aftermath, the monarchy initiated a process known as "Jordanization," aimed at reducing Palestinian influence in the military and civil service. This policy sought to ensure that East Bank Jordanians, particularly from loyal tribal backgrounds, remained in control of sensitive positions within the state apparatus. (Baylouni, 2008; Schwedler, 2024)

The Expansion of Welfare in the 1970s

The 1970s experienced an expansion of state-led welfare programmes that were reactive to market pressures and aimed at ensuring social stability. Some of the welfare mechanisms were fuelled by the domestic inflation, caused by the economic boom driven by oil revenues, foreign aid (which accounted for 50% of government revenue), and remittances sent by expatriates. State salaries could not keep pace with rising prices, which led to unrest, including discontent within the military (Baylouni, 2008; Tell, 2015; Martinez, 2022). In response to these economic challenges, the Jordanian government adopted a proactive role in managing the economy through the creation of the Ministry of Supply (MoS), established in 1974, tasked with administering subsidies on essential and politically sensitive goods. Maximum retail prices were set, and the government imported goods to be sold below cost through civil and military cooperatives, primarily benefiting public sector employees. Initially, these subsidies focused on staples like wheat, sugar, and petroleum but later expanded to include a wide range of food and non-food items such as powdered milk, bread, soap, and cigarettes. (Martinez, 2022) While the entire population benefited from the general reduction in market prices, access to the cooperatives remained restricted to state employees, reflecting the state's ongoing preferential treatment of its core base of East Bank Jordanians (Baylouni, 2008). Further to these regulatory measures, and likely influenced by Arab socialism principles that had gained prominence in neighbouring countries, the government enacted the Temporary Social Protection Law No. 30 of 1978, enacted in 1979, expanded welfare provisions to include categories such as old age, disability, death insurance, and work injury insurance.

The End of State-Led Welfare and the Turn to Economic Liberalization

State-led welfare came to an end with the regional recession of the mid-1980s. In Jordan, the decline in regional oil prices led to a sharp reduction in foreign aid and labour remittances. (Baylouni, 2008) As revenue streams dried up, the government was forced to borrow heavily to maintain its spending levels, resulting in a significant increase in foreign debt. Jordan turned to the International Monetary Fund resulting in structural adjustment plan which included the removal of subsidies, privatization of public sector investments, cuts in state employment, and gradual elimination of customs duties. (Baylouni, 2008; Martinez, 2022)

In this new cycle, the economic liberalization policies had a major impact on those employed in the civil service. While measures targeting the public sector and general welfare were reduced, the military became the main recipients of government resources. The state focused its support on the military, largely composed of East Bankers. Military conscription was eliminated in 1992, enabling the continued dominance of East Bankers in the armed forces. By 1997, 10% of Jordan's labour force was employed in the military, and in rural areas, that figure rose to 20%. While social welfare for the general population declined, the military's budget grew, and its personnel benefited from enhanced social provisions, such as pensions, free medical care, scholarships, and access to discounted goods. (Baylouni, 2008)

During Jordan's structural adjustment period, the government's focus shifted from broad social welfare through subsidies to targeted programmes aimed at the most vulnerable populations. The economic reforms of the 1980s led to the introduction of two key laws that shaped Jordan's social protection system: the National Aid Fund Law No. 36 of 1986 and the Zakat Fund Law No. 8 of 1988. The National Aid Fund (NAF) was designed to support poor and needy families through monthly and emergency financial assistance, helping raise their standard of living.² The Zakat Fund, which modernised the 1944 law, granted the fund legal and financial independence, allowing it to manage donations and provide targeted aid more effectively. By 1998, approximately 50,000 families benefited from NAF, and 3,000 households received support from the Zakat Fund. (Baylouni, 2008) Additionally, micro-financing programmes targeting women's enterprises and other small-scale initiatives were introduced to alleviate poverty and support economic development. Privatization of key state services such as water, electricity, telecommunication and its national airline, was accompanied by the dismantling of the Ministry of Supply in 1998, further marking the state's shift away from general welfare. (Baylouni, 2008; Martinez 2022)

Neoliberal Economic Reforms and Rising Inequality in the 2000s

The 2000s in Jordan were characterised by a tension between the deepening of economic liberalization and the stalling of political reforms. The government, prioritising economic development through neoliberal policies like free trade agreements and privatization, focused on benefiting economic elites at the expense of political participation. As a result, political liberalization consistently took a backseat to economic priorities, fostering social unrest and public dissatisfaction with the monarchy's governance (Ryan, 2005). The creation of Qualified Industrial Zones and foreign investments exacerbated inequality and unemployment, failing to deliver benefits to the broader population (Moore, 2003). These initiatives further highlighted Jordan's controlled approach to political development, which preserved the monarchy's power without enacting genuine democratic reforms (Baylouni, 2005).

The arrival of Iraqi refugees in the mid-2000s meant that Jordanians often attributed rising housing and food prices to the influx of Iraqis, but broader factors such as global inflation, increasing oil prices, and government austerity measures were more responsible for the economic strain (Nanes, 2007). Jordan's neoliberal economic policies deepened inequality, with social safety nets proving inadequate in protecting the most vulnerable segments of society.

The World Bank reports from the early 2000s underscored these economic challenges. As food subsidies were eliminated by 1999, the National Aid Fund (NAF) expanded to provide targeted cash assistance to vulnerable households. However, it failed to effectively address the poverty gap. The NAF, which was designed to assist the poorest, saw a significant portion of its benefits leaking to non-poor households, with only 16% of its benefits reaching the chronically poor or highly vulnerable populations (World Bank, 2002; 2004). These inefficiencies persisted at the governorate level, particularly in rural areas like Tafeela, which received disproportionately low aid compared to other regions like Jarash and Maan.

By 2009, official data indicated a reduction in poverty, but public perceptions contradicted this, largely due to stagnant incomes despite increases in expenditures. Rural areas remained disproportionately affected by poverty, with higher rates compared to urban centres, and the fragility of the situation was underscored by frequent movement in and out of poverty. The removal of fuel subsidies in 2008 and compensating measures like cash transfers aimed at

² The caveat of NAF is that it only provides aid to those families with Jordanian national ID, leaving out long-term residents with no ID cards. This includes three different types of residents: children of Jordanian mothers, but not Jordanian father, ex-Gazans, those Palestinians from Gaza who came after 1967, and Palestinians who had been residing in the West Bank in 1988. See NRC, 2024

cushioning the impact on lower-income households were ineffective due to poor targeting, with the NAF only reaching a small fraction of those in dire need (World Bank, 2009).

The findings of the World Bank reports from the early 2000s highlight a neglected dimension in the general literature on the development of social policies in Jordan—namely, the selective and fragmented nature of welfare interventions, particularly in rural areas. In contrast to the prevailing focus on national development and the East Banker/Palestinian divide, a few scholars have argued that even at its height in the 1970s, Jordan's welfare regime was far from inclusive even to its East Banker population. Significant divisions were evident along lines of class, gender, geography, and clientelism, with geography, especially in the southern governorates, being particularly prominent. For decades, the rural south has been marginalised in terms of infrastructural and social development, a pattern reflecting Jordan's broader developmental trajectory. This trajectory has been shaped by a pronounced urban bias, which became particularly pronounced during the 1970s. This urban-cantered development, often attributed to the influence of Jordan's business elites, led to the concentration of industrial investments, government expenditures, services, and infrastructure in the Amman governorate (Baumgarten 137-43; Malkawi; Tell, "The Politics" 90; Lenner, 2017).

The Syrian Refugee Crisis, 2011-2019

The Syrian war and the influx of refugees had a profound impact on the economy of Jordan, particularly in trade and tourism. The closure of borders disrupted trade, as Syria had been a key partner in both originating goods and serving as a transit country for manufactured and agricultural products. This led to the collapse of trading economies in border towns that were simultaneously overwhelmed by large numbers of Syrian refugees. The war also negatively impacted Jordan's trade balance: imports increased to meet the needs of the larger population, while exports dropped significantly due to the loss of key routes through Syria. (Abdih and Geginat, 2014; Baylouni, 2020)

The rapid rise in the number of users of public services, including healthcare, education, and water supply systems, also led to a deterioration in their quality, with larger class sizes, overcrowded hospitals, and increased stress on water resources. A study estimated that re-establishing the quality of public services to pre-crisis levels would have required an additional fiscal spending of 0.6 percent of GDP in 2013 and one percent in 2014 to prevent a decline in the quality of life for Jordanians. (Abdih and Geginat, 2014)

The war also affected food prices, although global food price increases complicated the ability to isolate the impact of the refugee crisis. The availability of inexpensive goods from or through Syria diminished, affecting local economies. Additionally, inflation in Jordan rose, particularly in the rental market, as Syrian refugees searched for housing, leading to higher housing costs. (Abdih and Geginat, 2014; Baylouni, 2020) Tourism, particularly in the early years of the conflict, also declined as the region was perceived as insecure.

The dynamics of the international humanitarian system incentivised the Government of Jordan to highlight their role in managing refugee crises, positioning themselves as central to both their citizens' and refugees' welfare. (Baylouni, 2020) This shift allowed them to negotiate with the international community for aid, claiming their populations were suffering due to the influx of refugees, in what has been dubbed as Jordan's "refugee rentierism." (Kelberer 2017; Awamleh and Dupra, 2024)

Five years after the onset of the Syrian war and amid increasing illegal migration of Syrian refugees to Europe, Western donors negotiated with Jordan a financial agreement known as “the Jordan Compact.” (Burlin, 2020) At the 2016 London Conference, Jordan labelled its refugee crisis a “developmental disaster” to emphasise the burden of hosting refugees (Kelberer, 2017). Despite being classified as an upper-middle-income country, Jordan managed to secure substantial international aid by highlighting the need for support for both refugees and its own population.

The Compact aimed to address the dual challenges of refugee needs and domestic economic pressures in Jordan. The agreement provided aid and loans to Jordan in exchange for the creation of job opportunities for Syrian refugees, with the intent of balancing support between refugees and the host communities. (Awamleh, 2024) However, while the Compact succeeded in bringing significant financial resources to Jordan, its implementation revealed the intricate relationship between humanitarian aid, state sovereignty, and public expectations, with the Jordanian state playing a central role in managing both the refugee crisis and domestic concerns. (Baylouni, 2020)

The Jordan Compact has faced considerable criticism for overlooking key aspects of Jordan’s political economy and labour market, particularly its focus on formal employment, which has failed to significantly improve the quality of life for Syrian refugees (Lenner & Turner, 2018). Many refugees remain in the informal sector due to bureaucratic barriers and restrictive policies. Additionally, the Compact has deepened Jordan’s reliance on foreign funding, contributing to an increase in national debt and exacerbating the neoliberal restructuring of the economy, reinforcing inequalities (Soederberg). This restructuring has prioritised Western geopolitical interests over the well-being of both refugees and Jordanian citizens (Soederberg).

The development of the National Aid Fund (NAF) during the same period offers further evidence of the neoliberal restructuring highlighted by critics of the Jordan Compact. The development of Jordan’s largest social safety net remained largely focused on its poverty-targeting approach despite the socio-economic pressures introduced by the influx of Syrian refugees. The core pillars of the welfare system, including NAF, did not fundamentally alter their structure to integrate refugees comprehensively into their programmes.

Instead, the system strengthened its focus on addressing poverty among Jordanian citizens through expanded and more efficient targeting mechanisms. Between 2015 and 2019, the National Aid Fund (NAF) in Jordan maintained core programmes to support vulnerable Jordanian households, including recurring monthly financial aid for orphans, widows, and people with disabilities. Temporary financial aid addressed short-term crises, while emergency aid provided relief during urgent situations such as the loss of a breadwinner. Physical rehabilitation assistance and vocational training were also integral components of NAF’s efforts.

Furthermore, between 2015 and 2019, the National Aid Fund (NAF) modernised its programmes, focusing on digital payments, enhanced targeting through the National Unified Registry (NUR), and creating tailored support systems like the Integrated Outreach Worker Programme (IOWP). Supported by the World Bank, these reforms prioritised technological and procedural efficiency. The National Unified Registry (NUR) was first conceived as part of Jordan’s broader efforts to reform and modernise its social protection systems, with initial planning and discussions beginning around 2015. The implementation of the NUR was largely driven by the need to improve targeting accuracy in social assistance programmes, especially in light of the growing economic pressures from both internal poverty and the Syrian refugee crisis.

By 2017, the National Unified Registry (NUR) was implemented to streamline Jordan’s social safety net, integrating data from various governmental sources to enhance targeting and reduce errors in

identifying vulnerable households. The World Bank praised its success, claiming it had significantly improved NAF's efficiency in delivering aid by 2019. However, the system's flaws became evident during the COVID-19 crisis, as it struggled to cope with the rapid increase in demand for assistance (See next section). These challenges highlighted limitations in the NUR's capacity, despite prior claims of its effectiveness.

Throughout this period, Syrian refugees were not explicitly included as direct beneficiaries of NAF programmes, neither did they include Palestinian refugees, who otherwise could benefit from UNRWA relief services. Instead, international organizations like UNICEF and the World Food Programme (WFP) took the lead in supporting the refugee population. Although the Syrian refugee crisis put additional strain on Jordan's economy, NAF's efforts remained primarily focused on Jordanian families, while refugee-related assistance was handled by international agencies.

Defining Conflict in Jordan

Protests as intrinsic to nation-state processes

In *Protesting Jordan*, Jillian Schwedler offers a comprehensive interpretative analysis of protests throughout the history of Jordan. The author argues that protests in Jordan are a centuries-old tradition of challenging political authority and addressing grievances, often tied to regional and global dynamics, and defines protest as the external expression of dissent, whether done loudly or quietly, collectively or individually, publicly or privately. It includes demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins, riots, and even passive actions like boycotts. (Schwedler, 2024) This approach underscores the ongoing, everyday nature of political contention in Jordan, as protests are conceptualised as part of a broader repertoire of public dissent, often in response to shifts in authority, social contracts, and state policies. As such, protests are deeply connected to the state's processes of negotiation, repression, and survival.

According to this account, protests in Jordan date back to the Bedouin revolts of the 1920s and 1930s, where Bedouins and tribal leaders resisted central authority through various acts of rebellion. These early protests were framed by tribal grievances against favouritism, government employment, and taxation. The establishment of Amman as the capital and the influx of Palestinian refugees further shifted the demographic and political centre, creating new dynamics of protest as East Bankers began to feel marginalised. Over time, armed revolts gave way to street demonstrations, evolving into a structured form of resistance.

Neoliberalism and Austerity

Since the late 1980s, protests in Jordan have been closely linked to economic austerity measures and neoliberal reforms. The protests reflect the deep dissatisfaction with the erosion of subsidies, and privileges had historically provided state benefits in exchange for political loyalty, especially from East Bankers. (Baylouni, 2008; Martinez, 2022; Schwedler, 2023) As the Jordanian state shifted away from traditional welfare policies, poverty-targeting measures and economic liberalization became central strategies. This transition, which began in the mid-1980s, was driven by pressure from international lending organizations to cut costs and balance the budget. These reforms primarily targeted subsidies and public sector employment, which had been key components of the political settlement with East Bankers. However, the military and security sectors remained largely protected, signalling a shift in the regime's social base and marking a new foundation for political support (Baylouny, 2008).

Scholars have analysed the protests of 1989 as a watershed moment, marking the first major unrest led by East Bankers. Increases in fuel prices sparked immediate riots in the regime-supporting southern town of Ma'an in 1989. This unrest signalled that even the regime's loyal base could be mobilised against it when economic entitlements were threatened. (Schwedler, 2023; Martinez, 2022; Baylouni, 2020)

Privatization stepped up late in the 1990s, beginning with telecommunications, water, electricity, and Royal Jordanian, the national airline. The dismantling of the Ministry of Supply in 1998 further marked the state's shift away from general welfare and in 1996, riots in Jordanian areas again followed the removal of subsidies (Baylouni, 2008) Three days after ending wheat subsidies, effectively tripling the price of bread, riots began in Karak, a key area for regime support. Karak's labour force was almost wholly dependent upon state and military employment. (Martinez 2023; Baylouni 2008) Some scholars emphasise that the 1996 protests were not just about bread prices but reflected once more deeper frustrations with the government's neoliberal policies and the erosion of the social contract that had historically provided subsidies and welfare benefits to Jordan's citizens, particularly East Bankers. (Schwedler, 2024)

By the mid-2000s, under the rule of King Abdullah II, Jordan's neoliberal economic reforms intensified, with the privatization of key sectors such as telecommunications, electricity, and water. These policies exacerbated social inequalities, particularly impacting both East Bankers and Palestinians, leading to rising unemployment and deepening economic grievances. Privatization further alienated the monarchy's traditional support base, including public sector workers and those reliant on state employment. Despite the monarchy's efforts to placate this base with targeted subsidies, poverty and inequality continued to grow, sparking waves of protests throughout the decade (Pelham, 2011).

The labour protests that began in 2006 set the stage for the broader protest movement that coalesced in the protest movement of 2011 and 2012. These early labour actions were cantered around demands for better wages, job security, and improved working conditions, particularly in industries that had been privatised as part of the government's neoliberal agenda. For example, phosphate workers were dissatisfied with the privatization of the Jordanian Phosphate Company and, by 2011, had formed independent unions to represent their interests, breaking away from the state-controlled official unions that failed to address their concerns. Similarly, port workers in 'Aqaba protested against job losses due to foreign land sales, contributing to the rising wave of discontent. These labour movements played a significant role in building momentum for the larger protests that would emerge in 2011 (Fidely, 2012; Lacouture, 2020).

Another important protest movement, the Day-Waged Labour Movement (DWLM), highlighted the contradictions between the state's historical obligation to provide employment and the promises of neoliberal reforms that had, in reality, only deepened impoverishment for many workers (Lacouture, 2020). Formed mainly by workers in the Ministry of Agriculture, workers began its first protests in May 2006, and their demands cantered around improving wages in a way compatible with the rise in prices and inflation in Jordan to ensure workers' dignity and access to social services provided to public sector employees, such as social security, retirement, vacations, and health insurance. They also demanded more job security by legally classifying them within the public sector (Ababneh, 2016, Fiorini, 2015). These labour protests underscored the growing discontent with neoliberal policies, and their connection to broader calls for political accountability and reform was evident. As independent unions formed and worker grievances became more pronounced, labour movements helped push civil society toward more robust resistance to neoliberalism.

The 2011-2012 protests, which unfolded in the context of the Arab Spring, saw a wide range of groups coalesce under what became known as the HIRAK movement (Ababneh, 2016). The Jordan Labour Observatory reported a steady increase in labour protests with a peak in the early 2010s following the Arab Spring. For example, in 2011, there were 828 labour protests, rising to 901 in 2012. This surge reflected widespread dissatisfaction with economic policies, unemployment, and poor working conditions. This included labour groups, youth movements, and governorate-based groups. Their demands were not only for economic justice but also for political reform. The movement drew from the grievances that had been simmering throughout the mid-2000s and connected labour unrest with broader political opposition to the monarchy's neoliberal economic policies. Scholars like Ababneh (2016) have noted that much of the literature on political protests in Jordan tends to overlook the role of labour movements, despite the fact that their demands were intrinsically linked to the wider discontent with corruption, government accountability, and economic inequality.

The protests of 2011-2012, therefore, were a culmination of years of growing dissatisfaction with both economic and political conditions. While labour groups initially focused on sector-specific issues such as job security and wages, their struggles were deeply intertwined with the broader grievances about neoliberal economic policies, corruption, and a lack of genuine democratic reforms. The labour protests were thus an essential part of a larger movement, pushing Jordanian civil society to demand more from the state, both in terms of economic justice and political accountability (Fidely, 2012; Lacouture, 2020). At a deeper level, the rise of independent labour organising also pointed toward the potential for a stronger civil society and a broader-based opposition, with implications for Jordan's political development moving forward.

Refugee Crisis and Welfare

In the period that followed and until 2018, the number of protests declined. According to JLO, this decline is attributed to a combination of repression, government promises that were not fulfilled, and legal obstacles preventing workers from organising into unions (JLO Reports, 2013-2018).

The period, however, was marked by the changing socioeconomic landscape brought by the arrival of Syrian refugees to Jordan, and the international response that followed. Anne Marie Baylouni argues that the arrival of refugees exacerbated existing economic pressures and created new challenges for infrastructure and public services. The Syrian refugee crisis exposed the fragility of state systems, leading to protests as Jordanian citizens demanded remedies from the government. Rather than alleviating the pressure, the international aid and loans that were supposed to help Jordan manage the refugee crisis often worsened tensions. (Baylouny, 2020)

According to Baylouny, the government's handling of international aid, which was used to bolster state institutions but failed to improve services for ordinary citizens, intensified public dissatisfaction. Jordanians increasingly felt that their own economic needs were being neglected in favour of refugees, further aggravating longstanding grievances about austerity and resource scarcity. However, Baylouny emphasises that, while refugees were often blamed in the popular discourse, the majority of protests directed their demands at the state for failing to provide adequate services.

As such, 2016 was a period characterised by the emergence of smaller-scale protests, driven by frustrations over unemployment, rising fees, and limited job opportunities. While labour unrest continued in certain industries, larger demonstrations began to take shape, signalling growing dissatisfaction with the government's austerity measures and its inability to address the economic concerns of the population. This unrest laid the groundwork for more intense protests in the

following years. By 2017, the situation escalated further as the prices of goods continued to rise due to tax increases and subsidy cuts. Towns like Karak and Tafileh became hotspots for youth-led protests, where demonstrators focused on corruption and privatization, accusing the government of selling the country's assets and resources to foreign interests. The protests were a reflection of a deeper mistrust in the state's ability to manage the economy and provide for its citizens, signalling a shift in public sentiment toward more organised and widespread opposition.

In this context, Baylouni situates the 2018 protests as part of a series of protests starting in 2016, the time when the 2016 financial compact for Jordan was analysed. Aimed to address the Syrian refugee crisis by providing Jordan with financial aid in exchange for allowing refugees access to temporary work permits and education, and while promoted as win-win solutions, these agreements failed to deliver the promised benefits to Jordanian citizens. Although significant amounts of international aid flowed into Jordan to support its infrastructure, particularly in sectors like water, waste management, and electricity, many citizens felt that the aid disproportionately benefited refugees. This sense of inequity fuelled public discontent, as the government struggled to balance the demands of international donors, refugees, and its own population.

Building on the narrative of opposition to neoliberal responses, José Ciro Martínez analysed how economic austerity measures culminated in the 2018 protests. The protest was directed against an unpopular tax reform and austerity measures, including higher taxes on goods and services (6% increase in gasoline prices, eliminating all subsidies on bread, a 10% hike in public transport fares, and a 10% sales tax on 164 goods), led to an increase in the cost of living, deepening the economic hardship for many Jordanians. The protests saw tens of thousands of Jordanians take to the streets, with demonstrations occurring across the country, including in the capital Amman, with demonstrators symbolically using bread in their protests (Schwedler, 2023). Protesters were supported by labour unions, professional associations, and a wide range of socio-economic groups. The movement was largely non-ideological and united people from different backgrounds in opposition to the government's economic policies. According to Martínez, the 2018 bread subsidy reform in Jordan was not only a fiscal measure but also part of a larger effort to reshape the relationship between the state and its citizens. The reform sought to create a new type of political subject—one who would increasingly rely on private means rather than public services. As Martínez highlights, the bread subsidy represented a crucial element of the state's social contract, particularly for East Bankers, who viewed it as a key entitlement. By cutting this subsidy, the Jordanian government pushed for a model of self-reliance where citizens were encouraged to see themselves as consumers, clients, and entrepreneurs. Citizens would now be responsible for securing their own livelihoods, with only a minimal safety net provided for those facing extreme hardship. (Martínez, 2023)

Coda: Covid-19: Ad Hoc Responses and Protests

COVID-19 accelerated the general economic decline taking place in Jordan since the mid-2000s (Laith Ajlouni, 2020). In particular, the pandemic led to a GDP contraction of 1.6% in 2020, one of the worst performances since 1989 (ERF, May 2022). The pandemic severely affected key sectors, including tourism, transportation, and retail, which saw sharp revenue declines. In contrast, sectors such as agriculture and information/communication were less affected due to their essential nature and increased demand for online services (ERF, May 2022; ERF, 2022). The fiscal deficit expanded from 6% to 10% within the first half of 2020 due to increased government spending on healthcare and social protection, while public debt also worsened.

In response to the new economic reality, the government implemented measures to support the financial sector, including loan restructuring and expanded loan guarantees for SMEs (ERF, 2022).

Other fiscal measures included a JOD 50 million allocation for COVID-19-related expenditures and the creation of the Himmat Watan Fund for relief efforts. The Central Bank of Jordan responded by injecting liquidity, reducing the compulsory reserve ratio, and cutting interest rates (ERF, 2022). Despite these efforts, the overall economic environment remained strained, highlighting the challenges Jordan faced in mitigating the pandemic's effects on both fiscal stability and economic growth.

Throughout this period, the pandemic exacerbated existing social divides. Women and youth faced higher unemployment rates, with women particularly affected due to increased caregiving responsibilities during lockdowns and school closures (ERF, August 2022). Educational inequality deepened, with poorer households unable to access online learning resources, further entrenching divides between wealthy urban families and rural populations (ERF, August 2022).

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Jordanian government swiftly implemented a range of social protection measures to mitigate the economic and social impact of lockdowns on vulnerable populations. Utilising existing institutions such as the National Aid Fund (NAF) and the Social Security Corporation (SSC), the government aimed to address the needs of both formal and informal workers. Private sector donations and international support also played key roles in funding these initiatives.

NAF and Its Expanded Role During COVID-19³

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Aid Fund (NAF) primarily supported over 55,000 households, focusing on vulnerable groups such as orphans, the elderly, widows, and families living below the poverty line. However, with the onset of the pandemic, NAF significantly expanded its programmes to accommodate the growing number of vulnerable households, including informal workers, female-headed households, and those who lost income during the crisis.

The Takaful programme, initially expanded in 2019 to provide additional services such as health insurance and school meals, was further scaled in 2020. By the end of that year, NAF had assisted over 250,000 households, with additional expansions bringing the total to over 160,000 more by 2021. Financial assistance ranged from 70 JD to 136 JD depending on household size.

NAF's expansion was supported by a mix of public and private sector funding. For example, the Hummat Watan Fund, a private sector initiative, contributed 27 million JD to NAF's cash programmes, while the World Bank provided 374 million USD in June 2020 to support 270,000 households through the Takaful 3 programme. By June 2021, over 1 billion USD in support for Jordan's economic recovery had been approved by the World Bank and IMF, with 100 million USD specifically allocated to NAF programmes.

In collaboration with the Social Security Corporation (SSC), NAF also targeted formal and informal workers. The Musanid programme provided formal workers with access to advance payments from their social security savings, while the Tadamun programme offered direct cash transfers to informal workers impacted by the pandemic.

NAF's focus in 2022 shifted toward long-term poverty reduction, with Takaful 1 serving as a core poverty alleviation programme, providing quarterly cash assistance to 88,000 families. Takaful 3, originally a temporary emergency response, became part of the broader economic recovery effort. In addition to cash transfers, NAF introduced subsidies for essential services such as energy and

³ Based on Analysis of NAF annual reports, from 2020 to 2023

transportation to ease financial burdens on low-income households. In 2023, NAF further consolidated its programmes, expanding Takaful 1 as a key pillar of poverty alleviation. While Takaful 3 was initially designed to address the immediate economic fallout of COVID-19, it was integrated into the broader social safety net framework to support ongoing recovery efforts. The expansion of digital services continued to improve registration and payment systems, ensuring wider accessibility.

Despite NAF's efforts, refugees, particularly Syrian refugees, were largely excluded from these programmes, as they primarily targeted Jordanian citizens. However, international organizations like UNHCR and WFP continued to provide critical support to refugee populations. Additionally, the Tamkeen Iqtisadi programme provided assistance specifically to Palestinian refugees from 1967 and individuals with Jordanian mothers but non-Jordanian citizenship.

Protesting the Social Crisis in Jordan

As documented by the JLO, COVID-19 pandemic intensified labour protests, as economic conditions worsened further. Although the number of protests dropped by 2020 due to the lockdowns, by 2021, they had surged again, increasing by 55% from the previous year, with 225 protests documented. The pandemic led to widespread job losses and wage cuts, pushing many workers to protest the government's response and austerity measures. This period saw an increase in protests related to layoffs, salary reductions, and poor working conditions, especially in sectors like agriculture, education, and healthcare. According to their analysis, while historically the public sector has been more active in labour protests, especially in education, healthcare, and transport, the deteriorating socioeconomic situation marked an increase in private sector protests, particularly in industries like construction and manufacturing. (JLO reports)

In December 2022 a wave of protests emerged by transport drivers, demanding reduction in fuel prices and cancellation of special taxes on fuel derivatives. protest movements began in the south of the country and soon spread elsewhere. Protests, marches, and demonstrations expanded to include Irbid, Zarqa, and the capital, Amman. In the south, many merchants in Ma'an and Karak subsequently closed their shops in solidarity with striking transportation workers, while some demonstrators blocked roads with debris and burning tires. Once again, the trigger this time was the steadily rising price of fuel due to the Jordanian government's having complied with IMF-directed budget cutting measures to reduce state subsidies that cap energy prices, while at the same time raising taxes on the very same commodities. (Ryan, 2022)

By 2023, JLO reported that protests underscored the depth of Jordan's economic and social crisis, where stagnant wages have been consistently eroded by rising prices for essential goods and services, resulting in worsening living conditions for the majority of citizens. Compounding the issue is the decline in working conditions, marked by a significant drop in the real value of wages and the minimum wage, which has not kept pace with inflation. Many workers face salary delays or non-payment, and basic labour rights, such as regulated working hours, annual and sick leave, official holidays, health and safety standards, and access to social insurance through the Social Security Corporation—are often disregarded. Moreover, weak health insurance coverage and inadequate working conditions further exacerbate the challenges faced by Jordanian workers. (JLO 2024)

Understanding Social Conflict in Jordan in relation to Welfare

Political Settlement and the Moral Economy in Jordan as a Driver of Dissatisfaction but not Conflict

The literature on political settlements and political marketplaces emphasises that stability in conflict-affected areas is shaped by elite power-sharing, rather than the state's institutions or legitimacy (Walton, 2024). In Jordan, as the previous pages explain, the monarchy's alliance with East Bank elites through military and public sector privileges helped establish a stable political settlement. This arrangement, often referred to as the "Hashemite Compact" (Tell, 2015), represents Jordan's "moral economy" (Baylouny, 2008; Lacouture, 2020; Martínez, 2023), where state resources, like jobs and subsidies, are distributed based on social norms and obligations, particularly benefiting East Bank Jordanians.

This moral economy has been defined by the monarchy's provision of state resources as a right of citizenship has reinforced its political power, as welfare distribution operates on ethical obligations beyond market-driven logic. It has served as a system through which political loyalty is secured, and social stability is maintained, but it has also led to disparities, particularly between East Bank Jordanians and Jordanian of Palestinian origins, in terms of access to welfare and social protection.

The Palestinian community in Jordan is diverse in terms of class and legal status, however it is perceived uniformly as "Palestinian" by East Bankers (Gudrun Kroner, 2008). This national distinction leads to structural imbalances that manifest across different socio-economic classes. Among affluent Palestinians, for instance, wealthy Palestinian entrepreneurs face challenges in the business environment, dominated by East Bankers who hold political and public service positions key to the development and implementation of policies that can hamper the business environment (ARDD participant observation).⁴ Despite progress reported by the World Bank's "Doing Business" rankings, these quantitative rankings fail to capture the qualitative complexities faced by Palestinian business owners.

For middle-class Palestinians in Jordan, the state's preferential treatment of East Bank Jordanians in public sector employment, where better working conditions and social security benefits are available, constitutes a significant form of structural discrimination. Palestinians of Jordanian origin, unable to access these public sector opportunities, are predominantly pushed into the private sector, which is characterised by high levels of informality and fewer benefits (citation needed). More vulnerable Palestinians, particularly those without Jordanian citizenship, face even greater obstacles in accessing essential services such as quality healthcare, education, and financial assistance from the National Aid Fund (NAF). Without national ID numbers, they are excluded from critical services, including citizen fee schemes and cash transfer programmes. Consequently, many are forced to rely on UNRWA for basic services, revealing the deep layers of exclusion experienced by Palestinians within Jordanian society.

Jordanian Palestinians are often reluctant to engage in protests. In an interview, a resident from one of the Palestinian camps in Amman mentioned that some Jordanian Palestinians initially joined the HIRAK movement, which protested economic conditions in 2011 and 2012. However, their participation was short-lived as their participation stopped when state repression became stronger in the years after. Lamis El Muhtaseb (2013) explains that Jordanian Palestinians' hesitation to fully engage in protests stems from fears that active involvement could result in the loss of their citizenship or further marginalization. Moreover, many Palestinians worry about being perceived as destabilisers or threats to the monarchy. This sense of vulnerability drives them to maintain the status quo, even though it perpetuates existing inequalities, rather than risk the uncertainties of political change or potential repression (El Muhtaseb, 2013).

⁴ This disconnect became clear during a meeting between tourism entrepreneurs and Jordanian authorities, where entrepreneurs proposed government support, but parliamentary representatives dismissed the need for further engagement (ARDD meeting)

In this context, despite the worsening conditions in Palestinian refugee camps, protests within the camps are rare and typically connected to isolated incidents of violence. One notable example is the attack in Baqaa camp in June 2016, which resulted in the deaths of five police officers. The incident was framed as a “terrorist attack” and linked to Jordan’s broader efforts in the fight against ISIL. Alongside fear, the unclear division of responsibility for services within the camps adds another layer of complexity. In an interview with a long-time camp resident, it was noted that confusion and a sense of paralysis often prevail when it comes to services, as the division of responsibility between UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) and the Jordanian government’s Department of Palestinian Affairs (DPA) remains unclear. While UNRWA is responsible for most services in the camps, the DPA manages certain municipal services and infrastructure maintenance.

This dual system of responsibility creates significant challenges for residents, as the lack of a unified management framework leads to inefficiencies and neglect. Issues such as overcrowding, deteriorating environmental health, and the absence of coherent urban planning are persistent problems. UNRWA’s diminishing resources and limited capacity to enforce housing regulations have worsened these conditions, while the Jordanian government’s informal and flexible governance often results in further neglect. Consequently, camp residents face inconsistent and inadequate service provision, as the overlapping responsibilities between UNRWA and the DPA fail to address the camps’ infrastructural and social needs comprehensively (Al Hussein, 2010).

As Munir Atalla (2012) aptly observed: “If anything can be said about the inhabitants of the many refugee camps in Jordan, it is that they have shown remarkable resilience in the face of unspeakable injustice.”

Neoliberal Austerity Policies: Entitlements and a Gradual Shift in the Political Settlement as a Driver of Protests

The literature on protests in Jordan, as we have explored in the previous pages, consistently links the implementation of austerity economic results driven by structural adjustment programmes to the emergence of social unrest, starting with the 1989 Ma’an protests, followed by the 1996 Karak protests. The removal of fuel and bread subsidies and the increase of prices played a central role in both instances, highlighting the connection between the reduction of essential services and conflict. Notably, however, these protests did not originate in Amman, the site where protests normally took place, but in key tribal regions in the south with a strong historical legacy of resistance and protest (Schwedler, 2022).

The Ma’an protests resulted in the reconfiguration of the political settlement in two different ways: first the Ma’an protests led to the enactment of a new electoral law that gave more power to the tribes at the expense of Palestinians (Ryan 2002; Lucas 2005). A second, more subtle however, was the gradual reconfiguration of support base of the government. As explained earlier, the state focused its support on the military, largely composed of East Bankers. This shift came at the expense of the social welfare for the general population, including East Bankers working in the public sectors, while the military’s budget grew, and its personnel benefited from enhanced social provisions, such as pensions, free medical care, scholarships, and access to discounted goods. (Baylouny, 2008)

It is this new political settlement, the neoliberal political economy clashed with East Bankers redistributive demands (Yom, 2020), and so disenfranchised East Bankers, and middle-class Jordanian Palestinians to some extent, directed their grievances against the government. The continuum of protests since 2006 that the literature explores and we have summarised,

culminating in the large protests of 2018, illustrate the growing dissatisfaction in the new settlement.

The protests of 2018, when, according to contemporary observers remarked how the protests were joined by different segments of the population because the strike against Jordan's income tax law reflected middle-class concerns, yet expanded to include demands from the poor, who were not directly affected by the law. They joined because they suffered from rising prices and saw the tax amendment as part of the broader economic policies worsening their conditions. Although various classes participated, including capital holders opposing higher taxes, the strike represented a larger frustration with government policies and socioeconomic inequality, highlighting differing interests among participants without reducing the movement to mere political manipulation.⁵

The question arises whether these protests in Jordan would have been possible if the economic inequalities had only affected Jordanian Palestinian and not disenfranchised East Bankers. On this point, as we have seen, José Ciro Martínez's analysis emphasises how subsidy cuts reshaped the state-citizen relationship by fostering a political subject reliant on private means over public services, pushing for a model of self-reliance where citizens were encouraged to see themselves as consumers, clients, and entrepreneurs. This gradual disenfranchisement of East Bankers, who viewed subsidies like bread as entitlements, played a key role in the protests, revealing a link between citizenship entitlements and protest participation, while a lack of entitlements fostered fear and deterred protest.

The link between citizenship and entitlements is also illustrated in the women's movement for the right to pass citizenship. The women's movement can be seen as an extension of broader struggles for citizenship entitlements in Jordan beyond women's rights. Under the current legal framework, Jordanian women cannot confer citizenship to their children, leading to numerous protests advocating for equality and the repeal of discriminatory laws. Without citizenship, children remain without rights to basic services such as education, healthcare, property ownership, and legal employment. This movement has been mainly analysed as a women's rights movement, however it not only highlights gender-based discrimination, but also reinforces the connection between citizenship entitlements and protest, where the denial of rights fuels ongoing political activism.

Design of Services or Citizen Entitlement: Subsidies vs. National Aid Fund Cash Transfers

Subsidy schemes in the MENA region emerged after World War II to stabilise consumer prices in response to volatile global markets. By the 1950s, these subsidies became crucial for nation-building and reinforcing autocratic rule. By the 1960s and 1970s, subsidies were central to the state's relationship with society, offering administrative simplicity, universal access, and policy flexibility. These systems helped maintain economic control and social stability by mitigating the risk of unrest over rising living costs. (Vidikan and Loewe, 2021)

Jordan's implementation of commodity subsidies can be traced to the early 1960s under Prime Minister Wasfi Tal, who sought to strengthen the patrimonial state's economic foundations. These subsidies, initially focused on essential imported goods such as wheat, petroleum, and sugar, were directed primarily at supporting Transjordanians (East Bankers). (Tabaza, 2021; Martinez, 2023) As inflation surged in the 1970s, the welfare system expanded, particularly for public sector workers, formalising the distribution of subsidies through the creation of the Ministry of Supply in 1974. Among these, bread subsidies became a cornerstone of Jordan's social contract, stabilising prices and mitigating economic grievances. (Martinez, 2023)

⁵ (<https://www.7iber.com/politics-economics/jordans-strike-and-uprising/>) For analysts like Ahmad Abu Khalil, and unobserved by the literature, these protests truncated the conversation on progressive taxation in Jordan.

The regional economic downturn of the 1980s, combined with the structural adjustment conditions imposed by the IMF in exchange for loans, marked the first significant attempt to remove subsidies in Jordan. In the context of the broader debate on “shock versus gradualism” in policy reform (Cachanosky, 2015), Joud Tabaza argues that the 1989 protests and riots, which erupted in response to the abrupt removal of subsidies, prompted the Jordanian government to adopt a more gradual approach. Instead of implementing sudden cuts, the government introduced targeted reforms aimed at gradually reducing subsidies, with an emphasis on building public trust and mitigating the economic fallout. By 2020, as Tabaza highlights, Jordan had successfully phased out bread subsidies with minimal public backlash, demonstrating how a gradualist approach can effectively navigate politically sensitive reforms. (Tanaka 2020).

As subsidies were gradually reduced, a shift towards a poverty-targeted approach, primarily through cash transfers, was introduced. This shift was institutionalised with the establishment of the National Aid Fund (NAF) during the critical years of Jordan’s economic transformation. As Martínez argues, subsidies historically played a central role in the entitlements of East Bankers, symbolising a broader social contract between the state and its citizens. In contrast, NAF has never been perceived as an entitlement but rather as a safety net for the poorest segments of society, limited to those holding national ID numbers for the most part (ARDD participant Observation).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, NAF expanded its beneficiary base to address the economic fallout of lockdowns. However, interviews with NAF recipients revealed that the programme was not regarded as an entitlement but was instead associated with the stigma of poverty. Becoming a NAF beneficiary was seen as a reflection of the state’s failure to provide dignified support to its citizens (ARDD participant observation). This contrasts sharply with the universal nature of subsidies, which carried no such stigma. From the perspective of beneficiaries, subsidies offered broad-based support without the social burden or connotations of poverty, underscoring the difference in perception between universal subsidies and targeted cash transfers.

Despite the World Bank’s efforts to improve the targeting mechanisms of the National Aid Fund (NAF), a system inherently limited to addressing only Jordanian citizens and biased in its selection of beneficiaries, even in its automated form ⁶, no significant protests in Jordan have explicitly addressed NAF or its targeting system, other than frustration or discontent. Although there was considerable unease during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many citizens found themselves relying on NAF programmes, these grievances did not escalate into public demonstrations. This suggests that while targeted cash transfers like NAF may meet immediate needs, they fail to replace the broader social contract once upheld by universal subsidies. This suggests that while targeted cash transfers like NAF may address immediate needs, they do not fulfil the broader social contract that subsidies once represented, highlighting the complex interplay between entitlement, social stability, and state-citizen relations in Jordan.

State Responses: The State always Wins

Protests have not gone unnoticed by the state. In an interview, a well-known Jordanian anthropologist, explained how the government acts on protests according to the level of protest and rationale behind. According to the literature explored in this paper, the Jordanian state has employed a multifaceted approach to suppress and control protests, blending coercive and non-coercive tactics with strategic political liberalization.

⁶ See Human Rights Watch report, Automated Neglect, to understand the algorithm biases. In addition, it is well known in Jordan that beneficiary selection of NAF recipients follows a patronage system, with families entering the system, even when they should not, and vice versa.

The state has often relied on security forces, including the police, military, and intelligence agencies, to break up protests, using physical force, arrests, and detentions to suppress dissent. During times of heightened unrest, like the 1989 and 2011 protests, the state deployed heavy policing and even military intervention to quell demonstrations. Interviews with a camp resident underscored how the police repression increased after the HIRAK protests of 2011-2012, preventing camp residents from joining further protests.

In *Protesting Jordan*, Jillian Schwedler discusses how the Jordanian regime often engages in pre-emptive measures to prevent protests from escalating. These tactics include surveillance, intimidation, and the strategic use of curfews or roadblocks to prevent large gatherings. During the HIRAK protests in 2011, in anticipation of larger demonstrations, the Jordanian government employed widespread surveillance and closely monitored political activists and opposition groups. The state-imposed curfews in sensitive areas and strategically placed roadblocks to limit the mobility of protestors and prevent large gatherings from forming. Additionally, key activists were subjected to intimidation and, in some cases, selectively detained, effectively undermining their ability to organise and lead the protests. These tactics, as Schwedler points out, were part of a broader strategy to contain dissent before it could escalate into a serious threat to the regime.

At times, the Jordanian government has responded to protests with temporary economic reforms or welfare measures, such as reinstating subsidies or providing temporary financial relief to appease public discontent. For instance, following mass protests of 2012 sparked by the government's decision to remove fuel subsidies as part of an IMF-backed austerity programme, the Jordanian government quickly reinstated some subsidies and introduced temporary cash transfers to low- and middle-income households to alleviate the impact of rising fuel prices. This measure was intended to diffuse public anger and prevent the protests from escalating further. Baylouny highlights this as part of Jordan's broader strategy of using short-term economic concessions to appease public discontent without fundamentally altering the state's reliance on neoliberal policies. (Baylouni, 2020)

Another tactic relates to co-optation, offering concessions, engaging in dialogue with certain opposition figures, or making symbolic reforms that do not alter the broader status quo. This tactic defuses tensions while maintaining regime stability. (Baylouny, Schwedler, Yom). In 2018, to quell the unrest, King Abdullah II dismissed Prime Minister Mulki and replaced him with Omar Razzaz, a former World Bank official, signalling the regime's willingness to listen to public grievances. The appointment of Razzaz, who was seen as a more reform-oriented figure, along with promises of revisiting the tax law, effectively co-opted the protest movement. This shift defused tensions without altering the underlying economic policies, allowing the regime to maintain stability while offering only symbolic concessions. The replacement of Mulki illustrated how the monarchy uses co-optation, offering leadership changes and dialogue, to placate public discontent without implementing fundamental reforms.

Political liberalization in Jordan is another tool within the state's repertoire to manage dissent and prevent conflict, particularly in the context of neoliberal austerity. As Sean Yom argues, the state's introduction of new forms of political liberalization, such as parliamentary competition, electoral clientelism, and civil society engagement after the protest of 1989, served as functional substitutes for the material patronage that the state economy could no longer sustain. These "novel political goods" were designed to sooth public discontent by offering limited political reforms, thereby preserving a degree of popular support while mitigating the risk of unrest. This approach exemplifies how the regime strategically uses controlled political openings to calm dissent without fundamentally altering the political status quo. (Yom, 2020)

Yom's analysis builds on rentier state and authoritarian resilience literature, in which states like Jordan, have maintained stability by distributing material benefits (relying on external revenues) in exchange for political quiescence. As external rents declined and economic pressures mounted under neoliberal reforms, the Jordanian state could no longer rely solely on material patronage to secure loyalty. Yom's concept of "political liberalization as a substitute" illustrates how, in the absence of ample economic resources, the regime has shifted to offering limited political engagement, through elections, clientelism, and controlled civil society participation, as a means to maintain regime stability.

By carefully managing these processes, the regime is able to maintain authoritarian control while projecting a façade of reform. In this way, political liberalization functions not as a pathway to genuine democratization, but as a calculated mechanism to absorb and defuse opposition, showcasing the state's ability to adapt its methods of governance to maintain stability in a changing economic landscape.

Finally, the Jordanian regime successfully maintains its stability through a dual strategy of fear and division. Sean Yom's exploration of fear underscores how tribal Jordanians, historically the primary beneficiaries of state patronage, continue to support the monarchy out of concern that revolutionary change could lead to a Palestinian-dominated government. This fear, rooted in the belief that the Hashemite monarchy safeguards their institutional privileges, prevents tribal communities from joining radical protests that could threaten regime turnover. The preservation of their status, even as neoliberal economic policies erode some of their privileges, makes them more likely to support the status quo than to advocate for systemic reforms. (Yom, 2020)

Schwedler's analysis complements Yom's by demonstrating how the regime actively exacerbates these societal divisions, particularly between East Bank Jordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin, to weaken unified protest movements. By playing on the distinct political and economic interests of these groups, the regime effectively prevents a cohesive opposition. While East Bank Jordanians are reassured with promises of continued state patronage, Jordanians of Palestinian origin, who are marginalised in public and political life, focus on grievances related to political representation and equality. This division reduces the potential for collective action and weakens the overall force of protests, as the regime capitalises on these internal cleavages.

Together, Yom's concept of fear as a deterrent and Schwedler's focus on dividing protest movements reveal a powerful interaction: the regime both capitalises on the existing fears of key constituencies and actively manipulates societal divisions to maintain its hold on power. By ensuring that tribal Jordanians are reluctant to challenge the monarchy and simultaneously preventing unified opposition through divisions between societal groups, the regime effectively mitigates the threat of large-scale, unified protests.

The impact of fear among the population cannot be underestimated. According to several interviewees, there is a limit that protests will not go beyond, as different segments of population fear the chaos that could ensue and that could result in conflicts like the ones in Syria and Libya, while other segments fear they can come at a great personal cost. On this point, one of the interviewees brought up the fate of the Teachers Protest.

The Jordanian Teachers' Syndicate, reestablished in 2011, led a major strike in 2019, demanding salary increases and better working conditions. Despite several attempts to negotiate with the government, the syndicate received no response, leading to protests. After the sudden death of syndicate president Dr. Ahmad Al Hajaya, a planned agreement with the government collapsed,

and on September 5, 2019, 5,000 teachers protested despite police interference. The strike officially began on September 8, with broad public support. After a month of closed schools, the government agreed to a gradual salary increase of 40% to 75%, ending the strike on October 5, 2019. However, in April 2020, the Government announced it would not increase teacher salaries pursuant to the 2019 agreement. On July 25, 2020, the police raided the Teachers Syndicate headquarters in Amman and 11 of its branches across the country, shuttered them, and arrested all 13 syndicate board members on dubious legal grounds. The government appears to have retaliated against the Syndicate commencing several prosecutions against the Syndicate's board with the goal of securing its permanent closure. To this day, some members of the board remain in prison. (Dawn and HR)

These tactics form a comprehensive state repertoire designed to neutralise dissent while preserving the regime's political dominance. The strategic use of political liberalization, fear-based deterrence among tribal communities, and the selective repression of protest movements illustrates the complex interplay of coercion, co-optation, and symbolic reform in Jordan's approach to managing opposition.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals several key findings regarding the relationship between political settlements, social welfare, and conflict in Jordan. First, the "Hashemite Compact" has historically maintained stability through the distribution of state resources, such as public sector jobs and subsidies, primarily benefiting East Bank Jordanians. However, this system has led to significant structural inequalities for Jordanian Palestinians, who are largely excluded from public sector employment and essential services. Despite these disparities, fears of marginalization and citizenship loss have led to a general reluctance among Palestinians to participate in protests.

Second, the introduction of neoliberal austerity policies, particularly the gradual reduction of subsidies, has reshaped the state-citizen relationship. While subsidies were once seen as entitlements tied to citizenship, they have been increasingly replaced by targeted cash transfers through the National Aid Fund (NAF). This shift, while addressing immediate needs, has not filled the void left by the broader social contract that subsidies once represented. As a result, dissatisfaction has grown, leading to widespread protests, particularly in 2018, which reflected broader frustration with socioeconomic inequality and government policies.

These findings suggest that Jordan's political stability has relied heavily on balancing entitlements with political loyalty, but neoliberal reforms are reshaping this dynamic, fostering dissatisfaction and protest. These three arguments illustrate the connection between political settlement, social stability, entitlement, and protest in Jordan, particularly in the context of neoliberal reforms and their impact on different segments of Jordanian society.

Finally, the Jordanian state's approach to managing protests, which combines both coercive tactics, such as deploying security forces to suppress dissent, and non-coercive measures like political liberalization and temporary economic reforms. A key factor in the regime's stability is its ability to leverage fear and division, particularly in a context where economic reforms and austerity measures have put pressure on the political settlement. The analysis of fear highlights how tribal Jordanians, historically the primary beneficiaries of state patronage, remain loyal to the monarchy due to concerns that revolutionary change could result in a Palestinian-dominated government. This fear discourages radical mobilization and reinforces support for the existing order. Simultaneously, the regime actively deepens divisions between East Bank Jordanians and

Jordanian Palestinians to prevent unified protest movements, thereby weakening collective action and enhancing its control over dissent.

Beyond coercion and the exploitation of societal divisions, the Jordanian state uses co-optation and symbolic reform to alleviate tensions without fundamentally changing the political structure. By engaging with opposition figures and offering superficial political concessions, the regime maintains an appearance of responsiveness while retaining power.

Ultimately, the combination of political instability fears and the regime's strategic manipulation of societal divisions allows the Jordanian government to navigate economic and political challenges without facing substantial threats to its authority. The state's comprehensive repertory (repression, division, co-optation, and controlled political liberalization) effectively neutralises dissent, illustrating the capacity for gradual economic change, even if against popular will.

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