

THE MILITARY'S EVOLVING ROLE IN JORDANIAN POLITICAL REFORM

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INTRODUCTION

Following the Arab Spring, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan seems to have faced less instability than its neighbors, much like monarchies across the region. Analysts agree that the regime has navigated the demands of its population in a manner that has *preserved* its own control. Despite this analysis, there remain important challenges the monarchy must address in the coming years.

In particular, the Jordanian military's role within the state and their reaction to these developments has often been neglected. Lack of analysis on the Jordanian Armed Forces comes despite its increasing importance as a member of the elite coalition. Most academic work on the subject of Jordan's military has merely assumed the institution's consent to any political development approved by the king. This ignores the tumultuous relationship the military has had with past monarchs and the recent strain between military officials and the ruling family.

In the Middle East and North Africa, the military institution has been identified as a key player in the setting and execution of government policy (Rubin, 2002). Armed forces have also played a pivotal role in deciding the outcomes of protest movements and revolutions in countries affected by the Arab Spring (Lutterbeck 2012, pg 44). As such, particularly in the case of Jordan – a monarchical regime dependent on a tribally-dominated military to maintain its rule – an analysis of the army is crucial to understanding political developments in the future. The military is the game-changer: an increasingly powerful actor recognizing its decision-making capabilities. Their tension with the monarchy will guide future reform in Jordan.



A BRIEF HISTORY

The Jordanian Armed Forces emerged from the Arab Legion, an institution that existed prior to the creation of the Jordanian state itself under British rule. The main function of the Arab Legion was to organize tribes and Bedouins against the Ottoman Empire. When the British created the Jordanian state for the Hashemite family, the Arab Legion was passed to the command of the King Abdullah I in 1949 (Herb, 1999).



*Glubb Pasha, British Commander of the Arab Legion
(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)*

It took a number of decades for the Jordanian ruling family to cultivate the “civic-myth” responsible for its legitimacy later on (Kamrava, 2000). For precisely this reason, the rule of King Abdullah I came to an abrupt end with his assassination in 1951. Coup attempts continued for his grandson, King Husain, particularly in 1957 and in 1970. Luckily for the king, common Bedouin soldiers sided with the monarch instead of with their commanding officers, and thus the ruling family survived.

The King’s reaction to these coup attempts was to purge all officers suspected of harboring disloyalty to the monarchy (i.e. those officers with nationalistic impulses affected by military coups in the region). The king cracked down on civilian protests, banned media publications and political

parties, and instated curfews and martial law. He also reconstituted his cabinet with assuredly loyalist members only, removing members of Palestinian origin (George 2005, pg. 31). From that point forward, the King pursued policies of patronage to the tribes and Bedouins termed “East Bankers” at the expense of Palestinian citizens. This was as a result of Palestinian politicization, contrasted with the loyalty of Bedouin/tribal elements during coup attempts. The King made it

clear that the armed forces were to remain separate from politics, and personnel with any sort of political conviction were not to be tolerated (Kamrava 2000, pg. 90). Particularly, the events of Black September in 1970 – in which members of the Palestinian Liberation Organization attempted a coup against the king – were responsible for marginalizing Palestinians with Jordanian citizenship almost entirely. Despite some evidence to suggest that Jordanians of Palestinian origin constitute 2/3’s of the entire Jordanian population

today, King Hussain, King Abdullah II, and the top brass have pursued a consistent policy of limiting their role in the armed forces (“Jordan Personnel,” 1989). The King has relied heavily on the Jordanian tribes for important military appointments, increasing their ties to the regime and aggrandizing the tribes at the expense of the Palestinians within the armed forces.

Despite initial conflict with military officers, King Hussain was able to refashion the army to support his family’s rule and consolidate his personal power over the armed forces. It is safe to say that both the patronage offered by the monarchy and the “de-Palestinianization” of the armed forces has increased the military’s loyalty to Hashemite rule since the tumultuous period pre-1970 (Tell 2004, pg 17).



THE JORDANIAN ARMED FORCES TODAY

According to the constitution of Jordan, the King and his Council of Ministers are responsible for internal and external security. The chain of command between the Armed Forces and the state flows through this Council. Although the Parliament has oversight over the Council of Ministers in theory, this Council is appointed by the King and all final decision-making is under his authority (Tell, 2004).

The monarch, as commander in chief, has generally sought to complicate the chain of command between the Armed Forces and the state beyond this title. For instance, the Armed Forces Law of 2001 stipulates that the commander of each service branch should report to the Minister of Defense who also has “complete mandate” over the Armed Forces and their objectives. The office of Minister of Defense has been vacant for many decades however, with that position’s responsibilities allocated to the Prime Minister instead. For reasons of workload supposedly, the Prime Minister has always delegated the responsibilities of Defense Minister to his Chief of Staff. The Chief of Staff is nominated by the Prime Minister, but approved by the King, and accountable to him only (Tell, 2004). Consequently, the King’s authority over all defense matters is wide-ranging.

Although the Constitution has allocated some means of control for the Parliament over the military, reality is quite different. The legislature does not have any security committee and thus suffers from a lack of civilian expertise or direct oversight. Reliance on foreign aid, particularly U.S. military aid, helps the Armed Forces remain autonomous from any constitutionally-mandated oversight (Tell, 2004).

Civilian control of the armed forces through the executive and legislative branches, particularly through the chain of command and Parliament, is

for all intents and purposes nonexistent. This dynamic exists as a result of the King’s involvement and his abundant avenues for intervention, all in the name of consolidating his own power and maintaining the control of the ruling family. But, this assumes the acquiescence of the armed forces wholly and in all circumstances. As recent events prove, this may not always be the case. Thus, in an attempt to maintain absolute control, the king may have empowered the military as a political actor.

THE ARMED FORCES AND THE ARAB SPRING

Following the Arab Spring, the military has been used to quell protests focused on electoral reform, neoliberalist policies, and charges of corruption (Riedel, 2012). The gendarmerie in particular –

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recently formed to act as part of the coercive apparatus under the jurisdiction of the Jordanian Armed Forces – was put to good use (Sayigh, 2011). This paramilitary force has been involved even in gatherings predominantly supported by “East Bankers” (Vogt, 2011). There is no reason to believe that the remaining service branches would not follow suit, no matter which group is involved in protest (Yom, 2013). The military is not only loyal to the monarch, but also has no shortage of experience in maintaining domestic stability, as its history proves.

Some questions remain, however, as to whether East Bankers (perceiving marginalization at the



expense of Jordanian Palestinians) will continue to deploy for the protection of the monarchy in this loyal fashion (Yom, 2013). Political grievances expressed both by military veterans and their East Bank tribes may indicate a gradual shift in the political landscape of Jordan (Goldberg, 2013) (Schenker, 2013). Most importantly, it may point to some unrest within the Armed Forces themselves.



(Muhammad Hamed, Reuters)

POLITICAL REFORM

While outright mutiny may be out of the question for the professional and sufficiently loyal armed forces, some questions have been raised over whether the army will get involved in the debate on political reform, or continue to acquiesce to the King's pace. In May 2010, a petition was raised by the National Committee of Military Veterans calling for an end to corruption, a resolution to the "Palestinian" question within Jordan's borders, and changes to the constitution for the benefit of parliamentary power by limiting the monarch's role (David, 2010). This organization has significant political power, encompassing over 140,000 veterans including high-ranking generals from the most prominent tribes (Vogt, 2011). Analysts considered this political involvement by the military veterans, and their broad scope of both

political and economic demands, as a "culmination of a gradual process in recent years, whereby senior army veterans interfere in politics" (David, 2010).

This proved to many within the regime that the military was not a silent actor in the political arena. In fact, it was beginning to vocalize its demands, some of which flirted with attacking the monarchy itself. Their petition, for instance, emphasized the

corruption around the queen and demanded an end to "elite treachery" (Vogt, 2011).

Specifically, the "Hirak" movement emerging out of royalist towns has been highly vocal both about maintaining the East Bank character of the state and other issues of reform (Schenker, 2013).

Members of these tribes represent military officials at all levels; thus there is no reason to believe that tribe members within the armed forces do not share the same grievances. Corruption within the state bureaucracies, and within the

monarchy's inner circle specifically, has signaled to the military establishment that they are personally being harmed by these developments (Muasher, 2013). For instance, neoliberal reforms have worked to privatize and thus reduce public resources and expenditures, affecting public servants such as soldiers and officers to a great extent (Vogt, 2011). Despite the doling out of material benefits at any sign of unrest, it seems the military leadership recognizes the increasingly powerful role they play in determining the country's political future. This explains their re-emergence on the political stage, after many decades of seeming professionalization and subordination to the king.

CONCLUSION

Although the protest movement was quelled by state force, King Abdullah II continues his attempts



to maintain the balance between opposition movements amongst East Bankers, the regime's economic beneficiaries, and the urban (Palestinian) protesters. Neglecting the military's grievances however, particularly in such a turbulent context, may prove detrimental to his long-term control, especially considering their representation of the "East Bank" elements of society. Their ever more vocal demands will define the pace and scope of future political reform. Without the loyalty of the military, the threat of the tribes to "follow Tunisia and Egypt" poses great risk to King Abdullah II, and to the future of his line (Vogt 2011, pg 67).

NOTES:

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