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The crisis of the center with the peripheries in Jordan
The hour of confrontation has struck

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La Jordanie est en proie à deux crises au moins : crise d’un régime contesté par une opposition vigoureuse, au premier rang de laquelle se trouvent les islamistes ; crise économique qui se traduit par un fort endettement et un marasme social. Cet article met en exergue le caractère fondamentalement économique des soulèvements contre le pouvoir central – certes plus discret qu’ailleurs : leur occurrence dans les petits et moyens centres urbains (depuis les événements de Ma’an en 1989) atteste d’une dégradation des privilèges jusque-là accordés par le régime hachémite aux membres des tribus jordaniennes, à l’origine de la rupture du contrat d’allégeance.

It appears that the contemporary history and development of the Jordanian cities of Amman, Zarqa, Irbid, and Karak is linked, like other cities of the world, with the political history of the modern state. The latter was the direct cause of the crises...
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experienced by the city, which result from the administrative and organizational policies pursued by the state to achieve its short-term political and security objectives. The main cities, particularly Amman, became disorganized «human reservoirs» as reflected by the presence of 38% of the population of Jordan in the capital Amman\(^1\), where they suffer from housing, transportation, and employment problems.

Moreover, although those cities have created circumstances of rich human coexistence, the aforementioned policies have contributed to the creation of “rural and Bedouin”\(^2\) blocs in the cities, separated from their social roots on the one hand, and incapable of political and economic integration on the other.

From its foundation in 1921 up to the present day, the Jordanian state has had a “conscious bias” in favour of “tribal logic”, to the detriment of a “civil state logic”, in its representation of the geography of the desert badia. While this was part of its quest for domination and stability, it in fact created circumstances of temporary «client-patron» relationships, which cease when the interests of both end. Is this relationship sufficient to engender a «crisis» between the various segments of society and its components?

In answering this question we shall shed light on three themes: the formation of the city, the relationship of the regime with the tribe, and finally, the rebellion of the peripheries against the political center.

The dynamic demography of the Jordanian city

Jordanian cities are marked by substantial variety in their structure and history, although it should be pointed out immediately that it is necessary to differentiate between Amman and the other Jordanian cities. As the capital, Amman embodied a diverse population: the initial nucleus was the Circassians and Bedouins, followed by Lebanese merchants, Syrian employees, and then hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, followed by Iraqis, Asian domestic workers, and Egyptian workers, all of which led to it playing a role “as a venue for intensifying social interaction”\(^3\).

The establishment of Jordanian cities and their architectural
and demographic development was associated with the emergence of the modern state on the one hand, and the successive political migrations from neighboring countries on the other. This in turn led to two consequences: the first was positive, relating to human and cultural diversity, and the second negative, relating to increased pressure on the infrastructure and services of cities, which weakened them and their capacity to provide basic services to their populations.

Thus after being a part of the wilaya of Damascus affiliated to the Ottoman state, the capital Amman was established at a distance from the existing cities, such as Salt, Irbid, and Karak. Schools and governmental departments were established, and political, economic and social elites were formed, and it came to attract elites and merchants from distant cities of origin. Against this backdrop, the political, economic and social formation of the state contributed to the emergence of new classes that were to a great extent independent from the traditional historical context of societies, markets and other cities.

Most Jordanian cities, and especially Amman, grew forcibly. This was due to numerous factors, including:

1. The exposure to successive waves of internal migration from the countryside to the cities. Currently, 82.6% of the inhabitants of Jordan (6.7 million total) live in cities, while the rest live in the countryside and the Badia desert. This makes Jordan a highly urbanized country, particularly given that 38% of the entire population lives in the capital Amman. The reason behind those migrations is the quest for job opportunities, as well as the health, educational and recreational services available in cities but not the countryside and the Badia.

2. The wars and conflicts witnessed by the Middle East led to many major successive migrations to Jordan such as: Palestinians in 1948, 1967; Lebanese due to the civil war in 1975; Jordanians and Palestinians after their expulsion due to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1991; Iraqis in the wake of the American occupation of Iraq in 2003; and finally, the Syrian crisis in 2011 has led to the migration of hundreds of thousands to Jordanian cities, prompting the Jordanian Prime Minister AbdullahNsour to declare the governorates of the north, Irbid, Mafraq, Jerash and Ajloun, «disaster areas».

3. Migrations engendered by customs and traditions, such as: revenge, al-jalwa (departing from the venue of habitation) prevalent
in the countryside and the Badia, which forces the relatives of the person who commits a crime to take leave of the area in which they live and to go to another area, usually the city. An instance of this is the Jalwa witnessed by the town of Al-Hashimiyyah in the Zarqa Governorate in March 2012, which led to the displacement of around 1300 persons from a single tribe.

While those causes of migration could give the impression that Jordanian cities are merely «cities of refuge,» they have also contributed, in one form or another, to a human experience of coexisting with the «other». In reality, Jordanian cities are considered a model of simultaneous homogeneity and diversity. The Jordanian people have remained homogenous ethnically, culturally, and religiously despite the various migrations and their pluralism. Currently, Arabs represent 98% of the population, of which 96% are Muslim Sunnis and the remainder Arab Christians. There is a clear and influential presence of ethnic minorities, such as Circassians, Shishanis, Kurds, Armenians, and others.

Zaid Al-Mheisen, the former adviser to the Mayor of Amman, defines the city as a center of its surroundings, and says, «It is a historical document of old and modern civilizations by dint of its architectural structures in terms of houses, streets, forts, citadels and walls, houses of worship, public squares, and amphitheaters and otherwise, and it is a social document of social fusion which it witnessed throughout history.»

Accordingly, a view of the populous Jordanian cities such as Amman, Zarqa and Irbid would highlight for us the social mosaic of those cities, particularly Amman, which is mostly constituted by the peripheries. For example, there are areas from the southern cities (Al-Tafayleh and Al-Ma`aniyyeh), and the areas of Al-Abdallat and Al-Kharabsheh (city of Salt). And the areas of Palestinian refugees (Mheisseer area from Jerusalem, Wihdat, and Al-Hussein), and the areas of religious and ethnic minorities (Al-Ashrafiyyah: Armenians, and Al-Muhajirin, and Al-Shabsugh: Circassians) and others.

The markets of Amman have also been colored by the names of areas that are unrelated to them: hence, there is Al-Yamaniyyah market (founded originally by Yemeni merchants), and Souq Al-Bukhariyyah (merchants from the Caucasus south of the former Soviet Union), etc. The other Jordanian urban centers follow patterns similar to that of the social mosaic of the city of Amman and its interactions, albeit less clearly.
The crisis of the center with the peripheries in Jordan

Although it is possible to claim that the center has become the «point of encounter of the peripheries», it has failed to become a complete melting pot. The peripheries remain in poor and destitute areas, distant from services, and with high unemployment rates, which maintains them on the margins of the city of which they are one of the components 15.

Role of the regime in «tribalizing» the center

«Due to the recent urban history which goes back to the end of the 19th century as relates to the cities of Amman, Irbid, Madaba, and Ma’an, and to the 18th century as relates to the cities of Karak and Salt, Jordan did not rely substantially on its cities in the process of nation building, but rather relied on the countryside and the Badia from which the regime enlists its army» 16.

Thus the successive Jordanian policies vis-à-vis the process of political and social modernization of the center and periphery since the founding of the Emirate in 1921 until the present were characterized by contradiction. On the one hand they were anchored in the «tribe» as a basic unit on which the regime depends for its stability. On the other hand, they sought to create a modern civil state that is rooted in the values of citizenship, justice and equality. How can the regime reconcile the two sides of this equation, which are politically, socially and economically contradictory?

At the outset, it must be stated that the tribe was—and continues to be—the foundation on which the modern state was established. King Abdullah I could not have founded his state in 1921 without controlling the tribes of East Jordan, which revolted against him in the beginning, and subsequently submitted to his authority and concluded agreements of allegiance to him 17. The Hashemite kings consider themselves to be the sheikhs of the most notable Arab tribe. From Abdullah I to Abdullah II, the kings of Jordan have conducted themselves on this basis, even if the latter has tried to decrease the importance of this role in the institutions of the state 18.

The Jordanian journalist Nahed Hattar states in an article entitled «The tribes lose their state» that «if the monarchy in Jordan has survived until today, it owes this to the Jordanian tribes, which were
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and continue to be, the pillar of solidarity on which it relies, and the social and political forms of the internal alliance with them enable the Jordanian political regime to overcome the major challenges which faced it: the Wahhabi challenge in the twenties, the Nasserist challenge in the fifties and sixties, the Palestinian challenge in the seventies of the previous century; any of these challenges could have toppled the regime» 19.

The Hashemite family and the tribes have become the two pillars and the identity of the Jordanian regime. In discussions of the national identity, a chasm exists between Jordanians from the East Bank of Jordan and the West Bank concerning the issue of allegiance to the Hashemite family. In reality, the Hashemite family, since its founding of Jordan, embodies the identity more than its institutions. Hence, to be Jordanian means, primarily, an affirmation of an allegiance to a monarchical system whose history rests on enlisting the support of Jordan tribal leaders 20.

The political and military conflict between the Jordanian state and radical Palestinian organizations in 1970, which was called the «September events», deepened the social chasm between two large population blocs in Jordan, given that the consequences of the conflict were marshaled in the subsequent development plans. This coincided with the emergence of two significant factors:

1. Formation of a state bureaucracy sector.
2. Inflow of money from the oil rich countries as a result of the oil shock in the wake of the 1973 war 21.

The regime used a large portion of the inflow of Gulf money in building security apparatuses and relatively advanced infrastructure (education and health). A portion of the inflows were invested in mining industries such as phosphate, potash, and others 22. These succeeded in absorbing most of the east Jordanian component of the population.

In this way, a robust nucleus, in economic and security terms, was formed by the East Bank Jordanians separately from another population bloc in the country, that of the Jordanians of Palestinian origin. This necessarily drove the latter to the private sector, in activities such as construction, tourism and banking, based on a recognition that they were excluded from the state economic arena in the formal and quasi formal sectors 23.

This period, extending from 1970 to the mid 80s of the twentieth century, might thus be referred to as the «alliance of the suburbs»,
between the regime and the peripheral governorates, which have a dominant familial and tribal character. The regime relied on this alliance to impose a form of political stability.

The tribal segment of society benefited from its support of the Hashemite monarchy in terms of financial assistance and positions of prominence and influence in the government, as well as the building of roads, hospitals and schools. Visits by the king to the tribes are considered routine, in addition to the counsel sought from them relating to public issues and Jordanian policy, not to mention that the majority of the Jordanian army and its leaderships are of tribal origins.

Therefore, we have a patron-client relationship between a regime seeking stability and continuity, and a segment of society that despite its small numbers has been able to play a significant role in the emergence and stability of the state, and to avail itself of special privileges. In a nutshell, it may be said that «the positions of internal security and other sensitive positions continue to rely completely on those tribal affiliations and allegiances».

Rebellion of the peripheries against the «status quo»

It appears that social conflict in general, and class conflict in particular, have reached their utmost level in Jordan through what are termed the «popular movements», which have substantially intensified since 2011. And despite the «calculated favoritism» by the regime towards the peripheries, particularly Bedouins, the principal rebellions have occurred in small towns and cities with east Jordanian majorities, and which are traditionally known for their support of the Hashemite regime: Salt and Karak in the seventies of the previous century, Ma’an 1989 and 2002, Dhiban area from which protests emanated in 2011, and the «October uprising» from Amman to all the other peripheries 2012.

Three forms of the rebellion of the peripheries against the political center (regime) have crystallized, namely:

First, «geographic rebellion». An example of this is the «rebellion of April» in the city of Ma’an 1989. Second, «social rebellion». The most significant example of this is the emergence of military retirees
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and tribes as rising forces opposed to the regime in 2007. Thirdly, both “geographic” and “social” rebellion. The best example is “the activism of Dhiban,” and the “uprising of October.”

Clearly the direct causes of those rebellions, in the main, are economic with social ramifications. This underscores the failure of the economic policies of the regime, and its dependence on the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank and their advice, particularly after the national debt reached $20 billion US in 2012.

The activism of Ma’an, “the uprising of April” 1989, is considered the first significant rebellion of the peripheries against the political center. Ma’an is the city in which the founder of modern Jordan, Emir Abdullah, arrived on 11 November 1920 and forged alliances with the tribes. Demonstrations erupted on 17 April 1989, and after one day they began to expand to encompass most of the cities of southern Jordan, reaching Karak, Tafileh and Salt. The cause is attributable to the acceptance by the Jordanian Government of the terms of the World Bank at the end of 1988, which led to a rise in the prices of foodstuffs. Those events caused King Hussein to become aware that the support of the tribes, which had seemed absolute until that moment, was not unconditional.

“Those who like the idea of comparing between the movements of 1989 and 2011, due to the fact that they do not differentiate between the two, find that the failure of the 80s movement is a substantive cause of the birth of the current movement.”

There has developed a sense of class gaps on the part of a segment of society that is important to the regime, namely, the 150,000 “military retirees,” a large number of whom formed a committee in 2007. In a statement issued by the committee, “The oppression suffered by the Jordanian citizen is absolutely unprecedented, for the Jordanian citizen does not presently have any right to anything; medical treatment is an act of benevolence, food is an assistance, high cost education is a favor, housing is a gift, and clothing is a charitable act. It is as though the citizen lives as a slave in a fiefdom.”

The tribes, which constitute 40% of the population of the Kingdom, feel that the political and economic privileges which they used to enjoy have begun to dissipate, particularly with the arrival of King Abdullah II as monarch. Accordingly, the allegiance of the tribes, or at least a portion of them, to the Hashemite regime is no longer absolute. Thus 36 personalities representing prominent Jordanian tribes (Group of 36) issued a statement on February 5,
2011 in which they criticized the ruling family, warning of the arrival of «the Tunisian and Egyptian deluge will reach Jordan sooner or later, whether we wish it or not» 37.

Notwithstanding indications of the emergence of those rising forces at the peripheries 38, the regime has not dealt effectively, either politically or economically, with their grievances 39 and the situation has reached a crisis. Thus there was the «Dhaban unrest» in 2011, and subsequently the «uprising of October» 2012.

The rebellion of Dhaban in southern Amman is of considerable importance due to its great role in launching what may be characterized as the «Jordanian Spring» 40. It sparked the first demonstration in Jordan on January 7, 2011, over the absence of allocations. Demonstrators raised for the first time a picture of a loaf of bread with the caption: «Where are you dear?» 41.

The economic crisis was undoubtedly felt on the Jordanian political scene since the beginning of 2011. Four governments out of five did not tamper with prices – particularly of fuel and essential commodities – on the basis of advice, particularly from security quarters, that such decisions could exacerbate protests and make them more widespread 42. Nevertheless, the first important decision after the formation of the fifth government in two years, with Abdullah Nsour as prime minister, in October 2012, was to raise the prices of fuel and gas by 54%. This led to a wide wave of protests in the Kingdom. More than one hundred demonstrations occurred during one evening on November 13 2012, in what was known as the «uprising of the October» to evoke the memory of the «uprising of April» 1989. This economic crisis provoked the use of the slogan «The people want the removal of the regime» for the first time 43.

The regime first attempted to distance the tribes from the Arab Spring, characterizing those demanding reform as Palestinians who are trying to hijack the state. This rhetoric achieves several aims, most importantly, distancing the Jordanian tribes from the developing popular activism, and secondly, continuing to divide Jordanian society into two big segments: East Bank Jordanians and Palestinians. However, this strategy did not last for long, since Jordanians quickly discovered that the demonstrators and indeed those leading the demonstrations are the sons of the tribes. Also, the attempt of the regime to highlight its role in combating corruption and legally pursuing the corrupt led it to collide with the tribes that stood against it 44.
Conclusion

Clearly, there exists a real political, social and economic crisis in Jordan concerning the relationship between the geographic and political center (the city and the political regime), and the geographic and human peripheries (the countryside and the badia). This crisis has deepened in the shadow of the transformation of the state from a «tributary state» to a «taxation state» which has made an impact on the segments of society (rural and Bedouin peripheries) that were considered politically loyal to the center, and which depended on the regime to support them materially and morally.

King Abdullah II is fully aware of the crisis enveloping the relationship between him and the periphery, particularly the tribes. «He was not reluctant to hold a meeting in the city of Ma’an in mid 2012 with the tribal chiefs to restore and bolster the relationship with them in accordance with a pact (hilf al-fudul)».

Despite attempts at reform and reconciliation, the relationship between the center and the peripheries has entered a new and totally different phase. In the shadow of deteriorating economic conditions, with a national debt of 20-22 billion dollars, and in the shadow of an Arab Spring armed with the communication and information revolution, Jordanian citizens of diverse segments and locations no longer accept policies and decisions applied to them in the past.

The Jordanian monarch’s emphasis on «reform» corroborates the depth of the crisis. He has declared his desire to change to a «constitutional monarchy» in which the people would rule themselves. Will he succeed in this quest after the previous governmental policies led to favoring certain cities over others, and certain social segments over others?

And how can cities recover their role in development, civilization and production after having become associated with names that are synonymous with extremism and confrontation with the state and society, such as Abu Mus’ab Al-Zarqawi, near the densely populated city of Zarqa, or Muhammad Al Shalabi «Abu Sayyaf», one of the Salafi jihadi leaders in Ma’an, one of the poorest areas in Jordan?
Notes

2. Personal Interview with the Jordanian leftist opposition figure Mowafak Mahadeen, Amman, March 20, 2013.
5. Personal interview with the researcher and journalist at «Al-Ghad» Newspaper Mr. Ibrahim Gharalbeh, Amman, March 10, 2013.
6. «Urban» includes localities of (5000) population or more as were defined in the 2004 census.
10. Kamal, Mowafak, «A tribal evacuation in AL-Hashimiyyah area displaces 1300 persons and places 102 families below the poverty level ar.» Al-Ghad Newspaper, Amman, April 1, 2012.
13. Personal interview with Mr Zaid Al-Mheisen, adviser to the former Mayor of Amman, April 2, 2013.
14. Personal interview with Mr Zaid Al-Mheisen, adviser to the former Mayor of Amman, April 2, 2013.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
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34. Ibid.
35. Personal Interview with the Jordanian leftist opposition figure Mowafak Mahadeen, Amman, March 20, 2013.
37. Ibid, P. 98.
39. Ibid.
40. Al-bataineh, Khaled , op. cit.
42. Al-Najjar, Muhammad, op. cit.
43. Ibid.
44. Mahmoud, Khaled, op. cit.
45. Personal Interview with the Jordanian leftist opposition figure Mowafak Mahadeen, Amman, March 20, 2013.
46. Mahmoud, Khaled, op. cit.