



October 2022

Office Palestinian Territories

# Jordan and the Palestinian cause

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## An analysis of contemporary foreign and domestic political dimensions

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This report provides an integrated analysis of foreign and domestic political factors and developments that have shaped Jordan's contemporary stance towards the Palestinian cause. This report is the second case study of a wider research series by the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation (KAS) Office in the Palestinian Territories that re-assesses the place the Palestinian cause holds within the Arab world more than a decade after the Arab Spring.

### Introduction

The Palestinian cause has long unanimously been referred to as the principal Arab cause, a source of unity within the Arab world. Historically, it has captured the deep sympathy and commitment of the Arab people and significantly shaped Arab states' political course. Yet, throughout the last decade, this fundamental notion of Arab unity has been increasingly contested. Not only have the 2011 uprisings - commonly known as the Arab Spring - seemingly turned Arab citizens' attention inward to domestic problems and away from traditional foreign affairs considerations, but also an increasing number of Arab states have normalized ties with Israel and supported policies that are perceived to be against Palestinian interests and that previously would have been unthinkable. As a result, a provoking question has infiltrated the public and analytical discourse in recent years; namely whether there is an increasing "Arab fatigue" towards the Palestinian cause.

When attempting to define the Palestinian cause, this study looks at two dimensions: Firstly, a superordinate political one. Here the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API) put forward by the Arab League may be used as a point of reference. Although today, in effect, it has lost its operability, it remains the most widely-agreed upon proposal for peace endorsed by Arab states. Most significantly, it offers Israel peace with the Arab League's 22 member states in return of a withdrawal from lands occupied in 1967, a "just" settlement to the Palestinian refugee problem in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 194, and the establishment of a sovereign independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Secondly, the definition of the Palestinian cause may also be extended to include a "lower" dimension, making it a human cause that is about guaranteeing Palestinian fundamentals of life and day-to-day welfare as the protracted Palestinian-Israeli conflict drags on for the 7<sup>th</sup> decade.

The "Arab world" in the political context can be defined as comprising the 22 member states of the Arab League. Yet, they are as diverse on an inter-state political level as they are on an intra-state societal one. For this reason, before being able to make an informed and differentiated claim regarding the place the Palestinian cause holds in the Arab world today, it is imperative to gain an in-depth understanding of a significant number of individual countries first. Here, the country selected as the second case study as part of the KAS publication series is Jordan (the first case study about Egypt can be accessed [here](#)). Jordan is a unique case since - more so than any other Arab nation - both its foreign and domestic politics are inextricably interdependent with the Palestinian cause. Most importantly, this is due to its geographic proximity and the fact that at least half of the Jordanian population is of Palestinian descent. As a result, contemporary Jordanian-Palestinian relations have largely been driven by one looming fear: namely that Israel attempts to turn Jordan into "the alternative homeland for Palestinians". Against this background, this study will provide an integrated

analysis of Jordanian foreign and domestic political dynamics in relation to the Palestinian cause and how they have developed within the highly dynamic and rapidly changing environment of the Middle East throughout the past decade.

## History and background

### The beginnings: Jordan, Israel – and Palestine?

From the very outset, the history of the modern state of Jordan is inextricably linked to the history of the territory that most within the Arab world consider to be Palestine. In fact, the two lands only became formally viewed as two separate entities after 1921, when Winston Churchill severed Transjordan – its name derived from its location east of the Jordan River – from Palestine, which under the British mandate was set out to become a national home for the Jewish people. Transjordan came to be ruled by Abdullah I of the Hashemite dynasty, who formally became the monarch of the Hashemite Kingdom of Transjordan after gaining independence from Britain in 1946. In 1948, the creation of the state of Israel led to the *nakba*, or ‘catastrophe’, referring to the mass expulsion of around 700.000 Palestinians from their homeland.<sup>1</sup> When the first Arab-Israeli war (1948-1949), in which Transjordan fought alongside four other Arab states against Israel, came to an end, King Abdullah I was left in control of East Jerusalem and parts of the territory west of the river Jordan, becoming known as the West Bank, that was previously set out to form an independent Palestinian state. The territory was formally annexed in 1950 through a series of steps that were ushered in by the 1948 Jericho conference and Transjordan was renamed to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. After the unification of both banks under the monarch’s rule, Palestinians were naturalized as Jordanian citizens and gained an equal number of seats in Jordan’s parliament.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Jordan’s hitherto sparse population grew by around 75% to 1.2 million.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, as the liberation of Palestine emerged as one of the strongest unifying causes of the nascent Pan-Arab movement – indicative of the struggle against both European imperialism and Jewish Zionism – Jordan came under increasing criticism by the Arab world for controlling parts of the land that was to form the Palestinian state. In 1951, King Abdullah I was assassinated by a Palestinian gunman in Jerusalem, though his son and successor King Hussein I (reign from 1953- 1999) continued to consolidate the integration of Palestinians into Jordan. In 1952, a new constitution promoted the equality of all Jordanians before the law and the 1954 amendment to the Nationality Law stipulated that citizenship would be granted to any Palestinian that was a resident in Jordan between 1949 and 1954.<sup>4</sup> This process of “Jordanization” went hand in hand with a process of “de-Palestinization”; so, for example, was the term “Palestine” banned from all official documents and the idea of a unified Jordan was conveyed in the country’s educational curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

### From war against Israel to war against Palestinians

In 1967, Israel recaptured the West Bank including East Jerusalem from Jordan in the third Arab-Israeli war, which in the Arab world is also referred to as *naksa*, meaning ‘setback’. Nevertheless, on basis of Jordan’s constitution, the territory legally and administratively remained part of the Hashemite Kingdom. Jordanian law continued to apply and Palestinians in the West Bank retained their citizenship. Israel furthermore agreed to uphold the Hashemite’s custodianship over Muslim and Christian holy sites in Jerusalem, a role the Hashemite family held since 1924. Yet, King Hussein was faced with several major challenges including economic losses from the war, Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and an increasingly hostile Palestinian population. In 1970, these developments culminated in the Jordanian civil war, later remembered as “Black September”, fought

<sup>1</sup> See Flapan, “[The Palestinian Exodus of 1948](#)”, Journal of Palestinian Studies, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> See Brand, “[Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity](#)”, Journal of Palestine Studies, 1995.

<sup>3</sup> See Hussein, “[Jordan and the Palestinians](#)”, in Ababsa, “Atlas of Jordan”, Presses de l’Ifpo, Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See “[Law No. 6 of 1954 on Nationality \(last amended 1987\)](#)”, UNHCR, 1954.

<sup>5</sup> See “[Palestinians in Jordan, 1948-1967](#)”, Palestinian Journeys, 2013.

between the Jordanian Armed Forces loyal to the king and the Palestinian *fedayeen*<sup>6</sup> fighters associated with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The PLO, which was established in 1964 with the purpose of bringing together various Palestinian groups in the struggle for Palestinian liberation, ramped up its presence in Jordan after 1967 to launch attacks against Israel. This posed a threat not only to Jordan's internal stability as well as external relations with Israel, but also endangered the monarch himself. His reign was openly challenged by Yasser Arafat, whose Fatah group came to dominate the PLO. The organization was eventually expelled to Lebanon but Jordan's civil war remains part of the country's collective memory until today. While many Jordanian-Palestinians distance themselves from the actions carried out by the PLO's fedayeen, parts of society continue to be polarized by divergent narratives of either harsh governmental action or, on the other side, Palestinian disloyalty.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the perspective, the Black September marked a watershed moment in Jordan's history, significantly shaping its sociopolitical affairs and national identity formation.<sup>8</sup>

### Peace in the making?

In 1974, the PLO was recognized as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people by the Arab League. Despite the fact that King Hussein endorsed this decision, Jordan-PLO competition over the loyalty of the Palestinian people and control over the West Bank continued. Their strained relations recuperated somewhat in light of the shared opposition to the Camp David Accords and signing of the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty; the first peace treaty between any Arab state and Israel, thus viewed as an unprecedented break-away from Arab unity and a stab in the back of the Palestinian cause. Yet, throughout the 1980's Jordan's position towards peace with Israel also gradually started to change, bringing with it the subordinate goal of attuning the PLO's stance towards a peace process as well.<sup>9</sup>

The outbreak of the first *intifada*<sup>10</sup> (1987 – 1993) brought an abrupt end to any such ambitions. Now King Hussein's first concern was to avoid a spill-over of violence that would undermine Jordan's internal stability and threaten its fragile demographic equilibrium that was cautiously kept since the 1970/71 civil war. As the *intifada* revealed that the Hashemite monarchy enjoyed little sympathy in the West Bank compared to the PLO, in 1988, the king took the decision to sever all remaining legal and administrative ties to the West Bank, except the custodianship over Jerusalem's holy sites. This meant that around 760.000 Palestinians residing in the West Bank, approximately 20% of the Jordanian population at that time, lost their citizenship.<sup>11</sup> While Jordan issued temporary passports that could be used for limited purposes such as travelling, under the Israeli occupation, those Palestinians effectively became stateless. King Hussein explained his decision as one that henceforth ought to pave the road towards Palestinian self-determination under the PLO.

Israelis and Palestinians held peace talks for the first time in the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference, during which, upon Israeli demands, Palestinians were represented within a joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. This changed in the 1993 historic Oslo Accords, the first agreement between the PLO and Israel towards a process for peace. Here, the Palestinian leadership acted as direct negotiation partner to Israel, independent of any Jordanian delegation. This Palestinian-Israeli interim peace eventually opened doors for Jordan to establish its own peace agreement with Israel, known as the Wadi Araba peace treaty, signed in 1994 by King Hussein and Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin. Whereas both sides committed to work towards a solution of the Palestinian refugee question, unlike the Egyptian peace treaty, the Jordanian agreement was not formally linked to the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Key issues between the two signatories rather

<sup>6</sup> The Arabic word *fedayeen* (فدائيين) translates to "the one who self-sacrifices", commonly referring to Palestinian guerrilla fighters.

<sup>7</sup> See Ryan, "[Identity Politics, Reform, And Protest In Jordan](#)", Appalachian State University, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> See Brand, "[Palestinians and Jordanians: A Crisis of Identity](#)", Journal of Palestine Studies, Summer 1995.

<sup>9</sup> See Satloff, "[Jordan and Reverberations of the Uprising](#)", Current History, February 1989.

<sup>10</sup> The Arabic word *intifada* (انتفاضة) translates to "shaking off" and, in the Palestinian context, refers to the Palestinian popular uprisings aimed at ending the Israeli occupation.

<sup>11</sup> See Hussein, "[Jordan and the Palestinians](#)", in Ababsa, "Atlas of Jordan", Presses de l'Ifpo, Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2013.

concerned borders, land and water as well as the status of Jerusalem's holy sites. Particularly the latter created tensions between Jordan and the Palestinian National Authority (PA), which was formed during the Oslo process as an interim governing body for partial rule over the West Bank and Gaza Strip until the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would be resolved. The latter saw Jordan's custodianship over Jerusalem's holy sites, which was reaffirmed through the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty, as a violation of any future Palestinian state's sovereignty. In 1995, King Hussein's trusted Israeli partner Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli extremist for his peace efforts with the Palestinians. While the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty survived, relations between the two countries have turned from a warm to a cold peace ever since.

### **Hardening fronts amidst unfulfilled hopes for peace**

As the Palestinian-Israeli peace process failed to progress, the second *intifada* (2000-2005) once again raised Jordanian fears of transboundary instability and spillover of violence. Furthermore, after winning the legislative elections against Fatah, the Palestinian Islamist Hamas party took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, which effectively brought the Palestinian Territories under split control since then, adding another warring party and further complexity to an already protracted conflict. Thus, during the 2000s, to keep the stability on a domestic level, Jordan employed a near zero-tolerance policy for public demonstrations; so, for example, were protests restricted to mere symbolic events and controlled actions in the capital Amman during Israel's assaults on the West Bank city of Jenin, Lebanon and Gaza between 2002 and 2009.<sup>12</sup> On a foreign policy level, Jordan, as a small and comparatively weak Arab state, was increasingly seen to follow in line with its bigger and more powerful regional allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Most notably, when the Arab League adopted a new peace initiative led by Saudi-Arabia called the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative (API)<sup>13</sup> - offering Israel peace with the Arab League's 22 member states in return for a withdrawal to the 1967-borders, the creation of an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital and a "just" solution to the Palestinian refugee question - Jordan strongly endorsed the initiative. Although it never materialized, the API was a historic initiative by which the Arab world for the first time implicitly recognized Israel and accepted negotiations as a strategic route for resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

## **Jordan's contemporary foreign politics and the Palestinian cause**

### **Adamant proponent for peace: Jordan and the Palestinian-Israeli peace process**

More so than any other Arab state, Jordan has an intrinsic national interest to resolve all conflicting issues between Palestinians and Israelis. This is largely due to three main factors; firstly, and quite obviously, Jordan's geographic proximity and resulting security concerns in keeping its 327 km-long border with Israel and the Palestinian Territories safe; secondly, Jordan's delicate demographic balance between citizens of Palestinian and Transjordanian descent; and lastly, the Hashemite's role as custodian of Jerusalem's holy sites.

Despite the ongoing Oslo negotiations, the 2000s saw no halt of violence between Palestinians and Israelis, making the prospect of a peaceful solution appear ever-more unlikely. The last direct peace talks between the two sides were held in in 2014. Shortly after their collapse, a devastating war on Gaza and a wave of violence in Jerusalem broke out, rendering any remaining confidence in the established US-led peace process obsolete. Jordan, which, together with Egypt, had been the US' core regional ally and trusted partner in the peace negotiations, watched the evolving developments with concern. Arguably, this concern was greatly exacerbated with the arrival of the Trump administration (2017-2021) and the advent of a new paradigm for Palestinian-Israeli peace. Jordan was alarmed by the American embassy move to Jerusalem in 2018, as this was not only seen as an encroachment on the status of Jerusalem but also generated speculations about worst-case scenarios that Trump's awaited plan for peace in the Middle East might propose - particularly the notion of a confederation between the Palestinian Territories and Jordan.

<sup>12</sup> See Tell, "[Early Spring in Jordan: The Revolt of the Military Veterans](#)", Carnegie Middle East Center, November 2015.

<sup>13</sup> See "[The Arab Peace Initiative Official Translation](#)", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2002.

To fully grasp the gravity that this fear holds for both Jordanians and Palestinians, it is central to see it against the history backdrop: while it was King Hussein who initially attempted to create a political unity between the East and the West Bank, the monarch abandoned this aspiration once and for all when he took the decision to disengage from the Palestinian Territories in 1988. Instead, it was the Israeli right, largely from the Likud party, that kept the “Jordan option” alive. Yet, with one substantial twist; while Jordanian efforts prior to 1988 were directed towards integrating both Palestinian land and people into Jordan, in the dominant right-wing Israeli version, Israel would take the land and Jordan would take the people - or to be more precise, the *Palestinian* people, while “Judea and Samaria”<sup>14</sup> would become fully inhabitable for the Jews. Over the decades, this notion, which is equally dreaded by Jordanians and Palestinians, had come by myriad different names and shapes: Jordan-Palestinian (con)federation, the Jordan-option, Jordan is Palestine idea, alternative homeland, population transfer; or yet others would argue that none of these terms should be used, as in fact, all of them are mere Israeli euphemism for what in reality would amount to no less than an ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. Regardless of the terminology used, Oraib Rantawi, founder of the Amman-based Al Quds Center for Political Studies, notes that “all of them have in common that they intend to resolve the Palestinian cause *outside* of Palestine, in Jordan, and at the expense of both, Jordanians and Palestinians.”<sup>15</sup> Against this background, it becomes apparent why Palestinian statehood is a security priority of the first order for the Hashemite Kingdom, one that is viewed as paramount to its own sovereignty and stability.

Although Trump’s so-called “Peace to Prosperity” plan, which was released in 2020, did not suggest a Jordanian-Palestinian confederation, the proposed vision based on economic and humanitarian incentives at the expense of a political solution was equally daunting to both Jordanians and Palestinians. In essence, the plan constituted a break with nearly half a century of US policy and international consensus regarding the two-state formula. While he avoided to outright reject the proposal, the king reiterated Jordan’s steadfast stance based on the two-state solution. “This has endeared Jordan to the Palestinians.” says Dr. Khalil Shikaki, director of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR). “They view Jordan’s role in the peace process much more positively than for example Egypt’s, in part because Egypt has been a lot more cooperative with Trump’s peace plan. Even though Jordan has a lot of interest in maintaining good relations with the US, it is nevertheless more sensitive to the Palestinians’ perception.”<sup>16</sup>

Jordan continued to lend its capabilities to alternative efforts for peace, as for instance in the multi-lateral framework of the Munich Group consisting of Jordan, Egypt, France and Germany.<sup>17</sup> Yet, its capabilities are limited. While Jordan continues to enjoy high esteem and credibility with its partners, its traditional role as interlocutor in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has gradually diminished. This is largely due to its reduced leverage on the conflicting parties as well as within the international scene. On one hand, Jordan has grown more and more dependent on Israel for resources and the US for economic aid; on the other, political relations with the Israeli leadership hit their lowest point under Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu. This meant that, in effect, Jordan’s diplomatic channels with at least two out of the three main conflicting parties had grown insufficient, as it only cultivates close ties with Fatah/PA, while its relations with Hamas also leave much to be desired. “How can you mediate between two parties you have bad relationships with? You need mediators yourself to restore your relationship.”<sup>18</sup> says Oraib Rantawi. Thus, for the time being, Jordan’s long-standing ally, Egypt, appears to fill the role of the primary regional mediator, especially after it brokered a swift ceasefire between Israel and Hamas that ended the violent escalations in 2021. While Jordan and Egypt stand in close

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<sup>14</sup> The biblical term “Judea and Samaria” is commonly used in Israeli religious or nationalist discourse to refer to area known as the West Bank.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Oraib Rantawi, founder and general director of the Amman-based Al Quds Center for Political Studies, April 12, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Dr. Khalil Shikaki, director of the Ramallah-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, October 13, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> See [“Joint Statement by Foreign Minister Baerbock and the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, France and Jordan on the Middle East Peace Process”](#), Press Release Federal Foreign Office Germany, February 19, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Oraib Rantawi, founder and general director of the Amman-based Al Quds Center for Political Studies, April 12, 2022.

consultation and their positioning within the Palestinian-Israeli arena should thus not be understood as one based on rivalry, Egypt evidently reaps more political perks, such as improved international standing and diplomatic leverage with the US and Israel, which Jordan, thus, does not benefit from to the same extent.

The departing of both Netanyahu and Trump has eased the political dilemma for Jordan to some level. The new US administration under Biden, at least on a rhetoric level, resumed its support for the two-state solution but is unlikely to initiate any bold steps towards renewing the peace process. On the Israeli side, the new PM Naftali Bennett has made efforts to rectify relations with Jordan but is known to outright reject the two-state solution. Instead, a “shrinking the conflict” approach has found its way into the Knesset, which, similarly to Trump’s vision, talks about improved economic conditions for Palestinians at best. According to Ibrahim Dalalsha, director of the Ramallah-based Horizon Center for Political Studies and Media Outreach, “there is a consensus among all involved parties that under the current Israeli government, there will be no meaningful progress towards peace.”<sup>19</sup> This currently leaves few options for Jordan on the table, except to continue to lend its long-standing experience and best efforts to multi-lateral peace building initiatives to lay the groundwork until a more conducive environment for peace talks may arise.

### **Navigating the triangle: Jordan’s political relations with the conflicting parties**

#### Ally by default: Palestinian Authority/Fatah

Since the disengagement from the West Bank in 1988, Jordan has been cautious in its approach towards the Palestinian leadership lest it is seen to undermine Palestinian self-determination. Since the PA was formed as the governing body intended to lead Palestinians towards statehood, Jordan arguably has been its staunchest ally. Given Jordan’s steadfast position on the two-state solution, Dr. Mudar Kassis, professor at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies at Birzeit University, notes that “by definition, whatever the PA does is something that, in essence, is acceptable to Jordan.”<sup>20</sup> Their political course in regards to the Palestinian cause are thus aligned in largely every aspect. While in the past the status of Jerusalem’s holy sites had been a point of friction, the issue was settled in 2013, when King Abdullah II and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas signed an agreement, formally recognizing Jordan’s historic custodianship over the sites until the formation of a sovereign Palestinian state. In addition, shared opposition to Trump’s policies, which, amongst others, cut US funding for the PA, has further strengthened their united position and course of action.

Yet, this harmonious outward appearance should not entirely be taken at face value. According to Ibrahim Dalalsha “at the top political echelon, relations between the leaders, Abu Mazen [Mahmoud Abbas] and King Abdullah, seem excellent. But the lower you go in the political system the more multi-layered it gets, and lots of explanations and clarifications are needed.”<sup>21</sup> Particularly frustration with long-term head of state Abbas<sup>22</sup> is known to subsist among Jordanian political circles. Not only is he viewed by some as a bad strategist who at times had risked Jordanian interests, but also his unpopularity amongst Palestinians, who increasingly take to the streets to demand his resignation, is a matter of concern to many in Jordan.<sup>23</sup> According to a survey from the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), almost 80% of Palestinians demanded Abbas’ resignation in September 2021. Further, the prediction was that if elections were to be held at the time of the survey, Fatah under Abbas would do significantly worse against Hamas than Fatah under prominent member Marwan Barghouti.<sup>24</sup> Cognizant of the fact that this leadership rift weakens Fatah’s position vis-à-vis Hamas, Jordan has tried on multiple occasions to mediating the internal party dispute, yet to no avail.<sup>25</sup> On the other

<sup>19</sup> Interview Ibrahim Dalalsha, Director at Horizon Center for Political Studies and Media Outreach, October 13, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Dr. Mudar Kassis, professor at the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Studies at Birzeit University, April 3, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Ibrahim Dalalsha, director at the Horizon Center for Political Studies and Media Outreach, April 5, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Mahmoud Abbas is the chairman of the PLO since 2004, president of the PA since 2005 and chairman of Fatah since 2009.

<sup>23</sup> See “[اللهم رام في عباس ضد ومظاهرات.. نجله قتلة إلى بنات نزار والدم من مؤثرة رسالة](#)” (Arabic), Aljazeera, July 3, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> See “[Public Opinion Poll No \(81\)](#)”, Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, September 15 – 18, 2021.

<sup>25</sup> See Musa, “[الفتاوية المصالحة فشل بعد الانتخابات لخوض ويستعد غزة إلى يعود دحلان تيار](#)” (Arabic), Aljazeera, February 17, 2021.

hand, both Egyptian and Jordanian intelligence services were claimed to dissuade Abbas from holding the indefinitely adjourned Palestinian legislative and presidential elections, out of the fear of a likely Hamas victory, which would entail significant repercussions for the internal politics of both countries.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Jordan, much more so than Egypt, must be wary of Palestinian popular sentiment to maintain calm and stability both within and next to its borders. For some in the Jordanian political establishment, this means that Jordan ought to lay the political groundwork and start preparing for a post-Abbas era to ensure that Fatah, not Hamas, will regain popularity and influence among Palestinians and thus continue to dominate the PA in the future.

#### A player to be reckoned with: Hamas

Since the Palestinian Islamist Hamas party took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007, Jordan's main efforts were concentrated on strengthening the Ramallah-based Fatah government vis-à-vis its rival. At the same time, it tried to moderate the latter, specifically regarding Hamas' stance towards the two-state solution. When in 2017, due to a variety of reasons, Hamas indeed appeared to soften its stance on Israel, resulting in a rapprochement with Jordan's ally Egypt, voices from inside of Jordan trying to find a similar new formula for the kingdom to deal with the group became more outspoken. According to Farah Bdour, program director at the Amman Center for Peace and Development, "some believe that Jordan should reopen channels with Hamas to create the leverage it needs in order to advance its national interests."<sup>27</sup> In contrast, more conservative forces, often from within the Jordanian security establishment, point towards the increased risk that an involvement with Hamas could entail on a domestic level. Here, from a pure security perspective, the fear is that Hamas could use Jordan as a launchpad for attacks on Israel. In addition, from a political perspective, Hamas is known to see Jordan as a strategic opportunity to significantly enlarge its support base through the kingdom's Palestinian-origin population. Farah Bdour outlines that the camp opposing closer ties with Hamas thus argues "that Egypt has the luxury to open up to Hamas because it doesn't have the demographic issue that Jordan is facing."<sup>28</sup> In fact, although King Abdullah II shut down all Hamas offices in Jordan in 1999, the group has maintained close ties with its ideological Jordanian counterpart, the Islamic Action Front (IAF). The IAF is the political arm of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and largest political party. As the latter has been leading the anti-normalization camp, voicing sharp criticism against the regime's ties with Israel and the US, conservative loyalists close to the monarchy are wary to see its influence enlarged by granting Hamas additional inroads into Jordan.

Notwithstanding those differing opinions, after May 2021, Hamas' growing influence and popularity among Palestinians both west and east of the Jordan River is hard to dispute. During 11 days of violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians that spread beyond East Jerusalem and Gaza, Hamas emerged as the incontestable leader of the resistance movement, a de facto force that must be considered in any prospective political or security arrangement. Against this backdrop, Oraib Rantawi characterizes Amman's behavior towards Hamas as reactive rather than proactive: "Hamas gaining popularity now is very bad news for Amman. Ismail Haniyeh<sup>29</sup> tried hard to find a new approach with Jordan, this is something to capitalize on; but Amman only took initiative after May, when he received thousand phone calls from all over the world. In this regard, Jordan is always 10 steps too late, it has marginalized itself."<sup>30</sup> While it is unlikely that the Jordanian leadership will go far in developing relations with the Islamist organization in the near future, the current situation has left it without much leverage to mediate either within the intra-Palestinian or Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In view of the changing facts on the ground, it may become increasingly difficult for Jordan to retain its own regional

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<sup>26</sup> See Abu Amer, "[Postponed Palestinian Elections: Causes and Repercussions](#)", Carnegie, May 11, 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Farah Bdour, Program Director at the Amman Center for Peace and Development, April 14, 2022.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Farah Bdour, Program Director at the Amman Center for Peace and Development, April 14, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Ismail Haniyeh is the chief of Hamas's political bureau, former deputy leader from 2014 until 2017 and prime minister in Gaza between 2007 and 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Oraib Rantawi, founder and general director of the Amman-based Al Quds Center for Political Studies, April 12, 2022.

relevance unless it takes a more flexible approach that strikes a certain balance between the two Palestinian factions.

#### Negligent partner in cold peace: Israel

Jordanian-Palestinian political relations can never be fully understood on a purely bilateral level; much rather, it should be seen within a triangular frame that in all aspects - directly or indirectly, willingly or unwillingly - must consider Israel. Sharing a 327km-long border with Israel and the Palestinian Territories under Israeli occupation, Jordan is linked to the Jewish state in ways that go beyond the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Here, one of the core components of Jordanian-Israeli bilateral relation is security. Continued intelligence sharing and coordination against common threats have enabled Jordan to keep Israel's eastern border safe even when nearby conflicts, such as the most recent one in Syria, exact their toll on the Hashemite Kingdom. On the other hand, Israel acknowledges Jordan's role as an indispensable bulwark against such forces and has therefore invested in keeping its neighbor militarily and economically afloat; amongst others, through the exchange of resources, most notably water and energy.

However, the last decade has seen a change in the nature of this interdependency; namely one by which Israel, as the significantly more powerful player, increasingly dictates the terms of the relationship, while paying less and less attention to the interests of the small, economically battered and comparatively weak Arab state to its east. This was accelerated during the period of coinciding terms of Israeli PM Netanyahu (2009-2021) and US President Trump (2017 - 2021), which arguably turned into Jordan's worst nightmare. While Netanyahu was long known as an unpredictable and untrustworthy partner - one that, above all, never acknowledged the centrality of the Palestinian question for Jordanians - , with Trump in the White House, both of them felt emboldened to take unprecedented, unilateral steps in violation of Palestinian and simultaneously Jordanian interests. As a result, Jordan-Israel relations deteriorated to "an all-time low", as described by King Abdullah himself in 2019.<sup>31</sup> On the US' side too, Jordan's position as trusted regional ally had noticeably been downsized. This put Jordan in a grave dilemma, especially given its prolonged economic crisis, which was further worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, and resulting dependency on external resources and aid assistance. Despite this, Netanyahu was perceived as unwilling to make even small concessions to invest in its alleged partner's strategic and economic well-being; so, for instance, were Jordanian requests to expand exports to the West Bank repeatedly rejected. According to Ofer Zalberg, former senior analyst at the International Crisis Group, Israel feared that this would come at the expense of its own exports to the Palestinian Territories while disregarding "the outsized positive impact such an increase in Jordanian exports would have on the Jordanian and West Bank economies as compared to the slight market share Israel would lose as a result."<sup>32</sup>

Only in 2021, after both Netanyahu and Trump left office, did the new Israeli PM Naftali Bennett attempt to rectify the relationship with the monarchy. In line with the new government's "shrinking the conflict" approach, economic concessions regarding Jordan-West Bank trade were eventually made, in addition to bilateral economic ties between Jordan and Israel.<sup>33</sup> However, given the growing power asymmetry, Jordan may increasingly have to choose between advancing its own diplomatic and economic standing on one hand, and putting its foot down for Palestinians on the other. According to a Palestinian expert, who wishes to remain anonymous, "right now, as seen by the PA, the trade agreement is more in Jordan's interest than Palestinians. But the truth is, Amman does not have what it takes to impose anything on Israel to advance Palestinian interests, even if they may use their limited leverage to the best of their abilities."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See "[Interview: King Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on Middle East Issues](#)", Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 21, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> See Ofer Zalberg, "[The Regional Stakes of Sourred Israeli-Jordanian Relations](#)", International Crisis Group, March 23, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Tentative reports say the deal could raise exports from Jordan to the PA from about \$150 million to over \$700 million per year. See Bassist, "[Israeli, Jordanian economy ministers sign West Bank export deal](#)", Al-Monitor, November 4, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Palestinian expert, April 10, 2022.



### Against the current: Jordan and the Palestinian cause in a shifting regional environment

Jordan is often characterized as a small, comparatively weak Arab state that, without any major industry or significant natural resources, had been dependent on external support since its establishment. Its leverage to secure this support has historically been its geopolitical importance, not least so in the Palestinian-Israeli context. Being located in the heart of the Middle East, Jordan's geostrategic position has elevated it on one hand to act as a "buffer" between most of the Arab world and Israel, and on the other, placed it at the crossroads of intersecting conflict zones and disputes. In spite of this, Jordan has kept its long-standing reputation as the regional "anchor of stability". It has successfully avoided to get directly embroiled in any of the surrounding turmoil, most importantly by following a prudent foreign policy course and cultivating smart diplomatic alliances. Yet, within the last decade, political dynamics in the region have shifted in ways that require Jordan to re-evaluate its regional stakes and relations, therewith inevitably bearing consequences for Jordan's standing in view of the Palestinian question.

Firstly, two of Jordan's main allies and, above that, financial benefactors, the US and Saudi Arabia, have in many ways walked "off the beaten track"; not least the peace track, as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States were seen to become Trump's closest regional allies in cooperating and promoting his so-called "Deal of the Century". This created a new paradigm for peace in which the UAE and Saudi Arabia replace Jordan and Egypt in their long-standing role as the main US peacemaking partners. Furthermore, as four other Arab States, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, have signed normalization agreements with Israel under the 2020 Abraham Accords, this did not only give the final push to the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative – initially led by Saudi Arabia that was now green-lightening the normalization agreements – but also rendered Jordan's historic relevance as a gateway between Israel and the Gulf states superfluous. As a result, Jordan's ability to use its leverage to advocate for Palestinian interests in the international arena has been diminished, while its dependency on external benefactors has grown. Although the Kushner-Mohammed Bin Salman strategy to economically incentivize Jordan (amongst other Arab states), to accept Trump's peace proposal did not bear any fruit, Gulf states are now seen to take the backdoor in pursuance of geopolitical goals.<sup>35</sup> Here, a Jordan-Israeli-UAE water-energy project, funded by the Emirates, was signed in 2021 without the inclusion of the Palestinian Territories, as was initially proposed by EcoPeace Middle East, the NGO that conceptualized the project. Nada Majdalani, the organization's Palestinian director, notes: "Especially in the case of Jordan, shared environmental concerns can nourish the political track towards a two-state solution. But stability and real peace will only be guaranteed if such agreements of any sort, environmental or economic, include the Palestinian angle."<sup>36</sup>

A second layer of these novel developments is one by which predominantly Sunni Arab states and Israel are seeking greater alliances to face their common regional enemy, Iran. While Jordan is part of this Sunni Arab, anti-Iranian bloc, its threat perception differs from that of its allies. Iranian support for Hamas and the Islamic Jihad<sup>37</sup> is certainly also cause for concern in Jordan but it takes lower priority on the security agenda than the progressing Israeli encroachment on the Palestinian Territories and East Jerusalem. Therefore, when in March 2022, Israel hosted an unprecedented summit to discuss with its Arab allies the strengthening of security and economic ties, King Abdullah, in a symbolic move and to illustrate the diverging interests, visited Palestinian President Abbas in Ramallah instead. On this occasion, King Abdullah reaffirmed his support, stating that "we and the Palestinians are closest to each other and we are sitting in the same trench. We are here today to listen to what Palestinian are demanding of Jordan and to reduce the obstacles and challenges they face."<sup>38</sup> In contrast, the fact that the Palestinian cause, as the issue that had always stood between Israel

<sup>35</sup> See Yom and Sammour, "Why Jordan's identity can't be bought", *The Washington Post*, June 24, 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Nada Majdalani, Palestinian Director of EcoPeace Middle East, March 30, 2022.

<sup>37</sup> The Palestinian Islamic Jihad is a Palestinian armed faction based in Damascus. Its objective is the establishment of an independent Islamic Palestinian state. It is opposed to the Oslo Accords and declared a terrorist organization by Israel and most Western states.

<sup>38</sup> See "اليوم الله رام في عباس محمود الفلسطيني والرئيس الثاني عبدالله الملك جلالة حديث" (Arabic), *The Royal Hashemite Court YouTube Channel*, March 28, 2022.

and the Arab world, was far from being the priority on the Negev summit's agenda, is thus indicative of the shifting geopolitical dynamics and interests in the Middle East.

## Jordan's contemporary domestic politics and the Palestinian cause

### Identity politics and the legacy of the Arab Spring in Jordan

It is impossible to understand the full weight the Palestinian cause holds for Jordan as a nation state without understanding its full meaning for Jordanians as a people. In Jordan, the Palestinian question is a deeply human cause, which has shaped Jordanian society since the state's foundation. On one hand, this naturally concerns Jordan's Palestinian-origin population - refugees and their descendants from the western side of the Jordan River - that makes up an estimated 50 - 70% of the country's 10 million strong population. On the other hand, it likewise concerns Jordanians who originated from the territory east of the Jordan River. Therefore, the latter are sometimes referred to as East- or Transjordanians, or Jordan's native population, largely with tribal or Bedouin roots. Given that the Jordanian government refrains from publishing data on the exact demographic composition, today the question of demographic majority is a contested and politicized issue. Likewise, much of the analytical discourse of the past has been conducted through an "East Bank - West Bank identity" lens. Applying this level of analysis, it is often contended that much of the political discussion eventually reverts back to the underlying issue of identity politics.

Historically, the formation of those different communal identities was driven by the monarchy's policies of "Jordanization". Particularly after the Black September, Jordanian-Palestinians were excluded - albeit neither in official nor absolute terms - from governmental institutions and public sector jobs including the military and security apparatus. These positions were instead given to members of Transjordanian tribes, known to be loyal to the monarchy and mostly living in the rural hinterlands, while Jordanian-Palestinians, living in and around urban areas, came to dominate the private sector. These dynamics over the decades, perhaps rather unintendedly, resulted in what was described as an "ethnic division of labor".<sup>39</sup> This gradually started to turn into a stumbling block for the monarchy, when King Hussein and after him King Abdullah embarked on a road towards greater privatization and neoliberal reforms. As a result, voices from the traditional loyalist East Bank core grew louder, portending that the increased privatization played into the hands of Jordanian-Palestinians at their expense. In an attempt to restore relations, in 1993, the regime gerrymandered electoral districts to overrepresent East Bankers - in particular those areas prone to rioting - vis-à-vis the largely urban Jordanian-Palestinian population. This did not much to satisfy the protesting tribes, while instead leading to the further retreat of Jordanian-Palestinians from the political sphere, hence deepening the already existing communal fault line.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, especially throughout the last decades, the focus on Jordan's identity politics has sometimes become a pitfall and an intended or unintended distraction from other, more pressing issues that Jordanian society is facing today; namely, first and foremost, a deteriorating economy driven by longstanding structural deficiencies and corruption. Today, it therefore seems almost cynical to talk about an "ethnic labor divide", when the unemployment rate among Jordanian youth (age 15-24) has reached 52% in 2021.<sup>41</sup> Voices addressing these omnipresent economic grievances have gained momentum and found their way into public discourse in 2010/11, when sociopolitical spaces all over the Arab world thrust open in what became known as the Arab Spring. Here, Farah Bdour notes: "In the past, we had more or less distinct identities. However, what we saw in 2011 is the creation of a class identity. The people who came together on the 4<sup>th</sup> circle were

<sup>39</sup> See Ryan, "Identity Politics, Reform, And Protest In Jordan", Appalachian State University, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> See Tell, "Early Spring in Jordan: The Revolt of the Military Veterans", Carnegie Middle East Center, November 4, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> See "23,3% Unemployment Rate during the Fourth Quarter of 2021", Department of Statistics of The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, March 24, 2022.

Jordanians of all origins, protesting common economic grievances and corruption.<sup>42</sup> In this way, the novel *Hirak*<sup>43</sup> movement had created a new political discourse and language of national unity, based on which political activists would generate cross-communal mobilization even after the Arab Spring.<sup>44</sup> Thus, on a societal, day-to-day level and among Jordanians themselves, the historic identity divide is perceived to be less salient today. Also Yazan Doughan, Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology London School of Economics, notes: “As with the question of whether citizenship can be passed down the maternal line [discussed in more detail in the last chapter], identity politics nowadays is something that comes up in very particular contexts. So, it does emerge but it is not as salient as it has been in previous decades. Most young Jordanians today, whether they are of Palestinian or Transjordanian background, do not see a contradiction between the Jordanian and Palestinian identity, and they find that invoking such a distinction plays into the hands of the regime.”<sup>45</sup>

This is not least because especially since the mid-2010s, an incline in authoritarian practices in dealing with opposing voices had been noticed. Amongst others, dozens of individuals (one of them a renowned Jordanian cartoonist who mocked Arab states’ normalization with Israel), journalists and *Hirak* activists commemorating the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Arab Spring were detained.<sup>46</sup> Also affected was the traditional Jordanian opposition, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, which was outlawed in 2020. Related developments may serve as an example of how the aspect of identity, at times, influences political dynamics in Jordan and vice versa: particularly throughout the last decade, a significant number of East Bank Jordanians had defected from the organization and established new rival Muslim Brotherhood associations in Jordan. As a result, some have claimed that the original, much larger Muslim Brotherhood has morphed into “a de facto party for Palestinian-Jordanian Islamists”.<sup>47</sup> While this may be exaggerated, the group certainly remains steadfast in its criticism of the regime’s relations with Israel and the US, support for the Palestinian cause and ties to Hamas. The new Muslim Brothers, in contrast, are known to focus primarily on internal Jordanian issues, while standing closer to the monarchy. When the former group was thus outlawed through a court ruling in 2020<sup>48</sup>, whereas the latter was licensed, concerned voices pointed out that such legal interventions, which in effect institutionalize communal rifts, lead not only to “the confluence of rising anti-Muslim Brother and anti-Palestinian sentiment among Transjordanian nationalists” but also risk “repoliticizing the divide between Jordanians of Palestinian origin and those of Transjordanian origin.”<sup>49</sup>

In addition, whereas the emergence of the *Hirak* has shown how especially younger generations united around common economic grievances that made historic intercommunal divides less salient, poor economic conditions are also known to be fertile breeding ground for polarization. Especially the visible gap between some well-served urban areas and much of Jordan’s rural hinterlands that lack basic infrastructure, fuels resentment among certain groups. Some experts have in particular pointed towards the few but very vocal ultra-nationalist Transjordanian voices that openly call for the disenfranchisement of Jordanian-Palestinian citizens.<sup>50</sup> Katrina Sammour, Amman-based political analyst and risk assessor, who is conducting

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Farah Bdour, Program Director at the Amman Center for Peace and Development, April 14, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> The Arabic word *hirak* (حركة) translates to ‘movement’ and, in the Jordanian context, is used as an umbrella term for the loose association of local opposition and grassroots movements without a single political affiliation that emerged in Jordan in 2011/2012. See Ababneh, “[The Struggle to Re-Politicize the Political: The Discourse on Economic Rights in the Jordanian Popular Movement 2011-2012](#)”, The Project on Middle East Political Science, November 2019.

<sup>44</sup> See Doughan, “[The New Jordanian Patriotism After the Arab Spring](#)”, Brandeis University Crown Center for Middle East Studies, March 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Dr. Yazan Dough, Assistant Professor at the Department of Anthropology London School of Economics, June 2, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> See “[Detention of Activists in Jordan](#)” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, April 29, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> See Patel, “[The Communal Fracturing of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood](#)”, January 2018.

<sup>48</sup> While the original Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed, its political wing, the Islamic Action Front, is not affected by this ban and continues to run in elections.

<sup>49</sup> See Patel, “[The Communal Fracturing of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood](#)”, January 2018.

<sup>50</sup> See Ryan, “[Identity Politics, Reform, And Protest In Jordan](#)”, Appalachian State University, 2011.

research regarding xenophobic speech within these fringe groups, notes: “They take *real* economic grievances and put them in the frame of identity. There *are* massive inequalities when you look at the infrastructure existing in the cities versus rural areas, so they are claiming it cannot just be a class difference. And since in Jordan there happen to be these ethno-geographic markers, it is easy to tell a story around identity instead.”<sup>51</sup> It was thus argued that if not addressed on a national level, the exploitation of the identity issue by these reactionary elements of society will remain a looming threat.

Voices affiliated with the *Hirak* but also from other parts of society have therefore called upon the monarchy to live up to its self-cultivated image as the mediator and unifier of all Jordanian people, and launch an inclusive national dialogue; one that goes beyond the talking points of prolonged economic and political “reforms”, which over the years has lost much of its credibility. Instead, it ought to engage diverse actors from the civic society and political fields to enter into a transparent conversation about issues such as the lack of a Jordanian identity that all citizens can ascribe to and that is firmly based on equitable political and economic opportunities for all. According to Sammour, “keeping the issue a no-speak topic on a national level, plays in the hands of those who are looking to create enemies from one another. There are real issues that we need to overcome as a nation. This also includes an examination of our history, taking responsibility for what happened and finally move on.”<sup>52</sup>

### **The Palestinian cause: Common denominator among Jordanians**

As illustrated, the identity variable plays a significant role in shaping real-life socioeconomic conditions and political dynamics in Jordan. Yet, the fallacy of an analysis that is conducted purely through the identity-kaleidoscope, is that it may lead to the perception of a dichotomous Jordanian society embroiled in a divisive zero-sum competition. Not to speak of the fact that Jordanian society includes a variety of other ethnic and religious minorities (that are not subject to this study), in practice, such a clear-cut fault line between Jordanian-Palestinians and Transjordanians does not exist. Taking a look at the two groups’ motives and interests in relation to the Palestinian cause demonstrates this clearly. On one side, Oraib Rantawi notes that “the hard-core opposition to the confederation idea are the East Jordanian communities because for them it is a matter of entity and identity.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, as Jordan’s geographic and political entity as a state is up for negotiation within the context of the Palestinian cause, East Bank Jordanians see their identity threatened as any new influx of Palestinians to Jordan would turn them into a minority. Reversely, one might therefore assume that Jordanian-Palestinians would look favorably towards enlarging their share of the demographic pie; but in fact, the latter likewise reject Jordan as an “alternative homeland for Palestinians”, as this alludes that both their right of return to Palestine as well as their legal status within Jordan will come under threat. Lastly and above all, this perceived jeopardy to both groups’ identity is fueled by the omnipresent struggle over scarce resources, employment opportunities and other existential livelihood concerns. “Jordanians look at the worsening situation and everybody is having the same question: ‘Where are these 3 million Palestinians going to go?’ And that’s an economic fear more than an identity fear”<sup>54</sup>, says Katrina Sammour.

This broad societal consensus became ever-more visible in light of the unprecedented infringement on Palestinian rights by the Trump administration. A 2019, a KAS opinion poll asked Jordanians about their support of the king’s “three no’s” that were issued ahead of the Trump’s peace plan; 98% supported the king’s ‘no to giving in on Jerusalem’, 96% ‘no to an alternative homeland for the Palestinians’, and 87% ‘no to settling the Palestinians in Jordan’.<sup>55</sup> In contrast, whereas the monarchy’s actions in support of the Palestinian cause are looked favorably upon, its ties to Israel are a thorn in the side of most Jordanians. The same KAS study finds that 70% of Jordanians were in favor of limiting political relations with Israel; and when asked about

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Katrina Sammour, Amman-based political analyst and risk assessor, May 25, 2022.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with Katrina Sammour, Amman-based political analyst and risk assessor, May 25, 2022.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Oraib Rantawi, founder and general director of the Amman-based Al Quds Center for Political Studies, April 12, 2022.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Katrina Sammour, Amman-based political analyst and risk assessor, May 25, 2022.

<sup>55</sup> See Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, “[Survey on Jordanian's Perceptions on Foreign Relations](#)”, August 2019.

Jordan's biggest enemy, nearly half named Israel as the number one, far ahead of the US (10%), Iran (7%) and Syria (6%).<sup>56</sup> Therefore, citizens fiercely express their disapproval every time the government is perceived to strengthen ties with the Jewish state, as for instance in 2021, when hundreds of demonstrators protested against a 10 billion dollar gas deal signed between the two governments.<sup>57</sup> Here too, it should be noted that it is by no means only Jordanian-Palestinians that hold such views. In fact, fundamental opposition to Israel is particularly strong among Jordan's military veterans and the army in general, whose members largely come from a Transjordanian nationalist base. Dr. Tareq Tell, Jordanian scholar and assistant professor at the Department of Political Studies at the American University of Beirut, states that "many of them grew up in an army, which, although its leaders were colluding secretly with the Israelis, was supposed to be training to fight the Israelis. [...] So the ideology of anti-Israel hostility is very strong. And many of the veterans in particular think that they were discarded because of the shift to a peace-based army [after the 1994 Wadi Arab peace treaty]".<sup>58</sup>

Moreover, when Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza are under attack from Israel, large solidarity protests commonly take place in Jordan, as for instance, during the 2014 Gaza war and the 2021 violent escalations, when Jordanians were seen to self-organize and march to the Israeli border. Typical demands that are brought up repeatedly are the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador and the cancellation of the peace treaty. In addition, also on a parliamentary level, Jordanian MPs make similar demands.<sup>59</sup> Camille Abescat, research fellow at Noria Research and PhD candidate at Sciences Po / IFPO, who focuses on Jordanian legislative politics, notes that "for MPs - whether from a Palestinian or Transjordanian background - being in favor of the Palestinian cause is a way to appear legitimate, it's a way to raise attention. Some of the biggest debates in parliament are sparked when it comes to the Palestinian cause."<sup>60</sup> Although the parliament exerts no factual influence on the political decision-making process - neither does the Palestine Committee that is part of the Jordanian parliament - it nevertheless portends the weight the Palestinian question continuous to hold across societal and political strata in Jordan. According to Oraib Rantawi, for this reason, Jordanians ought to be given a say in issues as crucial as the Palestinian question. "Political decisions should be discussed in a very transparent way. And even more, there should be a referendum. People should be asked, let's say, if in the future they want a confederation of any sort. For lasting peace in this part of the world, leaders need to stop talking on behalf of the people and start a real process of engagement and consultation."<sup>61</sup>

### **Palestinians in Jordan: All are equal but some are more equal than others**

One aspect of paramount importance, which is at the core of the Palestinian cause since its inception, is the question of Palestinians' right of return. It refers to UN General Assembly Resolution 3236, according to which Palestinian refugees and their descendants have the right to return to the land from which they fled. While the issue is central to any viable peace process, throughout the past 70 years, not a single Palestinian refugee has formally been granted this right. This begs the question, at what point or to what extent should Palestinian refugees be granted national rights in the host country they reside in, or whether their hereditary right of return as Palestinians forever forecloses any other national rights? On a formal level, this question was answered as early as 1965, when the Arab League adopted the Casablanca Protocol, its most significant treaty on the treatment of Palestinian refugees in Arab host countries, which indicates that Palestinians shall be granted certain basic rights while retaining their right of return to the Palestinian homeland.<sup>62</sup> While in practice,

<sup>56</sup> See Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, "[Survey on Jordanian's Perceptions on Foreign Relations](#)", August 2019.

<sup>57</sup> See Davis, "[Hundreds protest in Jordan against water-energy deal with Israel](#)", November 26, 2021.

<sup>58</sup> See Tell, "[Protests and Politics in Jordan](#)", The Center for Arab and Middle Eastern Studies YouTube Channel, February 20, 2013.

<sup>59</sup> See Al-Najjar, "[الحكومة ويهدد إسرائيل سفير لظرد بصوت الأردن برلمان](#)" (Arabic), Aljazeera, February 26, 2014. And "[بطرد تطالب النيابة فلسطين](#)" (Arabic), Alghad, April 26, 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with Camille Abescat, Jordan project manager and research fellow at Noria Research, May 20, 2022.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Oraib Rantawi, founder and general director of the Amman-based Al Quds Center for Political Studies, April 12, 2022.

<sup>62</sup> See "[Protocol for the Treatment of Palestinians in Arab States \('Casablanca Protocol'\)](#)", UNHCR, September 11, 1965.

most Arab states did not lived up to the agreement, it is fair to say that, among all of them, Jordan has done most to safeguard Palestinian fundaments of existence, livelihood and welfare by granting them Jordanian citizenship. While the initial decision to do so by Abdullah I ought to be seen against the historic background (he aspired to rule over the Palestinian people, generally known to be well-educated, business-minded and urbanized, as much as over the land they inhabited, including Jerusalem and the fertile Jordan River valley), this arguably has worked in the Jordanian-Palestinians' favor, especially when compared to Palestinian refugees in other Arab states.

Despite the granting of citizenship early on, this did not mean that over the decades all Palestinians in Jordan would acquire the same rights. Firstly, there are around 2.3 million Palestinians that are registered as refugees with the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA).<sup>63</sup> Whereas most of them hold the Jordanian passport, there are around 175.000 ex-Gazans without citizenship, most of them who fled to Jordan in the aftermath of the 1967 war.<sup>64</sup> Since before that, Gaza was under the administrative rule of Egypt, Jordan considered them an "Egyptian liability", thus never granting them citizenship or basic rights.<sup>65</sup> As a result, most are living in impoverished circumstances in UNRWA administered camps across the country.<sup>66</sup> Here, Trump's 2018 decision to cut the entire US aid budget to the already chronically underfunded UNRWA hit especially hard in Jordan, which hosts 40% of all UNRWA registered refugees in the Middle East.<sup>67</sup> Anthropological observations have shown that this enduring situation of poverty and precarious statelessness has taken a toll on Gazans' identity. "Their impoverishment as Gazans is what gives the identification "Gazan" one of its primary meanings in Jordan. To be known as a Gazan is to be known as a deprived member of the Palestinian community."<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, a number of new elusive state policies reveal the tenacious wary eye of authorities on Palestinians in particular, that is to say, the "demographic threat". According to Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, "in 2013, the Jordanian Government declared a ban on Palestinians fleeing the Syrian conflict from entering its territory. [...] While Jordan has been treating Palestinian refugees from Syria in an extremely biased manner, Jordan still opens its borders to Syrian refugees who have fled for the exact same reasons."<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, in 2016, new decrees specifically affecting Palestinian refugees in Jordan were issued, thenceforth requiring them to pay for work permits as well as increasing costs for renewing documents.<sup>70</sup> Another prime example is the long-standing issue popularly known as "the children of Jordanian women".<sup>71</sup> It refers to the law by which a child born to a Jordanian mother and a non-Jordanian father is not a citizen of the state. Albeit not explicitly stated anywhere, this law is known to disproportionately affect Jordanian women married to non-citizen Palestinian men, who make up the largest share of these "foreign" marriages.<sup>72</sup> Women and human rights organizations, which have repeatedly tried to refute the law, thus, state that the law discriminates on the basis of both gender and origin.

Yet, also Jordanian-Palestinians with allegedly full Jordanian citizenship were targeted by what has been described as an "ongoing hidden process of legal and bureaucratic minoritisation of an otherwise

<sup>63</sup> See "[Where We Work](#)", UNRWA, June 2022.

<sup>64</sup> See "[Syria, Lebanon and Jordan Emergency Appeal 2022](#)", UNRWA, January 18, 2022.

<sup>65</sup> See Abed, "[The invisible citizens of Jordan](#)", in *Minorities and State-Building in the Middle East*, Springer International Publishing, 2021.

<sup>66</sup> See "[Where We Work](#)", UNRWA, June 2022.

<sup>67</sup> See "[Infrastructure & Camp Improvement in Jordan](#)", UNRWA, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022.

<sup>68</sup> See Perez, "[Minoritising Gaza Refugees in Jordan](#)", in *Minorities and State-Building in the Middle East*, Springer International Publishing, 2021.

<sup>69</sup> See "[Palestinian Syrians: Displaced Once Again](#)" Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2022.

<sup>70</sup> See Hammad, "[Decades of Resilience – Stateless Gazan Refugees in Jordan](#)", Palestinian Return Center, 2018. And "[الأردن: المملكة في المقيمين غزة قطاع بأبناء الخاصة العمل تصاريح رسوم فرض تُعيد](#)" Palestinian Refugee Portal, January 13, 2017. And Abu Amer, "[Palestinians in Jordan outraged over new work permit requirements](#)", Al-Monitor, 2021.

<sup>71</sup> See "[I Just Want Him to Live Like Other Jordanians](#)", Human Rights Watch, April 24, 2018.

<sup>72</sup> See "[I Just Want Him to Live Like Other Jordanians](#)", Human Rights Watch, April 24, 2018.

demographically significant (if not fully majoritarian) population.”<sup>73</sup> As documented by Human Rights Watch in 2010, against the background of the stalling peace process and resulting fears of a “transfer” of Palestinians to Jordan, several thousand Jordanian-Palestinians were stripped of their citizenship – over 2,700 between 2004 and 2008 alone.<sup>74</sup> This mainly affected Palestinians crossing in and out of the West Bank. Human Rights Watch notes that “some Jordanian officials have said they are doing so in order to forestall supposed Israeli designs to colonize the West Bank, by maintaining the birthright of Palestinians to live in the West Bank. Yet the real reason may be Jordan’s desire to be able to rid itself of hundreds of thousands of Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin whom Jordan could then forcibly return to the West Bank or Israel as part of a settlement of the Palestinian refugee problem caused by the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars.”<sup>75</sup> In fact, this “well-intentioned desire to preserve the Palestinian cause” is a common justification evoked by Arab states for not granting Palestinians more rights within their borders. Increased national rights are said to decrease the chance of Palestinians’ right of return, while making it easier for Israel to grab whatever land is left of Palestine and, in the specific case of Jordan, further substantiate the Israeli claim that Jordan is the alternative Palestinian homeland.

Whereas this issue of “split rights” had long been a taboo, among the diverse voices of the burgeoning *Hirak*, there were also prominent individuals and groups specifically dedicated to the “Jordanian-Palestinian cause”, such as ‘Citizenship and Return’, or ‘the Movement for Equal Citizenship’. For the first time, Jordanians of Palestinian origin, who were hitherto perceived as passive and disinterested in domestic politics, were demanding a new social contract between them and their government; namely one that would acknowledge both their rights as full, equal citizens of Jordan and their right as Palestinians to return to their homeland. On a parliamentary level too, pressure groups were formed, amongst others, to advocate for a new electoral law that would guarantee equal representation of all Jordanian citizens.<sup>76</sup> While the parliament is known to hold little to no influence on the country’s decision-making process, it nevertheless is a tool for MPs to derive benefits for their constituencies in areas such as education, health care or employment.<sup>77</sup> As a result, over the decades, Jordanian-Palestinians have come to face certain disadvantages in these fields. On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that this did not hinder a significant number of Jordanian-Palestinian families and businessmen to gain major economic strength and influence by successfully ascending within Jordan’s private sector. Overall, while particularly since the Arab Spring, the divide between Jordan’s two main communal groups has become less salient, the inter-Palestinian divide within Jordan remains a thorn in the side of the Palestinian human cause.

## Conclusion

Since the Arab Spring shook the Middle East more than a decade ago, the region is in a process of profound transformation, and unprecedented developments have not least influenced the Palestinian cause and the place it holds within the Arab world. By analyzing Jordanian foreign and domestic political dimensions, this research gained insights regarding whether or to what extent Jordan’s position towards the Palestinian question has changed. Here, the Palestinian cause was defined on two levels: as a superordinate political endeavor that ought to lead to Palestinian statehood, and a lower, “more human” dimension that is about guaranteeing Palestinian basic rights and fundamentals of life – an important underlying theme to this research that at times, however, poses a certain dichotomy.

### Jordanian foreign affairs and the Palestinian cause as a political endeavor

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<sup>73</sup> See Abed, “[The invisible citizens of Jordan](#)”, in *Minorities and State-Building in the Middle East*, Springer International Publishing, 2021.

<sup>74</sup> See “[Stateless Again – Palestinian-Origin Jordanians Deprived of their Nationality](#)”, Human Rights Watch, February 2010.

<sup>75</sup> See “[Stateless Again – Palestinian-Origin Jordanians Deprived of their Nationality](#)”, Human Rights Watch, February 2010.

<sup>76</sup> See Rantawi & Oroub, “[Modest but Powerful Activism for Palestinian-Origin Jordanian Rights](#)”, Al-Shabak, October 1, 2012.

<sup>77</sup> See Rantawi & Oroub, “[Modest but Powerful Activism for Palestinian-Origin Jordanian Rights](#)”, Al-Shabak, October 1, 2012.

- The Palestinian-Israeli peace process has seen a change in paradigm that is not to Jordan's and the Palestinians' benefit. Trump's "Peace to Prosperity" plan cast aside the long-established two-state formula, while simultaneously downsizing Jordan's historic role as peace-making partner and trusted interlocutor in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. More so than its allies, Jordan has proven to be a persistent proponent of the two-state solution, yet, frankly lacks the diplomatic leverage and geopolitical weight to reverse the established facts on the ground that continue to shape the Palestinian-Israeli conflict even in the post-Trump/Netanyahu era. Moreover, the fact that a growing number of Arab states are looking towards Israel for economic and security partnership, creates a strategic dilemma for Jordan in which it needs to strike a balance between its own diplomatic and economic standing and the advocacy for the Palestinian cause.
- Jordanian-Palestinian political relations cannot be fully understood on mere bilateral terms. Throughout the last decade, ties with the PA/Fatah have remained stable and largely unchanged. However, the unpopularity of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, internal Fatah rivalry and the emergence of Hamas as an increasingly influential player, might necessitate a reassessment of Jordan's political positioning vis-à-vis the Palestinian factions. Jordan's leverage and ability to act as a mediator within the intra-Palestinian as well as Palestinian-Israeli conflict is reduced as long as it does not find a new formula that allows for a more flexible, rather than reactive approach especially towards Hamas. Ultimately, any such dynamics at all times must consider Israel, which has significantly expanded its geopolitical sphere of influence compared to Jordan, and thus felt emboldened to disregard Jordanian and Palestinian interests in unprecedented ways. As a small state with limited capacities, Jordan cannot shape the political course of Israel, but it can use its capacities to buttress a more united Palestinian front.

#### **Jordanian domestic affairs and the Palestinian cause as a human endeavor**

- Palestinians' rights in Jordan have been standing on wavering ground. While amongst all Arab states, Jordan has arguably done most to safeguard Palestinian welfare by granting them citizenship, over the decades, an echelon of different legal categorization has prevented all Palestinians from obtaining the same rights. Especially in the past decade, arbitrary legal processes and elusive policies have stripped Palestinian refugees as well as those holding full Jordanian citizenship off certain previously held rights. This illustrates that the notion of the "Palestinian demographic threat" is well alive within Jordan's institutional and political apparatus, as well as the underlying belief that the Palestinian right of return forecloses their full national rights within Jordan. While this threat is fueled externally by Israel and the unresolved Palestinian question, the Jordanian regime also runs the risk of fueling internal instability by marginalizing parts of Jordanian society rather than striving to unite them on the basis of equal rights.
- The question of Palestinian-Transjordanian identity, on a societal level, has become less salient as novel dynamics during the Arab Spring were seen to unite Jordanians around a class identity instead. Yet, it is hard to discern whether these dynamics will prevail in the future amidst an ongoing economic crisis that is also fertile breeding ground for reactionary elements of society, some of which call for the disenfranchisement of Jordanian-Palestinians. The formation of a united Jordanian national identity must be supported by pertinent governmental processes as well as long-promised political and economic reforms, which so far have lacked in substance and credible political will. This also means that broad parts of Jordanian society should be consulted and engaged with, especially when it comes to questions that hold as much sociopolitical weight as the Palestinian cause. Strengthening Jordanian society internally will not only make Jordan less susceptible to external pressure from Israel and other more powerful players, but also help bridge the gap that exists between leadership and population when it comes to the political course towards Israel and Palestine.

#### **In the case of Jordan, can the notion of an increasing "Arab fatigue" be substantiated?**

On a political level, Jordan frankly cannot afford to show fatigue towards the Palestinian cause. It is the Arab state with the most direct interest in resolving all conflicting issues between Palestinians and Israelis. Its geographic proximity and delicate demographic balance leave the kingdom with little room for political



maneuvering or flexibility when it comes to the two-state solution, which is considered a national security concern of the first order. Therefore, even as the regional environment, including interests of Jordan's allies, have shifted, the kingdom's position towards the Palestinian cause has remained steadfast and unchanged. However, as this situation of enduring divergent interests tilts Jordan's political cost-benefit analysis, the economically battered state may increasingly be forced to choose between its own national concerns and putting its foot down for Palestinians.

On a popular level, throughout the last decade, also Jordanian society has shown no signs of fatigue when it comes to expressing their sustained support for the Palestinian cause. Large solidarity protests fill the streets every time Palestinians are under attack by Israel, while other demonstrations are held in fierce rejection of Jordan's relations with the latter. Especially the persistently looming threat of Jordan as "the alternative homeland for Palestinians" continues to shape societal dynamics inside of Jordan, as all Jordanians are equally wary of the consequences a worsening situation in the Palestinian Territories might bear for them. Thus, the Palestinian cause in Jordan has always been and continues to be a deeply human cause that is not only about a distant vision of a future Palestinian state, but also about every-day communal life, processes of social transformation and real and imagined questions of identity.

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