



Silent Majority

Palestinian Jordanians and the search for identity

By Chris Phillips

Amman's Downtown district is no postcard picture. Whilst neighbouring cities Damascus and Jerusalem are blessed with ancient architecture, the centre of Jordan's capital seems to be inspired primarily by 1960s Soviet aesthetics. Hemmed in by barren hills and subject to a never-ending deluge of polluting traffic that has blackened most of its grey concrete buildings, Downtown feels like its already operating beyond capacity. This is not surprising given Amman's sudden transformation from a provincial backwater of 50,000 during the Second World War into a bustling metropolis of 2.5 million today, caused by numerous waves of Palestinian refugees crossing the Jordan river, first in 1948, then again in 1967. These refugees and their descendents have long outnumbered the original 'East Bank' Jordanians, yet their integration and acceptance into the social, economic and political fabric of the Hashemite Kingdom is still far from assured.

One such refugee is Mohammad, a tailor in his late 50's who runs a workshop in the centre of Downtown. A remarkable multi-tasker he keeps one eye on the gridlocked traffic outside his shop, the other on the small television broadcasting Al-Jazeera suspended above the door, all the while operating a sewing machine and engaging his customers in conversation. "When my father came here from Jaffa in 1948," he explains, "there really

was nothing here. A road, a mosque, a few shops maybe, but that's it. We had to build our lives from scratch, we came with nothing." He finishes the last stitch and pauses to inspect his handiwork. "You know, I will never forget Palestine, but Jordan is my home now. I'm proud of what we built here."

Mohammad's friend Abu Khaled, seated beside the television, chain-smoking and sipping bitter black Arabic coffee, scoffs at this optimism. In his late 40s and visibly poorer than his shop-owning companion, Abu Khaled has a less positive spin on the life of Palestinians in Jordan. "We will always be second class here," he says, pensively dragging on his cigarette. "I am forbidden from doing things because I am a Palestinian. I am a hotel porter, but all the good jobs go to the Jordanians, so I cannot work at the five, four and three star hotels where the pay is decent and the tips are high. Instead, I can only work at cheap hotels, where the money is lousy. I came here from Palestine over thirty years ago, but people still deny me work when they see 'Bethlehem' as the birthplace on my ID card. At the same time, I am not allowed a visa to return to Palestine. So I am trapped."

The contrasting opinions of the two friends typifies the ambivalence felt amongst both Jordanians and Palestinians towards the refugee 'problem' in the Hashemite Kingdom. On the one hand stand the many Palestinians who have prospered in Jordan, forming a prominent trading class in Downtown and beyond. Whilst they may still feel a spiritual attachment to the Palestine of their parents and grandparents they, like Mohammad, have absorbed a Jordanian identity. In contrast, many share Abu Khaled's view that they are second class in the eyes of the Hashemite state. Forty years after Jordan lost the West Bank to Israel, and sixty years since the first Arab-Israeli war, descendents of refugees from both conflicts remain in breeze block refugee camps scattered around Jordan. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) that operate these camps, in 2003 1.7 million of Jordan's 6.3 million population were registered refugees, and the majority of Jordanians are descended from Palestinians. For some inside or outside the camps, like Abu Khaled, resentment has grown against a government seen to favour Jordanians over the Palestinian majority.

"Of course discrimination exists!" exclaims Maher, a Palestinian Jordanian spokesperson for UNRWA's Amman office, located in a comfortable compound on the outskirts of town. "Jordanian Jordanians, that is, those whose ancestors are from pre-1948 Transjordan, will automatically get certain jobs over Palestinian Jordanians. Positions in the army, security forces and important bureaucratic roles will

always go to Jordanians. There is almost never a Jordanian ambassador who is of Palestinian origin."

Unlike in other Arab states however, this discrimination is not official policy. Whilst the 400,000 Palestinian refugees living in neighbouring Lebanon are legally barred from certain forms of employment or purchasing property and denied citizenship, no such official restrictions exist in Jordan. "Palestinians in Jordan get the best treatment out of the Arab states," claims Maher. "Every Palestinian arriving in 1948, and everyone from the West Bank who arrived in 1967 has citizenship. The only Palestinians without citizenship are the few who fled here from Gaza after the Six-Day War, as this territory was part of Egypt, not Jordan." All but the few Gaza Palestinians, as citizens, can seek employment where they wish and have no obligation to stay in their original refugee camps. Many, like Maher himself, worked hard to climb out of poverty. "I was one of the first to be born in Jordan," he says reminiscing. "My parents had fled from Lud in Palestine in 1948 and we grew up in the Jebel Hussein camp in Amman. I was born in the 1950s and at first we literally lived in tents. As the first generation of refugees, we were determined to make something for ourselves. All our parents made us work hard at school so that we could get out of the camp. Eventually, after studying and working abroad, we had enough money to move to one of the nicer neighbourhoods in Amman and leave the camp behind."

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Maher contrasts his own success with those Palestinians crying foul of Jordanian prejudice. Whilst acknowledging the existence of unofficial discrimination in certain industries, he laments those still in the refugee camps for not bettering themselves. "The poor Palestinians have both an inferiority complex and a persecution complex. They use Palestinian identity as an excuse for under-achievement. It is possible, for example, that someone is refused a job because he is Palestinian. It is more likely, however, that he does not have a good academic record and is not as good as other, Jordanian, candidates. But instead of working harder and getting better grades, he will complain that he is discriminated against because he is Palestinian. A lot of the discrimination here is exaggerated, though it does exist."

Memories amongst the poorer Palestinians are, however, not that short, and few have forgotten the conflict 40

years ago when a dividing line between Palestinians and Jordanians seemed very real. The 'Black September' civil war of 1970 was an unwelcome bi-product of the defeat by Israel in 1967. Having annexed the West Bank in 1948 and declared its citizens Hashemite subjects, Jordan faced not only an influx of angry refugees on losing the territory 20 years later, but the militant factions of the PLO who were determined to liberate the lost land. Using the Jordanian Palestinian refugee camps as bases, Yasser Arafat's PLO set up a state within a state in Jordan and there were increasing calls for them to overthrow the Hashemite regime, reasoning that the Palestinians now outnumbered the Jordanians. The late King Hussein acted quickly and ruthlessly, ordering his army to confront the Palestinians and expel the PLO. Bearing in mind the bloody fighting that followed, it is not surprising either that Jordan still insists on a largely Jordanian security force, or that some Palestinians remain suspicious of the Amman government.

Wahdat is one of the oldest Palestinian camps in Amman, sitting on a hill just behind Downtown. Now more a poor suburb than a delineated camp, Wahdat's market stalls bustle with energy as veiled housewives scabble for the latest bargains, pulling bemused infants behind them. Unlike in Downtown, where the red, white, black and green starred Jordanian national flag hangs over most buildings beside assorted images of King Abdullah II, Wahdat is notable for the absence of both. "Why would we have a picture of the King?" asks Ayman, a waiter in a run-down fast food joint in the camp's centre, "here we are Palestinians, and he is a Jordanian king." He is only 19 years old meaning that the events of Black September and the flight from Palestine occurred long before his birth. Still, both Ayman and his colleague Khalil maintain the resentment of their parents towards the Jordanian government. "Its not that we don't feel Jordanian," says Khalil while squeezing ketchup over a customer's sandwich, "its just that the government don't care about us. If what they care about is Jordan, but its not us, then that makes us Palestinian by default."

Khalil's concerns are reflected in Jordan's unbalanced electoral boundaries. Though the King maintains overall control, Jordan is one of the few Middle Eastern states where the elected Parliament actually has some power. However, constituency boundaries are not drawn based on actual population, and Palestinians are always underrepresented. Carnegie's Arab Reform bulletin highlights that urban areas like Wahdat may receive the same number of MPs as rural areas with a population up to seven times smaller to ensure the dominance of Jordanian tribal leaders. Years of this underrepresentation, aided by



Wahdat Refugee Camp
Amman, Jordan

increasing poverty, has created a climate where young men like Ayman and Khalil feel disconnected from Jordan and resentful towards the government. "We have no love of the government here," says Ayman, "They take all this money from the Gulf and America, but none of it comes here. People in the camp are simple, they care about money, food, work and sleep. But there are no jobs in this area, there is no money."

Ayman and Khalil's concerns are primarily economic, not political. They define themselves as Palestinian Jordanians and their resentment at underrepresentation stems from a desire to improve their lot in Jordan rather than to reunite with their brethren on the other side of the Jordan river. In fact, the resentment found in Wahdat is not limited to poor Palestinians, but is typical of a growing trend between the haves and have-nots in a state where the poverty gap is widening. "In Jordan there are only two levels, the top and the bottom," says Hussein, a poor Jordanian taxi driver with no familial links to Palestine, "There is no middle. And most of us are at the bottom." Increasingly people speak of two Ammans. Densely populated East Amman, which includes Downtown and Wahdat, is home to the majority of the city's residents, largely Palestinian and poor. Luxurious West Amman, in contrast, is the commercial and financial centre housing the Jordanian elite, new skyscrapers, trendy bars and shopping malls.

A taxi ride from Downtown to West Amman takes you into a different world. Spluttering aging cars transporting seven-child families are replaced by smart American SUVs

and their bleached blond made-up drivers. Over-crowded refugee camps are transplanted by red-roofed villas on cobbled suburban roads. Towering malls have supplanted two storey concrete shops. There are cranes everywhere, busy assembling the latest banks, hotels and restaurants that their Gulf and Western clientele demand. In 2010, developers in West Amman aim to complete their first major skyscraper: the \$300 million Jordan Gate complex of offices and luxury apartments. This figure is already being dwarfed by the construction of a new Mall, the Abdali Central Marketplace, estimated to cost \$370 million. A visitor from Wahdat, many of whom live on less than a dollar a day, would rightly feel enraged.

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The division is by no means black and white, and many among the West Amman elite are themselves of Palestinian origin. Nour and Mona are medical students at the University of Jordan in one of West Amman's nicest suburbs. Sitting in the McDonalds that faces their faculty, sporting trendy silk headscarves peppered with stars and sequins, they predict the results of the next evening's episode of Star Academy, a popular televised talent show. "I hope the Jordanian guy wins," grins Nour, "not because he's Jordanian, just because he's the best. I'm not so blindly patriotic. I love Jordan, it is my home, but the best should win wherever they are from." The same age, but from different worlds to Khalil and Ayman, Nour's parents both fled Palestine in 1948, setting up a successful business in West Amman. "I feel both Jordanian and Palestinian," she says, "I was brought up in Jordan and I love my country but when my Dad tells me of the old times in Jaffa it makes me feel so close to Palestine." Mona, who's family fled the West Bank in 1967, sees things slightly differently. "Its different for me, all my extended stayed in the West Bank, we were the only ones to leave. We often see our relatives from there and we know how bad it is day to day, so sometimes I feel more Palestinian. I would say I was both Palestinian and Jordanian though." Unlike the boys in Wahdat, their Palestinian identity is more spiritual than political or economic. Whilst being Palestinian to Khalil and Ayman represents an economic grouping of the underprivileged, for the wealthier girls in West Amman being Palestinian appeared a more romantic strand of a their established Jordanian identity.

The East-West Amman division has another dimension, however, which has the potential to reverberate around the Middle East. The resentment and economic deprivation

faced by poor Palestinians like Ayman and Khalil is steadily increasing the popularity and reach of Jordan's Islamists. Whilst militant al-Qaeda-inspired groups remain marginal, as illustrated by widespread condemnation amongst all section of Jordanian society when three West Amman hotels were bombed in 2005, more mainstream political Islamists are growing in number. The Islamic Action Front (IAF) are more moderate than either Hamas or Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, yet the regime still fear them sufficiently to ensure that electoral boundaries reduce their ability to acquire parliamentary seats. This is the very political discrimination that Ayman and Khalil complain about and it is the IAF who would benefit were they to

be given fair representation. The rise of political Islam as a consequence of economic disparity and political underrepresentation is as serious a phenomenon amongst poor Jordanian Palestinians as amongst Egyptians and Lebanese – and could prove potentially as explosive.

For all the talk of discrimination and underrepresentation, the government is not oblivious to the divisions between its Palestinian and Jordanian citizens and knows that rivalry and resentment can have damaging consequences. On one level, the division can be expressed in a relatively harmless sporting rivalry. During the football season when Wahdat, with its largely Palestinian following, plays Faisali, with its mostly Jordanian supporters, abusive chants and swearing, sometimes bordering on the racist and offensive, will be exchanged between the two sets of fans. "Is this really any different from what you see when Manchester United plays Liverpool?" asks Maher, sat drinking tea in his West Amman UNRWA office. "These day to day rivalries we can cope with. It is the outside events that the government most fears." By 'outside events' he means those in the occupied West Bank.

Having renounced his claim to the West Bank in 1988 and made peace with Israel in 1994, the late King Hussein hoped that a broader Palestinian-Israeli peace would follow allowing the refugee issue to be finally settled and whichever Palestinians remained in Jordan to be finally integrated into society. However, with no peace emerging and Israel reoccupying the West Bank in 2002, the treaty has proved an albatross around the neck of King Abdullah II, recently celebrating a decade on the throne, prompting

accusations from Palestinian Jordanians that Amman sold out their brethren. Whilst the regime depends heavily on the Western diplomatic and financial support it still receives for its peace with Israel, no 'peace dividend' has been felt by the Palestinian Jordanians who are often denied access to visit relatives in the occupied territories. Multiplying their frustration is the paradox of retaining a passionate interest in events in Palestine, yet having no opportunity to influence events, either due to underrepresentation in Jordan or an unwillingness by Amman to back up condemning rhetoric of Israel with concrete action.



This continued interest in Palestine however, causes certain East Bank Jordanians to sporadically question the loyalty of Palestinian Jordanians to the Hashemite state, usually in response to developments in the West Bank. "When (Israeli Prime Minister) Benjamin Netanyahu was first elected in 1996," says Maher, "he had this slogan, 'Jordan is Palestine.' That scared the Jordanians because they feared he wanted to revive the old PLO dream of overthrowing the Hashemites and declaring a Palestinian state here. In that kind of climate it was inevitable that the Jordanians wanted to guarantee the loyalty of the Palestinian Jordanians – they didn't want them to support Netanyahu's idea." Netanyahu's recent re-election in 2009 therefore prompted similar fears. "As soon as Likud returned to power in January," quips Maher, "there were Jordanians on the radio suddenly calling for some Palestinians to have their citizenship revoked. The government wouldn't have it, but it shows that resentment can work both ways if external events provoke it."

Abdullah II's foreign policy is literally torn between the two segments of his population. Glued to Al-Jazeera twenty-four hours a day, the Palestinians are well aware of events in the West Bank and demand action from Amman. In contrast the Jordanians, aware of the cost of the last war with Israel, whilst sympathising with events in Jerusalem and Ramallah prefer talk to action. This dichotomy is seen in Mohammad's tailor shop in Downtown. Watching on their television a statement of support for the recent Goldstone Report on the 2009 Gaza War from King Abdullah, Abu Khaled mumbles a few words about 'not doing enough', whilst Mohammad pleads with his friend that the monarch's hands are tied by outside powers. Not surprisingly, though both have emotional ties to Palestine, Mohammad has far more to lose from any future conflict.

Action is being taken by the government though to ensure that future generations of Palestinians will feel more Jordanian and integrated. Unlike his father Hussein, Abdullah II does not seem to want to wait for a Palestinian-Israeli peace before he fully integrates his refugees. A unifying program has been initiated by the King. In UNRWA's Palestinian schools, for example, the Palestinian flags have been replaced with Jordanian standards and Abdullah's picture placed in every classroom. On a wider scale, the King launched three widespread campaigns to promote national unity. 'Jordan First,' 'We are all Jordan,' and 'The National Agenda,' were all designed to integrate the disparate elements of Jordan's population, particularly the Palestinians, behind the state and monarchy. "Unfortunately," says Maher, "the Jordanian officials lack the King's zeal and enthusiasm. The programs were a good idea, but they were not widely implemented. The king wants to move fast but he is held back by others, like the tribes who want to protect their privilege. He wanted pluralism, they didn't. These slogans were very academic in the end – they haven't been filtered down to the man in the street. It ended up just as propaganda."

Abu Khaled, sitting in Mohammad's shop, indulging in more coffee and cigarettes, has another view on the matter. "In the end, it's all about money. Whilst they continue to discriminate against us and invest the foreign money on shopping malls and hotels, why should we feel part of their world?" Mohammad, who has completed various garments whilst his friend has stayed glued to the television sighs. "This is our home. I hope one day we will return to Palestine, but in the meantime we must make do." ■

Chris Phillips is IDEAS' Middle East International Affairs Programme Assistant.