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Papers

Jordanian Tribal Violence: Historical Context and Current Problems

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The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan’s rich developmental history in both the political and social spheres have been complex and dynamic, ever since the country’s creation in the early 1920s. If any research pertaining to Jordan’s society is to be understood, it first must be placed in a historical context, and later examined on its own. Perhaps the most prevalent social issue facing this country is violence between tribes and dangerous infighting. While crime is considered low in Jordan,\(^1\) 2009 started a seemingly peculiar upswing in the number of violent disputes between tribes. Although the problem itself is not new because Jordan has always been a tribally organized society, the statistics of 2009, which will be discussed later on, provide an interesting foundation for discussion. Using that year as a jumping-off point, we will ask several key questions to anchor our research: What is the historical background of tribes in Jordan? Has this changed over time? What made 2009 an unusual year? What can we conclude, or solutions can be suggested? Ideally, discovered case studies and examples will be able to help us glean an understanding of this complicated social issue.

\textit{Tribalism in Jordanian History}

Jordan, early in its creation was unlike its neighboring countries—it lacked a bustling urban center such as Damascus or Jerusalem, and as a result it was largely unsophisticated socially, politically, culturally.\(^2\) Instead it was organized tribally, and tribes were the most important units of governance and social division. The following is key in defining and explaining the tribal framework:


Tribes in Jordan were groups of related families claiming descent from a supposed founding ancestor. Within this overall loyalty, however, descent from intermediate ancestors defined several levels of smaller groups within each tribe. Tribespeople described their system as segmentary; that is, the tribe resembled a pyramid composed of ascending segments, or levels… in the event of conflict, segments would unite in an orderly fashion from the lowest level to the highest as conflict escalated.³

This arrangement fit with Jordan at that time, because the people were largely nomadic and their way of life revolved around agriculture and livestock. Over time with the formation of a stronger federal government and the introduction of available military service, hospitals, and schooling, the tribes slowly began adopting more sedentary lifestyles. However, “Despite the near-disappearance of the nomadic way of life, tribal social structure and organization have not necessarily been transformed as drastically.”⁴ This makes an interesting point: although the country continues to modernize in many spheres, the tribal social structure from long ago remains. Indeed the Hashemite rulers are sanctioned because of their ancestry, and a move toward abandoning tribal support would be damaging to the legitimacy of their leadership: King Hussein publicly supported the role of the tribe and tradition in Jordan's past and future by stating, "Whatever harms tribes is considered harmful to us. Law will remain closely connected to norms, customs, and traditions. . . . Our traditions should be made to preserve the fabric of society. Disintegration of tribes is very painful, negative and subversive."⁵

While tribalism now is certainly not identical because Jordanian lifestyles have changed over time, it still is bound to create a complicated relationship with local and federal authorities, the government and monarchy, and most importantly will maintain divisions and rules along tribal lines. More specifically, now that we have engaged a historical timeline and placed tribes within a historical context, we can begin to examine the recent phenomenon of tribal infighting.

2009-2010: What happened?

Let’s begin by examining the population of Jordan:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Population: Population: Percentage of Jordan’s Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amman and Central Region:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zarqa</td>
<td>838, 250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balka</td>
<td>349, 580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amman</td>
<td>2, 027, 685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madaba</td>
<td>135, 890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Population:</strong></td>
<td>3, 351, 405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northern Region:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irbid</td>
<td>950, 695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajloun</td>
<td>118, 305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jarash</td>
<td>156, 675</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mafraq</td>
<td>245, 665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Population:</strong></td>
<td>1,471, 340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Southern Region:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th># Of Fights</th>
<th>% Of Total Fights</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amman + Central Region</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Region</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Region</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This information shows that the total number of tribal fights in 2009 was approximately 224. “The year 2009 witnessed a marked increase in the number and form of brawls with a social background in an unprecedented manner in Jordanian society,” said Mazen al-Qadhi, chief

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of the public security directorate, during a meeting on January 22nd on "the rule of law and social tensions"."

A carefully study of the Jordan Times newspaper revealed that the country witnessed a great deal of infighting, with the conflicts varying in degrees of size and severity. The following are some examples of such conflicts: during a large drug sting, police fatally wounded a man and his tribe consequently rioted in a West Amman neighborhood, set fire to a police booth, and destroyed police cars. The leader of the Neimat tribe had to become involved. Recently universities an Amman and al-Salt experiences serious unrest after one student attacked and killed another on campus, causing uproar and violence on both campuses, that spread to their respective tribes. Again, tribal leaders as well as local and federal authorities had to intervene to stop the continuing hostilities. Additionally, student elections at Al Hussein University were tainted by tribal conflicts, with students running for positions experiencing threats or ultimatums based on tribal affiliations. This frustrated both the school officials and students at the university by marring the democratic process. Each of these examples demonstrates that tribal violence and conflicts is widespread in whom it affects, and is not limited to a particular sphere in Jordan. It began as confrontations between individuals and subsequently spread to their tribes, on university campuses between students, in riot form, as well as targeting police and local authorities. With this in mind, what explanations for this aggression have been provided?


Understanding the Violence and Providing Solutions

Violence on universities is arguably the result of education problems, in which students are not taught how to appropriately and respectfully engage in serious debate.

Yarmouk University (YU) journalism professor Adel Ziyadat noted that the current syllabus “does not have any text that encourages students to tolerate others’ opinions. Once I tried to get the students to hold a debate during a lecture… but they almost started a fight,” Ziyadat told participants, highlighting the need for extracurricular activities to teach students how to conduct dialogue.¹⁴

This understanding is useful in that it also provides a constructive solution, by suggesting a bottom up approach to addressing the violence. If students were given a concrete framework in understanding and respecting various opinions, there would be little reason to resort to aggressions, causing broader problems with their respective tribes. Other suggestions were provided at a recent conference in Amman, in which many Arab and international scholars contributed their thoughts on the power of tribal affiliations.

Bassem Tweisi believes that the tribal affiliation has come to dominate students' activism in Jordan, curbing a movement towards more self-directed political and cultural participation that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s…Yemen's Fuad Salahy pointed out that the governing elite in his country has worked to "reproduce" tribes, seeking their help to enforce its power, and added that the state has "enlarged" the tribes' role against a "modernisation" movement of political parties and civil society organisations.¹⁵


These two explanations explain hostilities between tribes in a much more general context. They indicate that the violence is more broadly a push to strengthen tribal ties as a response to the rapidly changing and modernizing world. As we discussed before, tribalism has a rich history in Jordan, and is one of the fundamental pillars of its old culture and old society.

**Final Thoughts and Lasting Impressions**

This complex social issue is clearly one that has frustrated many Jordanian citizens, from students to government officials. Because it is clearly widespread and taking place among a wide variety of tribes and people and the upswing in aggression is relatively new, it is more challenging to acquire concrete statistical research and proven solutions, because it is very much a problem that is still being grappled with. But scholars and government members alike have recognized the problem and are gradually beginning to suggest causes and remedies, as we have seen. The key is for bottom-up and top-down solutions to function in unison. If students are to learn how to engage in disputes in healthy ways, simultaneously the government must assert it’s primary control, even if tribal rules are to be respected. It is clear that a lack of trust in local authorities cause citizens to look to their tribes for protection, which is an issue that the Jordanian monarchy and local authorities need to more clearly address. While it is not possible and not necessarily recommended for Jordan to drop its tribal nature, and there is no singular prescription to the violence we have seen, it is essential for the citizenry to continue examining this problem with hopes of eradicating it.
Works Cited


