Jordan’s East Banker-Palestinian schism

By Lamis El Muhtaseb

Executive summary

Relations between the two peoples of Jordan (the East Bank Jordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin) are going through a tense period following the events of the Jordanian Spring, when the majority of Palestinians refrained from actively joining the Jordanian protest movement. The Jordanian awakening therefore saw only the rise of new East Bank protest groups in addition to Jordan’s traditional opposition forces, i.e. the Islamist movements and leftist and communist parties. Palestinians reacted to these events by calling for equal citizenship rights with their East Bank counterparts and an end to the policy of discrimination adopted by the state for the past 40 years in terms of which employment in the military, government and public sector was effectively limited to East Bankers, leaving only the private sector to Palestinians. This policy has created a divided Jordanian society where sentiments of fear and distrust, and conflicting interests prevail. Despite the depth of the links between the two peoples, this discriminatory policy, East Bankers’ fear of Jordan being made the “alternative homeland” solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem, and Palestinians’ fear of being deprived of their Jordanian citizenships and left without an identity have increased the schism; divided and weakened the protest movement; and, inevitably, strengthened the regime.

Two peoples, one country

Jordan is a modern state with complex geopolitical, socioeconomic and historical components. It was founded as an emirate known as Transjordan in 1923 as part of the settlement between the British and French that divided and reshaped the Middle East and formed the basis for the state of Israel on Palestinian lands. In 1949, following the declaration of the state of Israel and the Arab-Israeli war, what remained of Palestine, i.e. the West Bank and East Jerusalem, became part of what had by then become the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. This unification between the East and West Banks of the Jordan River has been reasserted politically, legally and constitutionally since the beginning of the 1950s. Many Palestinians moved (or were forced to move) to the East Bank, while others remained in the western part, especially after the 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Consequently, the fabric of Jordanian society became a mixture of two main components, the East Bank Jordanians and the Palestinians, forming a society characterised by concrete and unyielding ties because of the geographic, historical, social, economic and political interdependence of the two populations. Despite this, the official numbers of the two populations remain an ambiguous and “sensitive” issue for the Jordanian authorities. However, according to some recently declared figures, two million Palestinian refugees are registered with the United Nations Relief and
Discrimination, fear and conflicting interests

At the public level the view expressed by East Bankers is that Palestinians enjoy economic advantages and often great wealth because the economic sector is exclusively theirs and contains the wealthiest Jordanians, while poverty and low-wage jobs are left to the “original” Jordanians. The elitists among this segment fear competition from Palestinians and are eager to safeguard their own...
private interests, be they political or economic. Then there is the group of politicians, intellectuals and academics who claim that granting full Jordanian citizenship to Palestinians can only damage the Palestinian cause, specifically the right of return, which Israel opposes with all its might. Moreover, and at all levels, fears of Jordan being made the Palestinians’ “alternative homeland” as a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict are strongly felt. Nevertheless, many East Bankers, especially at the intellectual and political activist level, admit that the state adopted this policy of discrimination against Palestinians to divide the Jordanian people. Many of them, however, lament that this policy, apart from the fact that it has made them hostages to the impoverished public sector, has also been adopted against segments of East Bank Jordanians, where some tribes and some regions are given importance while others are marginalised. This is the reason why poverty and frustration are growing among many East Bankers, where effectively loyalty to the regime has become the only determining factor of good citizenship. Indeed, this is the reason why many East Bankers are now calling for reforms.

Generally speaking, Palestinians feel that discrimination exists in the military and public sectors, where priority in employment is given to East Bank Jordanians. So their view is that they had to resort to the private sector to make a living, but not of their own free will. Moreover, they point out that they have worked hard and contributed greatly to the building of a modern Jordan, whether working in Jordan or abroad. They also point out that there are many poor Palestinians, while there are many wealthy families among East Bankers, and that Jordan’s elite, especially at the political level, mostly consists of East Bankers. Therefore, wealth is not restricted to Palestinians and their elitist political influence has always been marginalised. Most importantly, although many emphasise their right of return and that their original homeland is Palestine, they protest that they have lived so long in Jordan and have contributed as much as the East Bankers to building the country, so it is therefore their right to be treated as Jordanians and enjoy the full rights and duties of their citizenship.

Some, especially in academic circles, are careful to point out that although their commitment to the Palestinian cause is unquestionable, it is impossible to ignore the reality on the ground, i.e. that Israel has the upper hand and that nobody is capable of stopping its relentless efforts at weakening the Palestinian Authority and confiscating more Palestinian land. Consequently the two-state solution is not a likely scenario. For this reason, Palestinians living in Jordan should no longer be excluded or treated as “guests”, particularly because regardless of the present confusion regarding the outcome of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, East Bankers’ fears of Jordan becoming an “alternative homeland” for the Palestinians has been considerably weakened by the UN General Assembly’s declaration of Palestine as an observer state. Moreover – and to further add to the confusion – there is much talk of a future confederation between Jordan and what is left of the Occupied Territories (Palestine), although both parties deny these rumours at the official level and some claim that it is too early to talk about such a confederation. Nonetheless, many East Bankers oppose this solution for fear of a Palestinian majority dominating Jordan.

Conclusion

The East Banker-Jordanian Palestinian division is a sensitive and complex issue with historical, political, economic and social implications, as demonstrated in this analysis. However, what has made it a serious threat to Jordan’s national unity is the state’s policy of “Jordanisation”, which has enhanced this division between the two peoples, despite the fact that, regardless of the political outcome of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the links and interdependent relations between the two Jordanian population groups effectively impose a process and policy of integration and co-operation rather than one of discrimination and favouritism. However, due to the events of the Jordanian Spring and the unclear process of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this issue of equal rights and “full” Jordanian citizenship for Palestinians living in Jordan, unless dealt with rationally by both parties, could evolve negatively, enhance the schism and consequently play into the regime’s hands by affirming the status quo and the quest for stability as alternatives to genuine democratic reform in Jordan.

References


Lamis El Muhtaseb is a visiting fellow at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the European University Institute, Italy. She is also a post-doctoral fellow at the Johns Hopkins University/SAIS Bologna Centre, Italy. She is the author of “The intellectual and political evolution of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood” (Geopolitics of the Middle East, July-September 2008), “Riforme costituzionali in Giordania” (Codice delle Costituzioni Straniere, forthcoming 2013) and “Le rôle du Mouvement Islamique dans le ‘printemps jordanien’” (Devenir Révolutionnaire: Au Coeur des révoltes Arabs, forthcoming 2013).

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