

# 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

Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East; around 350,000 are unregistered, most of whom have Jordanian citizenship; and one million live in Jordan without a national number (i.e. without citizenship) (Alghad, 2013). Jordan's total population is estimated at 6,508,887 (Index Mundi, n.d.).

In 1988 the late King Hussein announced in a speech Jordan's legal and administrative disengagement from the West Bank. This speech, however, was not translated into laws or constitutional amendments. Despite this, many procedures followed aimed at withdrawing Jordanian citizenship from Palestinians who lived in the West Bank, but also in Jordan. Moreover, Jordanian authorities adopted a policy of Jordanisation (*Ardana*) of the public and government sectors. According to many, this policy had already existed since the 1970s, following the Black September civil war between Fatah Palestinian troops and the Jordanian army.

Because of this policy, employment in the military and security forces is almost entirely restricted to East Bank Jordanians. This discrimination extends to the political, economic, and public education and health sectors where priority is given to East Bankers, especially in high positions, except for some cases in the education and health sectors and some high political positions. This has inevitably left the private sector to the Palestinians, above all the economic sector. Two examples of such discrimination can be found in the higher education and political systems. Admission to public universities based on competition is limited to 20% of university places, while the other places are reserved for the army and security forces, various ministries, the "less fortunate areas", districts other than Amman, etc. In the political system the one-person-one-vote electoral law marginalises Palestinians' representation in parliament and the political system, and increases that of East Bank Jordanians, especially tribal and pro-regime loyalists.

This division was systematically created by the regime, which draws its support from tribal, military and elitist loyalty, and has produced a society of two peoples who are effectively at odds, especially at the moment following the events of the Jordanian Spring. Indeed, this discriminatory policy has sowed the seeds of mutual fear, suspicion, distrust and feelings of injustice among many people and, strangely enough, in both segments of Jordanian society.

### **The Jordanian Spring and the schism**

Prior to the events of the Arab Spring, and most probably due to the country's economic crisis and the widespread high-level corruption present in Jordan, protesting voices started to be heard from traditional pro-regime loyalists, the army and security forces, including a specific group who called themselves the "retired military" and who called for economic, social and political reforms. These protests referred specifically to the economic gap between East

Bankers and Jordanians of Palestinian origin, and also to illegitimate cases of giving Jordanian citizenship to Palestinians, including relatives of Queen Rania (who is of Palestinian origin) or people connected to her. Noteworthy too were the rising voices that followed within the Jordanian Islamist movement, known for its focus on the Palestinian cause and whose popular base is constituted mainly of Palestinians, which called for reforms within the movement and started to emphasise Jordanian priorities over Palestinian ones. Such events were an indication of the general mood prevailing among East Bank Jordanians due to the increasing economic and political crises.

When the Jordanian uprising erupted, these sensitive issues resurfaced strongly. In fact, while the Jordanian Spring produced a large variety of youth and popular Jordanian protest groups of mostly eastern Jordanian origin in addition to the elitist group of the National Front for Reform, the majority of Jordanians of Palestinian origin refrained from actively joining the protest movement either at the elitist or public level. Moreover, and despite the fact that Palestinians share their East Bank Jordanian counterparts' demands for democratic reforms, a more urgent matter arose especially among many politicians, scholars, academics, intellectuals and civil activists, i.e. the long-standing policy of discrimination against Palestinians residing in Jordan. This resulted in calls for equal rights to those of East Bank Jordanians and an end to the policy of discrimination that divides the Jordanian people. The most important among these initiatives is the National Initiative for Equal Citizenship, which sent a letter to King Abdullah II detailing the discrimination that Palestinians suffer from in the various state sectors.

The failure of Jordanian Palestinians to join the protest movement and the various initiatives to gain full citizenship rights, which have been criticised by the East Bank protest front as untimely, can be attributed to the fear among Palestinians that the Jordanian authorities could react brutally against them by making them mere "guests" in Jordan or citizens without tribal affiliations that would normally protect them from the state. Worse still, this policy of discrimination has managed to plant a fear among many Palestinians of the "other" and of the unknown should the Jordanian monarchy come to an end. Therefore the status quo is preferred to a chaotic situation where the other part of the population (i.e. the East Bankers) is protesting against the Palestinians' acquired wealth and rights as Jordanians.

### **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

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