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FOOTNOTES

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THE POLITICS OF PROTEST IN JORDAN

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In most accounts of political protests, we focus on the immediate interaction between protesters and the policing units that confront them on the street. We stress whether the confrontations escalate into violence, and if one or the other side acted appropriately. Did the protesters go too far? Did they begin to damage property? Did the police work to deflate tensions, or did they escalate the situation?

While not diminishing the importance of protest dynamics in this sense, I want to highlight several factors that give us a different lens for viewing protests, and thus reveal some significant new insights. Thus, I argue that we need to step back and consider a longer history of protests in any case we are examining. We should do this not only to identify the precursors to revolutions or insights about possible future events. The point of looking back also should be to help us understand what might happen in the present. We might ask: What kinds of groups have had what relationships with the regime over the years? What types of protests have been permitted, and what kinds of protests have been repressed? How does the government use law? This way, when we arrive at seminal moments, we are not completely shocked—though we might be completely surprised, as many of us were by recent events in the Arab Spring.

Relatedly, I want to look systematically at protests in Jordan over the years in regard to three particular dimensions that are seldom closely examined: law, space, and spectacle. In terms of law, protests are seemingly extra-legal moments during which law is not relevant because the situation is about protesters and police clashing in the street or square. In fact, the picture is far more complex.

LAWFUL PROTESTS

First, we need to move beyond the notion that protests are uncommon in authoritarian states. In fact, most (but not all) authoritarian nations have long traditions of protest. In the West, we rarely hear about these protests, and many of them do not achieve what they set out to do. Yet they constitute a culture of protest that is much more widespread than commonly believed. Jordan has a long history of protest activities—and not only the large protests that we see in the media during which someone burns an Israeli flag, people march for the Right of Return, or thousands shout "U.S. out of Iraq." The rarely seen protests might involve 50 people sitting in front of the Prime Ministry, work stoppages by judges in support of a lawyer who has been arrested and not charged, or even labor strikes and sit-ins. In Jordan, protests are perhaps not as widespread as they have been in Egypt the past few years, but they have taken place for decades.

In the early 1950s, Jordan's first constitution allowed the right to political assembly, and the people often exercised this right. The constitution was suspended in 1957 and was not reinstated until after 1989. Yet, even during that 32-year period, protests occurred. The government would sometimes crack down on them, but the bigger issue is that people were still pushing the boundaries.

In 1989, a “political reopening” occurred, similar to the one that had taken place in the 1950s, with the emergence of multiple political parties, activism, widespread public debate, and a free and vibrant press. The king lifted martial law, and the new constitution, which was an amended version of the old constitution, again allowed for public gatherings.

Yet, since 1989, if someone wishes to organize a protest one must inform the Jordanian government where it will be held, what it will involve, and how many people are expected. However, the permit system did not exist in the 1990s; it was put in place in 2001 through a temporary law. Thus, during this period, one simply had to inform the government of a planned protest, though the government would often pressure the organizer not to have a certain kind of protest, would declare that there would be too many people, or would suggest a different place. In particular, the government tried to dissuade marches, as it wanted protests relegated to stationary, small, and easily-contained places. It is seldom acknowledged that Jordanian protestors have engaged in such a dialogue with different parts of the government for years.

In 2001, Jordan’s parliament was suspended, and in the two years until the new parliament was established approximately 250 temporary laws were passed. These laws were designed to address security issues, but they expanded to include such matters as raising the price of car insurance and curtailing public gatherings—which were obviously not immediate security concerns. When the parliament reconvened in 2003, it signed a law requiring citizens to get permission from the government to gather in public. As a result, one no longer only had to inform the government of a protest; one now had to gain its permission. The law decreed that organizers of the protests were also personally responsible for any damage that might result from the gathering. This legislation constitutes a substantial barrier, yet people still file for protests all the time, and from many different outlets—political parties, professional associations, and independent movements. Again, citizens negotiate and debate with the government about these events.

What happens to protestors when they are arrested? The government uses different parts of the law, depending on what it wants to accomplish. You would think that the public gathering law would be the one referenced in such cases. But every year since 2003 when I have traveled to Jordan to interview three dozen lawyers and activists who have been arrested, I have not found a single case of someone being prosecuted for violating this law. When a protestor is arrested in Jordan, he or she is always prosecuted for damaging state property, threatening state security, or insulting a foreign regime—completely separate charges from the public gathering law. Clearly the government uses the law to deflate, structure, channel, and encourage certain kinds of protests while suppressing others. Examining this interaction, may mean we are less surprised by what happens during times of revolution because we will have a sense of what has happened in the past.

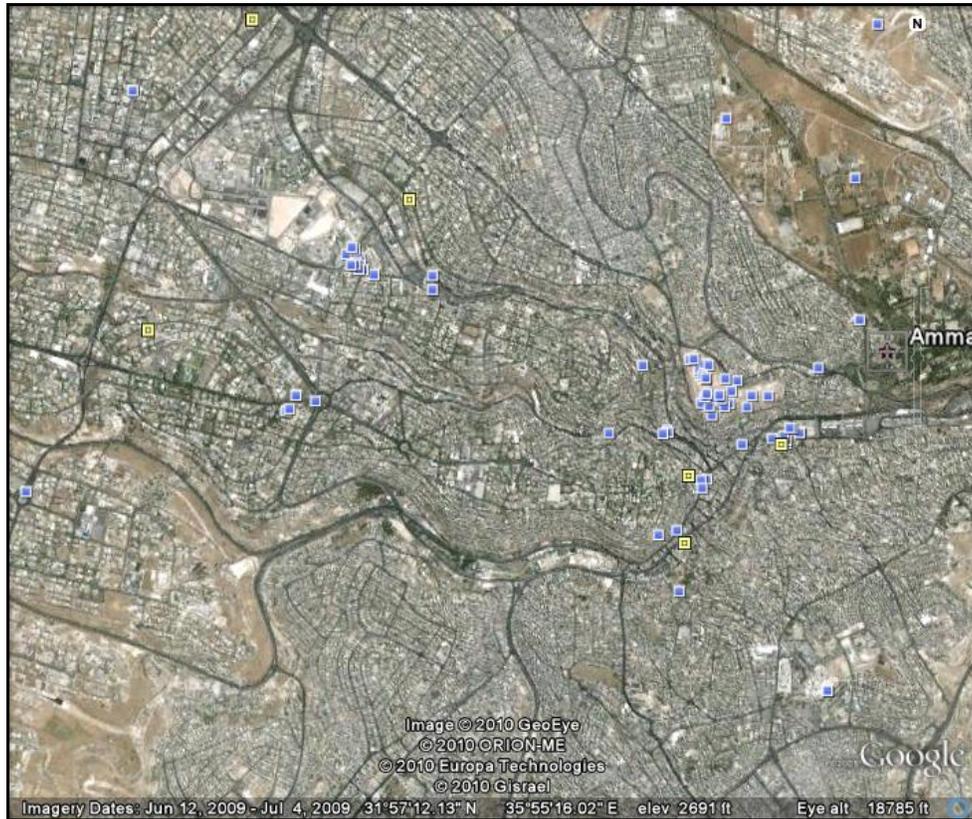
PHYSICAL SPACE

I came upon the topic of physical space as it relates to protests by accident. I was interviewing a protestor who was talking about how he and his colleagues choose sites for protests. We were driving around the city, and he said, pointing to the Prime Ministry, “You know, we can’t even protest here anymore.”” He continued, “There are all of these high-speed underpasses and overpasses and the cars go flying by and we can’t stop traffic anymore here. So we have to protest somewhere else.” This insight led me to begin looking at the way Amman has profoundly changed over the last decade—and how its altered space has affected protests.



This picture is of a peaceful Muslim Brotherhood-organized protest in downtown Amman from about seven years ago. It was taken outside of a mosque. Amman is a series of hills, and when this picture was taken, the immediate downtown area was the center of town. This protest basically shut down the city center, and as a result, the government was displeased. Today, however, the government generally does not care what one does downtown, because downtown is no longer Amman’s center of

commerce.



Notice on this Google Maps the downtown area and the area generally called West Amman, which is where the commercial is now located, spread across a wide area. On Zahran Street, a person used to be able to obstruct intersections. The Prime Ministry offices are in one of the circles, and one could block off the whole circle. As a result, protestors could shut down a lot of the area. This is not possible anymore due to the new overpasses and underpasses mentioned above that move traffic very quickly. Consequently, Ring Road is no longer a threatening place to have protests because very few people venture there anymore. If you are not seen, you are not disruptive (or hence, effective). This is a spatial question, and it has real impact.

In West Amman, which has been reconstructed to facilitate spaces of global capital, one finds large projects intended to create a cosmopolitan city.



The Abdali Boulevard project is creating a “new downtown.” It is in the district of Abdali, and it stands near the site of the old Mukhabarat Building. Thus, a neoliberal project is literally being built on the foundations of a security state. Such projects are fostering public spaces that are actually private commercial spaces, which can be policed and controlled more stringently, as citizens have no right to be there. If you are not buying a \$4 coffee in an upscale cafe, you are not really welcome in that space. This elitism helps the government, because it keeps those who do not “belong” (those who might protest) out of West Amman. Essentially, the government wants to ensure that foreign investors can go to the sushi bars and beautiful hotels and get to their places of work.

I do not believe that any of these urban building projects are intended to block protests; I have found no evidence to indicate such a plan. However, shutting down protests has been a side effect of these projects, and protestors are increasingly frustrated. Carrying out successful gatherings has become increasingly difficult, as many public spaces are either out of town, very carefully policed, or undesirable because of heavy traffic. Though it is still true that if critical mass occurs in a high traffic area, people can shut down the city, 200 people can do far less than they could even a few years ago.

Protestors want to operate in places that will make the most impact. A heavily populated and affluent neighborhood such as West Amman has become an ideal space to disrupt. Various government-employed policing agencies prevent protests there and in other prominent commercial districts by shutting down roads, preventing protestors from coming in—particularly those traveling in buses sponsored by protest organizers. When protestors succeed in getting through, the police try to clear the space as quickly as possible by transporting them in minivans to different places around the city, where they are detained for hours. The protestors are usually not charged. Rather the space has been effectively emptied of potential disruption, the protestors made invisible. In contrast, the police manage protests in places like university campuses and refugee camps by circling the protests so that they do not spill over, effectively hiding them from the more general public. Though groups in these spaces can protest all day, no one sees and no one cares

Janet Abu Lughod wrote famously about Tahrir Square in Cairo, noting that it was inspired by Haussmann's Paris, with its large open squares and wide avenues that form spokes and feature bridges. The irony is that Napoleon III hired Georges-Eugène Haussman to prevent large-scale movement of people in Paris—so that tanks could get in and out easily to maintain clear lines of sight for shooting. There is a lovely irony that a square in Cairo, inspired by such spatial ideology, became the site of a revolution. It is probably the most easily policeable space in Cairo, but that is where the revolution took place.

SPECTACLE IN PROTESTS

Spectacle is about protesting for a specific audience and gaining visibility. The presence of such elements as the media, YouTube, and cell phones has changed everything, though I do not think we understand the full ramifications. Many say that because of these devices, the state no longer controls the narrative. Yet, the state had not been in complete control of the narrative for years because many of the television and radio stations were broadcast from Army outposts. What is different now is that everyone has a video camera on their cell phone, and they can immediately upload videos to YouTube. This changes what is possible.

Let me conclude with an example of a protest that may aid in understanding protests to come. In Jordan, Queen Rania has become the model of a good protestor, organizing marches to support humanitarian events and also appearing at more controversial gatherings. When she participates in charged events, one knows that the government is panicking a little and attempting to flip the narrative. In 2002, when Israel invaded Jenin and Nablus and several other towns in Palestine, Amman was effectively shut down by large-scale protests for about six weeks. Late into the protests, the Jordan River Foundation invited Queen Rania to join a march in support of the Palestinian people. She led the march, and an image of her at the protest was released—but it was not intended for Jordanian audiences. Its intention was to say to Westerners, “Don't be afraid of Muslims on the street. It is not scary, we are already like you. We can already be in dialogue.”

Most interesting in regard to these protests, aside from this image of the Queen, is that the planned marches went from places like the Professional Association Complex to the Prime Ministry—or to Parliament, the Israeli Embassy or the U.S. Embassy. Hence they arrived at places identified as symbolically complicit in the invasions. Queen Rania's march went from the Fifth Circle, which is the site of two very prominent hotels, to a U.N. office involved in Palestinian relief only two blocks away. Symbolically, her march said, “We are for the Palestinian people. We are not protecting Israel or our government or U.S. policy; we are with the people.”

The narrative of the protests was thus partially manipulated through the use of space. Attending to such aspects of protest can help us understand the nature of future protests. This does not mean that we can know when a country will explode in revolution, but grasping these dimensions can help us know when a protest is common and when it is truly something different.

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