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Choosing Jordanianness

The dialogic construction of Jordanian identity discourse on nationhood and belonging

Choisir la jordanité : La construction dialogique de l'identité jordanienne : discours sur la nation et l'appartenance

اختيار الأردنية: البناء الحواري لخطاب الهوية الأردنية حول الوطنية والانتماء

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Abstracts

English Français العربية
This article investigates the dialogic construction of Jordanian identity discourse as reflected through the production of everyday discourse on the nation, following both Anderson's (1983) idea of nation as a 'socially constructed community' and Billig's (1995) concept of 'banal nationalism'. Against both the narrative of unifying regime initiatives and Transjordanian ethnic exclusivism, we delve deeper into the narrative of everyday nationalism, revolving around everyday practices through which ordinary people 'choose the nation' by means of popular culture. We draw on nationalist songs, memes, graffiti and social media hashtags where Jordanian 'everyday nationalism' involves a dialogic construction of identity that can draw on either Transjordanian or Palestinian symbolism. This discourse of nationhood is dialogic through its constitutive, if oppositional, relationship between symbols representing Transjordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin. Here, 'choosing the nation' goes beyond simple narratives of unity or exclusion, reproducing constitutive identity fractures yet remaining dependent on their continued existence.

Cet article étudie la construction dialogique du discours sur l'identité jordanienne telle qu'elle se reflète dans la production du discours quotidien sur la nation, dans la lignée à la fois des travaux d'Anderson (1983) sur la nation en tant que « communauté socialement construite » et du concept de Billig (1995) de « nationalisme banal ». À rebours à la fois d'un récit valorisant les initiatives unificatrices du régime mais aussi sur l'exclusivisme ethnique transjordanien, nous approfondissons le récit du nationalisme quotidien. Ce dernier s'article autour de pratiques

quotidiennes par lesquelles les gens ordinaires « choisissent la nation » par l'intermédiaire de la culture populaire. Nous nous appuyons sur des chansons nationalistes, des mèmes, des graffitis et des hashtags sur les réseaux sociaux où le « nationalisme quotidien » jordanien implique une construction dialogique de l'identité. Celle-ci peut s'appuyer sur le symbolisme transjordanien ou palestinien. Ce discours sur la nation est dialogique par sa relation constitutive, bien qu'opposée, entre les symboles représentant les Transjordaniens et les Jordaniens d'origine palestinienne. Ici, le « choix de la nation » va au-delà des simples récits d'unité ou d'exclusion, reproduisant les fractures identitaires constitutives tout en restant tributaire de leur existence continue.

يبحث هذا المقال في البنية الحوارية لخطاب الهوية الأردنية كما تنعكس من خلال إنتاج الخطاب اليومي حول مفهومي الوطنية والانتماء، مستندًا إلى فكرة أندرسون (1983) عن الأمة بوصفها "مجتمعًا متخيَّلًا اجتماعيًا"، ومفهوم بيليغ (1995) حول "القومية المبتذلة". وبعيدًا عن كل من مبادرات النظام لتوحيد الهوية الوطنية الأردنية، وحصرية الهوية الأردنية بالشرق أردنية، يتعمق هذا البحث في سردية القومية اليومية التي تتمحور حول الممارسات اليومية التي من خلالها "يختار الناس العاديون" سرد هويتهم من خلال الثقافة الشعبية. يعتمد هذا التحليل على الأغاني الوطنية، والميمات، والكتابات الجدارية، والوسوم على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، حيث تتجلى القومية اليومية الأردنية كبناء حواري للهوية يمكن أن يستند إلى رموز شرق أردنية أو فلسطينية. يتميز خطاب الوطنية هذا بطبيعته الحوارية، من خلال بناء علاقة تكوينية – وإن كانت تضادية – بين الرموز التي تمثل الشرق أردنيين وتلك التي تمثل الأردنيين من أصول فلسطينية. وفي هذا السياق، فإن "اختيار الأردنية" يتجاوز حد السرديات التبسيطية للوحدة أو الإقصاء بين الأردنيين ككل، إذ يعيد إنتاج الانقسامات التكوينية في الهوية، مع بقائه معتمدًا على استمرارية وجودها.

Index terms

Full text

Introduction

1   Post-independence Jordan, particularly after 1946, has been understood through three major interpretive schemes widely reproduced in Jordanian and international media outlets, formal and informal political discussions as well as academic literature about Jordan (Layne, 1994; Lynch, 1999; Massad, 2001; Alon, 2007; Ryan, 2018; Schwedler, 2022). First, the Jordanian state has been understood as a resilience regime that has, despite its status as a newcomer to the area in 1921, successfully withstood regional challenges such as regime change, revolutions and protests, and has engendered meaningful social and political changes in Jordanian society in order to project a unified state front. Second, Jordan's economy is often described as a stagnant, with high unemployment and dependent on international donors particularly from the United States (being the second largest recipient of US cash support after Israel), highlighting the significant impact of external aids in stabilising the country's economy. A final narrative describes Jordan as being in a perpetual identity crisis, pitching Jordanians in the hinterlands – considered the bedrock of the regime – against Jordanians of Palestinian origin in urban centres. At the heart of this identity crisis are perceived deep-seated divisions: 'True' Jordanians against other refugees and migrants, urbanites against the Bedouin and rural dwellers, and regime favourites against marginalised groups. As these various groups compete with one another, the potential for further conflicts increases leading to ongoing discussions of how to define the language, culture and identity of Jordan.

2   These three interpretations intersect with the role of the Hashemite regime as an external, neutral powerbroker that stabilises ethnic tensions and maintains the loyalty of all Jordanians, irrespective of their origins and descents. This role of the Hashemite regime is exemplified in the implementation of royal slogans and initiatives such as *Jordan First* in 2002, *We Are All Jordan* in 2006 and the 2021 recommendations of the Royal Commission to Modernise the Political System for a unified Jordanian national

identity. These three initiatives intend to 'end' Jordan's identity struggle and gerrymandering politics.

3   Central to the new making of national identity in Jordan – what it means to be 'Jordanian' – is the role of the Hashemite regime, the Jordanian Armed Forces and the Public Security Directorate in projecting power and fostering a sense of nationhood and belonging among those who might identify as 'True Jordanians'. This represents one way in which national identity discourse has been used to broker settlements in domestic unrest, as the regime has tended to resort to the 'reinvigoration' of Jordan's national identity discourse as a tool to renew the loyalty of the Jordanian people. In what follows, the political history of Jordan within the last hundred years or so will be examined by focusing on its creation as a state-nation and the main events that lead to its emergence as an imagined (national) community from 1921. Then a selection of relevant literature on nationalism and the state, including scholarship on Jordan, will be reviewed. This review shows that this body of literature has tended to focus on either regime or exclusionary narratives. Finally, by analysing examples from popular cultural forms, an alternative view of Jordanian nationhood is offered as a matter of oppositional alternatives, or of nationalism as a choice between two possible identities. This is a narrative which, while to some extent inclusive, still hinges on the reproduction of harmful stereotypes between 'original Jordanian' Transjordanians in the hinterlands and other Jordanians – such as Jordanians of Palestinian origin – mainly in urban centres.

Jordan as an imagined community

4   The making of Transjordan, where national claims were not locally structured, can be analysed from the perspective of Anderson's (1983) idea of *imagined community*, because the establishment of Transjordan as a new political entity suggests an absence of established Jordanian culture and people before 1921. Thus, the idea of the imagined community in the case of Jordan must be placed within the larger context of pre-existing political imaginaries that were not constrained by the nation-state model. Following Anderson's idea of the power of (print) media in shaping people's sense of nationalism, the Jordanian nation can be seen as a 'socially constructed community', imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of a Jordanian community. A series of dominant or official events – those recognised by authorities or the general public – made possible the imagination of this community, but also laid foundations for some of its constituent fractures.

5   When formally established in 1921, the Emirate of Transjordan had a small and scattered population with a few wandering tribes present in summer and winter encampments in the southern part of what is known as *Bilād al-shām* and on the east side of the Jordan River (Méouchy et al., 2013). Although no census of the population had been taken when Transjordan was created in 1921, the population was estimated to be in the neighbourhood of 200,000. Of these, some 10,000 were Circassians and Chechen and about 15,000 Christians in proto-urban areas, such as Amman, As-Salt, Madaba, Ajlun and Karak (Mandate for Palestine – Report of the Mandatory to the League of Nations, 1924). Amman, the newly established capital city of Transjordan, was in 1921 sparsely populated, had no defining local dialect and had a mostly non-Arab population (Abdel-Jawad, 1986; Al-Wer, 2007). As-Salt, to the northwest, was considered the largest town in Transjordan. However, over time, the population of Amman, which became Transjordan's capital, significantly increased following the influx of Palestinian refugees after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the Six-Day War in 1967 (Alon, 2007: 152).

6   With the help of the British Army and the British Air Force, the Emirate of Transjordan under Emir Abdullah successfully defeated two local rebellions – the 'Adwan and Kura rebellions – in 1921-1924 (Alon, 2007: 52), calling for 'Jordan for Jordanians'. These two rebellions coincided with Wahhabi incursions in southern parts

of the emirate, which aimed to weaken Emir Abdullah's new position. These rebellions, led by notable Transjordanian figures, were amongst the largest revolts against the newly established government in Amman, but were presumably also directed against the British Mandate of Transjordan and British influence in the region.

7 Emir Abdullah was very successful in creating 'deep bonds' between the newly established Hashemite regime in Transjordan and Transjordanian people in the hinterlands, by linking people's livelihoods directly to the employment and patronage of the Hashemite ruling regime (Nanes, 2008: 88–89). Tell (2013) provides an interpretative history of the emergence and consolidation of the state of (Trans-)Jordan in terms of an unwritten contract between the regime and the tribes[1]. This relationship between the Hashemite regime and Transjordanian people can be understood in the framework of *mécénat* (or patronage) because the Hashemite royal initiatives have been quite successful in preventing regime collapse or revolution from within, or an organised national collation against the Hashemite ruling family, themselves newcomers to the region in 1921.

8 Writing about British legacy and Glubb's impact on the formation of Transjordan, Jevon (2017: 208) argues that the young King Hussein seemed to have 'no intentions of playing the pliant puppet role the British had intended for him,' but rather managed to consolidate his power within three years of his accession to the throne in 1953. King Hussein declared the Arabisation of the Jordanian army and dismissed Glubb and other senior British officers in 1956. Hussein's decision, according to Jevon (2017: 242), 'was not simply about striking a blow against Britain. Rather, it was about reacting against British obstinacy, breaking free of British constraints, and Glubb was the perceived personification of this problem'. This suggests the magnitude of the perceived impact of Britain on the formation of Transjordan and its military, domestic and foreign policies, breaking away from which was a necessary step in creating a new national identity of Jordan.

9 However, Jordan's continued political, economic and security dependence on the US seems to have merely displaced the issue of foreign dependency, as the regime's international alliances sit uneasily with a romanticised Transjordanian past of Bedouin strength and independence (Schwedler, 2022: 267–268). The congruity of Jordan's imagined national community and the position and activities of Jordan as a state thus remains under question, and open to challenge by citizens who may not identify with the state's actions and alliances on the world stage or its economic priorities.

Studies in nationhood and nationalism

10 The development of welfare state projects and everyday nationalism reproduced 'by ordinary people doing ordinary things' (Fox and Ginderachter, 2018: 547) in the mid-20th century provided the state with new and nuanced approaches for nation-building. The everyday practices of ordinary people in defining state-national identity were not originally given much attention in the literature on nationalism and national identity. In the last few decades, a growing body of literature has begun to engage with 'nationhood' from the perspective of everyday life (Fox, 2004), i.e., from the bottom-up. This approach looks at how nationhood is shaped by ordinary citizens, and their involvement in the redefinition of discourses and projects in relation to the nation, national symbols and identities. However, this approach is in the margins of academic scholarship on nationhood in Jordan, supporting the case for considering more empirical material linked to 'bottom-up' processes of creating national identity. In what follows, we first review some of the critical literature on everyday nationalism, before reviewing the state of the literature on nationalism in Jordan and how a more sustained consideration of forms of everyday nationalism could be used to complement existing scholarship.

11 The everyday nationalism approach is based on Billig's (1995) work on banal nationalism which tries to shift the narrative from extreme and 'hot' expressions of nationalism (as expressed by the state and officials) to consider how the nation is taken

for granted and reproduced by ordinary people in everyday life. Billig argues that much of the process of nation-building involves the familiarisation and internalisation of national 'markers', as, over time, the nation becomes more expressed in unnoticed habits and less visible forms of nationalism that constitute social life. Nationalism, as Billig understands it, is constantly flagged (and sometimes embedded) in everyday life through the practices of state institutions, state and private media, routine symbols and habits of using language and popular expressions; but ultimately, it is its very reproduction in everyday life that gives it its power.

12   Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) argue that existing scholarship on the making of nations has neglected the role of ordinary people engaged in routine activities and has rather focused on construction of the nation from above. They outline four modalities of the production and reproduction of nationhood in the everyday, which they term 'talking the nation', 'choosing the nation', 'performing the nation' and 'consuming the nation' (537–538). These four modalities shift from the 'traditional concerns' of banal nationalism and other classical works that focus on analysis of the state, elites and historical origins of nationalism, and align with critical research that questions a focus on the state and top-down approaches at the expense of bottom-up perspectives.

13   In the context of Jordan where *the state was created before the nation*, most existing studies about nationhood and nationalism have focused on the study of Jordanian nationalism from the top down, and much fewer on nationalism from below. Past literature has drawn on three main ideological frames that have discussed nationhood and nationalism in Jordan: the top-down creation of nationalism through state initiatives, colonial effects and tribal influences; the, again, top-down development of understandings of Transjordanian nationalism as opposed to, but also excluding, the Palestinians; and finally, and least extensively, understandings of everyday nationalism.

14   The first frame is represented most prominently by Massad's (2001) study on the rise and development of Jordanian nationalism as a function of colonial effects, pan-Arabism and tribal influences. For Massad, a major role in the development of the nationalism has been played by the military and the forces of law and order, which have resulted in Jordanian national identity in the 1940s being represented primarily through the image of the Bedouin. He argues that unlike his predecessor Peake, who favoured townsmen in the Transjordanian army, Glubb sedentarised the formally nomadic Bedouin tribes by enlisting them in the Transjordanian army. In doing so, Glubb has been seen as a creator of new cultural forms and identity politics that later came to define (indigenous/original) national culture and identity of Jordan, based on 'Bedouin' culture and the traditions of people in the Jordanian rural areas and hinterlands. Even as it draws on racialised stereotypes not borne out by historical reality (Barakat, 2023), this has been a most prolific frame for understanding Jordanian national identity in the writings of several western historians and scholars, from Vatikiotis (1957), to Patai (1959), Wilson (1990), Layne (1994), Shryock (1997), Lynch (1999) and Alon (2007).

15   The second frame discusses the development of Jordanian nationalism in the broader context of pan-Arabism, Jordanian-Palestinian relations, and the Middle East peace process. Abu Odeh (1999) traces the construction of Jordanian national identity in the context of ever-changing triangular relationships between Transjordanians, Palestinians and Israelis. He argues that Transjordanian nationalism defines Jordanians of Palestinian origin as 'the other' in the construction of a separate national identity for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. This view was first espoused by Emir (and then King) Abdullah I in response to pan-Arabism, and later by the annexation of the West Bank to Jordanian rule after the 1948 war with Israel. The relationship between Jordanians of 'East Bank' origin – or Transjordanians – and Jordanians of Palestinian origin came under closer scrutiny when the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) mounted a major challenge to the Jordanian establishment between 1967 and 1970, which culminated in armed violent clashes, known as Black September, between the Jordanian army and members of the PLO and led to the expulsion of PLO from Jordan to Lebanon by the end of 1971. In the aftermath of Black

September, the Jordanian government began a 'national purge' that has since then favoured the employment of Transjordanians in the army and security forces (Barahmeh, 2020: 109). Jordanians of Palestinian origin were left free to create their own business establishments, but were to stay away from real political power, resulting in a complex and uneasy relationship between Transjordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin.

16   The third frame, which has not been discussed extensively in literature, is the study of Jordanian nationalism from below, from the perspectives of ordinary Jordanians, whether of Palestinian or Transjordanian origin. Anderson's (2005) study analyses Jordanian nationalism from the perspectives of ordinary people in the street. Anderson argues that 'the street', no less than the state, has played and continues to play a major role in the process of defining the national identity of Jordan. Using primary sources that include memoirs, interviews, textbooks and archives, she demonstrates how changes in socio-economic and political realities, the establishment of armed forces and the explosion of media outlets have all converged to offer ordinary people in Jordan an alternative sense of national identity – one that has helped redefine the relationship between the Hashemite family and the people of Jordan.

17   It is important to acknowledge Anderson's (2005) work on nationalist voices from the street, but also to go beyond static understandings of nationhood in Jordan as an opposition of state versus society (Mitchell, 1991; Migdal, 2001), a 'fuzzy' nationalism that deals with the construction of Jordanian nationalism in an eclectic way due to security concerns (Frisch, 2002), or a merely 'warm' nationalism based on merging Arab supranationalism with Jordanian and Palestinian identities (Culcasi, 2016). The work of Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008) suggests one particular strategy through which nationhood is (re-)produced by ordinary people in everyday life – choosing the nation – through the medium of popular cultural forms. In this realm, nationhood frames the choices people make about various topics, such as sports teams (Faisaly vs. Wahdat), food (*mansaf* vs. *mulūkhīya*) and speech/discursive practices (phoneme substitution/manipulation of the letter *qāf* (ق) in Arabic). Sometimes, as with pronunciation of the qāf, this is a choice in the literal sense: one may choose to pronounce words in one way or the other, strategically emphasising different narratives of belonging. More often, it is less of a choice at an individual level – it would be a rare thing indeed for a football supporter to switch their loyalty from Faisaly to Wahdat, for example – than the fact of the existence of alternatives, of two *possible* ways of being Jordanian, with one perhaps seen as more legitimate than the other. In both these cases, however, 'choosing Jordanianness' becomes a matter of coming down on one of the two sides of Jordan's constitutive nationalist divide – Transjordanian or Palestinian origin – without fully excluding either, a dialogic process which subtly challenges both regime attempts at nationalist unification and narratives of exclusion of people who are not 'original' Jordanians.

Methodology

18   The present argument is based on evidence from everyday popular cultural forms including nationalist songs, graffiti, memes and social media hashtags to think about the status of nationalism in Jordan and the larger question of nationalism in the 21st century. These are interpreted as traces of ordinary people's practices and experiences of nationhood and modes of (dis-)belonging in Jordan, including remarks made by ordinary people in sporting competitions and in social media spaces. Some of these remarks are publicly accessible and written in public spaces and some are drawn from social media spaces, such as Facebook, X-Twitter and YouTube. The selection criteria were based on popularity metrics that make these remarks natural avenues for ordinary people wishing to amplify their voices and convey a particular message about the national identity of Jordan.

19   A context-attentive discourse analysis methodology is broadly adopted to identify patterns and themes in the data selected, as well as to analyse the use of language in collective identity discourse. Many of the collective discourses on identity politics and nationhood in Jordan involve references to key historical events and dynamics. These include the history of Transjordan and its tribes prior to the 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the influx of Palestinian refugees to Jordan, Black September and Jordanian disengagement from the West Bank in 1988. Additionally, the ongoing and routine rivalry and clashes in sports between Faisaly (mainly pro-Transjordanian) and Wahdat (mainly pro-Palestinian) play a significant role in these discourses. The already complicated and the politically sensitive nature of language that is being used to describe 'true/original Jordanians' or 'Transjordanians' and 'Jordanians of Palestinian origin', as well as the concomitant use of such language to legitimise the Palestinian right of return, also highlights the rejection of attempts, both from the regime and from the perspectives of ordinary people, to make Jordan into an 'alternative homeland' for Palestinians in Jordan. However, this language is also highly context-specific, and its meaning(s) cannot be wholly captured by the framework of state nationalism and modes of (dis-)belonging. The aim is to evaluate identity politics from below, from an everyday perspective often excluded from positions of power.

20   This approach does not capture people's thoughts or feelings directly; for that purpose, interview work or longer-term ethnographic fieldwork would obviously be more appropriate. The discussion is limited to publicly available discourses – narratives circulating in the public sphere that appear in social media settings and other public spaces. While obviously performative, the chosen examples still appear to mount a challenge to the narratives promoted both by the Jordanian state as well as exclusionary Transjordanian nationalism, in contexts and spaces where some element of popular recognition is necessary for them to become widely known and reproduced.

Choosing Jordanianness: An analysis of popular cultural forms

21   While identity and the sense of belonging to a country often bring people together, in the case of post-independence Jordan, these have been a source for an ongoing and heated debate on what could best define the language, culture and identity of Jordan, and who are 'true Jordanians'. While this has certainly been influenced by the many regime projects to define what 'being Jordanian' means – implying that 'Jordanian identity' is an inherently problematic concept that can only be clearly defined through sustained state-led public debate and initiatives – it also appears, in a somewhat different fashion, in popular cultural forms. As the examples below demonstrate, these forms often do not seek to either encapsulate or exclude what would seem to be contradictory and opposing narratives; rather, such narratives feed off each other, both in the sense of binary opposition – one *is not* the other – and by creating a dividing line along which a choice should be made to determine on which 'side' a Jordanian citizen stands. In such everyday cultural forms, 'being a Jordanian' thus takes on a dialogic aspect in the sense of Bakhtin (1981): Jordanianness is not just a single, dominant, 'monologic' identity – whether regime-driven or Transjordanian – but rather emerges through challenge and opposition with other, alternative identity narratives, including those of Jordanians of Palestinian origin.

22   The analysis here explores this dialogic nature of Jordanian nationhood by examining the fractures along which Jordanian-ness is 'chosen' in popular cultural forms, such as nationalist songs, sports affiliations and hashtags and posts of social media platforms. As the analysis below demonstrates, the constant reproduction of these **choices** at the level of 'everyday nationalism', and the challenge for Jordanian citizens to align themselves on one or the other side of a divide, contradicts both the unification and exclusion narratives of the Jordanian nation.

Military or civilian uniform

23   Military uniform and patriotic nationalist songs are possibly among the most overt forms of banal nationalism in Jordan. There are others, less obvious examples, such as standing to the national anthem. According to Barahmeh and Fras (2023: 88), Jordanian official discourse is heavily militarised and many royal family members of the Hashemite family are military-affiliated or used to have some military background at some point in their life. It is no surprise that the Jordanian army and other security forces (including their uniforms) are highly valued and revered in the state media, such as in the 2016 Jordan TV programme *The story of a song is the identity of a nation* (Arabic: حكاية أغنية ... هوية وطن) or on social media outlets where nationalist localism is heavily exaggerated in many nationalist songs and lyrics to reflect themes of unconditional loyalty of the army and the masculinity of all Jordanian men. The glorification of military uniform (known locally as *fūtīk*, فوتيك) over those who wear civilian clothes (known locally as *sawīl*, سويل)[2] is most apparent in nationalist songs in Jordan – songs that inevitably picture the Jordanian army with chivalry and courage, such as those sung by the famous Jordanian singer Omar Al-Abdallat.

24   '*Kōbān*'s song' is one of the most famous Jordanian nationalist songs. It was written by two men often considered great symbols of Jordanian nationalism: Wasfi Al-Tal and Field Marshal Habis Al-Majali, chairman of the Jordanian Armed Forces between 1958 and 1975.[3] The song is sung by Salwa Al-Ass, a Lebanese-Palestinian who became famous for her performances of Jordanian nationalist songs. *Kōbān's* song sheds light on the differences between being a '*Kōbān*' and a 'non-*Kōbān*' on a battlefield, where *Kōbān* is originally a Kurdish word denoting a cowardly person or a civilian who may flee from war. In this famous nationalist song, the image of the non-*Kōbān* is portrayed to reflect the image of a soldier (known locally as *'askarī*, عسكري) who is the protector of his homeland, the prince charming and the most popular with Jordanian girls for overtly demonstrating the meaning of 'true' Jordanianness by wearing a military uniform, with eyes vigilant like those of a hawk. The song thus presents a clear choice between soldier and civilian, brave, uniformed defender of the homeland and cowardly *Kōbān*. Here the soldier does, in a sense, stand for 'true' Jordanianness; but the symbolic potency of his figure remains dialogic, as it hinges crucially on the civilians from whom he is distinguished and whom he is meant to protect.

Teklakūsh or teglagūsh

25   When he assumed the presidency of the Wahdat Sport Club in 2017, Yousef Al-Saqour, a local businessman from Wahdat refugee camp, said the phrase 'Teklakūsh' (تكلكوش) meaning 'do not worry much'. The phrase then provided much fertile material for jokes and mockery in social media and in everyday language by fans of the rival Faisaly Sport Club, who are mostly Jordanians of East Bank origin, and which is run by the powerful 'Adwan tribe from the Balqa region. Wahdat, however, is named after the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Amman, which was established in 1956. To reassure his fans in Jordan that their football team would perform better in that season's football championship, Al-Saqour pronounced the *q* (qāf) in the word *teqlaqūsh* (تقلقوش) as *k*, a pronunciation characteristic of Palestinian rural dialects. The word would not have stopped anyone or would have gone unnoticed if Al-Sagour had pronounced the letter as a voiced plosive 'g', *teglagūsh,* i.e., as most East Jordanians pronounce it, whether they are of rural, Bedouin or urban origins. The phrase went viral. Written prominently with the letter 'kāf' (ك), it appeared on walls in public places, was used as a hashtag on social media, was sometimes placed as a banner on shops, and a number of popular singers sang songs using the phrase among Jordanians of Palestinian origin. Interestingly, later on, when Al-Saqour presented his profile in a video on a Wahdat-affiliated page on Facebook, he pronounced the *q* in his family name Al-Saqour as 'g'. This was perhaps a pragmatic move to make his profile more appealing to the wider

Jordanian society where the 'g' pronunciation is more prominent in private and public spaces, but also underscores a more literal phonetic **choice** between an East Jordanian-coded and a Palestinian-coded sound variant.

26   This rivalry between Faisaly and Wahdat reveals a much deeper divide between Transjordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin. It reached its peak when the two teams met during the finals of the Jordanian Pro League in 2017. The Faisaly fans used the expression *Punch in the Nose* (in Arabic: دق خشوم) to express their victory over Wahdat. The phrase was not only used in social media spaces in Faisaly-affiliated pages and personal accounts, but also went viral in public spaces as a form of graffiti in the city of As-Salt (largely inhabited by East Bank Jordanians). However, the role of the Jordanian national football team in unifying the nation was apparent when the national team received a huge hero's welcome at Queen Alia International Airport following their remarkable performance at the 2024 Asian Cup Final. Faisaly and Wahdat, though their identities are distinct and in many ways oppositional, are both constitutive elements of Jordanian 'everyday nationalism', reflecting the complicated interplay of unity and rivalry within Jordanian popular culture.

Nashmī or non-Nashmī

27   Jordanian cultural space has long been dominated by the abstract figure of the *nashmī*, which stands for the masculine ideal of Transjordanian people who work for the army and police, or those in national sports teams who represent Jordan at international events – usually in the plural, *nashāma* (masculine) or *nashmiyyāt* (feminine). The word *nashmī* has been extensively used in Jordanian popular culture online to denote references, among others, to the true meaning of being a Jordanian. The word, according to Mahadin (2022: 63), has become 'indelibly associated with East-Banker Jordanian masculinity' and often denotes chivalry, generosity, hospitality and courage. The Jordanian use of the word *nashmī* implies a sense of belonging to Transjordanian culture and often embodies an image of a man wearing a *shmagh* (Arabic: شماغ), a red-patterned head cover that symbolises Transjordanian culture and traditions – contrasted sometimes with a similar, black-patterned scarf, *kūfiyyā* (Arabic: كوفية), which symbolises support for Palestine. Describing *nashmī* in this way further emphasises its Transjordanian nationalist connotations and the abstract image of *nashmī* is represented mostly in the 'East Bank' Jordanians' cultural scene – the 'original' Transjordanians. While the ideal Jordanian remains a *nashmī,* the non-*nashmī* – one not wearing a *shmagh*, or even an alternative scarf – remains a present, if unstated, background identity.

Mansaf or mulūkhīya

28   In more explicit terms, *nashmī* can also be opposed to *fidāʾī* – a member of the Palestinian armed resistance – as in popular representations of the football 'derby' between Faisaly and Wahdat as the match between *al-nashmī* and *al-fidāʾī*. Sometimes, this opposition is even extended to food, i.e. the difference between *mansaf* (a typical Transjordanian dish of meat, rice and yoghurt) and *mulūkhīya* (a dish made from jute leaves and a staple of Palestinian cuisine). Early in 2014, Faisaly fans were seen cheering for their team displaying a banner that translates as 'Waiting for Wahdat to win the League is like waiting for McDonald's to serve *mulūkhīya'* (Arabic: يا مستني الوحدات يفوز بالدوري يا مستني ماكدونالدز يعمل ملوخية), drawing on a symbolic opposition that has a long history in Faisaly-Wahdat matches (Tuastad, 2019). The banner referred to the impossibility of Wahdat winning the 2014 League, given its last championship win was in 2010/2011. The opposition led a few Jordanian journalists and media commentators to write about *mansaf* and *mulūkhīya* as threats to Jordanian unity and to call for the adoption of a fictional hybridised '*manslūkhiyya*' as the national dish of Jordan

(Arabic: المنسلوخية). Following Wahdat's victory in the 2014 Pro-League, its fans dubbed the league the '*Mulūkhīya* Champions League'. In response, the Faisaly fans used the phrase 'Take your *mulūkhīya* and head to the Bridge' (Arabic: ملوخياتك وعلى الجسر) – with the 'bridge' referring to the Allenby Bridge (known officially as King Hussein Bridge) crossing between Jordan and the West Bank, implying the latter to be the 'true' homeland of *mulūkhīya*, and by extension, of Jordanians of Palestinian origin. The choice between Faisaly and Wahdat, or *mansaf* and *mulūkhīya,* thus determines not only one's sports loyalties, but also implies one's origins in either of the two constitutive halves of the modern Jordanian nation.

Elders or youngers

29   In Jordan's tribal social traditions, elders have much authority over their families and those younger than them. Tribal elders in Jordan are therefore highly respected and a popular focus of social authority for both the regime and its people. Here we reflect on one of Habis Al-Majali's nationalist songs from 1972: *We are the elders in this country* (Arabic: حنا كبار البلد). Sung by Samira Tewfik, a Lebanese-Armenian singer who became known for her performances of Jordanian Bedouin songs, this famous song reflects Jordanian army control over the land and the consolidation of its power, amid its rejection of interventions from other Arab and non-Arab countries following the 1970–71 armed conflict with the PLO. The introduction of this song reads: 'We are the elders in this country. We are its chairs.' The song thus presents a clear division between tribal elders (Transjordanian people) and youngers (Palestinian refugees and other (non-)Arab minorities in Jordan). This also implies a direct challenge to foreign countries and people who would intervene in Jordan's domestic issues and policy.

30   In another popular song broadcast by Faisaly fans on YouTube in 2017, the nationalist singer Fares Tufaha, a local singer from the Jordanian city of As-Salt, draws on the nationalist feeling of superiority of Faisaly over Al-Wahdat and other clubs, stating that Faisaly performs dramatically better than other sports clubs and thus deserves the title of 'The Blue Elder' (Arabic: الزعيم الأزرق). The lyrics read: 'Sit down boy, we are the elders in this country. Faisaly is the eldest from the time it was born' (Arabic: اقعد يا ولد احنا كبار البلد. الفيصلي هو الزعيم من يوم ما انولد). Early in the song, the lyrics reference 'The Blue Elder', born, like the Faisaly club, in 1932. In the Jordanian sporting context, the term 'The Blues' refers to Faisaly, whereas Wahdat is dubbed 'The Green Genie' (Arabic: المارد الأخضر). The introduction of Tufaha's song establishes melodic and rhythmic material related to the central image of Jordan as a nation of Transjordanian Bedouin elders, those who precede and surpass in their existence other groups in Jordan.

31   Jordan is symbolically depicted in nationalist songs and folklore stories as a nation of 'true men' or warriors, a link intensified in Jordanian popular cultural production following the influx of Palestinian refugees since 1948 and the 1970–71 armed conflict with the PLO. The muscular, warrior-like image for Faisaly permeates the introduction of Tufaha's song and is implicitly linked to themes of the fidelity and loyalty of Transjordanian people to the Hashemite regime from the time the club was formed in 1932, i.e., a decade after the establishment of Transjordan in 1921. The song thus builds on the now familiar oppositions between the Faisaly, *nashmī,* 'original' East Jordanian identity – that of the 'elders' – and the 'younger', and perhaps less legitimately Jordanian, generation represented by Wahdat and its many supporters of Palestinian origin.

Discussion

32   The popular cultural forms examined above reveal a dialogic, oppositional framing of understandings of being a Jordanian that sits uneasily with ideas of a unified national

identity, or a single 'imagined community' of Jordanian citizens. As it is traditionally understood, national identity should ideally be a stable concept. It is given, perhaps at birth; it remains a core part of someone's identity for the rest of their lives; and it can only be changed with great difficulty. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the dominant understanding is of Jordanian national identity as a 'problem' or 'identity crisis'.

33   On the Transjordanian side, such discourses often blame Palestinian refugees and the regime/government (usually, *ḥukūma*) for allowing the influx of large numbers of Palestinians and letting them dominate the business sector and some aspects of political power. On the other hand, discourses constructed by Jordanians of Palestinian origin revolve around their conflict with Israel and the gradual loss of Palestinian identity and heritage in the face of Israeli aggression. The discourses constructed by the Hashemite regime and government officials do not blame either side. Instead, they emphasise the unity of all Jordanian people, irrespective of their origin, in facing internal and external threats, and consistently suggest unifying 'solutions' through royal initiatives, such as *Jordan First* and *We are all Jordan* along with the recent recommendations of the Royal Commission to Modernise the Political System to create a unified Jordanian national identity that would 'end' Jordan's identity struggle and its gerrymandering politics.

34   State power does, of course, offer some support to the image of the Transjordanian as representing 'authentic' Jordanian identity. However, the two ideologies cannot be completely conflated, as demonstrated by the fear that one day Jordan may become an 'alternative homeland' for Palestinians – a fear that continues to loom large in Jordanian media and public discourse, particularly following Donald Trump's return to the White House in 2025. The idea of an 'alternative homeland' is a geopolitical project, commonly dubbed the 'Jordanian-Palestinian Confederation', an option putatively promoted and popularised by the US administration and Israel as one workable solution to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the problem of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East. While the Hashemite regime has always publicly spoken out against the plan, its projects of nationalist integration have also done little to assuage the fear that the alleged confederation plan would solve the Palestinian question at the expense of Jordan, while also leading to the erosion of Palestinian identity and delegitimising the Palestinians' right of return to their homeland. Ultimately, such discussions merely reinforce the supposed fault lines between Transjordanians and Jordanians of Palestinian origin, and which everyday Jordanian nationhood discourses represent on a daily basis.

Conclusion

35   In the analysis of everyday nationalism in social media spaces and sporting competitions that we have examined about choosing Jordanianness, the meaning of Jordan as a nation cannot be reduced to either of the opposing narratives. Rather, popular cultural forms such as nationalist songs, memes, graffiti and social media hashtags demonstrate the dynamism of Jordanian national **identity as choice**: a choice between Transjordanian and Palestinian, Faisaly and Wahdat, *mansaf* and *mulūkhīya,* the *gāf* and the *kāf*. Sometimes, it is a choice in the literal sense – as with Al-Saqour's strategic switching of the *gāf/kāf* pronunciation. But more often, it is not so much a matter of true individual choice as the fact that the two alternatives do exist, and emphasising one's loyalty to one side would not be nearly as potent without the existence of the other, opposing pole. The fact that everyday nationalism in Jordan thrives on such choice, furthermore, causes an endless amount of difficulty for top-down initiatives to 'resolve' the problem of Jordanian identity, as no process of unification or exclusion is able to capture the dialogic dynamism of popular cultural forms.

36   The existence of this choice does, to an extent, imply the inclusion of both sides of the divide in the national narrative. However, it is important not to romanticise this 'choice of nationalism' from below, as it carries at least two further, troubling implications. First, the opposition reinforces narratives of discrimination, which in situations of unequal power reproduce discourses of exclusion and oppression. These can have certain elements of ethnic exclusion, as in chants sending Wahdat supporters 'to the Bridge'. Second, this discourse of opposition and choice can drown out other, alternative forms of belonging, whether they wish to merge the opposing sides or avoid/transcend the choice altogether. A more tolerant social and cultural climate of national narratives in Jordan would thus require not only transcending its constitutive divide, but also go beyond attempts at unifying the two sides alone (which implies their continued existence). Alternative, less symbolically loaded forms of belonging are required for this task.

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Notes

1 This interpretation, derived from nationalist historiography, particularly from the Hobbesian conception of the state, emphasises the significance of a powerful authority to maintain civil peace and protect the interests of the governed through the social contract. For further information, see Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan,* 2024 [1651].

2 The Jordanian Arabic words *fūtīk* (فوتيك) and *sawīl* (سويل) are loanwords derived from the English terms 'fatigue uniform' and 'civil[ian]', the latter being the opposite of 'military'. It is largely used in military contexts to differentiate between military and civil uniforms. Other examples used in military contexts include *filda* (فلدة), derived from the English term 'field jacket'.

3 Wasfi Al-Tal (1919-1971), the son of the famous Jordanian poet Arar, was a popular Jordanian figure and his popularity as a 'leader' in the 1960s even surpassed King Hussein's, who was still young at that time. He was prime minister of Jordan for three separate terms in 1962-63; 1965-67; and finally, from 1970 to 1971, when he was assassinated by PLO affiliates while attending an Arab League summit in Cairo. His assassination exacerbated anti-Palestinian sentiments among some Transjordanians, who describe the office of Jordan's prime minister as being 'vacant' since that date. Al-Tal and Al-Majali, both from powerful Transjordanian tribes, are seen by many Transjordanians as great symbols of soldiering and discipline and often draw an ideal picture of loyalty and seriousness in serving their homeland and people.

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