

Jordanian Youth in Collective Action: Structure and Significance of the Jordanian *Al-Ḥirāk Al-Shabābī* (Youth Movement)

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Abstract

Increased and widespread regional collective action in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) during the recent Arab revolutions reflects the existence of a marked change in the structure and the strategies used by young organised activists. This period has witnessed greater organisation efforts from young actors, taking the role of leaders and organisers, which have resulted in a variety of social movements that pursue strategies different from former ones. I argue that, in Jordan, the Jordanian Al-Ḥirāk Ash-Shabābī (Youth Movement) represents this new regional trend of youth-led, youth-organised, informal, uninstitutionalized, horizontal, network-like organization that is re-defining what dissent looks like in the country today. In the case of Jordan, the role of youth has been widely understudied, resulting in an incomplete interpretation of this revolutionary period in Jordan. The aim of this paper is to contribute to this gap of knowledge, analysing the movement's appearance and organisation to present its overall socio-political characteristics.

Keywords

Organisation, strategy, collective action, youth, Arab spring, Jordan

Resumen

El aumento y la expansión de la acción colectiva en Oriente Medio y el Norte de África durante las recientes revoluciones árabes, reflejan la existencia de un cambio significativo en la estructura y las estrategias empleadas por activistas jóvenes organizados. Este periodo se ha caracterizado por un mayor esfuerzo organizativo por parte de los jóvenes, que han adoptado el papel de líderes y organizadores, resultando en una variedad de movimientos sociales que ponen en marcha

estrategias diferentes a las que se empleaban con anterioridad. En Jordania, Al-Hirāk Ash-Shabābī (Movimiento de Jóvenes) representa esta nueva tendencia regional —movimientos liderados y organizados por jóvenes, de carácter informal y no institucional, y organizados como una red horizontal no jerarquizada— que está redefiniendo la disidencia hoy. En el caso de Jordania, el papel de los jóvenes no ha sido estudiado en profundidad, lo que ha resultado en una interpretación incompleta de este periodo revolucionario en Jordania. Este artículo tiene como objetivo reducir esta brecha de conocimiento, analizando la aparición y organización del movimiento, presentando sus características socio-políticas principales.

Palabras clave

Organización, estrategia, acción colectiva, juventud, Primavera árabe, Jordania

Introduction

Increased and widespread regional collective action in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) during the recent Arab revolutions¹, which has later taken different forms and directions in each case, reflects the existence of new dynamics for analysis in societies that were thought to languish in a stagnant status quo. They challenge the opinion of some scholars such as Berman who some years ago wrote that ‘the most probable scenario in Egypt and the rest of the Arab world is regime persistence rather than its collapse in the near future’ (Berman, 2003: 19). Moreover, the role taken by youth, as leaders and organisers of this new wave of contention, contradicts with the idea of Arab youth as apolitical and conformist which was dominant before 2011.

Since the beginning of the Arab revolutions, new dynamics have been present which make the question on *what the young do* —in terms of networking, organising, deploying resources, or mobilizing— increasingly relevant². We find that in this recent period, youth actors that do not belong to traditional structures have started mobilising independently and in an uninstitutionalized manner. Moreover, we see that this period has witnessed greater organisation efforts from young actors, taking the role of leaders and organisers, which have resulted in a variety of social movements that pursue strategies different from former ones in the form of ‘quiet encroachment’³.

Since 2011, youth activism has become ‘loud’ regionally, and there has been a marked change in the structure and the strategies used by these young social actors. Structures and strategies mobilised by different social actors, and the varying regime response, as well as the social and political significance of mobilisation, have differed between cases, reaffirming the importance of the existing regional heterogeneity. Therefore, there is an imperative need to carry out in-depth

¹ Different terms have been coined to try to capture the essence of recent revolutionary episodes such as ‘Arab Spring’, ‘Arab Uprisings’, ‘Arab Awakening’, or ‘Facebook Revolutions’. I prefer to call them ‘Arab revolutions’ as a literal translation of how it was normally called in Arabic among activists (الثورات العربية – *ath-thawrāt al-‘arabiyyat*) before the term ‘Arab Spring’ was literally translated into Arabic. I agree with Hanafi that this term better accounts for the radical regional, social and political transformations in politics and political subjectivities. See HANAFI, S. (2012).

² Before the Arab revolutions, youth as a social category was studied together with the urban dispossessed, Muslim women, and other urban grass-roots, coming to form what this author defines as ‘the subaltern’. See BAYAT, A. (2010). Youth *nonmovements* ‘characterized less by *what the young do* (networking, organizing, deploying resources, mobilizing) than by *how they are* (in behaviors, outfits, ways of speaking and walking, in private and public spaces).

³ Bayat (2010) presents ‘quiet encroachment’ as ‘quiet, largely atomized, and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action— open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology, or structured organization’. Before the Arab revolutions, these strategies were prevalent, resulting in the ideas of apolitical Arab youth. *Ibid.*

research that sheds light on new actors, new forms of organisation, and new strategies that will re-frame our understanding of regional politics and society.

In Jordan, the Jordanian *Al-Hirāk Ash-Shabābī* (Youth Movement) represents this new regional trend of youth-led, youth-organised, informal, uninstitutionalized, horizontal, network-like organization that is re-defining what dissent looks like in the country today. The role of the Jordanian Youth Movement has been widely understudied, resulting in a misrepresentation of this revolutionary period in Jordan. The aim of this paper is to contribute to this gap of knowledge, analysing the movement's appearance and organisation to present its overall socio-political characteristics.

The origins of Youth contention in Amman: the 24th March 2011 sit-in

On Thursday 24th March 2011, an assorted group of young Jordanians gathered after the noon prayer on *Duwwār Ad-Dākhiliyya*, the 'circle' of the Ministry of Interior, in the capital city Amman⁴. Their aim was to organise a sit-in that would gather more people on Friday, weekend holiday for the majority in Jordan. *Duwwār Ad-Dākhiliyya* is the roundabout or junction in central Amman where the Ministry of Interior is located. In Jordan, spaces are chosen by activists to facilitate mobilisation or because of its symbolism, and among other symbolic spaces where political protests frequently take place⁵, youth decided to mobilise outside the Ministry of Interior that day.

Three months into the Arab revolutions, these young Jordanians had been leading and organising weekly Friday protests, in different locations, since January 2011. Under the banner of '*yawm al-ghadhab*' (Day of Anger), these actions, although organisationally divided, shared a common feature: anger. March 24 was the first time that all these small 'angry' constituencies were gathering to do something together, something similar to what youth was organising in other Arab countries regional cases. In line with other regional initiatives, such as the *6th April Youth Movement*⁶ in Egypt (Carr, 2012; Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2011), or the *20th February Movement*⁷ in Morocco (Desrues, 2012a), youth had organised this joint sit-in under the name *24th March Youth*⁸.

The *24th March Youth* became the umbrella that gathered assorted young Jordanians, mainly of a socialist and leftist background. The way activists behaved at prayer times during the sit-in reflect this. With the *adhān* (call for prayer) in Islamist organized protests, everyone lines up and prays.

⁴ This research is based on fieldwork carried out by the author since 2011 in Jordan. The fieldwork is conformed of participant observation, interviews, and focus groups. The author has decided that, due to security reasons, the names of interviewees for this research will remain anonymous.

⁵ These spaces include Al-Husseini mosque in Downtown, the parliament, the prime ministry, the Israeli embassy, the US embassy, or the road to the King Hussein Bridge connecting Jordan and Israel.

⁶ 6th of April Youth Movement - حركة شباب 6 إبريل (*ḥarakat shabāb 6 'ibrīl*). Facebook page available at: <https://www.facebook.com/shabab6april?fref=ts>

⁷ Mouvement 20 février - حركة 20 فبراير (*ḥarakat 20 fibrāir*). Facebook page available at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/AdminGroupMoov20Feb/>

⁸ آذار 24 شباب (*Shabāb 24 'Adhār*). Facebook page available at: <https://www.facebook.com/shbab.march.24?ref=ts&fref=ts>

However, at the *fajr* prayer, around 5.00 am on the night of the 24th March in *Duwwār Ad-Dākhiliyya*, only around tens of activists went to a corner to pray. 'The vast majority did not'⁹.

The majority of activists that organized on the 24th March had been participating in protests throughout their lives, and were politically conscious. However, they had very little or no experience in organizing and leading a movement. The organization of the 24th March had been worked on during the weeks that preceded the sit-in on social media. Their Facebook 'community' had been their main channel to reach audiences and publish the decisions they had agreed to organize around. The sit-in was called for because of their 'love' and 'commitment' to the country; it would be 'peaceful' and 'popular', calling 'for national unity' and 'against social fragmentation'¹⁰.

Already before the 24th March, activists had been facing huge pushback from loyalists. Online, on their Facebook page, numerous comments were published criticizing this initiative and calling for the protection of Jordan. As well as online, loyalists organized rallies and mass demonstrations of loyalty to the king. In response to these different forms of criticism, youth organizers of the 24th March reminded their audiences of the peaceful nature of their initiative; 'Do not disrupt citizens' interests; the sit-in is peaceful, peaceful, peaceful. We will not close *Duwwār Ad-Dākhiliyya*'¹¹.

Pushback from loyalist groups manifested itself on the same 24th March with the organization of a pro-monarchy rally in Dabouq¹² by the business elite. To understand loyalty today in Jordan, we have to think back to 1989 bread riots, followed by Jordan's first International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan, and the beginning of the liberal autocratic development of Jordan. At that moment, state interests were realigned, and loyalty was established with the military and the security apparatus, which are majority Jordanians of Jordanian origin, and the business elite, which are in their majority Jordanians of Palestinian origin that benefitted from the development of the private sector. Since then, loyalty can no longer be completely understood in terms of the historically constructed Transjordanian/Palestinian-Jordanian ethnical division only. Loyalty in Jordan is increasingly secured in terms of the division between those who have more, and those who have less.

*'The majority, regardless of our demographic background, is becoming socio-economically marginalized and disenfranchised, and suddenly we have less. And then there is this business elite that now has more'*¹³.

Thinking back on the way loyalty looks like in Jordan today, helps us understand what happened on the 24th March, shortly after youth gathered in *Duwwār Ad-Dākhiliyya*. Across the street from where activists were holding their sit-in, around chants like 'peaceful... peaceful... peaceful' or 'our pride and our freedom... in the unity of Jordan', a loyalist group started gathering. Activists refer to them *balṭajjiyya* or 'thugs', and assert they were 'people who were hired to go and beat other people'¹⁴. These *balṭajjiyya* brought speakers and started playing patriotic music while circling

⁹ Interview with anonymous blogger carried out by the author on the 4th November 2014. Abdoun, Amman, Jordan.

¹⁰ Posted on their Facebook page, on Wednesday 23rd March 2011, at 15.46 hrs.

¹¹ Posted on their Facebook page, on Wednesday 23rd March 2011, 18.33 hrs.

¹² Dabouq is one of the most prestigious areas of the capital city of Amman. Located in West Amman, near King Abdullah II's Palace, it contains villas and palaces inhabited by the economic and political elite of Jordan.

¹³ Interview with anonymous blogger. *Op.cit.*

¹⁴ Interview with anonymous blogger. *Op.cit.*

activists, overshadowing their claims. Moreover, as activists recorded first, and denounced through online media later, these *balṭajjiyya* were carrying knives and sticks¹⁵ to threaten activists.

Naturally, fear started building among activists, who felt the situation could become violent any minute. However, they continued trying to gather on the square as much people as possible from those that were supporting them on social media. 'Not only Facebook, we are also acting Face to Face'¹⁶. With this call, and thanks to the mobile application they had created, as well as their live streaming channel of events on the ground, more and more people started joining the sit-in throughout the night of the 24th March. In response to the increasing number of protestors, on the morning of the 25th March, buses started reaching the square, with more groups of loyalists arriving from different areas in Jordan.

Seeing the increasing numbers of people gathering on the square around a small number of young organisers, the Islamists showed up 'in the last minute'¹⁷, giving the government the opportunity to label it an Islamist sit-in, hinting that 'these are Palestinians trying to overthrow the monarchy'. The regime was playing the card of identity politics to access the memory of 1970 Black September civil war, particularly in older generations. This would surely influence the 'security-minded and stability-minded population'¹⁸ to refrain from supporting activists. On the 25th March, the security forces dissolved the sit-in with the use of force.

'The regime was afraid of the effects of the Arab spring internally. There was a certain time when the regime was feeling extremely scared, particularly on the 24 March 2011. This is maybe why they responded with the harshest security attitude that I have ever seen in my time as a journalist. At that time they stopped this protest with huge use of force and repression and violence. They used balṭajjiyya a lot, and the regime had an attitude that we had never seen in our lives against opposition in Jordan'¹⁹.

The 24th March 2011 remains in the memory of some as 'a missed opportunity for society'; as an 'opportunity completely capitalised on by the state, pushing out the pro-Jordan propaganda once again'²⁰. However, for activists of the Jordanian Youth Movement, 'the 24th March was the start of the movement. We saw the world around us transforming, people getting what they want in a number of ways. Among them, people gathering in big assemblies in demonstrations and sit-ins, with specific demands related to taxes, education, health'²¹.

After the 24th March was dissolved, a huge division with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) became evident, creating divisions among young activists. Some of them never managed to agree with the

¹⁵ Pictures posted on their Facebook page, for example on Saturday 26th March 2011, at 20.47 hrs, and Monday 28th March 2011, at 03.52 hrs.

¹⁶ Posted on their Facebook page, on Friday 25th March 2011, at 13.25 hrs.

¹⁷ Interview with anonymous blogger. *Op.cit.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Interview with anonymous journalist carried out by the author in Arabic on the 9th September 2013. Jabal Amman, Amman, Jordan.

²⁰ Interview with anonymous blogger. *Op.cit.*

²¹ Interview with anonymous activist carried out by the author in Arabic on the 29th September 2014. Jabal Lweibdeh, Amman, Jordan.

MB again while others moved closer to the MB. The latter would later form the 'child' movement of the MB, *Al-Hirāk Ash-Shabāb Al-'Islāmī* (Islamist Youth Movement). Harsh criticism escalated between the MB and young opposing activists while trying to find points of convergence after the traumatic experience they shared on the 25th March. However, this coalition strategy of trying to find points of convergence failed when mutual accusations of being traitors or of being un-loyal citizens²² appeared. 'All this was a game from the power'²³, explains an activist of the Jordanian Youth Movement. This break happened mainly because 'there were people in some groups that were not activists', they were 'hackers'²⁴, condemning the infiltration of what they saw as informants of the regime that had the aim not only of informing, but also dividing.

The 24th March and the period that followed led young activists to realise the importance of organisation, the strength of other institutionalised parties, and the harsh environment they would have to face later. They became aware of their variety of backgrounds and of the importance of mobilising a common shared will of fighting together in order to organise into a movement. For them, during the following months, 'it became obvious that there was a problem in working with the older generations; they think in a different way.'²⁵ After these events, the movement took around one year to be established. On June 2012, the Jordanian Youth Movement was created.

The creation of the Jordanian Youth Movement: What's new?

The Jordanian *Al-Hirāk Ash-Shabābī* (Youth Movement)²⁶, created on June 2012, represents this new regional trend of youth-led, youth-organised, informal, uninstitutionalized, horizontal, network-like organization that is re-defining what dissent looks like in the country today. It was created and is organised by young people that found it necessary to organise 'a social, youth, political frame which talks about us.'²⁷ Ideologically, the movement is an umbrella to a variety of ideologies, and although the majority label their ideology as leftist, socialist, communist, or nationalist, there are also a few Islamists: 'They are the Islamists that we can call "defectors" of the Muslim Brotherhood.'²⁸ It is necessary to clarify at this point that only part of the youth

²² This discourse has high resonance in society until today, since it appeared strongly after the 1970 Black September Civil War. It is normally used against the Palestinian community or the Islamist or MB support base.

²³ Interview with anonymous activist. 29th September 2014 *Op.cit.*

²⁴ Interview with anonymous activist. 29th September 2014 *Op.cit.*

²⁵ Interview with anonymous activist carried out by the author in Arabic on the 4th September 2013. Jabal Lweibdeh, Amman, Jordan.

²⁶ Data used in this paper was gathered during extensive periods of research and participant observation in Jordan. These periods of fieldwork were done during the months of September 2011 to September 2012, in January 2013 during the Parliamentary Elections in Jordan, in April 2013, and three months in the summer of 2013, when the majority of the interviews were carried out. During my extensive fieldwork periods, I observe activists in the movement during all the activities they carry out, including informal social gatherings, events, meetings, and diverse public demonstrations such as marches and sit-ins. As well as participatory observation, research includes semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. This provided me with invaluable primary data that enabled an analysis of what activists think about the political situation in Jordan and about their organization activities and ideology. The fluidity of the individual ascription of activists and constituencies in the movement makes it difficult to select interviewees for this project and to define the movement's boundaries. However, I use three ways to determine who the activists are: first, I use snowballing sampling in interviews; second, I use the boundaries established by activists in the interviews to questions on, for example, who can form part of constituencies; and finally, I use the constituencies' identity as established in their manifestos. For security reasons, and although the majority of the interviewees want their names to appear, all activists will remain anonymous.

²⁷ Interview with anonymous activist. 4th September 2013. *Op.cit.*

²⁸ Interview with anonymous activist. 29th September 2014 *Op.cit.*

activists that started protests in 2011, were the ones that created, led, and organised the Jordanian Youth Movement in 2012. This movement does not include youth that was absorbed into the ‘child’ youth movements of other institutionalised opposition groups during 2011, as in the case of youth activists that joined the aforementioned *Al-Hirāk Ash-Shabāb Al-Islāmī* (Movement of Islamist Youth) affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood.

An atomized and fluid movement

The movement is formed of constituencies²⁹ that are loosely organised as a network. These constituencies are volatile, they frequently disappear, reappear, merge, and change name. Activists of the movement move from one constituency to another, and some of them consider themselves ‘independent’, or not linked to any particular constituency but to the movement as a whole. Localising or drawing a defined line around the movement is difficult because of the movement’s fluidity. On their Facebook page, they state their location as being in ‘every street, every neighbourhood, every lane, every house’³⁰. Constituencies notably vary in their organisation and ideology, resulting in different conceptualizations of change and a variety of preferred ways of reaching this change. The Jordanian Youth Movement is national, and although its main activities and participants are localised in the capital city Amman, some constituencies are localised in other governorates such as Madaba, Zarqa, Irbid, Ma’an, Kerak, Tafileh or Aqaba. The constituencies vary in numbers in different locations, with bigger ones being present in the capital city Amman.

A youth movement

The Jordanian *Al-Hirāk Ash-Shabābī* (Youth Movement) presents itself in society and among other movements as a youth movement, as *shabābī* in Arabic translates into English as ‘of youth’. Youth is about age, an age group or a generation, as the majority of its participants are aged below 30. Jordan is not an exception to the youth bulge that characterises the Arab region, and Jordanian citizens aged between 15-30 yrs of age constitute over 30% of the total population (2011). The movement presents itself as representative of this social cluster. It is important to disentangle further the concept of youth and its relevance as a descriptive category.

Youth is also more than age. Youth is a complex social category which I relate to a period of life transition, to shared social grievances or to the feeling of belonging to a social group. Youth is transitioning from childhood to adulthood, with all the repercussions this entails politically, economically, and socially. Shared grievances create solidarity between young people and derive from a lack of economic independence, and from a feeling of social and political exclusion from the centres of power. Young people have not yet become socially independent from the older generations as these still largely influence their decisions, and feel excluded from political decision-making processes. In the words of Naseem Tarawneh, a Jordanian activist blogger, ‘youth should not be treated like some special subset to be catered to or ignored. When you represent 60% of a population you *are* the population’ (Tarawneh, 2011). Moreover, in Jordan and in other Arab countries, youth face situations in which cultural scripts, messages, and codes of various

²⁹ These constituencies include individuals, groups, unions, organisations and movements.

³⁰ In Arabic: ‘كل شارع وحي وحرارة وبيت’ (transcription: “*kul shāri‘ wa ḥayy wa ḥāra wa bayt*”).

agencies of socialization are often inconsistent with their ideas, and the youth social movements of the Arab Spring ‘reveal the genesis of a new generation sparked by the desire for civil liberties, advocacy for human rights, and participatory democracy’ (Khalaf and Saad Khalaf, 2011: 9; Desrues, 2012b).

Beyond the ethnic and tribal frames

Ethnically, the youth movement includes citizens of Palestinian origin as well as Transjordanian citizens. To talk about ethnicity in Jordan means to refer back to the historical construction of ethnic divisions through an identity politics strategy put forward by the regime and through warfare and refugee construction in neighbouring countries. Understanding this historical ethnical composition of society and the way in which the regime has tried to politically fragment ethnicities will lead us to understand that the Jordanian Youth Movement contradicts this ethnical historical division. The struggle of youth in Jordan is a struggle of Jordanians of Palestinian origin as well as Transjordanians. Palestinian-Jordanians have remained away from any type of political participation since the Black September civil war in 1970, however now we see Palestinian-Jordanian youth is mobilising, and not alone; they are doing so together with Transjordanian youth or tribal youth. In contrast to the predominant ‘backwards’ idea of tribes, tribal youth is ‘a more pragmatic, decently-educated segment of youth that (in many cases) has formed a layer beneath the advertised surface (i.e. the “dinosaurs”); a segment that is still struggling to translate their grievances into political action through activism and street protest’ (Tarawneh, 2014).

This movement is therefore the only movement that challenges traditional frames of ethnic and religious understandings of social and political subjectivities. In Jordan, multiple identities have been deployed historically, and reinforced through different episodes of conflict. These have resulted in current social fragmentation along several lines, including ethnical (Transjordanian/Palestinian-Jordanian), religious (Muslim, Christian, secular), urban/rural, class, or gender. Traditional political opposition parties and movements, including their ‘child’ youth movements, are still working within these ethnic and religious frames (Jordanian-Jordanian, Palestinian-Jordanian, Islamist, tribal, etc), however the Jordanian Youth Movement is trying to challenge these traditional frames by mobilising a more inclusive discourse that favours unity instead of social fragmentation and divisions. They do so by mobilising grievances that affect the majority of Jordanian citizens, which have been socially, economically, and politically excluded, particularly since the beginning of the 2000s and the realignment of political loyalties with the beginning of an accelerated economic liberalisation in the country. This reflects on the way in which youth mobilises in a way that contradicts the Jordanian-Palestinian divide which they consider has been promoted by the regime in its historical strategy of identity politics³¹.

The movement is predominantly male, and women are a notable minority among the activists that participate in it. Some female activists refer to the ‘cultural limits’ for women’s activism and the need to ‘really understand and respect the culture we are in and work within this space and try to develop on it’³². Moreover they assert talking about women and specific demands to socially and politically empower women as ‘western thoughts’³³ and as ‘liberal’³⁴. In general, the movement

³¹ Interview with anonymous analyst and activist carried out by the author on the 15th September 2013. Jabal Amman, Amman, Jordan.

³² Interview with anonymous activist carried out by the author on the 13th September 2013. Jabal Lweibdeh, Amman, Jordan.

³³ *Ibid.*

does not include specific women's issues in their demands and, because their demands intend to improve the political, economic, and social situation as a whole, activists argue that this change will inevitably be important for women, as a social category which is part of youth and of society³⁵.

Socio-economic and residential profiles

Activists in the youth movement belong to a working class, both from poorer urban and rural areas, and middle income neighbourhoods. Young activists try to make a living by undertaking precarious jobs, many times multiple jobs at a time, that generally do not allow them to become fully economically independent from their families. This applies to youth from poorer working classes as well as to youth of middle-income areas³⁶. Tobin has analysed this middle and working classes in Jordan, especially in Amman, and argued that the 'heightened notion of middle-class status and "aspiring cosmopolitanism" provides a new significant form of social organisation in Amman', reorienting the population 'away from political reform' and serving as 'a means to reinforce the status-quo' (2012 p. 96). In this situation, activists in the Jordanian Youth Movement, are confronting their families and environment, as well as risking their work places because 'not everyone is so accepting, it depends on your surroundings, working in this country is pretty hard, you actually need to sacrifice'³⁷.

Goals

In the words of activists of the movement, their goals include 'social equality'³⁸ and mobilising for 'a country that is free and has its own choice and fights for its decisions'³⁹ at an economic and at a political level. Their motivation to act and get involved in this uprising in Jordan is mainly social, seeing that 'there is a clear social injustice'⁴⁰ and feeling that they 'have to fight for any right that has been stolen'⁴¹. They identify this social situation of injustice 'with the capitalist economy and it is related to the tyrannical authority in this country'⁴². Activists address the importance of the liberal autocratic model of the regime to be engaged in social mobilisation in this last period. First, the socio-economic problematic is explained in relation to the country's dependency, privatization, and its social effects:

³⁴ Interview with anonymous independent activist of the movement (that does not belong to any constituency), carried out by the author in Arabic on the 22nd September 2013. Jabal Lweibdeh, Amman, Jordan.

³⁵ Interview with anonymous activist carried out by the author in Arabic on the 24th August 2013. Jabal Lweibdeh, Amman

³⁶ The different between both is found in the dependency their families have on them.

³⁷ Interview with anonymous activist carried out by the author in Arabic on the 13th September 2013. Jabal Lweibdeh, Amman, Jordan.

³⁸ Interview with anonymous activist. 4th September 2013. *Op.cit.*

³⁹ Interview with anonymous activist carried out by the author in Arabic on the 5th September 2013. Jabal Lweibdeh, Amman, Jordan.

⁴⁰ Interview with anonymous activist. 24th August 2013. *Op.cit.*

⁴¹ Interview with anonymous activist. 5th September 2013. *Op.cit.*

⁴² Interview with anonymous activist. 24th August 2013. *Op.cit.*

*'The economic problem is related to the economic system that the regime puts forward in the country. An economic system that is dependent on foreign aid and the privatization and selling of national companies. This caused the economic liberalization that impoverishes the Jordanian society. This has a reflection in social classes where the rich become richer and the poor become poorer.'*⁴³

Second, although 'the economy is what has spread a lot of this', for it is what affects society and creates social grievances on a daily basis, people got interested in politics once they realised that the economic situation was linked to the political system. As explained by a Jordanian blogger, 'that connection, once it was made, it could not be separated'⁴⁴. Political issues of concern for activists of the movement are 'related to the formation of governments, decision-making process, the lack of freedom, in general'⁴⁵, highlighting the authoritarian nature of the regime.

Young independent leaders, Youth self-organisation: the path of experimentation

The Jordanian *Al-Hirāk Ash-Shabābī* (Youth Movement) is the only youth movement in Jordan that is actually completely led and organised by youth, independent, and where youth are the only ones that make decisions. The other 'child' movements depend organisationally and strategically on decisions taken by the political party or traditional movement they are affiliated to. In words of an activist of the Jordanian Youth Movement, 'the *hiraki* [activist of the movement] is the one not linked to any political party, and at the same time it is a youth movement that is simple and spontaneous.'⁴⁶ Overall, what characterises all activists that form the Jordanian Youth Movement is that they 'are mainly people who are seen as being fed up with classical parties, fed up with ideologies'⁴⁷.

*'Jordanian youth are unique in the sense that they are expressing a growing discontent with political parties and their role in the country. They would much rather see candidates run in elections as individuals, and the youth would prefer voting for ideas and changes rather than specific party platforms' (Hedengren, 2013)*⁴⁸

The movement is informal and uninstitutionalized, without links with other opposition actors that have 'relations with the regime, relations with authorities', which gives them ideological, strategic, and organisational independence; 'it was not important for us if our movement was always small in relation to them, but we as youth would be able to decide whatever we wanted to.'⁴⁹

The main characteristic of the movement is that it rejects and breaks first, with the official opposition, which are those legalized opposition parties and professional associations that utilize the institutionalised channels of political participation in the country and, second, with the so-called alternative opposition, the opposition that presents itself as the option capable of filling the

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Interview with anonymous blogger. *Op.cit.*.

⁴⁵ Interview with anonymous activist. 24th August 2013. *Op.cit.*

⁴⁶ Interview with anonymous activist. 5th September 2013. *Op.cit.*

⁴⁷ Interview with anonymous analyst. *Op. cit.*

⁴⁸ Uniqueness of Jordanian youth in the national context, as this is a generalised trend in the Arab region. See, for example, DESRUES, T. & KIRHLANI, S. (2013).

⁴⁹ Interview with anonymous activist. 4th September 2013. *Op.cit.*

political void⁵⁰. In this opposition context in which the official and so-called alternative opposition are 'actually the same in a way; both of them are opportunistic, both of them are not really radical, they are both trying to find a piece, or their own piece or share within the system'⁵¹, activists in the Jordanian Youth Movement seek to open new spaces for activism independent from the state. Jordanian traditional political actors 'did nothing and they became part of the regime so the young people rejected them automatically'⁵². Due to this, in the eyes of young activists of this movement, traditional political parties 'became weaker because they were not able to answer what the street wanted. People moved way faster than them, they were still within their structure'⁵³.

This rupture with traditional politics in the country includes disagreements with all political parties, from the Islamic Action Front (IAF) to the political parties of the traditional left. Activists of the Jordanian Youth Movement are 'youth who very often identify with neither the state nor its traditional opposition forces' (Ryan, 2011: 385). Party system and traditional political opposition groups —of the whole ideological spectrum— is perceived as a historically constructed system for exercising social control. It is the only movement in Jordan that is independent from political parties and from the traditional opposition structure. This has made them become 'the most controversial' movement in the country (2014 p. 74).

*'We try to find a third way, different from the leftist and nationalist political parties, and the Muslim Brotherhood. This third way is under the name of 'youth movement', which is not in line with any of the traditional ideologies, neither leftist, nor nationalist or Islamist.'*⁵⁴

What they want: a reformist or a radical change?

In terms of political significance of the movement, it is important to include a final reflection on the myriad of conceptualisations of change and what change should look like in Jordan that are present in the movement. Given its structural independence, and its complete lack of institutionalisation, movement activists are completely outside of the scope of control of the regime. This gives them the space and the ability to have a variety of voices that include reformist and radical demands. Other youth movements, such as the aforementioned 'child' youth movements linked to other traditional opposition constituencies, are controlled or partly institutionalised into the system. This mechanism of social control provided by traditional opposition parties prevents youth from radicalising.

In the Jordanian opposition scene, discussions on the legitimacy of political authority in Jordan in the official opposition and in the so-called alternative opposition have been absent, and 'both the official and the alternative oppositions consider the head of the political system [the monarch] to be some sort of moderating sage' calling for a 'change in policies, not a change in regime' (Bustani,

⁵⁰ Although overall the movement presents a rupture with these other forms of opposition in Jordan, there are individual activists in the movement that have links with other opposition groups.

⁵¹ Interview with anonymous analyst. 31st July 2013. Jabal Lweibdeh, Amman, Jordan.

⁵² Interview with anonymous activist. 13th September 2013. *Op.cit.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Interview with anonymous activist. 5th September 2013. *Op.cit.*

2011). Hisham Bustani refers to two statements by members of both opposition groups presented to support this idea: the Muslim Brotherhood **stated** that ‘the Islamists in Jordan call for reform, not a total change. We acknowledge the legitimacy of the regime,’ and the Jordanian Campaign for Change (*Jayeen*), that includes all the so-called alternative opposition groups, **stated** that ‘the King is the only constant in Jordanian politics’ and stressed his constitutional immunity.

The Jordanian Youth Movement is therefore the only movement in Jordan in which we find radical voices, meaning claims that seek regime removal and not just reform. The term “radical” has multiple connotations and has been defined as ‘a transformation of systemic power relations perceived to sustain ongoing injustices’ (Eschle and Maiguashca, 2013: 13). Radical demands tend to focus on complete restructuring of the system rather than incorporation into that system (Fitzgerald and Rodgers, 2000). I understand radical constituencies in this paper as those that demand a complete change in the political, economic, and social system in the country through direct confrontation and opposition to the monarchical regime itself.

‘The issue is not about reforming, it’s not about taking something and changing its form. It is about flipping the table. It is about changing from the root. It is the change so the people can live a decent life, specifically, the poor people.’⁵⁵

Activists of the movement that take this position towards change explain that:

‘Radical. Why not reformist? Because the political regime that we have in Jordan, the core of it, it is not able to reform. It is not able to change for several reasons. First, that Jordan is connected to the international economic system, and the political decisions made in agreement with the US. And our economy is linked to the IMF. So you have to change the regime radically and in a peaceful way. Reform will be just superficial, not from the root.’⁵⁶

Although radical voices exist only in the Jordanian Youth Movement, at least two different ways of conceptualizing change are present in the movement, and radicalism coexists with reformist voices. The spectrum of change and strategic choices by different constituencies in the movement ranges from radical, those that seek totalizing or complete change through abrupt upheaval and regime overthrow, to reformist, those that are in favour of a more evolutionary process. Reformist voices inside the movement do not consider that change will *only* be achieved through the removal of the regime. They adopt a less rupturist conceptualisation of change that would also, in their view, result in the aims of social, economic, and political transformation. There are variations in terms of what ‘reform’ means exactly inside the movement:

‘No one agrees on what reform is. We do not know how to define it. We know that it is the safer word to use for change, as opposed to other words that start with ‘r’, but at the same time, we don’t agree on what that means because we come from different backgrounds, we come from different interests’⁵⁷

Radical and reformist voices in the movement are not fixed; they have fluctuated in time, resulting in fluctuations in the strategies of the movement. Radicalisation and de-radicalisation of

⁵⁵ Interview with anonymous activist. 24th August 2013. *Op.cit.*

⁵⁶ Interview with anonymous activist, in Arabic. 4th September 2013. Jabal Lweibdeh, Amman, Jordan.

⁵⁷ Interview with anonymous blogger. 4th November 2014. Abdoun, Amman, Jordan.

movement strategies since its appearance has depended on the regime's varying response to social mobilisation in the country. Due to the non-hierarchical and loose organisational structure adopted by the Jordanian Youth Movement, they have been more vulnerable to this varying opportunity structure nationally and regionally. In words of an activist of the movement, 'circumstances are the ones that pressure you to take one or another decision.'⁵⁸. These circumstances are built on the different political moves put forward by the regime in response to social mobilisation.

The Jordanian regime's response to Youth mobilisation

In response to social mobilisation, the Jordanian regime has put forward a set of liberal democratic moves –such as government reshuffles, and putting forward a roadmap to reform that includes constitutional amendments, reform committees or elections–, at the same time as it has created greater costs for mobilisation through the use of repression and securitization –including a selective application of the law, infiltration, surveillance, street repression or imprisonment of activists, among other. This balancing act or 'steam valve' forms the counter strategy of the Jordanian regime, which 'must meet opponents' minimal expectations for political openness and participation but prevent them from undermining the regime's ultimate control' (Brumberg, 2003: 6).

The first set of moves that the Jordanian regime has put forward in order to respond to social mobilisation since 2011 are liberal democratic moves, which have not compromised the regime's authority in any way, and have been part of this balancing act that allows for a controlled political participation and pluralism. The words of a young activist of the movement illustrate the effect of these liberal political moves, in this case the role of the parliament, on the social perception of the political process in Jordan:

*'They come and tell you there is a Parliament that represents the people, but who are these parliamentarians? Who elects them? Who is the one who fakes their election? In fact there is no justice, the government is not trustworthy. So everything is an empty talk at the end. So the meaning of democracy has been distorted.'*⁵⁹

At the same time as it has put forward these diverse liberal political moves, the Jordanian regime has reinforced its nature of police state that is using repressive and selective securitization measures to control grassroots social discontent in increasingly disenfranchised and marginalised social clusters. The Jordanian Youth Movement has been particularly targeted with repressive policies. As so many international eyes were on Jordan, as they were on the rest of the region, this repression could not be exercised through open attacks, so different diverse repressive measures have been developed.

⁵⁸ Interview with anonymous activist. 5th September 2013. *Op.cit.*

⁵⁹ Interview with anonymous activist. 29th September 2014 *Op.cit.*

The complex simultaneous combination of liberal and authoritarian regime moves has had many implications for the organisation and significance of the Jordanian Youth Movement as well as for the future of social mobilisation in the country. The strategy that has been put forward by the Jordanian regime in response to the movement's activities has had different results at a social level. Overall, fear has taken over society, as well as activists of the movement. This fear has resulted in almost complete demobilisation and in the silencing of radical voices and radical demands in some social movements.

*'Now, there is no confrontation. If there is someone who wants confrontation, he is stupid. He is opening his chest to the fire'*⁶⁰

Despite this, the original socio-economic burdens and grievances that pushed disenfranchised and marginalised social clusters, such as youth, to mobilise at the beginning of 2011 still exist. In some areas, they have even been worsened with increasing living prices, justified by the increased economic pressure on the regime due to the influx of refugees. Therefore, in the words of an activist of the movement:

*'Inspiration is still based on people's suffering, or your own suffering as part of this society. At the end you are part of the working class, and you need to keep fighting to be able to live. The real inspiration is the pain and suffering.'*⁶¹

Conclusion

In this article I have presented the structure and significance of the Jordanian *Al-Hirāk Ash-Shabābī* (Youth Movement), and argued that, in Jordan this movement represents the new regional trend of youth-led, youth-organised, informal, uninstitutionalized, horizontal, network-like organization that is re-defining what dissent looks like in the country today. By analysing the appearance, the organisation of the movement, and the significance in relation to several challenges posed by the context, I aim to contribute to the gap of knowledge on this particular youth movement.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Interview with anonymous activist. 5th September 2013. *Op.cit.*

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