Microfoundations of the Arab Uprisings

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2 Routines and Ruptures in Anti-Israeli Protests in Jordan

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Abstract

This chapter examines the anti-Israeli protests in Jordan before and after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings. The protests seldom attract more than several dozen protesters and are heavily policed; yet feel routine and uncontentious. Through careful ethnographic attention to the micropractices of this series of protests, it becomes evident that the protests do political work for both state and nonstate actors. I look beyond the self-evident claims making against centers of power and examine what various actors understand the micropractices of the protests to mean. In particular, these routine protests both maintain space for the expression of political dissent toward the regime’s peaceful relations with Israel while also shoring up the regime’s power.

Keywords: Jordan, protests, micropractices, script, routine, uprising

In early September 2011, protesters in Cairo breached the Israeli embassy by breaking apart a security barricade with sledgehammers and climbing through a window. They accessed what an Israeli official described as a “waiting room,” where they tossed stacks of Hebrew-language documents out of the windows (Sherwood 2011). Protesters tore down the Israeli flag hanging outside, and Egyptian security forces reportedly watched without intervening for several hours. In Jordan, weekly protests since the outbreak of the uprisings across the region had been strong, but they had not reached a size or intensity that seriously threatened the regime. Still, King Abdullah II was nervous. He had already sacked a prime minister and lifted restrictions on public gatherings, reforms introduced to assuage anti-regime
sentiment. The breach of the Israeli embassy in Cairo, however, made the king particularly uneasy: Jordan and Egypt were the only Arab states that had signed peace treaties with Israel. As the regime feared, Jordanian activists took the events in Cairo as inspiration to escalate activism around their consistent condemnation of Jordanian-Israeli relations. A Facebook page announced the organization of a Million Man March on the Israeli embassy in Amman, to be held a few days later, on Friday, September 16. It focused on three demands: annulling the 1994 peace treaty, expelling the Israeli ambassador to Jordan, and permanently closing the Israeli embassy in Amman. Coming just one week after the break-in of the embassy in Cairo, Israeli officials were concerned enough to evacuate all but a skeletal staff the day before the event (Greenberg 2011). Unlike in Cairo, Jordan’s security forces had no intentions of watching idly. In the end, however, the protesters were far too few to push back the 1,500 security forces, let alone even come close to the Israel embassy (Agence France Press 2011): Only a few hundred protesters turned out. Instead of a march, the group held a demonstration adjacent to the Kaluti mosque in the upscale neighborhood of Rabia, more than half a mile from the embassy. The organizers expressed extreme disappointment at the turnout (Kershner 2011), although they declared the preemptory evacuation of the Israeli ambassador and staff to have been a major success (Agence France Press 2011).

The New York Times suggested that the Arab uprisings had created a rupture that unleashed long-simmering anti-Israeli sentiment in the two countries that had signed peace treaties with Israel (Kershner 2011). But for observers of protests in Jordan, the demonstration was very familiar. Jordanians have been protesting against the peace treaty with Israel since before the document was signed, and hardly a month has passed without a demonstration, march, or boycott raising the issue. Even more, anti-Israeli protests near the Kaluti mosque in Amman were not only frequent, they had become almost routine (Schwedler 2017). The most visible difference between the Million Man March and the other Kaluti protests was the dramatically increased security presence. The timing of the event – coming not only during the period of the Arab uprisings but also within a week of the Israeli embassy breach in Cairo – invoked the increased regime response, but the organizers had hoped for a far greater turnout as well.

1 The organizers adopted the name symbolically and never even hoped that the crowds would reach that size; Jordan’s population is approximately seven million. They had hoped, however, that the crowds would reach into the thousands. Interview with author, March 17, 2016.
This chapter examines the anti-Israeli protests at the Kaluti mosque before and after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in order to bring to light dimensions of the protests that are often overlooked. In one reading, the low turnout for the Million Man March might be read as evidence for the failure of a mass uprising to emerge in Jordan. But in another reading, that event was part of a set of protests that, although small and often overlooked, did considerable political work other than to just pressure the regime to change a policy. This chapter will examine the latter reading.

In the following section, I first briefly examine how scholars study protests and general and the Arab uprisings in particular. I illustrate how attention to micropractices can reveal political work done through protests that is often overlooked by analytic frameworks that prioritize questions pertaining to social movements or uprisings. I look beyond the self-evident claims making against centers of power and examine what various actors understand the micropractices of the protests to mean. I argue that the Kaluti protests prior to the uprising worked both to maintain space for the expression of political dissent toward the regime's peaceful relations with Israel while also shoring up the regime's power. I then turn to the specific dynamics of the Kaluti protests that took place prior to the uprising, paying close attention to the interactions between various participants and security agencies over the course of the protests. Having attended 21 similar protests, I identify routines as well as innovations, and I share insights from participants about what they understand to be happening. Finally, I examine the post-uprising Kaluti protests, noting innovations and deviations from the familiar script until July 2014, more than three years after the uprisings began. By focusing on the microdynamics of a limited set of protests, I hope to reveal the ways in which protests can do a wide range of political work, beyond that of building a movement, making a claim against a regime (or some other power), or, on the part of the state, displaying a willingness to either permit or repress dissent. The Kaluti protests maintained a space for open criticism of one of the regime’s core commitments – peace with Israel – while protesters refrained from crossing a line that would invite repression. In July 2014, however, a rupture in that established script resulted in a harsher repression of some protesters and, subsequently, a loss of the regime’s toleration for the events. These events together provide a richer understanding of Jordan’s modest Arab uprising by bringing into focus continuities and ruptures in the practice of protests and policing around the Kaluti mosque.
Approaching the Study of Protests

In most scholarly studies, the concept of “protest” is left undefined. Protests can take a variety of forms but they always entail the possibility that humans, even those furthest from power, have the capacity for expressing dissent— an act of protest—as well as potentially realizing change as a result. Protest can be done quietly, individually, and even secretly, but not unintentionally, and not only in one’s own mind. Protest is dissent translated into action, however minor, even if done without the hope of realizing change. It is “explicit [expression of] criticism of other people, organizations, and the things they believe or do” (Jasper 1997, 5). Protest can be “hidden” or can range in visible actions such as whistleblowing, speaking out, demonstrating, and more; it need not be part of an organized movement.

Most studies of protest, however, focus on social movements, political parties, unions, clubs, spontaneous groups of people, and so on. The unit of analysis is not the protest event, but either the organizing group or a larger “cycle” or “wave” of protests, such as a revolution or uprising. The protest event is of interest primarily because it helps to piece together a larger story. This analytic focus on the metaphorical life or cycle of a movement or uprising directs attention toward questions about the origin, development, and trajectory of the social movement or uprising. How does a movement or uprising begin, gain followers, and evolve? What tactics and strategies does it adopt or adapt? How does it utilize mobilizing resources (e.g., social media, cell phones, networks, and so on)? What are the internal dynamics of the movement or uprising? And, of course, how do various powers or state agencies respond to and interact with the movement?

Many scholars examining the Arab uprisings have adopted just such a focus, concentrating on the trajectories of the uprisings, rather than the dynamics of specific protest events. Of those, many studies employ a methodologically nationalist approach, meaning that the nation, state, or country is treated as the basic and natural political unit of the modern world (Wimmer and Schiller 2002). Scholars thus focus on the uprising in a single case, or else draw comparisons between states in an effort to understand the variations in the trajectories of individual cases (Brynen et al. 2012; Brownlee, Masoud, and Reynolds 2015). Many analyses of the uprisings begin

2 James C. Scott (1985, 1990) is credited with developing the notion of “hidden transcripts” or everyday forms of resistance.

3 Exceptions are exemplified by the work of James C. Scott’s everyday forms of resistance (1985) and Lisa Wedeen’s politics of acting as if (1999).
with the seemingly self-evident statement that the uprisings began with the self-immolation of Tunisian street-cart vender Mohammed Bouazizi and then diffused across the Arab world. It is told as the story of a rupture and a diffusion, of citizens “breaking through the wall of fear” to demand the downfall of long-despised regimes (Patel, Bunce, and Wolchik 2014). While the uprisings began in Tunisia, each state touched by the diffusion has its own beginning, the moment when protests erupt in a new state. I have elsewhere developed a critique of the limitations of comparing the uprisings to each other as discrete objects and attempting to identify the causal variables that explain differences between them (Schwedler 2015); here I wish merely to draw attention to this pattern of analysis in which protests are but events or units in some larger whole that itself is the object of analysis.

Methodological nationalism also tends to aggregate protests at a state level, obscuring the particularities of protest activities in different locales. The events in Tahrir Square, for example, have come (in the scholarship as well as in popular imagination) to represent – and are treated as representative of – the entire Egyptian uprising against the regime of President Husni Mubarak. If the central analytic question is why some mobilization succeeded in overthrowing the regime, local and regional variations melt away as nation-level stories come into view. Of course, scholars of Egypt certainly would acknowledge that Tahrir Square did not mirror the dynamics and mobilization of protests elsewhere in Cairo, let alone the rest of Egypt). As Youssef El Chazli demonstrates, the spatial dynamics of Alexandria meant that protesters on January 25, 2011, wove their way back and forth across the city, rather than seeking to congregate in a central square, as was the case in Cairo (2016, and this volume). But these variations across space are of little interest to studies that seek to explain the trajectory of the uprising as a whole. Even many scholars who have examined protests prior to the uprisings – such as the Kifaya movement in Egypt or the labor movements in Tunisia and Egypt (Beinin 2012, 2016) – retain an analytic focus that probes when and why the protests escalate to a level that challenges the regime or draws a regime response.

My concern with the dominant scholarly approaches to the study of protests (and thus the uprisings) is that these framing questions overlook other issues such as what different actors understand themselves and others to be doing, or the meaning-making that happens over the course of even a single event. Instead of seeking to explain origin and trajectory (of a movement or uprising), in this chapter I ask instead: What political work is done in the course of a protest or set of protests, and for and by whom? I explore
those questions through a close examination of the micropractices of the Kaluti protests before and after the outbreak of the Arab uprisings in 2011.

Protests can do a broad range of political work in part because they have multiple audiences: participants in the protests, a wider constituency or group, a general public, a specific government agency or personnel, a regime, a foreign government, international organizations, corporations considering investment opportunities, or a global public, to give just a few examples. Asking what a protest accomplishes, therefore, requires a second question, for whom?

From 2006-2010, I attended 21 protests at the Kaluti mosque, each of which was attended by members and leaders of Islamist groups, leftist political parties, and professional associations. Each protest expressed the same three demands: expelling the Israeli ambassador to Jordan, permanently closing the Israeli embassy in Amman, and annulling the 1994 peace treaty. Some protests were held as Israel invaded Palestinian-controlled territories, others were linked to no specific event. After my third or fourth protest, I began to recognize patterns in the actions of the security services, the protesters, and by passers-by. My observations cannot be generalized to all anti-Israeli protests in Amman, or even to all of those held at the Kaluti mosque. But, they help uncover meanings and practices that are often recognized by participants but invisible or irrelevant to most life-cycle analyses. In addition to observing the protests, I conducted more than a hundred interviews with protesters and two with Public Security Directorate (PSD, or Amn al-‘Amm) officers, many during protest but some before, after, or between protests. My open-ended guiding questions – What is happening? Why are you doing this (and not something else)? Why are the (security services) doing this (and not something else)? – aimed not to reveal a single narrative of a protest or set of protests, but to reveal multiple perspectives of what participants understood themselves and others to be doing and what they hoped to achieve.

Many of the insights I gained are insightful for analyses that focus on the lives of social movements or cycles of protests. Notably, recognizing routines in protests and policing enables one to better identify a rupture in those practices. From a distance, large ruptures are highly visible, such as the mobilization in Tunisia following Mohamed Bouazizi’s death, or the January 25 mobilization in Egypt. But seemingly small innovations and their significance only become recognizable when routine practices come into sharp relief. Even small ruptures can be meaningful, indicating a pushing of boundaries or defiance of a previously honored red line, whether done by the security services or by protesters. Such insights can call into question commonsense understandings of when a protest cycle or an uprising began.
Anti-Israel Protests in Amman

Protests against the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty began before the treaty was signed in October 1994 at Wadi Araba, the southernmost crossing between Jordan and Israel. Early protests took place outside of the parliament (where the treaty was to be ratified), in the main downtown area, and at the Professional Associations Complex located in the western Amman neighborhood of Shmeisani, where the professional unions (niqabat) have offices. Criticism of the treaty was a main topic in the lead-up to the November 1997 parliamentary elections, which every opposition political party boycotted in protest of government reforms restricting press freedoms and altering the elections law in ways that gave disproportionate representation to loyalist regions (Lust-Okar and Jamal 2002, 358; Schwedler 2006, 55-56). In the redistricting, Palestinians in particular found themselves in some regions with as little as one-tenth the representation of non-Palestinians (Schwedler 2010).

Most anti-Israeli protests are relatively small (a few hundred protesters), but some do escalate. On such occasions, tens of thousands of Jordanians filled the streets of many parts of the country, but most notably in the capital Amman, Irbid (a city north of the capital), and Ma’an (a small trucking town in the south). The dynamics of many large-scale protests in Jordan are exceptional from many other parts of the Middle East for several reasons. Most notably, state security forces are a powerful presence but seldom turn on protesters, and thus serious injuries and deaths are rare. Arrests are not infrequent, but detained protesters are released without being charged, usually after intimidating questioning at a distant police station.

The first large-scale and disruptive anti-Israeli protest was held in January 1997, on the occasion of the opening of the first Jordanian-Israeli trade fair. Thousands of protesters, organized by former government officials, the professional associations, labor unions, opposition political parties, and independent activists, convened in various locations around the trade fair complex in southwest Amman, effectively clogging the streets so efficiently that the fair itself – while officially inaugurated a day later than planned – saw the convention hall nearly empty (Schwedler 2005). The ecstatic protesters had utilized the then new SMS (short message service) of the expanding mobile phone industry to inform each other about such pragmatic issues as the whereabouts of security forces, which intersections had been blocked, and where the protesters were advancing unimpeded. While the regime did try to stop protesters from reaching the site by blocking nearby intersections, one minister at the time told me that they did not try very hard: The government had been experiencing particularly
tense relations with Benjamin Netanyahu and was not motivated to stop the protests entirely, which had outraged the Israeli prime minister.4

Over the next few years, anti-Israeli protests were held increasingly at the Kaluti mosque, symbolically important for its relative proximity to the Israel embassy but also useful because it is situated next to a large empty lot ideal for assembling protesters. Anti-Israeli protests also took place in other locations, notably at the Professional Association Complex in Shmeisani. During major Israeli aggressions against Palestinian-controlled territories, crowds in Jordan occupied many major intersections across Amman and nationwide. Large-scale protests broke out across Jordan, for example, following the outbreak for the Second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000. Later that fall, the regime became concerned over a ten-day sit-in in the southern city of Ma’an. Several human rights advocates and activists from Amman attempted to join the protest but were turned back by army and PSD forces, leaving them unable to reach the sit-in. Located along Jordan’s main north-south trucking route to the port of Aqaba, Ma’an has been the site of many large protests in opposition to government politics. The 1989 protests against the regime’s lifting of bread and oil subsidies, which led King Hussein to introduce political liberalization and democratic elections later that year, began in Ma’an before spreading across the country.

Jordanians took to the streets in large number again eighteen months later as Israel launched Operation Defensive Shield, which lasted from March 29 to May 3, 2002. During that period, the Israeli Defense Forces swept through numerous Palestinian cities, destroying hundreds of buildings in Jenin, Nablus, and elsewhere. The largest protests were in Amman, where the majority of Palestinians in the kingdom reside. They were held on seven consecutive Friday afternoons and were highly disruptive of traffic but generally peaceful. The army moved armored vehicles to many major intersections, but did not intervene to control the crowds or push them back.

For the regime, large protests are never welcome because they can be unpredictable and difficult to contain. King Abdullah openly and strongly condemned the Israeli aggression, but he was eager to contain the protests at home without being seen to oppose the strong anti-Israeli sentiment in the kingdom. The regime sought to manage the large crowds of protesters rather than to repress them, while simultaneously advancing two projects intended to demonstrate the regime’s commitment to the Palestinian cause. First, the government launched a telethon to raise money for humanitarian

4 Interview with Minister of Information Marwan Muasher, May 7, 1997, Amman. Muasher also served as Jordan’s first ambassador to Israel following the signing of the peace treaty.
relief for Palestinians, encouraging Jordanians to donate 10 Jordanian dinars ($14) by texting a given phone number. Second, it organized its own march through the Jordan River Foundation, a royally endorsed nongovernmental organization, or RONGO. Led by Queen Rania, the march included parliamen
tarians, cabinet members, and other prominent Jordanians, aiming to
demonstrate government and regime sympathy for the Palestinians without
yielding to the widespread demands to close the Israeli embassy in Amman
and cancel the peace treaty (Schwedler and Fayyaz 2010). When the Israeli
operations subsided in early May, so did the large protests across Jordan.

Many other anti-Israeli protests have taken place since the 1989 political
opening, including during the siege of Gaza in 2009, when Israel's Operation
Cast Lead killed 1,400 Palestinians in three weeks. Less reported in the local
Arabic media (and nearly absent in the English-language press) are the many
boycott events in which organizers issue lists of products to boycott and often
burn them (along with Israeli and US flags) in bonfires, post blacklists of Jor-
danians doing business with Israeli counterparts, and organize art and music
performances that clearly convey critiques of Israel, support for Palestinians,
and opposition to the regime's peace treaty with Israel (Schwedler 2003).

The Kaluti Protests

The Kaluti mosque is located in the affluent neighborhood of Rabia in west
Amman, on Omar bin Abd al-Aziz Street, known locally as “the street that
leads up to the Israeli embassy.” Situated near the bottom of a gentle hill,
it is adjacent to a vacant lot to the north. Its location more than a half mile
from the embassy provides both proximity as well as distance: to reach
the embassy, the crowds would have to march up the road, which narrows
past the field where protesters assembly. The spot is a chokehold that the
regime might easily secure, but Kaluti is close enough to the embassy for
protests to make a symbolic statement.

Most of the Kaluti protests are coorganized by a number of political
and professional groups, but not in a consistent or coordinated manner.
One or another of the groups might announce a protest, and then others
will call on their numbers to turn out. The cast of participants varies, but
they usually include members of the leftist Wahdah5 party, the Jordanian

5 Jordanian Democratic Popular Unity Party (Hizb al-Wahdah al-Sha’abiyyah al-Dimuqratiyyah
al-Urduny), formed in 1990 as the Jordanian branch of the Popular Front for the Liberation of
Palestine.
Communist Party,6 and the Muslim Brotherhood Society and its political party, the Islamic Action Front.7 Leaders and members of the professional associations – doctors, lawyers, engineers, agricultural engineers, and dentists – also participate frequently. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the elected leaders of the professional associations often came from Islamist ranks, so the coordination between the professional associations and the mainstream Islamists was easy and routine, even as animosities between the groups sometimes emerged.8

The diversity of regular participants underlines the extent to which the role of the Kaluti mosque in the organization of the protests cannot be reduced to its symbolism as a religious space. More than a site of pious gathering following the major communal prayer of the week, the Kaluti mosque provided an adequate physical space for assembly in the same neighborhood as the Israeli embassy. Even with Islamist leaders recite Quranic passages or lead prayers at the protests themselves, the character of the events is seldom exclusively or even primarily religious.

Most protests at the mosque begin on Friday afternoon. Contrary to some perceptions, crowds do not assemble following the Friday prayer, the congregators riled up by a fiery sermon. Rather, people trickle out and gather next to the mosque and in front of it, some leaving and returning, others milling around and chatting as others arrive. Leftist protesters gather apart from the Islamists, often distinguishable by their sartorial choices as well as by their greater gender diversity. Women donning head-scarves are present in the leftist as well as Islamist contingents, but they are most vocal in the former. The sizes of protests can vary substantially, but leftists typically number from 20 to 40, and Islamists from 50 to 100 or more.

Also present are various branches of the security services, occasionally in numbers that exceed those of the protesters. They arrive before protesters begin to assemble, and they include two visibly distinct contingents,

6 Founded in 1948 (Hizb al-Shuyu’iyah al-Urduny).
7 While the Muslim Brotherhood (Jama’a al-Ikhwan al-Muslimuun) and the Islamic Action Front party (al-Jabhat al-‘Aml al-Islamiyyah) were institutionally separate in 1992 when the latter was formed, by the late 1990s the two had become essentially one and the same.
8 Over the past decade, the regime has worked to weaken the influence of both Islamists and leftists in numerous arenas, including the professional associations and university student councils. Given that membership in one’s professional association is mandatory to practice professionally, most members pay their dues but little more. By encouraging (and likely paying) more nationalist and conservative members to participate, vote, and run for association leadership positions, the regime has steadily weakened “opposition” voices in those bodies.
and sometimes two less visible ones. First are members of the PSD. They handle most of the routine policing but are present at protests. They often cluster in groups of two to four and stand off to the side or across the street. They move casually around and through the assembly, on some occasions also chatting with protesters and handing out bottles of water. Their interactions with protesters and particularly with the leaders of the Islamist group suggest familiarity. Both leftists and Islamists confirmed to me that they knew and were friendly with some PSD officers. During one protest, on June 12, 2009, I spoke with a PSD officer who told me that the PSD routinely observed known leaders of the group during protests – leftists as well as Islamists – in order to gain information about how everyone understood the event to be going. At times, they chatted with protesters directly.

Indeed, the regime is always concerned with the possibility that the protests could escalate. Its second contingent is the Darak forces, Jordan’s gendarmerie or militarized police force, which is more popularly understood to fill the role of the riot police. These forces congregate in two spots: approximately 50 meters up the road, where the protest will eventually head, and off to the far right (east) side of the empty lot. The Darak in the street are clad in riot gear but are directed by an officer without a helmet. Before the protest begins, they stand off to the left (west) side of the road, their masks raised and shields held casually, waiting for instructions. The second contingent of Darak forces, across the field, stand around eight to ten armored vehicles readily visible to the protesters.

The two remaining state forces are members of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID, known as the mukhabarat or secret police) and plain-clothed baltajiya (individuals loyal to the regime but not necessarily on permanent payroll). The GID is the security force most responsible for harassing and intimidating citizens, threatening them with physical, financial, or professional retaliation if they fail to abide by the regime’s “requests.” In protests, they largely play a more passive roll, monitoring and recording who is present but seldom intervening directly. The latter are the “muscle” or thugs brought in beginning in 2009 to aggressively engage protesters so that the uniformed forces do not have to. The increased presence of the baltajiya at protests beginning in 2010 (and through the uprisings) underlines a desire to more aggressively constrain protests without uniformed forces having to engage them physically. This move is likely due in no small part to widespread recording of protest events by protesters, bystanders, and journalists.

The protests themselves begin gradually, with people assembling next to the mosque and milling about, chatting with each other. A small truck
arrives and Islamist leaders pass out the green flags of the Muslim Brotherhood, while leftists congregate with flags representing their parties, most frequently the red flags of the Wahdah and the Jordanian Communist parties. Other protesters carry Palestinian or Jordanian flags, as well as placards that may be hand drawn or more professionally produced. Some protesters don the black-and-white kufiyah (headscarf) that in Jordan symbolizes Palestinian nationalism and resistance; some cover the face “Hamas-style” (as one Jordanian described it), while others draped the scarves around the neck.

The events will often “begin” with Islamist leaders reciting passages from the Quran and leading a prayer. Often, leftists will chant or begin a call and response, sometimes seemingly in an attempt to drown out the prayer. Most commonly, chants include “No to the Zionist entity, no to the peace treaty!,” “Zionist entity out of Jordan!,” and “The Jordanian people stand with the Palestinian people!” The protesters usually come together into a single crowd for a short period, visible by the mingling of red and green flags in the assembly; at other times the two camps remain distinct, even if adjacent to each other.

Jordan’s leftist parties and Islamist groups have a long history of engaging with each other, particularly in opposition to specific government policies (Schwedler 2006, 2011; Clark 2006). They began holding joint press conferences as early as 1992, expressing shared concerns over changes in the electoral law, restrictions on press freedoms, and the overall reversal of democratic openings that took places over the course of the 1990s. Islamists and leftist were also well represented in the professional associations, which became a kind of proxy democratic public space as the opportunities to express dissent in the parliament steadily decreased. But the groups were not without tensions. Leftists in particular disliked the Quranic readings and prayers at protest events and rallies, and often sought to chant over the religious rhetoric. Younger Muslim Brotherhood supporters took particular affront to leftists during such moments, although Islamists leaders generally tried to keep the calm and ignore the leftists. On some occasions, younger Brothers even get into fights that begin with shouting and sometimes escalate into shoving and even punching, until Islamist leaders or the PSD break it up. I attended a rally9 at the Professional Association Complex in June 2010 but after four hours needed to leave for an interview. One activist told me, “Don’t leave before

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9 The rally was held to honor the Jordanians who were aboard the flotilla that departed Istanbul on May 31, 2010, aiming to bring aid to Gaza, which Israel had blockaded.
the Brothers and leftists get into a fight!” Curious, I remained and within
the hour, shouting turned into shoving until PSD officers and one Islamist
elder broke up the small melee. While I witnessed such incidents on only
a few occasions, the antagonism between the sides and the possibility
of a fight is not unusual, even at events supported by groups across the
political spectrum.

At the Kaluti protests, the assemblage will gradually move off the curb
and into the street after an hour or so of gradual congregation and chanting
on the sidewalk or field adjacent to the mosque, attempting to shut down
traffic. The drivers of cars and trucks seem more annoyed than concerned,
and they creep forward to make their way through the crowd as long as
possible.” The PSD and Darak forces continue to stand off to the side and
make minimal effort to stop the protesters or keep traffic flowing. Once
the road is clogged, an officer will direct traffic away from the street and
sometimes assist trapped drivers in backing out of the crowd blocking the
street.

This period, with the mass of people in the street and the PSD the
nearest of the security agencies, can last as little as fifteen minutes or more
than hour. Eventually, the leftist contingent will begin to move north up
the road a few steps at a time, broadly in the direction of the Israel embassy.
As this period approaches, the Darak assemble in a line well up the street
but blocking the possibility of the protesters’ advance up the road. At
that time, the forces don their helmets and line up shoulder-to-shoulder,
while two or three more senior Darak officers move around giving orders
and organizing the line. The forces line up at the same location, directly
opposite of the doorway for building number 114. Until the protesters ap-
proach that location, the security forces do not interfere in the protesters’
activities.

Before any possible tension increases in anticipation of a confronta-
tion between protesters and the Darak forces, the Islamist contingent
departs. This dynamic was pointed out to me in 2008 by leftist protesters.
“Watch the green [Muslim Brotherhood] flags disappear; the Islamists
are afraid of actually confronting the police,” said one. They mocked the
timidity of the Islamists – a perspective that I had heard on previous

10 Indeed, on more than on occasion, I have encountered a protest while in a taxi, and the
driver has expressed aggravation or frustration at the protesters. Their comments remind me
of living in Washington, DC, where traffic disruptions from protests are routine. But as Jordan
is not a democratic country, it is interesting to note the extent to which protests are a routine
part of life in the capital, so much so that citizens are more annoyed than concerned.
occasions – suggesting that the Brothers’ avoidance of any real confrontation with the regime proved that they had been co-opted. One activist argued that Islamists wanted to be photographed at protests so that they could display to their supporters their opposition to the regime, while “in reality they try really hard to avoid any real confrontation” (interview with Hisham Bustani, January 13, 2007, Amman). Such a view of Islamists as avoiding real contention with the regime is echoed among many leftist and independent activists.

Hamzeh Mansour, a prominent leader of the Islamist movement who has served as secretary-general of the Islamic Action Front (IAF), pushed back against this characterization during an interview in 2003. He said that they (the Muslim Brotherhood and the IAF) viewed the Palestinian cause as among their core missions. To that end, they regularly worked with other political parties as well as the professional associations to coorganize protests and support each other’s events. But they tried to avoid confrontation with the security forces because they feared the presence of instigators who aimed to make trouble or cause property damage in order to give the security forces a reason to respond harshly or shut down the event, or to portray the Islamists in a poor light. “When we see people we do not recognize, we are concerned that they will disrupt the peaceful nature of the event by throwing stones or breaking windows or lights.” The Kaluti protests of the mid-to-late 2000s were not disrupted by such instigators, however; the Islamists simply departed as the protesters advanced slowly toward the Darak line blocking the road.

At the Kaluti protests, the now predominantly leftist protesters gradually move closer to the Darak line, but there is little sense that the impending confrontation will turn violent. In fact, the street itself is never entirely blocked, and people – passers-by, journalists, and even members of the assemblage – can easily walk freely around the back and sides of the police line. The appearance is one of the protesters performing an effort to march on the Israeli embassy more than actually trying to do so. For their part, the Darak forces play their own role of “stopping” the protest’s advance – standing in a line with shields raised that signifies “You shall not pass!” without actually blocking off the entire road. Armored Darak vehicles across the field to the east do always signal a willingness and capacity for repression, however, should it be necessary.

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11 Interview at IAF offices, Amman, December 10, 2003. This interview concerned the Islamists’ experiences with protests in general, and did not discuss the more routine Kaluti protests discussed here. He did speak of an earlier effort to hold a major protest at the site in 2002, but on that occasion the security forces blocked access to the site and the event was consequently canceled.
As the distance between the protest and the police vanishes, women often take the lead in the chants. One female activist told me that they did so in order to dare the police to violently repress women who are peacefully protesting, particularly with photographers heavily present. The protesters do not attempt to break through the police line, but some limited pushing is not uncommon as the protesters and police finally meet. This final period of confrontation can last as little as ten minutes or more than an hour, depending on the energy of the crowd.

In June 2010, a new actor appeared at the Kaluti protests: the baltajiya, plain-clothed supporters of the regime brought in to serve as “muscle” to create a buffer between protesters and the uniformed security forces. These men hold hands and form a line facing the protesters, their backs to the uniformed police. One Wahdah protester told me, “I think they’re doing this so that they have an excuse to get physical but [the government] can deny responsibility; even if it is caught on camera, they’ll say it wasn’t them” (interview during a protest, June 2, 2010). The faces of these plain-clothed men express hostility as they glare at the protesters and journalists alike. They glare menacingly not only at protesters but also at reporters and others observing the protesters, as if threatening them to stay back. The police, however, focus their attention on the protesters themselves, largely ignoring journalists and other observers as they move in and out of the crowd, even around the back of the police line itself.

Jordanians have been protesting actively in Jordan since the political liberalization of 1989, and even with the reversal of many of those reforms they have never stopped. In November 2010, the IAF and Wahdah parties both boycotted the parliamentary elections and called for the king to withdraw from governance and allow a real constitutional democracy to emerge. Protests escalated in size and frequency, but most did not represent a significant rupture from existing protest routines.13

By September 2011, protesters gathered at Kaluti almost weekly since the uprising began, and some of the activists began to refer to themselves as the Kaluti Group, as did the media. Their Million Man March failed to attract the numbers they had hoped, but the protests at the site continued. In July 2014, large protests across Amman erupted in response to the launch of

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12 I understood “they” to refer to the regime, but I did not have the opportunity to follow up for a more specific answer about who she thought had given the order to bring in these men.

13 A full review of the ruptures that did emerge is outside of the scope of this chapter, but will appear in my forthcoming book, Protesting Jordan. Also see Tobin (2012); Ryan (2014); and Yom (2014).
Israel's Operation Protective Edge in which more than 2,300 Palestinians were killed and 10,000 injured, including 3,000 children, over a seven-week period (Maan News Agency 2015).

During that period, some dozen Kaluti Group protesters broke routine: despite the heavy police presence, they pushed passed the Darak line in an effort to make their way up the street in the direction of the Israeli embassy. They were stopped well short of their goal, but their willingness to violate the understood script led to their arrest. Their arrest was announced via loudspeaker to those remaining with the main protest near the mosque. All were released later without being charged.

The Work of Protests

If the Kaluti protesters were not trying to actually reach the Israeli embassy all those years, what were they doing? In 2010 I asked one independent activist, What would happen if you just decided to start the protest farther up the street, closer to the Israeli embassy? Without hesitation he said, “They would arrest us and beat the shit out of us” (interview with Hisham Bustani, June 14, 2010, Amman). The protests would be shut down, he said, and they would not be able to protest at all. But reaching the embassy was not the objective as much as protesting against it.

The question of whether to seek political change by working “within” the system or outside of it is a perennial one for activists. Adhering to state-imposed boundaries limits possibilities for change but affords greater room to operate; crossing known red lines invites swift repression. The actors in the Kaluti group protests may have brought different agendas to the events, but they largely adhered to the script that enabled them to carry out the protests with regularity over the years. The protests were contentious to the extent that they consistently called for the end of a treaty that the regime was committed to maintaining; however, the protesters’ adherence to a script that had been learned and adopted over time had a practical effect of deflating the protests of more contentious dynamics: they had become routine, mundane, almost ritualistic. The blasé attitudes of many bystanders, onlookers, and drivers caught in traffic further suggest that the protests did not even register as even potentially politically contentious. In that sense, their adherence to behavior acceptable to the regime also worked to shore up the regime’s own authority.

What, then, were the protesters getting from the protests? What kinds of political work were they doing, and for whom? And what did each understand themselves and others to be doing? In talking to protesters, it is
clear that a primary reason for holding protests, even constrained ones, is to keep open the crack that allows for the open expression of political dissent, particularly around Jordan’s relations with Israel and the rights of Palestinians everywhere (but particularly in Jordan). The work of the protests was not only to express specific claims against the regime (abrogation of the peace treaty, etc.), but also to affect public discourse. In this case, the protests keep the widespread disapproval of the treaty present in the public spaces.

All protests, and thus all actors in protests, have numerous audiences. For the protesters, these include: passers-by, some curious and others shouting words of encouragement or of condemnation at the protesters; the Jordanian body public; journalists and others recording or photographing the event; and the regime. Protesters also participate for themselves, and for their followers, to show their own continued relevance as well as for affective reasons and building solidarity.

For all the protesters, the Darak forces serve for as a proxy for the regime, in that confronting security forces symbolizes confronting the regime and its policies as well much as it entails a real physical confrontation. But protesters direct their chants at the Darak officers themselves, calling them out for their service to a regime that has betrayed the Palestinian struggle by making peace with the enemy. Here the presence of the leftists at the last stage of the protest is as meaningful as the Islamists absence: only the leftists are immediately shouting at the Darak, confronting them face-to-face. Thus the Islamists, in their absence by that stage, are not participating in the critique directed at the individual Darak officers.

Leftists also have Islamists as an audience, daring them to be more contentious than they are willing to be, and exposing their unwillingness to directly confront the regime. Islamists appear little concerned with leftist or leftist critiques of Islamists, but as a movement and party they are plenty concerned with their own constituency. Journalists from the Islamist weekly Al-Sabeel photograph the Islamists and their flags and report on their presence at protests, expanding the Islamist audience from those who came out to the protest at the leaders’ requests, to include those who follow Islamist media but are not present at the events.

The Islamist leaders are clearly concerned with the regime, more so in the late 2000s than in earlier periods. In the 1990s and early 2000s, they were visible participants in many contentious protests, including several at which Islamist leaders were injured. At the Kaluti protests, however, the leaders and their ranks routinely exited well before the other protesters moved into closer confrontation with the Darak.
For the regime, allowing the protests supports its declared commitment to freedom of expression. King Abdullah has boasted to his allies that Jordan is a “moderate” regime working to implement democratic reforms, but real political freedoms have steadily declined. Protests that are widely photographed provide tangible evidence that the regime tolerates political dissent. Indeed, several protesters told me that the ability to protest on highly political issues was by the late 2000s the only remaining political freedom in Jordan. With the parliament, the professional associations, and media all tightly constrained and conveying overwhelmingly proregime perspectives, protests are one of the few remaining arenas for expressing political dissent. The regime tolerates rather than encourages protests, and always seeks to keep them contained. And as long as the protesters adhere to the established script, routine protests also work to produce and reproduce the regime’s power.

Protests can do other work for the regime, as in 1997 when the first Jordanian-Israeli trade fair was effectively shut down by hundreds of protesters choking access to the exhibition hall. The regime might have more aggressively pushed back the protesters, but instead let the protests do the work of interfering in normalization at a time when government officials and King Hussein were frustrated with the actions of the Israeli prime minister. The protests proved a useful interruption, and one that the regime could also portray as illustrative of emerging democratic life in Jordan. At the same time, the regime sought to monitor and manage protests, lest the crowds become too large or difficult to easily contain. The heavy Darak presence, the armored vehicles, and the appearance of the baltajiya betray regime concern that protests might escalate. Protests keep alive the possibility of serious challenge to the regime, which remains vigilant in preparing for (and seeking to prevent) that moment.

As scholars of protest have recognized, regimes also can gauge public sentiment by watching protest activity closely for changes. The Kaluti protests played this role for the regime. With the protesters seldom numbering over 200, a sharp escalation would provide the regime with valuable information. Similarly, the failure of the Million Man March in September 2011 to bring out a significantly larger-than-usual crowd conveyed its own message, to the regime as well as the organizers. But even at their most routine, the Kaluti protests kept present the possibility of a larger mobilization, signaling to the regime that they would not go away.

My current book manuscript, *Protesting Jordan*, explores the regime’s preference for small, stationary protest events, rather than larger events or marches. What the regime permits or forbids also varies by neighborhood.
Finally, not immediately present but still members of the audience for the Kaluti protests are Israel and the Israeli embassy officials up the road; the regime, which maintains the peace treaty; the parliament, which ratified the peace treaty; the United States, which considers Jordan a key ally and watches the kingdom closely; and other foreign nations.

Many Amman residents encounter the Kaluti protests but do not exhibit a sense of concern or danger about them. Passers-by sometimes stop to watch but, just as often, they continue walking up or down the street without so much as a turned head. The heavy presence of the Darak – with their armored vehicles and a line of officers in riot gear blocking much of a street – simply does not elicit concern, even though Jordan is not a democracy. I have often hired a taxi to drop me near to a Kaluti protest and have on several occasions witnessed the driver register exasperation at the ways in which protests disrupt traffic. Photographs of protesters confronting riot police suggest danger and potential violence. But that possibility – while always present – is often understood to be so remote that it does not register with bystanders and passers-by.

Protests may be a central form of contentious politics, but they do other kinds of political work as well. In particular, what the protests mean, and to whom, extends well beyond the straightforward narrative suggested by a regime-opposition confrontation. Protests that might seem to be failing – in their diminishing numbers and failure to produce real policy changes – may be quite productive in other ways.

References


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