

YOUTH IN THE ARAB WORLD

June 2010

Dilemmas of Identity and Cultural Diversity among Ammani Youth

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Background Paper

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Youth in the Arab World

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Summary

This report is an overview of the research conducted as part of Takween's project on Identity & Cultural Diversity in the city of Amman. Using the method of discourse analysis, it investigates the politics of identity among Ammani youth, particularly those from marginalized ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Our research focuses on anxieties around issues of ethnic and national identity among this group and detects shifts in identity politics from older to younger generations in the city. While older generations viewed themselves as ethnic communities whose focus is the community itself, younger Ammanis increasingly engage with their ethnicity as an identity that is directed towards a generalized Jordanian public. In doing so, they attempt to overcome their marginalization by a dominant nationalizing ideology. This ideology defines Jordanianess in terms of genealogical purity limited to those who can trace their patrilineage to points of origin from within the boundary of the state, to the exclusion of those who trace theirs to other places. Yet, as marginalized youth attempt to negotiate their place in Jordanian society, they are faced with the challenge of presenting their identity as both Jordanian and ethnic, and their ethnicity as cultural rather than political.

Why Jordan, Amman, National Identity and Youth?

Historical Background

There is no doubt that debates around national identity abound in all nation states. In many of these debates, “the youth” as a social category feature prominently because of anxieties around social re-production—i.e. anxieties among older generations over what future generations will be like. Yet these debates have a particular salience in Jordan relative to the country’s history, demography and political situation. Moreover, the debate tends to be more intensified among younger generations in the capital city of Amman.

Unlike other urban centers in the Levant, Amman is a city whose history begins with the founding of the Jordanian state in 1921. In its short history, the city has been a destination for natural and forced migrants. Beginning as a small village of just over a thousand inhabitants in the early 20th century—most of which were Circassians and Chechens resettled by the Ottomans following the wars with Russia—the city received many immigrants from nearby urban centers such as Damascus, Beirut, Jerusalem, Haifa and Jaffa. This second wave of migrants comprised of bureaucrats who held the main posts in the nascent Jordanian-Arab government, as well as a merchant class that connected the city to the rest of the region through a trade network. With its designation as a capital city, internal migration ensued from nearby towns, such as as-Salt, Irbid, Madaba and Karak. The wars with Israel in 1948 and 1967 brought large numbers of refugees from Palestine to Jordan, most of which were settled in Amman. Similarly, the Gulf War of 1991 brought many Jordanians of “native-Jordanian” and Palestinian descent back from Iraq and the Gulf states. The constant expansion of Amman through suburban sprawl brought in recently settled nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes to the city. From a little village of just over a thousand inhabitants, Amman’s population now stands at little below 3 millions.

Since the clash between the Jordanian army and PLO-affiliated militant groups in 1970, Jordanian nationhood came to be mostly associated with patrilineal descent. Those who could claim descent from within the boundaries of the state at the time of its founding in 1921 considered themselves real Jordanians. Those who traced their genealogies to Palestine were considered Palestinian regardless if their ancestral hometowns lay in what is now Israel, or the West Bank, at the time still part of Jordan.

Since Amman’s history starts with the founding of the state, the city was irrelevant in making claims about Jordanianness. As such, no one would claim descent from Amman, including those who lived in the city or its vicinity at the turn of the century—such as the Circassians, the Chechens and some nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes like the Abbadi and the Adwan. By now, there is a sizable young population in Amman that was born in the city and whose connection with their ancestral hometowns has been weakened by spatial, temporal and social constraints. However, patrilineage still plays a major role in forms of identification among them due to the political power invested in it.

Simultaneously, the (neo-)liberalizing reforms initiated in the country following the economic crisis and the consequent urban riots of 1989 have allowed for a different kind of political discourse based on notions of citizenship irrespective of descent. Jordanians are increasingly compelled to participate in public discourse as Jordanian citizens rather than as members of any particular social group. In opposition to the politics of descent, an emergent identity of Jordanian citizenship promises those excluded more political power. Equally important in this regard are notions of Arab nationalism and Islamism, both of which are undergoing similar questioning and transformation in public discourse particularly with respect to how they relate to the Jordanian state. As such, questions around who counts as Jordanian—and consequently, what it means to be Jordanian in the first place—are at the center of public debate and the source of much political and social anxiety. Within this cultural and political landscape, Amman’s youth stand as distinct political agents. First, they constitute the bulk of the country’s population. Second, they are taken to indicate the future of the nation. But most importantly, they are a new generation whose material ties to the city of Amman—albeit not necessarily their symbolic ties—are stronger than those to other places.

Project Background

The project on Identity & Cultural Diversity in the City of Amman (ICDCA) was initiated in April 2007 by Takween's founder and director Ms. Samar Dudin. The project was motivated by a dense socio-political situation in Jordan that heightens reflection on issues of personal, communal and national identity, particularly among the young population of Amman¹. Through earlier engagement in youth-related projects, Ms. Dudin noticed that many young Ammanis complained of a lack of recognition of their diverse cultural backgrounds in the public sphere; be it in local media, sites of urban public life, or in engagements with the state bureaucracy. Moreover, anxieties around identity in Amman seem to be caused by a dominant nationalist discourse adopting a "purist" Jordanian ideology whereby only those who can claim to be "native" Jordanians are treated as a "real" Jordanians—particularly if they are also Sunni Muslims—and whereby those who deviate from this norm are seen to be less than full Jordanians, if at all. Of particular importance is the situation of Palestinian-Jordanians who, despite being a very large group (numerically), or perhaps because of it, are constantly excluded from dominant definitions of Jordanianness.

The ICDCA was not conceptualized as a research project as such, but rather as a form of cultural activism that aims at mitigating the sense of anxiety around identity—personal, communal and national—among young Ammanis by promoting an attitude of tolerance towards cultural differences between the various communities. It also aims at initiating a dialogue around what might constitute an all-inclusive Ammani-Jordanian identity that incorporates the various ethnic, religious, political and cultural backgrounds of the city's inhabitants, while simultaneously reflecting the city's social and material history as the capital of Jordan. In sum, the aim was to create a sense of unity in difference among Amman's youth that both celebrates the city's cultural heterogeneity and yet allows for a unified Ammani and national identity.

Set to explore and mitigate these anxieties among Amman's youth, the project developed in three stages. The first stage focused on the identity discourse internal to marginalized ethnic and religious groups. Over a period of one year, Takween conducted nine focus-group discussions in conjunction with community organizations and individual from these communities. These included Circassians, Armenians from the Armenian Club in Jabal al-Ashrafiyyeh, Chechens from the Prince Hamza Charity

Society, Palestinians from the Wihdat Sports Club, participants in Musaab Khorma program at Ruwwad Foundation in Jabal an-Nathif, Bani Sakhr Bedouins from the Society for Development and Rehabilitation of Rural Women, Christians, Baha'is, Arab Revolt Club, and the All Jordan Youth Commission. At this stage, Takween's engagement was on a communal level, and since some of the organizations involved were run or otherwise dominated by older generations, the narratives explored then were—by degrees—aligned to the official narratives of these institutions.

From these discussion emerged a second stage which comprised of a set of interviews with individuals from each of the focus groups. While the focus-group discussions were concerned with collective or communal aspects of cultural identities in Amman, this second phase was more concerned with the personal narratives of members of minority groups. The end result of this process was a set of eight short videos where each participant commented on his/her relationship with the city. Each individual talked about their sense of exclusion, alienation and the pain that these cause, as well as the positive relation they have to the city and their aspirations for its future.

While the first stage focused on narratives produced by particular social groups, and the second on individual narratives, the third stage focused on creating a dialog between members of these various groups around their cultural particularity and the extent to which they feel accepted or alienated by the Jordanian society. Here, young Ammanis engaged with each other, not merely as members of their respective cultural and ethnic groups, but rather as citizens, both Ammani and Jordanian commenting on their own narratives of inclusion and exclusion, and potentially identifying with each other's marginality, as well as their collective sense of citizenship. Three events were organized as part of this phase. The first was a workshop on identity and cultural diversity in Amman, which included participants from the various cultural communities involved in the previous phases, as well as several local researchers concerned with the issue from a historical, architectural, political and anthropological perspective. This workshop culminated in proposing a set of projects that aim at engendering an all-inclusive Ammani identity. The second was a round-table discussion entitled **Hāra Ammaniya** (Ammani Neighborhood) where participants talked about their relation to the city of Amman and issues of public representation. The third was also a round-table discussion focusing on two main themes: whether members of the various cultural groups feel accepted in society, and how their attitude towards identity and cultural diversity differs from that of the older generations.

1 See the Historical Background section above.

About this Research

The present research is a social-scientific reflection on the materials recorded during the various events and activities conducted by Takween for the ICDDCA. Its aim is not to quantitatively measure attitudes of young Ammanis towards issues of identity and cultural diversity against a fixed and predetermined set of values by means of questionnaires. Rather, it is a qualitative study of the ways in which young Ammanis perceive their world and how this perception informs how they engage in social and political debates and interactions. The focus on qualitative research here is twofold. First, we take social categories such as identity, youth, diversity, modernity, tradition, democracy etc. to be culturally and historically specific. As such, we do not attempt to gauge these as variables defined against an external benchmark. For instance, we do not attempt to measure how alienated or rooted, modern or traditional, tolerant or intolerant, religious or secular young Ammanis are. Rather, we take the definition of these categories to be part of what needs to be studied and try to map them in their specificity and particularity. Second, the significance of such mapping is that these categories are central to the ways in which young Ammanis engage socially and politically with their context. As such, we assert that an understanding of the political and social dynamics among young Ammanis rests upon an understanding of their world-view, which is not necessarily similar to that of other generations in Jordan, or of young people in other places.

The notion of identity is central to this mapping. Here, we do not take identity to be a natural feature that emerges out of the genealogy, sex, income level or age of an individual or a group. We take identity to be a label attributed to individuals or groups by the individuals or groups themselves or by others, and where such attribution is highly political. Much as being feminine cannot be reduced to the biological notion of female sex, being Jordanian or Palestinian or Armenian cannot be reduced to being of “pure” Jordanian, Palestinian or Armenian descent. Similarly, being middle class cannot be reduced to income level, but should also—and perhaps more importantly—include what middle-classness means in this particular context. We take the debates around identities among young Ammanis to be precisely about the negotiation of what it means to be Jordanian or Ammani. That is to say, that they are about the negotiation of social norms. The central question we pursue in this study is: on what grounds are these norms negotiated?

In the same vein, we do not take “the youth” to be a statistical-demographic category that can be defined in terms of age-groups. Instead, we take it to be a social and psychological category that is specific to the community’s self-understanding. We are concerned with how and on what grounds someone might be considered or might consider him/herself a youth and to what effect. Moreover, we take into consideration the fact that the scope of such a category may change from one context to another. In other words, someone who might be considered a “youth” in one context is not necessarily so in another. By doing this, we take “the youth” as an identity category similar to any other identity category—be it national, ethnic, religious, etc.—that cannot be understood in isolation from other contrastive identities. In this case, “the youth” is a medial category that only makes sense in contrast to “the older generation” and “the younger generation” however these might map onto actual groups or individuals in different contexts.

In analyzing the video-recordings and their transcriptions we paid attention to the ways in which identity categories were invoked. This was done on two levels: the identity narratives that young Ammanis from different cultural groups produced, and the linguistic resources by which the narration was made. On the first level, we focused on the stories that these groups and individuals produced to assert themselves as rightful bearers of a Jordanian or Ammani identity and the implications of such assertions on defining what it means to be Jordanian or Ammani. As such we were not merely concerned with how members of different culture groups portray their Jordanianness, but also the dominant notions of Jordanianness that they are set to challenge². As such, we were less concerned with the content of these narratives or whether they are true depictions of social and historical realities or not. Rather, we were interested in the form and structure of narratives to understand how claims of identity are made.

2 The point we are making here is that even as marginalized cultural groups assert their Jordanianness, they do so in contradistinction to dominant notions of Jordanianness. As such, these dominant definitions of Jordanianness are as important to the counter-narratives of marginalized groups as is the latter’s deviation from the dominant norms.

On the second level, we paid attention to the linguistic resources by which young Ammanis make these narratives and assertions. This is to say that we were not merely concerned with what individuals were saying in these recordings, but also how they are saying it. This second level was particularly important for our research because of the ways in which different social groups in Jordan are stereotypically associated with certain dialects and/or languages. The issue of language and its relation to notions of ethnic and cultural identity emerged in the focus-group discussions of phase one, as well as the first workshop in phase three. This was particularly a salient issue for groups that are not ethnically Arab, such as Circassians, Chechens, Armenians and Kurds. Each of these groups emphasized the role of their respective language in maintaining social cohesion³. Ethnically Arab groups were less reflexive on the role of language as an emblem of cultural identity. However, considering general stereotypes of Arabic language use in Jordan, their choice of dialect in these conversations was quite telling.

Much like all Arabic speakers, Jordanians differentiate between two kinds of Arabic: **Fuṣḥā** and **‘Āmmiyya**. **Fuṣḥā** is the official language of the state and is associated with officialdom as well as with pan-Arabism and Islam. **‘Āmmiyya**, on the other hand, is only a spoken language that has no official status, but whose various lahjāt or dialects are attached to different social groups based on their ethnicity, genealogical origins, national belonging, class and gender. Here, the study of what dialect a particular speaker uses to say something is as important as what is being said in determining the kind of identity that person is performing⁴. Similarly, English is becoming widely used in daily conversations, particularly among younger generations in the more affluent parts of West Amman. English has thus become a mark of class, education, modernity and cosmopolitanism.

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- 3 While Circassians, Chechens and Armenians maintain their knowledge of their respective languages from one generation to the next through formal schooling, Kurds do not. The reason for this requires more elaboration than space permits. However, what concerns us here is that Kurdish participants expressed a sense of lack in relation to these other groups because of their inability to speak their ethno-national language: Kurdish.
 - 4 Since we do not take identity categories to be a mere reflection of social structures, nor do we take a person's membership of culture groups to be a mere reflection of that person's position within social structures, we paid attention to how people spoke to determine what they are *speaking as* at any given moment. For instance, a person may be speaking as a youth, as a Jordanian, as a Ammani, as a Palestinian, as an educated person, etc. or any combination of these categories at any one moment. Moreover, this identification may change for the same person, even over the course of a single conversation.

Research Findings

Tolerance vs. Recognition: Generational differences?

The issue of tolerance was constantly stressed by Takween's team as well as the youth that participated in the various phases of the project. Individuals from marginal groups often expressed their feeling that they are not always tolerated because they deviated from normative definitions of Jordanianness, most importantly by "native" Jordanians. For instance, Palestinians often complained that they did not receive the grades they deserved in university when their professors were "native" Jordanians.

Some even went as far as describing Jordanian society as "racist." Yet, there were also narratives of discrimination on the part of marginal groups. Some participants insisted that they passed some courses in university because the professor was of the same ethnic group as they are. Similarly, many participants complained that members of their ethnic groups routinely discriminated against other ethnic groups, including dominant ones, such as "Jordanians" or "Arabs."

Takween's initial impulse was that discrimination was unidirectional: the dominant group (i.e. "native," Sunni Muslim, Jordanians) discriminating against marginal groups (e.g. Palestinians, Chechens, Armenians, Christians, and Baha'i etc.) However, it soon became apparent that this is not necessarily how young Ammanis experienced discrimination. Some participants from stereotypically dominant groups, such as Jordanians of Bedouin descent, or those hailing from Jordanian towns and cities other than Amman, felt equally discriminated against in the city. In one of the short videos produced, a female hailing from the town of **As-Salt** describes her experience in Amman using metaphors of diaspora. Nonetheless, she does so using the Urban Jordanian dialect associated with the city of Amman. In response to these findings, Takween attempted to create venues for dialogue between members of various ethnic groups, where they can collectively discuss their sense of alienation in the city to bring together an all-inclusive Ammani identity.

Contrary to initial expectations, however, most of those who participated in the last two meetings held in March 2010 did not feel they were either alienated or not tolerated in Jordan. Specifically asked to respond to a question on whether they feel they are accepted in Jordanian society, most participants responded by saying that they indeed are. Moreover, many of those who mentioned that they felt they were occasionally not accepted by others also expressed their indifference towards such attitudes, characterizing those who discriminate against them as ignorant and their discrimination as insignificant.

These responses might seem puzzling at first, but they need not be so. A close analysis of the discussions that took place reveals that something other than tolerance might, in fact, be at issue. Many participants were more concerned with issues of recognition than tolerance. The contrast is clearest between older generation and youth participants in focus groups where both generations were involved—e.g. Kurd and Circassian focus groups. Older participants were less concerned with issues of recognition. This is to say that they were not particularly interested in educating a general public about their ethnic groups. In some cases, they were even suspicious of attempts by Takween and the youth to involve them in a public discourse on identity and diversity. The institutions run by these groups were more oriented towards their respective ethnic communities and had little interest in making claims of representation on a public level. In other words, these institutions were more interested in issues of community, rather than ethnic identity⁵. As such, the older generation's idea of tolerance is the avoidance of controversy. They are not particularly interested in learning about other ethnic groups, but accept them so long as friction—and even contact—does not occur.

The youth, on the other hand, understand their ethnicity differently. They are interested in their being recognized as ethnic-Jordanians and as such were more eager to talk about their ethnicity publicly. The contrast is starkest in the case of Kurds, where the youth were accused by the older members of their organization to be "causing trouble" because they wanted to present their Kurdishness as an identity rather than thinking of themselves simply as a community that has no public aspirations. The youth perceive the attitude of the older generation as intolerance and attribute it to their lack of social and geographic mobility. Several participants explained this through the metaphor of village-life vs. city-life. They see their elderly as having an isolationist village-mentality, whereas they have a cosmopolitan city-mentality⁶.

5 The distinction we are making here might be subtle, but at the same time extremely important. The argument we are making is that these ethnic institutions tend to be inward-looking, rather than oriented to a general national public. It is in the latter case only that issues of identity arise.

6 More on this in the section on Directions for Future Research below.

Narrating Identity: A double bind

Pursuing identity politics, however, comes with some political risks. When ethnic groups mobilize emblems of their identity—such as language, dress, and flags of other nation-states—they risk marginalizing themselves further by stressing that they are not from Jordan, but rather from elsewhere and hence not “real” Jordanian. The challenge that ethnic groups face is to present their relationship to other places as cultural rather than political.

Here, the structure of the narratives that ethnic groups give of themselves is key to claim an ethnic, but yet a Jordanian identity. A close look at the recordings reveals that different ethnic groups mobilize different narratives. The structure that each ethnic group used depended on how their identity deviates from a normative Sunni-Arab- Jordanian identity. Palestinians, for example, mobilize a narrative of pan-Arabism and their being rightful Jordanian citizens. Kurds, mobilize a narrative of Islamic history stressing their genealogical ties to the Muslim military leader **Ṣalāḥid-dīn**. Circassians stress their being the first inhabitants of Amman and—like “native” Jordanian—being divided into tribes with their own customs and traditions. Armenians, on the other hand, stress a common Ottoman history mobilizing the narrative of the Armenian genocide and their seeking refuge in Jordan.

Thus far, these narratives have been confined to the discussions initiated by Takween and similar organization. It is unclear, at this point, to what extent various ethnic groups may publicize their identity narratives on a larger scale. It is also difficult to speculate what the political effects of such attempts might be—if they take place indeed. Yet, a few remarks can be made about the relation between the narratives of ethnic groups and the purist narrative of “native” Jordanians. On the one hand, the narratives by which ethnic groups assert their Jordaninness challenge the dominant narrative that casts them as “outsiders,” or “foreigners.” Ethnic groups stress their role in Jordanian political and social history and their participation in creating what might be called a Jordanian culture. On the other hand, however, these narratives follow the same structures as those of the dominant one. For example, while ethnic groups attempt to challenge the genealogical grounds for citizenship, they also narrate their histories in genealogical terms, using notions of kinship and migration to assert their identities.

Directions for Future Research

As mentioned earlier, the ICDCA was not conceptualized as a research project, but the video-recordings that were generated through the project provide useful data and valuable insights into identity politics and nationalism among Amman's youth. This report is a reflection on that data and the whole process by which the project has proceeded. It is also a chance to reflect on possible areas for future research that might have been overlooked thus far. In what follows, we list several of these areas and the kind of insights they may bring:

Methodology

Since the project was conceived as a form of cultural activism, the data was mostly collected through focus-group discussions and meetings between members of various ethnic groups. It would be necessary, however, that future phases of the project include other research methods that may bring other insights to complement what has been collected here. For example:

- a) It is important to include ethnographic data that can help contextualize future discussions. The interactions that take place between participants "off-record" are as important as what gets recorded during the "official" time of events.
- b) This data needs to be supplemented by biographical data of participants, such as education, income level, place of residence, place of work, etc. some of this data was available for some participants in the current phase, but it was mostly anecdotal and unsystematic.
- c) There is also a need to situate these biographical data within their larger statistical context in Amman. Our attempts to get such data from the Department of Statistics during the current stage were unsuccessful, but other sources might be consulted in the future.

Other Demographic/Identity Dimensions

The current phase of research has focused almost exclusively on ethnicity as a social category, and, to a lesser extent, on generation. It remains to be seen however if these are the only dimensions of contrast that are relevant to the identity politics taking place:

- a) Class and education may well be equally important. Since participants in this phase were mostly from middle-class or aspiring middle-class backgrounds, it may well be the case that notions of cosmopolitan identity is important for this group alone. It remains to be seen, for instance, if young Ammanis from lower classes perceive themselves in terms of ethnic identity, or if other social factors, such as family, locale, and class are more prominent. Future research should ask if ethnicization taking place across social strata, rather than taking it for granted.
- b) Given the village vs. city metaphor given by several participants as a way for explaining generational differences, future research should take into consideration the social dimensions of urbanization. For example, how do young Ammanis imagine life in the city? How is it different from life in a village? Moreover, it is important to consider how family narratives of moving from the countryside to the city relate to notions of identity. For example, what percentages of those who live in Amman were born in Amman? How many are 1st, 2nd, or 3rd generation Ammanis?

Where/ When is Identity Important, and for whom?

Considering the ICDC's format, the project took the issue of ethnic to be important for all members of ethnic groups at all times. Yet, looking at the data collected in this phase, it seems that there are certain places and times when awareness of ethnic identity is usually heightened—whether as a problem to be resolved or something to be valorized. Therefore, future research should look into these times and places and consider how and why identity becomes important there-and-then, but not in other places and at other times:

- a) Participants often identified two places where identity becomes important. The first is in encounters with the bureaucratic institutions of the state. The second is encounters with people from similar or different ethnic backgrounds at universities. Thus, it is important to explore the question of identity in these institutional sites. This is particularly the case given that universities have recently become sites for ethnic violence, often spiraling out of disputes between students from different ethnic groups. Similarly, unfair treatment of students by professors from different ethnic backgrounds has come up often in descriptions of discrimination by the youth.
- b) Even within these institutional sites, it is worth considering at what times identity gets invoked. Future research should consider the kind of activities during which one has to reveal one's ethnic identity, what different participants try accomplishing through them and how the invocation of identity affects the way participants interact.

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