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THE EFFECT OF TRIBALISM ON POLITICAL PARTIES

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Abstract:

Tribalism has been the fundamental organizational unit of Middle Eastern Society for thousands of years. Recently however, modern scholars have questioned the viability of tribalism in the burgeoning democratic systems of the region. This study weighs in on this debate, focusing specifically on how tribal loyalties influence the effectiveness of political parties, considered by political science researchers to be the most effective way for the people to impose their will on the government. Focusing specifically on Jordan, this research takes into account information collected from interviews with several prominent members of Jordanian political, social, and intellectual life, including the heads of several political parties and a tribal Sheikh, as well as existing research on both political parties and tribalism. It concludes that tribalism is not inherently at odds with democracy, and only hinders democratic systems, such as political parties, when tribal loyalties trump national ones.

ISP Topic Keywords:

Cultural Anthropology

Regional Studies: Middle East

Political Science

Introduction:

In his famous book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Samuel Huntington argues that the next great struggle for Western, neo-liberal democracy will be the cultural and religious values of the developing world. Nowhere is this struggle more evident than in the Middle East, where the traditional values of tribalism have hindered the effectiveness of burgeoning Western democratic systems. This paper will address the intersection of these two competing institutions in the Middle East, focusing specifically on the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

The researcher first became interested in this topic when confronted with the prevailing public sentiment in Jordan that political parties are the solution to government ineffectiveness, uninformed voting, and widespread corruption. This line of thought runs contrary to the modern, Western perspective on political parties, which has become intertwined with the negative connotations of partisanship, government deadlock, and, once again, uninformed voting. In order to identify the source of this intellectual dissonance, it is important to understand the differing political histories of Europe and the Near East.

Prior to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, and the subsequent imposition of colonial hegemony by the British and French, the modern nation-state did not exist in the Middle East. Instead the region was governed by a plethora of tribal authorities, the likes of which had not been seen in Europe since the Germanic tribes adopted Christian and Roman ideals and governance models around the 6th century A.D. (Herrin, 2019 and Editors, 2017). Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify the differences between this tribal system, still prevalent in the Middle East today, and what became the classical European system of kingdoms with which Westerners are more familiar. The former is aptly defined by Khoury and Kostiner as “large,

bounded political communities which are defined with reference to descent” (1993). While the idea that these groups are neatly defined and non-overlapping is an academic fiction, real life borders between tribal influences and memberships are blurred, treating them as unique and exclusive entities will be sufficient for this research.

The largest difference then, between the Middle Eastern tribal system and the feudal system which developed in Europe, is tribes’ ongoing emphasis on kinship ties. In a feudal system, an individual belonged to a certain state; paid taxes to certain baron; or, fought for a certain king because of the land on which they lived. Land conferred allegiance. In a tribal system, kinship confers that same allegiance: “descent is a vehicle for delineation of groups and the transmission of rights and duties” (Khoury 1993). Consider this comparison: “a tribe which sets out to defend its land or to invade that of others is not pursuing material as opposed to kinship interests, any more than a nation state which sets out to protect its oil supply is pursuing material as opposed to national ones” (Khoury 1993). An individual performs a service for his/her tribe for the same reason an individual performs a service for his/her country, because of a perceived sense of solidarity between himself/herself and others.

It is important to emphasize the word “perceived” in the above, for much as the bonds uniting members of a nation state are artificial constructions which people are socialized into accepting, so too can tribal kinship ties be fictitious. As a matter of fact, these tribal connections are often no more than frequently repeated statements of affiliation, with little to no official genealogical backing (Khoury 1993). Yet the possibility that these tribal relationships are specious does little to diminish their importance in both traditional and modern Middle Eastern society, in the same way that synthetic nationalism remains important to citizens of the United States despite their diverse origins.

The British noted the importance of tribalism when they assumed control over a large portion of the Middle East: “Beyond the immediate vicinity of the towns, which are few in number, Mesopotamia is a tribal country” (Abdul Hussein 2014). This recognition shaped British policy. In an attempt to secure tribal loyalty, the Hashemites, the British installed monarchs of the region, granted tribes vast autonomy, enshrined legally in the constitutions of the fledgling, Middle Eastern states. In addition, British and French authorities made efforts to urbanize Middle Eastern tribes, converting them from subsistence to capitalist economies. While initial efforts to do so backfired, causing revolts, most notably the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925, eventually, tribal power shifted to the cities as tribes began to transition towards their contemporary form.

This urbanization of tribal authority coincided with the oil boom in the region, granting tribal leaders, still largely autonomous due to British concessions and now poised to benefit from the newfound value of their ancestral land, immense wealth and power. As their power grew, tribal authority and tradition began to supersede the previously European lifestyle of Middle Eastern cities (Abdul Hussain 2014). The result was a Middle East region which could be considered socio-politically in two equally viable ways, “one based on kinship and loyalty in the old tradition of Arab tribalism. The other [...] based on Sykes-Picot and the interests of the colonials and their Arab urbanite protégés” (Abdul Hussain 2014). Viewed in a more individual sense, the modern Arab continues to embody two competing allegiances: one to his/her tribe and another to his/her country.

It is these dual allegiances which cause parties to be viewed more positively in a Middle Eastern context, where governments struggle for socio-political legitimacy with tribal authorities which have existed for hundreds of years. Joel Migdal provides an excellent framework in which

to consider this struggle, emphasizing how “[s]tates may help mold, but they are also continually molded by, the societies within which they are embedded” (1988). In such a system, states are forced to sacrifice authority to powerful non-state actors, effectively ensuring they remain a weak state, in order to preserve peace and stability. Gacem specifies this for a middle eastern context:

“However, the state should accommodate the tribes by establishing a system of power-sharing which allows the tribes to access high positions in the government, and to gain wealth and privileges. In return, the tribes pledge loyalty to the central authority and use their tribal networking system to reach the mass population and ensure political stability and prosperity.” (2019)

This is the current system in Jordan, and while the country has succeeded in maintaining stability in an otherwise tumultuous region, a lack of prosperity has given rise to increased dissatisfaction with it.

Increasing the strength of political parties is seen as a solution to this issue. Political parties are seen as vital to the health of democracies, serving as intermediaries between the will of the people and government action (Nueman 1956). They may aptly be considered the labor unions of politics. While it is difficult for an individual’s voice to directly impact government policy, by joining a single voice to many other like-minded voices, political change may be effectuated. The health and effectiveness of political parties can then be defined by how well these parties are enacting the political changes desired by their constituents.

By this definition, the effectiveness of political parties in Jordan remains low, as there is widespread dissatisfaction with both the government and parties attempting to influence it:

“Seventy-two percent of Jordanians do not have confidence in the parliament, and 64 percent do

not have confidence in the country's political parties" (International Republican Institute, 2018). In an attempt to rectify this lack of confidence, the Jordanian government provides financial and educational support to parties as part of its ostensible efforts to further democratize the country.

As part of its review of the impact of the dual allegiances to tribe and state, this research also seeks to identify the connections between this dissatisfaction, and the tribal system still prevalent in Jordan. While the study is confined to the country of Jordan, and only several large parties were interviewed, it is the researcher's hope that the results can be generalized to the Middle East region as a whole, attempting to identify both the challenges which democracy faces interacting with tribal traditions, and the root cause of those challenges.

Literature Review:

Almost without exception, wherever representative democracy has existed, political parties have emerged as an inseparable adjunct. From the left wing "Populares" and right wing "Optimates" of the Roman Republic in the first century B.C., to the pro-crown Tories and pro-democracy Whigs of the early British constitutional monarchy in the late 1600s, to the Republicans and Democrats in the modern United States, these parties have shaped not only the policies of the various democratic nations of which they are a part, but also the history and form of democracy itself.

Because democracy and political parties have been so inexorably linked, it is difficult to differentiate between their inceptions. To do so, one must look at some of the original electoral systems which emerged contemporaneously in the Western world around the 13th century C.E. in local governments within the modern borders of France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy (Colomer 2007). These burgeoning democratic systems exhibited similar characteristics, namely multi-member districts (in which an electorate votes for multiple positions within the same

body); an open ballot (in which each individual is voted for individually, not as a bloc); and, a voter's ability to vote for as many candidates as there are positions to be filled. While this second characteristic appears antithetical to party formation, "the important point to be made here is that these traditional electoral rules, while being able to produce satisfactory and acceptable citizens' representation, also create strong incentives for self-interested, would-be political leaders to form 'factional' candidacies or voting coalitions, in a word 'parties'" (Colomer 2007). Consider the following example: there are four candidates, W, X, Y, and Z, running for two seats, A, and B. In a nonpartisan election, votes would be fairly evenly distributed, with candidates W and Z winning. However, if candidate W agrees with candidate X on certain important issues, the two can advise their voters to support the other for the remaining seat, thus forming a rudimentary party. The premise of such a party is the elevation or subjugation of specific issues compared to others, and an unspoken decision by some voters to prioritize the issue(s) upon which candidates X and W agree over electing a preferred candidate Y or Z, who may more accurately reflect a voter's belief on lower priority issues. It is sufficient for only a few individual voters to make this decision, "since, even if they are few, they can make a difference [in an otherwise relatively even election], especially under [a] simple plurality rule where no specific threshold of votes is required to win" (Colomer 2007). If this happens, the formation of the coalition of W and X changes the outcome of the election, placing each candidate in one of the two vacant seats. The only way for the other two candidates to prevent this "party sweep" is to form a coalition of their own, combining their constituents in a necessarily oppositional party.

This explanation of party origins both explains Nueman's definition of political parties, and vindicates the Western critique of them. These proto-political parties are indeed "concerned with the control of governmental power and [...] compete for popular support with another group

or groups holding divergent views” (Nueman 1956). In addition, such parties also “may produce sentiments of dissatisfaction and disappointment relative to previous experiences of voting for individual candidates, especially in largely consensual societies in which the formation of party candidacies may introduce political polarization” (Colomer 2007). Whether political parties have a positive or negative impact on voter representation however, scholars agree that the political parties are a necessary consequence of democracy: “When all these strands come together, we obtain not only the modern party, but also the *party system* as a structural requirement of the political system and thereby as one of its subsystems” (Sartori 1976).

Recognizing the potential negative impact of political parties is not a novel trend in the literature. The early 18th century viscount and philosopher Bolingbroke lamented the existence of political parties, believing they “stem from passion and interest, not reason and equity” (Sartori 1976). Blondel agrees with this assessment, stating “(f)actions and parties were synonymous with battles in the real sense of the word: this was how the Roman Republic ended, and it was how Italian city-states came to fall prey to monarchs who ruled nearby” (1995). However, the parties which Blondel discusses and to which Bolingbroke bears witness in the mid-18th century were radically different from the political parties of today. Prior to the suffrage movements of the late 1800s and early 1900s, voting rights were commonly based on property ownership. This meant political parties, classified by Duverger as “cadre-parties,” only needed to appeal to a small minority of wealthy clientele:

“They relied on the occasional donations of rich supporters, and aimed at securing the support mainly of the rich and influential. The experts, prestigious people, and financiers were the ones to help the cadre party in elections ... It was the quality of the supporters that mattered for the cadre-parties, not the quantity.” (Rowaan 2015)

Because they were dependent on only a small minority, parties would only serve the interest of a small minority.

However, the expansion of suffrage fundamentally changed the makeup of political parties. Faced with the growing need to appeal to the general populace, and not just a select few wealthy individuals, parties, now called “mass-parties” by Duverger, began to adopt a more modern form:

“[Parties] started formal procedures of enrolment and relied on annual payments of a large body of members, not on occasional donations like the cadre-parties. Also, criteria for membership were not present for mass-parties. ... One of the most important distinctions between the two types of party organization is the mass-parties' appeal to the public.” (Rowaan 2015)

While the expansion of suffrage required parties to appeal to the general public for votes, the same is not true for monetary support. Modern scholars have called into question whether it is possible to ever truly escape the traditional cadre-party dependence on wealthy donors: “The super-rich control resources that parties and politicians require and, as a result, are courted. Politicians have incentives to pay attention to the policy concerns that animate wealthy donors on left and right alike (Bonica and Rosenthal 2016). Wealthy individuals are thus able to have a larger impact on policy decisions than the average constituent.

This conclusion, that parties do not perfectly represent the will of the masses, is similar to the one drawn by Bawn et al. They argue “that parties in the United States are best understood as coalitions of interest groups and activists seeking to capture and use [the] government for their particular goals, which range from material self-interest to high-minded idealism” (Bawn

2012). This alone is not inherently contradictory of Nueman's definition: parties are attempting to control governmental power. However, Bawn et al. proceed even more cynically:

“In our account, parties are no great friends of popular sovereignty. Electoral competition does constrain group-centric parties to be somewhat responsive to citizen preferences, but they cede as little policy to voters as possible. Parties mainly push their own agendas and aim to get voters to go along.” (Bawn et al. 2012)

This, as well as Bonica and Rosenthal's conclusions about the influence of the wealthy, clashes with Nueman's optimistic belief that parties are the great link between the will of the people and government action.

Nueman is not alone in positing this claim however. Dr. Marume et al. articulately defend the need for political parties, analyzing the institutions in an African context: “The importance of political parties in a democracy is especially great because without them effective popular control of the government probably would be unattainable in politically organized communities of any significant size” (2016). Hofmeister and Grabow are even more unequivocal in their defense of parties, stating, “In a democracy, the parties are still the most important connecting link between state and society... Parties carry out a political leadership role that a modern democracy cannot do without” (2011). Rowaan, echoing Duverger, adds that parties also serve an educational purpose: “mass-parties started to teach the masses about politics, educating them to become knowledgeable, active citizens” (2015). The common thread of these arguments is clear: that though parties do bear the possibility of division, they are ultimately a necessary evil, the most effective known method of actualizing the democratic ideal of rule by the masses.

This is certainly the belief in the Middle East, where political parties are seen as the preferred vehicle for transferring power from the ruling elite to the masses. This transition to

democracy is difficult however as “Arab regimes are, at best, wary of ceding real authority to processes or institutions that would empower voters, and in some cases actively suppress indigenous attempts to diffuse authority” (Cambell 2010). Efforts for democratization are further complicated by security concerns in the region. Sarah Bush touches on this specific issue while setting up her larger argument that democracy assistance has declined worldwide as aid organizations have grown less antagonistic towards ruling authoritarian governments: “setbacks to democracy in the former Soviet states despite considerable foreign aid, the rise of Islamist parties – all those events have led policy-makers to question democracy promotion’s efficacy and even desirability (2015). This is in line with recent political actions by the United States, such as the support of the authoritarian el-Sisi’s overthrow of the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood. The lasting impact of Arab Spring has also acted as a deterrent to foreign democratic aid into the region, as “many Western policy makers and analysts are asking whether efforts to foster democracy in the Arab world even make sense given the instability and conflict that political change has brought” (Carothers 2015). Despite these doubts, democratization movements still exist in the region, both endogenous and foreign-stimulated efforts to diminish the power of the ruling elite.

As stated before, the preferred method of the endogenous effort to arrest more power for the masses is the formation of political parties. This was especially true in the period of optimism following the initial successes of the Arab Spring: “Parties proliferated [in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia] as people seized the opportunity to organize politically and make their voices heard in the democratic process” (Muasher 2013). However, these parties, over 300 between the three countries were, for the most part, failures. Many failed to accomplish anything more than to register with their respective governments, and even those that successfully cultivated a

modicum of grass-roots support lost in elections to more established organizations that had been present in some form in the countries for decades prior (Muasher 2013). Shea lays out a plethora of causes for this overwhelming failure of nascent parties:

“Particularly in fledgling democracies, parties may: lack clear ideologies; fail to articulate distinctive and coherent policy proposals; have weak structures that remain dormant outside election campaign periods; have narrow and/or shifting support bases that are defined by personal, regional or ethnic ties; and struggle to conduct cohesive action in Parliament.” (Shea 2018)

Muasher adds to this list of difficulties, highlighting the difficulty in differentiating between individual parties in a super-saturated market:

“The result is a morass of poorly distinguished political organizations that can be almost impossible for voters to tell apart. Often, parties have relied on the personalities of their founders rather than on clear programs, making them unsustainable in the long run and raising skepticism among citizens that the real aim of such parties is the personal glorification of individuals rather than the people’s well-being” (2013).

These difficulties are apparent in Jordan as well, which currently has 48 political parties recognized by the government.

These modern Jordanian parties were not officially allowed to operate in the country until 1992 when the government ended a 35-year period of martial law, enacted in 1957, ostensibly in response to the rising popularity of Communist and pan-Arab parties in the nation. Prior the period of martial law, political parties were unrestricted in Jordan, and many scholars consider these parties to have been far more effective than their modern counterparts: “Before the king outlawed them in 1957, Jordanian political parties were vibrant organizations. They were

connected to the masses; based on solid, ideological foundations; and demanded real political gains” (Lust-Okar 2001). This success culminated in political parties forming a parliamentary majority in 1956, enabling them to form the only party-based government in Jordanian history. The triumph was short lived however, as ensuing clashes with royal authority led to the government's dissolution and the banning of all party activity in the country (Shteiwi 2005).

Academic literature about political parties during the ensuing 35 years is limited, as those parties that continued to exist were forced to operate clandestinely. Despite their illegality, parties, particularly those of nationalist or leftist leaning, continued to serve as the primary opposition to the government, often acting through licensed labor unions and professional associations (Shteiwi 2005). Simultaneously, the 1967 war with Israel caused the genesis of Palestinian-orientated parties, “whose sole concern was to liberate Palestine” (Shteiwi 2005). In 1989, these parties were allowed to compete for parliamentary elections, and by 1992, they were once again allowed to operate freely in Jordan, albeit under more restrictions than their 1950s counterparts.

Ideologically, modern Jordanian political parties differ drastically from the predominantly leftist and pan-Arab parties from 40 years prior. While such parties continue to exist, they are now dramatically weaker, and often struggle to survive, while the right wing, Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, dominates the political scene (Lust-Okar 2001). The term “dominates” is used in a relative sense here, as the IAF controls 10 seats of the 130-member, elected lower house. The next two largest parties, both Islamicist as well, control five seats a piece, with the remaining 45 parties controlling only a total of 11 seats. The result is lower house with three quarters of its members unaffiliated with parties,

a state of affairs which traditional scholarship equates to the government having less accountability to the will of the masses.

Contemporary scholars cite two primary reasons for the modern weakness of political parties in Jordan. The first is the continued strength of the monarchy, who retain vast legal and judicial powers despite the presence of a democratically-elected parliament. Critics of this system argue that this parliament is a farce, one established to distract and pacify both Western powers and internal democratic movements: “the country’s parliamentary system... gives the kingdom the veneer of a semi-democratic state. Upon closer examination though, the Parliament can be seen as a mere pressure release valve for the regime and source of political distraction for the general population. It is designed to fail as a legislative body” (Fox 2012). The cause of the system’s success to this effect has been the proactivity of the regime which established it: “Political liberalization in Jordan was a defensive move, intended to shore up the monarchy, it was not a reaction to the pressures of already well-mobilized political parties. Indeed, opposition parties were in a weak position to push for greater change” (Lust-Okar 2001). The governmental reaction to the Arab Spring, where limited concessions were granted to prevent demand for sweeping reform, mimicked this approach.

The second reason political parties remain relatively weak in Jordan is the continued strength of tribal authority. Discussed in the introduction, tribal allegiance is further promoted by the government to discourage party affiliation. Nowhere is this more evident than in the “one person one vote” law, known academically as the single non-transferable vote (SNTV). This law, enacted in 1993, is commonly believed to have had the intent of stemming the success of Islamic parties in the elections of 1989: “With the SNTV voting system, King Hussein expected that a large number of voters would feel compelled to use their single vote for a

member of their extended family or tribe, regardless of his or her views, rather than on a candidate from a political party” (Fox 2012). The reason for this loyalty is not purely an altruistic sense of connection to one’s tribe members. Having a tribal member in office grants economic benefits, both in the form of direct financial aid by wealthy tribe members, and of potential job placement through the family members in office.

The influence of the tribal system on politics is further magnified by “the disproportionate allocation of electoral seats to East Bank, tribal communities, rather than using demographic proportionality as the basis for seat allocation” (Fox 2012). This regulation results not only in a larger number of seats going to tribal candidates, but also in a systematic oppression of Palestinian Jordanians, a disenfranchised populace more likely to vote for opposition political parties, in part because of parties’ near universal support of renewed war with Israel.

This then is the current political state of Jordan: parties, ostensibly supported by the government, struggling to appeal to a people who find it more directly beneficial to elect tribal affiliates than political party members. There is a consensus, both academically and among local practitioners, that stronger parties are necessary to further limit royal power and increase the political power of the people. Such a reality has yet to come to fruition however, as parties continue to struggle against traditional systems and a government reticence to cede power.

Methodology:

In order to determine the effects of tribalism on political parties in Jordan, the researcher interviewed the leaders of several prominent parties, as well as a high ranking government official tasked with political party promotion; a member of a private think tank, Al-Quds, analyzing the health of political parties in Jordan; and, a tribal Sheikh from southern Jordan. The SIT staff and the researcher’s advisor provided contact information and introduced the interview

subjects to the researcher. All interviews were conducted in the subjects' offices, with the exception of the tribal Sheikh, whose interview was conducted at SIT. Specifically, the researcher met with members of an anonymous secularist party; the most established party in the country, acting as the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Action Front; and, the Zam Zam party, which split-off from the Islamic Action Front in 2016.

Ideally, the researcher would also have interviewed several other relevant political parties in Jordan, particularly a leftist party, such as the Communist party or the socialist Ba'ath party. However, securing interviews proved to be the most significant challenge of the research process. Absent the contacts of the SIT staff and the researcher's advisor, securing interview subjects proved impossible despite sending emails and calling the numbers listed on the official government website.

The difficulty of accessing party representatives also forced the researcher to change his methodology slightly. Originally intending to only interview parties, a lack of interview subject availability required that the focus of the research broaden to encompass the governmental, tribal, and outsider perspectives. The result is a broader picture of political life in Jordan, less focused on how parties deal with the issue of tribal authority, and more focused on how different elements of Jordanian society view the intersection of tribalism and the party system.

All of the interviews conducted, except for the interview with the Sheikh, were held jointly with another researcher studying the government's role in political party facilitation in Jordan. This joint method was used to be respectful of interview subjects' time. In addition, both researchers benefitted from the broader discussion with interview subjects, gaining a more complete picture of political party life in Jordan. All interviews proceeded in a semi-structured manner. Both researchers came prepared with a list of questions, conferring beforehand to

prevent redundancy. As respondents answered, each researcher asked follow-up questions to encourage the respondent to elaborate and expound upon specific points, as well as to clarify certain statements. Interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes in length. Questions were not identical for each interview, but evolved as answers from previous interviews suggested other points of interest for each study. In instances when the interview subject did not feel comfortable conducting the interview in English, a translator was present to help facilitate communication. This was necessary for the representative from the Islamic Action Front, Zam Zam, the government official, and the Sheikh.

While the use of a translator did not provide a challenge for the researcher, it is important to emphasize the dilution of information that occurred as a result. Exact wording was not always translated, and summaries were occasionally given for longer responses. This was especially true during the interview with the government official, the first interview in which a translator was required. After this interview, the translator was reminded to translate literally, word for word, to the extent she was able.

It is also important to recognize that those interviews conducted in English also resulted in some imprecise communication, as it required subjects to respond in a non-native language. While subjects were able to do so, their eloquence and comfort in expressing their opinions may have been affected. The impact of translation became particularly evident when the researcher used the word tribalism, a key component of this study. This word had to be explained to nearly every interview participant, who understood the concept best as “familial or regional allegiance.” While the researcher does not believe the necessity of this explanation affected the information gathered from the interviews, it highlights an interesting linguistic difference, and serves as a reminder that the language used affects respondents’ ability to express themselves.

Informed consent was obtained from each interview subject in order to ensure that each understood that their responses would be used for research that might be published. When necessary, the form was translated and explained in Arabic. Acquiring signatures for these forms proved to be another challenge for the researcher, as some respondents worried about the possibility of being misconstrued. However, when anonymity was assured, all respondents consented. As a result, in order to preserve the anonymity of the interview subjects, all names and exact positions have been omitted from this study. Instead, each is referred to by the organization represented, with the exception of the subject from the secularist party, who asked the name of his party be omitted as well.

In the researcher's opinion, this desire for anonymity was the most pressing ethical consideration for the study. Still, the researcher must also recognize his own positionality in collecting and analyzing the information gathered. Interview subjects may respond differently to an undergraduate student from the United States than to an individual from a different background. The researcher believes that his status as an outsider may have made subjects more candid in their criticism of the state of Jordan's internal affairs. Although, the researcher must also recognize that that same Western, outsider status may have also caused responses to be skewed towards what respondents believe a Westerner would want to hear. One respondent even commented to this effect, predicting that other interview subjects would report things in order to appeal to Western sensibilities. From an analysis perspective, it is critical for the researcher to recognize his own biases in analyzing the information gathered, understanding that he is not as intimate with the Jordanian socio-political history and landscape as a native would be, and, as a result, must do his best not to apply Western ideology blindly to a Middle Eastern context.

The researcher took handwritten notes during the interviews, focusing on capturing in shorthand all the words spoken by the interview subjects. While recording interviews would have provided a more accurate representation of what was said, Jordanian social custom is suspicious of voice recordings. Handwritten notes were thus used to respect this custom and make the participants more comfortable with the interview process.

Within 24 hours of the conclusion of the interview, these handwritten notes were clarified and reorganized for easier reading and analysis. This short time frame was important to ensure information and impressions were recorded accurately. Reorganization was useful, as a respondent's answers to different questions often spoke to the same overarching theme, and could be grouped together for ease of analysis. During this process, the researcher added in-depth notes, pointing out areas of future inquiry, comparing responses to previous interview subjects, and highlighting important points. However, the researcher took care to differentiate between later, personal notes and contemporaneous statements made by the interview subjects in order to maintain the information's integrity.

Overall, the researcher was impressed by the stature of individuals willing to take the time to meet with an undergraduate researcher. While additional interviews were desired, the researcher would never have been able to replicate the quality of interviews obtained had he conducted research in the United States. In addition, the hospitality of all those interviewed was notable, each providing tea and coffee and ensuring that the researcher felt welcome in his/her office. These factors, combined with the accessibility of the SIT staff and the researcher's advisor, enabled the researcher to conduct robust research with few challenges, despite the short amount of time allotted.

Findings:

The interviews conducted describe the political-tribal conflict in Jordan from several different perspectives, ranging from the official government stance, to the position of the firmly oppositional Islamic Action Front (IAF), to the perspective of a tribal leader unaffiliated with the government. While each interview subject emphasized different aspects of the relationship between tribal and political life, many themes emerged.

One such theme is the public's lack of trust in political parties. The government official recognized this issue, stating that one of the tasks of the Ministry of Political Development is to educate Jordanians on the importance of political parties in a democratic system. The Sheikh agreed with this sentiment, stating that royal efforts to encourage political party participation will not come to fruition until there is mass awareness about parties' role in the government. In concurrence, both the secularist party and IAF representatives stated that one of the challenges of running a political party in Jordan is the people's ignorance of the potential positive impact of the organizations. Meanwhile, the representative from Zam Zam attributed the lack of trust in parties to a more general distrust of all governmental affairs, and a failure to differentiate between the government and the parties which are supposed to influence it.

The government official provided a radically different explanation for the lack of trust in political parties, providing two primary reasons for the preference of tribal candidates. First, he asserted that most parties prioritize pan-Arab issues over Jordanian specific ones. While the political importance of the liberation of Palestine among the Jordanian populace contributes to this prioritization, the government official emphasized foreign power's role, stating that other Arab countries attempt to use Jordanian parties to promote their own national interest. The representatives from Zam Zam and Al-Quds agreed, the former citing the existence of Jordanian

parties with headquarters in other countries as proof. However, neither the Zam Zam nor the Al-Quds subject believed that this issue was as significant as the government official claimed, and all of the party representatives with whom this researcher met emphatically denied subjugating Jordanian specific issues to pan-Arab ones.

The second reason which the government official provided to explain the lack of faith in political parties relates to the history of parties in the country. Shortly after the Israeli occupation of the West Bank in 1967, foreign nations began to arm political parties within Jordan in order for said parties to be able to resist the Israeli military without the consent of the Jordanian government. The Jordanian government opposed this action, arresting and discrediting participating political party affiliates. The government official posited that the ensuing conflict between party and state caused the public to view parties as inherently oppositional to the government and consequently, as inherently dangerous. This perception remains to this day. The representatives from the secularist party and the IAF affirm the ongoing presence of this perception, although the IAF added that the validity of this sentiment remains as well: it is still dangerous to be a member of a political party, as the government continues to attempt to suppress membership. Zam Zam echoed this statement, citing the fear of political party participation, a result of continued government interest in party ineffectiveness, as a reason for Jordanians to vote for tribal affiliates in elections.

While the representative from the IAF expounded primarily on the fact that the government continues to actively suppress parties, one of the most common arguments to that effect was elucidated by the representative from Al-Quds. Citing the government's system of providing funding to political parties, whereby any party that has 500 members from seven governorates receives 50,000 JD from the government, he asserted that at least 20 to 25 of the

parties in Jordan exist solely to receive this money. The representative from the secularist party confirmed this, stating that many parties abuse this system, using the money for themselves or their family members. The mention of family members is important here, as the Al-Quds representative explained that finding the members of such a “fake” party is easy, as one can just ask their family members [tribe members] to join.

The Al-Quds representative went on to state the government encourages these fake parties to exist by selectively investigating the legitimacy of a party and the 500 members required to compose it. If a party agrees with government positions, no inquiries will be made, while robust background checks are conducted on the members of oppositional parties. The result: politically irrelevant parties, willing to take any position the government wants in order to avoid scrutiny, are placed on equal footing with real parties which oppose government policies.

Even the government official noted the problem of “fake” parties, stating that about 50% of parties exist because of the personal benefits accrued, not for the good of the people, adding that this compounds the public’s distrust of political parties as institutions. He also stated that the issue is aggravated by the state of the Jordanian economy, characterized by a 19% unemployment rate and prolonged weak GDP growth unable to compensate for a growing workforce and the influx of refugees (World Bank). Elaborating on the effect of the poor economy, the official explained that Jordanians become more dependent on tribal affiliates in a weak economy, relying more on the economic benefits of a tribal member being in office. The representative from Al-Quds agreed with this, stating that the weakening economy has caused individuals to lose their social safety net. Since popular opinion holds that parties are unable to affect policy change, most people turn to tribes to help them.

Expanding on the direct influence of tribes in political affairs, the official added that the Jordanian people do not believe there is a systematic difference between the policy decisions of political party representatives and tribal representatives. Thus, because a tribal affiliate can provide more immediate assistance than a party member, and due to the afore discussed general distrust and fear of political parties, tribal candidates tend to win elections. The representative from the secularist party took a similar stance stating that one needs to deal with tribes with the same mentality as you deal with political parties: both have internal elections to determine candidates for office and run to represent a particular constituency. However, he listed three reasons for why party representatives were preferable to their tribal counterparts: first, that tribes tend to elect popular individuals, not individuals with a vision or concrete plan; second, that the representative from the largest tribe will win, not the best person for the position; third, that individuals in the government elected through their tribe tend to put the interests of their tribe before the interests of their country, as it was their tribe, and not their country, which put them into office. The Sheikh disagreed categorically with these assertions, stating unequivocally that tribal representatives in parliament act no differently than party representatives.

Despite this dissonance, it is important to elaborate on the third argument made by the representative from the secularist, as it speaks to an identity issue touched upon by every interview subject. According to the government official, this issue of identity is most prominent when comparing Jordanians of Jordanian origin, to Jordanians of Palestinian origin, who became citizens in 1950. Relating this to political parties, he stated that only people of Palestinian origin need parties, and that the people of Jordanian origin view political parties as helpful only to those of Palestinian origin. He added that many people of Jordanian origin believe their Jordanian identity is tied inexorably with their tribal affiliation, and that joining a party would erase this

affiliation. The Sheikh confirmed this, stating both that all Jordanian society is tribal, and that, to many, a country is simply a container for different families [tribes].

The representatives from the IAF and Al-Quds implicitly agreed with this assertion, the latter adding that Jordanians tribal identity often competes with a Jordanians national identity. According to both the IAF and Al-Quds representatives, the government has willfully encouraged this tribal sub-identity in order to weaken party power. The Al-Quds representative explained this stance in detail, stating that the government began systematically promoting tribal loyalty to counterbalance the influence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). This continues today, although they are now attempting to limit the power of the Muslim Brotherhood, which, like the PLO, is also composed primarily of Palestinians. The Al-Quds representative provided two defenses for this stance. First, he pointed out that the parties in the fifties were noticeably stronger than contemporary parties, attributing the difference to government efforts to strengthen tribes in the interim. Second, he stated unequivocally that the “one person one vote” law (SNTV) is designed to revive tribal sub-identities and to encourage people to prioritize these identities over their Jordanian identity. The secularist party representative, while not as openly critical of the government, also mentioned the need to change the “one person one vote” law, stating that it causes people to vote based on region of origin [tribe], not based on the best interest of Jordan. The IAF representative agreed, stating that if the law is changed, support for political parties would increase. The representative from Zam Zam circumnavigated blaming the government for the reinvigoration of tribal identity, refusing to cite a specific law as the cause of tribal supremacy in Jordan. However, even he heavily emphasized the need for parties to represent all of Jordan, not a single ideology or ethnic group, a statement which implies that tribal representatives currently fail to do so.

Despite this overt refusal to blame the government for tribal dominance in political affairs, the Zam Zam representative was firm in his belief that the established government is not interested in strengthening democracy in Jordan. He expounded on this towards the end of the interview, stating that the laws currently in place to help parties are merely decorations to make it appear as if the government is promoting democracy. In reality, the government is threatened by strong political parties, as those parties could cause entrenched officials to lose both political power and the financial benefits they currently reap from said power. The IAF representative agreed that the financial benefits accrued by government officials is a reason for the suppression of political parties. Similarly, the representative from Al-Quds, while avoiding allusions to government corruption, explicitly stated that the government wants to weaken political parties, not strengthen them.

In part because of this belief, all three of these subjects believed that parties themselves have little opportunity to increase their own political sway, instead asserting that parties will remain weak in Jordan until either the government imposes reform or there is a grassroots movement demanding reform. To this effect, all three party representatives agreed that, if in power, they would pressure the government to enact reforms on election law; the laws governing political parties; and, the laws determining how governments are formed. The secularist party representative was more optimistic about the possibility of reform, stating that if the party is able to affect change on the government, they will gain support from the people. The representatives from Zam Zam and Al-Quds disagreed, asserting that the Jordanian government will not cede more power to parties unless the people force them to do so. The IAF agreed with this implicitly, focusing on the fact that parties are less able to effectuate change because they are only able to

operate in the political landscape as it currently exists: dominated by those in favor of maintaining the status-quo.

The government official explained well why this status-quo is accepted by the population: Jordan is not bloody. The government handled the Arab Spring protests without the loss of life, and more recent protests have similarly been handled peacefully to an extent greater even than some western countries. He specifically cited France as an example. The official also noted that the government is able to use neighboring Syria as a warning against mass political upheaval. The representative from Al-Quds elaborated on this, noting that the government was able to make small political reforms to appease the masses, while maintaining all meaningful political power. Thus appeased, and fearing a descent into an anarchy similar to that of their northern neighbor, the masses accept the status quo, electing tribal members to help alleviate immediate economic suffering, and thereby failing to demand larger democratic reforms.

Yet the above explanations fail to take into account the emotional dynamic at play, one described simply by the Sheikh when asked why people vote for tribe members and not party representatives: blood is more important than ideology. People are always connected to their tribe, regardless of intellectual disagreement. The same cannot be said for political parties, which, the Sheikh pointed out, only exist as long as people agree. This reality means that tribal connections are more enduring, and therefore perceived as more important to Jordanians. This influences election day choices.

While the Sheikh found this state of affairs to be not only natural, but also desirable, the rest of the interview subjects disagreed, believing the country would benefit from parties having a stronger influence on the government.

Discussion:

Despite his disagreement on the question of the tribal system's merit in modern democracy, the overarching message of the Sheikh's words was a far less contentious claim: tribalism is an omnipresent and inalienable part of Jordanian society. Other interview subjects hinted at this reality: the IAF representative prefacing his tirade against the government's influence in tribal affairs by noting his respect for the social links between families in implicit deference to the need for some amount of tribal influence; the secularist party representative asserting that a party can only be established in Jordan if public figures are attracted to the cause, conceding that the Jordanian people are too entrenched in the tribal system to be entreated directly; the government official acknowledging the ongoing prevalence of *wasta*, a word originating in the tribal tradition of conflict resolution that encompasses the English concepts of nepotism, brokerage, and cronyism, with an emphasis on "reliance on family and recognition of kinship hierarchy" (Al-Ramahi 2008). Each of these statements warrants a larger discussion, such as the possibility that Jordan's political parties remain cadre parties by Duverger's definition (Rowaan 2015), or the impact of a socio/political/economic system grounded in *wasta*. (See Al-Ramahi 2008, Jackson 2019, Feghali 2014). However, the discussion most pertinent to this research stems from the fact that, although eighty-three percent of Jordanians believe *wasta* is a form of corruption, sixty-five percent deem it necessary to get a job (Azzeh 2017). In other words, while people are dissatisfied with the current system, the majority find it indispensable to financial and professional success.

It is statistics like this that gives many of the interview subjects hope for future change. While the government official expounded on Jordan's historical success in intelligent protest management, other governments were also successful in this way. The Lebanese government,

for example, also succeeded in handling the Arab Spring protests with relatively little bloodshed, and ultimately suppressed the 2011 movement's rhetoric through focus on the mounting war in Syria and a fear of similar anarchy spreading across national borders (Asfour 2012). Yet this fear did not outlive the decade, and in 2019, in response to worsening economic conditions, Lebanon once again descended into political discord, with protestors demanding a complete governmental system change. The comparison between Lebanon and Jordan is not perfect, but the similarities give credence to the closing remarks of the representative from Al-Quds, who asserted that the "culture of fear" which the government attempts to foster in Jordan is gone; that people are willing to risk everything when they have nothing left to lose; and, that there is a chance for similar protests to break out in Jordan after the next election.

But the Jordanian people are far from having nothing to lose. The representative of the secularist party framed this well, pointing out that, while dissatisfaction with the political and economic status quo abounds, Jordanians will never starve: each knows at least one family member with a job who is able and willing to provide enough money for his/her struggling tribal affiliate to live. The government official agreed with the latter point, adding that having a tribal member in the government becomes indispensable for such a tribal support system. Such a connection not only ensures that said member has a steady income stream, it also gives rise to the possibility that said connection can provide a tribal affiliate with another government job. This trend is, in part, responsible for the bloated public sector of the Jordanian economy, estimated to account for over a third of total employment, far higher than the world average twenty-one percent (OECD). As the economy weakens and private sector jobs become harder to find, people's reliance on this system of *wasta*, and thus on the government, increases.

The undeniable impact of this system is another example of the manner in which the Jordanian government benefits from strong tribal affiliation, lending additional merit to the Al-Quds and IAF representatives' belief that the government fosters tribal loyalty. Their citation of the SNTV law as proof is shared by many: "Critics say the formula deepens tribalism and favours government loyalists because voters are more likely to vote for a fellow tribesman whereas in the past there was a greater chance the votes could be spread out among the different open seats" (Smaayeh 2010). More concretely, Al-Sharif points out that regardless of the intention of the law, it certainly had the effect of weakening Islamicist parties, as they lost half of their seats in the Lower House in the election after the law was enacted (2017). Al-Sharif provides further evidence for governmental support of tribes, recounting an event in October of 2017:

"[T]he speaker of the Upper House (Senate), Faisal al-Fayez, had to retract a statement he made a day earlier when he said tribalism has become an impediment to political reforms. The second day he was forced to make another statement extolling the virtues of tribes and their role in Jordanian society, adding that 'our first loyalty is to the throne and the king and second to the tribe.'" (2017)

The government official did not directly confirm or deny the government's stance on tribes in Jordan, equivocating that Jordanians believe their identity is inexorably tied to their tribal affiliation. This is unsurprising, as the focus of the interview was the government's efforts to promote political parties, the task with which this official is charged.

Despite this charge, the official implied that the government's desire to cede power to political parties is not absolute. For example, when discussing the roles of the Ministry of Political Development, he emphasized that the King fully supports the IAF and believes they

should be allowed to take power if they have the mandate of the people. However, he added that if they were in power, they would not be allowed to renew war with Israel, as the government believes such a war would be detrimental to the country. While such a comment may seem innocuous, it reflects the government's continuing efforts to control political parties and limit their ability to implement the will of the masses. The Zam Zam representative lamented these efforts, asserting that the aforementioned ministry should not control Jordanian politics, affirming that: if the people want war with Israel, it should happen.

The literature agrees with the concern of the Zam Zam representative, as traditional party theory holds that the original purpose of parties is to better link government action with popular opinion (Nueman 1956). Government attempts to diminish this link, even on a single issue, weakens parties' ability to do this, weakening party strength.

Government efforts to diminish party strength suggest a larger question, that of causality: does the undeniable weakness of parties in Jordan cause increased tribal influence, or does the traditional and government augmented strength of tribes cause decreased party influence? Interview subjects disagreed on this point. The representatives from Zam Zam, the secularist party and the government asserted that the increase in tribal affiliation is a result of the failure of parties to provide the same economic alleviation which tribes are able to provide. The Sheikh, took the opposite side, asserting that tribal connections have always been stronger than the ideological perspectives relied upon by parties. The IAF and Al-Quds representative agreed, albeit with a slightly different argument: that the government formed by parties in 1956 demonstrates the potential success of parties in Jordan. The reason parties are weaker today: government efforts to strengthen tribal loyalties. All of these arguments have merit, and there is undoubtedly a feedback loop, whereby weak parties cause increased tribal reliance, which in turn

weakens parties, which in turn further strengthens tribes. However, based on the millennia old tradition of Jordanian tribalism, and far more recent introduction of the democratic system and the party sub-system which inevitably accompanies it (Satori 1976), this researcher agrees with the Sheikh on the ultimate cause. Tribalism and the tradition of *wasta* is ingrained in the Jordanian psyche, and the fact that these phenomena have come to the Western limelight only recently does not change the reality that tribes have always played a more important role in Jordanian society than political parties.

Conclusion:

While the Sheikh is correct in asserting the omnipresence and significance of tribalism in modern Jordanian society, his insistence that tribal connections rightfully have preeminence over ideological ones highlights the fundamental challenge in Jordanian democracy: the political subjugation of national interest to tribal interest. So long as this remains the norm, political parties will continue to fail; people will continue to rely on tribes on account of economic necessity; and the cycle which reinforces the subjugation of ideological association to familial association will be perpetuated.

This is not to say that tribalism and democracy are untenable co-habitants of a nation-state. To say this would be to ignore a millennium of European history, where smaller groups of loyalty and affiliation existed within larger, nationalistic kingdoms and states. A peasant was loyal to his family and village, who in turn were loyal to a minor lord, who in turn was loyal to another lord, who in turn was loyal to a king. The modern United States can be seen to exhibit a similar form of expanding and overlapping loyalties:

“We find a sense of belonging, of unconditional pride, in our neighborhood and community; in our ethnic and social identities and their rituals; among our fellow

enthusiasts. . . And then, most critically, there is the *Über*-tribe that constitutes the nation-state, a megatribe that unites a country around shared national rituals, symbols, music, history, mythology, and events, that forms the core unit of belonging that makes a national democracy possible” (Sullivan 2017).

The phrasing of an “*Über*-tribe” is reminiscent of an aspect of Jordanian tribalism mentioned by the Sheikh: smaller families exist within larger families, with the larger family being the more important socially. If loyalty to this larger family was effectively nested inside a larger loyalty to the Jordanian nation, as occurs in established western democracies, it would not retard democratic development: “Tribalism only destabilizes a democracy when it calcifies into something bigger and more intense than our smaller, multiple loyalties; when it rivals our attachment to the nation as a whole” (Sullivan 2017).

However, while the medieval feudal systems in the world provide historical precedent for the prioritization of national loyalty in other countries, no such history exists in the Middle East. Instead, tribal loyalties predating most modern countries are pitted against loyalty to hundred-year-old nation states, artificially imposed by colonial powers. This discrepancy is further exacerbated by the ineffectiveness of the Jordanian government, which has failed to provide the same economic assistance and social welfare support which tribes continue to provide to their constituent members. Political parties, do not escape public blame for this, having continually failed to translate the will of the public into government action. While this is largely due to historical and contemporary government efforts to limit party power, often by strengthening tribal influence, the public rightfully sees tribes, and not parties, as the more effective method of ensuring continued, personal well-being.

It is unclear how to change this reality. The most straightforward answer: by increasing government responsiveness to the will of the people, is not presenting a solution, but merely restating the problem. Many believe the answer lies in political parties, and there is truth to this as well: parties' superior ability to affect government change is well documented. However, so long as parties are hamstrung by a government which is, at best, only half-heartedly committed to increasing party power and efficacy, they will continue to fail. But this causality speaks to the root of the issue: the government rules, not through the mandate of the people, but through the mandate of the Western powers which established the Hashemites as constitutional monarchs and which continue to sustain the government monetarily. So beholden, the government remains a poor representative of its people, unable to give parties, and through them, the people, full control of the government for fear of losing the foreign aid on which they rely. The peace with Israel is the quintessential example of this: a political decision implemented and maintained at the behest of Western desires, not the desires of people. Tribes are not so susceptible to Western influence. This is the cause of tribal loyalty's precedence over national loyalty, which in turn hinders democratic progress in the country: the greater ability of tribes to be responsive to the needs and desires of the people.

Study Limitations:

While the researcher attempted to analyze the intersection of tribalism and democracy from a variety of perspectives, the largest limitation to this study is its scope. The one tribal leader interviewed cannot be assumed to be indicative of all tribes in Jordan, and ideally this study would have been able to compare his thoughts to the thoughts of individuals in a similar position. The fact that only one tribal leader was interviewed also has the possibility of giving the study an anti-tribal system bias, as the other five interviews conducted were all firmly of the

belief that tribes played a negative role in politics. This potential bias is only compounded by the researchers innate unfamiliarity with the tribal system. Despite this, the researcher made every effort to consider the potential positive impact of tribes.

In addition, as mentioned in the methodology section, it would have been desirable to interview a leftist party in order to analyze the potential impact of their political leanings on their beliefs about tribalism.

Another potential bias of this study is that only the intellectual elite were interviewed. The study thus fails to take into account the opinion of the average Jordanian directly. Ideally, a survey would have been distributed to this effect, however, time limitations prevented this. Instead, the research is dependent on what people more directly involved in political or tribal affairs think the masses believe.

Recommendations for Future Study:

While this study focuses on the role of tribalism in the political sphere, the research only scratched the surface of tribalism's deep-seated role in Jordanian culture. Further studies could analyze this impact further, investigating tribal influence in the economic and social activity of Jordanians, especially considering *wasta* and its effect on society.

Similarly, this study focused only on Jordan. Another study could be conducted in a different Arab country, investigating the similarities of the tribal-political intersection across the Arab world.

On a broader political note, over the course of this study, many interview subjects mentioned the importance of both female, and youth political participation. Another study could analyze the correlation between these factors and the health of a democracy. Possible operational

definitions of youth and female political participation include voter registration, voter turnout, political party membership, representation in elected bodies, etc.

In addition, several interview subjects discussed the influence of religion on political parties and voting patterns. This could give rise to a variety of studies, including, but not limited to, a comparison of the importance of religious issues in politics in the Arab world to the importance of such issues in Western democracies; an analysis of how economic factors influence the popularity of religious parties; and an examination of the effect of religion on the propaganda of both religious and non-religious parties in the region.

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