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Hirak and *Hosha*: Modalities of Collective Action in Jordan in the Wake of the Arab Spring

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Abstract

This essay considers how the rural and tribal have been obscured from prevailing scholarly accounts of unrest and protest in the years since the Arab Uprisings of 2010–2012, and what this might mean for wider scholarly theorizations of protest and revolution. It draws on fieldwork in central Jordan, especially with Hirak Dhiban, where historical circumstances render visible dynamics also significant elsewhere. It takes as a heuristic binary two broad discursive modalities of seemingly dissimilar collective action that in fact reference and relate to each other in various revealing ways: on the one hand the politically populist and self-consciously leftist Hirak protest movements, prominent in the waves of protest since 2011, and on the other *hosha*—"tribal clashes." It considers how contestations over the legitimacy, revolutionary potential, and moral valence of protests often hinge on discursive claims that, in a sense, Hirak is *hosha*, or *hosha*, Hirak. It engages with anthropological theories to interpret protest as a generative and affective process, rooted in local histories and imaginaries, even while responding to wider events. It calls for a broader reappraisal of where revolutionary potential is located and how it is recognized in anthropological and historical scholarship.

Keywords: Jordan; Arab Spring; Hirak; protest; revolution; tribes; communitas; prefiguration

The paradox of Jordan's political stability despite its artificial borders, economic precarity, and lack of popular legitimacy has long preoccupied scholars. At a high level, Jordan's role as a Western client might explain its survival of waves of mass protest from 2011 that toppled many of its neighbors, but at the social and ethnographic level, various scholars have attempted to explain the local mediations that sustain geopolitical patronage. Explanations have been sought in the Hashemite monarchy's religious and historical prestige, the East Banker–Palestinian divide, and —the focus of this essay—the sociopolitical role of tribes, which is often seen as reproducing state-promoted conservative, pro-monarchic discourse (Massad 2001).

When I began working on Jordan as a graduate student, I encountered a wide political literature focused on regime survival (Beck and Hüser 2015; Ryan 2018, 2025; Elkahlout and Hadid 2021), which portrayed Jordan's frequent protests as too routinized to threaten the state. Jordanian protest seemed an unpromising terrain for scholars, especially in comparison with the more dramatic upheavals elsewhere in the region.

Nonetheless, collective action became central to my fieldwork in Madaba, Dhiban, and the surrounding area of rural central Jordan between 2017 and 2019. Initially interested in the colonial history of tribal categories—and mindful of critiques of the scholarly obsession with Jordanian tribalism—my interlocutors directed my attention to political protest, tribal demonstrations, and violence, and to the ways these overlapped. Tribal clashes were discussed and reported in the national media but rarely analyzed in the same terms as political protests and labor movements. They were depoliticized and temporally displaced; a relic of the past, unlike the networked protests of the Arab uprisings. Tribes entered the normative political reading of Jordan's protests (if at all) primarily as a factor in regime survival.

Jillian Schwedler's *Protesting Jordan* (2022) began to expose this oversight, arguing that even routinized protests can shape political life. She shows how protest and resistance—often mobilized through tribal categories—have shaped and been shaped by state-making in Jordan through a dialectical process dating back to before the state's founding in 1921, as a colonial client regime that grew around sites of resistance. She distinguishes between instrumental, policy-focused protests and more transgressive calls for structural change, noting that these forms interact and co-constitute Jordan's protest landscape. Building on this, I propose a heuristic binary—Hirak and *hosha*—to show how protests in Jordan are entangled with imaginaries and repertoires of tribal collective action.

Since 2011, widespread, transgressive unrest (unlike Schwedler's "routinized" protests) has periodically erupted into everyday life, including in Madaba. Waves of demonstrations drew in ideologically and socially diverse participants, rallying popular fury against morally charged concepts like "corruption" in January 2011–November 2012, the summers of 2016 and 2018, and winter 2018–2019. These waves were sometimes dubbed (retrospectively) a *habba* (literally "rage," often translated as "uprising"), named after the month they occurred. While mass urban protests were sometimes permitted but increasingly routinized and marginalized, more contentious acts—especially in rural areas—involved encampments, roadblocks, and sharper critiques of the regime and royal family, prompting harsher state responses. In each case, overtly political protests coincided with waves of "tribal" (and thus supposedly non-political) violence and unrest.

In Madaba, I observed how nationally oriented Hirak protests were entangled with tribal forms of collective action. This entanglement operated at multiple levels: in state discourse, in protestors' counter-narratives, and in the everyday lives of participants. As Jordan's "soft" authoritarianism hardened, understanding what happens to currents of dissent as they are driven underground necessitates thinking through these entanglements, revealing dynamics particularly visible in Jordan, but relevant elsewhere.

The Scholarly and Anthropological "Arab Spring"

In reorientating toward protest, I followed a common path for anthropologists working in the wake of the Arab Spring. Surveys of Middle Eastern anthropology

(e.g., Slyomovics 2013; Joseph 2015: 28) suggest the Orientalist tendency to trivialize sustained popular political activity[1] persisted in regional work even after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In reaction, anthropologists working on the Middle East in the last fifteen years have increasingly turned to social movements and urban protest, following the zeitgeist in the wake of the Arab Uprisings of 2010–2012. Funding opportunities and eventually publications followed years after the revolutionary wave receded, with the typical academic lag (Schielke 2014).

The delay in deep empirical studies did not stop the emergence of early, enthusiastic narratives claiming a fundamental political rupture. Many focused on the affect and aesthetics of urban protests—carnivalesque joy, transcendent togetherness, and Durkheimian "collective effervescence" (Werbner, Webb, and Spellman-Poots 2014). Much work also highlighted the potential of Arab "youth" (Joseph 2013), defined by social position as much as age, and reimagined from a demographic burden or fundamentalist threat into a revolutionary vanguard (Sukarieh 2012). This youth was often portrayed as precarious, with class-like properties (Standing 2011), and with urban or peri-urban aspirations. Dabashi (2012), in one of the earliest books on the revolutions, saw potential to end the region's "postcolonial moment," envisioning a new non-Western universalism rooted in the "cosmopolitan worldliness of Muslim societies." Others used the Arab Spring as a springboard for activism and scholarship on gay rights (Needham 2012) and democratic knowledge (Sadiki 2015). Even as optimism faded amid authoritarian backlash and civil war in Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, and Libya (Feldman 2020), interest in protest endured, reframed as "tragic resistance" or Berlantian "cruel optimism," with activists insisting "the revolution continues" (Armbrust 2019).

Anthropologists have emphasized the novelty of the Arab revolutions, inspiring new ways of theorizing protest and revolution, and even new praxis. Following Time Magazine's 2011 naming of the protestor as Person of the Year, Chris Dole (2012) linked the Arab Spring and Occupy into a single metanarrative of a protest "moment," sharing some common causes and offering mutual inspiration and solidarity. Zeynep Tufekci (2017), describing the "networked protests" of 2011, writes of "a global cultural convergence of protester aspirations and practices. If I squinted and ignored that the language was Turkish, I felt that it could have been almost any twenty-first-century protest square: organized through Twitter, filled with tear gas, leaderless, networked, euphoric, and fragile" (ibid.: xv).

While comparison is useful, ethnographers might look askance at "squinting" past language and culture. As Ciavolella and Boni (2015: 3–4) argue, anthropology is on its strongest ground when it is a "tool for denying both the universality and the stability of political and social organizations." Whether the revolutionary "multitudes are actually struggling against the same enemy—from the Egyptian dictator to the Wall Street financial elite—and for the same idea of alterpolitics" (ibid.: 6) should remain an open question.

Most accounts of the role of social media (Castells 2015; Tufekci 2017) focus on the acephalous quality of these revolutions. Organizing and taking part in mass gatherings that cut across social cleavages seemed to prefigure a more egalitarian, free

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[1]Exemplified in Bernard Lewis's infamous spats with Edward Said over the etymology of *thawra*—the Arabic word used to translate "revolution" (Said 1995[1978]: 315; Lewis 1982).

form of society. Prominent among the intellectual concepts used to explore this tendency, and the ideological indeterminacy of these (non-)movements, were horizontalism (Sitrin 2014) and the notion of prefiguration (Bogg 1977) whereby activists resist vertical organization and formal structures and aim to enact and embody their political project for the future in their present.

Even when such labels were not evident, they appear as strong themes. Samuli Schielke (2015: 256) describes how suburban protestors from beyond the initial Cairene activist bubble began to experience moments of a "lived utopia of meaningful life." Through public collective action, and a preparedness to die to perfect an imperfect world, the revolutionaries of 25 January and afterward in Egypt "lived out" their demands for freedom and dignity. Although Schielke is more existential than political, his account follows Graeber's concept of prefiguration in anarchist-inflected direct action, summed up in his famous aphorism that "direct action is, ultimately, the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free" (Graeber 2012: 4). This turns up regularly in accounts of the immediate aftermath of the 25 January Revolution where protestors and residents asserted their capacity for dignity and action beyond state coordination by beautifying the urban environment (Winegar 2011), and in the witty visual art and music that accompanied the political transition in Egypt. It gestures at an important element of the experience of protestors, of something carnivalesque, liberating, unstable, and generative. But, of course, how one goes about "acting as if one is already free" varies considerably in different social and historical contexts.

This experience of a prefigurative break in the normative social order has been suggestive, to some anthropologists, of ways to grasp revolutions using "traditional" theoretical concepts from the ethnographic comfort zone of lived experience, anticipation, and affect. Thomassen (2012), reflecting on the theoretical weakness of anthropology in engaging with revolutions in Arab Uprisings, reworked Victor Turner's (1967, 1988) theory of ritual transformation. Key here is Turner's characterization of the middle liminal phase of Van-Gennep's typology from *Rites of Passage* as *communitas*—a time of "antistructure" in which normal social relations are upended; of fluidity and ritual danger, where tricksters rise to the fore. The idea of revolution as a *communitas*-generating political ritual was taken up by Armbrust (2013, 2019) in his work on the Egyptian revolution. Turner's original conception of rituals remained bound up in synchronic ahistorical time, concerned with explaining how *communitas* eventually fades back into structure. In contrast, Thomassen and Armbrust's work combines with anthropological conceptions of the event as generative, not merely as an instantiation of social patterns (Kapferer 2010). They explore what might happen when the liminality of communitas generates something new and unexpected, even if it is not what the revolutionaries-as-ritual-practitioners intended.

The repurposing of Turner's ritual transformations suggests a broadening of the anthropological study of "revolutions" out beyond those settings and forms usually considered by political scientists. Rommel's (2021) work on how the revolution was experienced through an affective change in Egypt's football fandom provides an ethnographic exploration of these themes, complimenting Armbrust's focus on media and mediation. He describes how the "emotionally charged and highly politicized 'football bubble'" (2021:14) of the Mubarak era was burst by the revolution. This led to a transformation in modes of masculinity and the relationship between football ultras and the state—an example of the potential in

revolutions, as times of communitas, for generative events. The loud occupation of space, wild sociality, and potential violence of working-class football fans can be seen as a form of liminal sociality spilling into the revolution, taking it beyond Tahrir into working class and informal neighborhoods. Yet while anthropologists have been comfortable recognizing the revolutionary role of football ultras as precursors to the communitas of the protest, the not-dissimilar demonstrations of violent masculinity inherent in the so-called "tribal clash" remain a more problematic source of revolutionary potential.

Martin Holbraad, while largely rejecting Turner's framework for its socially conservative returns to structure, has gone down a similar (if vaguer) route. Drawing on the Arab Spring (as an event), among a variety of historical and ethnographic accounts of revolution, Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi (2020: 64–65, 151–54) consider how revolutionaries seek to bring about "new worlds" by "overcoming … local particularities." They head toward "a transcendent new political horizon disentangled from the immanence of present, quotidian life." For them, revolution is "cosmogonic" with the potential to bring into being new social worlds, and an attempt to transform or overcome normative values for new utopian ones. The role of ethnography here is to examine what kind of worlds protestors, counter protestors, and bystanders imagine are being brought about, and the tensions within such imaginaries, including how they relate to "local cosmologies." Though dismissive of universalist and rupture-centered accounts of revolution that reproduce the European political imagination, their approach reinstates rupture and novelty ethnographically. Yet in a slightly different way, their book presages the argument I make here. Crucially, they sought this cosmogonic imagination not in vanguard revolutionary theorists but in those peasants, subalterns, and indigenous groups who, while sometimes triggering revolts, were often imagined as "structurally incapable of bringing about revolutionary change" (ibid: 153). At one point, suggestively, they draw on Cherstich's work on Libya (2020: 58–62) to ask pertinent questions about why "most of the analyses of revolution have tended to conceal the role of … tribe in order to focus on emerging new forms of sociality" (ibid.: 52). Cherstich points to how Libya's history of tribally-constituted resistance to Italian colonial rule and imaginaries of a past of tribal rule without coercive state apparatus informed both the rise of Gaddafi in 1969 and his overthrow in 2011. For them, tribe is a lens through which revolution and its relation to "state and non-state politics" can look very different to European notions. Their resurrection of "segmentary" logic—balanced opposition between groups sharing a name and reputation, such as tribes, within a social setting with some ideal of acephaly—and their nebulous treatment of "local cosmologies" (how bounded, and at what scale?) requires further development to be fully convincing. But the broader point, of the tribe as an idiom of political action with the potential to parochialize European notions of revolution, is one I take up here.

The Arab Spring in Jordan

Jordanians keenly followed the uprisings of 2010–2011. While Jordanian protests had their own proximate causes and contexts, protestors saw parallel problems in other Arab countries and took inspiration from them in how to protest. The use of social media in organizing and overnight encampments to occupy public spaces rapidly

proliferated with Jordanian protestors proclaiming solidarity with Egypt, other Arab countries, and even the Occupy movement (Ammon News 2011). Pre-existing networks of labor activists, having campaigned for a year in 2010, were quick to link their campaigns to this globalized moment.

Chants and Facebook posts in Jordan's protests directly borrowed from Tahrir Square and such as "bread, freedom, and social justice," (ʿaīsh, ḥurrīyya, ʿadālat ijtimʿaīa) and later "bread, freedom, and dignity" (ʿaīsh, ḥurriyya, karāma). Other protest chants related to international economic governance that rose to prominence relate to a context that Occupy and anti-globalization activists would recognize: "Do you know who rules us—the IMF!" (btarifu min yahkmnā, sunduq ad-dawlī ʿalaynā) (Ababneh 2018). Although resisting the effects of structural adjustment initiatives and rejecting neoliberal economic policy and the privatization of key national industries has been a theme of almost every Jordanian protest since the 1990s, opposition to individual policies has been subsumed within far wider and more strident calls for a change in the mode of government, if not of rulers, since 2011.

On 24 March 2011, Jordanian protestors attempted a mass encampment within the large roundabout next to the interior ministry—duwār al-dākhlīa—with some shouting that dākhlīa would be the Jordanian people's Tahrīr (referring to Cairo and its Arabic meaning "liberation"). Some young men even stated, "We are all Bouazizi." However, differences emerged in the degree to which most protestors were comfortable calling for the fall of the regime. The protestors at the encampment took the most famous chant from Cairo, "the people demand the fall of the regime" (al-shaʿb yurīd isqāṭ al-niẓām), but, influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood, changed "fall" to "reform" (iṣlāḥ) (Susser 2013). When counter-protestors and security forces broke up the encampment, no sustained effort at mass occupation recurred, though street marches and periodic attempts at encampment continued. In the summer and autumn of 2012, after changes of government and limited reform had quieted protests, the government reduced grain and fuel subsidies under pressure from international creditors, delivering further pain for the poor. A more violent and diffuse wave of protest began, characterized by rural roadblocks of burning tires and direct fighting with police and security forces in provincial towns. It was in this moment, when I was conducting fieldwork, that it seemed the target of protest was shifting, from pressuring the state's redistributive arm to directly resisting and ultimately dismantling its retributive arm.

Despite not leading to full regime change, the wave of protest in Jordan coinciding with the broader Arab Uprisings of 2010–2012 kept returning. It has ushered in new forms of collective action and created new and unexpected alliances and solidarities across Jordan's social spectrum involving new ideas of patriotism going beyond conventional ethno-social divides between original and immigrant-origin Jordanians (Doughan 2020). This necessitated new responses from the regime and set the scene for periodic resurgences of mass protest.

The various ways Jordanians made sense of these protests also partook of specific, local, rural histories of resistance, in ways contrary to the wider anthropological literature on Arab protests. It was in the small rural, local movements called the Hirak, and especially the Hirak of the town of Dhiban, among self-consciously tribal Bedouin protestors, that the full Tahrir chant (with isqāṭ rather than iṣlāḥ) was first voiced openly in 2011. It was here too that people started to describe Hirak as not an uprising (habba) but a thawra—revolution. It was from such places that periodically reignited mass unrest in the capital—a process Schwedler (2022: 280) evocatively

describes as "the periphery converges on the center." It was the comparatively radical speech of these Hiraks, as Doughan (2018: 162) says, that fundamentally shifted the popular Jordanian understanding of the meaning and ends of *iḥtijāj* (protest), from calling for state correction of unjust acts and policy errors to the overthrow of unjust rulers.

Overlooked Roots: Local and Tribal Imaginaries in the Arab Uprisings

This might seem like a localizing and exceptionalizing intervention (the cliché that Jordan is exceptionally "tribal"). However, I see this as contributing to a general reappraisal of what the Arab Spring narratives overlooked. Across the countries that experienced sustained protests following 2011, rural and tribal protest has been marginalized as lagging behind urban centers and even retarding them as a source of counterrevolution, with important consequences for the ways protest has been contained, subverted, or rendered invisible.

The term "Arab Spring," used in English and Arabic (*al-rabīʿ al-ʿarabī*), is an invention of Euro-American commentary;[2] it implies a parallel with the 1858 Spring of Nations in Europe and, thus, a temporal lag of 160 years behind Europe. Few scholars endorsed simplistic framings of the Arab "quest for freedom" in European terms; it was more a matter of attention. McDonald (2019) and Swedenburg (2012) both make the point that international sources emphasized hip-hop over other musical genres found in the Egyptian protests to increase their relatability to Western audiences.[3] Massad (2012, 2014) points to how Euro-American media sought out the colorful street art of Cairo and Tunis, marginalizing other voices not using democratic, liberal, rights-based language.

There was a tendency (often justifiably) to write about the rapidity of social and political transformation as rupture—a full social revolution in the sense developed by European theorists.[4] But a focus on unprecedented and novel "eventness" obscures the Mashriq's long history of revolutionary struggle. It erroneously assumes the Arab Spring came out of a landscape of authoritarian quietism and religious fundamentalism, with all prior secular revolutionary movements suppressed and forgotten. As recently as 2012, Fisk (2012: 18) could talk of a "deeply rooted tendency in Arab peoples to tolerate a lesser evil: better a dictatorship than anarchy, better peace than freedom, better secularism than religious divisions." Feldman (2020: iv) describes the Arab Spring as a "noble, tragic series of events in which, for the first time in recent Middle Eastern history, Arabic-speaking peoples took free, collective political action as they sought to achieve self-determination." It is not clear why the Palestinian Intifadas and

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[2]The term was first coined by Marc Lynch in a Foreign Policy journal article (Lynch 2011) entitled "Obama's Arab Spring," following which Obama himself took up the term. It probably entered Arabic through the speeches of Mohamed al-Baradei in Egypt.

[3]Swedenburg (2012: np) states: "The emphasis on rap makes it seem that Westerners, through the export of a 'Western' art form, somehow played a major role in overthrowing Husni Mubarak. This notion allows far too easy an identification between Westerners and the Tahrir revolutionaries and makes for too quick an 'understanding' of their movement, as if it is all about Arab youth overthrowing the older, passé generation's traditional and puritanical culture, in order to usher in a more tolerant, modern and U.S.-friendly order."

[4]For instance, to borrow Armbrust's (2018) exemplar of the type, see Theda Skocpol's (1979: 287) "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structure, accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below."

the high tide of anti-colonial Arab Socialism in the 1960s do not count, nor, for instance, the Dhufar revolution in Oman, with its links to wider "red internationalism" and to continued anticolonial struggle in the putatively conservative and quietist Gulf (Takriti 2013).

This meant other routes to revolution were overlooked, and implicit European hierarchies were retained; not only the civilizational hierarchy of Orientalism, but that of Marxist revolutionary potential. Even though many Hirakis saw themselves as leftist or even Marxist, they were rarely classified as such internationally, nor did they receive statements of solidarity in the way that the Tahrir encampments did. A continuation of the general Marxist disinterest in peasants and the rural, despite the removal of socio-economically static Barbarian and Asiatic modes of production from the cannon (Sawer 2012), is partly to blame. How much revolutionary potential might be seen in the social settings from which the Jordanian Hirak emerged? Most protestors' recent ancestors were semi-nomadic pastoralists and they retained strong attachments to smallholding agriculture and military employment. Their historical imaginaries of the pastoral past, of arms-bearing and violence, extracting surplus through raiding and tribute (*khuwa*), might make them seem less a revolutionary vanguard and more a violent lumpenproletariat (or *balṭajiyya*) from which counterrevolutionary backlashes emerge. Bedouin may not have been a "sack of potatoes," as Marx (2008[1858]) memorably described the French small-holding peasantry, but the ways they cohered were hardly suggestive of class consciousness. Even the more optimistic later formulations in Marxist theory of the potential of peasants to "leapfrog" straight to revolution without going through capitalist industrial proletarianization are not easily applied to such social groups. Since the 1960s, anthropologists working in the critical agrarian tradition have been at the forefront of reappraising the peasant as a revolutionary subject (Thomassen 2012: 681), but less so tribesmen and nomads, outside of the general interest of James Scott in ungoverned places, and the enthusiasm of postmodernist philosophers for nomads as metaphor.

This thinking is less prevalent in some strains of Arab revolutionary and leftist writing, and indeed many Jordanian Bedouin developed longstanding sympathies for Arab nationalism and Ba'thism.[5] Crucially for the ethnographic material I present, one of the founding figures of Hirak Dhiban and one of my key interlocutors, Muhammad al-Snaid, drew his ideological orientation from his mentor Naheed Hattar, a leftist Jordanian activist from a Christian family from Salt.[6] Until his

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[5]The leading Bani Sakhr shaykhs of the interwar period, Mithqal al-Fayiz and Haditha Khraisha, fostered links with Arab nationalist and anticolonial leaders and intellectuals, giving them sanctuary against the French colonial administration in Syria (Abu Nowar 1989: 196). They were demonstrating their own sovereignty and ability to offer honorable protection against powerful empires, according to principles of shaykhly conduct in north Arabia at that time. But this does not preclude a more general and ideological interest in their ideas; several prominent Jordanian Bedouin joined the Syrian Baʿth party in the 1960s, such as Hakim al-Fayīz.

[6]Often dismissed as what Schwedler (2022: 159) terms a "radical nativist" for his opposition to Palestinian influence in Jordan, Naheed Hattar was a polemic opponent of what he referred to as the "Zionist conspiracy" to create an "alternative homeland" for Palestinians in Jordan. But he also referred to himself as a Marxist—if not a doctrinaire one—coming at Marx via Mahdi Amel and Gramsci. He centered his political project on the notion of liberating the "toilers" from corrupt compradors and aristocrats (Hattar 1998). The continuing controversies over Hattar's political thought in Jordan, and of Hirak in general, is suggestive of some of the ways in which the left and right political spectrum may prove a misleading heuristic in Jordan.

assassination in 2016,[7] Hattar wrote extensive works of commentary and political theory and had a central role in the surge of labor movement activism that preceded and led into the Hirak protests of 2011, becoming a heroic martyr for many Hirak activists. He wrote "The tribes tended towards Arab nationalist and 'leftist' values … meaning emphasizing the state's socio-economic role and the rights of the poor, and hostility towards the private sector and the rich. … [This is because of] the egalitarian Bedouin peasant values, the aversion to trade and its traditions, the condemnation of wealth and extravagance, and the priority of political tribal status over financial status" (Hattar 1998: np).

Hattar attempted to build a historical picture of East Jordan as a hybrid Bedouin-peasant agricultural society of "sons of the ploughing" (*ibnāʾ al-ḥarath*). Proudly resistant to compulsion and with a distinctive tradition of hospitality, they were in opposition to the Ottoman class of landowners and desert tribal leaders, who later became colonial elites, but also to neoliberal technocrats and Islamists. Many Jordanians would dispute this picture. It has, however, widely influenced Hirak activists in Dhiban, linking their struggle both to nationalist opposition politicians and to the wider history of Arab revolutionary and anticolonial struggle.

Tribal Specters

To bring this overlooked context into view necessitates a reckoning with the anthropological specter of tribes as a politically potent imaginary, at least partly distinct from their historically contingent reality. A term eschewed in much recent scholarship to escape its primitivist baggage and associations with evolutionary, civilizational hierarchies (see Sneath 2023; Guha 2021), tribe remains in media and policy literature on the Middle East (Gonzales 2009). In Lila Abu-Lughod's (1989) excoriating post-Saidian review of the regionalist anthropological literature, the continuing myopic attention to tribes and segmentation was cast as a problematic zone of theory. However, in the subsequent refocusing, the places and settings left out were not so much re-examined or reinterpreted in new less-Orientalizing ways, but rather ignored, as to study them was to risk reproducing the oriental gaze.[8] As Hughes (2023) notes (citing Assi 2018), colonial authorities and post- or anti-colonial movements and scholars have implicitly shared a high-modernist hostility to people who move around, or to what Judith Scheele (2019) calls the "state-dislike"; as primitivist justification for colonization in the former case, and as an embarrassing hindrance to resisting such a discourse in the latter.

Anthropological attention is returning to the contemporary significance of forms of political life and affiliation once described as tribal, in ways that do more to overturn modernist and structural-functionalist excesses than ignoring the topic. Judith Scheele's work analyzing the significance of these "state-dislike" spaces in

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[7]Hattar was shot on the courthouse steps in Amman during his trial for blasphemy, resulting from his posting a cartoon on Facebook mocking the "God of Da'esh," which his supporters believe was politically motivated.

[8]As Shryock (2021: 514) has pointed out, by 2012 Jessica Winegar and Lara Deeb felt able to claim that "tribal social organization has practically vanished as a topic of concern for scholars," a vanishing that has helped "dispel the image of the region as a tribal, exotic, and isolated place" (Deeb and Winegar 2012: 540). Tribes have not vanished as a topic of concern for most Jordanians outside of a small metropolitan bubble in Amman.

North Africa and the Sahara over the *longue durée* has been important in this correction; rather than being "beyond" or "against" the state, "tribes and states … functioned together, without one ever durably subsuming the other," producing different but mutually recognizable and entangled historical and political imaginations (Scheele 2021: 914).

The 2021 *IJMES* roundtable on tribalism in the modern Middle East (Wien 2021) indicates a wider shift. Dukhan's (2021) intervention on Syria focuses on how autocratic states made use of a resurgence in concepts of tribalism since the 1970s, in ways that suggest not only the historical contingency but durability of tribal forms; tribes are not always premodern antitheses of the state but have a dynamic and contingent relationship to it. The contribution from Andrew Shryock (2021), the preeminent scholarly proponent of tribes in Jordan, writes against a dismissal of historical tribalism in Jordan as colonial effect (contra Massad 2001), and points to how historical imaginaries of honorable hospitality and protection continue to inform political activism and rhetoric. Shryock gestures to how, at times of state stress or conflict, folklorized and nostalgic modes of tribalism can morph into armed militias.

Moreover, the rural basis for larger protests resulting in (urban) revolution is slowly coming into view. Mathilde Fautras (2015) offers a compelling account linking Bouazizi's self-immolation, his family's subsequent mobilization of kin networks, and the wider protests of the Sidi Bouzid region to longstanding campaigns for agrarian justice in the face of land dispossession. In Egypt, anthropologists have been at the forefront in calling attention to actors beyond Tahrir Square and Cairo, including in rural and peri-urban areas (Schielke 2015; Winegar 2012). Most importantly, in Syria, anthropologist Dawn Chatty contends that "in the wake of the 'Arab Uprising,' tribal identity, affiliation and political solidarity have emerged anew as significant elements in the conflict that engulfs the Middle East" (Chatty 2014: 16–17). Focusing on the way tribal politics survived official state anti-tribal policy and rhetoric, Chatty traces the significance of Haurani tribal leadership in sparking the initial March 2011 protests in Dar'ā that marked the beginning of the Syrian Uprising, and the important role of the 'Anizah and Shammar Bedouin confederations in arming and protecting the Syrian National Coalition. Arms-bearing among Bādīa tribes continues to matter.

Alice Wilson (2013) made a similar point a decade ago, from the perspective of the Gdeim Izik protests in Western Sahara that preceded the protests in Tunisia—conventionally seen as the beginning of the Arab Spring—by two months. Wilson argues for attention to "margins and marginality" as useful for "illuminating—through their presumed resistance to, or creativeness as regards—the centre" (2013: 83). Wilson points out that "in a context of presumed connections between urban space, state power and democratic publics … desert protest may seem an unlikely candidate as a regime changing uprising." But this is due to a misplaced "reluctance to recognize the non-sedentary as a political space … [because of] ahistorical conceptions of politically significant spaces and populations" (2013: 91–92).

This turn nevertheless still sits uneasily with post-orientalist sensibilities and requires constant hedging. The veering between fetishizing and dismissing the political potential of tribes and margins in Western scholarship continues. Cherstich, even within Holbraad's wider project, seems an outlier (Cherstich, Holbraad, and Tassi 2020). Anthropologists have been justifiably suspicious of theorizations that rely on essentialized and romanticized views of nomads and

their relationships with statist modernity, notably Deleuze and Guattari's nomadology (see Ciavolella 2015). Yet they have contributed to such moves empirically, "launching … the marginalized into the vanguard" as Thomassen (2012: 681) puts it. They have done so by describing the ways nomadic pastoralists and other people recognized as "tribal" develop pragmatic ways to try to keep elements of the state at arms-length— while engaging with others—and maintain some distinctive social forms (hospitality and protection) in the face of capitalist market penetration. In what follows, I set out how protest in Jordan suggests ways to neither lionize nor dismiss such potential, but to explore its varied ongoing significance in protest.

Hirak in the Lands of *Hosha*

Most Jordanians do not share academic discomfort with the tribal label. Many Jordanians think of themselves as part of named tribal entities, called in Arabic ʿashīra (pl. ʿashaʾir); they are "covered" by such names at various scales, though the significance they place on this is varied and contextual. Such names are seen as cohering an admixture of idioms of descent, political alliance, cohabitation, shared historical experience, and, most importantly for this argument, shared reputation, so that insults to bearers of that name become insults to all covered by it. Some Jordanians use reputation-carrying names to reckon with social relations and to think about social space. Jordanian and Arab media frequently reported on ishtabākāt ʿashāʾirīya (tribal clashes). These typically begin with a social media call to defend tribal honor, followed by vigils, marches, roadblocks, or, more rarely, violence. Such acts blend longstanding registers of rural resistance with newer, networked protest forms, though this intersection remains undertheorized. They also blur familial, local, and national politics.

My interlocutors called these events *hosha*, meaning scuffle or skirmish. The term evokes spontaneous mobilizations to defend tribal honor, based on a certain "prickly" disposition toward matters of shared reputation, ranging from minor campus fights to prolonged feuds and road-blocking protests. Occasionally, as in Ma'an (early 2000s, 2016, 2022), they escalate into lethal violence and open defiance of state authority (see Hamarneh 2003). These actions rely on the credible threat of violence and serve as demonstrations of a tribal name's power to mobilize, especially among restless *shabāb* on social media and in cafés. They overlap with *thār*—organized revenge within genealogical limits—a practice historically targeted by reform efforts. While the threat of *thār* once encouraged amicable settlements (see Watkins 2014), today's *hosha*-like actions often bypass formal dispute resolution, troubling both traditional leaders and the state. The rise of tribal social media (see Hughes 2018) has enabled young men to assert identities like Bani Sakhr or Bani Hamida and organize outside the authority of shaykhs and their guesthouses, sidestepping the procedural norms of tribal justice (Watkins 2014).

I came to understand their place in a broader social landscape, distinct from media portrayals. Around Madaba, villages were mapped through the names and histories of ʿashaʾir, with the "Bedouin Villages"—settled by the Bani Sakhr—carrying a distinct reputation. A historian friend described the southern Balqa, my field site, as "the land of *hosha*." Early in my fieldwork, young Bani Sakhr men showed me a video of a campus fight at Israh University. A student shouted ḥumr al-nuāẓar—the Bani Sakhr war-cry meaning "red eyes!"—as he threw a chair. They explained it signified both ferocity and, jokingly, a fondness for illicit substances. They often

claimed exemption from the law, boasting that if they got into trouble, their shaykhly relatives would resolve matters directly with officials, bypassing formal procedures. While these claims hinted at a nebulous power and status that came through their shared name, most of these men were unemployed or underemployed, unable to marry or leave their family homes despite university degrees. They described themselves as bored and frustrated, with limited prospects. Few had engaged in political protest, but they took part in tribal Facebook groups that circulated memes and imagery of honor, vengeance, and masculinity, and which occasionally amplified calls for *hosha.*

In journalistic coverage such events were often treated with moral ambivalence, as they are in casual conversation among wealthy, educated Ammanis. They were seen as proof of a "backwards" (*mutakhalif*) mentality persisting among some rural communities,[9] temporally displaced even as they take on an increasingly suburban character. For pious political Islamists, they appear *jahīlī*, associated with the lawless pre-Islamic time of ignorance. For both, they were distinct from political protests. Yet Schwedler (2022) suggests, based on media scanning, that the number of tribal clashes rose considerably in 2010, in the run up to the national protests. I found Hirak and *hosha* often looked and sounded similar, and even took place in the same settings, involving the same people: bored, rural, under-employed young graduates. The way the state censored reporting of these events implies this similarity: a 2019 ban on writing or speech that promoted "sectarian sedition … or foster[ed] conflict between … the various component so the nation" was applied to both (Samaro and Sayadi 2019).

The emergence of local "grass-roots," decentralized, and heterodox networks of protestors called *ḥirāk al-shaʿbī*, ("popular movements")—frequently referred to collectively as a shorthand in Arabic and English as the Hirak[10]—was a significant departure from previous *habbāt.* For political scientist Sean Yom (2014: 234), the crucial point is that while East-Banker constituencies have previously threatened violence, this was long treated as a security matter, not a political challenge. The April Uprising of 1989, in response to cuts in subsidies, began to change this; demonstrations and riots in small-town provincial Jordan, starting in Maʾan and spreading to Tafilah and Karak, forced the government of King Hussein to sack his prime minister, end martial law, hold elections, and water down economic austerity (Shlaim 2008). Since then, rural, tribal districts in the formerly pastoral highlands (though not the agricultural Jordan Valley) have risen up not just over local issues, but at moments of national unrest. In Jordanian parlance, the protests of 2011–2012 have come to be metonymically dubbed the Hirak, as these networks came to take on a key role in instigating and organizing protests in the capital, even though the largest turnouts of protestors, especially the 24 March protest encampment, were led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Many Hirak protestors went further than any had in 1989 in not settling for the usual blandishments. These Hirak networks informally linked labor movements, the national veterans' associations, and unemployed youth. Without formal structures or official connections to established political blocs or

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[9]See for instance an article in Dunya Al-Watan (2010) reporting on a fatal clash in Wadi al-Sir just outside Amman, which saw rival families burn businesses and houses as "caused by a backwards mentality."

[10]The term *ḥirāk*, also prominent in Iraq, Algeria, and other Arab nations, is now a general-purpose word for any sort of broad-based, oppositional political protest. It literally means "movement," but lacks the idea of an organized movement with a leadership like the term *ḥaraka.*

interest groups, they broadly shared a set of symbols, chants, issues, and social media communication channels (including tribal and family association groups and chats).

Much of this could be subsumed within prevailing accounts of networked protest, horizontalism, and prefiguration discussed above. However, Hirak emerged in suburban, small town, and rural areas associated with putatively "East-Banker" or "tribal" Jordanians: a constituency long thought to be "unflagging supporters" of the monarchy, but now instead delivering "raucous and uncontrolled opposition from the heart of tribal countryside historically allied with the crown" (Yom 2014: 229–30). Mass protests in the capital in early 2011 were, perhaps wrongly, seen by many in such communities as being led by the urban majority who descended from Palestinian forced migrants. However, as Doughan (2020) shows, this rapidly shifted, and those who had at first taken part in counter-protest rapidly moved to begin their own protest movements. This challenged assumptions held since the Black September conflict of 1970 that the main threat came from disaffected, poor urban Palestinians, as those speaking a Badawi dialect of Arabic would always support the regime.

It could be argued these communities took part not primarily due to being rural and tribal, but due to a perceived threat to their class-like positionality in the state, via employment and patronage. Bayat's (2015) focus on those pauperized by neoliberalism —the "middle class poor"—has some bearing given the preponderance of Hirak activists who grew up with a thwarted expectation of state employment. Bayat's point that rural village protests are an extension of "creeping urbanity" reflects the Jordanian experience of employment and property prices in former agricultural and pastoral regions swallowed by the expanding capital. However, this risks missing that these protestors had their own modalities and referents. As many of my interlocutors discussed, *hosha* provided a practical and obvious precedent and example for mobilizing for collective action, quite distinct from routinized urban protest. People arranged marches, made banners and noise, and blocked roads. More broadly, I argue, *hosha* presented a model of what demanding "dignity" from the state might look like.

These protestors mobilized against *fasād*—"corruption." Semantically open, contested, and carrying moral and theological connotations suggesting physical and spiritual degeneration, *fasād* was capable of uniting political Islamists, secular opposition protestors, and pro-market reformers in condemnation, if not definition. Corruption in its most globalized register as a target for development intervention by the World Bank and other international institutions is a matter of enforcing transparency and legibility in bureaucratic practices (Muir and Gupta 2018). The target of anticorruption is often *wāsṭa*, the ubiquitous acts of asking for favors, networking and patronage though which most Jordanians navigate bureaucracy and search for employment. *Wāsṭa* is imagined emerging from, and to be strongest within, tribal communities, as part of their lawlessness. But as Doughan (2024) shows, such practices take place within, not outside, the rule-of-law through the space afforded by subjective judgement within bureaucratic processes. Through evoking imaginaries of kinship, care, and the tight connections of the tribal past, even its most transactional contemporary forms are not straightforward subjects of moral condemnation for many Jordanians.

Hirakis instead located corruption at a higher scale, focusing on the way the already-rich (including then-Prime Minister and economic liberalizer Samir al-Rifa'i, the businessman and court official Basim Awadallah, and the family of Queen Rania) benefited from Jordan's three decades of imposed structural adjustment while most

people, especially rural, have grown poorer. The privatization of natural resources (especially phosphate mines) and national industries and the corporatization of utilities was theft, a plundering of common wealth (Lacouture 2021). Hirakis read the World Bank, its backers, and its local "compradors" as complicit in, not opposed to, "corruption." Their movements took aim not just at a few "corrupt" wealthy individuals, but the wider international systems through which an upward redistribution of wealth and power occurred. Protestors wrote the slogan "corruption = hunger" (al-fasād = al-juʿa) on loaves of Arabic bread in March 2011, linking corruption to the rising price of subsidized bead and flour mandated by structural adjustment programs. Martínez (2018) explores the centrality of the moral politics of bread[11] to the way Jordanians experience, imagine, and contest the state: the government-subsidized khubz ʿarabī—emblematic of the "middle-way"-mediated market capitalism of Jordan under King Hussein—reduces its eaters to an abject bare-life, politically subject to state largess. Many Hirakis I knew insisted that lowering the bread price was insufficient for social justice and a degree of "dignity" (karāma). Sabri Mashaʿllah, a Hirak activist, told me they would rather go hungry than eat "the bread of the corrupt"—that is, accept inducements, like reduced bread prices, to stop protesting.

Protesting against corruption, protestors demanded karāma for ordinary Jordanians. A new politics of dignity required new forms of tribal solidarity that did not partake in the longstanding systems of patronage—of old men making deals in their guestrooms—but involved new modes of direct participation that emerged in Hirak, and also in the social-media driven hosha. Though firmly based on calls for economic justice and redistribution, the language of karāma suggests, as Doughan (2018: 96–114) argues, something wider. He traces how from nineteenth century nahda literature, a term for a mode of religious grace became infused with Kantian notions of human dignity, involving an appreciation of humans as ends-in-themselves. Crucially, the term also has connotations of reputation and honor of tribal names and shaykhly lineages, and is etymologically connected to the term for valorized hospitality (karam), a concept many Jordanians link to imaginaries of a Bedouin, tribal past (Shryock 2004). Like corruption, dignity can contain multitudes.

There have been several survey-based quantitative attempts to assess the relative significance of causes to Hirak protestors, especially among Jordanian scholars, which tend to show a clear hierarchy: with "economic" factors (especially employment and cost of goods) first, followed by "social" factors second, and "political" factors third (al-Daʿaja 2016; Bani Salāma 2013). Hasan al-Daʿaja's (2016) work, which was limited to the Bādīa regions, however, makes clear that these factors were presented as intermingled expressions of a "gap" (fajwa) between Bādīa residents and the wider nation.

Most activists I spoke to acknowledged a division between "political" issues and "social" (often in practice economic) ones, such as unemployment, but they refused to rank them, seeing in corruption and dignity the causes and cure for both. They rebuffed the neoliberal move of depoliticizing economic demands. One activist I spoke to said that trying to pick them apart was counterproductive—"the state will

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[11]Martínez (2018) situates this within a long history of grain riots and protests following increases in bread prices (treated as a depoliticized, almost mechanical, form of unrest), and the close association between the legitimacy of rulers and access to bread.

say 'patience'—first jobs, then services, then political reform. We say no! If we settle for one-by-one, we will get nothing." Echoing the prefigurative debate, activists stressed that collective acts of protest created unity and political awareness, rather than being a product of pre-held, shared political positions. Though less precise in their claims, this approach endured; long after the urban majority were off the streets in Amman, and the Muslim Brothers were once again compliant, these regional movements continued in the name of a national, not merely a local or tribal, cause.

Hirak Dhiban

My fieldwork has focused on the Hirak of the town and district of Dhiban, 90 kilometers south of Amman in the south of Madaba Governorate, and one of the first and most radical of the regional movements. Often referred to as Dhiban *al-mansīa*—"Dhiban the forgotten"—due to state neglect, the last decade served as a national reminder of Dhiban's existence. Locals said with pride and dismay that Dhiban was where the Jordanian "Arab Spring" started. On an early trip there, the minibus driver quipped to me that all Dhiban produced was protestors. In 2017 I found the town still battered from a violent encounter with law enforcement in the summer of 2016. Despite simmering resentment, it seemed my task would be historical: assembling an account of the events of 2016, and before that of 2011 and 2012. Instead, I found my interlocutors saw Hirak as emerging long before the Arab Spring, and continuing into the present. Months later, Dhiban was once again central to national protests.

The Dhiban district consists of the town itself, around 13,000 people, the nearby small towns of Libb and Mlīh, and several smaller agricultural villages, and the more remote upland villages of the Jabal Bani Hamida district; it has a total population of around 50,000 (Department of Statistics 2024), almost all of whom consider themselves part of the Bani Hamida tribal category. Formerly semi-nomadic pastoralists and cultivators living seasonally in villages of stone and mud-clay houses, the modern town of Dhiban rose in the 1950s as more families settled in permanent concrete houses. Since the 1970s many have become increasingly economically reliant on military and low-level public sector jobs. Dhiban, and especially the Jabal, are poor and remote, with lower employment, land, and property prices, and less political representation than districts further north and nearer the capital, dominated by the more politically influential Bani Sakhr tribes. They were connected to national infrastructure and government services only in the 1990s. As state employment was reduced in the 2000s, there was an exodus of the young to Madaba and Amman; those who remained were reliant on pensions, a handful of low-wage local employers, or dwindling agricultural work.

In 2006, long before the Tunisian protests, agricultural day-wage laborers—many employed by the Ministry of Agriculture in state-owned farms—formed a labor movement in Dhiban (*Hirak ʿUmmal al-Muyawama*) to demand permanent contracts and better conditions. They believed poor wages were due to high unemployment undermining their bargaining power. Their leader, and one of my key interlocutors, was Muhammad al-Snaid, an agricultural engineer and farmer born in the 1960s to local Hamaydah pastoralists. His land had been taken over by the Wala agricultural station, transforming his father from a pastoralist to a wage laborer in the 1980s. When he and other workers were moved from permanent to daily contracts, he established a fighting fund and got workers to agree to a common

bargaining position, protesting locally and in Amman outside government buildings. Using private minibuses run by sympathetic drivers, Muhammad organized high-profile gatherings outside government offices, including a notable overnight mixed-gender sit-in in 2010 outside the royal court. This drew widespread attention, meetings with officials, and gradual improvements in contractual rights (see Ababneh 2016). By 2010, most of the original 300 workers had received some form of contract. Though focused on specific demands, they showed solidarity with teachers' and dockworkers' unions, partly through the Jordanian Social Left Movement *(ḥarakat al-yasār al-ijtimā ʿi)*—an informal initiative of Nahed Hattar—which drafted manifestos by retired army officers criticizing corruption and neoliberalism.

As protests spread from Tunisia to Egypt, several members of this labor movement, led by Muhammad al-Snaid, formed a local Dhiban youth committee and, on 7 January 2011, staged a protest at Dhiban's central roundabout. Al-Snaid said, "We were the first in Jordan. … Really, we were already activists … [because] we saw that making requests [*muṭalabāt*] of the government was pointless if the government did not change." In January, unlike in Amman and Irbid, protestors in Dhiban chanted "down with the government that raised the prices, down with Rifai"—referring to Prime Minister Samir Rifai—who resigned a month later—punning on the Arabic root shared in his name and the word for "raise." By March, they were calling for the fall of the regime *(niẓām)* rather than just the government *(ḥukūma)*, refusing to be appeased by a prime ministerial resignation and directing demands at the court and king. Al-Snaid expected a few marchers but was met by hundreds, swelling to thousands by March. Speeches at Dhiban's *duwār al-ḥurriyya* ("freedom circle") were posted on social media and watched nationwide. Their discourse was pro-worker, pro-union, and leftist, while also calling for greater political participation.

As activists in other towns and in tribal groups followed Dhiban's example and proclaimed their own Hiraks, al-Snaid and others from Hirak Dhiban began coordinating days of action with agreed titles when their supporters would converge on Amman. They named their network *jayīn* ("we are coming") and organized protests in Amman of over a thousand people. These commuter-protestors from the peripheries gained a reputation for their toughness and resolve at the major urban clashes in Amman. In 2018 Dhibanis still chanted that "the *darak* [the gendarmerie] fear when the buses from Dhiban come [i.e., to protests in the capital]." These protests continued throughout 2011 and with renewed energy in late 2012, when further price cuts were announced. Rural Hirak protests continued despite promises of reform and symbolic resignations, long after mass urban gatherings in Amman had ceased. Finally, they were subject to a crackdown, with mass activist arrests at the end of 2012. Regular protests in Dhiban continued.

Those taking part in Hirak Dhiban were mostly younger men, *shabāb*, living with their parents, struggling to set up their own household or to marry. Like the bored *shabāb* in the coffeeshop showing me videos of brawls, many were graduates, some gaining scholarships through their fathers' military service, but struggled to gain the public sector and military employment of these previous generations. They were skeptical of government reform, keen to exert themselves and prove their strength, and proud of an ability, couched in terms of history and identity, to resist external threats and pressure. Like those Bani Sakhr arranging *hosha* via Facebook, they were

hostile to the gerontocratic structures of patronage through which the royal house has traditionally sought to steer tribal affairs.

Along with al-Snaid, a middle-aged local lawyer from a major landowning family, ʿAli al-Brizat, and an unemployed psychology graduate, Sabri Mashaʿllah, also came to prominence as informal spokesmen, regularly interviewed by the press, including international and English-language papers (Buck 2011; Ersan 2019). After years spent in and out of prison, trying to re-group the movement, in June 2016 these and other activists returned to national prominence when they erected a large "unemployment tent" at the roundabout in Dhiban, where they gathered to talk, share food and make their presence felt. Similar tents emerged elsewhere in Jordan, and many Jordanians speculated that the spirit of 2011 was returning. It was, as Sabri put it "like a party—like a wedding." Participants sat, sang, and drank tea and coffee, and took turns bringing in and sharing meals. Osama al-Hisa, a friend of Sabri's who lost his job as a teacher due to his activism, told me "those were the sweetest days. We knew the meaning of *karāma*." One day during Ramadan, as Sabri and others told me with anger so intense they were near tears, just as those assembled were preparing to break their fast together, the *darak* (gendarmerie) pulled down and burned the tent, beating up and arresting around twenty inside. Fighting broke out in the town, tear gas was fired, and several *darak* were injured. It was at this moment, Sabri said, that many gave up on asking for economic reform—"the young turned against the system."

The government called the Dhibanis "outlaws" in official statements afterward. Since then, Mashaʿllah and Brizat have been in and out of prison, with regular protests demanding their release. Muhammad al-Snaid, released from prison in 2017, has been made the director of the local Walah River agricultural station, a major local employer, becoming less involved in direct activism. But he continues to frame his work in reviving local agriculture as a form of activism, and remains a critic of many local government practices, including water pollution and supply (see Wojnarowski 2025). Protests demanding the release of "prisoners of conscience" (*mʿataqalī al-raʾī*) continued. Mashaʿllah and others were given a brief meeting with the governor of Madaba, who offered to help find them jobs in a local factory. Sabri refused, telling him he had not studied at university for that.

In 2019, as yet another wave of protests receded, the central pedestal of the freedom roundabout in Dhiban was demolished, ostensibly as part of long-promised state-sponsored neoliberal "development." It was widely used on social media as a metonymic symbol of Hirak Dhiban. It was replaced with giant plastic Latin-script lettering reading #[heart-symbol]Dhiban—broadly interpreted as a punitive gesture. Osama pointed out that the demolition showed how seriously the government took Dhiban as a symbol of resistance.

I asked ʿAli al-Brizat why Hirak had emerged in Dhiban. I had already asked Muhammad al-Snaid, who talked of political economic factors and Dhiban's central position in the country, while Sabri Mashaʿllah told me Dhiban had one of the highest rates of unemployed graduates in the country. 'Ali, on the other hand, said "because the Bani Hamida have a genius for politics" and have always been at the forefront of rebellions, the first "Jordanian" (before Jordan existed) tribe to rebel against the Turks. More broadly, he told me, to widespread agreement, that the people were demanding *karāma*, a quality most evident in true *aʿrāb* tribes, and less in urban-dwellers.

Many younger activists, including Sabri Mashaʿllah, privately told me they disagreed with Brizat's framing; it was too close to how their enemies saw them,

feeding a pro-government discourse that reduces Hirak to primordial, chauvinistic, rural lawlessness—to mere *hosha.* Sabri told me, "We're suffering, risking our lives and freedom, for everyone. Not like those guys in Israh," referring to the campus where the *hosha* video happened. Many educated and well-off Jordanians in the capital were suspicious of Hirak for these reasons. A female university student of Palestinian descent told me, "I want change but who are these people? … They all wear their *shmagh*s [red and white head cloths, associated with Jordanian nationalism in opposition to the Palestinian kaffiyeh]. … You think they really speak for someone like me?" She, like many others, feared anti-Palestinian, nativist nationalism and the socially conservative values residing in the countryside that lay behind Hirak activists' demands. As Doughan (2018: 92) points out, in the early days the same communities around Amman that became centers of Hirak, such as Hay al-Tafilah (a poor suburb whose inhabitants had moved from the tribal area of Tafilah in the south), were also the sources of pro-regime thugs—"*balṯajiyya*," a slur leveled by Hirakis in Dhiban at the Bani Sakhr.

Versions of this sentiment have also cropped up in scholarly accounts. Anthropologist Arvid Lundberg (2018) studies what he calls *"haraka Dhiban"* (sic) as a negative counter-example to urban protest, based on an implicitly European typology of more or less "open" (*infitāḥ*) liberal or illiberal protest. While the former is focused on political ideas (especially a directly elected government) and dialogue, the latter is focused on broad social and economic grievances, and polemic claim-making. Despite acknowledging that rural protestors were more strident in their demands and less easily dispersed, they lacked significance because they had accepted "a political and economic system based on patronage" (2018: 58). Lundberg interviewed many of the same people I knew but came to a markedly different view of al-Snaid and others, seeing their ideology as fundamentally parochial and chauvinistic, obsessed with cleansing Palestinians from the body politic, as rival state beneficiaries.[12] "Corruption," in Lundberg's reading, is what Dhibanis call urban Palestinians getting rich (ibid.: 62). The connections to labor movements, to women's employment, and the widespread commitment to freedom for Palestine are all absent from Lundberg's account. Sabri wanted to foreclose exactly such allegations that he knew would discredit their protests, especially in the eyes of international observers, reducing the chance of any political change being accepted by Jordan's international backers.

An obvious question is why some areas produce only *hosha*, while other, similar and even neighboring places produce Hirak as well. In the Madaba governorate, this question is partially addressed by considering the differences between the Bani Sakhr and Bani Hamida. The Bani Sakhr tribal name, historically dominant on the Madaba plain, and still resonant nationally, has been used to rally support for demonstrative collective action. But it has been largely peripheral to national protests since 2011, and, indeed, their leading shaykly family, Fayiz, was instrumental in assembling counterdemonstrators to resist the Hirak in 2012 (Alon 2016: 14).

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[12]This is not to say that some activists have not traveled in this direction; as al-Snaid put it (private communication): "The strange thing is that many of those who speak in the name of Nahed Hattar today, may God have mercy on him, have taken only his Jordanian identity, and abandoned his humanity, leftism, socialism … and internationalism."

The Bani Sakhr were originally engaged in camel herding, moving seasonally into the interior Arabian desert. They claimed noble tribal genealogical origins (*aṣīl*) and were recognized in colonial categories as "Bedouin" (Glubb 1938). The Bani Hamida, relying on sheep-herding and cereal cultivation in the highlands above the Dead Sea, moved between higher and lower pastures with the seasons, with more fertile land encouraging them to take up seasonal village residence and cultivation at an earlier date; this way of life meant they were not treated with the same degree of autonomy by Ottoman and colonial rulers as the "noble" camel-herders, but rather as recalcitrant subjects. Nora Barakat (2023: 33–45, 208), using Ottoman archives, shows how the Bani Sakhr shaykhs were able to exploit the Ottoman Hajj administration to serve as bureaucratic partners in a process of agrarian investment and expansion by which the Ottomans sought to turn the Bādīa (steppe-lands of the Syrian desert) into "state-space." As the registered owners of vast agricultural plantations, leading Bani Sakhr families became central to a period of state expansion that made them militarily and politically indispensable despite the collapse of the pastoral and later the agrarian economy in the twentieth century.

The Bani Hamida, on the other hand, appear in the archival record from which Barakat (2023) assembles her narrative as already engaged in a combative relationship to projects of state authority, refusing Ottoman-protected European travelers and antiquaries, resisting Ottoman efforts to survey their flocks and assess tax, and, as a result, facing punitive military expeditions to force their submission in 1867 and 1889 (Rogan 1999: 189). Barakat recounts a letter from other local tribes congratulating the Ottomans on subduing these local "bandits" (*ashqīya*) (2023: 151–53). This pattern was to repeat itself in the comparative roles of the Bani Sakhr and the Bani Hamida leaders in the Arab Revolt during the First World War. As powerful holders of state patronage and the state-refusing rebels outside the "sphere of submission" (as Barakat calls it), these roles have a surprising continuity.

Hirak as *Hosha* and *Hosha* as Hirak

This differing history suggests how Hirak and *hosha* relate, drawing potency but risking critique as their repertoires overlap, mimic, and contest each other, without losing their oppositional quality. While they may be treated as distant poles in external and pro-state discourse, for most Jordanians, and certainly for the activists I knew, this distinction was recognized as partly false, imposed to divide and discredit opposition. Osama showed me a 2018 Facebook post from a pro-regime source about how "disorderly young men in a lawless area took advantage of the national disturbances, which do not directly affect them." "They lie!" he said, "corruption and poverty effects everyone. Wherever the young and poor are angry and hitting [i.e., *hosha*], corruption is to blame." When I asked Brizat about the campus scuffles, he stated that "these are a product of desperation and ignorance; not a true expression of tribal origins." With political education these young men would channel their anger into Hirak. Another young Dhibani, Hisham, told me he thought such distinctions irrelevant: "There's no difference so long as they fight the *darak*." But distinctions do matter. Osama describes himself as an "activist" (*nāshit*), a term widely used for political protestors, but would not apply the term to the campus brawlers.

For others the distinction between these poles is maintained but the directions are reversed. In 2016, amid the furor over the Dhiban unemployment tent, the Bedouin poet Muhammad Funatil al-Hajaya published a poem in *al-Ittijāh* entitled *mā*

humamhum Dhiban ("They don't care about Dhiban") (Tamplin 2018: 379). The poem sharply criticizes the "rented pens" of the media who exploited the suffering of the Bani Hamida to stoke unrest and turn Dhiban into a revolutionary symbol. In contrast, the Bani Hamida are praised as "the best of men," "watchful swords" protecting Jordan, marching to shouted chants of "*siyyah*," the Hamaydah *nakhwah* (battle cry), also used by protestors. Here, Hirak is reframed through a tribal lens that allows for dissent grounded in loyalty and suffering, qualities urban protestors, despite their claims of solidarity, are denied. The poem thus legitimizes tribal protest while discrediting broader revolutionary discourse. That a poet aligned with the monarchy can reframe Dhiban's revolt as a noble, even tragic, tribal grievance—both exalting and containing it—is telling.

Such moves of simultaneous association and disassociation can have unpredictable effects. In late April 2018, a social media storm erupted over a major *hosha* in Madaba between the Bani Sakhr and the Shuwabkah. The spark was grainy footage of Zayid al-Fayiz—of the Bani Sakhr's shaykhly lineage—being attacked at an ATM in Amman by a group of Shuwabkah men, beaten with a metal bar, and pushed into the street. I pieced together a narrative of the conflict that had led to this fight, from friends both among the Bnia Sakhr and in the Suwabkah village of Juraynah, who were living behind protective police roadblocks, unable to go to work. ʿAimad Shuwabkah, an army officer in the queen's security detail, met a Christian woman during a royal visit. Allegedly he obtained her number and pressured her repeatedly to sleep with him, even threatening her children. She fled to Zayid al-Fayiz's home, invoking *dakhala*—sanctuary based on the sanctity of the house (*ḥurmat al-bait*). Zayid's acceptance of *dakhāla* was a symbolic assertion of sovereignty and honor. ʿAimad demanded her return and was forcibly removed—or, according to a friend in Juraynah, kidnapped and beaten—by Zayid and his companions. Humiliated, ʿAimad retaliated with the public attack in Amman.

The conflict quickly escalated. Tribal mechanisms were activated: elders met, guarantors were appointed, reconciliation was held in the *dīwān* of Mithqal al-Fayiz and an 'atwa amnīyah, and a "security truce" was put in place, preceding a full reconciliation. But on 6 May, the video of ʿAimad's attack surfaced, and Bani Sakhr men began organizing online to gather and express their anger without deference to the formal process of reconciliation underway between tribal authorities. To avoid unrest, police arrested ʿAimad and placed the woman in protective custody. Bani Sakhr protestors in pickup trucks blocked roads, firing bullets (in the air toward buildings, not directly at people), including at the Governor's office, climbed gendarmerie vehicles, and demanded *jalwa* and *diyyah*—exile and blood money—alongside criminal charges, invoking both tribal and civil law. Under pressure from the king and a media blackout, the Shuwabkah handed over eight men, and a new ʿaṭwa was agreed upon.

Despite its modern trappings (video, ATM, social media), the story echoed classic Bedouin feud narratives: illicit sexuality, revenge, and the sanctity of protection. Yet the state was deeply entwined: the men involved were state employees, the mediators were politicians, and the government worked to contain the fallout. The incident gained political traction when Dr. Ahmed Oweidi—a prominent opposition figure, tribal historian, and anthropologist (Shryock 2004)—shared a widely accepted version online. He reframed the issue not as tribal, but as a case of state corruption, pointing to ʿAimad's misuse of power and his ties to the queen's household. Oweidi's posts focused on the queen's role in employing ʿAimad, turning a personal feud into a

critique of the monarchy. While most Hirakis stayed neutral, some warned that only the corrupt would benefit from such divisions. Eventually, the truce held and Oweidi ceased his campaign, but the atmosphere remained tense. Anti-queen sentiment lingered, especially among young Hirak activists in Dhiban, who reframed grievances against her ally Basim Awadallah as symbol of national corruption. "All we need is another spark," Oweidi said.

Talk of sparks was apt. While Madaba was consumed by *hosha*, a general strike and mass protests erupted in Amman on 30 May 2018 in response to IMF-driven tax reforms and rising food and fuel prices. During the hot Ramadan evenings, thousands gathered at the Fourth Circle outside the Prime Minister's office after iftar, launching what became known as *habbat Haziran* (the June Rage). As Schwedler (2022) notes, Amman's car-centric design has shrunk protest spaces, pushing demonstrations away from traditional sites like the Husseini Mosque. By occupying the Fourth Circle, next to the Prime minister's office, protestors disrupted traffic and government operations, yet it was telling that the focus was not the royal court nor the interior ministry from which the state's security apparatus is directed, as in 2011. On 4 June, Prime Minister Hani Mulki resigned. His successor, Omar Razzaz, reversed some austerity measures and secured new Gulf aid. Most protestors dispersed by 6 June, following union calls to stand down. Protest continued in Madaba and Dhiban.

On 2 July, Dr. Faris al-Fayiz—Zayid's cousin and a vocal academic at the University of Jordan active since the 2011 protests—released a video on social media criticizing the royal family (Abu Sneineh 2018). Faris framed both the queen (of Palestinian-Kuwaiti origin) and the king, with his Hashemite lineage (originally from the Hijaz), as outsiders; they were "guests of the tribes" who had betrayed their hosts—"this is our land … you owe us, we don't owe you." He accused the queen and her family of looting the Jordanian public through privatization, calling her *shaitāna* ("she-devil"). He was swiftly arrested. In response, his relatives mobilized Bani Sakhr protests, calling online to "shake the state." Senior tribal leaders —those who had recently helped resolve the *hosha*—issued an ultimatum: release Faris within twenty-four hours or the Bani Sakhr will block the main desert highway near Jiza, linking Amman to the airport and the south. In Dhiban, Hirak activists rallied at the roundabout, demanding the release of all political prisoners, including Faris. Two days later the government placed Faris under house arrest, which the Fayiz family accepted. Yet protests in Dhiban continued, using Faris's case to spotlight the broader plight of political detainees. Dhibanis sought to transform a genealogically specific grievance into a universal call for justice.

Hirak networks, especially in Dhiban, remained active both on the streets and online after 6 June. In September, a week-long strike and civil disobedience campaign was launched via Facebook by a group claiming to represent rural Hirak and labor unions. Many adopted its symbol as their profile picture. As one put it, "the fear is gone." These online groups helped sustain smaller Thursday evening protests through late 2018 and into 2019. Various factions attempted to brand the movement with names like "Thursday March for Dignity" and "We Are Not Silent." Brizat's speeches from Dhiban and Amman, calling for an end to austerity, renationalization, and mass employment under an elected government, were widely shared on YouTube.

By December, police had fenced in protestors in a hospital parking lot they had been using as a rallying area, 400 meters from the Fourth Circle. I attended several protests with Bani Hamida students from the University of Jordan, where opposition

figures, including Hirak leaders and Dr. Oweidi, spoke to small circles, often under the watch of suspected plainclothes intelligence officers (*mukhabarat*), who silently recorded their speeches. Many of these figures, including Sabri, were arrested without charge. Another oppositional figure in the Fayiz family, former parliamentarian Hind al-Fayiz, began to coordinate a WhatsApp group to record such disappearances and push the state to give legal grounds. Though released during the pandemic, Sabri was re-arrested in 2021 during the broader crackdown that accompanied the arrest of the king's nephew Hamza bin Hussein, following a supposed coup attempt. The prince, long popular among some opposition figures, is considered more like his father, the late King Hussein—known for his masterful performance of interpersonal association based on a knowledge of tribal names and reputations—than his brother King Abdullah, whose milieu is seen as impersonal, amoral, globalized capital, embodied in the court business elite. Tellingly, the case against the prince hinged on his increasingly frequent meetings with tribal leaders, behavior that, for the king's intelligence advisors, self-evidently prefaced an attempt at seizing power. Once again, *hosha* and Hirak were entangled.

These three events in the summer of 2018 and their aftermath—a tribal feud, mass urban protest and strikes, and a threat of tribal collective action to release a public figure—fed off each other, bringing down a prime minister and briefly threatening the regime. Throughout, attempts to cast protest as *hosha* and vice versa were central to claims to legitimize and delegitimize collective action and unrest in the eyes of different constituents.

Repression and Dignity

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, Jordan's economic situation has worsened, and responses to activism—especially online—have grown harsher. In July 2023, the government amended cybercrime laws that criminalized political speech and content deemed divisive (Aljazeera 2023) despite widespread protest, leading to the arrest or fining of seventy to one hundred activists, writers, and organizers. Since then, media self-censorship has intensified (Shamandafer 2025). Three months later, Israel's assault on Gaza began, prompting weekly, non-transgressive protests near the Israeli embassy and Husseini Mosque, as well as inducing an undercurrent of resentment at Jordanian normalization. In April 2025, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, long tolerated as a loyal opposition, was banned, and its offices raided, supposedly in response to an alleged plot to attack Israel from Jordanian territory (Quilliam 2025).

As overt activism was pushed underground, tribal discourse surged. Folkloric social media pages proliferated, often veering into critique. A striking example is Ali Tarawna (Al-Faqrani), a veteran labor activist who posts in Karaki dialect, blending heritage with sharp commentary. His catchphrase, "*Uṣḥā yā qurīa*" ("Wake up, oh village!"), and rooster symbol resonate with rural audiences. In 2025, his posts became more pointed, including the viral line: "ʿandnā fasād wa-mā ʿandnā fāsidīn" ("we have corruption, but no corrupt [people]") (Al Faqrani 2023). His arrest in Karak on 12 May sparked national campaigns for his release, led by Hirak figures like al-Snaid.

In February 2025, as Trump pushed for Jordan to absorb Ghazawi refugees, Hattar's writings warning against plots to make Jordan *al-waṭan al-badīl* ("the alternative homeland") resurfaced. Brizat and others organized Dhiban's first

march in two years, this time under banners supporting the king's refusal. Tribal leaders from Bani Hassan and Bani Sakhr made public declarations of loyalty on behalf on their tribes, but such loyalist protests, long part of tribal repertoires, seemed intended to intimidate as much as reassure. Al-Snaid recently co-hosted an anniversary march near Dhiban commemorating Maher al-Jazi, the Jordanian who killed three Israeli border guards in 2024, attended by al-Jazi's father and relatives from the Huwaitat, one of the largest southern Bedouin tribes. While the king condemned the attack, the government has been unable to prevent the commemoration of al-Jazi as a heroic martyr. The well-attended gathering gave al-Snaid the opportunity to make a speech that has since been widely posted on social media, which sought to cast al-Jazi as not only a martyr for national but tribal dignity: "huge protests in the capitals of the infidels against the slaughter of the people of Gaza, and we forget … when will we defend our dignity? (*matā ḥamā karāmatunā*) … This son of the tribes, the martyr … reminds us of our dignity. The tribes defend our dignity." Al-Jazi's attack was dubbed "Operation Karāma" in Jordan, after the town of Karameh near the Allenby Bridge where it took place, already symbolically charged as the sight of the 1968 battle where Jordan repelled an Israeli attack, and where several Huwaitat soldiers fought. Speeches circled back to this and other historical examples of a tribal "culture of resistance," as al-Snaid put it, that, they said, even the king could not ignore.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring still looms large over the subsequent waves of protest in Jordan, but in ways that are less visible than in Egypt. There is no Tahrir, no battle (or street art) of Mohammad Mahmoud Street, fewer martyrs, and a less dramatic turn to counterrevolutionary repression. Hirak Dhiban might seem a sympathetic subject for an activist anthropology of protest. As part of the centering of "indigenous" forms of critique and resistance in anti-globalization movements, and like the Zapatistas, Hirak Dhiban is self-consciously opposed to the infrastructure of neoliberal capitalism, which is considered the root of the "corruption" almost all Jordanians feel is damaging their society. But media and scholarship have taken only cautious interest in the local Hirak movements. The prevalence of discourses that seek to trivialize, parochialize, and delegitimize Hirak by pointing out its resemblances to *hosha* may go some way to explaining why it is excluded from a wider alterpolitics. Hirak and *hosha* are fuzzy and contested concepts used to describe a range of modalities of collective action that are entangled and related, in ways that maintain their polarity rather than merging them.

   The Jordanian case, providing a view from the margins, suggests a wider problem, of where we expect to find and recognize revolutionary potential. The Jordanian Hirak emerged from marginal areas like Dhiban, where people maintain a "prickly" attitude toward compulsion and the state. Though fewer in number, Hirakis did far more to shift the meaning of protest toward revolution than the urban protestors mobilized by the Muslim Brotherhood. Yet they forever risk falling into *hosha* in the eyes of the urban elite, the media, and many scholars. Such conflations run both ways. Hirak partly seemed a powerful and rooted movement because it sprang up among people with a reputation for, and long history of, keeping the state at arm's length (if more in the popular historical imagination than in reality). Demanding "dignity" in this context invokes historical imaginaries of *karāma* of a quite different sort to those of urban protestors in Cairo. This is hardly a new observation; to paraphrase,

Marx people do not make revolutions under self-selected circumstances, and troublingly old traditions may weigh on the minds of revolutionaries (Marx 2008 [1858]: 26).

To return to Armbrust's (2019) repurposing of *communitas* to describe revolutionary moments, he sees *communitas* as a form generated by political rituals of transformation that emerge from specific local contexts. I too find these capacious anthropological concepts helpful in moving away from definitions of revolution couched in Marxist terminology and European experience. If we are to take seriously the experiential side of taking part in protest—the profoundly moving and affective "experience of solidarity and altruism within communities engaged in collective rebellion" (Tufekci 2017: xv), or indeed the prefigurative and carnivalesque sense of lived utopia, we must also consider the various historical, conceptual, and social contexts from which they emerge. We must examine the complex range of meanings in a protest demand such as *karāma* as it travels. As anthropologists interested in activism and protest look for new beginnings, Hirak may look too much like *hosha* for comfort. Yet these modalities of collective action and their entanglements create a conceptual space in which potentially revolutionary realignments occur, just not the ones many anthropologists might expect.

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