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Research Article

When Patronage Fails in Jordan: Vulnerabilities of Returnees in a Time of Crisis

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Abstract

Jordan is widely perceived as an island of stability within a turbulent Middle East, yet this perception conceals significant internal fragility. This paper examines the gradual erosion of the Hashemite monarchy's long-standing patronage system, which historically distributed state resources—jobs, subsidies, and stipends—to loyal East Bank tribes in exchange for political allegiance and social cohesion. Drawing on recent economic data, policy analyses, and reports from international organizations, the study traces how external austerity programs, demographic pressures, and declining revenues have undermined this arrangement, producing disillusionment among traditional supporters and intensifying the exclusion of non-tribal groups such as Palestinian-Jordanians, refugees, and urban professionals. The analysis further explores how scapegoating of outsiders has emerged as a mechanism of control and how new coercive instruments, including expanded surveillance, protest restrictions, and the 2023 cybercrime law, reveal a shift from patronage to repression. By linking these domestic transformations to the experiences of failed asylum seekers and other returnees, the paper demonstrates that the weakening of tribal protection and the expansion of state control create new layers of vulnerability. The findings suggest that all Jordanians now face heightened structural risks, yet those outside the East Bank tribal framework encounter particularly acute exposure to exclusion, marginalization, and state pressure.

Keywords

Jordan, Patronage, Tribal, Palestinian-Jordanians, Returnees

1. Introduction

Extreme turmoil has been the rule in the Middle East region for decades, with matter of degree being the only differentiator between one time period and the next. Western governments share, and their policies reflect, a common belief that Jordan is a unique island of stability surviving in a storm ravaged sea [1, 2]. To some degree, this is accurate. Yet, the benefit bestowed upon Jordan belies and even obfuscates the full truth, which is that Jordan's domestic order is mightily strained by an ongoing economic crisis combined with a rather complex social order harshly divided along tribal, ethnic and refugee lines [3, 4].

The Hashemite monarchy's actions for decades clearly reflect a patronage system that has long distributed public sector jobs and subsidies to its most loyal tribes [3]. In so-doing, other groups have been unequivocably marginalized: case in point: Palestinian-Jordanians [5]. For some time, this preferential treatment went largely unchallenged while coffers remained full, thanks in part to foreign aid and remittances [6].

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Today, however, as economic resources contract further and unemployment soars, this long-established system is breaking down [7]. Jobs, stipends, and other safety-net benefits for tribes are drying up. Non-tribal groups are growing particularly vulnerable, and the government has turned to scapegoating outsiders who lack tribal ties including refugees, Palestinians, and urban Jordanians [8]. Scapegoating is just one facet of a growing mechanism of control.

This paper argues that this convergence of economic austerity, patronage breakdown, and scapegoating creates growing structural risk for those failed asylum seekers who upon return to their original country of Jordan face greater exposure to repression, surveillance, and exclusion if forced to return to Jordan.

2. Patronage, Tribalism, and Regime Stability

Traditionally, studies of Jordan have treated the three topics of economic reform, tribal patronage, and refugee politics as separate domains. For example, studies of Jordan's austerity plans have explained how the International Monetary Programs (IMF) have triggered waves of protests for more than forty-five years [1], pointing out instances of state repression and at times, limited concession. Other scholars have focused efforts on Jordan's tribal politics, highlighting how East Bank tribes historically formed the backbone of regime loyalty, and were rewarded with both military and civil services posts [3]. Still other works have focused on Jordan's humanitarian actions, as the country has absorbed millions of refugees from Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and more; yet scholars and news reports consistently highlight the purposeful lack of refugees' full inclusion [9].

Missing from this large body of work, however, is a systematic analysis of how shrinking public resources translate into reduced protection for groups outside core tribal networks. This important change leaves the marginalized, including refugees, returning failed asylees, and others without protective social capital. This gap is critical to an accurate legal consideration of claims of risk in returning to the country of Jordan.

3. Economic Instability in Jordan

Jordanians are no strangers to economic instability. With few natural resources to rely upon, the kingdom has long survived on a patchwork of external aid to maintain balance.

3.1. External Financing Landscape

Jordan's heavy reliance on foreign aid heavily impacts how it governs. No country can direct its own governance entirely once it finds itself in the position of relying on others to keep its books balanced. It is, therefore, worthwhile to examine the source of Jordan's external funding, if we are to understand the constraints the government experiences, the resulting impact on its citizens, and the dangers those restraints have on returning failed asylees.

Donations and loan guarantees from foreign governments, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other funding entities, combined with the significant number of remittances Jordanians send home to family members from across the world, keeps the country afloat. Given Jordan's population of only 11 million people, the sums Jordan receives are staggering in size, with the United States providing highest single share of support. In 2022, the U.S. pledged to deliver $1.45 billion annual to Jordan's coffers for seven years [10]. The European Union also provides help in the form of grants and loans, at an annual rate of several hundred million per year. Between 2014-2020, that amount totaled nearly $2.5 billion. Support also comes from the Gulf States of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Qatar, who pledged $2.5 billion over five years.

On top of these commitments, Jordan also receives loan package from the World Bank and IMF, or International Monetary Fund. While the World Bank focuses efforts on development programs such as education water management, refugee-related projects and fiscal reforms, the IMF provides loans with ties to austerity such a fiscal reforms and refugee-related projects. Neither organization exceeds $800 million a year, with average amounts of #600 million annually.

Remittances from Jordanians working abroad, primarily in the Gulf states, make up nearly 10 percent of Jordan's GDP, providing another important, if volatile, source of household income and foreign exchange [11]. However, this influx of cash goes directly to the family members of Jordanian citizens, many of whom are working in Gulf States, and has no limiting impact on governance outside its significant contribution to the economy.

3.2. Constrained Lending and Conditionality

Unlike Jordan's bilateral donors, (US, Europe, Gulf States), the IMF and World Bank provide assistance primarily through loans (rather than grants), and these loans have been increasingly constrained. Jordan's debt-to-GDP ratio, now approaching 90 percent, raises concerns about debt sustainability, making large new loans less feasible [12]. Moreover, both institutions attach stringent conditions such as tax reforms, subsidy reductions, and fiscal austerity that have repeatedly triggered mass protests, most notably in 2018 and 2023. As a result, their support rarely exceeds $600–800 million annually, and is increasingly funneled into targeted, concessional programs in areas such as education, water management, and refugee integration [6]. In contrast, bilateral donors like the United States and the Gulf states provide more flexible budgetary aid, leaving the IMF and World Bank in a narrower, supervisory role.

While foreign donors, the IMF, and the World Bank are central to Jordan's fiscal survival, external financing tells only part of the story. Even with generous bilateral grants and concessional loans, the kingdom's economic foundations remain fragile because of long-standing internal weaknesses. Chronic unemployment, rapid demographic growth, scarce natural resources, and a limited private sector all compound the pressures created by reliance on aid [13]. These structural vulnerabilities not only magnify the impact of donor conditionality but also deepen the hardships felt by ordinary Jordanians. For returnees, this means re-entering an economy whose fragility is not simply a matter of foreign dependence, but of systemic, homegrown obstacles that the state has struggled to overcome.

3.3. Structural Vulnerabilities of Jordan's Economy

Jordan's economy has been precarious since its creation as a modern nation state in 1946. Once a part of the vast Ottoman Empire until its collapse in 1918, the land then came under British rule as part of the Palestine Mandate. Britain ended the mandate in 1946 and gave Jordan full independence. Jordan was recognized as an independent sovereign state that year, and joined the United Nations in 1955 [14].

From the outset, there was little Jordan could rely on to build its economy. Unlike its oil-rich neighbors, it boasts few natural resources. The country is dry with little arable land, and has long suffered extreme water scarcity [15]. With nothing tangible to offer or to build on, the king took advantage of his only asset: political loyalty to the west, which it was willing to pay for.

Neighboring oil-rich Arab countries in the Gulf provided employment for many of Jordan's citizens, which did nothing to build its own productivity, but as we have seen, the workers boosted GDP levels and lowered the government's burden. In addition, these same oil producing states began providing aid to its neighbor, grateful for their supply of workers [16]. For a time, particularly during the 1970's and 1980's, Jordan enjoyed relative prosperity due to the oil boom. Public employment expanded exponentially, with tribally-connected subjects receiving subsidies, salaries, and benefits to secure loyalty [17].

Despite the two decades of largesse, the arrangement was always out of Jordan's control. When oil prices tanked in 1989, and the oil boom went bust, Jordan had no power to find its way out of financial distress. Gulf jobs were cut, Gulf aid declined precipitously, and Jordan nearly defaulted on its loans. The IMF imposed its first austerity demands, which included subsidy cuts and tax reforms. As a result, mass riots broke out in 1989 and 1996 [18].

3.4. The Refugee Burden

Since its creation, Jordan has absorbed successive waves of refugees that have reshaped both its society and its economy. The largest and earliest came with the 1948 Arab–Israeli war, when hundreds of thousands of Palestinians crossed into the East Bank [19]. Another major influx followed the 1967 Six-Day War, swelling Jordan's Palestinian population further. Jordan granted many of these refugees citizenship—unlike other Arab host states—both to secure international legitimacy as a state tied to the Palestinian cause and to attract foreign aid from Western powers invested in regional stability.

Later decades brought new arrivals: Iraqis fleeing the Gulf War in the 1990s and again after the U.S. invasion in 2003 [20], and more recently, Syrians escaping civil war after 2011 [21]. Each influx stretched Jordan's limited resources, especially housing, water, education, and jobs. Yet hosting refugees also became a political and financial bargain: international donors poured in assistance earmarked for refugee relief, allowing Jordan to sustain its role as a humanitarian safe haven while offsetting the costs of care.

This combination of humanitarian duty, strategic calculation, and economic necessity explains why Jordan opened its borders. Refugees bolstered Jordan's claim as a frontline state of regional crises, while the promise of aid provided a strong incentive. Still, the financial lifelines attached to refugee hosting never fully compensated for the burdens on ordinary Jordanians. Instead, refugees became both an economic resource—attracting billions in foreign support—and a political liability, often scapegoated in times of hardship [22].

4. Patronage Breakdown and Its Consequences

The durability of Jordan's political order has long rested on a bargain between the Hashemite monarchy and its East Bank tribal constituencies. By distributing government jobs, subsidies, and stipends through these networks, the monarchy secured loyalty and built a stable foundation for rule [16]. Yet this arrangement was always fragile: it depended on foreign aid and state revenues sufficient to sustain an expansive public sector [23]. As fiscal pressures have mounted and resources have contracted, the monarchy's ability to uphold the bargain has diminished. The weakening of patronage networks is now reshaping Jordan's social contract, producing disillusionment among loyalist tribes while intensifying the exclusion of non-tribal groups, especially Palestinians [2].

4.1. The Tribal Bargain: Loyalty in Exchange for Benefits

From the early years of independence, the Hashemite monarchy relied on a carefully constructed alliance with Jordan's East Bank tribes; families and confederations indigenous to Transjordan [3]. Considered the kingdom's most reliable citizens, they were seen as untainted by Palestinian nationalism, which increasingly challenged Hashemite rule after 1948 [2]. In exchange for loyalty, tribal families were rewarded with preferential access to public-sector employment. Civil service posts, military careers, and security positions were overwhelmingly reserved for East Bankers [24], while subsidies, land grants, and stipends reinforced their privileged position. The result was a dependable support base: tribes delivered loyalty and social stability, and the state provided economic security. Over time, this bargain shaped Jordanian identity itself, with East Bankers cast as the "true Jordanians" and Palestinians systematically marginalized from the levers of state power [25].

4.2. Citizenship and Structural Exclusion

The demographic balance underpinning this bargain shifted dramatically with successive Palestinian refugee inflows. Beginning in 1948, Jordan absorbed more than 100,000 refugees directly into the East Bank [26] and later annexed the West Bank, granting citizenship to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians living there [16]. After Israel's victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, another 200,000–250,000 Palestinians crossed into Jordan, while those who remained in what became the Israeli-occupied West Bank continued to hold Jordanian nationality [27]. That arrangement lasted until 1988, when King Hussein severed Jordan's administrative and legal ties to the West Bank, formally stripping Palestinians there of Jordanian citizenship [23]. By then, however, Palestinians already outnumbered East Bankers inside the kingdom. Today, while millions of Palestinians in Jordan retain Jordanian nationality, citizenship functions less as an avenue of inclusion than as a marker of exclusion: they remain largely shut out of the army, security services, and patronage networks that continue to anchor the regime's tribal loyalists.

4.3. The Erosion of Patronage in the Era of Austerity

For decades, citizenship marked the line between privileged East Bankers and marginalized Palestinians, yet economic crisis now exposes loyalist tribes to the same strains once borne mainly by others.

The fiscal base that once sustained Jordan's patronage system has steadily eroded under the weight of population growth, debt, and repeated rounds of IMF-driven austerity [7]. Subsidy cuts, tax increases, and hiring freezes have left younger generations of East Bankers unable to secure the government jobs their parents took for granted [6]. Once-reliable channels of patronage—public sector employment, fuel subsidies, and stipends—are drying up, producing visible disillusionment in tribal strongholds such as Kerak, Maan, and Tafileh [4]. Protests in these areas underscore a profound shift: the very groups that anchored Hashemite rule are now expressing frustration at a system that no longer delivers the benefits promised in return for loyalty [24].

The unraveling of patronage has not only weakened regime stability but also blurred the sharp boundary between insiders and outsiders. While Palestinians, refugees, and urban professionals remain the most excluded, East Bankers are discovering that their loyalty no longer guarantees protection. As subsidies disappear and jobs shrink, tribal families face the same precarity that once seemed reserved for marginalized groups. This convergence has destabilizing implications: it deepens resentment toward refugees, fuels scapegoating of Palestinians, and erodes the trust that once bound East Bank tribes to the monarchy.

4.4. Scapegoating Outsiders: Palestinians, Refugees, and Returnees

As the patronage system frays and economic pressures mount, the Hashemite regime has increasingly turned to scapegoating as a mechanism of control. Outsider groups—those without deep tribal roots in the East Bank—have become convenient targets for public frustration. Palestinian-Jordanians, despite constituting a numerical majority, are still portrayed as politically unreliable and excluded from the military and security services [25]. Syrian refugees, now numbering over one million, are blamed for straining schools, hospitals, and the labor market [21], even though donor aid has subsidized many of these services [7]. Urban Jordanians without tribal affiliations are similarly cast as "Westernized" or insufficiently loyal [2]. In this environment, returnees from abroad are especially vulnerable: lacking tribal protection, they can be framed as disloyal, foreign-influenced, or economic competitors, making them disproportionately exposed to harassment, surveillance, and exclusion [26].

5. Regime Responses: Coercion and Control

The regime has responded to this erosion with a mixture of concessions and repression. On one hand, the state has promised new development initiatives and occasional public hiring drives to placate disillusioned tribes [24]. On the other, it has tightened restrictions on protest and speech, relying on security services to contain dissent. [4] This balancing act highlights the limits of the Hashemite bargain in the twenty-first century: without the resources to sustain patronage, the monarchy is increasingly forced to rely more on coercion.

With the patronage system eroding, the monarchy of King Hussein has increasingly turned to coercion as a means of survival. Where loyalty was once secured through jobs and subsidies, today it is enforced through surveillance, arrests, and restrictive laws. Protest activity, once tolerated in tribal areas as a pressure release, is now tightly controlled, with demonstrations dispersed and activists detained [21].

The 2023 cybercrime law epitomizes this shift: by criminalizing online criticism of the monarchy, religion, and state institutions, it extends repression into digital spaces and targets both domestic dissenters and diaspora voices [8].

For returnees, the risks are particularly acute. Political statements made abroad—whether in protests, interviews, or even social media posts—can be grounds for prosecution upon arrival in Jordan. In this way, the regime has replaced favoritism with coercion, deepening the vulnerabilities of those who lack tribal protection or state favor [8].

6. Implications for Returnees

The collapse of the old bargain—where the state bought loyalty with jobs and subsidies—means returnees can no longer count on the protections that once cushioned life in Jordan. Even East Bankers, historically closest to the monarchy, are facing shrinking opportunities and closer scrutiny. Tribal ties may still help mediate with officials, but those informal shields are weaker than they used to be [23].

For non–East Bank returnees—Palestinian-Jordanians, refugees, and urban professionals—the risks are sharper. Without tribal networks to intervene on their behalf, they are easier to single out as “outsiders,” “Westernized,” or disloyal [25]. Their time abroad, especially in Western countries, can be framed as evidence against them in a climate where blame is shifting onto those perceived as outside the core [16].

The legal tools described above amplify these vulnerabilities. Speech and activity undertaken while abroad now fall within an expanded enforcement net, raising the odds of investigation or detention on return—particularly for those without family or tribal backing to deflect pressure [8]. In short, all returnees face a harsher environment, but exposure is uneven: East Bankers encounter diminished protection; non–East Bank returnees face layered risks of exclusion and punishment. This is the practical landscape to which failed asylum seekers would be sent back, and it underscores the structural nature of their danger.

7. Conclusion

Jordan is often described as an island of stability in a turbulent region, but that reputation obscures the fragility of its domestic order. The monarchy’s long-standing reliance on patronage networks has come under severe strain from economic crisis, foreign-imposed austerity, and demographic pressures. As benefits have dwindled, the bargain that once bound East Bank tribes to the state has weakened, leaving even loyal constituencies unsettled. At the same time, Palestinians, refugees, and urban professionals remain systematically excluded, and in times of scarcity they are increasingly scapegoated as the cause of unrest.

In place of patronage, the regime has turned to coercion. Expanding surveillance, tighter protest restrictions, and new legal instruments have extended state control into both physical and digital spaces. These shifts do not simply affect domestic politics; they directly shape the risks faced by those who may be forced to return.

For returnees, the consequences are stark. East Bankers face declining protection, while non–East Bank returnees—Palestinians, refugees, and others without tribal ties—confront structural exclusion and heightened vulnerability. In today’s Jordan, returning does not mean reentering a stable society, but stepping into an environment where loyalty can no longer be purchased and dissent is increasingly punished. This reality underscores the need to reconsider the “stability” narrative and to recognize the genuine risks awaiting failed asylum seekers who are sent back.

Author Contributions

Shaul Michael Gabbay is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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