



SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN JORDAN

2020





OVERVIEW

In the few years following the 2010/2011 Arab uprisings, the number and scope of social movements in the region increased at an unprecedented pace. The majority of these movements did not grow out of the established political parties, or civil society associations, but they were rather formed through different loose and informal structures. These new movements are not ideologically or religiously uniform, but rather have different worldviews and priorities. Many studies have concentrated on the role of youth movements in the aftermath of the Arab Uprisings, while neglecting empirical research on other social movements and/or social actors, like women's movements, Islamist movements, unions and syndicates. While the role of traditional civic and political organizations — like syndicates, unions, protest movement, Islamist movements and opposition parties — were undermined by recently the surge in independent activism and youth movements during and right after the Uprisings, these traditional movements and organizations have come to the forefront of public debates and contestation.

This policy paper is part of a larger research project conducted in Jordan and Egypt between 2018 and 2019, with the aim of exploring the emergence of social movements in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. The project was implemented by the Information and Research Center - King Hussein Foundation (IRCKHF) in partnership with the American University of Cairo. The research in Jordan was based on 52 in-depth interviews with different social movement actors working on social, political, economic, and human rights issues as well as 5 in-depth interviews with policymakers.

The project aimed to bring social movement actors and policymakers together to promote meaningful and effective dialogue between them. The research also aimed to understand the following:

- What kind of change are social movements in Jordan interested in and what tools do they deploy to achieve it?
- How do social movements and policymakers interact and communicate with each other and how effective is this interaction?
- What interventions or forms of protest provide to be most effective in regards to achieving the goal of a movement?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND PROCESS

Our team established a database of existing formal and informal social movements working on human rights as well as social, political and economic reform. The team reached out to several social movement actors through targeted and snow-balling sampling techniques. 52 in-depth interviews were conducted with 35 men and 17 women who are engaged in different movements across the Kingdom, including coalitions, unions, political parties, activists and civil society organizations.

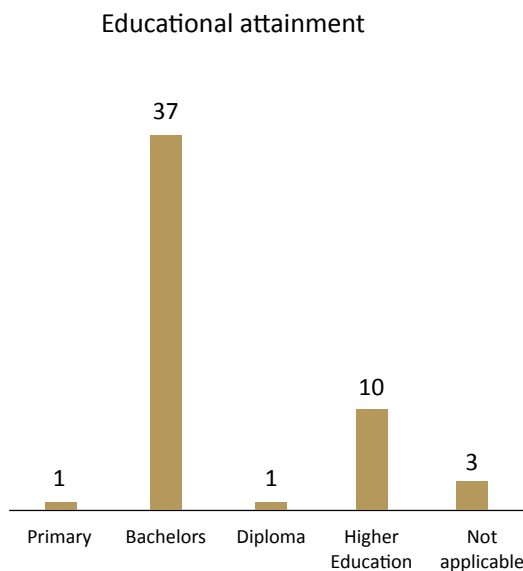


Figure 1 - Educational attainment of research participants from social movements

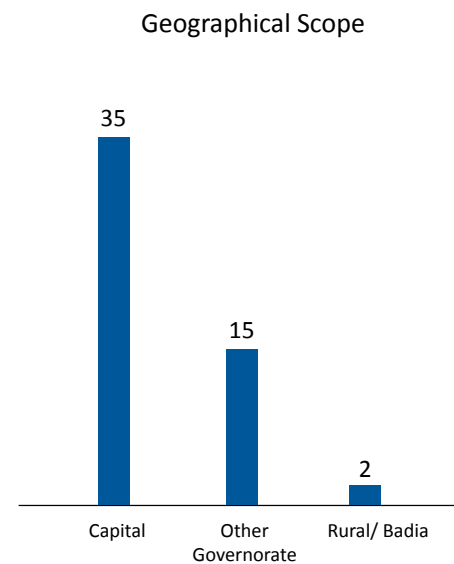


Figure 2 - Geographical scope of research participants from social movements

Additionally, 5 interviews were conducted with different policy actors in Jordan, including representatives of ministries and a member of parliament. The team aimed to conduct more interviews with social movement actors and policymakers but due to the sensitivity of the topic, not many responded.

Research tools were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the American University of Cairo. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and all ethical considerations were taken to protect the privacy and confidentiality of research participants. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using Atlas.ti. The data analysis was based on an analysis plan developed by the teams in Jordan and Egypt. In early 2020, the data was presented to research participants in a validation workshop that brought together different social movement actors and policymakers in Jordan.

FINDINGS

1. Types, objectives and demands

Social movements included coalitions, unions, political parties, activists and civil society organizations (CSOs) working on different issues. Their motives and demands varied, but can be summarized into the following three main broad categories:

Defending liberties and human rights: these movements focused on advocating for and defending several human rights and worked on issues including gender equality, gender-based violence, women's economic participation, workers' rights, the rights of people with disabilities, students' rights, and freedom of expression. Most of these movements were formal and organized.

Demanding social, political and economic reform: these movements focused on demanding economic, social and political reform, including the amendment of various legislation, enhancing social justice, ending corruption, enhancing the work of political parties, and boycotting Israel. Some of these movements were informal.

Environmental protection: these movements focused on advocating for environmental reform, rights, protection and access to environmental spaces. Their activities included protests, calls for legislative reform, meetings with government and decision makers, and awareness campaigns through coalitions, civil society and national campaigns.

The five policymakers who were interviewed had a different view of what constituted a social movement. They stated their preference to communicate and interact with formal movements that are governed by the law. They regarded informal movements as unorganized, with conflicting demands and messages.

Box 1: Social and Economic Marginalization

Since 2011, Jordan has witnessed a rise in the number of protests and demonstrations not only in the capital but in several governorates calling for social, economic and political reform. The vast majority of members participated informally and were not affiliated with political parties. Research participants emphasized that the reason behind many individuals and groups informally mobilizing in the governorates was the rising rates of poverty and unemployment and the lack of investment in services and resources in their areas. Additionally, they expressed that their communities feel that they are unheard by policymakers. Due to this marginalization and exclusion, individuals and communities living in governorates and rural areas have little confidence in the government and its policies.

The majority of participants – who were interviewed and took part in such demonstrations – expressed that they have doubts about continuing their activity for several reasons including increased frustration for not seeing real social, economic and political progress; lack of resources and organization; and familial, community or tribal pressure for taking part in such demonstrations. Some also expressed their concern and fear over their future, especially over their career prospects and their families, due to arrests and security constraints.



2. Challenges faced by social movements

Social movements in Jordan face a variety of challenges, some of which are common across movements and relate to the legal and structural environment in which they operate, and others more specific to the scope, type, resources and organizational capabilities of each movement. Informal movements were found to face greater challenges in their organization and work.

Policymakers perceived informal movements as unsustainable, for their lack of organization and unrealistic demands. They also added that informal movements have no alternative but to join existing formal movements such as unions and political parties, in order to have a legal governance.

Generally speaking, the following challenges were the most commonly cited among the different movements:

- Laws limiting freedom of expression:** several laws were said to be limiting social movement actors freedom of expression online and offline. These include the Information Systems and Cyber Crime Law, the Press and Publications Law, and the Access to Information Law. In 2018, potential new legal restraints on the Jordanian civil society's freedom of speech and expression online emerged. The government drafted amendments to the 2015 Cybercrime Law as a broad definition of 'hate speech' was introduced. The definition was problematic because it was overly vague and could be applied to any internet communication, putting civil society, activists and human rights defenders at risk of detention. As a result, civil society organizations led an online campaign demanding the withdrawal of the amendments and met with the prime minister discussing the amendments' downfalls. In response to the campaign, the government withdrew the amendments in December 2018.¹ However, just a few days after the draft was withdrawn, the government made some new amendments to the bill before sending it back to the House of Parliament without consulting with civil society. Accordingly, the law is still accused of limiting freedom of speech in Jordan.²
- Regulation of CSO's registration, activities and funding:** members working in CSOs stated facing increased constraints in their registration as well as obtaining approval on activities and funding. This was also mentioned in the Civil Society Sustainability Index of 2018, which stated that laws affecting CSOs, especially the Law on Societies No.51 of 2008, created challenges for organization in 2018, as it uses vague terminology that allows officials to impose arbitrary restrictions on CSOs.³

1 USAID, FHI360 & ICNL (2019), [The 2018 CSO Sustainability Index for Jordan](#)

2 Mena Rights Group (2019), [Latest Cybercrime Law amendments once again risk curbing free speech in Jordan](#)

3 USAID, FHI360 & ICNL (2019), [The 2018 CSO Sustainability Index for Jordan](#)

- Lack of enabling environment for political parties:** participants belonging to several political parties spoke about the different factors impacting the effectiveness of political parties in Jordan including weak public turn out and the reluctance of many to be involved in political life due to social and security concerns, as well as policies and laws that restrict the role of political parties. According to the Jordan Country Report on Human Rights Practices, the Ministry of Political and Parliamentary Affairs has the supervisory authority of political parties in Jordan under the Political Parties Law. The law states that parties must have 150 founding members, all of whom must be citizens; parties may not be formed on the basis of religion, race, gender, or sect; and prohibits membership in unlicensed political parties. Overall, there are around 50 registered political parties in Jordan, with the most organized being the Islamic Action Front.⁴ Out of the 1.5 million people who can vote in Jordan, only 35,000 are members of Jordanian political parties.⁵
- Arrest and detention:** several participants, especially those who participate in demonstrations, spoke about their exposure to restrictive measures by security officials including arrests, detention and questioning. They believed that such measures are used as an intimidation tactic to limit the work of social movements.
- Lack of institutionalized communication between movements and policymakers:** several participants pointed out that the relationship and communication between social movement actors and relevant policymakers is not institutionalized; based on the policymaker's readiness and openness to communicate with the movements, rather than official and institutionalized structures. As mentioned previously, policymakers who were interviewed stated their preference to communicate with formal and registered social movements, and expressed that communication with informal movements remains challenging.
- Restriction of unions:** participants who are members of labor movements spoke about the challenges that they face in their work, including their freedom of association and right to collective bargaining. According to article 98 of the Labor Law, establishing new unions requires the approval of the Ministry of labor and at least 50 founding members. The Law also defines 17 industries and professions in which trade unions may be established, and requires that they register under the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions, which is a governmental entity.⁶ The research participants gave several examples on restrictive measures by the government, for example the refusal to register a union for farmers. Up until now, the Labor Law does not recognize independent unions, which is a violation of the Jordanian Constitution which affirms the right to freedom of assembly.

4 US Department of State (2018), [2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Jordan](#)

5 Shehab Makahleh (2020), [Why Jordanians are reluctant to join parties](#). The Jordan Times.

6 US Department of State (2018), [2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Jordan](#)

Box 2: The Jordanian Teachers Association

The Jordanian Teachers Association was established in 2011 after the teachers' continuous demands for it. The association is an elected legal body with financial and administrative independence established by Law No. 14 of 2011 to represent teachers in Jordan. It aims to defend teachers' individual and collective rights and calls for the betterment of teachers' conditions for all members working in education.⁷

In September 2019, the union which represents more than 100,000 teachers, started a strike that lasted for one month. It was Jordan's longest public sector strike that disrupted the daily routine of public schools throughout the kingdom. It was met with security enforcement and with the closing of some of the capital's main streets limiting access to teachers coming to Amman from around the kingdom in protest. The one month strike ended after the government agreed to raise teachers' salaries and meet their other demands.⁸

However, demands regarding increasing pay have partially been met by the government only to come to a halt when in April the government announced that it was to freeze all public sector pay due to financing implications brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in a number of protests that resulted in the decision to shut down the teachers union and all its branches throughout the kingdom for two years, and the arrest of all 13 members of the union's Council Committee based on allegations related to 'criminal and corruption charges' in addition to other arrests of other teachers.^{9 10}

7 Arab Org. Website: Jordan Teachers Association

8 Marta Vidal (26 Sep 2019), *Teachers on strike in Jordan demand higher income, 'dignity'*

9 The Jordan Times (25 July 2020), *Jordan Teachers Association ordered closed for two years*

10 Middle East Monitor (26 July 2020), *Jordan judiciary demands shut down of teachers' union*

2.1 Freedom of Expression

Many participants have stated that there are several laws which restrict their freedom to express and violate their privacy. One example is the Cyber Crime Law which was introduced in 2015 and was widely condemned by activists, journalist and civil society. The amendment of the law which was drafted in 2018 also raised concerns among civil society, especially regarding the introduction of the ambiguous definition of hate speech. The law defines hate speech as 'any statement or act that would incite discord (fitna), religious, sectarian, racial or ethnic strife or discrimination between individuals or groups.'¹¹ This loose definition is said to open the door for interpretation and thereby restrict media and civil society freedom. According to the National Centre for Human Rights (NCHR), based on the Cyber Crime Law, 1821 journalists and activists were charged and another 161 were detained in 2018.¹²

Administrative detention was one of the challenges cited by many participants. Local governors continue to use the Crime Prevention Law to place activists and journalists in administrative detention, sometimes up to a year. According to the NCHR, 37, 683 people were placed in detention in 2018, compared to 34,952 in 2017 and 30,138 in 2016.¹³

2.2 Freedom of Assembly

While the Public Gatherings Law does not require Jordanians to get government permission to hold public gatherings or demonstrations, many still seek permission from the Ministry of Interior to hold such events, and several events were cancelled by the ministry without explanation.¹⁴

Several participants expressed that government has placed restrictive measures on them, limiting their freedom to organize public gatherings and events, and hindering their freedom of assembly. This was a clear violation of the Jordanian Constitution which stipulates that 'Jordanians shall have the right to hold meetings within the limits of the law.'¹⁵

11 MENA Rights Group (2018), [Amendments to Jordan's Cybercrime Law Risk Curbing Free Speech Online](#)

12 National Centre for Human Rights (2018), [Annual Report 2018](#)

13 Human Rights Watch, [World Reports 2020 – 2017](#)

14 Human Rights Watch (2019), [Jordan: Events of 2018](#)

15 Constitution of Jordan, [Article 16](#)

Box 3: Successful Advocacy by CSOs Working on Women's Rights

Civil society organizations working on women's rights all strive towards the achievement of gender equality in society and legislation. Each CSO uses different tactics and conducts a variety of activities including lobbying, advocacy for policy change, awareness raising and training. Participants working on women's rights and gender equality spoke about the successes that they along with others were able to achieve in the last few years, especially pertaining to policy change. Examples include, abolishing article 308 and amending article 98 of the Penal Code, amending articles in the Labor Law to encourage women's economic participation as well as the issuing of non-citizen children of Jordanian mothers with identification cards and civil privileges.

According to the 2018 CSO Sustainability Index for Jordan, there was more advocacy in 2018 in comparison to previous years as Jordanian CSOs engaged in many successful campaigns.¹⁶



¹⁶ USAID & FHI360 (2019), 2018 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index for Jordan

RECOMMENDATIONS

To Policymakers

- Unify the references that regulate the work of civil society organizations, to prevent duplication and multiplicity of institutions that supervise them.
- Limit interferences in the work of civil society organizations such as registration delays, approvals for grants, meetings and activities.
- Institutionalize dialogue between parties and governments in an organized and permanent manner, that does not fluctuate depending on the flexibility of a particular policymaker.
- Remove restrictions to establishing new trade unions by amending the Jordanian Labor Law. This includes restrictions such as: providing for no less than 50 founding members when establishing a union; limiting trades and industries where workers are entitled to organize themselves; and granting authority to the Minister of Labor to dissolve the union, without resorting to the judiciary, in the event that a violation is committed.
- Remove restrictions from the Jordanian Labor Law in Articles 44 and 98 that prevent workers from claiming their rights without the existence of trade unions representing them.
- Increase government consideration of the demands of the actors in peaceful demonstrations and protests in the governorates, who operate in the form of informal individuals or groups and are unaffiliated with any civil society organization.
- Stop security measures against activists participating in sit-ins and demonstrations in the governorates and members of political parties.
- End the restriction on freedom of opinion and expression by amending Article 11 of the Cybercrime Law related to publishing and re-publishing what involves defamation, insult and insult by electronic means.
- Amend Article 2 of the Public Gatherings Law that includes a broad definition of public meeting and abolish the authority of the administrative ruler that allows the use of force to break up a meeting or restrict or disperse meetings, peaceful demonstrations and sit-ins.

TO CIVIL SOCIETY

- Policymakers interviewed recommend that individuals and groups who operate informally join existing formal movements, such as unions and political parties, to facilitate communication with them.
- Promote and increase joint collective and institutional work on issues that CSOs are working on through coalitions and alliances.
- Work to develop political party discourse towards society, expand their influence and social bases in the capital and the governorates and update political party programs.



