Minorities

Miranda Egan Langley

Jordan is formally recognised as a constitutional monarchy; however, in practice, the government serves at the pleasure of the king, who, throughout the Jordanian history, has displayed a tendency to override their authority at will. This monarchy has had to evolve and adapt to the ever-changing social structure of its region's inhabitants, as minority groups dominate the Kingdom.

It is also a country in which its minority groups can often fall between the gaps as tensions increase with the continuing flow of refugees from the neighbouring countries. The available data on the total number and proportion of ethnic groups appear to be an object of frequent state management and have often resulted in political controversy, where ethnic groups can be a politically sensitive issue and official data on them are not available in public domain. However, acknowledging the rich historical tapestry of minorities which inhabit the region, their origins, and, for many, their continued existence in the Kingdom is the key to the understanding their present status (Alan 2005) in Jordan's social structure.

M. E. Langley (✉)
Honorable Society of Kings Inns, Dublin, Ireland
e-mail: miranda.langley@lawlibrary.ie

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The Ottoman Empire, King Abdullah, and Beyond

During the Ottoman rule (1516–1918 CE), the territory now known as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan was primarily populated by the Bedouin tribes. The Ottoman administration was fragile and was not in a position to effectively control the tribes. This was evident in the many towns and villages which were abandoned, resulting in the decline of agriculture and subsequently the movement of families and tribes who frequently travelled from one village to another owing to the lack of resources or infrastructure. Jordan was to emerge from the clutches of the Ottoman Empire primarily populated with a foundation of Bedouins, who remained as they were, as masters of the desert, continuing to live much as they had for hundreds of years.

Prior to the British involvement, the region had a small settled population in the north-west that remained largely desert and was inhabited by Bedouin tribes. In 1921, Britain awarded Transjordan, the area east of Palestine and the Jordan River, to Emir Abdullah. The initial attempts at forging a regional state disregarded any previous claims to an exclusive existence that the region might have had (Robins 2004). The tribes were co-opted by the Emir, and he recruited a small armed force predominantly from the southern tribes. It was not until 1946 that Transjordan became an independent state and was formally recognised as the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

During this pivotal time, ethnic minorities were already visible throughout the region. Many Syrians and Palestinians opted to migrate to Jordan in an attempt to escape over-taxation and ongoing feuds, while many Muslim Circassians and Chechens fled the Czarist Russian persecution to settle in Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. Before the British involvement, the Ottomans had settled Circassians together with a few Shia Chechens, on the almost completely deserted East Bank between 1878 and 1909. Their intention was to form a barricade against the predatory Bedouin and also to develop the region agriculturally. The result was that they created the first proper settlements at Amman, Zarqa, and Jerash (Zabad 2017). At the time of the independence, Circassians numbered about 6000 and formed an elite and loyal core retinue for Abdullah, well represented in the armed forces and administration. It is clear that from the very foundations of the state, Jordon already had a significant share of minority groups.

In the present context, these groups can be divided into three broad categories of minorities: refugees, religious minorities, and ethnic minorities.

Refugees

Initially, relations between the King and the emerging Israeli state remained amicable; however, in 1948, Transjordan fought Israel to capture the West Bank, part of the putative Palestinian Arab state. When it formally annexed it in 1950, the population of Jordan tripled. Over time, the refugee population increased from about 300,000 in 1967 to over 1.8 million in 2006 with the addition of refugees and West Bank inhabitants (Minority Rights Group International 2008, p. 1).

The 1948 War was the first of several conflicts Jordan was to have with Israel, and the June War of 1967 resulted in Israel occupying the West Bank. In 1970, fierce fighting broke out between the Jordanian military and Palestinian fighters which resulted in King Hussein deciding to attack several of the Palestinian camps by ground and air force and in the crisis at least 400 were killed and over 700 wounded (Morris 2001).

Despite this conflict, Jordan has continued to host Palestinian refugees since 1948, and according to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (hereinafter, the UNRWA), there were 2.2 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan in 2017. Out of them, more than 440,000 are residing in 13 camps which are spread across the country. The UNEDW goes on to report that over 90 per cent of those individuals were holders of a Jordanian national identification number. This has enabled these individuals to access all state services, leaving them with the same equality as Jordanian citizens and providing the required foundations for successful social integration (The United Nations Committee of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women UNEDW 2017).

However, this is not the status quo for all Palestinian refugees who are resident within the country and there are significant constraints both in terms of access to basic essentials and education. While essential services were to be provided by the UNRWA to the Palestinian refugees, both residing inside and outside of the camps owing to limited resources and funding, it has only been in a position to provide those essential services to about 3 per cent of the entire population of Palestinian refugees (UNEDW 2017). This has meant that the deficit has fallen upon the Jordanian state, increasing the already strained financial burden. To add to this tension, the relationship between the resident Palestinians and the state remains fragile owing to Jordan's historical relationship with Israel together with the long-held belief by many Palestinians that a secret agreement took place between Jordan and Israel regarding the status of the

West Bank. This is compounded by the Jordanian fear vis-à-vis the Palestinian community within its borders (Castallenio and Cavanaugh 2013, p. 153).

While Palestinian refugees make up the majority of refugees, the country has also absorbed a wave of Iraqi refugees after the US-led invasion of that country in March 2003 and, at one time, the Iraqi refugee population ranged from 750,000 to 1 million and it made up about 17 per cent of Jordan's population (Nanes 2007, p. 1).

The Iraq war indirectly resulted in an economic boom for Jordan (Nanes 2007, p. 1) but the resulting refugee flows have become onerous, and the state was economically stretched. Jordan has admitted more refugees fleeing from the war in Iraq per capita than any other country (Ibid.). The influx has not only placed a heavy burden on the government but has also resulted in an increase in house prices and the cost of essential and basic goods.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) conducted a survey in 2007, which indicated that the migration of Iraqis to Jordan is predominantly a migration of families; with 77 of them, who arrived in 2003 and later, with the highest volume of movement of the population taking place in 2004 and 2005 (UNHCR 2007, p. 7). The survey also showed that the 68 per cent were Sunni Muslims; 17 per cent Shia Muslims, and 12 per cent Christian. Owing to increased fears over the import of sectarian violence from Iraq, after the 2005 Amman bombings, Jordan has routinely turned away male Iraqi refugees between the ages of 18 and 45 and has further attempted to prevent Shia refugees from entering the country (International Crisis Group 2008, p. 9).

There has been a particular concern raised by the Christian Iraqi refugees as funding dried up for the refugee community and the prohibition against working remained in place. The UNHCR report also showed that a majority of Iraqis were living on savings or received transfers and only 42 per cent received such transfers from Iraq. This has made a large segment of Iraqis in Jordan at risk of becoming vulnerable with the depletion of savings, as the deterioration in the security situation in Iraq has affected the transfers of funds. The result is that a decade later, the number of Iraqis living in Jordan has decreased to about 140,000. This number is significantly smaller when compared with approximately 1.2 million Syrians in the country in addition to about 600,000 Egyptian guest workers. While the Iraqi population of Jordan has shrunk from its high point of

about half a million in 2008, more affluent Iraqis continue to play a highly visible role in Jordanian society (Sheldon 2018, p. 1).

Jordan also has a significant number of Syrian refugees, which it is currently acting as a host country to. In November 2017, the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination stated that Jordan has the largest refugee population per capita in the world and identified 29 per cent of the population as refugees. The UNHCR indicated, as of 1 May 2018, there were 666,596 registered Syrian refugees in the Kingdom (UNHCR 2018). To put this into context, Jordan has received one-in-five of all Syrians fleeing the war. The UNHCR reports that, in 2017, many of these Syrian refugees are living in refugee camps, such as Zaatari and Azraq (Ibid.), where aid groups have converted desert wastelands into cities. *Human Rights Watch* reports that since the beginning of the war in Syria, between 2011 and 2016, Jordan had received over 656,000 Syrian refugees and out of them, approximately 79,000 were housed at the Zaatari Refugee Camp, 54,000 in Azarq Camp, and 7300 in the Emirates Jordan Camp in Zarqa Governorate and the rest have been living in towns and cities without permits (HRW 2016, p. 4). While the refugees have been welcomed warmly, such a large number of people have been taking its toll on the region.

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Jordan indicated that the direct cost of providing for such large numbers has amounted to about 5 per cent of the gross domestic product or in real financial terms about two billion dollars annually (UNEDW 2017). The impact of this is evident particularly in the education system which has witnessed a surge in the number of Syrian pupils who now represent 12 per cent of the student population (UNEDW 2017). Despite ongoing efforts to increase the capacity, 47 per cent of the schools remained seriously overcrowded with the direct cost of this crisis amounting to on an average two billion dollars a year (UNEDW 2017).

Jordan does not receive sufficient international assistance to manage the increased refugee crisis on its infrastructure, particularly in relation to education and health and, by November of 2016, only 57 per cent of the US$1.1 billion budget goal for 2016 had been raised. Furthermore, in 2016, there were at 80,000 Syrian refugee children who were not in formal education, but the Jordanian Ministry of Education has taken significant steps to provide access to education for more than 50,000 children and introduced targeted “catch up” programmes for children who had not had access to education for the past three years (HRW 2016, p. 10). To tide

over the crisis, 28,000 work permits had been issued for Syrian Refugees by the Jordanian labour authorities (UNHCR 2018). However, it is clear that despite these significant efforts, the state lacks the requisite means and infrastructure to support the ceaseless flow of refugees into the country.

Ethnic Minorities

Apart from the significant Palestinian, Iraqi, and Syrian refugee population, the country is defined by further minority divisions. While the countries official language is Arabic, English, Circassian, and Armenian are also widely spoken. The main minority and indigenous groups consist of Palestinians 3 million (50 per cent), Bedouins of Jordanian origin (est. 33 per cent), Iraqi refugees 450,000—1 million (7.5–17 per cent), Christians 360,000 (6 per cent), Chechens and Circassians 60,000 (1 per cent), Armenians 60,000 (1 per cent), Druze 12,000–14,000 (0.2 per cent), Baha'i 1000 (0.02 per cent), Kurds 30,000 Shia Muslims (number unknown), and Assyrians (0.8%) (CIA 2007). The Jordan Demographics Profile reported in 2018 that the main ethnic groups present in the Kingdom were Arab (98 per cent), Circassian (1 per cent), and Armenian (1 per cent) (Jordan Demographics Profile 2018).

The World Population Review on Jordon reports that Assyrian Christians make up 0.8 per cent of the population, most of whom are Eastern Aramaic-speaking refugees. There are also 30,000 Kurds, most of which are refugees from Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, and about 5000 Armenians. Jews, who were once prevented in the country, are 300 in number. In addition, it is estimated that there are 1.2 million illegal migrant workers and 500,000 legal migrant workers in Jordan, and thousands of foreign women come to work in hotels or other service sectors (World Population Review 2018).

Currently, the citizen population of Jordan is estimated to be 6 million. The majority of Jordanians, which includes a portion of the large Palestinian refugee population, descend from Bedouin or tribal origins.

However, there are about 60,000 Circassians and Chechens, who have retained their identity, living in Amman and six villages in the north. Circassians are highly integrated into the Arabic-speaking society while retaining community consciousness. The Circassians had been forced out of their homeland by the Czarist Russia, and thousands of them fled to the Ottoman Empire in 1864. Refugees scattered to the four corners of the

Empire: from Turkey to the Suez Canal and from Syria to Palestine. Circassians are one of the invisible expatriate minorities living in the Middle East and the precise number is not known. The census taken in 1933 by the British was the only occasion when people were ethnically identified, and it put the number of the Circassians to be at 5850 (Mackey 1979). However, today that number is closer to 60,000, and the impact that the Circassian community has had is significant. A Circassian became Jordan's first Prime Minister in 1950, an indication of the influential position the community achieved in the Kingdom. The Chechens have also retained a large part of their cultural identity and are more likely to speak their mother tongue (Kailani 2002).

There is no official source for the total number of Palestinians and it is often cited in numerous media reports that they number half or slightly more than half of the population. The UNRWA reports that there are 2,175,491 registered Palestine refugees as of 1 December 2016, and this would tend to suggest that almost 50 per cent of Jordan's population is made up of Palestinians (El-Abed 2014, p. 81) and most of them were refugees who fled the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948 and 1967 and their descendants. The Palestinians are located overwhelmingly in the north-western part of the country, principally in the environs of Amman, Zarqa, and Irbid. The Palestinian refugee community has retained its identity owing to the special management of King Abdullah I during the first exodus of Palestinians whereby full citizenship rights were granted (Amro 2008, p. 66). However, the same cannot be said for the rest of Jordanian minority groups.

Religious Minorities

The Constitution in Jordan guarantees freedom of religious beliefs and that is evident in the presence of religious minorities. In 2007, the main religions in Jordan were divided into Sunni Islam (92 per cent), Christianity (6 per cent), and Druze faith and Shia Islam (together around 2 per cent). In 2018, the religious minority landscape has changed somewhat. The Jordan Demographics Profile (2018) outlines that the majority of the country is Muslim (97.2 per cent), predominantly Sunni, and Islam is the official religion.

There are some Christians, the majority being Greek Orthodox, but there are also some Greek and Roman Catholics, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Protestant denominations. The non-citizen population also include about 0.4 per cent Buddhists, 0.1 per cent

Hindus, and a smaller portion of Jews, folk religionist, unaffiliated, and others (Jordan Demographics Profile 2018).

The overwhelming majority of Jordanians are Sunni Muslims. However, Christians form approximately 6 per cent of the population. Many of the Christians are Palestinians, but some are also from long-established East Bank families in the north-west of the country (USLS 2018). Many Christians in Jordan belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, while the rest are Latin Roman Catholics, Eastern Catholics, and various Protestant communities, including Baptists (USLS 2018).

The main areas of the indigenous Christian communities located in the East Bank were limited to towns such as Karak, Madaba, Salt, and Ajlun, and Christian communities were noted to also reside in Amman and some other major cities. In previous times, Christians were often largely represented among the more educated and affluent classes. As a result, they had increased access to education (USLS 2018).

The non-Christian religious minorities include a small community of Druze who live near the Syrian border. They originally derive from a small sect of the Ismaili branch of Shia Islam. Their belief system is based on the teachings of Imam Muhammad Bin-Ismail (died ca. A.D. 765), the Seventh Imam, whom they consider as the last Imam. This is in conflict with and opposed to other groups who recognised 12 Imams. There is some suggestion that the Druze were in fact a people even before conversion to the faith of al-Hakim, a Muslim (Marshal 2016, p. 2). For example, there are theories that suggest that the Druze are descendants of Persian colonists. Other sources suggest that they are of Christian descent, during the time of the crusades (Ibid., pp. 1–2). However, the latter is most unlikely considering that the first crusade began about 80 years after al-Hakim.

A unique aspect of the Druze identity is that they do not seek to assert their own country and are faithful to the country which governs their territory. As a result of this, they can be found in Israel, Lebanon, and Syria and are said to be great warriors. In 2005, the Druze in Jordan numbered approximately 20,000 (International Religious Freedom Report 2005, p. 1) and, in 2018, the figure rose to 41,000 (The Joshua Project 2018, p. 1). Although the government does not specifically recognise the Druze faith, considering them instead to be Muslims, it does not set out to impede their worship or customs (Ibid., p. 3).

The Shishans, a group whose origins lie in the Caucasus Mountains, are connected to the Circassians and are Shias. Estimates in the early 1980s

placed their number at 2000. However, data are unavailable as to their current population. Both the Circassians and the Shishans have adapted to their Arabic environment within a short space of time and both groups have adopted Arabic as their main lingua franca (Shoup 2007, p. 8).

In general, it would appear that there is a higher degree of religious freedom in Jordan with different groups being permitted to practice their faith. For example, in general, Christians do not suffer discrimination, holding high-level positions in the government and private sector and have been represented in the media and academia. However, it is noteworthy that there is a small religious minority of Baha'is, which inhabits the village of Al Adasiyah in the northern Jordan Valley, use Persian dialect (Harris 1958, p. 12) and have faced some societal discrimination (International Religious Freedom Report 2005, p. 6).

It appears that the majority of the indigenous population view religion as a personal choice and central to one's personal identity. This is evident in the fact that relations between Muslims and Christians are generally considered to be amicable (Ibid.).

Conclusion

Three major minority groupings exist in Jordan today, namely, refugees, ethnic minorities, and religious minorities and with the continued influx of refugees, the demography of these groups may continue to alter over time. The constitution which was established under King Talal in 1952 was progressive in many senses but primarily due to its approach in providing representation towards the minorities. The long practice was formalised in 2003 when women and minority groups are represented in parliament through a quota system. Nine seats, or 8 per cent of the Chamber, are reserved for Christians, and three seats are reserved for Chechens and Circassians.

However, while these groups are well represented, the cultural landscape has dramatically altered over time with significant numbers of Palestinians, Syrians, and Iraqis now living within the Kingdom in refugee camps or elsewhere. Furthermore, since February 2017, the UNHCR has reported that over 10,000 Somali, Sudanese, and Yemeni refugees and asylum seekers are registered with UNHCR in Jordan, though many members of these communities live in the country without valid documentation.

Although there have been significant regional and domestic issues which contribute to the constant influx of refugees, Jordan's high rates of population growth will inevitably be linked to its economic fortunes and failures. Amidst this vulnerability and the financial barriers, that many of these minority groups face, in particular, the refugees, there is a growing sense of alienation from the general Jordanian identity. In a media commentary on "*A nation of minorities?*" in March 2018, an author suggests that many of these minorities feel aggrieved and marginalised and often complain of mistreatment by the state system (Murad 2018). While Jordan is committed to the promotion and protection of human rights, it is clear that the battle for true equality for many minority groups living in the Kingdom will be a continued uphill struggle.

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