Collective action without groups

A case study of youth activism, fragmentation and political identification in Jordan

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Abstract

This paper aims to understand the ways in which Jordanian social and political activists aim to win the mindset of Jordan's youth and engage them for action. It specifically looks at the immense fragmentation in this field, aiming to outline what exactly causes this fragmentation. It will look for the formation of political identification, and the boundary processes activists engage in as they aim to form such political identifications. Empirically, this paper offers a non-exhaustive account of what activism can be in a place where stability is imperative and the political system is largely closed. Conceptually, the aim is to find ways of analyzing and understanding contention in a place where there are little to no groups, yet a range of incoherent efforts to promote change.

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Introduction

"When has anybody ever developed their own political identity? And here of course it's discouraged so it's even more absent. But also there's something more: there is no longer trust. People lost hope for a better future. Nobody knows the answer. There is no quick solution; the story that it's gradually progressing has been told for years and it's not true. Nothing is changing."[1]

In Jordan, stability is a given. It is the norm, and has been for some time now. Jordan had its wave of activism during the 'Arab Spring', but it is primarily known for its preserved level of stability since then. However, this certainly does not imply there is no drive for change. And if stability bears any positive meaning besides the absence of chaos, it certainly shouldn't mean that change is not an option. I came to Jordan to prove this point, and in a way, I did. However, I may have been too optimistic. Thinking that looking for youth activism would mean just that, youth-led activism. That I would find new political identities being made, new ideas being formed, boundaries being broken. What I found instead was a lack of collectives. A lack of groups, and an ever-increasing amount of boundaries. I found that there is more activism targeting youth than there is activism led by youths. I found that stability may not exclude change, but it certainly slows it down. Nevertheless, this paper has one core aim: to understand what makes these boundaries, and how 'we' make the boundaries. How people, youths, activists, may find their actions being constrained and re-directed but they nevertheless do take action. It was not until my last week in Jordan that this field I had been trying to make sense of was best put into words by a young social media activist: "I feel youth activism is getting bigger; but the problem is that there is no single frame – it's personal, no organized group. So all those efforts together just form a 'noise'."[2]

The purpose of this paper is to make sense of this noise that is activism. Mostly, to understand what makes it just that, noise. To understand how, in attempts to make collectives, people instead make boundaries; how in attempts to engage Jordan's youth, activists instead separate them. The purpose of this paper may appear broad, and it is, yet this is merely because I insisted on basing this research on the reality in front of me rather than the realities observers often wish to see, and try to paint for themselves. Perhaps the main contribution of this paper is to account for how social theory can inform an understanding of incoherent 'noise' in a way that nevertheless considers every form of action to be a source of change. The aim is to move closer to understanding how political identities are 'made', and especially, how one can analyze this at a stage where a group is actually not yet visible, but boundaries certainly are. The main question this research aims to answer is: *"Through which boundary processes are Jordanian social and political activists aiming to offer new forms of political identification for Jordan's youth, during the Spring of 2017?"*

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[1] Author's interview with participant #8, former political activist, Amman, 19 May 2017
[2] Author's interview with participant #9, social media activist, Amman, 21 May, 2017

Activism in Jordan: past accounts and theoretical misunderstandings

Looking back at the limited amount of both mainstream and scholarly attention Jordan has received, a pattern appears that in a way exemplifies the shifting narratives regarding the Arab region in the past decade. A number of past accounts focus on Jordan's efforts of 'democratization' and reform, often depicting Jordan as a 'liberal autocracy', by and large focusing attention on state-led developments.[3] Since then, a limited amount of literature has paid attention to the series of uprisings that Jordan experienced during the era of the 'Arab Spring', commonly known as the *hirak*. Doing so, scholars turned attention to non-state actors, society itself, and the triggers that sparked collective action. However, soon enough, both mainstream and academic discourse shifted its focus towards the Jordanian regime's apparently remarkable success in maintaining 'stability', both during these uprisings and in the years that followed.[4] Similarly, 'stability' as well as security are absolute key terms when foreign media, think-tanks and policy institutes discuss Jordan, as a way of ensuring a strategic partner in the fight against extremism, a regional host country for refugees and simply not another Arab country in peril. If there is any concern for internal developments, be it political expression or economic prosperity, it is merely to serve these goals.[5] The dominant pattern appears to be not only that change and stability might be mutually exclusive. More so, in scholarly literature as much as in common discourse, a dominant pattern is to look at the tension between change and stability from either one of two ways: what a state does in times of stability, versus what a society does, what activists do, in times of instability.

To the extent that there is an interest in the ability of non-state actors to bring about change, two other tendencies have dominated scholarly and mainstream debates. The first is one previously stressed by Ababneh (2016), who argues that "scholarly literature on Jordan invariably stresses that the most pressing issue faced by Jordanians is the absence of real democracy and political representation".[6] Such a perspective discloses, she argues, the fact that past protest movements then and now were in fact triggered first and foremost by socio-economic concerns. This is rightfully noted: even if the majority of scholarly assessments of Jordan's *hirak* acknowledge that its initial triggers were socio-economic, they consistently focus on the political

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[3] Ryan Curtis, "Political opposition and reform coalitions in Jordan." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 3 (2011); Sean L. Yom, "Jordan: The ruse of reform." *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (2013)

[4] Martin Beck and Simone Hüser, Jordan and the 'Arab Spring': No Challenge, No Change?, *Middle East Critique* 24, no. 1 (2015); Maria Josua, "Co-optation Reconsidered: Authoritarian Regime Legitimation Strategies in the Jordanian "Arab Spring"", *Middle East Law and Governance*, 8 (2016); E.J. Karmel, "How Revolutionary Was Jordan's Hirak?" *Identity Center*, June 2014. Accessed March 26, 2017, http://www.identity-center.org/sites/default/files/How%20Revolutionary%20Was%20Jordan%27s%20Hirak__0.pdf; Jillian Schwedler, "Jordan Drops the Pretense of Democratic Reform," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, April 28 (2016); Sean L. Yom, "Tribal politics in contemporary Jordan: the case of the Hirak movement. *The Middle East Journal*, 68, no. 2 (2014); Sean L. Yom, "The new landscape of Jordanian politics: social opposition, fiscal crisis, and the Arab Spring." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (2015)

[5] Some examples of such perspectives are: Oded Erand and Eddie Grove, "Threats to Stability in Jordan", *Strategic Assessment* 18, No. 2 (2015); Nikita Malik, "Syria's Spillover Effect on Jordan", *Carnegie Middle East Center*, February 13, 2014, accessed June 12, 2017, http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/54509; Megan O'Toole, "Discontent simmers among East Bank Jordanians", *Al Jazeera*, 3 June 2014, accessed April 5, 2017, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/discontent-simmers-among-east-bank-jordanians-20146381828614925.html; David Schenker, "Cracks Start to Show in Jordan", *Washington Institute*, September 13, 2016, accessed June 12, 2017, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/cracks-start-to-show-in-jordan; Robert Satloff and David Schenker, "Growing Stress on Jordan", *Washington Institute*, March 2016, accessed June 12, 2017, http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/growin.g-stress-on-jordan

[6] Sara Ababneh, "Troubling The Political: Women In The Jordanian Day-Waged Labor Movement." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 01 (2016)", 89.

aspects of the movement, and where these were lacking, on questions of why they *didn't* continue to ask for large-scale political reforms.[7]

Second, Jordan's lack of a clear national identity, and the division between 'Palestinian Jordanians' and 'East Jordanians' has long ignited an interest from scholars to understand the complexity of Jordan's demographic divide.[8] However, in most previous accounts of political activism in Jordan, a pattern persists in which these are in fact *assumed* to be the main 'groups'. Unable to thoroughly reflect on complex questions of identity as such, scholars tend to assume these are the primary way by which to understand who people are, what they want, and how they act. Beck and Hüser (2015) for instance, state that Palestinians simply did not want to lose economic privileges, while Jordanians did not want to lose political ones, further noting that "Palestinians were aware that if they had headed the opposition movement against the regime, the Transjordanians would have observed their participation with distrust."[9] This is precisely the type of "groupism" I aimed to avoid in this research, referring to the way in which scholars tend to assume clear, static, unitary, and externally bounded groups as basic constituents of social life.[10] The reason to avoid doing so, is not only that it may disclose other lines of division and drivers of activism. More so, a possible outcome of groupism is to "reify" groups: adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis, thereby reproducing the imagined static nature of identity.[11] Yom (2015), though making quite the opposite statement regarding past movements, similarly bases his analysis on pre-existing groups, arguing that the Arab Spring protests "eroded" the Palestinian/Jordanian divide, as they "believed that political common needs could overcome the demographic divide".[12] Though it may be true that boundaries have shifted since and political demands were present, he fails to offer an in-depth account as to what essentially drove activists, and how such a deeply rooted divide could be 'eroded' through common needs.

Bringing these patterns together, a tendency in previous literature is to assume groups, interests, or both, beforehand. Yet the theoretical debates regarding 'identity and interest' are in close proximity, but not so easily connected to what is known about contentious politics. Before outlining the exact definitions of these concepts, some basic understandings would show that assuming either one to essentially explain contention, to exist prior to it, is at all times problematic. Jenkins (2000) offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of the intersection between 'identity and interest'. His findings are as true as they are unsatisfactory: identity does not, as such, drive behavior, but should always be understood in context of the interests people hold, which in turn are products of political, social and economic history.[13] Connecting this to the field of activism, of contentious politics, Tilly (1997) makes a statement that is essentially the basis of how activism is understood in this paper: "all contention involves assertions of identity

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[7] A number of these are Danya Greenfield, "Jordan's Youth: Avenues for Activism." *The Atlantic Council, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East,* August 5, 2013, accessed January 25, 2017, http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/jordans_youth_avenues_activism.pdf; Maria Josua, "If You Can't Include Them, Exclude Them: Countering the Arab Uprisings in Algeria and Jordan." *GIGA Research Unit: Institute of Middle East* Studies, No. 286 (2016); Sarah A. Tobin, "Jordan's Arab Spring: The Middle Class and Anti-Revolution." *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 1 (2012): 96-109; Curtis, "Reform coalitions in Jordan," Yom, "Jordan: The ruse of reform"; Yom, "The new landscape of Jordanian politics"

[8] I will elaborate on this divide in the first chapter. For more in-depth accounts, see Luigi Achilli, "Disengagement from politics: Nationalism, political identity, and the everyday in a Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan", *Critique of Anthropology,* 34 no. 2 (2014); Hisham Bustani, "Jordan's New Opposition and the Traps of Identity and Ambiguity", *Jadaliyya,* April 20, 2011, accessed April 8, 2017, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1303/jordans-new-opposition-and-the-traps-of-identity-a; Curtis R. Ryan, "Identity Politics, Reform and Protest in Jordan", *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism,* 11 no. 3 (2011)

[9] Beck and Hüser, "Jordan and the 'Arab Spring", 92.

[10] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity without groups.* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 35.

[11] Jolle Demmers, *Theories of Violent Conflict: An Introduction.* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 29-30.

[12] Yom, "The new landscape of Jordanian politics", 924.

[13] Richard Jenkins, "The limits of identity: ethnicity, conflict, and politics", *Sheffield Online Papers in Social Research,* 2 (2000), 22.

as well as the deployment of collective interests."[14] In other words, collective identities and interests are as much created by contention as the other way around. In line with this, taking a closer look at what 'identities' in fact are, be it social or political, a key characteristic is generally agreed upon: identities are at all times processual in nature. They are not starting points nor end products, they are not 'products' at all, but merely ongoing processes of interactions and experiences, relations and representations.[15]

Taking this into account strongly problematizes the tendency to assume groups before analyzing contention: if identities are processual, they are just as much an outcome of our actions as constitutive of our actions, and if they are in constant connection to collective interests, these are continuously changing as well. Yet in many previous accounts of activism in Jordan, the primary assumption is that group identities *or* interests essentially drive action, either creating directly opposing 'groups' or leading to a complete erosion of social boundaries due to an overarching interest. The aim of this paper on the other hand, is to understand how activism continuously shapes processes which create, maintain, alter or break with forms of political identification. In this case, as noted, this is carried out in a setting where 'contention' is not quite what it is theoretically assumed to be as uprisings, large-scale protests and high-level political demands carry little support. A starting point for a categorization of units of observation therefore, is simply strategies, *forms* of activism, assuming that from action onwards, boundaries manifest, in this case contributing to the formation of collective political identification. The aim is to understand how, in aiming to develop new forms of political identification, activists in Jordan are each in their own way creating change in incremental ways, what fragments these efforts, and just how united it *should* be. In this case, I have assessed a range of different forms which I largely categorize into 'political' and 'social' activism; the argument being that the latter may just as well be capable of creating political identities.

Moreover, having originally aimed to look at 'youth activism' specifically, the role of youths shifted as I began to notice a pattern which was indeed explained to me during my first week in Jordan: "as a response to the history of ups, downs, and disappointments in the region as a whole, young people have a complete lack of belief in old symbols and slogans. Unconsciously, a movement is forming that wants to get rid of all these, and wants to create something different. This is being picked up on by civil society, the government, all voices on the internet: everyone is competing to win the young generation's mindset."[16] Thus, the aim is to understand just how they are trying to do so; how activists, both social and political, *aim* to offer new forms of political identification for Jordan's youth, but in the process, continue to create boundaries which amount to fragmentation and, ultimately, 'noise'.

Theoretical background and vocabulary

Inquiring how goals, values and identities are being formed through actions means that I aim to *understand* social processes from within, that is, through the eyes of those under study, rather than explaining them as a supposedly objective external observer. In other words, this paper takes a strongly interpretative epistemological approach. Ontologically, the view that actions

[14] Charles Tilly, "Contentious politics and social change", *African Studies*, 56 no. 1 (1997), 59.

[15] Alberto Mellucci, "The Process of Collective Identity." In *Social Movements and Culture*, Volume 4, edited by Hank Johnston, 41-63. Routledge, 2013; Richard Jenkins, *Social identity*. Routledge (2004), 5; Tilly, "Contentious politics and social change", 59.

[16] Author's interview with Wael, researcher at the Identity Center, Amman, 3 April 2017

create identities and interests as much as the other way around denotes a relational stance. Tilly is perhaps the strongest advocate of this way of understanding social life: he treats "interpersonal transactions as the basic elements of social processes. They show how interpersonal transactions compound into identities, create and transform social boundaries, and accumulate into durable social ties."[17] Thus, the wider ontological perspective behind the concepts used in this paper is that relations and interactions create dispositions, groups, and even interests, as much as how these in turn affect actions and interactions. As Tilly says, looking at social life in this way removes the need to understand pre-existing dispositions, as it blurs the distinction between "how" social processes work and "why" they work: the "how" is the "why".[18]

Tilly (2008) and Jenkins (2005) will be the main sources of theoretical knowledge in this paper. Jenkins outlines the complex, ongoing, processual nature of 'collective identification', primarily interested in social identity, though very well aware that political identities are closely related. Tilly has offered some more detailed definitions and concepts of how collective identities are continuously being transformed, with a stronger emphasis on their political nature and possible relations to contention. Both scholars, as well as several others, would assert that an identity by definition includes a *boundary*. If identities are 'made', produced, this is done merely through the making and unmaking of boundaries.[19] Hence, boundaries are the key term by which I will assess activism in Jordan. As said, identities, as well as boundaries, are defined by nearly all scholars as *processual*, meaning there is no absolute end-product of the process that is collective identification. To denote this processual nature, I will largely speak of *boundary processes* and political *identification* – a terminology that largely draws from Jenkins.[20] This processual definition further implies that boundary change, through the many *boundary change mechanisms* Tilly considers to be possible, can occur at any stage in this process. Such specific boundary change mechanisms will be highlighted throughout the paper.

Drawing from the framework laid out above, a number of core concepts and definitions that will cut across this paper should be highlighted. First, the most basic understanding of identities and boundaries is that each consists of two core units: *similarity and difference*. A boundary is where similarity and difference 'meet'; where identification takes place. "Similarity and difference reflect each other across a shared boundary. At the boundary, we discover what we are in what we are not, and *vice versa*."[21] Second, it is imperative to differentiate between *categories and groups*. A category is merely "a class whose nature and composition is decided by the person who defines the category. A category is therefore to be contrasted with a group, defined by the nature of the relations between the members. (…) Categorization, no less than group identification, is a generic interactional process, in this case of collective external definition."[22] Groups on the other hand can be spoken of once a process of group identification takes place: "Once relationships between members of a category involve mutual recognition of their categorization, the first steps towards group identification have been taken."[23] More specifically, Tilly's definition specifies how one can 'observe' a *social* boundary, that is, when one can identify not only categories but a certain level

of collective identification. These include four aspects: distinctive relations between sites on one side; distinctive relations between sites on the other side; distinctive relations across the zone between the two, and on each side, shared representations of the boundary itself.[24]

As for political identities, these are essentially "the subset to which governments are parties."[25] More specifically, Tilly defines political identities as "an actor's experience of a shared social relation in which at least one of the parties - including third parties - is an individual or organization controlling concentrated means of coercion."[26] The latter notion, that a government may be a *third* party to a relation, thereby still making one's identity a political identity, is crucial to emphasize. Through setting a boundary, setting certain shared relations and representations between an actor and state, one can hold a political identity even without engaging in action that necessarily targets politics.

A number of more specific concepts related to this framework will be defined throughout this paper. Taking an integrative approach, the chapters and sub-chapters in this paper do not derive from specific concepts but rather revolve around the empirical subsets of my findings, for which a similar set of concepts will continuously be applied to make sense of these findings. Overall, the core pattern running through this paper is a constant assessment of relations and representations, contributing to understandings of similarity and/or difference, and the important distinction to be made between a category as externally defined – at times by myself as an observer – and a group as internally defined.

Methodology

The findings of this research derive from a purely qualitative research method, consisting of a brief period of literature research, and two months of fieldwork in Jordan between late March and early June of 2017. Based in Amman, at times travelling to more rural areas, I have collected primary data through semi-structured interviews and discourse analysis, and secondary data through expert interviews as well as academic literature, NGO reports, think-thank publications and several western and Jordanian media sources. I began my period of fieldwork by speaking to local experts, such as academic or NGO-affiliated researchers, as well as a circle of formerly united, now more dispersed political youth activists from similar social and political backgrounds. The latter set of respondents were found through snowball sampling, whereas the former was more purposefully arranged. It was during this time that I began to realize that though I had not been wrong about assuming fragmentation and boundaries to be a relevant analytical lens, I had perhaps underestimated the complexity of my research topic – that is, the level of fragmentation and the absence of 'groups'. Thus began a period of uncertainty, continuously feeling that I *should* focus while remaining stuck at a stage of trying to understand the larger picture, not yet realizing that by continuing to speak to both activists from such a similar background and a range of NGO's with different outlooks, I was already engaging in what eventually became the core of my research: assessing how divergent strategies between groups with similar outlooks and goals, contribute to a fragmentation of youth activism. As I decided to continue on this path, I spent the last six weeks using a combination of snowball sampling and

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[24] Tilly, *Identities, boundaries and social ties*, 134.
[25] Tilly, "Contentious politics and social change", 59.
[26] Ibid., 60.

purposive sampling to gather respondents, aiming to speak to a more or less equal amount of respondents from two broad areas: formal political groups on the one hand, which I looked for purposively as I was aware of the main *new* players in the field, and social activists one the other, which I found through snowball sampling, setting the criteria that they should be community-based or at least operating outside Amman. In addition, I gained secondary information on worker's activism, taking place in rural areas especially, through reports, one crucial expert interview and previous academic literature.

In total, I have conducted 31 semi-structured interviews, the majority of which could be conducted in English; when this was not an option, a translator was present. I further gathered data through a range of informal meetings and follow-up conversations. All data presented in this paper derives from informants who were aware of my role as a researcher and had given their consent. Nevertheless, given the highly political content of most interviews – including those with less politically connotated initiatives – this research will in many, though not all cases refrain from giving personal names.

In addition to these interviews, I have conducted critical discourse analysis into openly shared documents, political programs, websites, and the data found through interviews themselves.[27] Asides from interviews, these included one political party, one political 'platform', a number of speeches and discussion papers as published by Jordan's King, and *7iber*, a youth-led online journalism platform with a highly critical political tone. Regarding the latter, which I will elaborate on when I discuss *7iber* as a form of activism, I analyzed a total of 10 articles, both English content available as well as a number of translated articles, most of which were published during the last year. The primary interest lied with the "ideological work" that discourse does, to the extent that groups have a vision for the Jordan's political, economic and social developments, and how this related to their actions. Therefore, I specifically used frame analysis as based on of Benford and Snow's conceptualization of frames.[28] This was not as a primary theoretical lens then, but simply a method of breaking up the discourses found. Of primary interest were diagnostic frames, that is, the identification of the "source of causality", often an injustice frame, as well as attribution of blame. Though in many cases 'collective action' in its usual understanding was not the aim of activists, prognostic frames – the articulation of a solution – and motivational frames – providing a rationale for action – were assessed as well.

Finally, it is imperative to acknowledge my own positionality. I was aware, even before entering the field, that a strong bias would derive from my background, gender, limited time frame and inability to speak Arabic. These factors created a situation where, certainly during the early stages of my research, I was limited to English-speaking, eager to speak, West-Amman based organizations, experts and activists – many of whom were culturally and politically similar to me.[29] Though this similarity certainly increased the level of openness and trust I received during these weeks, I soon realized that that I had become entangled in a rather closed circle of not only respondents but friends as well; one that is culturally, economically and politically hardly representative of Jordan. I partly justify this by emphasizing that I am interested in the

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[27] Discourse analysis in this case refers to critical discourse analysis, meaning I aimed to interpret and explain the social action that discourses produce; see, Teun A. van Dijk, "Principles of critical discourse analysis." *Discourse & society* 4, no. 2 (1993): 249-283.

[28] Benford, Robert D., and David A. Snow. "Framing processes and social movements: An overview and assessment." *Annual review of sociology* 26, no. 1 (2000): 611-639

[29] West-Amman is known to be the place where most political and economic activity in Jordan takes place, and is therefore culturally less conservative, and economically middle- and upper-class, a place that does not represent the majority of Jordanian citizens; at least one reflection of this trend is Sara Tobin, "Jordan's Arab Spring: The Middle Class and Anti-Revolution." *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 1 (2012)

development of *new* groups and constituents, and complemented my limited access with secondary data gathering on Jordanian society as a whole. Over time, I managed to speak to one Islamist party and a number of social activists from different backgrounds, often from less urban areas. Nevertheless, I cannot claim to speak for the majority segment of Jordanian politics, activism or society.

In light of this, each interview and each document I analyzed, required me to engage in what is referred to as "double hermeneutics". As many of my sources were simultaneously a source of information as well as a unit of analysis in themselves, I offered an interpretation of each person's interpretation, knowing that each respondent's reflections were not necessarily absolute truths. I was able to aggregate data only in two ways. For one, when gathering information about larger developments in society, such as general attitudes among the youth, the divisions in political identities or importance of group identities, I have at all times triangulated data, ensuring that such information was found in at least two, if not more sources, both documented and personally shared with me. Second, the fact that I obtained more personal, detailed experiences of only a limited social group and a limited number of activists, was not harmful for my research so long as I viewed their experiences as *illustrative* of how they were personally affected by larger political developments, which I constructed out of both theirs and other's experiences and expertise.

The outline of this paper reflects the forms of activism considered, more than it reflects a chronological order of events or theoretical sub-topics. I will begin by contextualizing the field and offering an account of the collective identities, interests and types of action that have led to the *hirak* several years ago, still lead to worker's activism today, and how this may have affected Jordan's demographic divide. The aim in this chapter is to elaborate on both empirical context and theoretical concepts, while combining the two in a way that helps to understand which boundaries and aims can assumed to be of relevance in activism today, based on the perspectives of former and current activists themselves. The second, larger chapter, will focus attention on what is left of more commonly considered 'political' activism, that is, those who openly talk about purely political issues and label their activity political. This chapter will ultimately serve to answer one question: why is it that 'political' activism in Jordan amounts to mainly abstract discourses and political rights as such; what prevents the emergence of effective forms of political identification that relate to Jordan's youth? I aim to answer this question by looking through the eyes of previous protestors, assessing a number of recently established formal initiatives and conceptualizing what online activism can be. The third chapter will shift attention to a completely different sphere that is opposed to political engagement in nearly every way – every way, that is, besides their actual aims. I will refer to this sphere as 'social activism', though this label is partly my own choice. It denotes a sub-category in the larger sphere of civil society which focuses on local needs, action, and a separation from the state. Bringing these spheres together, I notice that even among individuals with very similar aims and visions for Jordan, the strategies chosen lead to such divergent relations and discourses that they hold deeply opposing political identities. The theoretical contribution indeed relates to how contention can be understood in a place where collectivities are missing and political action is limited. In fact, throughout this process I break Tilly's 'rule' multiple times, of separating the 'how' from the 'why', instead insisting on *also* inquiring 'why' people do what they do, both directly and through discourse analysis. Doing so may not contribute to observing the boundaries that were indeed found; but it helps to shed light on the groups that very well *could* be there.

Chapter 1
Interests and identities: what *does* create unity?

1.1. 'Collective' or imposed interests? Jordan's political, economic and social context

"The Moroccan and Jordanian monarchies are flaunting their nondemocratic model after decades of obfuscating it behind the veil of reform. These are no longer "facade democracies," because they are dropping the facade. Royal autocracy is something to be valued, even cherished, as the conduit to stable and functional governance. Worryingly, few seem to care." [30]

Halfway through my period of fieldwork in Jordan, a pressing article regarding the increasingly autocratic nature of Jordanian politics did not quite read the way it would have a few weeks earlier. Knowing very well that it may be true, being reminded of this matter made me less eager to turn, more than I already had, to those who *did* care, acted on it, and spoke up about politics. Instead, I wanted to consider the agency of those who at first sight appear not to 'care', but perhaps hold a different set of priorities. Throughout the many interviews conducted as well as informal, everyday conversations, I had realized that few would disagree that the most pressing, concrete issues for Jordan's present and future, are largely socio-economic. Even those activists who are highly politically aware begin their stories of activism with the need for social justice. The socio-economic factors that the majority my respondents noted to be key concerns, largely revolve around unemployment, poverty, unequal development of rural and urban areas, and a poor education system. Unemployment rates are staggering, among the youths especially; for those age 20-24, figures from 2016 show a 33.3% unemployment rate, still rising. Some key causes include the effects of regional turmoil on Jordan's economy; the deterioration of the public sector yet unequal access to the private sector, and a deeply flawed education system exacerbating this.[31] In light of the latter, a number of respondents, including two NGO's specialized in education, expressed their criticism on the education system, noting the "skills gap", flawed examination practices, and, crucially, the fact that school curriculums consist of pure memorization, while no critical thinking is encouraged.[32] Moreover, cross-cutting the issues of poverty, unemployment and education is the matter of inequality. Asides from a widening gap between the rich and the poor, inequality based on origin and network – *wasta* – still strongly affects what one is able to achieve, while the high centralization of all development and economic activity to Amman exacerbates this. A relevant remark for this research is that centralization has led to a widening cultural gap as well; Amman, West-Amman especially, is widely known to be less 'conservative', that is, based on the types of leisure available, lifestyle, and cultural traits.[33]

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[30] Sean L. Yom, "Why Jordan and Morocco are doubling down on royal rule". *The Washington Post,* May 16 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/05/16/why-jordan-and-morocco-are-doubling-down-on-royal-rule/?utm_term=.bd1a12983e1f

[31] Phoenix Center for Economic and Information Studies in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "Position paper. Jordanian Youths: Persistent Crisis, Narrowing Options", 10 August 2016, accessed May 1, 2017, http://www.phenixcenter.net/en/paper/214

[32] Author's interview with iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017; Author's interview with Leaders of Tomorrow, Amman, 16 May 2017

[33] See Tobin, "Jordan's Arab Spring"

Meanwhile, rural areas lack investment, job opportunities, infrastructure and quality education. In sum, overall unequal *human* development is said to be a key concern.[34]

This very situation might best explain the type of attitude towards politics that I frequently encountered. One that reflects not a lack of awareness, not even a lack of care, but rather a lack of hope and trust. Cynical remarks such as "the government doesn't want poor people to have a life", double-sided responses when West Amman was granted yet another fashion mall, and unsurprised responses when corrupt re-organizations of a ministry occurred, all showed this attitude.[35] The article above may not have been wrong in noticing Jordan's undemocratic nature. Surely, decision-making power ultimately lies with a concentrated circle of elites. In short, decision-making starts from the monarchial establishment and the General Intelligence Directorate (GID); while the King appoints a prime minister and cabinet, most influence continues to lie with the palace bureaucracy. Parliament may be democratically elected, but it is also the body with least political power.[36] Undemocratic as this may be, it may also sever as only a logical explanation as to why 'political activism', calling for political reform as such, carries little support. As Ababneh (2016) notes: "by focusing solely on parliament as the platform for democratization, scholars make the assumption that parliament is an institution with real political power."[37] Moreover, to simply assume that Jordanian society should be willing to go higher and question the system as a whole, overlooks the fact that 'stability' is as much a concern for activists as it is for the state; the difference being, that it is not their end point. However, considering activism for non-political aims with less organized structures, there very well *is* activism, including street activism in Jordan. "The people that actually need issues addressed exist in other communities [then Amman]. So real protests exist in these communities more than in the city, but they rarely formalize, they don't get organized, because they are too busy overcoming poverty."[38] In a way, these three 'options' are the ones I consider here: formal politics and its weaknesses; past series of uprisings which indeed made political demands that went beyond parliament; and genuine, economically driven street activism today.

Youths and politics

Formal politics enjoys little interest or participation from society, particularly from the younger generation. As a local researcher noted:"youths feel excluded: participation is always limited one way or the other (…) not even being legally allowed to run for parliament gives a sense of not being capable, of exclusion. (…) This goes for nearly all youths, except those with good ties and circles. But if you're not from such an influential origin, you are probably excluded one way or the other and lack that trust."[39] In line with this statement, many political activists I spoke with indeed hold little trust for formal parties. "They [political parties] are not aware of the changes happening right now in society. For example, Islamists don't see that there are many young people who are religious, but not necessarily in a political way, they don't want that to interfere with politics."[40] Another activist noted a similar weakness among leftist parties, stating

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[34] E.J. Karmel, Ali al Batran, Mohammed Hussainy, "Reforming Education in Rural Jordan Enhancing the Capacity of Schools to Create Options, Not Dependency". *Identity Center*, n.d. Accessed April 20, 2017, http://www.identity-center.org/en/node/493

[35] Author's fieldnotes 2017

[36] Yom, "The new landscape of Jordanian politics", 286.

[37] Ababneh, "Women in The Jordanian Day-Waged Labor Movement", 89.

[38] Author's interview with Rawan, Human Rights & Policy Officer at the Dutch Embassy in Amman, 27 March 2017

[39] Author's interview with Wael, researcher at the Identity Center, Amman, 3 April 2017

[40] Author's interview with participant #10, social media activist, Amman, 24 May, 2017

that they are "anti-youth (…) young people can't do their activism the way they want to, there is no creativity".[41] Accordingly, reports show that a key explanation for the lack of interest in formal participation lies with a lack of trust in parties' ability to bring about change. Parties' insistence to list only abstract demands, separate themselves from the grassroots and the fact that they lag behind on social media, were all factors which made the *hirak* much more attractive to young people at the time.[42]

These movements, the *hirak,* were the latest instance in which key 'groups' – marginalized workers, critical youths and established parties – eventually came together. Though the majority of this research revolves around fragmented, non-protesting forms of activism present today, a reconstruction of these events as well as what is left of collective action for social justice today, is an integral part of how activism has fragmented in recent years. Additionally, I will assess the possibility that these events have affected the political salience of the identity-based divide, that is, between Palestinian Jordanians and East Jordanians. Doing so helps to understand the complexities and potentials of agency, activism, affecting deeply rooted social structures and contributing to collective identification.

1.2.   Collective action then and now

Jordan's *hirak*

Between 2011 and 2013, Jordan experienced a series of uprisings which in many ways were related to, and similar to, those in surrounding countries. The key differences were that Jordan's protests were less widespread, less violently dealt with, and largely called for reform, not revolution. Both observers and former protestors note that in early 2011, a first series of protests was triggered by the decision to sell out public institutions for unacceptably low commission rates. Khorma (2014) outlines how these protests were initially led by East Jordanians who, for long, had been rising in anger due to high unemployment, poverty, economic inequality and corruption.[43] The convergence of these events with regionwide protest movements sparked both independent and party-affiliated youths, from all backgrounds, to join the protests in newly established youth movements.[44] One former protestor shared what is also documented: established parties initially declined to join youth movements in the streets, only to align later when the demonstrations had already been organized. He confirmed that it was precisely because of this gap that many young members left their parties at the time to join independent movements.[45] From there on, many raised their demands, calling for limits to the power of the monarchy, social justice, and a stronger fight against corruption. Established parties on the other hand, once they became involved, were primarily interested in pursuing purely political, less drastic reforms. Meanwhile, movements with similar goals were spreading in tribal areas as well.[46]

The main events during these years were a large-scale protest in Amman on March 24, 2011 and a week-long strike in November 2012. The former was eventually violently dispersed, in

[41] Author's interview with participant #8, former political activist, Amman, 19 May 2017

[42] Identity Center, "Policy Paper: Bridging Divides Between Political Parties and the Jordanian People", n.d., 9. Accessed 11 May 2017, http://www.identity-center.org/sites/default/files/Policy%20Paper%2C%20English.pdf

[43] Tamer Khorma, "The myth of the Jordanian monarchy's resilience to the Arab Spring: lack of genuine political reform undermines social base of monarchy", *German Institute for International and Security Affairs,* July 2014.

[44] Khorma, "Myth of Jordanian monarchy's resilience", 3-4.

[45] Author's interview with participant #8, former political activist, 19 May 2017

[46] Khorma, "Myth of Jordanian monarchy's resilience", 4; Yom, "Tribal politics in contemporary Jordan"

ways that involved clear discourses of identity politics, setting the movement aside as led by Palestinians, supposedly showing disloyalty.[47] Regarding the November strike, a key factor leading to the de-escalation of events was the contained regime response – that is, in comparison to the way that events in Syria at the time were spiraling out of control. While wars were unfolding elsewhere, Jordanian security forces allowed the protests, while contained, and reportedly handed out water and juice to the protestors. [48] In a way, this is in fact a starting point for this research: the moment that collective action faded, while the interests, the demands, had not been met, and the coming together of these movements left profound impacts on the political identities of protestors. The main reforms implemented were in fact political, yet not in a way that significantly altered power structures; the more recent 'doubling down on authoritarian rule' indicates this.[49] Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, the same socio-economic concerns that existed then still exist today. As a way of shedding light on perhaps the only form of activism that *directly* mobilizes for these aims, the case of worker's activism should be considered. This is one aspect of the story of 'political activism', while showing how with certain characteristics, collective action still carries some support in Jordan, thereby showing which interests and boundaries most 'easily' create a group with a clear political identity.

Worker's activism in Jordan

Several years before the Arab Spring, a new labor movement was beginning to develop in Jordan. Though the freedom of labor activism in Jordan has been limited – they have been controlled, co-opted, "acquired" – these began to develop on an ad-hoc basis, without a political philosophy, for the mandate of improving working conditions.[50] Ahmad Awad, director of the Phoenix Center, an NGO which focuses activity on the support of trade unions helps to understand these larger developments. "Dozens of workers in the government, working in the daily base conditions were suffering. Lack of social security, lack of insurance, not receiving the minimum wage, stability of employment was very weak. Any manager, any director could fire any person from the job: and it was 50.000 workers."[51] To some extent, these movements have been successful: many gained contracts, employment, social protection policies and more. On the other hand, these did not then, and still do not, go through their activity without risks: "There was a lot of suffering: the leaders of these movements payed the price for that. Some of them were arrested for a few days, some of them slept in tents in the streets, in front of ministries. (…) Many were arrested, one of the workers was removed by force and is now disabled." The Arab Spring protests were at the same time triggered by such conditions, and provided a trigger for the labor movement itself to further expand. The response, again, was two-sided. One the one hand, the public sector was re-constructed and conditions were improved. On the other hand, at least as much of a reason why strikes decreased in numbers was the increased pressure from security

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[47] "Jordan's 24 Youth Sit-in Violenty Dispersed (Videos)", *Jadaliyya,* March 26 2011. Accessed June 18, 2017; Author's interview with participant #3, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017
Author's interview with participant #4, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017
[48] This was confirmed by participants #1-8; see Marty Harris, "Jordan's youth after the Arab Spring", *Lowy Institute,* February 2015, 6; Khorma, "Myth of Jordanian monarchy's resilience", 4
[49] Harris, "Jordan's youth after the Arab Spring", 4; Khorma, "Myth of Jordanian monarchy's resilience", 5-6.
[50] Jordan Labor Watch & Phoenix Center for Economic and Information Studies in cooperation with the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, "Labor Protests in Jordan 2016", 11 April 2017. Accessed on May 18, 2017, http://www.phenixcenter.net/en/paper/228; Author's interview with Ahmad Awad, director of the Phoenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, Amman, 28 May 2017
[51] Author's interview with Ahmad Awad, director of the Phoenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, Amman, 28 May 2017

departments. "While the government worked on working conditions, security departments put pressure on the new movement leaders."[52]

The case of workers activism provides both the empirical and conceptual context for other forms of activism today, as it helps to understand a number of key arguments. First, it provides an example of a very 'simple' but crucial assertion of both collective identity and interest: the main, clear boundary being to the state itself, as well as to private sector employers, thereby clearly politicizing the class boundary. Second, it was a focus on purely personal, material, genuine demands without political ideologies that allowed the movements to mobilize the way that it did, cross-cutting of identity (though, as I will note, public sector workers are largely East Jordanian), age, religion, ideology or even gender – with regard to the latter especially, trade unions are exceptionally egalitarian.[53] Ababneh (2016) describes this type of activism as a form of personal politics, a "politics of the everyday", that is informed with experience rather than ideology, juxtaposing this to the dominant understandings of politics as that which is formal, highly organized, and speaks in purely political terms"[54] Accordingly, Awad stated that "From where I'm standing, they work in the political field. When they are talking about changing the labor policies, they are playing politics. When they are asking to amend the tax policies, they are playing politics."[55] He further noted that leaving ideology out is in their benefit, even a necessity, as security departments would likely dissolve the movement if it was labeled with any sort of political ideology. The argument thereby put forth by both these observers, is something which I will refer to numerous times throughout this paper: the label of 'political' may not be the most telling indicator as to just how 'political' activists are.

Before moving into more specific examples of current forms of activism, which do not quite hold such a clear collective interest, identity and boundary, a meaningful line of context to address is the Jordan's demographic divide. Though the aim is not to *assume* groups to determine one's choice of actions, it surely plays a role with regard to social context. More so, having spoken to a number of previous protestors and their experiences helps to shed light on just how politically salient this divide is, while offering insights into how activity *can*, in perhaps small and indirect ways, affect deeply rooted social structures.

1.3. Palestinians and Jordanians: identity meets interest

Jordan's demographic history is complex, and offering a detailed account of this is far beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is certainly a case of 'identity vs. interest' in a way that affects, but is also affected *by* political contention. Though East Jordanians are often said to be the regime's main support base throughout history, this situation shifted since a series of economic liberalization policies were carried out throughout the 2000's. Before that, East Jordanians had certainly enjoyed full access to public sector positions, whereas Palestinians were largely excluded from this, as is still the case today. However, as the private sector expanded and the public sector deteriorated, this has led to a situation in which many Palestinians in fact hold

[52] Author's interview with Ahmad Awad, director of the Phoenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, Amman, 28 May 2017
[53] See Ababneh, "Women in The Jordanian Day-Waged Labor Movement"; [53]Author's interview with Ahmad Awad, director of the Phoenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, Amman, 28 May 2017
[54] Ibid., 89-99; 105.
[55] Author's interview with Ahmad Awad, director of the Phoenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, Amman, 28 May 2017

more elite positions in society.[56] Class is undeniably a cross-cutting boundary which, combined with a spatial separation in locality, might have led to a pattern which two respondents mentioned: that in small, marginalized areas especially the "perception that the other is the bad guy" exists on both sides.[57] Ryan (2011) noted this as well: "the economic dimensions of identity politics also underscore the crosscutting issue of social class. (…) Despite the fact that each community has its rich and its poor, there remains a tendency for each to see the other group as the wealthy one."[58]

One respondent, living in a Palestinian refugee camp, expressed a similar statement yet also demonstrating the importance of not to reify groups, and not to define individuals as mere members of one group or the other: "If you're born here, you will ask yourself: why am I born here, why am I marginalized, poor, unemployed? And you'll get to the Palestinian identity. But also, a bigger part is that every Palestinian knowns about their land being stolen. You know, your parents tells you this, you just know. So I treat myself as a refugee because I am a refugee. (…) But I have two identities really. One is definitely Palestinian, as all Palestinians have I think. Citizenship is just ink on paper for organizational purposes: it's not an identity – the Palestinian one is. But I have a second citizenship, a different form of identity: that as a Palestinian in Jordan. This is what leads to activism about demanding more rights and what also shapes my identity: what makes our identity is a sense of oppression."[59] Similarly, several Amman-based political activists expressed that they can very well hold two identities, and more so, that Palestinian and Jordanian political goals needn't exclude one another.[60]

I cannot make definite claims about these social identities as such. In fact, the assumption in this research is that it should not 'matter', that is, that a difference in social identity does not inherently implies opposing political identities and a lack of solidarity. Some respondents indicated that 'under the surface', separate identities still exist.[61] In formal and informal conversations, I was made aware of the existence of separate football teams, which continues to be a manifestation of two separate identities.[62] As one respondent noted: "it's one of the biggest issues still, it's a struggle of identity. Jordan is the only country where you can't say "I'm a proud Jordanian" because that would be racist. And this racism is there – partially because the regime wants it to be there, it used to be to their benefit. But now it can get really ugly. For example they have separate football teams and in the matches, the Jordanian team holds the slogan "master of country", while the Palestinian says "uncle of the King" – referring to the fact that the queen is Palestinian. This is dangerous, in my view." [63]Nevertheless, he immediately noted what has been confirmed much more, and what is more directly relevant here: "this is not necessarily a factor in preventing more organized activism: the Arab Spring is proof of this, they all joined there." The latter statement was confirmed numerous times; several respondents emphasized that the Arab

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[56] Shaul M. Gabbay, "The Status of Palestinians in Jordan and the Anomaly of Holding a Jordanian Passport", *Journal of Political Sciences & Public Affairs*, 2, no. 1 (2014), 5-6.

[57] Informal conversation with former political activist, 20 March, 2017; Author's interview with iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017

[58] Ryan, "Identity Politics, Reform and Protest in Jordan", 568.

[59] Author's interview with participant #7, anonymous political activist, Baqa'a, 15 April 2017

[60] Author's interview with participant #1, former political activist, Amman, 29 March 2017; Author's interview with participant #4, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #3, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #5, former member of Ma'an list, Amman, 6 April 2017;

[61] Author's fieldnotes 2017

[62] Mohammad Ersan, "Jordanian soccer teams' rivalry shows deeper divide", *Al-Monitor*, July 4, 2017. Accessed July 6, 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/jordan-teams-identity-fights.html

[63] Author's interview with participant #10, social media activist, Amman, 24 May, 2017

Spring protests indicated that a social boundary needn't prevent solidarity.[64] Though several articles and observers report that most Palestinians from refugee camps did not participate, perhaps out of fear for the risks, there were exceptions to this as well.[65] One political activist, himself such an excpetion, asserted that this coming together of two groups has had larger effects since: "2011 was a turning point, where Jordanian activists broke through oppression; their thoughts became translated into something real. It had always been there, but it became reality. (…) So Palestinian activists used to be isolated but have left their bubble: it is more one identity."[66] A statement this big I am not able to prove here. But the notion behind, that *thoughts* became something real, is shared among others: one former demonstrator shared that in his experience, what created unity, solidarity during these times was the mere fact that people *acted* together, they could see what joined action meant, it was "not just words".[67] This denotes a deeper theoretical argument that will cut through the remainder of this paper which requires some conceptualization first.

Discourse vs. practice

The analytical lens in this paper shows similarities to the 'duality of structure' as originally theorized by Anthony Giddens: a view of social life in which structure and agency are "each constituting the other and each complementing the other. (…) We are born into social structures that are both enabling and constraining to us. These social structures do not exist independently of us: we make them, and are made by them."[68] To further understand *how* then agency is both constrained by and constitutive of structures, three concepts form this interactive process: discourses, institutions and social practices. Structures are manifested through dominant discourses and institutions. On the other side, agency is able to affect structures through the social practices one produces; social practices can be defined as "relatively stabilized forms of social activity".[69] Consequently, this creates a social theory in which social life is an ongoing interaction between institutions, discourses, and social practices. Relational analysis and the theory of collective identification fall within this larger perspective, but this more abstract understanding is helpful to denote how then, relations and interactions could affect deeply rooted social structures. It helps to understand that agency can alter structures, social life, even without achieving institutional reform directly, through altering the dominant social practices and/or discourses that persist. Especially, it helps to understand that a truly powerful agent of change should be able to create *both*. Assuming that discourses are most powerful when accommodated with institutional power, one might suspect that the most promising form of changing social life for non-institutional actors is to begin changing social practices. The Palestinian-Jordanian activists mentioned above claim that it was precisely this, which contributed to the alteration of a this deeply rooted division during the latest series of uprisings: the mere *act* of coming together, turning their thoughts into reality and thereby breaking boundaries.

[64] Author's interview with participant #4, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #5, former member of Ma'an list, Amman, 6 April 2017

[65] Author's interview with participant #10, social media activist, Amman, 24 May, 2017; Achilli, "Disengagement from politics"; Karmel, "How Revolutionary Was Jordan's Hirak?"

[66] Author's interview with participant #7, anonymous political activist, Baqa'a, 15 April 2017

[67] Informal conversation with former political activist, Amman, 20 April 2017

[68] Demmers, *"Theories of Violent Conflict",* 127.

[69] Demmers, *"Theories of Violent Conflict",* 129.

Consequently, institutional responses accommodated with dominant discourses were the response at the time, and have continued to exist since then. Countering the practices of solidarity activism were the state's tactics of upholding identity politics. This has previously been documented, especially during the March 24 movement and the dispersion of this protest.[70] Moreover, one respondent shared his own experience with the state's identity politics: "The government always used this tense relation to its benefit. I've has faced lots of people that have this mentality, that as a Palestinian Jordanian, you've got no right to ask for what is assumed to be rights for Jordanian citizens. I once had an investigation interview with the Jordanian intelligence where they actually asked me: "We already gave you a room in the house, why are you asking for the living room"?"[71] In addition, the historical institutional division of interests is one that continues to contribute to divisions today. Though labor movements are hardly based on social identity, the fact is that the majority of them are carried out by public sector workers, which are majority East Jordanians.[72] Thus, institutions continuously constrain actions; by a mere separation of interests, and dominant discourses combined with state power, the potential for a formation of new, cross-cutting collective political identities is limited.

Without claiming to have the answer regarding the salience of these social identities, the findings here indicate that the Palestinian-Jordanian divide has not been, and needn't be, the most salient boundary in political activism. Cooperation across has occurred and still does occur, and when there is an observable divisoin, one could wonder to what extent this is truly about identity as such and not the interests linked to it – or even the way that state forces trigger them. Correspondingly, the starting point in this research is the notion that what fragments people can be a range of other factors than the social groups historically set for them.

1.4. Concluding the collectives

Thus far, I have argued that past instances of collective action and the limited forms that are left of it, have been driven by socio-economic concerns more than political rights as such, which contributed to the possibility of a clear collective interest, that is, until political factions, identity politics and regional chaos came in. Since then, trade unions have continued to illustrate that collective action can still occur, when collective material and concrete interests are a starting point. More so, it shows that what would conceptually be understood as a political identity, may not be labeled as such. Moreover, the experiences of protestors in the coming together of two social groups during the Arab Spring, and the effects it has had, exemplify an argument that will return numerous times throughout this paper: *practices* may be a more powerful force than mere *discourse* in its ability to alter social structures and boundaries. However, these findings also shows that institutional limits to both intergroup solidarity and continued activity remain strong.

Of course, the notion that such a congruence of collective identity and interest is the best form of mobilization is the most basic understanding of contention as put forth by Tilly. Yet it is especially relevant to keep in mind when turning attention towards forms of activism that simply do not quite have such a range; forms that are centrally located in the capital, forms that are

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[70] Ryan, "Identity Politics, Reform and Protest in Jordan", 574; Hisham Bustani, "Jordan's New Opposition and the Traps of Identity and Ambiguity", *Jadaliyya,* April 20, 2011, accessed April 8, 2017, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/1303/jordans-new-opposition-and-the-traps-of-identity-a

[71] Author's interview with participant #7, anonymous political activist, Baqa'a, 15 April 2017

[72] Author's interview with Ahmad Awad, director of the Phoenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, Amman, 28 May 2017

largely accessible to a select few, forms that are limited in discourse over practice, and forms that by definition speak of political, all-encompassing ideals. As a way of inquiring why politics remains stuck at discourse, who is trying to form new political identifications, and what is currently weakening and fragmenting these efforts, I now turn to what is left of political activism in the way it is commonly understood, which is also the way it is easily disregard as: merely 'talking politics'.

Chapter 2
Talking politics

Initially, I did not intend to pose the question of who actually 'cares' about politics. The form of activism considered in this chapter would have, and certainly could have, made up the main body of this research. This is a sphere that discusses political issues, openly labels itself as political, in which activists have far-reaching, all-encompassing aims. In recent years, here too, new strategies and ideas have been brought to the surface, each of which in its own way contributes to an incoherent field that is trying to develop new forms of political identification. Within these, boundaries are clearly paramount. However, finding myself focused on political activism while also engaging with those who are *not* concerned with politics as such, unveiled not only the differences but the similarities within this sphere. The main similarity being that which it has long been known for, the reason I refer to it as "talking politics": the very discourses in this sphere are far removed from the material realities that people face. This may not be a new finding, but it is certainly relevant to see how *new* attempts, often with the very aim of breaking this pattern, at times coming from those who were in fact involved in past uprisings, find themselves re-creating this boundary between political life and society. This chapter aims to outline the relations and interactions through which those currently involved in politics develop boundaries and, potentially, forms of political identification for their constituents.

I will begin by stating which categories are *said* to be most prominent in current political discourse, as externally classified – currently, that appears to be seculars versus Islamists. As these are broad categories and the scope of this paper is limited, I will take the experiences of a select group of former political protestors in order to understand how this categorization has emerged, to what extent these reflects *groups*, and how this affects one's available paths for activism today. As this group has not transformed into a single collectivity defined by strategy, I will instead focus attention on a number of alternative paths of activism. I will assess three recently established political constituencies that take an approach of formal involvement in which they hold a cooperative relation to the state, 'changing institutions from within'. Finally, I will turn to the arena of online activism and, though by definition a hardly cohesive 'arena', conceptualize this in a way that shows both the potentials and limitations to the ability of online activist to contribute to political identification.

2.1. Old groups, new categories: secularism as a political identity

During the early stages of research, a local political and economic researcher best articulated the development of which I was eager to understand the consequences, as much as the origins: "The most heated topic of debate in Jordan, since 2011 and even more so today, is:

what kind of state are we? In the latest elections the idea of a civil state was first really addressed by the Ma'an list. That is the big debate now (…) there is some support for the idea of a civic state but the main problem is that it is still a very vague concept. Those against it have a very distorted view, that it will drastically change the country – the thing is, Jordan right now isn't an Islamic state, but many have the perception that it is (…) these views have not yet been customized to society, and this will take a long time."[73]

If categorization is external classification, political involvement in Jordan indeed currently consists of these two larger categories: 'seculars', alternatively called 'liberals', 'progressives', a 'civil state camp', versus Islamists. This division is emphasized in mainstream media, by many political observers, and certainly by former activists.[74] The majority of politically affiliated respondents in this research have observed and experienced the growing salience of this boundary in recent years. I should emphasize yet again, that this does not reflect the field as a whole; those activists under consideration here are indeed a minority, which along one side of this boundary, that is the 'civil state camp'. Nevertheless, this chapter aims to illustrate how categorization can affect political activism – in this case, the lack thereof. The aim is to understand how the ongoing categorization of political life into seculars and Islamists affected the forms of political identification available for former political protestors.

Memories and interactions: what created this boundary?

"You know, we're a minority. The group that just wanted freedom. That didn't want Morsi or Mubarak, ISIS or Assad (…) by now it's a minority. And it stopped trying. In Jordan too."[75]

The former activists under consideration here may be a minority. Yet, these activists were once united, politically, and with that also engaged in collective action alongside workers and other movements. Looking back, as I would expect, relations, interactions, past memories and experiences have contributed to the existence of these categories and the salience of this boundary. What originally drives one or the other to be politically engaged, and what drives them to hold a certain political view, is not the aim of this research to understand nor feasible to offer precise answers to. It suffices to say that mere social group nor identity establishes a political view; most of my respondents shared that it was simply their upbringing, education, or purely individual experiences and personality traits which had initially triggered their interest in politics, and eventually brought them to a certain ideological stance.[76] Nonetheless, in these same personal experiences lie small, yet crucial explanatory steps in the process of political identification and boundary making. In fact, the fact that 'becoming an activist' is matter of personal experience does add to the question of political identification and boundaries. Many former activists noted that they have personally witnessed a rise in conservatism in everyday social life throughout the 90's and 2000's, and a number of them had turned away from religion altogether. Combined with

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[73] Author's interview with Wael, researcher at the Identity Center, Amman, 3 April 2017
[74] Several national and regional media sources have reported this, including Osama Al Sharif, "The Secular-Islamist Divide Deepens in Jordan", *Middle East Institute*, October 4, 2016. Accessed April 12, 2017, http://www.mei.edu/content/article/secular-vs-islamist-divide-deepens-jordan; Mohammad Aburumman, "Jordan: Islamic or Secular", *AlGhad*, October 17, 2016. Accessed April 12, 2017, http://english.alghad.com/articles/1193222-Jordan-Islamic-or-Secular; Mel Plant, "Youth movement takes on Brotherhood and taboos in Jordan vote", Monday 19 September 2016. Accessed February 6, 2017, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordan-parliamentary-elections-1478441765
[75] Author's interview with participant #1, former political activist, Amman, 29 March 2017
[76] One more detailed outline of such questions, confirming that it is a matter of personal circumstance upbringing, and environment, is Pénélope Larzillière, *Activism in Jordan* (London: Zed Books, 2016), 30-49.

the array of factors that first spark an interest in politics, questions of religion, social values, and personal freedoms have inherently become an aspect of their political identity. Several respondents began their story with an account of how historically, religious influence was both a political tool and a social influence – referring to the years in which Islamist institutions gained significant power over social life through education, hospitals, charity networks and political influence.[77] Each of them further stressed that though the increase in conservative influences in society is something they experienced personally, it is certainly a *political* development – that is, a matter of power distribution. As one political activist articulated, "the government, and the whole world, all of its allies, have always benefited from having strong Islamist presence because it ensures a religious tension."[78] Thus, personal experience may be just that, but it can certainly translate into political ideas; and vice versa.

Since then, relations *across* this boundary in particular have contributed to how salient it has become. This would be expected, according the Tilly's conceptualization of boundary change. One possible mechanism that affects the salience of a boundary, he argues, is *encounter:* "When two previously separate or only indirectly linked networks enter the same social space and begin interacting they commonly form a social boundary at their point of contact. To existing distinctive relations within the networks on either side of that point, encounter adds distinctive relations across the zone and shared attribution of meaning from sites on each side." [79]The basic premise here is that when interaction intensifies, boundaries become more salient, whereas it is when interaction declines that they become less salient. Indeed, this core political boundary has been further underpinned by a number of political disagreements and clashes in past protests, recent debates and social media. Specifically, many activists as well as local researchers referred to the event of a journalist's assassination, after having shared a picture that mocked ISIS, which sparked heated, polarized debates on social media.[80] Additionally, many pointed out the attempts that had been made to alter the education curriculum, removing some Islamic verses from elementary school textbooks. Part of a political strategy to reform the curriculum and simultaneously fight extremism, the attempts prompted heavy critiques from the Islamist-controlled teachers' association and again led to polarized debates. Such ongoing relations and encounters thus contributed to the fact that one knows exactly which 'camp' they belong to. However, a category is not a group; it does not inevitably make for a political identity. One liberally oriented activist expressed his experience with the types of debates on social media that have shifted attention from political and economic to more 'socially' divisive issues, referring to education, gender, culture and, certainly, religion. As a consequence, leftists and liberals largely fall along the same side of a boundary that hardly reflects deeply divergent political and economic views. [81] As one activist said it: "the hirak were about concrete issues. Since then nothing is".[82] Nevertheless, some have tried to turn this category into a 'group'.

If new political identifications are to be 'created' in any way, it could be through organizations. In Jenkins' theory of collective identification, organizations "do" identification. "In terms of identities, organizations are constituted simultaneously in a distinction between

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[77] Author's interview with participant #3, former political activist, 5 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #4, 5 April 2017; informal conversation with former *hirak* protestor, 6 April 2017

[78] Informal conversation with former *hirak* protestor, Amman, 6 April 2017

[79] Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries and Social Ties,* 183-139.

[80] See Al Sharif, "The Secular-Islamist Divide Deepens in Jordan"

[81] Author's interview with participant #2, Amman, 4 April 2017

[82] Author's interview with participant #4, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017

members and non-members, on the one hand, and in an internal network of differentiation among members, on the other. An organization without internal differentiation doesn't make much sense: organization *is* the harnessing and orchestration, under a symbolic umbrella, of difference. Thus between the members of any organization there is a relationship of similarity and a range of relationships of difference. In this respect, one of the most fundamental characteristics of organizations is that they produce and reproduce individual and collective identities. Whatever else organizations do, they do identification."[83] Furthermore, Jenkins asserts that *recruitment* is a key process by which an organization does identification or categorization, as well as a crucial aspect of his general understanding of collective identification.[84] In line with this argument, one key factor that spurred an increasing emphasis on a secular/Islamist boundary was the formation of the Ma'an list during the latest elections. The Ma'an (Together) list is perhaps most commonly mentioned as a significant, new and potentially influential organized political constituency. For the first time, secularism was openly advocated for in the formal party sphere; the term thereby became the basis of their outer discourse and recruitment.

The Ma'an list: doing identification?

Established in 2016 as a political 'list' to run for elections,[85] the Ma'an list has been primarily known for openly taking a stance in favor of a civil, *secular* state. Initiated by a longstanding political figure, the list aimed to form a "third way" between the regime and Islamists, with slogans that revolved around equality, gender, and especially, secularism – in doing so, it aimed to mobilize support from the younger generation especially. Through initially close networks, phone calls, and campaigning in Amman, as this is the district in which they ran, the list managed to find over 2.000 volunteers to join their campaign. One member, closely involved in the campaign, stated that perhaps the biggest success of the list lied with the impact it had on its own members, including himself. Where he acknowledged that many joined the campaign for financial benefits initially, he noticed a transformation throughout, in which a significant number of people truly became engaged for the idea.[86]

Yet in spite of such success, several observers have criticized the path Ma'an took, knowing that in a majority conservative and politically disengaged society, their slogans are bound to resonate only among a limited social group. Many political activists I spoke to stated that while they agree ideologically, they felt "the approach is illogical: it is based on attacking everything that is Islamic. And that's fine if you want to criticize it, but you need a substitute, and they didn't have a substitute."[87] Indeed, previous research regarding the election results in the third district, where Ma'an ran, argues that the list ran primarily based on this "imagined conflict" between a civil state camp and Islamists, while avoiding a collision with the state. It speaks of Ma'an using a cultural discourse that only spoke to a limited segment of society, one that is culturally connected and economically prosperous, while failing to offer *concrete* solutions to the economic concerns among the majority of society, thereby failing to offer an alternative to Islamic discourses.[88] True

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[83] Jenkins, *Social Identity,* 170.

[84] Jenkins, *Social Identity,* 131.

[85] During the last elections, a change in the election law included that voting is based on 'lists' of candidates; either individual or party-affiliated candidates can establish a list based on common goals – since then however, Ma'an has been in the process of becoming a political party.

[86] Author's interview with participant #5, former member of Ma'an list, Amman, 6 April 2017

[87] Author's interview with participant #10, social media activist, Amman, 24 May, 2017

[88] Shaker Jerrar, "Detailed election results in Amman's 3rd electoral district." *7iber*, 6 November 2016. Accessed and translated June 9, 2017, http://www.7iber.com/politics-economics/detailed-election-results-in-ammans-3rd-electoral-district/?utm_content=buffer1bb86&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

as this may be, I began to notice, based on at least one interview with a former member of Ma'an and its actual program, that the boundaries Ma'an has created may reflect structural limits, and the relations it is *capable* of having, more than it reflects intentions.

Assuming a relational approach, I cannot claim to understand the drives and dispositions behind the founders of the list, nor every individual volunteer, nor its voters. Nevertheless, it can be said that Ma'an essentially holds a leftist stance, with high aims for the redistribution of power in Jordanian politics.[89] Inquiring why exactly secularism should be a priority for Jordan, keeping in mind that it is hardly an 'Islamic state' currently, I was told that the role of religion in political life is a key aspect of current power structures, in which the King's legitimacy is unquestionable and several figures and institutions have an unfair amount of power.[90] This may simply reflect the political meaning of the concept of secularism, yet it is hardly the type of argumentation that the Ma'an list has become known for in common discourse. Indeed, this is how at least some members of the list experienced themselves, knowing very well that they could not easily win in other areas, aware of the misconceptions of secularism in society, and the overall lack of political participation. One former member left the list as it decided to transform into a formal political party: "there was a disagreement on the future of Ma'an. I wanted it to develop as a social movement, others wanted it to become a political party, with official membership. I don't like this formal, top-down approach because there is no party culture in Jordan, most youths don't even care about politics, there is little trust and their views are revolutionary compared to the long history of Islamic culture being intertwined(?) with politics. So I think you should develop the social sphere first, create a new political, democratic culture before you change the politics. Political changes will have no effect if society isn't ready."[91] Thus, the institutional and historical limits to formal participation has limited the ability of the Ma'an list to offer a form of political identification that reflects what its members – that is, at least some members – are essentially about. Paradoxically, they effectively end up reinforcing the discourse that social values, one's religious stance and personal lifestyle choices are in any way related to political ideas, more so even than economic concerns or matters of power distribution.

Similarly, many previous activists may be part of a 'category' of seculars, but this does not offer a strategy nor does it fully capture their political identity. The former activists I spoke with may be part of a category, but that does not imply that they are part of a 'group. On the other hand, they may be part of a group, but this group lacks a path for contention and is not labelled as a political one. It is precisely this *labelling* that should be conceptualized. For Jenkins, the distinction between a *nominal* and *virtual* identity denotes the difference between the *name and the experience* of an identity.[92] This distinction applies to the individual level as well as the collective level, in which case it draws strong similarities to the group-category distinction but it is not identical. Where categorization is mere external classification and group identification takes place when mutual recognition of a boundary and distinctive relations develop, the nominal and virtual sides of an identity are the *outcomes* of either processes. These can vary in content while the same boundary persists; the name can stay the same, while the experience varies, as much as that an experience can remain stable as a label changes. In the case of past *hirak* protestors, the latter appears to have taken place.

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[89] Ma'an List, Electoral Program. Accessed May 10, 2017, http://maanlist.com/البرنامج-الانتخابي/

[90] Informal conversation with former member of Ma'an, Amman, 13 April 2017

[91] Author's interview with participant #5, former member of Ma'an list, Amman, 6 April 2017

[92] Jenkins, *Social Identity,* 44.

Virtual identities, hidden discourses

Though a shared understanding of this separation from Islamists is surely present, it is far from the only boundary for Jordan's current and former youth activists. Then and now, the primary concerns for those protestors I spoke with include personal freedoms, certainly women's rights, as much as social justice, corruption and equality. One in fact stated: "Democracy is important, but the economy needs to be improved first. No political democracy without economic democracy." Nevertheless, as noted, many feel that in the current situation and due to past experiences, Islamist influences are their core obstacle. As a consequence, they feel social change is necessary *first*, yet in attempting to create that they seem to require political influence. One former protestor explained the situation in this same way: as one in which they hold the state accountable for the current situation, but the opposition they would encounter today often lies with Islamists.

A similar discourse shines through when speaking of security and possible instability: one in which, again, they hold the state accountable, but nevertheless feel that the current situation is an obstacle for them to create political change. Each of these activists primarily asserted that the general fear of a Syria-like situation in Jordan is what took away the momentum for collective action. However, whether this is a legitimate worry is more contested: "people believed, or were made to believe, that what happened in Syria could happen here. (…) But why would this happen if you're a democracy? This isn't a risk if you have a proper way of expression, if there is no torture, if you have a voice. If the regime says be careful, well it's because you ruined society! When political factions aren't allowed, people will divide based on things like kinship and tribes.(…) But still, without these big blocs, the regime and Islamists, if people revolt it would be bad." Similarly, a number of activists showed worries about extremism having a steady support base if Jordan was to fall into chaos.[93] Yet here again, many activists feel that the regime makes use of these threats to its own benefit while failing to sufficiently counter extremism. The conviction that 'countering hate speech' is all too often used as an excuse to increase censorship and limit online free speech, is one frequently expressed.[94] On one occasion, a political activist I spoke with was invited to the Royal Hashemite court to discuss counterextremism measures. Yet, his experience denotes the paradox of joining hands to maintain stability with the same regime he feels is responsible: *"they talked about stupid solutions: cleaning street, creating opportunities, small things. I said, look you need to create jobs. People have no jobs, no food, no humanitarian life. That is what they want! So the next time they held a meeting again, I wasn't invited. (…) The government just wants quick, simple solutions."*[95]

These findings indicate that there very well are similarities in *thought*, vision, relating to the state; a virtual political identity for this 'group' could very well exist. This is one in which the common discourse holds that economic justice requires political change, and social change ought to precipitate political developments. Yet, no amount of social nor economic advancement cannot be brought about without at least some political influence. Thus, if a virtual identity in

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[93] Author's interview with participant #4, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017; Informal conversation with former *hirak* protestor, Amman, 14 April 2017

[94] Hussam Da'nah and Reem AlMasri, "Infographic: Legislative Limits on Freedom of Expression in Jordan", *7iber*, November 10, 2013. Accessed April 24, 2017, https://www.7iber.com/2013/11/infographic-legislative-limits-on-freedom-of-expression-in-jordan/; Dana Gibreel and Reem AlMasri, "Proposed Social Media Law: Hiding Government's Incompetence behind More Legislations, *7iber*, January 18, 2017. Accessed April 24, 2017, https://www.7iber.com/technology/proposed-social-media-law-hiding-governments-incompetence-behind-more-legislations/

[95] Author's interview with participant #9, social media activist, Amman, 21 May, 2017

itself would suffice as a political identity, many former and current activists continue to form a group with shared political views. However, boundaries and political identities are create *through* action as much as the other way around; they are processual terms that by definition include relations and representations. The lack of a label and the lack of political engagement in society limits one's reach to 'share' a political discourse in a way that mobilizes, engages or convinces a significant number of people, and the label 'secular' alone hardly makes for a political group.

Relations and boundaries within

As for 'relations' within this category of seculars, these are not distinctive in the sense that it denotes a political group as a whole. To understand how relations affect boundaries, and especially political boundaries, *alliances* can serve to explain the political salience of a boundary. Though a simple definition, drawing from Wimmer (2008), political salience is determined by the amount of alliances made on one side of a boundary as opposed to across a boundary.[96] Based on the experiences of political activists, from both leftist and liberal backgrounds, the general agreement is that the array of leftist parties and liberal groups are strongly fragmented within each and amongst each other. [97] Furthermore, little points to the prospect of less formerly involved individuals reaching agreement. At least one former activist shared his experience in aiming to bring his friends, politically engaged individuals, together, to simply discuss how the very concept of secularism could be spread on the grassroots; something which proved difficult, ultimately unsuccessful, precisely due to ideological and interest-based divisions.[98] The boundary of social values may thus be most politically salient, but the underlying ideological divides further fragment this category. Ideologies have not disappeared, *concrete* ideas continue to be of importance – to individuals. Yet the ongoing categorization of politics into two large categories, set by a single political concept, overshadows such ideas; there is no pathway available, and virtually no 'label' that is anything other than an existing, abstract term. Those who do virtually share a political identity – that is, the previous protestors I spoke to – are limited in action due to not the secular/Islamist boundary alone, but the range of ideologies within, the overall lack of political engagement, and the state's level of control over precisely those areas of life they wish to revise. Similarly, on the other side, it suffices to say that the label 'Islamist' denotes a broad category that is continuously undergoing changes and has many lines of divisions, within the Muslim Brotherhood as well as between these and other Islamist groups and parties. In sum, a category does not make a group; it simply adds yet another boundary to an already limited arena of activism.[99]

As a consequence, many former *hirak* activists have a limited range of strategies available to them that fully do justice to their ideas. To some extent, this had led to disengagement; many shared that in their close circle, they've noticed previously engaged individuals to focus on their own wellbeing out of mere necessity and the lack of a clear future. Moreover, they expressed that over the long run, some progress has been made. One former activist had spent several months

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[96] Andreas Wimmer, "The making and unmaking of ethnic boundaries: A multilevel process theory." *American journal of sociology* 113, no. 4 (2008), 976.

[97] Author's interview with participant #2, Amman, 4 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #3, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #4, Amman, 5 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #8, former political activist, Amman, 19 May 2017

[98] Author's interview with participant #4, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017

[99] Jillian Schwedler, "Jordan: The Quiescent Opposition", August 27, 2015, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/jordan-the-quiescent-opposition; Osama Al-Sharif, Unprecedented Rift Splits Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood, March 3, 2015. Accessed April 26, 2017, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/03/jordan-muslim-brotherhood-revoke-membership-crisis.html;

in prison over graffiti painting "free education for all" before the Arab Spring; after these events, a similar activity led to 'only' a week of detainment.[100] Nevertheless, based on both formal and informal conversations it appears that a passion for development, a drive for advancement and dissatisfaction with the current social, political and economic status of Jordan has not disappeared among many young activists. Many have remained engaged in small or indirect ways. Generally, many previous activists, especially leftists have gone to work for NGO's, and online activism continues to be very much alive – the latter two will be the subjects of subsequent chapters.[101] Moreover, besides the Ma'an list, a number of formal initiatives and platforms have emerged in recent years which have in common that they clearly aim to combine change with stability, maintaining what Jordan has achieved. In doing so, these hold positive or at least cooperative relations to the state. As a way of understanding the paths that are available, and the political identifications these aim to create, a number of these formal platforms will be considered here. If political identities involve at least some separation, some boundary, to the state, yet the ability to create social or economic change comes from political influence, this begs the question of just how much separation is necessary to qualify as contentious, as an activist. Can *new* forms of political identification be developed through partnering with the state?

2.2. Changing structures from within

"All parties in Jordan, though they disagree on just about anything, agreed on one single thing: the disbelief that Jordan is a country that deserves to exist – they see it as a functional entity."[102]

ZamZam

On the party level, Ma'an was not the only new player in recent elections that sparked media attention. The National Congress Party, better known as ZamZam, was set up as the party wing of the ZamZam initiative, which in turn was established in 2014 by a number of Muslim Brotherhood members. Initially aimed to exist in parallel to the Muslim Brotherood, ZamZam's founders were eventually expelled, and established a political party in 2016. Their aims are clear: they are an Islamist party based on unity, national legitimacy and agreement; calling for *civil,* but not a secular state.[103]

The very roots of the ZamZam initiative and the philosophy of their party derives from the Arab Spring, that is, the period of instability that followed the Spring, both in the region and in Jordan itself. In the words of its members and founders, the events raised questions about the "national Jordanian project". Primarily, each member I spoke to emphasized that a main reason to found, and join, the initiative was because the Muslim Brotherhood prioritized the Palestinian cause over national Jordanian issues. This tendency goes past the Muslim Brotherhood only, as one member shared that all Jordanian political parties have external ties, reflected in the statement above. Thus, what essentially sets ZamZam apart in the eyes of its members, is the simple fact that they, unlike most other parties, put Jordan first, believing "in the struggle of

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[100] Author's interview with participant #4, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017

[101] The tendency of former activists to now work for NGO's was mentioned several times: Author's interview with participant #3, former political activist, 5 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #4, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #8, former political activist, Amman, 19 May, 2017

[102] Author's interview with Ahmad, member of ZamZam, Amman, 24 April 2017; informal conversation with former member of Ma'an, Amman, 25 April 2017

[103] Author's interview with Rheil, founder and member of ZamZam, Amman, 30 April 2017

Jordan to attain a democratic state."[104] Simultaneously, a need for unity arose from the chaos that followed the Arab Spring, which pressured ZamZam's founders to find ways to ensure stability and security in Jordan. The aim of the party is to be based on consensus and agreement rather than identity, religion, or even ideology. Their political identity is thus one in which a cooperative relation with the state is sought while internally, a diverse constituency is created. Presumably related to this, its discourse bears a striking resemblance to the way the King speaks of Jordan's political future in his speeches and discussion papers; both emphasize the need for stability, unity, and, indeed, believing in a civil, but not secular state.[105] Each member of ZamZam I spoke to further confirmed that they aim to be a partner to the state, not in conflict with it: "we want to change the workings of the institutions from within".[106]

In spite of these aims to provide unity, since its very foundation after the Arab Spring, ZamZam began to suffer from the same weakness all parties did. "Young people who believe in the goals of the Arab Spring feel that ZamZam somehow failed them, because they see ZamZam as a party that made so many compromises to the government in order to be a party. So those activists, those people, were kind of frustrated with the ZamZam initiative."[107] Still today, the aims of the party are directed at political institutions themselves, thereby hardly breaking the pattern of being limited to abstract political discourse. In fact, its own members are very well aware that this is simply the main role available to them: "what is actually the role of political parties in decision-making in Jordan is just to give recommendations and visions about the future, but at the end, decisions are made by the government, and by the government itself. As a political party, we're not a partner with the government; we can't affect the decisions the government makes. You can say that political parties are now just the opposing sound or voice, and what ZamZam is trying to do is try to communicate with the government in order to change the way they take these decisions, and in order to have a stronger participation, not for just this party but for political parties in general." [108]

If change comes from combining discourse with practice, it is clear this ability is lacking once again. ZamZam in fact aims to combine their discourse with adjustments *in* institutions through staying close to the state; theoretically, this should be a powerful force. However, practically it appears those discourses strongly resemble resembles that of the monarchy itself. In terms of being able to offer *new* forms of political identification then, their ability seems limited. Moreover, the origins of the party, similar to Ma'an in a way, derive from previously politically engaged and influential individuals. Taken together, ZamZam's relations and representations, were limited by existing structures which in turn lead them to maintain, even re-create the same boundary that has historically existed for political parties in Jordan: the separation between the grassroots and formal politics.

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[104] Author's interview with Ahmad, member of ZamZam, Amman, 24 April 2017
[105] King Abdullah, "Rule of Law and Civil State", *Discussion paper,* 16 October 2016. Accessed May 3, 2017, https://kingabdullah.jo/en/discussion-papers/rule-law-and-civil-state
[106] Author's interview with Ahmad, member of ZamZam, Amman, 24 April 2017
[107] Author's interview with two anonymous members of ZamZam, Amman, 3 May 2017
[108] Author's interview with Rheil, founder and member of ZamZam, Amman, 30 April 2017

Shaghaf

One attempt to break with this pattern while retaining a discourse that centers around *unity* is worth considering. The latest elections witnessed the emergence of a youth "alliance", Shaghaf. This group gained a remarkable amount of foreign media attention, in comparison to how well it is known among Jordanian activists. Having been recently set up, and highly decentralized, definite claims on what they are about, their success, and certainly their 'collective identity' are out of reach. Nevertheless, a brief consideration of this alliance once again shows the structural limits to moving between society and the state.

Shaghaf received the attention it did due to its high promises as well as offering a new understanding of activism. One in which cooperation with the state is sought, and protests are rejected, **"**aiming to exploit the state's own language and programs to expose vital shortcomings in Jordanian "democratic" institutions".[109] Similar to ZamZam, its discourse centers around unity and agreement, the main label simply being "Jordanian". Shaghaf was initially the idea of, once again, a single individual with a strong network in the spheres of civil society and politics. It has reached 5.500 members of a diverse range of backgrounds; however, this diverse makeup of the alliance was a consequence of purposive recruitment. Its founder chose community leaders from all backgrounds himself, and continues to emphasize this as the key characteristic of the alliance.[110] The reason to so is clear: asides from wanting to provide a place for youths to have an impact, the very aim was to "create a new identity", referring to the lack of a national identity in Jordan. However, assuming that identities are processual phenomena that manifest through relations and representations – through both discourse and practice – this is once again structurally limited in the setting Shaghaf operates in.

In terms of being between politics and civil society, a range of obstacles are to be overcome; the main ones being bureaucratic matters, financial concerns and the intelligence services. "For them it's dangerous that this exists, it's not logical"; as a way of again ensuring transparency and avoiding a battle, Shaghaf's founder has brought intelligence personnel into the councils. Moreover, one key way in which they aim to separate themselves from civil society is by rejecting all foreign funding, as "in the early stage, we need to maintain our image. Plus, since we have people from all backgrounds – you know, we have liberals, leftists, even people from the Muslim Brotherhood – I can't accept any fund because they will never all agree." Yet, he adds that for separate projects they will simply have to accept funds; to *act,* after all, they need resources. On the other side, its principal political aim during elections was to set up lists of demands for potential members of parliament were able to sign, so as to hold them accountable after the stage of elections. However, the demands set ranged from the need for a constitutional monarchy to objecting a gas deal with Israel, and other sensitive, high-demand issues; too high for members of parliament to meet, due to which none decided to sign the lists.

Thus, something similar to past groups can be said about Shaghaf. While their activity and primary aims were about concrete impact – decentralization, listing demands, and setting up projects – the pathways to achieve this in a way that has considerable political influence are limited. This in itself is hardly a new finding, but it shows yet again how these limits may shift the identity one is able to 'create', as this is inherently related to relations and *shared* representations.

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[109] Sean Yom and Wael Al-Khatib, "How a new youth movement is emerging in Jordan ahead of elections", *The Washington Post,* September 14, 2016. Accessed February 20, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/09/14/how-a-new-youth-movement-in-jordan-is-emerging-ahead-of-elections/?utm_term=.4b8bf725f163

[110] Author's interview with Mohammad, founder of Shaghaf, Amman, 14 April 2017

Again, larger concrete aims are overshadowed by a lack of ability to *change* things and instead a purely *political* goal that does not move beyond the organization itself, namely to create a collective identity. As a consequence, 'creating an identity' becomes a goal in itself, implying that a national identity, as such, is the ultimate goal for Jordan, rather than a necessary step in a political process.

Taqaddam

Seemingly unrelated, shortly after the Arab Spring an activist "platform" was set up. Taqaddam ("Progress") aims to be "the voice of Jordan's open-minded, progressive community", being a third way between a "conservative government and eternal opposition".[111] Though ideologically closer to secular values, its approach is one that bears resemblance to these forma initiatives, as it aims to "combine the bottom-up and the top-down" whilst holding a critical political tone in discourse yet being willing to cooperate with formal politics in their approach. In the words of one of its founding members, Taqaddam's founders "weren't your typical activists", but rather consisted of businessmen and -women, some mayors and a number of youths. They united to "capitalize on the Arab Spring momentum (…) to fill a void in the political spectrum: it is always viewed as having only the traditional establishment and the Muslim Brotherhood, partly by design, while people with democratic, socially progressive values did not have a place. So we wanted to create something evolutionary, while maintaining what Jordan had already achieved."[112] Since then, though limited in size and activity the platform has set up a number of specific projects, its main success being a currently ongoing project which aims to improve public transportation in Amman.

If boundaries are set by recruitment, those of Taqaddam are clear, as they are certainly an *organization* more than a movement or a party. Though they do not aim to exclude anyone for specific projects, for actual membership one must adhere to these "democratic, socially progressive" values. Concretely, since its foundation and now still, membership is mostly found through peer-to-peer contact within Amman. Still today, most members are business figures as well as politically influential figures; currently, the Minister of education is a member as well. The boundary that at the same times forms a clear 'collective identity' for Taqaddam is thus based on a number of previously existing ones: progressive versus conservative, Amman-based, and, as one member personally confirmed, a rather elitist reputation. However, Taqaddam is able to do that which many parties cannot: though limited in outreach, some concrete successes have been made. Taqaddam in a way bridges the gap between grassroots action and political discourse. Paradoxically, this example further illustrates the limitations to such an approach: they are able to do so, due to the same relations that have created a more elitist image: private sector alliances and political influence. It appears that precisely the type of activism that can directly contribute to society, is accessible to a limited segment of it. Again, regardless of dispositions and incentives, the very relations that give Taqaddam the ability to do what it does, are determined by the strategy chosen, thereby (re-)creating a boundary as much as deriving from it.

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[111] Taqaddam, "About us", Accessed April 30 2017, http://taqaddam.org/english-about
[112] Author's interview with Hazem, member of Taqaddam, Amman, 26 April 2017

Formal involvement: limitations and opportunities

In sum, seemingly different efforts for formal political engagement show similar outer boundaries and structural limits to their activity. Recently established political parties appear to continue on the path they are known for. They are unable to prove their ideals as they simply are in no such position, and due to a general lack of interest, complex political ideas are not easily shared and supported. Those explicitly aiming to create a path in between the grassroots and the political each show one outcomes of the same process: once again, practice and discourse is difficult to combine, unless a group is willing to work closely with the state and make use of resources that are not available to all. Concepts such 'national legitimacy', 'Islamist', 'progressive' and even 'Jordanian' essentially denote political goals, that is, the goals of creating new political constituencies. However, the methods of recruitment used and their limited ability to modify social practices, amounts to the fact that the most dominant boundaries are maintained, or better said: re-created.

2.3 Online activism: new 'groups' that bridge the generational boundary?

Perhaps the most common trend throughout my period of fieldwork Jordan was how my definition of activism, and of 'politics', continued to expand. Looking for activism in a place where collective action and street protests are hardly present, many respondents I consider to be activists may have hardly labelled themselves that way. In a place where most aspects of life are controlled or monitored, where politics can do little more than talk, and collective action for purely political goals has no social support, it is critical to understand one thing: discourse *is* social action.[113] Every boundary change, every new form of identification, includes discourse. The weaknesses of formal participation lie with being unable to turn their ideas into action; however, a partial cause is that formal politics is already of little interest among the majority of Jordan's youth. More so, the discourses they *do* use, are highly abstract. Social media on the other hand, is said by many friends and activists to be an outlet for non-formal sources of information, opinions and discussions on political, economic and social issues. Online activism may be characterized by being "noise" more than any other form but that is no reason not to consider it.. As noted, online activism played a significant part in the development of a 'secular/Islamist' divide; it certainly can be a relevant factor then, in the development of political identification.

Tilly puts forth a number of mechanisms through which social boundaries potentially change; *precipitating* mechanisms are those that do not yet constitute a change, but may very well lead to it. One such mechanism is 'conversation'. Though a broad concept, it is essential in understanding where new ideas, relations and identities may originate. Tilly defines conversation as follows: "Conversation certainly includes ordinary talk, but it extends to a wider range of similar interactions among social sites. In this broad meaning, conversation occurs wherever exchanges of information modify relations among the parties continuously and bit by bit (…) it qualifies as a boundary-causing mechanism when in the course of routine interaction participants incrementally alter relations between social sites by: 1) developing distinctive relations within at least two clusters; 2) establishing distinctive relations across the zone between two clusters; 3) creating or transforming shared representations of that zone between them."[114] Keeping this

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[113] Van Dijk, "Principles of critical discourse analysis," 353.
[114] Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries and Social Ties,* 140.

definition in mind, and holding that 'altered relations' can occur either between clusters of individuals or between those clusters and the state, this chapter aims to understand to what extent online activism creates 'conversation' and thereby contributes to the formation of political identification among Jordan's youth. Of course, it is once again not an exhaustive account, but conceptualizing a number of key characteristics helps to understand the key *boundaries* that online activism creates, blurs or maintains.

Precipitating change while defying authority

By online activism, most respondents considered here referred to discussions and expressions on social media regarding everyday events, local issues, questions of education, *wasta*, freedom of speech and even power distribution.[115] Though no more able to turn discourse into practice, on social media, activists can express their opinions in a place where an entire generation 'meets' and, by definition, exchanges information and ideas. Online activism can thereby function as a mechanism of boundary change through altering distinctive relations or shared representations, especially among the younger generation. However, it should immediately be noted that freedom of speech, and increasingly freedom of online speech, is highly limited in Jordan.[116] Earlier this year several newspapers covered the arrests of online activists who had spoken up about corruption, and at least one my respondents has been interrogated over social media posts.[117] Nevertheless, knowing the red lines, many activists feel this is the main arena where one can relatively openly discuss their ideas: the risks are there, but not *as* much as for other forms of political activism.[118]

Furthermore, if it isn't coherent ideas being discussed, general sentiments very well can be. One social media activist expressed a concern over a trend that may be world-wide, but in his view could have significant consequences for Jordan: the tendency to combine criticism with humor, that is, satire and sarcasm. *"The sign that there is something wrong, is the waves of satire, sarcasm in social media (…) In Egypt, before the Spring, you could see the same things happening. And Jordanians are not known for their sense of humor; so it's a way to steam of anger. Sarcasm is the most violent way of expression."* In light of this, I spoke to Al Hudood, a satirical news website which regularly addresses politics in Jordan and the region as a whole. In this case, satire is hardly a violent form of expression, but rather a way of voicing opinions one couldn't voice directly. "Once it took us ten days to decide whether or not to publish an article, but we did. It was a column-style piece about a "pig leader", sarcastically saying it is a good pig leader, the best pig, they love him (…) people would subtly understand, it hit very specific things about specific leaders." Its founder further noted that their target audience reaches across ideological and social boundaries: "satire can trick people in".[119] Similarly, one social media activist stated that "I use sarcasm, but very direct, very straight forward, and with dark humor. It causes a shock, but also makes people feel more awake."[120] Though definite claims on the impact of satire and online activism are far beyond the scope of this paper, the reason to highlight it here

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[115] Author's interview with participant #10, social media activist, Amman, 24 May, 2017

[116] "Freedom on the net 2016 Jordan country file", *Freedom House.* Accessed July 8, 2017, https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2016/jordan; Hussam Da'nah and Reem AlMasri, "Freedom of Expression in Jordan"

[117] Author's interview with participant #10, social media activist, Amman, 24 May, 2017; Ali Younes, "Jordan cracks down on activists over social media posts", Al Jazeera, 18 January 2017 http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/01/jordan-cracks-activists-social-media-posts-170117190455596.html

[118] Author's interview with participant #6, social media activist, Amman, 11 April 2017

[119] Author's interview with participant #11, founder of Al Hudood, Amman, 26 May, 2017

[120] Author's interview with participant #9, social media activist, Amman, 21 May, 2017

is because when conventional, outspoken forms of activism and speech are not allowed, it may be precisely in vague, incoherent, symbol-ridden, indirect forms of expression that new ideas and identities are being formed. Social media activism and certainly the use of humor that cuts across all segments of Jordan's youths, serves as a form of conversation that *precipitates* change, even if the outcomes cannot be determined here.

From 'noise' to a voice

As a way of overcoming the lack of coherence among online bloggers, some have attempted to organize their efforts; translating 'noise' into a coherent voice, and thereby, again, "doing" identification. In this case, the main boundary one is likely to run into is political one, that is, the state itself which hardly encourages online journalism, blogging or satire. Al Hudood has had to register itself abroad in order to function, and struggles to find advertisers as even the private sector is weary of being affiliated with politics in any way. Moreover, organization does not take away the risks of arrests as the red lines are as much present as ever, its founder noted. Similarly, though for a very different purpose, *7iber* is perhaps the most popular online news source among many activists, as well as less politically interested youths. The slogan being "*What's your story*?", 7iber was originally a citizen-let platform by and for people that, as their website states: "were motivated by a central idea that has not changed throughout these ten years: that it is essential for people to wrest their right to narrate their own stories, express their thoughts, and question those in positions of power." Since the Arab Spring, it has transformed into a journalistic website that for long continued to defy authorities, not only through offering a critical discourse but by its very existence. In a crackdown on public freedoms and modifications in laws regarding press and publication, 7iber, among more than 200 unlicensed websites, was blocked in 2013, and three other times since. Though clearly taking a stance against censorship and media restriction, 7iber has since obtained a license and has been able to financially support itself through foreign funds up until now.

If discourse is social action, 7iber is certainly worth considering. Its content expresses views few others openly share, ringing similarity to what is left of a virtual political identity among former *hirak* protestors who currently fail to form a visible, active political group. They have published a range of articles that directly criticize the undemocratic nature of Jordan's political system. [121] More so, the content of these as well as less openly political articles holds a discourse that continuously holds the state accountable for social, cultural, and economic failures. Though secularism is posited as a positive goal, the current lack of social and cultural development in favor of this is attributed to decades of political failure.[122] Where they speak of democracy, they speak not of the elections in itself but of the much higher power structures where decisions are made, further noting that there is "no political democracy without economic democracy"[123]. Articles regarding seemingly social issues, such as the education curriculum reforms previously discussed, put blame first and foremost with state authorities: "The two opponents struggle against each other in order to serve authority which doesn't care about either. And which always used one in fighting the other. Hence they undertake this illusive struggle on

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[121] See Hisham Al Bustani, "Monopolizing power through elections", *7iber*, Sunday 28 August 2016. Accessed April 30, 2017, https://www.7iber.com/politics-economics/monopolizing-power-through-elections/; Sufian Obaidat, "Vote for what you like", *7iber*, Sunday 7 August 2016. Accessed April 30, 2017, https://www.7iber.com/politics-economics/futility-of-participating-in-election-charade/;

[122] Obaidat, "Vote for what you like"

[123] Bustani, "Monopolizing power"

curriculum and many other issues that holds authority irresponsible for all the wrongdoing that it has committed to the education sector, and irresponsible in general for increasing the intensity of the social polarization seen these days after transforming all political arguments into a form of identity struggle."[124] 7iber further published a range of articles regarding internet freedom, censorship and the freedom of speech, consistently emphasizing the argument that "the government is linking hate speech and racism solely to the existence of social media platforms, and not to any social or political problems which have arisen due to the failings of the state".[125] Thus, asides from already holding a political identity by its very foundation, 7iber appears to break through this dominant pattern where seculars and Islamists are held up against each other while the state is left unaccountable. Could an organized online effort aim to blur this otherwise dominant boundary? In a way, its very discourse offers precipitating boundary change, that is, conversation. However, what is intriguing in this regard is how not only boundaries, but even collective interests, that is, priorities, shift through the strategies one chooses.

7iber, and any organized effort for online critical discourse, can spread all-encompassing ideas through text, but in direct relations it is primarily contentious in the regard of internet freedom. Correspondingly, this appears to be a priority issue for the platform, as it is simply their necessary step in continuing the fight towards larger aims: "Today, the reality of our region appears bleak, as Arab regimes excel in exploiting terrorism as a justification to reinforce their monopoly of power and capital, and to continue to restrict freedoms and violate basic rights of their citizens. These regimes tell their citizens that freedoms and security are mutually exclusive, and that calls for justice, freedom, and dignity undermine stability. (…) this reality is what drives us to continue working, to search for stories and ask questions, to insist on creating new spaces, and to build the foundation that makes such work possible."[126] Online activism has a relation to society, youths especially, in which it is capable of slowly but surely precipitating change through producing conversation. On the other hand, it has a relation to the state that does not only limit their outreach and ability to speak openly, but in effect shifts their interests to political rights 'as such', in this case the freedom of speech. And yet, it is precisely this gap between political struggles and material realities that has long maintained a boundary between society and politically engaged activists. As one NGO representative, with high experience in youth engagement, expressed: "what young people want unfortunately is not as inspirational. They don't want "a chance to share my voice", they want a better job so they can live happily and have the money they need to buy things they want."[127] Yet again, 'talking politics' remains just that; to the extent that they 'act', it is through direct relations to the state, perhaps to other opposition parties, but only marginally to everyday realities.

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[124] Shaker Jerrar, "Curriculums a Tool in the Hand of Authority : the Old New Religion Speech", *7iber,* 12 October 2016. Accessed April 25, 2017, http://www.7iber.com/society/school-curricula-religious-discourse-is-not-new/?utm_content=buffera0007&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com&utm_campaign=buffer

[125] Dana Gibreel and Reem Al-Masri, "Proposed Social Media Law"

[126] "7iber Marks Its 10th Anniversary", *7iber*, May 29, 2017. Accessed June 8, 2017, https://www.7iber.com/2017/05/7iber-turns-10-en/

[127] Author's interview with Leaders of Tomorrow, Amman, 16 May 2017

2.4. Concluding 'politics'

The pattern in this chapter essentially reaffirms the weaknesses of political engagement established in the previous chapter, presently conceptualized through boundary *processes*. Looking through the eyes of previous and current activists who intend to transform the system, it has become clear how through the limited paths currently available, one is likely to end up maintaining a number of key boundaries. These tendencies show that the boundaries which *fragment* political activism are not necessarily the same ones that *limit* it. That is, those boundaries said to be most salient – seculars versus Islamists especially – are not the only, not even the main boundaries that continue to limit the ability of activists to offer new forms of political identification. Rather, a continuous separation between discourse and practice, a limited range of strategies available, and the shifts in interests and relations that take place once such a strategy is chosen, continue to limit this ability. This chapter was thus a way to analyze in more detail *how* it comes that political groups tend to be stuck in such abstract concepts, political rights 'as such', even when it comes from precisely those activists who aimed to bridge this gap.

A focus on discourse alone needn't be an issue, if there are other groups or actors available in society who are able to focus on practice instead of discourse. I will now turn to those who have made a choice long before to not get entangled in these patterns, but to instead focus on *creating* development on the social level, where economic grievances persist and social change could begin. It has been noted that many former activists themselves have gone into NGO's, and in a way it is indeed civil society that I turn to. However, civil society is a broad concept; looking into this field highlighted a specific category, which I will refer to as 'social activism'. While social activism may not be a path which has proven particularly popular among former protestors, it is certainly one available; one which, in terms of strategy, is perhaps most contradictory to political activism as laid out above. Moreover, most of the initiatives and organizations I will speak of are set up in the past five years or have gone through significant shifts in activity since. Looking at these social activists shows a type of approach to 'activism' that may not be openly political, but it is surely relevant. However, this approach is as much promising as it is questionable: how powerful can altered social practices be, if they are stripped of any political discourse; what can activism be, without directing attention towards the state?

Chapter 2
Show, don't tell: social activism

NGO's are hardly regarded as a potential source of social and political change in Jordan; in fact, they are hardly regarded as a form of 'activism' at all. During my period in Jordan, the majority of political activists, observers and even those personally active in civil society, expressed the same range of criticisms on civil society. "They're just businesses", "they can only do so much", "they're directing; it's not who people are at all".[128] However, by outlining the main, closely interrelated points of critique, I can simultaneously find the basis for 'difference', for a boundary, between civil society as a whole, and a specific form of activism, 'social activism', under consideration in this chapter. This sphere may hardly seem political or contentious in any way. Nevertheless, it is worth considering and certainly worth comparing to political activism. For one, the truth is that in terms of aiming to engage Jordan's youth, attempting to offer new forms of political identification, and the 'noise' that is youth activism today, these local-level, seemingly apolitical strategies are very much part of the story. More so, taking a closer look at this type of activism shows a boundary that is simultaneously the starting point for analysis and a core finding of this research. A boundary between, yet again, discourse and practice; so much so, that those able to do the latter are primarily concerned with moving *away* from the state as much as possible.

2.1. Social activism vs. civil society: setting the boundary

In the past, a limited number of scholars have directed their attention towards the role of civil society organizations in Jordan. These consistently focus on what is left of, once again, a political function of civil society – that is, promoting human rights, democratization and holding the state accountable.[129] As it turns out, this is precisely the type of activity that is highly restricted in Jordan. Wiktoriwicz (2000) defines civil society as "the constellation of associational forms that occupy the terrain between individuals and the state. It is viewed as a mechanism of collective empowerment that enhances the ability of citizens to protect their interests and rights from arbitrary or capricious state power,"[130] In doing so, turning attention to Jordan, he found a pattern which continues to exist today: civil society performs a function of state control more than it allows organizations to hold state power accountable. Most NGO's spoken to confirm that they are more concerned with avoiding political relations than engaging in them: "the real role of civil society, in terms of overseeing the government and making sure everything is working – that's not really available to us"[131]. On another account, two social activists agreed that "the whole philosophy of civil society isn't working in Jordan (…) non-governmental organizations are not actually non-governmental, they are all controlled, even the ones with foreign funding."[132] Instead, much of civil society in Jordan performs a role of increasing 'social

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[128] Author's interview with participant #1, former political activist, Amman, 29 March 2017; Author's interview with participant #3, former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #8, former political activist, Amman, 19 May 2017

[129] Francesco Cavatorta and Azzam Elananza, Political Opposition in Civil Society: An Analysis of the Interactions of Secular and Religious Associations in Algeria and Jordan, *Government and Opposition* 43, no. 4 (2008); Larzillière, *Activism in Jordan,* 132-135.

[130] Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Civil Society as Social Control: State Power in Jordan", *Comparative Politics,* 33, no. 1, 43.

[131] Author's interview with Leaders of Tomorrow, Amman, 16 May 2017

[132] Author's fieldnotes regarding a conversation between two social activists, Amman, 14 April 2017

participation', encouraging young people to be engaged in their communities – something which very well contribute to development. However, state control is not the only weakness of civil society in Jordan. Regardless of an organization's precise aims, criticism is abound for the nature of NGO's and the approaches they take. Based on such criticism, as expressed by observers, but more so by local-level NGO's and individual activists themselves, a level of difference, a *boundary*, can be found.

Before going into these differences, a basic understanding of similarity in what I call 'social activism', is necessary. The term social activism could be replaced with 'community development' or a range of other terms used to denote the type of organizations and projects considered here. Though precise characteristics will be addressed throughout, in terms of concrete activity these activists operate in small, often marginalized communities and aim to improve development, change behavior, often focusing on what one could call human development. For instance, I spoke to iLearn, a small but growing organization that provides informal educational opportunities in marginalized areas;[133] iDare, an organization currently involved in countering a rise in extremism, that is, hate speech, with a community-based approach;[134] an independent youth activist from Zarqa who is both at the head of his town's Youth Council and closely involved in the Article 308 campaign;[135] another independent activist who has been involved in a wide range of local-level community development projects for years in his own town, Ajloun.[136] The specific activities vary, but in all cases, it is the *approach* that sets them apart, as I will show by outlining how social activists themselves experience the boundary with civil society, in terms of distinctive relations and shared representations.

Setting the boundary, experiencing difference

"To them, it's a job, not a fight (…) They don't have empathy, they have sympathy."[137]

Though hardly specific to Jordan, the complex practices of foreign funding and its effects on civil society have a large impact on those who aim to operate in marginalized communities for genuine causes. For one, it could affect the incentives behind civil society efforts. As one civil society researcher noted: "To be honest, recently one of the ministers in Jordan said it: if you want to be rich, you can go open a civil society organization and start seeking funds. Unfortunately, this is becoming the situation in Jordan."[138] Moreover, each civil society organization spoken to in this research reflects the same experience that derives from their dependence on project-based funding: "they are trying to win funds, not working together. They are competing instead of collaborating."[139] Leaders of Tomorrow, an organization currently focused on educational opportunities, experienced the effects of this pattern even regarding the topic of education alone: "We're not necessarily working toward a common goal. I think if it

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[133] Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017

[134] Author's interview with Suha, employee of iDare, Amman, 4 April 2017

[135] This refers to the Jordanian Article 308, which allows rapists to marry their victims; a campaign against this article has been going on for years, decades even, and in fact just recently, on August 1, 2017, it was finally repealed: Rana Husseini, "In historic vote, House abolishes controversial Article 308", *The Jordan Times,* August 1, 2017. Accessed August 1, 2017, http://jordantimes.com/news/local/historic-vote-house-abolishes-controversial-article-308

[136] Author's interview with participant #14, anonymous social activist from Ajloun, Amman, 30 May 2017

[137] Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017

[138] Author's interview with Youssef, researcher at WANA institute, Amman, 4 May 2017

[139] Author's interview with Youssef, researcher at WANA institute, Amman, 4 May 2017

were just local organizations, in some ways we would have to work together. But when someone rolls in with a ten million dollar budget and says 'we think this is really important', they can orient a bunch of local partners in that direction for budgetary reasons, and that does not encourage participation."

In addition to this, both external observers and several social activists expressed criticism regarding the centralization of civil society, and with that, the elitist and exclusionary character of the field. "Right now, they speak for people who understand what they say. But Amman is not Jordan (…) For example, whenever I go to conferences of civil society there are plenty of women, but I am usually the only one who is wearing a hijab. That doesn't represent Jordan".[140] As a consequence, one 'distinctive relation' across the boundary that social activists experience, is immediately evident: critical yet dependent. Several NGO holders and social activists considered here have almost exclusively worked with larger organizations and civil society. One social activist showed some contradictory statements that exemplify this: speaking of his experience in the Article 308 campaign, he shared that "we did not get proper support from civil society. Partly because of their awkward funding policies but also, it's hard to get into the civil society sphere if you don't have a network. I don't have that much of a network, so it's hard to get into."[141] Nevertheless, he continued to tell me that it was not until the campaign was picked up by larger organizations, with large funds and years of experience, that they were able to build an effective coalition that could put pressure on authorities.

Furthermore, perhaps a combination of these two, NGO's are often criticized for using top-down approaches that offer the wrong type of incentives for participation. This weakness of the field is most personally experienced by community-based activists as it limits their own abilities. "The problem with youth participation in civil society is that it has become a market. So they recruit youths by offering fancy hotels at special places, they offer money; people now even ask for benefits if they are asked to participate. So many youths participate for the wrong reasons. So the problem isn't so much a decrease in interest from youths, but bad practices, an approach that focuses on business and numbers. What youths really want is recognition, human development, but few offer that."[142] Another respondent, who works from within small communities, shared the same criticism: "You can go and train them about human rights, but they are still hungry. I know a lot of people going to workshops because it's not about human rights but because they serve a coffee break. Seriously. So how can you get development for this person?"[143]

Thus, the lines of fragmentation and limitation within the field of civil society are exactly those which community-based, social activists aim to move past: profit-based incentives, top-down approaches and, culminating from these two, flawed recruitment tactics. And yet, a distinct category of social activism that could turn into a *group*, an arena of activism for those who aim to take an alternative approach, is largely unavailable as they continue to be dependent on, and affected by, dominant patterns and powerful institutions. As a consequence, social activists are as much aware of the boundary between them and civil society as they are forced to operate across it. Nevertheless, by focusing on social activists individually, or community-based organizations separately, one can notice the formation of collective identities, as well as collective interests, in a

[140]Author's interview with Rawan, Human Rights & Policy Officer at the Dutch Embassy in Amman, 27 March 2017
[141]Author's interview with participant #15, anonymous social activist from Zarqa, Amman, 1 June 2017
[142]Author's interview with Suha, employee of iDare, Amman, 4 April 2017
[143]Author's interview with Mohammed, founder of Blue Umbrella, Amman, 7 May 2017

way that not only increases their potential but shows how social activism may very well be just that, activism, contention even, with political effects. Turning to these specific examples, I aim to understand through which relations and representations social activists assert a collective identity and collective interest in their respective communities, and how this in turn contributes to a certain type of activism.

2.2. From difference to similarity: one category, many identities

Though the background stories of the activists I spoke to vary, the majority of them have in common that they are originally from outside the capital. Many became engaged out of their own experience of either seeing those around them face abuse, poverty and marginalization, or having lived through it themselves. Being in close contact to marginalized communities surely contributes to the choice to engage in *action*; moreover, some activists considered here may simply have been unable to either enter the political scene or more high-standing NGO's.[144] However, this is hardly an absolute rule; two community leaders I spoke to, were themselves from wealthy families, but had taken the opportunities at hand to set up social initiatives. One particularly unusual story came from a social activist who is also a local imam; having moved to Amman and back to his own, smaller, at the time underdeveloped community, he used both his network, wealth and certainly his religious influence to contribute to development. He encourages young people to engage in advocacy, arranges cultural activities, and aims a proper host community to incoming refugees. He further asserts that by promoting a type of religious speech – a "moderate" one in his words – that centers on the everyday, he contributed to a more open-minded mindset. Inquiring whether he was alone in such a position, he said that "there are, in my surroundings, elsewhere, but not really coherent. Many like-minded people didn't get these opportunities to have an influence; they weren't offered a job as an imam, they have less resources. So people in other places are all doing their own things – it's mostly separate individuals here and there with similar views, not a clear group."[145] Once again, coherence is lacking; and again, individual characteristics and personal life stories might explain why one becomes active in the first place, but that does not in itself explain how boundaries manifest from there on.

Show, don't tell: action *for* collectives
More decisive is the type of recruitment, and priorities they set, in the communities themselves. Assertions of collective identity *and* collective interests, for social activists, are diverse, but have in common that they are primarily reflections of everyday realities. A telling example is iDare, a small to medium-sized NGO which uses what they call a "social marketing approach".[146] Focused on marginalized communities, each project is not only carried out but set up through a continuous dialogue regarding the problems their beneficiaries face. It is currently active in a single, small community for as much as a year, focusing on the issue of extremism as an increasing number of youths are leaving to join extremist groups abroad. Similarly, several individual social activists who work for their community through partnerships and projects

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[144]Author's interview with participant #15, anonymous social activist from Zarqa, Amman, 1 June 2017
[145] Author's interview with participant #13, anonymous social activist, Ibbin, 29 May 2017
[146] Author's interview with Suha, employee of iDare, Amman, 4 April 2017

continue to set their goals based on what they personally observe and experience. In many cases, this led to a focus on gender-related issues.[147]

Related to the above, social activists clearly hold an approach that places *action* before discourse – action that is aimed to directly contribute to people's wellbeing, even to economic and human development. To illustrate, an Amman-based women's rights organization emphasized the need for state-level encouragement of women's employment through, among others, providing daycare services for children.[148] A number of weeks later, I found myself speaking to a small women's organizations in a southern rural area which had set up such a daycare center themselves.[149] While on the political level, decentralization efforts are being shared but enjoy little trust and support, local initiatives create councils and committees through which youths can hold their own municipality accountable.[150] In a similar way, where political activists insist that the state should provide better employment opportunities, social activists encourage entrepreneurship and innovation, offering trainings and financial support.[151] The latter, however, shows that the type of action that is encouraged at times stands in stark contrast to what would normally be considered contentious, certainly to what many political activists would consider to be necessary path towards social justice.

More importantly, most community-based activists insist that their aim is not simply to offer direct, comprehensive solutions for large-scale economic and social grievances. Rather, their work is meant to have indirect, incremental effects regarding empowerment, altering social practices, and identities even. "The goal is to make people stand up for themselves. They're so co-dependent, they blame others; it's a mindset issue. (…) They don't think they are able. Most of my old friends are still in the orphan camp; they're stuck, many are criminals. I want to disrupt the norms, the loops, the many routines. Each community has different blame circles, they're always blaming each other, within the community. But they're blaming a ghost."[152] In order to create such long-term effects, the 'recruitment' tactics and incentives they offer are certainly not one of financial benefit. Rather than offering rewards for participation in predetermined projects, most of these aim to create sustainable entities in which community members remain active for their own benefit. Indeed, the community development NGO's I spoke to all aim to create a sustainable path of engagement where "the previous beneficiaries become the next volunteers".[153] As for independent activists or community leaders, these function almost exclusively on the basis of community participation and engagement, and their very aim is to increase this over the long run. As one community leader stated, regarding his encouragement of advocacy for local development: "when people see a milestone, they ask for more. And they used to ask me for more, but with time I developed a team, gave tasks to other people and the crew." [154] Similarly, a youth activist leading his town's Youth Shadow Council has hopes that go beyond the improvement of municipal services alone: "The main change I hope to see is to have youth

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[147] Participants #13, #14, #15 focus on gender in their work

[148] Author's interview with Layla, Arab Women's Organization, Amman, 3 April 2017

[149] Author's interview with Wadi Musa Ladies Association, Amman, 16 April 2017

[150] Author's interview with participant #14, anonymous social activist from Ajloun, Amman, 30 May 2017; Author's interview with participant #15, anonymous social activist from Zarqa and part of Zarqa City Youth Council, Amman, 1 June 2017

[151] Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017; Author's interview with Mohammed, founder of Blue Umbrella, Amman, 7 May 2017; Author's interview with participant #12, anonymous social activist, Baqa'a, 13 May 2017

[152] Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017

[153] Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017; Author's interview with Suha, employee of iDare, Amman, 4 April 2017; Author's interview with Mohammed, founder of Blue Umbrella, Amman, 7 May 2017; also see http://ruwwad.net/ for another NGO with this approach

[154] Author's interview with participant #13, anonymous social activist, Ibbin, 29 May 2017

councils in every city in Jordan, so youths would have the opportunity to make a real difference, a way to change cities. Plus, giving them a chance to have an impact is a way to prevent terrorism, crime, drugs and these things."[155]

Taken together, the type of activism discussed here is able to achieve at least two things due to their proximity, focus on direct action and community-set goals. For one, they are able to contribute to direct needs and concerns in a more effective way than other organizations. Secondly, when successful, they in fact engage, activate, *mobilize* their own beneficiaries. In so doing, they certainly contribute to forms of collective identification to which the state is at least a third party – speaking of extremism, development, innovation, education and municipal services is hardly unrelated to political life. The collective identity they offer in this case is inherently linked to collective interests; it is a combination of the two that directly forms the *basis* of activism, rather than social activists having to tap into abstract concepts or labels. It is one based on similarity more than difference, the outer boundary simply being that of their own community.

Boundary change

In fact, many community-based activities aim to *blur* boundaries more than emphasize them. If social structures are said to be an obstacle to development, yet discourse in itself is unable to tackle these, perhaps social activists can do what political activists cannot: alter social structures through creating new practices. An actual shift in social structures cannot so easily be observed, certainly not here, but by comparing the practices activists engage in to the main concepts of *precipitating boundary change*, the potential influence of this sphere of activism can be addressed – in this case, at least two such mechanisms are certainly brought about.

Conversation, as previously defined, is a key aspect of community-based activism. The majority of social activists focus on 'dialogue', be it in informal education centers, religious speech or ongoing community-based activism. As these activists offer more than a single exchange of information and remain involved for longer periods of time, they could very well create a situation where "in the course of routine interaction participants incrementally alter relations between social sites." Every organization that deals with education, trainings on entrepreneurship, or training in certain life skills is essentially transferring information that previously did not exist. Furthermore, encouraging safe learning spaces, the use of culture, art, or technology brings new *forms* of conversation precisely because, many believe, dominant institutions and habits fail to encourage critical thinking and self-empowerment, thereby keeping young people limited in mindset, unable to think of themselves as more than part of a group.[156] iDare for instance, has specifically focused on a project of 'alternative narratives', aiming to counter extremism by not *countering* hate speech but offering alternative discourses, forms of thinking, instead.[157]

More so, social activists are very well aware of the intersection between identity and interest, believing that people ultimately modify behavior not through discourse alone, but through changing the conditions they live in. This relates to the way that *incentive shifts* can pose as a boundary change mechanism: "participants in boundary processes receive rewards or penalties that affect their pursuit of within boundary relations, cross-boundary relations, and

[155] Author's interview with participant #15, anonymous social activist from Zarqa, Amman, 1 June 2017
[156] Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017
[157] See http://www.idareact.org/

representations of the boundary zone. They sometimes receive cooperation from others on the same side of a boundary, for instance, while receiving threats from those across the boundary. Changes in boundary-maintaining incentives regularly cause boundary changes." [158] Again, iDare specifically emphasized that since the early stages of its organization, they realized the importance of the concept of identity. That is, they aim to improve one's sense of *personal* identity, limiting the value people attach to group-based power, be it origin, religion, nationalism or tribe. Through offering human development and self-empowerment, they aim to offer an alternative. The idea is to not offer an incentive to any sort of group, but to *remove* the idea that wealth, development and power is based on group loyalty; "it's fake power; they don't look at themselves as a human being but define themselves by tribe, or family."[159] This focus on self-empowerment is found among many individual social activists as well. Leaders of Tomorrow is an organization that may not currently operate 'on the grassroots' but has shifted attention towards an online platform for educational opportunities; the aim, of the overall organization and this project in particular, is to counter inequality, offer opportunities, and indirectly pose an alternative to *wasta* being the primary way through which young people develop themselves.[160] Moreover, for all social activists goes that encouraging community engagement that actually brings them tangible, material effect, creates 'rewards' for this type of collective identity that centers around active citizenship, community-level solidarity and empowerment.

Idealist as all this may sound, conceptualizing the activities of social activists shows that, however small and incremental, they undeniably have some ability to alter social structures and thereby adjust boundaries on the grassroots level. Group-based boundaries and divisions, the rise of extremist ideologies, *wasta,* other forms of inequality, and many other deeply rooted social structures all contribute to the weaknesses political activists face as it limits those who have the ability to enter the political scene, inhibits cooperation, and creates a potential for conflict. More so, these are simply the most pressing issues people face. Unable to affect these top-down without first calling on the state to create new policies, social activists instead use a seemingly apolitical form of activism that operates on the grassroots. They do so in a way that has highly political consequences – that is, if these patterns can persist, spread and grow. Unfortunately, their ability to do so is highly limited, as again, it's incoherent; financial support is perhaps their main concern. Yet again, priorities shift; external alliances and relations are made that reflect an activists' necessity to continue more than it reflects what they are about.

2.3. Third parties: external allies, hidden boundaries

Every relation, every boundary, can contain third parties as well; it is therefore worth assessing the external relations social activists engage in. Is this an independent sphere of activism in the making; how do social activists move away from a dependence on civil society; and to what extent do they hold a *political* identity? Through assessing the alliances they make themselves, the opposition they face and the relations they do *not* have, it appears once again that a chosen

[158] Tilly, *Identities, boundaries and social ties*, 141.
[159] Author's interview with Suha, employee of iDare, Amman, 4 April 2017
[160] Author's interview with Leaders of Tomorrow, Amman, 16 May 2017

strategy from there on out contributes to boundary changes that come to define one's political identity.

Looking for alternatives

To some extent, though highly limited, cooperation between social activists and community development NGO's is happening. Partnerships and networks between grassroots initiatives exist, and several of the organizations I spoke to have such a network, partner with local actors at all times, or aim to amplify other NGO's prospects by sharing their opportunities.[161] As mentioned, specific campaigns such Article 308 have long contained both local-level activists and larger civil society organizations. Nevertheless, and despite the success of the latter campaign, this dependent relation on larger organizations is not always beneficial, and the fact remains that access to more powerful organizations is not for all. Most remained stuck in a relation to other NGO's – national and foreign – in which they are critical yet dependent. In some cases, this has led organizations and independent activists to find new alliances and partners, often found in the private sector. Several organizations have for long been supported by private sector partners as much as NGO's, and some are increasingly trying to improve these relations as a way of being independent from civil society.[162] Similarly, a number of them are in fact aiming to be a "sustainable social enterprise" through making sure their projects in fact do offer some revenue.[163] In a similar way, entrepreneurship is something that is increasingly being encouraged in communities themselves, as a way of improving sustainable development and employment.[164] It appears that social activists, more and more, move *away* from both the state and civil society, perhaps privatizing development and social work. If so, is there anything left of a political identity?

Political boundaries

In a way, both of these tendencies, a continued dependence on civil society, and a turn to the private sector, in fact denote a very distinct political identity. One community leader noted that part of the reason he finds most support in the private sector is *because* government support is largely lacking.[165] As one social activist said, this is in turn reinforces the fact a factor in the further limitations that derive from a dependency on civil society: "the main challenge of working as an activist in this field is the lack of support from the government. And also, all the bureaucracy that I'm facing; they make it as a condition to work with well-established organizations."[166] Moreover, keeping in mind that NGO's generally are monitored by the state, looking for external alliances and sustainability could in fact be a way of escaping such control. In fact, escaping control appears to be what defines the political identity of social activists. Based on the findings laid out above, social activism performs a number of functions that surely bear a

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[161] Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017; Author's interview with Mohammed, founder of Blue Umbrella, Amman, 7 May 2017; Author's interview with Leaders of Tomorrow, Amman, 16 May 2017

[162] Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017; Author's interview with participant #12, anonymous social activist, Baqa'a, 13 May 2017

[163] Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017; Author's interview with Leaders of Tomorrow, Amman, 16 May 2017

[164] Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017; Author's interview with Mohammed, founder of Blue Umbrella, Amman, 7 May 2017

[165] Author's interview with participant #12, anonymous social activist, Baqa'a, 13 May 2017

[166] Author's interview with participant #14, anonymous social activist from Ajloun, Amman, 30 May 2017

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political relevance yet without targeting the state. Though it may not include political relations in its work, it is precisely this separation that sets a boundary, and has far-reaching consequences.

Removing political discourse from the activities of an organization is beneficial for a number of reasons; one being that it is simply highly restricted to do otherwise.[167] Reportedly, restrictions have only increased in recent years, as one organization noted: "After the Arab Spring there was a lot more space, more tolerance on the part of authorities to give people space to express themselves. (…) Between 2015, 2016 and now 2017, that space has shrunk. There is no longer as much space for work that could even be perceived as a little bit political."[168] Moreover, adding political elements could harm one's ability to engage young people and limit an organization's success: "the name of politics or working with politicians, it will scare them. A lot of politicians want to be involved, and they put money in that. And it would help me with the money but not with reaching the target group. So we start to separate social and political – they still refuse to say they are working in politics, even if they do workshops in leadership, even in political parties, they still say no, I am a social activist."[169]

If there is a distinction between the nominal and the virtual, in this case, nominally social activists are just that – 'social' activists, largely still part of civil society, as they are either labelled an NGO themselves or continue to be dependent on them. Virtually on the other hand, both as an individual and perhaps as a 'group' to the extent that they have one, they can very well hold state authorities accountable for the problems they see. Several social activists expressed personal opinions on unequal development, a lack of social justice that is partly politically maintained, and weak investment in rural areas: "The only way to fix things is through social justice: align the poor and the rich. But especially since the middle class has disappeared, there is no channel left at all. What we need is infrastructure, but the government doesn't do that, they don't care about these people, they don't exist to them."[170] At this stage, it should be noted that political engagement in civil society is allowed to the extent that it revolves around 'increasing participation'.[171] However, many of those social activists I spoke to fit the image of a citizen who believes in social justice, and does *not* believe that the current political system is cut out to bring that about – a number of them made clear that they don't vote for this reason. One social activist noted that in his community, many social activists are politically involved as well, in the form of *opposition* rather than participation, noting that "the distinction is not always clear." He further explained his own decision to refrain from voting: "I don't vote, but I see that as a sort of political participation. It's a statement, a disagreement with the policies of the government and how they conduct the elections in Jordan. For me, it's not about giving a vote, it's more about questioning the whole system. Do we have a democratic system? Does the government want to be the voice for every citizen?"[172]

Thus, for those who are politically aware, do not believe in the current system, but essentially believe in social justice and grassroots change, social activism is a one of the few paths available to them – this is not necessarily a sign of disinterest or a lack of political awareness. In fact, given the fact that their aims are in reality very high-reaching shows that the choice for social

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[167] A number of statements in this section are left untraceable to as to ensure anonymity of individuals and organizations; these statements derive from the same set of social activists but I will refrain from making exact references

[168] Author's interview with anonymous social activist, Amman, 2017

[169] Author's interview with anonymous social activist, Amman, 2017

[170] Author's interview with anonymous social activist, Amman, 2017

[171] Author's interview with Rawan, Human Rights & Policy Officer at the Dutch Embassy in Amman, 27 March 2017

[172] Author's interview with participant #12, anonymous social activist, Baqa'a, 13 May 2017

activism is largely a combination of accessibility, restrictions on political work, personal stories but also a simple conviction that this strategy, one of *action*, is actually one more powerful than political participation or political activism. However, from the moment that such a path is chosen onwards, labels, discourses and relations are set, thereby contributing to an activist's boundaries and the type of collective identification they bring about.

Finally, it is worth noting to what extent ideologies are a factor in social activism. The same boundaries that are said to be most prevalent in political debates – secular vs. Islamist – have previously been reported to be the main boundary cutting across civil society as well.[173] The limited number of social activists who themselves experience such differences however, have one thing in common: it doesn't essentially prevent them from continuing their activity. One liberally oriented community activist shared that Islamists at times refrain from cooperating in social work out of ideological differences, but "it affects them more than it affects me".[174] Others confirmed such experiences in disagreement without direct confrontation. One community activist did share more negative experiences of facing strong opposition in response to his activities, but again, this has hardly prevented him from continuing his work. The truth is that convincing others of your ideas is simply not a necessary condition for an approach that centers around action, and to the extent that it is, competition with highly politically involved groups is avoided. To illustrate, in campaigning against Article 308 – which my respondent referred to as 'social activism' – he noted that opposition was surely found in a strong camp that is largely defined by traditional, conservative figures, among whom some youths, but opposition existed especially in the older generation and in parliament itself. Nevertheless he was convinced that "of course, the educated ones are in favor of changing this law – even if the government doesn't, this generation will change it."[175] Again, an attitude shines through in which change is expected to come from slow, grassroots effects, the social level, beginning with the younger generation, and that political developments will follow. This is precisely why he would refer to the campaign as a form of "social activism": not because it has no political effects but because throughout the campaign, support and alliances are made in society, through civil society organizations, not with politicians themselves. Again, it is this 'distinctive relation' of separation to the state that appears to define social activism, which may create a less contentious strategy, but at the same time enables social activists to create *practices*, and to continue their activity *despite* opposition.

2.4. Concluding social activism

In sum, what sets social activism apart from both civil society and political activism is their approach. This approach may very well be a consequence of one's position in society, dependent on both locality and class, but it is ultimately a choice one makes. This is an approach that centers around *action*, operates on the grassroots, sets interests based on communities themselves, and refrains from offering financial incentives. It thereby has the ability to mobilize youths and communities in ways that simultaneously empower them, *blurs* boundaries rather than creates them, and creates a collective identity and collective interest that is concrete and genuine. Having conceptualized their activities, they may very well be creating precipitating boundary change on the grassroots level. The power of these social activists may not lie in solving society's

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[173] Cavatorta and Elananza, "Political Opposition in Civil Society"; Larzillière, *Activism in Jordan,* 134.
[174] Author's interview with participant #12, anonymous social activist, Baqa'a, 13 May 2017
[175] Author's interview with participant #15, anonymous social activist from Zarqa, Amman, 1 June 2017

problems without politics, but it might very well lie with *mobilizing, empowering* society in a way that they become active, not for purely political goals but for their and their community's own, material need. They do so in ways that don't push labels, boundaries, nor even interests, but allow the next generation to develop these for themselves.

However, it is also an approach that is characterized by a particular relation to the state; one that is largely separate, yet controlled, and only indirectly affects politically relevant issues. The majority of social activists do not hold the state accountable in its everyday discourse and relations. A priority for many social activists thereby becomes to increase independence while gaining support. So far, this amounts to either a dependence on larger NGO's, thereby remaining part of a larger category of civil society, or looking for private sector support. This emphasis on moving *away* from the state thereby creates an outer boundary that makes this sphere what it is, reflected by the label they hold and their choice for action over discourse: the boundary between social activism and the political sphere, in which state accountability is unquestionable but grassroots action is prohibited. Moreover, in certain ways, social activism can stand in stark contrast to the type collective action coming from worker's movements as previously discussed, especially given a turn to the private sector and their inability to direct attention towards the state. Yet, many social activists I spoke to would not question that social justice is the ultimate aim, that political failure is at least partially to blame, and that the given system does not allow for sufficient participation. However, boundaries, and thereby the political identities one develops and brings across, are consequences of actions rather than thoughts; of labels more than experience.

Conclusion

The starting point for this paper was simultaneously the finding of this research. The very fact that I had to turn to a new scene, a new network, a new type of discourse that most protestors I spoke to in the first weeks would hardly consider activism, certainly not political activism, is a finding. It denotes that despite the countless lines of fragmentation found regarding ideology, locality, class, religion, origin and interests, strong similarities in terms of discourses and relations are found within larger 'arenas' of activism. It shows that political identities, if these are in fact defined by shared relations and representations, do not necessarily reflect what one is actually about, their aims, their vision, but merely the strategy they chose to take. From there on out, boundary processes set in and political identities are 'made'. Whereas formal politics requires labels that draw attention despite being unable to create concrete changes, online activists are able to share critical discourses but thereby shift their priority to a political right as such; social activists choose to create concrete changes at the grassroots, but thereby amount to a small, limited segment of a contested civil society, unable to hold a political discourse that reflects larger aims. Thus, among these individuals with similar virtual identities, deeply divergent observable, *nominal* political identities exist – or, in the case of those former protestors I spoke with, *no* nominal identity and thereby no pathway for action truly exists.

Different strategies towards similar aims of course needn't contradict one another. However, the boundary found in this paper reflects a crucial point of difference. This is a boundary between those who look for change through the political level, versus those who refrain from holding the state accountable at all, instead looking for ways to move development

away from state control. This boundary may not be salient in terms of conflict and competition, but it sufficiently separates these spheres in a way that they seem largely unrelated and in a way, deeply oppose one another. More so, it is a crucial distinction because it reflects the constant separation of *discourse* and *practice,* in this case *political discourses* and *social practices* which, together, theoretically, should make for a crucial change in social structures. These findings may hardly be surprising to those who know the field in Jordan; however, it could have significant conceptual consequences.

Theoretically, the findings in this research in a way pose question marks regarding current approaches to collective identification and its relation to contentious politics. In this case, I did not focus attention on 'groups', on what is commonly considered collective action, and instead applied the same type of framework – one that focuses on ongoing relations and representations – to small, indirect, even 'hidden' forms of activism. Forms of activism that are not as openly contentious. However, the existing definitions of political identities largely revolve around *shared* relations and representations. This approach does not require one to pay attention to the ideas, discourses and beliefs held among individuals who are in fact *not* in relation to one another, not in interaction, nor holding a shared representation of their identity. It was by continuously distinguishing between the nominal and the virtual, between label and experience, by in fact breaking Tilly's rule of leaving out the "why", that a type of similarity was found among strategies that at first sight appear deeply opposed to one another.

Social life may indeed unfold through interactions and relations, and identities and boundaries certainly do. However, which types of interactions and relations are possible is structurally limited – anywhere, certainly in Jordan, and especially when large-scale collective action is not an option. Looking at contentious action or all of social life in a way that separates thought from action amounts to yet again 'reifying' groups – not based on previously established social identities, but by the pathways for action that a political system allows. Moreover, taking into account that discourses and practices together contribute to social change, understanding similarities across seemingly separated spheres helps to understand who is actually contributing to social change, and in which ways. It helps to understand that an incoherent field of "noise" may be limited, but not inactive; and the limitations may not lie with visible boundaries as such, but the separation of strategies that preceded them.

The recommendations for further research regarding this topic are endless. For one, if there was ever to be a more detailed account of how and why the demographic divide in Jordan actually matters, it could provide an excellent case for understanding the complex intersections between identities and interests. Furthermore, a more detailed assessment of the political consequences of social activism could shed light on not only Jordan's future, but a global development in which non-state groups aim to break free from control and foster social change themselves. Paying attention to online spheres but certainly also to *un*organized, informal protests would be a way of understanding where ideas originate, where political identities come from, what really drives individuals before collectives formed. Above all, I would recommend that analyzing contention and social change should not begin when large collectives have become visible, and widespread action comes to the surface. Not to say that collective action inherently leads to stability, but because whether or not it does, the answer as to what people actually wanted and what brought them together, or in conflict, lies in understanding the processes of identification and contention that existed long before; agency exists, even during times of 'stability', and even when it amounts to little more than "noise".

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List of participants

Anonymous political and online activists
1. Author's interview with former political activist, Amman, 29 March 2017
2. Author's interview with anonymous political activist, 4 April 2017
3. Author's interview with former political activist, Amman, 5 April 2017
4. Author's interview with former political activist Amman, 5 April 2017
5. Author's interview with former member of Ma'an list, Amman, 6 April 2017
6. Author's interview with social media activist, Amman, 11 April 2017
7. Author's interview with anonymous political activist, Baqa'a, 15 April 2017
8. Author's interview with former political activist, Amman, 19 May 2017
9. Author's interview with social media activist, Amman, 21 May 2017
10. Author's interview with social media activist, Amman, 24 May 2017
11. Author's interview with founder of Al Hudood, Amman, 26 May, 2017

Anonymous social activists
12. Author's interview with anonymous social activist, Baqa'a, 13 May 2017
13. Author's interview with anonymous social activist, Ibbin, 29 May 2017
14. Author's interview with anonymous social activist from Ajloun, Amman, 30 May 2017
15. Author's interview with anonymous social activist from Zarqa, Amman, 1 June 2017

Formal political involvement
16. Author's interview with Mohammad, founder of Shaghaf, 14 April 2017
17. Author's interview with Ahmad, member of ZamZam, Amman, 24 April 2017
18. Author's interview with Hazem, member of Taqaddam, 26 April 2017
19. Author's interview with Rheil, founder and member of ZamZam, 30 April 2017
20. Author's interview with two youth anonymous members of ZamZam, 3 May 2017

Expert interviews
21. Author's interview with Rawan, Human Rights & Policy Officer at the Dutch Embassy in Amman, 27 March 2017
22. Author's interview with Wael, researcher at the Identity Center, Amman, 3 April 2017
23. Author's interview with Youssef, researcher at WANA institute, Amman, 4 May 2017
24. Author's interview with Ahmad Awad, director of the Phoenix Center for Economic and Informatics Studies, Amman, 28 May 2017

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25. Author's interview with Tasneem, employee of the Arab Network for Human Rights Education, Amman, 28 March 2017
26. Author's interview with Layla, Arab Women's Organization, Amman, 3 April 2017
27. Author's interview with Suha, employee of iDare, Amman, 4 April 2017
28. Author's interview with Saddam, founder of iLearn, Amman, 13 April 2017
29. Author's interview with Wadi Musa Ladies Association, Amman, 16 April 2017
30. Author's interview with Mohammed, founder of Blue Umbrella, Amman, 7 May 2017
31. Author's interview with with Leaders of Tomorrow, Amman, 16 May 2017