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**Political activism and the Palestinian cause  
in the Jordanian Higher Education System:  
an ethnographic account**

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by  
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## **Political activism and the Palestinian cause in the Jordanian Higher Education System: an ethnographic account**

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It is difficult to overestimate the importance education – and higher education in particular – has in the Jordanian society nowadays, as a national debate, a primary concern of the monarchy, a pillar of the nation state, and an effective means of raising Jordan's visibility in the region. I will not enter into the debate here, since I have already done so elsewhere. However higher education in Jordan is really one of the more harshly debated issues in public discourse, frequently addressed by the king or by the government, and a question of primary concern for both its importance on a regional level and from a strategic point of view.

Jordan is a small country, conceived since its foundation under the British mandate in the early '20s as a buffer state in the midst of many bigger neighbours – Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and of course Israel/Palestine. Beside this, since the very beginning of the emirate of Transjordan, as it was known until the war of '67, there was a bit of confusion about its borders, as Mary Wilson demonstrates in her book on the 'making' of Jordan (Wilson, 1987). Needless to say, the confusion primarily involved Palestine, i.e. whether it was supposed to be a state of its own or rather, as it had been the case until the defeat in the six days war (1967), the West bank of an Eastern one

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which was the Emirate itself<sup>1</sup>. The history of modern nationalism and the process of nation building in the *Mashreq* is not the topic of this paper, nor do I claim to have the necessary competences for such a task. Yet to comprehend the intimate link between Palestine and Jordan, which reflects heavily on almost all the aspects of the public life in the kingdom, and on higher education in particular, it is necessary to provide a brief historical introduction on the history of higher education in Jordan, and how it is intertwined with the history of the region and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in particular. In this paper I will try to address some of the questions pertaining to the Palestinian presence in the Jordanian university system without getting too much into the details of this rather dense and complex relationship. Instead I will focus exclusively on the university system, relying on the data that I collected during my fieldwork in Amman. Here I shall make clear that, although my main field is ‘ageing’ (I was in Amman between 2003 and 2005), the data that I present here still retains its validity, as I was able to confirm on various return trips, the last of which in January-February 2012. In fact, it could be argued that the situation has developed according to the trends that I am describing here.

I will start by briefly introducing some of the main aspects that denote the relevance of the Jordanian university system, and its political importance, relying on what I have already published on the subject (Cantini 2007, 2012) and to which I refer the reader willing to get more information of the ways in which this system works. I will then focus on the situation of Palestinians in Jordanian universities, before embarking on a discussion of how the university enhances the disciplining of the student population,

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<sup>1</sup> To be more precise, the moment when the late king Hussein in 1988 publicly declared the fact that Palestine was not to be considered part of Jordan, when he announced the rupture of the relations (*fakk al-irtibat*) with what is still known today as the “West Bank” (while Gaza has always been under Egyptian influence, also in these last years with the withdrawal of Israel from the strip and the security subsequently partly assigned to Egyptian forces). Yet, until now, the king of Jordan claims to be the protector of the holy sites in Jerusalem – those that concern Muslims, of course – and especially the Dome of the Rock, which is still reproduced in the Jordanian note of 20 dinars. But things are not quite so simple, for example, in the West Bank it is still possible to withdraw cash from ATM machines in Jordanian dinars, in addition to Israeli shekels.

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especially where demonstrations and political activities are concerned. I will then conclude by portraying the life story of one of the students I met while in the field, to show the concrete implications of the discussions that I develop in this paper on the concrete lives of students.

### The university in Jordan

The university of Jordan, which I focused in my study, is the oldest institution of this kind in the country. It was established in 1962, in what at the time constituted an area outside the capital Amman, and initially had only one faculty, literature, 167 students (18 of which were female) and 8 professors. In the academic year 2011/2012 there were ca. 32,000 (two-thirds of which were women) more than a thousand professors, 18 faculties and 83 departments. As with most countries in the MENA region, over the past few decades institutions of higher education have experienced a real boom, impressive both in quantity, in internationalisation and in the liberalization of the funding – which is all the more surprising given the fact that most Arab countries are kept under a tight political control<sup>2</sup>.

Demographic pressures associated with a disproportionately young population, coupled with the response of the private sector in accommodating the rising number of eligible students by creating private higher education institutions, culminated in the dramatic increase in the number of universities in Jordan. Today there are 10 public and 16 private universities in Jordan offering a variety of four-year degree programs. At the same time, the urgency of developing a vibrant higher education sector, compounded by Jordan's lack of natural resources and its subsequent reliance on human capital to remain competitive, led Jordan's leadership to pay significant attention on the sector and push for concrete strategies to support and expand its performance. One of the main strategies in this process has been the

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<sup>2</sup> Romani (2009), among others, analyses this process, which is indeed one of the most interesting issues in recent years throughout the region. For more information on the University of Jordan, see Cantini (2012).

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internationalisation of higher education, which has been accomplished in a number of different ways (Massadeh 2010). Private universities have seen a rapid increase in enrolments as well. From 2000 to 2006, enrolment at 12 private universities grew by about 18 percent annually from 36,642 to 55,744. However, enrolment numbers at community colleges declined from 30,000 to 26,215. This decrease in enrolment rates reflects both a bias toward institutions offering 4-year programs and decrease in demand within the labour market of a knowledge based economy for the quality and level of training community colleges provide. With the increase in the number of students attempting to obtain higher education, the government needs to allocate greater resources to improving the current higher education system as well as improve access to good universities for the rising population.

In 1962, the year in which the first university – as already mentioned – was founded, we should remember that the West Bank was still under Jordanian control, and that Jerusalem was the true cultural capital of the country, rather than Amman. The decision to establish a university in Amman (at that time actually on its outskirts) was thus primarily a political one, to set up the eastern bank as the centre of the country. The importance of the prestige associated with this was not simply confined to the relationship with those living in the western bank, the Palestinians. On the contrary, in those years pan-Arabism still retained its importance on a regional scale, and threats (or perceived threats) from the expansionist policies of Nasser's Egypt were among the main worries of the new king (king Hussein had come to power in 1953). Baghdad and Damascus, other than Cairo and Beirut, were the places Jordanians (and Palestinians) went to in order to receive higher educated, (other than western countries for the more affluent). Thus, since its very inception, the University of Jordan has been one of the distinctive signs of the new king's desire to "stand up on his own", to use an expression employed by Asher Susser<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Susser (2000) has focused on what he calls "the Hashemite success story", that is the Hashemite, the kings of Jordan, successful struggles to maintain their power. Indeed, Jordan is the only place in the Mashreq that has not changed its constitution in the last (almost) ninety years.

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## Palestinians in the Jordanian university system

One of the major consequences of the underdevelopment<sup>4</sup> of Transjordan and Jordanians at the time of the creation of the University of Jordan was the overrepresentation of Palestinians, at least in the initial years of the institution. As Yitzhak Reiter shows, this was also the case in the early years of the Emirate of Transjordan, where quite possibly due to British pressure as well as the different level of the two sides of the population, Palestinians were well represented in all the state institutions. During the '60s, about 95% of the academic staff of the University of Jordan was of Palestinian origin (Reiter 2002: 139). This percentage should not come as a surprise: at that time, according to estimates, the population of Amman was around 70-80% Palestinians, who were living in greater numbers than the Jordanians in the urban areas. This came to a sudden end with the bloody events in 1970 of what is usually referred to as "black September", in which there was practically a civil war between Palestinian fighters flown from the occupied territories – occupied by Israel just three years before – and the Jordanian army. Since almost everything in the country – and not only in Jordan – is controlled by the security apparatus (*mukhabarat*), from then on the Palestinians' status in all sectors of public life (including academia) without exception<sup>5</sup>, has decreased. Even if nowadays Palestinians are considered more or less the same as Jordanians, and actually they might even be the majority of

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<sup>4</sup> I have to make clear that I am not using the term "underdevelopment" as a judgment. With this I only mean that the population was still scarce, and that teachers were not to be easily found among the Jordanians. By Jordanians here (and hence) I mean those born in the eastern bank of the river Jordan, and especially those of tribal descent. By Palestinians I am referring to, of course, those born in the western bank of the river, and those born in Jordan from Palestinian parents. Palestinians from Gaza and from what had become Israel are of course excluded from the Palestinians which I am concerned of in this paper. See Brand 1999 for further details on this distinction.

<sup>5</sup> As Reiter points out, quoting Laurie Brand, "the appointment of professors is also contingent upon receiving clearance from internal security, and dismissal is also used as a political weapon against faculty" (2002: 140).

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the population in Jordan – estimates put them between 52-55% of the total population, but almost 80% in Amman<sup>6</sup> – their percentage in the public sector is always less than their presence in the society at large. Reiter acknowledges that in the mid-‘90s Jordanians have reached roughly the same levels of Palestinians as faculty staff in public universities – from 95% in the ‘60s, to roughly 50.5% Palestinians and 49.5% Jordanians (in the academic year 95/96).

Even more interesting than the mere figures Reiter presents on the number of Palestinians in higher education, however, are his findings regarding the variety of factors influencing the presence of Palestinians in the Jordanian universities. Starting with the political events of ‘black September’, and the subsequent decline in the importance of Palestinians, there are at least two other important factors to consider: the boom of universities all over the country and, above all, the inception in the early ‘90s of private universities. The first factor is quite telling, since, as already mentioned, Palestinians are in the majority in Amman and other major cities (mainly Irbid and Zarqa). However, Palestinians are underrepresented in the other provinces of the country, especially in the South. Thus, having universities in places in which Palestinians are underrepresented means that in these universities the percentage of Jordanian staff is likely to be much higher than in Amman<sup>7</sup>. For instance, at the Mu’ta

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<sup>6</sup> These figures are to be considered as before the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Since then, the number of Iraqi refugees in Amman and in Jordan in general has had a strong impact on the Jordanian population. Estimates again speak of at least half a million Iraqis, in a country that has less than 6 million inhabitants. Some think that the presence of Iraqis is somehow encouraged by the government in order to ease the Palestinian influence on demography – other than for economical purposes, with the revenues of Iraqis that constituted one of the major incomes in the last years in Jordan. A research in 2007 pointed out to the fact that there are almost 750.000 Iraqis in the Kingdom ([www.forcedmigration.org](http://www.forcedmigration.org)), although this figure might now be decreasing. In the last year there has been an expectable increase in the number of Syrian refugees, although figures are not still clear also because many of them have family ties especially in north Jordan.

<sup>7</sup> Especially if universities are asked for local councils that understand them as being a major tool for offering jobs to local graduates, as seems to be increasingly the case especially in the underdeveloped south, with Ma’an and Tafileh as the more recent examples quoted – both at the end of the ‘90s.

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University (established in 1981 mainly as a military institution), in the southern city of al-Kerak, Jordanian instructors represent 84% in the humanities and 66% in the natural sciences<sup>8</sup>.

The other important factor in this regard is the mushrooming of private universities since the early '90s. As Reiter acknowledges, the private university boom is linked to the return of some 300,000 Jordanian nationals from the Gulf due to the first Iraqi war. They were mainly of Palestinian descent, many possessing university degrees and had gone to the Gulf to teach or to perform high skill jobs. Because of their high level of education, it was assumed that they would find a similar form of work at home – however the jobs were not there, due to the bad economic situation in Jordan. Thus the mushrooming of private universities has to be situated in this context, where the need of finding work for those who came back from the Gulf met the rising demand for more higher education, given the booming youth population and the increasing incapacity of the public universities to face this rise in demand. The rationale behind government's decision to allow the birth of private universities, as Badr notes, is to be found in the thought that "if young people want to study despite the fact that the labour market could not absorb them, then they should do so at their own expense and not at the one of the government" (1994: 93, quoted in Reiter 2002: 143). While much more could be said about this, the main point to take away here is that the percentage of staff of Palestinian origin in private universities is quite high – around 70% – and this might have something to do with the fact that 11 out of 13 private universities (in 2002) are owned by Palestinian entrepreneurs, and hence Palestinian teachers do not encounter discrimination at these institutions.

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<sup>8</sup> The gap between Jordanians and Palestinians in the humanities is lower than the one in the natural sciences in almost all universities of the kingdom. The reason is to be looked for in the tendency among Palestinians to rely on studies that might enable a private profession, since public service is almost precluded to them, and thus natural sciences are more favourably looked upon by Palestinians.



## Violence and discipline

I will now focus on a quite different topic, which I feel is intimately linked with the discussions already addressed in this paper concerning the issue of discipline and violence. I tried to mention the ways in which discipline and political control are somehow embodied within the university itself, being at the core of the functioning system privileging some and controlling the rest. I would like now to take into consideration several examples involving how the calmness of the University of Jordan campus was broken, albeit in an “institutionalised” way. Student elections are an important part of university life, and Jordan is no exception in this regard. Thus, I will start by analysing the elections of 2004, which I witnessed in person. Another important feature of campus life are the demonstrations, especially demonstrations with political aims, and I will describe a couple of them and the reactions they provoked. I will conclude my analysis of the university setting in Jordan by describing the life story of a female student I met, whose vicissitudes seem to me quite relevant to the point I’ve been trying to make.

As I have already mentioned, the University of Jordan is one of the more prominent in the country, and its prestige directly associated with that of the state – this being the case, everything is kept under tight control. Student elections are no exception. The student council is made of 80 members (half of them nominated by the academic senate, the other half elected) and one head. The head is also nominated, and this means that the majority of the council is always favourable to the decisions made by the academic senate, which in turns is quite eager to follow political directives from above. Needless to say, students are well aware of this system – which partially reflects the political system at large – and consequently are not particularly motivated to go and express their own views at the ballot box. Moreover, and this again reflects the more general political system, the only organized group inside the university, the

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Muslim Brotherhood<sup>9</sup>, was prevented from presenting its candidates many times. In 2004 more than half of the candidates linked to it were declared by the academic senate unfit to run for elections.

That notwithstanding, on the day of the elections the campus, which is normally quiet, is animated and there are many groups of young people gathering in the gardens and alleys, playing drums and singing. As I was told, due to the above mentioned restrictions almost all the candidates run on a tribal or a regional basis, and the groups are made up of the members of clans or their clients and associated neighbours. When the results are announced, fights burst all over the campus between the winners and the losers. These fights are quite violent, as groups are armed with clubs and occasionally guns (used to shoot in the air) and they throw stones at each other. More interesting to me was the contrast with the usual absolute prohibition of violence on campus – guards are everywhere and at even the slightest sign of a potential fight they intervene and take those involved in custody. Moreover, students not actually involved were attending the fights; as if they were assisting or playing a supporting role in a ritualized show. While the guards are nowhere to be seen, they are nonetheless present inside the buildings to make sure that the violence does not propagate outside what seems to be a well-defined boundary. From time to time, they pick up some of the more excited fighters, but they limit themselves to this without attempting to stop the fights, which actually continue for several days after the election before concluding with different forms of reconciliation.

The resurgence of tribes in Jordanian public life is nothing new given that tribes have been at the core of the Jordanian state – including the military, judiciary system and even business sector – from the very beginning. I argue that tribes are increasingly becoming the only viable path for expressing forms of anger and dissent – a claim made all the more plausible given that all political parties have been irrelevant for quite

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<sup>9</sup> Jordan was since the beginning of 2011 the only country in the Middle East in which such a movement is legal, albeit fiercely opposed by the state; see Moaddel 2002

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some time and even the MB seems to be less and less relevant in this regard<sup>10</sup>. The MB is commonly perceived to be collaborating with the state power, which the MB recognizes in turn for having some benefits at the social level. This neo-tribalization is heavily encouraged by the state, because it conveys dissent in paths that are easily controlled, and because it allows the regime to present itself as a factor of modernization in an otherwise too-rooted-in-its-“traditions”-to-change country. This latter point has also been made in other studies on Jordan, and is (to an extent) demonstrated by a quotation from a book of a member of the royal family (Ghazi Bin Mohammed 1999), in which this phenomenon is presented as something which will not change and which the state is trying to modernize.

It's merely a resurgence of the ancient animosity between the ahl al-madar and the ahl al-wabar (the “clay-dwellers” and the “animal-hair dwellers”); between the sedentary and the nomadic; [...] it is also a tension sadly more real than outsiders probably imagine, and persists to this day underneath the surface of society, rearing its ugly head every now and then in the most unexpected places. For example, the last three years (1997-1999) have seen “mob fights” at the University of Jordan – fortunately none too serious – between students from the ‘Abadi Tribe and the old Settled Clans of Salt. Moreover, in May 1999, three days of fighting erupted, at the same university, between hundreds of Beni Hamidah and Beni Sakhr students, and this because of a single (albeit public) slur by a Beni Sakhr student about the Beni Hamidah! Needless to say – and having personally been involved in the solution of the problem – what finally defused the situation was the traditional “cup of coffee of reconciliation” between the elders of both Tribes, rather than the pressure brought to bear on the two Tribes by the University and civil authorities!.

Being able to silence all other forms of dissent, and, at the same time, not appearing to be directly responsible for what is happening, all the while appearing to be working hard to change this situation, is one of the main reason behind both the good reputation the Jordanian regime enjoys in the western world and its stability (see Schwedler 2010 for a political analysis of the implications of this game). Whether tribal violence erupts independently of state interventions or not, it is evident that it leaves

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<sup>10</sup> These notes should be handled with care, though, for the political situation in Jordan is rather unstable since the outbreaks of protests in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria among other countries, especially given the new relevance that different branches of the MB are acquiring in most of these states.

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little or no room for other forms of dissent and for this reason is at least tolerated by university authorities. However, as we will now see, the attitude of authorities regarding political demonstrations inside the campus is quite different!

In Jordan more than half of the population is of Palestinian origin. The exact figure is the subject of intense debate: underestimated by the state which wants to stress the Jordanian character of the state and overestimated by Palestinians who want to make clear that they are the ones who make things happen and keep things going. It seems safer to put this figure somewhere between 60-75% of the population, and almost the same proportion is to be found among students. For this reason I expected huge protest demonstrations in favour of the Palestinian *intifada* and against the military operations of the Israel army directed at destroying Hamas – especially the day after the killing of the sheikh Yassin in 2004, the spiritual head of the Hamas movement, or when there were mass killings of Palestinians including many children as a consequence of military operations (as occurred many times in 2004). Similar demonstrations were spreading all over the Arab world, at least as it was portrayed by satellite channels such as *Al-Jazeera*, so I assumed that the same was about to happen in Amman. Jordan has been under martial law since the early '50s, and for this reason almost all political demonstrations in the capital city are kept to a minimum – there are no rights for demonstrators, and police can be brutal. But access to the campus is officially interdicted to police and army, and since students are a potentially subversive category, I went to the university expecting to see some action there. Jordan is the second Arab country – and least for the time being – to have signed a peace treaty with Israel, after Egypt. The king is usually seen as a good ally of US and Israeli interests. However many Palestinians say that Jordan is not a free country, and that Israelis and Americans are treated better than Palestinians (Jordan is nevertheless the only Arab country which granted citizenship to Palestinian refugees, even though refugee camps continue to exist till this day). Thus demonstrations against Israeli actions or US interests immediately become demonstrations against the status quo, and as such are treated by the state and all the security apparatuses.

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The day after sheikh Yassin was killed – an act which seemed particularly outrageous to Muslims and Palestinians, since he was considered more a spiritual leader or religious symbol, was quite old, and in a wheelchair (although Israel did hold him responsible for some terrorist operations) – the demonstration inside the campus was limited to some 200 hundred students, about half of which were veiled women, surrounded by many university guards and almost 50 members of the notorious *mukhabarat*. The secret police were highly visible, wearing suits and sunglasses in typical Hollywood fashion, and thus represented an immediately recognizable marker making it clear that the approved demonstration was going to take place without violence. The sharp contrast to the violence on the occasion of the students' elections is easily visible, and even the students themselves understood the discrepancy, which I will try to make clear in the conclusion. During the many demonstrations I had the chance to witness, there was almost always a speech delivered by a student – usually one belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood and coming from the faculty of *shari'a* (Islamic law) or from Engineering. After the speech the students marched toward the main campus gate, which was closed for the occasion and guarded from the outside by riot police, yet I never witnessed a direct clash. Instead it was more a staged action for the cameras of the state television, which the evening news inevitably headlined as a violent student demonstration.

## Conclusion

I have thusfar tried to show how the higher education system works in Jordan, to highlight its relevance for the nation and for the stability of the regime. By way of a conclusion I will present the life story of a female student I met while doing my fieldwork, whose perspective enabled me to have an insider perspective on many of the issues I discussed in this paper.

Zeinat<sup>11</sup> studied literature (the most prestigious faculty in the humanities) whose condition I consider to be representative of the chaos and disorientation many

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<sup>11</sup> Needless to say, the name has been changed for reasons of privacy and personal security.

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Jordanian young people experience nowadays. Dressed in a western fashion, smoking in public (which is considered inappropriate for a girl by most strata of the conservative Jordanian society) and always sitting with her mostly male friends, she immediately poses some challenges to many of the taken-for-granted public norms. Furthermore, she drives a car – which is again considered something pertaining to masculinity – and she has a strong interest in political activism, which derives from her personal story. Her father has been a fighter for the Palestinian cause since the late '70s, and this has led him and his family to emigrate from one Arab country to the next in order to escape repression – which he nevertheless experienced in the form of torture as well as other kinds of humiliation – until he finally settled down for a while in Jordan, where Zeinat grew up. Zeinat inherited from her father both a deep sense of awareness for the injustices her people have had to suffer and the willingness to act. However she soon discovered that the University of Jordan was not the place to organize demonstrations. During her first year as a student at the university, she saw many of her friends thrown in jail for having tried to organize some form of political activism on campus, and the hard lesson was soon learnt. She is still an activist, but rather in quiet a personal way. For instance, she translated into Arabic a book from an Israeli historian that questioned some mainstream (in Israel) assumptions about the birth of Israel, something that no MB member would have even thought to do and something which nonetheless is against Jordanian law. Her engagement is becoming more and more personal and always less organized at a group level.

Zeinat told me that, since any form of political engagement is strongly opposed by the regime, and this is widely understood by all the students, all those who might have some political interests keep silent and do not take part in any of the activities I described above (elections and demonstrations). There is a kind of tacit assumption between the university authorities and the more conscious students that the current situation is not likely to change in the near future, and that the regime is not going to accept any form of criticism of its policies – internal, economical, with foreign countries, and so forth. What is offered to these more aware and normally privileged students are some personal freedoms concerning dress codes, sexual behavior and a limited freedom of gathering in places where the social norms are less strict and where they

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can enjoy some freedom of speech. Yet the current balance is not enough, and the burden of knowing all too well how the system works is often too hard to put up with – and migration is an easy way out for well-educated young people, familiar with several languages and who are open-minded.

This is not only limited to the Palestinian cause, of course, and actually many people involved in the university system claim that the major rift is not the Palestinian/Jordanian one, but rather that of belonging to the “right” circles which more easily lead to good careers -- something I experienced on many occasions. As far as this paper is concerned, however, it seems quite clear that being engaged in political activities related to the Palestinian cause can quickly lead to problems with the Jordanian authorities, all the while that very system is somehow pointing out the general direction concerning “appropriate” forms and modes of expressing dissent, which occurs within a neo-tribal context, reinvented or re-empowered as it is. The university system is, then, to be seen as an integral part of the regime’s survival strategy; a strategy and process that most students are quite aware of.

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