Episode Transcript

Episode Title:
Rituals of Protest

Guest:
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Jon Alterman:
Jillian Schwedler is a professor of political science at the City University of New York’s Hunter College. She’s about to publish a book called *Protesting in Jordan: Geography of Power and Descent*. She’s also a non-resident fellow at the Brandeis Crown Center for Middle East Studies. Jillian, welcome to Babel.

Jillian Schwedler:

Thank you, Jon. I’m happy to be here.

Jon Alterman:

You’ve been studying political protests in Jordan for more than a decade. How are Jordanian protests different from the protests in other countries you’ve worked on like Yemen and Iraq?

Jillian Schwedler:

The biggest difference is that a lot of the protesters come from the regime’s supposedly loyal support base, and they speak of the social contract that was established with the first King Abdullah in 1921. That arrangement led them to support the new regime in exchange for jobs and other kinds of development projects in their areas. Jordan had a major period of protest during the uprisings, but the significant difference was there wasn’t agreement about changing the regime. A large part of the protests really want more regime. They want more jobs. They don’t want the Hashemite regime to fall. They want the Hashemite regime to honor what they see as a social contract. That’s a very different dynamic than you see in other parts of the region.

In Jordan, you have a population that is in some ways split between East Bank Jordanians—that is descendants of the Bedouin tribes that were there when the Hashemites came up from the Hijaz—and people of Palestinian origin who came from the West Bank or other parts of Palestine in 1948, or subsequently. Do Palestinians and East Bank Jordanians protest in different ways?

Jillian Schwedler:

When a significant difference happens, it happens on occasions when East Bankers are protesting for more jobs or against corruption in the outlying governorates. For example, in Amman you see East Bankers and Palestinians protesting together around common issues. Whether it’s about Israel-Palestine, or jobs, or against corruption, you’ll find them mixed together. Those protests are very orderly and peaceful. There is very rarely any property damage. The people that organize them are largely activists, members of political parties across the political spectrum, or members of professional associations. They’re very careful, and they don’t plan damage to property. They’re very careful to be respectful.

In the outlying governorates when they’re making demands on the regime—demanding more jobs and the end of corruption—they very often go back to a repertoire that dates to the nineteenth century. They will block roads, set things on fire, damage government property, burn down government buildings, and go after government vehicles. That’s a repertoire that doesn’t exist in the capital for the most part. The value-added of my book going back so far is that you see these consistent repertoires. They did similar kinds of things. They weren’t calling for an end to Ottoman rule. They simply thought that they were being taxed too much or that the Ottomans had overstepped their boundary.

In one instance, Ottomans were asking local women to carry water to them, and the men rioted in rebellion because they thought this was unacceptable. They would write up a petition and send it to Damascus or Istanbul demanding that something change. If you look at those patterns, you see those are the very patterns that still exist in those areas. In fact, they talk about a lot of these rebellions that go back. They talk about rebellions under the Ottomans—the Kura rebellion, the Shoubak
Rebellion—as well as ones that happened after the Hashemites arrived in the 1920s. They have this repertoire.

Jon Alterman:
In response to these protests, the government can try to co-op the protestors. It can try to coerce the protestors. How does the government decide between those options, and have the choices changed over time?

Jillian Schwedler:
Typically there’s a combination of responses. There are efforts to divide the people that are protesting the organizations. If it's the Herak organizations in the South—or if it’s a particular movement—they’ll often try to co-opt a number of individuals or appeal to other powerful tribal leaders to call for calm and divide them.

The government is also responsive. Jordanians believe—and I think they’re right—that the most effective way to bring about reform is through protests because protests actually bring responses. They’ve won jobs through protests. There was an instance in which a village was protesting the lack of water, and the king himself went out there to visit and to promise them that tankers of water were on the way. They said, "We don't want that. We want piped water." They actually got piped water to their village in the next few months.

So protests are actually fairly effective, but the regime response, then, is to try to co-opt some individuals. They’ll offer prominent organizers, government positions or arrest certain activists who are seen as too unruly or who crossed the boundary and criticized the regime or the king directly. They’ll provide some financial response, whether it's offering jobs, cash payments to local notables, or moving a development project from one area into another area.

Protests in the East Bank areas really do bring results. Again, many of the big protests in Amman are issue-based—about canceling the peace treaty or anti-austerity measures.

Jon Alterman:
How has the rise of social media affected protest movements in Jordan? Are there more leaderless protests that are largely spontaneously led by disaffected people, or are most protests still led by organized groups with clear grievances and clear goals?

Jillian Schwedler:
I think you can divide the protests into three clusters. You have the Herak, or East Bank protests, that are largely locals organizing around a particular issue—for jobs, or water, or what have you. Those basically emerge from the community and are not necessarily organized by a pre-existing group.

Activists, political parties, and professional associations will call for protests like the cancel the gas deal protest. Then you have the sort of massive spontaneous protest, which is what we’re seeing now in Jordan. Those typically are around Israel-Palestine. There were similar protests around the Iraq war. These are about external conflicts, and they erupt in solidarity.

The only massive spontaneous protest that you find that are about domestic issues in Jordan are the anti-austerity protests—protests in opposition to the lifting of subsidies. We saw this in 1989. Those protests in Jordan are called the Hibit Naysan—because it was the month of April, Naysan. Jordanians remember that as a massive uprising that effectively led King Hussein to liberalize the country, so from that moment they realized that change could be realized in part through massive protest. We saw these again—at a lesser scale—in 1996. We also saw similar protests at the tail end of the uprising period in November 2012 with the Hibit Tishrin protests, which were against the lifting of electricity prices. We saw this in 2018 with the massive nationwide protests that were initially against revisions to the tax law but then also extended to broad opposition to austerity
and neoliberalism. Protest chants will be against the world bank and the IMF directly. They’ll say, "Who’s ruling our country? The IMF is ruling our country." You have those kinds of sectors.

Just to summarize: there are the East Bank isolated, localized protests; protests nationwide organized by activists around specific issues; and then periodic massive outbursts that bring everybody to the street—either about foreign wars and conflict or about anti-austerity measures.

People do a lot of creative things. Petitioning still remains significant and has remained significant. They circulate manifestos and black papers criticizing the regime, and those get a lot of attention. Social media is important—especially since 2009 when Twitter and Facebook became available in Arabic, and this coincided, of course, with the spread of smartphones.

Prior to that, they did use cell phone short message service to coordinate during protests, but it really changed with the combination of social media and smartphones. You could not just coordinate, but you could upload images and everybody could record everything. It’s just a treasure trove, and one of the most remarkable features of the uprising period across the region—not that these were Twitter or Facebook revolution—was precisely that information could be shared widely and external media could be accessed easily. People were following things on Al Jazeera, for example. The protest space became a different kind of space because it included virtual space.

Now, of course, these are also resources for governments because they can monitor people, intercept plans, and track networks of activists and who’s doing what. Jordan like many countries introduced and then amended a cybercrimes law, which extends the provisions of several other laws. It is illegal to criticize the king, to criticize the royal family, to do anything that could destabilize or threatened relations with a friendly country—which means you can’t criticize Israel and you can’t criticize the United States. You can’t post something that could create national anxiety.

These are so broad that basically anything falls under them, so people post things on social media that they get arrested for. They post themselves speaking out against the king at protests, and then they get arrested for that. Last August, we saw the arrest of the famous Jordanian cartoonist, Emad Hajjaj, because he posted on his website a cartoon that mocked the Abraham Accords. He was arrested, detained, and charged with terrorism for posting that cartoon. He’s a high-profile enough figure that there was an international campaign. The government was embarrassed. He was released. He’s still being charged and prosecuted, but they’ve dropped the terrorism charge. If you’re prominently connected—from a prominent tribe—and you post something, you’ll still get arrested and harassed, but there’ll be an outcry and you’re very likely to get released. You might still get charged, but you’re likely to get released. People that aren’t so well connected don’t have that advantage.

There’s an environmental anti-nuclear activist named Basel Burgan, who has been arrested. He was in detention for several weeks two years ago. They’re basically pressuring people to stop doing business with his drug store, and this pressure has been continuing for several years. What is his offense? He posted on Facebook a report by a former Jordanian nuclear engineer that suggested there was a leak in a Jordanian nuclear plant, and he wrote, "If this is true, this is a catastrophe." He discovers very quickly that it's not true. It's about a test, so it didn't actually happen. He withdrew it immediately and said, "Thank God that this didn't happen." He's arrested for posting something that created national anxiety, and he's being prosecuted under the cybercrimes law for that. That rumor had been widely in circulation already. They were simply looking for a reason to arrest him. He’s from a very small Christian tribe. He’s not from a prominent family, so there he sits.
Jon Alterman:
How do Jordanians think about political change, given what they see going on elsewhere in the Middle East? Have what they've seen elsewhere in the Middle East taken the bloom off the prospect of political change?

Jillian Schwedler:
Particularly coming out of the uprising period that's exactly what happened. After those massive anti-austerity protests in November 2012—which were put down violently—a lot of the activists were divided on whether to call for protests again and whether to try to get people back into the street, precisely because some of the other countries were descending into violent conflict and that didn't look so exciting.

In 2012, leftist and progressive activists, in particular, were very nervous about the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power in Egypt. A third factor that really split the opposition was the Syrian conflict. A lot of people had admired the Syrian government for its anti-imperial stance and its strong anti-Israeli stance. They had no rose-tinted glasses about its atrocities, but they admired that portion of it. As Syria descended into civil war, there was a conundrum because you see this regime doing monstrous things. It's looking less and less like a civil war of people versus regime than a proxy war. A lot of leftists were divided over it. Some activists moved to Damascus and stayed there. It ended friendships. It ended some movements, and it really put a dampening on protests of the level that called for reform. That has mostly disappeared. You had several years of relative calm with not a lot of discussions of protest.

Since 2017 and 2018, there's been much more appetite for returning to the streets. There were the massive anti-austerity protests in 2018. There was a protest later in 2019, which was East Bankers coming and protesting in the capital. This was actually an innovation as well. Most of the East Bank protests prior to the uprisings were in their local areas, and with the uprisings, you saw activists, increasingly interconnected— getting to know each other and traveling to the capital. Then, through 2019, you saw these protests, “March for Work.” They would come from as far as Aqaba. One, in particular, made a big splash. They marched from Aqaba and picked up unemployed along the way, and they all walked to the capitol to protest. It was quite an event, and people gave them shelter and blankets along the way and cheered them on. They won jobs this way.

That only increased this as a protest tactic. It was a new innovation, like "Let's walk to the capitol. Instead of demanding jobs and complaining in our home towns, let's go to the capital directly." Typically there'll be a lot of protests to parliament in downtown Amman at the Husseini Mosque because that used to be the center of government offices. Outside of the downtown area, you see protests either at embassies, at parliament, or at the fourth circle interchange, which houses the office of the prime minister. These protesters—these marchers—were going to the royal court downtown, so they're not making demands on the government. They're making demands on the regime—on the royal family—and telling them, "You need to provide for us." There’s constant talk about the social contract being violated. There are protestors saying, “Let's keep the Hashemite regime, but would Prince Hamzah be better at honoring the social contract that we feel King Abdullah is not honoring?"

Jon Alterman:
I haven't seen a lot of reports of Covid-related protests, although Jordan had some very strict quarantine-like restrictions last spring. The restrictions were lifted, and the infection rate went very high. Was it surprising to you that Jordan wasn't convulsed by protests over that issue or did it seem to fit a pattern?

Jillian Schwedler:
Jordan did have a very severe lockdown that was lifted after a couple of weeks. You could leave a few hours a day, and it was fairly
effective. Protests did re-emerge pretty quickly, but not in the same forms they had taken place in before. On one street, there is a massive medium that’s supposed to be for rapid transit, Cars can’t drive down and it’s not completed, so it's basically empty. The Muslim Brotherhood organized a protest there against the Trump administration’s deal with Israel. They lined up in the medium, social-distanced apart, and it had the visual effect that people driving for miles could see these protestors lined up on that long road. Against the Abraham Accords, people did take to the street.

There were only a few Covid-related protests. The most significant ones were when several patients died in a hospital in Salt because of a lack of oxygen. People broke out nationwide and protested against that. People were protesting the anniversary of the “March 24th Youth,” which was a small encampment of a few hundred youth protestors that tried to create an ongoing sit-in, like Tahrir, calling for reform—making it very clear that it was no challenging the king. That was violently dispersed after one day.

March 24, 2021 was the tenth anniversary of that protest, and there were protests in commemoration of that. There were a lot of arrests around that protest, including arrests for violating social distancing and not wearing masks.

**Jon Alterman:**
You've spent a lot of time looking very deeply into protests in Jordan. What are the more universal conclusions you’ve drawn about protests throughout the region, based on your deep understanding of the protest movement in Jordan?

**Jillian Schwedler:**
Well, I'm hoping that my book has some insights that travel globally about protests. The level of state repression is often contingent on who is protesting and what they’re protesting about. What my book shows, also, is where people are protesting. There are protests in certain areas, like around the Kalouti Mosque for the anti-normalization with Israel protests. Anytime there's a campaign like there is now, people will pour out there. These protests have their own kind of routine. You show up here, and the police line up there. You don't actually try to march on the Israeli embassy. You symbolically try to march on the Israeli embassy because if you were really trying to march on the Israeli embassy, you wouldn't assemble exactly where the government expects you to assemble. You would do something different.

There are these certain routines, and as long as you adhere to what the police expect you to do, you can be pretty sure they're going to use relative restraint. The crowds try to push the boundary sometimes, so there are tensions and clashes. Protests downtown by the Grand Husseini Mosque have a routine. You assemble at the Grand Husseini Mosque. You give some speeches. You march to the municipal center in Ras Al-Ain, give some speeches there, and then you go home.

The things the government will not allow are encampments. There used to be people who put up tents periodically. Now putting up tents is a very hostile act, and you have these almost comedic struggles over tearing down tents, and putting them back up, and tearing down tents and putting them back up. If you take those insights—that certain spaces have their own repertoires for protests that might be less aggressively policed as long as the activists honor the red lines of that space—those are the kinds of practices that you could investigate in other places. Are there places where it’s okay to protest, but if you deviate from that, you’re going to get met with violent repression?

A lot of that tends to map on neighborhoods. Wealthier neighborhoods have different means of being policed than in poorer neighborhoods. In a lot of poorer neighborhoods, you can protest all you want. You might meet repression, but as long as you don't leave that area you can just have at it. However if you decide you want to march to Wall Street or
someplace symbolically important—or a major upscale neighborhood—they really try to prevent you from ever assembling in the first place. I think those kinds of insights can travel to other places globally, not just in the Middle East.

Jon Alterman:
It sounds like you're talking about a very elaborate ritual of protest, where each side understands the anticipated actions of the other. As long as each side understands what the boundaries are for it, the other side respects it, and this becomes an ongoing part of the political process. There is symbolism involved, and there is a response involved.

Jillian Schwedler:
I agree. This is why Jordanians see protests as one of the ways to enact change. There is a side to it that's interesting. When there are massive protests, the government will ask for the resignation of the prime minister, appoint a new one, and call for national dialogue to investigate the situation. That happens so frequently that people scoff at it. They say, "Okay, great. There's a new prime minister, a national dialogue, but nothing's going to change. The legislation is going to go through anyways." But, they'll return to the street because the streets do bring responses on many issues.

Jon Alterman:
Jillian Schwedler, thank you for joining us on Babel.

Jillian Schwedler:
Thank you so much, Jon. My pleasure.