

FIELD REPORT FROM JORDAN

Adapted from the broadcast audio segment; use the audio player to listen to the story in its entirety.

Over the millennia, waves of empires have washed over the seven hills of Amman. These hills are now densely packed with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, rural Jordanians and Iraqis who have swarmed to the city over the last half-century. Amman is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the Middle East. With the backdrop of history and tradition, this hillside is witnessing something decidedly 21st century.

Friday prayers are long over. The sun is setting on the sprawling city of two million and a sextet of young Jordanians is rocking a stage set among a grove of small pines.

Young men in Led Zeppelin and Pink Floyd t-shirts and young women in headscarves are dancing to rock-n-roll with the Temple of Hercules looming in the distance.

In this cauldron of modernity and history – of east and west, young Jordanians are often struggling to figure out just who they are and where they fit in.

Despite the spread of western cultures and values, there are still strong social and religious traditions in Jordan that even the most liberal youth have to navigate.

It's a world many youths are struggling to understand and reconcile. Some adopt a global and, some might call, a rejectionist sense of identity. But they are an extreme found most often in the affluent and educated section of west Oman.

Rula is a 27-year-old who works for a software company. She explains how she views her identity.

"I would say, of course, being Muslim. This is what's all getting me to the right role. Then my family is what I was raised on, and then being a Jordanian, part of this country. I became more religious – more attached to my religion. Maybe because it's true. Maybe what's mentioned in Koran. Me becoming more mature. I started being... as a Muslim, yes, I started to realize this."

For her, the hierarchy is religion, family, then nationality.

"I want to have fun but I know that won't affect my religion and won't affect my beliefs. I still believe that I should get back and pray to God and ask him for forgiveness for attending this concert."

Muin Khoury is a pollster and research analyst with the Royal Hashemite Court in Jordan. He focuses on social pressures on youth and their values and identity.

"In the past, during my generation, we were probably Arab first, then Jordanian, then whatever religion you belonged to. Today, it's religion and then your tribe and then the state as an identity. I don't know if the sense of pride is also failing there. You tend to go to subcultures like religion where it's safe. Religion never fails you. It's the word of God so it's not a controversial sphere."

In the older, poorer and more conservative east Amman, there is greater unemployment, greater frustration and greater numbers who are identifying on a religious level. East Amman is far more representative of Jordan as a whole. In the west of the city, there is a mix of women with and without headscarves. In east Amman, all of the women are wearing headscarves.

Roughly, a third of the six million people in Jordan are of Palestinian origin, which is a significant identity factor in the country. Their emphasis on religious identity mirrors data from a comprehensive Gallup survey of Arab youth. According to that poll, 90% say religion is an important part of daily life. But equally striking as the focus on religion was the omission of ethnicity as they describe their identities.

Dr. Musa Shteiwi is a Professor of Sociology at the University of Jordan as well as the Director of the Jordan Center for Social Research. He has done extensive research in polling on youth issues, including identity.

"The Arab countries are hardly acting together or hardly able to propose or promote an Arab identity to things, whether it's a Palestinian question or the Iraqi question or any regional question. I think it sort of lets you know the decline of Arab nationalism in the region is consistent with the polling."

In his polling research, Dr. Shteivi has also seen a sizable growth in religious identity. He is quick to point out a seeming contradiction. While religious identity has grown, support of the Islamic Action Front, the Islamist political party in Jordan, has declined.

Dr. Mohammed al Masri is a Political Scientist at the Center for Strategic Studies in Jordan. He's seen a change to a more conservative society.

"The Islamic movement managed to change the cultural and the social behavior of Jordanian society and push it from a more open society to a very conservative society. The number of women with headscarves in Jordan nowadays is surely more than what it used to be in the mid-seventies. The religious symbols and explanation of everything is more religious than it used to be 30 years ago."

Radicalization has not become a significant problem in Jordan, but growing economic hardship and unemployment, the lack of outlets for young people to express themselves and vent their frustrations combined with ever present extremists looking for recruits in the region creates a fear that radicalization could become a real problem. Identity patterns are clearly changing. Along with the growth of religious identity is tribal identity.

Naseem Tarawnah is a 27-year-old Jordanian who is one of the editors and founders of 7iber.com, a youth-focused website designed to promote citizen expression and activism. He says there is a closer attachment within tribes.

"Why do people vote for tribes and don't vote for political parties is because tribes number in the thousands and they can actually protect you. They can actually offer you some sense of service where you can go to someone that is related to you and say, 'You know what, I voted for you as a member of parliament. You owe me a job.' That kind of sense where you can't pander the same way to a political party that has no connection to you."

The increase in tribalism has also brought an increase in violence. Riots and tribal clashes have become more common on university campuses. It's a sign of the growing frustration and the lack of positive outlets for Jordanian youth.

Jordanian youth and youth across the Arab world are facing daunting challenges. For the moment, many are just trying to stay optimistic and find relief wherever they can.

– *Reported by Sean Carberry for America Abroad*

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