Does Your Security Represent You?: Informal Institutional Ethnic Divides in the Jordanian Military
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In 1920 the British Foreign Office organized populations they labeled as “Bedouin warrior-types” into the “Arab Legion” anti-Ottoman militia. Jordan’s Hashemite Arab Army developed from this Western tool, which predated the Jordanian state by 27 years. The military went on to attempt several coups, fight in internal and regional wars, and strongly shape the concept of “Jordanian-ness.” Today, 100 years after the “Great Arab Revolt,” post-colonial ethnic groupings continue to shape the demography of the mainly “Transjordanian” (or “East Bank”) Jordanian security services. This over-representation affects the state’s relationship with the majority population of Palestinian-Jordanians who took refuge in Jordan in 1948 and 1967. Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin are isolated from state welfare systems; they are themselves dominant in the Jordanian private sector and respectively benefit from private-sector welfare.

The most recent literature evaluating Jordanian civil-military relations was written soon after Jordan’s “Black September” civil conflict between the Jordanian state and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), directed by a number of “West Bank” Palestinians and other refugees. These books reflect the military’s demography after many of its Palestinian members were purged, post-conflict, from the forces, or deserted during the conflict. These authors often consider misrepresentative demography as a natural outcome of the war.
Over the course of 5 months in the field, I have interviewed a range of Jordanian veterans and academics to understand the demographic shifts in the Jordanian military over the last forty years. This research questions the role military demography has played as a factor in, and an outcome of, state-society relations.

I have found that Jordan’s non-representative security services negotiate regularly with the Jordanian government on the behalf of the dominant East-Banker minority. As a beneficiary of increasing international military aid, Jordan has created a dialogue around military participation that legitimates ethnic and tribal divides. This discourse guarantees continued Western aid to Jordan’s military as a purportedly equal and stable institution but masks the role of the security services as political actors. Jordan’s non-democratic, non-representative regime has been performing symbolic democratization for an international audience since the country’s political opening in 1989. The interaction of this performative reform, economic liberalization, and lingering on-the-ground conceptions of misrepresentation in state institutions holds significant lessons for transitioning regimes and civil-military relations across the world.