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ISME Conference 2016

Helmets and Hijabs: Gender Roles in the Jordanian Armed Forces

Women are an integral and growing part of the Jordanian military and police forces, yet I was unaware that there were any women at all in the Jordanian military and police despite having lived there for an entire semester. By interviewing Jordanian women in a variety of uniformed roles, I have begun to explore the lives of female soldiers and their experiences within Jordanian society. Not only is this a significant field for women in general, it is also becoming more relevant in the wider Arab world and specifically in Jordan as security forces of all types seek to integrate women into their ranks.

This paper explores the following question: how does having women in their military affect Jordan as a society and as a country, and how does it affect these Jordanian women and gender roles in Jordan? Through the interviews and research I conducted this summer, this paper explores gender roles and how gender influences women in the Jordanian military and societal perceptions of women. I argue that women are in the Jordanian military because their participation is seen as a way for Jordan to be a more “modern” country and because there is a growing necessity for them within the realm of national security. Women’s participation in the Jordanian military allows for a disruption of what is seen as typical gender roles according to my interviewees, and also in their view encourages the advancement of greater Jordanian society towards a progressive, modern state with distinct but equal involvement from both genders.

A parliamentary monarchy, Jordan is seen as “one of the most open and tolerant societies in the Arab World”.¹ It is a majority Sunni Muslim country with few natural resources and, in recent years, an abundance of refugees from the surrounding region.² While an article of its constitution declares that citizens are equal in all respects, there are still cultural and social expectations that vary for men and women.³ As every country does, Jordan has a gender binary that affects the way women and men dress and interact both in private and in public.

While the gender binary influences Jordanian women in a number of ways, the women that I interviewed who currently serve or have served in the military all had varied experiences with the gendered expectations placed upon them depending on their family, location, and socioeconomic status. While it is apparently becoming more necessary for women to work according to my interviewees, there is still a dearth of employed women. Of women eligible to work in Jordan, 22% participate in the labor force versus 87% of men.⁴ 37% of the other 78% of women are “inactive” or not seeking work, while 41% are unemployed.⁵ Due to these statistics and other factors that influence Jordanian women, it should be clear that my interviewees are a small section of society whose experiences are specific to them and the conflagration of factors that affects their lives.

In Jordan, the military is an institution that is consistently seen as nationalistic and quintessentially Jordanian. The entire Jordanian Armed Forces is made up of about 100,000 active duty personnel and 65,000 reservists. The army is the largest of the

¹ Terrill, W. Andrew, *Global Security Watch: Jordan*, 23.

² *Ibid.*, 24.

³ Massad, Joseph A., *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan*, 53.

⁴ “Women in Jordan – Limited Economic Participation and Continued Inequality.”

⁵ “Education in Jordan.”

branches, including 88,000 personnel.⁶ The main mission of the JAF (Jordanian Armed Forces) is to defend Jordan; they neither have the desire nor the resources for a large-scale operation.⁷ Jordan is also an active UN member who routinely sends contingents to participate in UN peacekeeping missions all over the world, and is designated by the United States as a major non-NATO ally.⁸ According to the Directorate of Women's Military Affairs, women make up 4.09% of all personnel in the Jordanian Armed Forces, which is approximately 3,500 women. About 60% of all women (or about 2,100) in the JAF are found within the Royal Medical Services where there is a higher concentration of women than in the rest of the military.

In the following pages, I discuss my interviews and the stories that these women told. The interviews were conducted entirely in Arabic, but all of my notes were taken in English. As such, everything not in quotes in this paper is my paraphrasing of the interviews. There was no randomization of selection for my interviewees, since I interviewed those to whom I was connected or introduced. As such, almost all of my 18 interviews are with officers and do not represent a random sample of all positions or perspectives for women in the Jordanian military. Additionally, any names used in this paper are pseudonyms in order to maintain privacy for my interviewees.

For many of my interviewees, the fact that they were women who served in the military was not something that they saw as creating tension. On the contrary, they saw their choice to join the military as one that advanced their career or as a product of their sense of nationalism and not their gender. One interviewee, Lana, spoke about how in high school she hadn't even known that women were in the military until she did a report

⁶ Terrill, W. Andrew, *Global Security Watch: Jordan*, 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

on the police and walked into their office only to see several women in uniform. She was very struck by them; she said that they were “kind and beautiful and seemed very good at their work.” After graduating from college she was planning to do a master’s degree but was delayed by a semester. While exploring what she should do in the meantime, her mom saw an ad in the paper for female police officers and pointed it out to Lana who promptly signed up. She would come to love it despite the abrupt start. For others it was a more distinct choice; one of my interviewees, Maya, remarked that she had always had a dream of going to Sandhurst (a British officer training center) and becoming an officer, so she enlisted as a corporal after she finished at university. Another common reason for joining was that some of my interviewees had family, especially their father, who had served.

One of my interviewees, Selwa, who is from a very small rural village, described herself as Bedouin and said that it was “in her blood;” she felt a strong love of country and an affinity for the military. She talked about knowing that the army would give her responsibility and allow her to develop her skills in both the medical realm and with regards to her leadership ability, something she did not think she would find in the civilian sector. Another interviewee, Inez, spoke about the very tension that so many people assume exists when I asked her about her decision to join. She explained that she had wanted to be in the army for a long time and that her father had been in the air force. She has four sisters in the army and one in the police, and she loves her country very much and wanted to serve it. However, she added, she still loves what is deemed as typical womanly things like perfume and makeup and such, and that does not detract at all from the knowledge that she would do anything for her country. She seemed very

intent on making it clear that whatever tension existed for women in the military, she did not feel that it prevented her from behaving and embracing her identity as a woman.

While most of my interviewees were enthusiastic about their jobs and were glad to talk to me about them, Inez was particularly bent on telling me all about how wonderful she had it as a woman serving in the Jordanian military. She spoke at length about the wonderful opportunities she obtained through her job, and she brought up things like the technology in her hospital and how it compared to the rest of the world. When I asked her whether she felt there were particular challenges to being a woman in the JAF, she emphasized that of course there are issues in any industry but that they mostly came from being “misunderstood and never lasted for very long before they were resolved”. She described that she was under no false assumptions about being in the military, despite the fact that she loved it: “You’re serving in the army and you aren’t totally free, you’re only 80% free because the army gives freedom and preserves dignity and pays well but is still demanding.”

One thing Inez mentioned that nearly every other interviewee also brought up was the concept of spending time with family and the competing demands from both their job in the military and their role as a wife and mother (or sister, etc.). Apparently balancing mothering and being a good wife with fulfilling duties as an officer was not an easy task. Both family and the military as institutions in Jordan are something that Mady Segal deems “greedy institutions”: they make “great demands of individuals in terms of commitments, loyalty, time and energy.”⁹ That is to say, women are expected to put their role as mother among their top priorities – it is one of the reasons that employment in the health and education sectors are so popular for women, because they allow more time at

⁹ Segal, “The Military And the Family As Greedy Institutions,” 9.

home to take care of the children and other housework. But simultaneously, the military also demands copious amounts of time and dedication from its members, particularly its officers since they assume responsibility in many of their positions.

These demands manifest themselves in a variety of ways, not all of them pertaining to time. Lana worked for most of her career in the Family Protection Department (FPD), which deals with familial abuses to children or women within the home. She said that she loved the work that she did and knew it was incredibly important but also said that it was very hard because of the nature of the issues. She described a situation when a 3-year-old girl was brought in: she had been thrown from the third floor by her mother and her leg and arm were broken, plus her ear was ripped and there was blood all over her. She talked about how dealing with those sorts of things on a regular basis led to emotional fatigue at times, but that she appreciated how important her work was. Along with the emotional burden, there were times during which she had to be on call and sometimes attend to issues at inopportune times such as in the middle of the night. But despite the “greediness” of the military as an institution, Lana was very proud of the work she had done and the department in which she had participated.

Many Jordanian women must also deal with the fact that there is an imbalance of expectations between the man and the woman with regards to duties at home. The majority of Jordanians assume that household duties are the responsibility of the woman and that the man’s responsibility is to work outside of the home and earn a living. The issue that comes with this assumption is that now in many families, both the mother and father are working either due to economic pressures or due to the fact that the woman wants to work. “Increasingly, Jordanians talk about the need for two-income families.

Yet...an understanding of women's work outside of the home as valuable or beneficial is not shared by all."¹⁰ Especially through the lens of the "greedy institutions", it is easy to see why an imbalance in expectations might further complicate the tensions that Jordanian women feel between their work and home lives.

Regarding this balance of responsibilities, Selwa, who is a colonel that has served for 27 years, stated that she kept her life organized so she never had a problem balancing the requirements of family and work. She thinks that the new generation is less organized and therefore they have more trouble balancing life, children, sleep, etc. But others did not echo this sentiment; in fact Fatima, another (younger) officer, mentioned that she felt the hours were long and required sacrifices but that the work was worth it. She was a social worker for several years and is now a manager of the social workers in a particular section of the hospital. For her the work with other people was a significantly important portion of what she valued in her work; not only was she serving her country but she also gets to see firsthand how she is able to help other Jordanian citizens. Another officer mentioned that as women in the military, they face more challenges than civilian women do in terms of housework and familial responsibilities. She mentioned how many women have flexibility in their workplace where they could leave or stay home if a child is sick or needs assistance. On the contrary, she pointed out that for military women this is not an option since they have responsibilities and duties that cannot be pushed off. She underlined that in general this issue of balance is the same for women across many career fields but is more heightened for those serving in the military.

¹⁰ Droeber, Julia, *Dreaming of Change: Young Middle-Class Women and Social Transformation in Jordan*, 139.

While there were challenges that surfaced in my conversations, many women also mentioned significant benefits that they appreciated about their job in the military. One such perk is the fact that the military makes clothing much simpler for women. All clothing for the military is acceptable under Sharia law, my interviewees recounted, and now that the hijab is allowed with the uniform (about twenty years ago it was not acceptable to veil while in uniform), they find it much easier than in normal life. While some of the older interviewees remarked that the new generation needs a better sense of decency in not wearing too much makeup or nail polish with their uniforms, the younger officers mostly just expressed their appreciation for the system. Even the women who did not veil mentioned that a big win on behalf of women by the Directorate of Women's Military Affairs was the overturn of the rule that kept women from wearing the hijab in uniform. It was seen not only as an improvement for those within the military, but also as a boost to recruitment processes since more women would be willing to join if they didn't need to unveil.

It was in 1995 that this institution, the Directorate of Women's Military Affairs, was established by Major General Aisha Bint Al Hussein, daughter of the late King Hussein. It was founded to assist with the integration and functionality of women as participants in Jordanian national defense with a specific eye to the military. At the directorate they focus on recruitment, training, and human resources. It was in 1997 that a decision to extend maternity leave was put in place; it was the work of the directorate that made that happen. There were also a number of regulations revolving around military housing that favored men, but around the year 2000 the Directorate was able to get those regulations overturned. The Directorate also functions as a central agency for any

complaints or incidents in which a woman who feels that she has been discriminated against. By consolidating the issues, the Directorate aims to enact policies that are efficient and allow women to flourish within the Jordanian Armed Forces.

There are many more narratives from my interviewees that are significant, but it is also important to note some facts about the military and its female participants. While it is seen as a historically masculine institution, the military still managed to attract all of these women for a variety of reasons. Clearly, their perception of the institution was not that of a solely masculine, gendered place where they would not fit in. Perhaps it is as my interviewee told me, a mark of the changing times, but it could also be a reflection of the military shifting its policies and making itself more attractive to the wider Jordanian population, including women. It is apparently widely known that the military is a fantastic job to have, with benefits that affect not just you but also your family after you. According to one of my interviewees in the medical field, there were 3,000 women who applied for just 700 spots when she was entering the military. It was no small accomplishment to obtain one of the spots, and she said that her family and friends were just as excited as she was when she succeeded in obtaining a slot.

The same can be said for the police – there are currently over 3,500 women serving in a variety of roles within the Jordanian police. The equivalent of the Directorate for Women’s Military Affairs in the police is the Women’s Police Administration, founded in 1987 to assist all females in the police. Under its jurisdiction are two main components: the women’s prison and a training center for female police officers. According to my interviewees, the prison is not just a place for criminals but is also a rehabilitation center. In fact according to an interviewee, it was renamed in 2004 to be

called the Recuperation Center so that people place more emphasis on the women as having a chance to make something for themselves after leaving and so they don't return again for a different crime, as many people who go to prison end up doing. The prison teaches classes and offers options for women to develop life skills that they can use upon their release. One remark from the head of this women's police administration was that Jordanian society wants to see even more changes for women and loves being at the front of all other Middle Eastern countries regarding women's role in the military.

While it is a mere slice of the whole population of women in Jordan, it is clear that the narrative woven by my interviewees is one that challenges some of the norms that are embedded into Jordanian society. These women are clever, hard working, dedicated, and focused, and they believe that their presence in the military is bringing Jordanian society closer to a progressive, modern state with distinct but equal involvement from both genders. They are normal people, but they are also extraordinary in their unique choice of career and lifestyle. They joined the Jordanian military by their own choice but they are also, perhaps unknowingly, part of a larger initiative by Jordan as it strives to be what they deem a "modern" country. They are also proud to be part of a force that integrates women since there is a growing necessity for them within the realm of national security, especially as the threat of global terrorism rises.

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