

“Food and power: The cultural reproduction of global capitalism in Jordan’s charitable food sector”

Abstract

In this paper, I analyse the political dimension of food in the Arab region by showing how the management of food insecurity is integral to the reproduction of power in Jordan. The reproduction of a market-based system of ‘food security’ occurs through the mechanisms of civil society and serves to support globally dominant food system relations and actors. In Jordan, support for these relations is actively anchored within the social fabric through the mediation of charitable organisations. These organizations in turn, are supported by public donations that are often religiously motivated. In this way, the mitigation of food insecurity through country-wide food aid is made possible through the financial contributions from the population at large, which ensures that, as per neoliberal ideological doctrine, the state does not formally intervene in public welfare even though behind the scenes it promotes and facilitates this set-up. The paper highlights how the Jordanian organization Tkiyet Umm Ali, which outwardly is part of the civil society sector, in effect reproduces the social, political and economic relations of the group that is currently occupying the state. That is, the Hashemite elite. In doing so I highlight the relevance of Gramsci’s concept of the integral state. The aim of my paper is to show how power is reproduced in the domain of food and to show how culturally significant practices such as religiously motivated donations are pivotal in the reproduction of not only the domestic elite, but also circuits of global capital. These findings reiterate the importance of state actors and situated cultural practices in reproducing global food system relations even though they do acknowledge the role of Jordanian food business actors that operate across borders.

Introduction – Context & Background

On a warm Saturday in July I joined a group of volunteers handing out food aid packages in Amman, the capital of Jordan. The trip took us to some of the poorest areas just outside Amman and to the old UN refugee camps in the inner-city which have turned into permanent boroughs. In spite of the organisation's ground rules on respecting people's dignity, many of the volunteers - who were mostly urban professionals and well-off university students like myself - took pictures with their mobile phones as they were not normally exposed to such levels of poverty. In one hamlet, where we had arrived unannounced, we were encouraged to enter a small building with bare walls, containing a very basic kitchen consisting of a stove in a corner and lots of mattresses on the floor in other parts of the house. All of this so we could see for ourselves what poverty was like. A TV crew, shooting a promotional video for the NGO filmed the entire encounter. (Excerpt Research Diary, 29 March 2014)

This was an excerpt of my research diary when I undertook field work in Jordan. The NGO in question is called *Tkiyet Um Ali*, which means the hospice of the mother of Ali (umm ali), the current King's late mother. King Abdullah is a descendant of the Hashemites, a clan originally hailing from South Arabia, but whom were installed in Amman by the British colonial administration after the Arab revolt of 1921. *Tkiyet Um Ali* (whom I will hereafter refer to as TUA) is a charitable organisation, founded in 2003. In the decade preceding its foundation, Jordan had been plagued by poverty and food riots. First in 1989, following a fiscal crisis of the state. Then in 1996 and 2001, following the imposition of IMF regulations and most recently in 2012, following protests connected to the Arab uprisings that took place in most countries in the region. Since then, the management of food insecurity became a key priority for the government and *Tkiyet Um Ali* as organisation grew explosively in terms of the size and scope of its activities.

TUA delivers food aid packages and provides warm meals for needy families in Amman. In context of the ongoing refugee crisis in the region, a lack of economic growth and increased pressure on food prices the number of people receiving food aid from TUA has steadily grown. In 2016, it delivered food packages to around 18,000 families and warm meals to about 400 people every day in downtown Amman ([Jordan Times](#), 16 June 2016).

TUA prides itself on being what its management calls a ‘neutral’ organisation; it provides food aid to anyone and does not have political aspirations (Interview 18 March 2014). It particularly distinguishes itself from the charitable activities of the Muslim Brotherhood, as was made clear in an interview:

In order to finance its activities, TUA invites donations from the general public. It widely advertises its food aid targets – such as reaching the target of helping 20,000 families a day, or 18,300 families a month – and actively communicates its message throughout the city and on TV. It also takes its volunteers and donors on tours, to raise awareness of food insecurity in Jordan and foster commitment to helping TUA tackle the issue. TUA’s website facilitates online donations and runs various campaigns to raise funds.

The fundraising appeal is particularly intense during the lead-up to Ramadan, the annual fasting month for Muslims. Generally, charity and alms giving have an important place in Islam. Each Muslim is expected to donate 2.5% of their income to charity. Donations made during Ramadan have additional spiritual significance because the aim of Ramadan is to pause at and connect with the fate of those who are suffering, through the act of fasting. Because of this, it is common for people to donate food for the daily *iftar* – the breaking of the fast – during Ramadan. In spite of the organisation’s ‘neutrality’, it does mobilise the teachings of Islam in its fundraising appeal.

This slide for example, shows a donation leaflet of TUA, allowing you to sponsor a family, which directly refers to religious teachings.

TUA’s director of communications explains the references to Islamic teachings as follows: ‘We are not being supported by the government. Nor by any foreign or international donors; we are completely dependent on domestic donations.’¹ Accordingly, the emphasis on Islamic values is viewed as ‘a marketing tool that appeals to a segment of our audience. It features in how we target them but it doesn’t reflect in any way on how we distribute the packages or

¹ TUA director of procurement and supply chains, interview with the author, Amman, 12 March 2014.

the meals. The donations of the people are just given to people according to their need' (TUA management, interview 12 March 2014).

In addition to income from fundraising, Tkiyet Um Ali (TUA) also depends on corporate donations and relies on its sponsors the Arab Bank, The Jordan Commercial Bank, American Express, KPMG, Coca Cola, PepsiCo and many others (TUA website). The Arab Bank, Tkiyet Um Ali's corporate partner has enabled electronic giving, facilitating direct donations to TUA for its customers through Internet and telephone banking and the use of credit cards, which 'allow card holders to donate small amounts of their purchases' to the four non-profit organizations registered in Arab Bank's programme.² In this way, the process of donation is made highly accessible for Arab Bank customers. On the other hand, the Government of Jordan incentivizes companies to donate by providing a favourable taxation structure: donations can be deducted from tax (TUA management, interview 18 March 2014).

'In the Jordanian law for income tax, there are some exemptions for the people who give donations. So big companies or wealthy people might benefit from this when they donate something. [...] The country's government is giving some incentives for people to donate. Once they give out, they will get the tax exemption. For the big companies, it can make a difference' (TUA management, interview with author 18 March 2014).

Slightly distinct from donations, TUA is also sponsored by large global corporations – such as the Coca Cola group, PepsiCo, KMPG – and international food retailing groups such as the Nuql and the Fakhreldin group which support its activities through donations. However, TUA also supports established food companies through its procurement policies. Each year, it reviews the content of its packages and issues food tenders in order to meet its needs. Whilst nutritional value is a prime criterion in what is included in the food packages, costs are of concern too. In this way, large international food groups have an advantage in terms of securing tenders. The lamb meat of the *Udhiya* sacrifice, for example, is sourced in Australia and shipped back to Jordan by large fleet-owning livestock importers. This means that the meat in the food aid packages, comes from sheep reared in Australia, where sheep production

² Arab Bank, 'For the Fourth Consecutive Year, Arab Bank and Tkiyet Um Ali Continue their Cooperation through Various Initiatives during Ramadan', Arab Bank Newsroom, 22 July 2013.

is large-scale and low-cost. Here, it is ritually slaughtered prior to being shipped back to Jordan. In Jordan, TUA relies on the services of EasyLog, a state-of-the art third party logistics provider, a company with a registered capital of 1 million JOD (Al Layan Group website) and which counts the official distributor of McDonalds as its clients (GNFS, see Al Layan website) Through its procurement strategy, TUA thus supports some of the country's most important players.

Is TUA and NGO?

Although TUA management describes itself as a non-governmental organisation that is politically neutral (see above), this self-assertion may be questioned for various reasons. As I have already shown, TUA relies on a number of corporate sponsors and thus reproduces a particular set of economic relations through its activities and procurement policies. In addition, as a result of its Royal patronage, TUA can best be described as royal NGO or RONGO (Brand 2001). As Laurie Brand has argued, organisations that are closely affiliated with the monarchy enjoy a special status in Jordan.

'Royal leadership does not only fulfil a patronage role, it also includes hands-on management and the Royal NGOs (RONGOs) are not subject to the Law of Charitable and Voluntary Societies (1966) as other NGOs are. As such, they cannot be interfered with by the state in the same way as other NGOs in Jordan' (Brand 2001: 581).

Finally, in recent years TUA has begun to receive large amounts of government funding thereby fully collapsing its purported non-governmental status.³

So What? Why should any of this matter?

In sum, Tkiyet Um Ali is a large semi-governmental NGO that distributes large amounts of food aid and relies on the general public in financing its activities, so what? Many of you will be familiar with critiques of liberal conceptions of civil society, which means that TUA's semi-

³ On 20 August 2017, the *Jordan Times* announced that Jordan's ministry of planning will finance TUA's activities with a sum of 525,000 dinar (JOD) in 2017, which is 95,000 dinar higher than the support received in 2016 (430,000). These sums, which have for the first time been published openly, really cause the term NGO to collapse in spite of the organisation's self-image.

governmental status will not surprise you. The organisation furthermore provides much needed relief in a poor country in the Middle East. What is the issue?

In this paper, I argue that TUAs role in the Jordanian food economy has special significance firstly, because the provision of food aid is an ineffective way to address hunger and food insecurity in the long-term. Secondly, because it reproduces a specific constellation of class relations and in doing so, it reproduces the very food insecurity it tries to combat. This, in turn, provokes normative questions regarding social justice and accountability that we need to pay attention to.

I will now deepen this argument by presenting three Gramscian concepts that help us understand the relations of power that pervade Jordanian charitable food provisioning sector.

Enter Gramsci: the integral state and the historical bloc - Analysis and Argument

In order to flesh out my argument how food charities reproduce food insecurity, I will draw upon Gramsci's notions of the integral state, the historical bloc and hegemony.

Contra liberal conceptions of civil society as a check on government, Gramsci argues that there is no real distinction between civil society and the state, and, that ruling classes need to occupy both civil society and the state in order to successfully reproduce its own project. Civil society is thus seen as an arena where the interests of the ruling political group are anchored, as opposed to contested.

The point is thus that civil society's norms and values reinforce the material relations of the ruling group's class project, which it also seeks to advance through the institutions of the state. This agreement between on the one hand material forces – such as for example economic relations – and on the other, norms, ideas and institutions is what Gramsci refers to as a historical bloc. Hegemony, as a technology of rule and dynamic of power that is based upon the forces of coercion and consent, exists within this context.

I argue that Tkiyet Um Ali as an organisation reinforces the hegemony of the Hashemite royal family, which is its patron. Through the delivery of food aid, TUA provides relief to the poorest segments of society, which – in context of a stagnating economy – have little

opportunity. In doing so, the organisation takes the sharp edge of the extreme poverty that forced people onto the streets in 1989, 1996, 2001 and once again in 2012. The activities of TUA place the royal family in a positive light, because through it, it becomes the face of much needed relief. At the same time, and in true neoliberal fashion, the donations of the public which are raised during Ramadan and throughout the year, ensure that public spending on food subsidies and other support remains low on the account of the government. This is important, because it are precisely expenses such as food subsidies that are heavily criticised by international financial institutions (IFIs) which have bailed Jordan out in the past. In this way, the activities of TUA have become of crucial strategic importance.

In addition, the food aid construct relies on culturally specific practices such as religious donations. In expanding this model to an institutionalised and professional scale TUA contributes to the cultivation and communication of new norms in Islamic giving. The IT savvy and widely advertised campaigns of Tkiyet Um Ali provide Islamic charitable giving with a new face. Where in the past the dignity of beneficiaries was paramount to Islamic giving, Tkiyet Umm Ali's need for large volumes of donations has prompted highly visible PR campaigns which put pressure on the imperative to place beneficiaries' dignity first. Furthermore, TUA's campaigns – and the notion of food charity in general - has become integrated within the fabric of society through the spread of online donation portals, cash booths and other means of giving. It could be argued that these simple, transactional forms of donating contribute to a normalisation of hunger and food insecurity while also placing responsibility for countering hunger in Jordan upon the shoulders of dutiful Muslims, shifting attention away from the responsibility of the state towards its citizens.

In the process, the country's existing economic relations – which favour a small business elite with close links to the royal family – are supported. In doing so, dominant actors within the neoliberal food regime are supported in their operations. As such, providing for marginalised populations *within* Jordan has become closely embedded within the operations that support the country's economic and political elite. As Peter Thomas has clearly argued (Thomas 2015), the misfortune of marginalised groups is not their exclusion. It is precisely their *inclusion within* a specific set of social and political arrangements that produce their very marginality, which is to be deplored. In this paper, I have aimed to show that the culturally situated

practices of Tkiyet Um Ali contribute to the reproduction of a political and economic elite that has failed to address the root causes of food insecurity in Jordan. Moreover, as this economic elite upon whose support the Hashemite regime depends is enlisted in the management of Jordanian food insecurity, it can be argued that the existence of food insecurity in this way actually benefits these economic and political actors. This recognition would go a long way in explaining the continuation of food insecurity and hunger in spite of the countless pledges to end it once and for all.

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