



Unwilling participation: The political entanglements of ethnographic research

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on my research about Jordanian politics and interactions with the country's intelligence services, this article reflects on instances where the ethnographer becomes less of an observer and more of a participant in the political landscape under study. Specifically, I aim to highlight how moments when a researcher does not just observe but rather gets involved in a political system, often against his or her will, can put features of that system into sharper relief. In such situations, difficulties and mistrust should not be seen merely as obstacles. Rather, they compel the researcher to sort out similar problems as our informants sort out and to learn about the most effective way to do so. Relations of trust might be the best way to get access to a field, but thornier relations reveal more about its inner dynamics.

Keywords: Intelligence services, research assistants, participant observation, public anthropology, Jordan

Introduction

I had not really reflected on the possibilities – and risks – of being a participant, not just an observer, of Jordanian politics until an interviewee asked me to send my research findings to the royal court, the centre of the country's political power. At the time, I was conducting research in Maan, a desert town and provincial capital in south Jordan, which had been relatively isolated from the rest of the country until a university was established there two decades ago, which brought students and academics from all over Jordan. Other institutions, most importantly the military, had also long gathered Jordanians from all over the country, but universities have now overtaken the army as the most important nation-building institution, and – as Jordanians with experience in both civil and military life insist – they build a nation in a vastly different way. What this interviewee, a former president of the university, suggested I submit to the royal court was not that type of information, suitable for academic publications. It was rather a type of information that would be highly inappropriate to make public but surely more politically relevant than anything else I had written about Jordan.

In this article, I want to reflect on these and other situations where one becomes less of an observer and more of a participant in the political landscape one is studying. More precisely, I want to highlight how situations when a researcher does not just observe but rather gets involved in a political system, often against one's will, can put features of that

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system into sharper relief.

Several anthropologists have emphasised the value of a more politically committed and morally engaged form of anthropology, for example as a precondition to gain access to the daily lives of political activists (Razsa 2015), or as a means to deepen our understanding of a community by participating in its social life more fully (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 411). More broadly, the idea is that anthropology should be more actively involved in addressing public issues and engaging with the world – to the benefit of both the societies in which we work and of the discipline itself (Low and Merry 2010; Kirsch 2018).¹

The type of political involvement I am interested in in this essay is not that kind of voluntary commitment but rather the kind of involvement into which one is inadvertently drawn. It is characterised by an often frustrating lack of control that involves obstacles, or potential obstacles, to conducting research. These obstacles might include mistrust that the fieldworker needs to deal with, to gain access to the field, or political ambitions of a research assistant that make it more difficult to conduct interviews together. This type of involvement does not conform to the fieldwork ideal of achieving ‘good rapport’. Instead, it is marked by difficulties, misunderstandings, and mistrust, which appear as problems precisely in contrast to the ideal of more harmonious relationships. But even though such problems can threaten the fieldworker’s access to places and interviewees, they also offer insights into the inner dynamics of a political field.

The benefits and risks of such political involvement have been extensively analysed by anthropologists working in settings of war or polarised conflict (e.g., Finnström 2008: 19; Nash 1976). In such contexts, it is difficult to be accepted as an impartial observer; fieldworkers are often identified as either friend or enemy and are easily drawn into the dynamics of the conflicts they study. This can include exposure to physical danger or even direct violence (Mahmood 2008).

In contrast, my reflections are based on fieldwork in Jordan, known as the most stable country in the Levante, and thus from political involvements that lack direct danger and that attract less attention. I focus on three such involvements: becoming a springboard for the political ambitions of a research assistant, writing of non-public reports (like the one I was asked to produce in the vignette), and interactions with the intelligence services.

The significant role of research assistants in ethnographic research has long been a focus of methodological reflection. Seminal works have pointed out that ideal research assistants or key informants often occupy a somewhat marginal position within their societies (Rabinow 1977; Turner 1970). As outsiders, they have an awareness of what for most people is just the “seen but unnoticed backgrounds of their everyday affairs.”² In Victor Turner’s famous

¹ Another way to describe the surge of interest in so-called engaged anthropology is to focus on the fading away of a competing idea: The notion that there is an inherent conflict between objectivity and ethical commitment. The belief in this contradiction is still very alive in disciplines such as political science but has largely lost value in anthropology. Commitment is seldom, at least not in itself, seen as a threat to the scientific status of a work, and the question more often becomes in which way commitment can benefit research, or what the institutional obstacles are to an anthropology that is more engaged in public issues.

² This is one reason scholars have taken transgenderism as a privileged vantage point for studying how sex and gender are enacted in everyday life (Kulick 1998: 10). In his classic study of transvestites, Harold Garfinkel argues that they “have as resources their remarkable awareness and (un)common sense knowledge of the organisation and operation of social structures that were for those that are able to take their sexual status for granted routinised, ‘seen but unnoticed’ backgrounds of their everyday affairs” (1967: 118).

discussion of one such outsider, Muchona, whose reflections on Ndembu's religious and social world were pivotal to Turner's attempts to understand it, Turner emphasises Muchona's distance from political struggle: "Living as he had done on the margins of many structured groups and not being a member of any particular group, his loyalties could not be narrowly partisan, and his sympathies were broader than most of his fellow tribesmen" (Turner 1970: 134). In this line of thought, reflexivity goes hand in hand with political detachment.

As mentioned earlier, anthropologists working in conflict zones have noted that such distance is impossible. Fieldworkers often have to collaborate with individuals who are directly involved in the violent events they seek to understand (Hoffman and Tarawalley 2014). Such collaborations are a condition for gaining access, placing the anthropologist in a position where he or she must understand the field through someone who is a political player in it, with all the difficulties that entails.

Instead, I want to make a point about collaborations with political actors that also applies outside of conflict zones. If ethnographers are 'using' research assistants, the reverse is also true: they use us, and when the assistant is a political actor, the way he or she uses the ethnographer reveals something about the political field he or she is part of.

Another form of political involvement I discuss – writing for a restricted audience – has received less analytical attention. One reason for that is that the ethical status of such writing has been deeply questioned. "Make Your Results Accessible," is one of the principles in the American Anthropologist Association's statement on ethics. A major concern has been the use of anthropological research by military or intelligence agencies, for example during Project Camelot in 1964, a Pentagon program for developing counterinsurgency strategies, and more recently during the American occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan (Gonzales 2008; Price 2011). The involvement of anthropologists in intelligence gathering was a central concern behind the American Anthropologist Association's first statement on ethics (adopted in 1971) and led to a clear condemnation of the publication of any secret reports (Price 2016: 29-31).³ Beside the ethical concerns, there was a fear that such practices would harm the international reputation of the discipline, making it harder for ethnographers to gain the trust of the communities they study.

Nevertheless, outside of academia, there are of course many genres of professional writing where the texts are not made public. "During the late 1970s and early 1980s, as more anthropologists found employment in applied settings outside of universities, increasing numbers of anthropologists were uncomfortable with [the ethic code's] restrictions on such activities as writing 'secret' reports" (Price 2016: 31). Academics interested in writing policy briefings, white papers or expert opinions for political organisations must accept that such writing sometimes cannot be distributed beyond a limited group. Secrecy might actually grant a certain freedom to that type of writing: an organisation that requests a written product are usually more open to challenging findings if they are not made public. Using an example from Jordanian politics, I will reflect on the difficulty of limiting the audience and on what that difficulty says about political power.

The final relationship I will examine is that between fieldworker and intelligence services. While anthropologists gather information about the communities we visit, their institutions – particularly their intelligence services – gather information about us. Through

³ The statement was titled "Principles of Professional Responsibility."

our actions and words, we inevitably communicate with them, and it is these interactions that we now turn to.

Explaining what you are up to

“It is important for the researcher to carefully explain the purposes of the research project in terms that are comprehensible,” Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt (2010: 44) write in their guide for fieldworkers: “[Anthropologists] often find that if they do not actively present themselves in an appropriate role, the community may assign them to an inappropriate one”. In research about politics in Jordan, researchers must consider how to present themselves not only to the community but also to the intelligence services. What makes this particularly challenging is that the intelligence services never talk to you directly, and in the rare cases they do, they do so incognito.

When I conducted fieldwork during the Arab Spring in Jordan, interviewing oppositional political activists, my research assistant did this presentation for me. He was from one of the country’s most influential tribes, with relatives holding high positions in the army and government. Officials at the intelligence services came to him – not me – with questions about my activities in the country, and I was protected by the symbolic capital of his tribe and family. I was, as Jordanians put it, ‘his guest’. The way I communicated with the intelligence services was through my choice of research assistant.

That my research assistant was from an influential Jordanian tribe coloured that communication. While more than half of the Jordanian population have their family origin outside the country, especially from Palestine, this group has weak political influence. The important political and security institutions (e.g., the parliament, army, intelligence services) have been dominated by Jordanians who are members of the tribes that were present in Jordan when the country came in to being in the 1920s. Tribes that held a leading political position at that time have often maintained that position until today, and many prominent contemporary politicians are descendants of people who were tribal leaders at the time of the country’s foundation (Alon 2016).

Many of the people I have worked with in Jordan take pride in being part of entities they refer to as *‘ashira* (plural *‘ashair*), which they would translate into English as ‘tribes’, ‘clans’, or ‘families’ (Shryock 2021: 512). An *‘ashira* always has a specific name and typically includes several thousand members. It normally has multiple *diwans*, buildings where people gather, especially for social activities. Moreover, an *‘ashira* “asserts a special relationship to physical space, or territory, or patterned movements through both; it has a known history, which its members tell in relation to, and in opposition to, other *‘ashair*; its structure is segmental, or nested, with named groups embedded in named groups, sometimes using a genealogical idiom, sometimes an idiom of alliance” (Shryock 2021: 512). Partly due to the weak role of political parties in Jordan, tribes are the most important organisation in political elections. They select candidates, form coalitions with other tribes, and organise election campaigns – most members of the Jordanian parliament have won their seats through this process. Tribes have evolved under the influence of social and economic change, as well as shifting state policy (Massad 2001; Watkins 2014), and they have in turn influenced the development of the Jordanian state.

While military coups and civil wars have been common in the region, Jordan has remained stable – it is the only state in the Levante where the ruling elite has been intact

through the transition to independence (Tal 2002: 126). One pillar of the monarchy has been its alliance with the tribes. According to the historian Yoav Alon, this alliance can be traced to the slow integration – rather than violent subjugation – of the tribes into the emerging Jordanian state that developed after the first World War. Tribesmen got a greater stake in the existence of the state and the regime in Jordan than in most other Middle Eastern countries, where the common result of state-formation was “the coercive subjugation of the tribes accompanied by their marginalisation in society” (Alon 2009: 1-2). Tribesmen – who are heavily overrepresented in the military and intelligence services – have stayed loyal to the regime when there have been threats of military coups.⁴ This support has also granted the tribes, particularly the larger and more influential ones, a degree of independence from state power. The royal court is cautious not to alienate them, as doing so could risk turning people in the army and other important institutions against the king. In other words, the intelligence services treated my research assistant as someone they could trust and had to respect.

My indirect communication with the intelligence services was important for my ability to conduct research in the country. Jordan is a monarchy where most political power is vested in the king, but much of this power is, in practice, delegated to the intelligence services (*al-mukhabarat*), especially since the current king ascended the throne in 1999. Although the intelligence services regularly intervene in politics, they very seldom do so through violent methods. Instead, they tend to employ tactics such as buying out leaders of an opposition group with government jobs, making sure that job opportunities are withdrawn for people who participate in protests with radical demands, or encouraging divisions within opposition groups. The regime is known for its (by regional standards) liberal ways of dealing with opposition and the freedom it allows researchers. What was at stake in my communication with the intelligence services was not my safety but my access to the field.

I also had other indirect ways of communicating with the intelligence services. During most of my field trips in Jordan, I have tried to present myself in an appropriate role by always starting my fieldwork with interviews with senior officials or politicians, such as members of parliament, university presidents, or senior officials at ministries. My aim has been to establish the fact that I am a researcher, before turning up in more sensitive contexts. Moreover, when I have met people in such positions of power, I have tried to present my research ideas in a way that portray Jordan in a favourable light. One Jordanian researcher I worked with had advised me to do so. “[That way of presenting the project] is not a lie,” she remarked, noting that my research did, in fact, put Jordan in a positive light. But it was a matter of emphasis. She called it flattery.

What the effect of all this has had, I cannot know for certain, but I do know that the intelligence services have an image of me, and that that image has helped during incidents that might otherwise have jeopardised my fieldwork, or at least restricted my access.

One such incident was the spreading of a rumour that I had Israeli or other dubious

⁴ The Jordanian monarchy has relied on the support of these tribes – and their role in the military – when Nasserists, Bathists, Arab Nationalists and National Socialists sought to overthrow it in the 1950s and 1960s, and when Palestinian *fedayeen* (commandos) sought to replace it during the period of 1968-1971 (Mishal 1978). Nevertheless, since the reign of the present king, an increasing number of tribesmen and military veterans have started to think that the regime does not fulfil its side of the bargain. For instance, the Jordanian protest movements that emerged during the Arab Spring were strong in the provinces outside the large cities, among people from the Jordanian tribes, the traditional backbone of the Jordanian regime (Schwedler 2022; Tell 2015).

connections, which happened during my last field trip at the university in Maan. The instigator of the rumour was a professor at the faculty of education, who, for reasons unknown to me, had already spread other rumours about me during my previous visit. I was conducting research on how the establishment of the university had affected local society, and I attended lectures, socialised with staff, and conducted formal interviews with staff and students. In the evenings, I tried to see as much of the local society as possible, speaking with a wide variety of people. In other words, I was engaging in the kind of ethnographic work that anthropologists normally do.

That the anthropologist is a spy working for a foreign government is perhaps the most common suspicion anthropologists face during fieldwork. This is partly due to striking similarities between how ethnographers and intelligence operatives gather their information – the close observation of everyday life, attention to broader context, and desire to blend in (Borneman 2009: 240; Verdery 2018: 17-18). “How you work,” a man who worked as a consultant for intelligence communities in the Middle East once told me, “is similar to how we work,” drawing a contrast between that type of work and methods that are less immersive.

The rumours that I was a spy rather than a researcher never started to fly, however. This was partly because an official at the university did her best to dispel them. She had been receiving me at the university, reviewing my letters of recommendation, and introducing me to staff and students. When people shared rumours about me being a spy with her, “I tell them that everything is official [that I had all the formal approvals from the university in Maan],” she told me.

The deeper reason the rumour never started to fly, however, was that people did not really have to be suspicious, because the intelligence services handled that work for them — one of their tasks is, of course, to scrutinise the activities of foreigners. Katherine Verdery, writing about her fieldwork in communist Romania during the Cold War, notes that the constant surveillance by the intelligence services affected all the relationships she made in the field, even though she did not realise that until many years later, when she read the file they had had on her. The intelligence officer was present in any conversation she had, like a hidden third party, sometimes directly involved with her respondents, sometimes “just a hidden possibility they might fear” (Verdery 2018: 19). It was a surveillance that eroded trust.

In my case, however, surveillance had the opposite effect, making it easier for people to trust me. As the official at the university who defended me noted, the intelligence services would “tell us if there was a problem.” They had contacted her in other instances, for example, to prevent a visitor who would give a talk at the university. I continued to get access to the interviews and information I asked for, and the knowledge that the intelligence services had vetted me was a kind of watermark, making that access possible.

Another time, a coincidence put me in a difficult spot. Early on during one of my research trips, a friend of mine – hearing that I was interested in recent changes in Jordan’s education sector – recommended that I interview a retired school principal, whom she had heard about. We arranged a meeting, and I took a taxi to his home, where we conducted the interview. The principal was very politically opinionated, but from my perspective, the interview was somewhat disappointing. However, the next day, he did something that might have affected my work far more than a lacklustre interview. He posted allegations of high-level corruption in Jordan on his Facebook page. This certainly gave the intelligence services the impression that I might have encouraged him to make that post, and the following day,

a man who claimed to work at the hotel I was staying at began asking me detailed questions about what I was doing in Jordan. I was worried but put on a smile, stated my research purposes, and emphasised the senior officials and politicians I was about to meet.

What makes this type of impression management a way to learn about Jordanian politics, and not just a precondition for studying it, is that the researcher is forced to deal with questions of communication tactics that also political activists, at least several of the leading ones, must deal with. These activists think about how to communicate not just with ‘the people’ but also with intelligence services, and there are various ways to approach this communication, as the following story illustrates.

A Jordanian democracy activist, one of my long-time informants, had gotten admitted to a ‘political leadership’ program in the United States, and while there, he took every opportunity to meet senior American officials and politicians and posted photos of these meetings on his Facebook page. I first thought that he did this to gain status, but I later learned that there was a political strategy behind it: “It is for the *mukhabarat* (the intelligence services)” he told me. When they “see me in photos with these people (e.g., Henry Kissinger),” he reasoned, they will not dare to “do something against me” (e.g., stop his political activities), because they will fear that “I have very prominent political connections.”

This tactic backfired, however. After having established an NGO in Jordan and working with education programs for the country’s political parties for a year, he learned from a relative that a section within the intelligence services saw him as a problem and had been interfering with his work for a long time. They could not understand his intentions and were suspicious of his American support. He realised that, despite Jordan’s alliance with the United States, an important part of the regime was suspicious of the country’s ambitious political intentions in the Middle East, and he had gotten associated with Americans who were too influential, creating the impression that he was involved in some kind of American strategy for the country. He tried to weaken his association with the superpower, by finding work in a small European country with a less ambitious foreign policy agenda, such as Norway or the Netherlands. He still thought about how to present himself to the intelligence services — no longer to show that he was a person one should not mess with, but rather to give a soothing answer to the question of what he was up to.

What is in it for the research assistant

“In our experience,” Kathleen DeWalt and Billie DeWalt (2010: 45) write, “some of the first contacts [in a new field] are often made by people [...] adept at discovering what resources the researcher might have and how those resources can be diverted to themselves and their families.” My most recent research assistant, Rosol – an administrative employee at the university in Maan and a campaign worker in the parliamentary elections – was adept at discovering opportunities that came with having a researcher around. He worked for me a few hours each week, arranging interviews, but what he most sought was neither money nor any other material resource but, in the word he used, ‘relations’. When I conducted interviews he had arranged, he always insisted on hanging around, even if he did not do any talking. He also wanted to be present in the interviews I arranged myself with influential people. “Why did you not call me!?” he asked when I told him I just finished an interview with a former mayor. “Did you mention my name, that a guy named Rosol al-Abbat is helping you?” he asked after I met the university president. Since I aimed to create an

atmosphere where the interviewee felt safe enough to speak very openly, I experienced this constant search to be present as a problem.

Also in other situations, Rosol's ambition to build connections was evident. He once recounted how, during a trip to the capital, he had tried to enter a meeting at the Lions Club. He was wide-eyed with astonishment as he walked toward the entrance, passing a fountain, gold ornaments, and other signs of wealth. When the guard saw him, he seemed puzzled and asked who he was. "I am a public employee from Maan [which is a backwater]," he said. The guard had looked down at him dismissively and wagged with his hand: "Away." Rosol laughed when he told the story, then stressed: "Imagine if I had been able to enter! The people inside. Ah!" I asked what he would have done. "Going around taking phone numbers. And there might be an old woman to marry."

I chose to work with Rosol, but it might be more accurate to say that Rosol chose to work with me. I met him when I was visiting the university, going around the campus to conduct interviews with students and staff. Like most other staff I met, Rosol invited me for a coffee at his office and asked what I was doing in Maan. He was keen on establishing contact and suggested we meet again. In this regard, by no means did he stand out from other people I met. A few students approached me asking if I could help them practice English, others were interested in migrating to Europe, and a few just wanted to interact with a Westerner (I was the only one living in Maan at that point). Some academic staff were interested in potential collaborations with my Swedish university. Rosol, however, stood out because he was particularly good at reading what I wanted and understanding how he could help me with that. He suggested some people I should meet, and hearing that I was interested in how elections worked, he started sharing stories from his experience working on election campaigns. He was adept at establishing a relationship that would be beneficial for both of us.

In Jordan, as in many other places, people believe that strong personal networks and relationships are essential for securing a good job and for social advancement more generally. Rosol, as mentioned, was engaged in Jordanian politics, where the concept of 'good relations' and the ambition to get them have a more specific meaning. In parliamentary elections in Maan, one can only win through the support of one's tribe, and when I asked people which qualities they look for when they select the candidate of their tribe, the most common answer were "wealth and good relations."

Having good relations is partly about being social, which includes attending weddings and funeral wakes and helping people with various problems. Through these actions, candidates build the impression that, once in office, they will serve what is called the 'general interest' (*maslaha 'ama*) rather than their personal one. Candidates spend time convincing people that they are a good person rather than that they have a good political program, which is a reflection of the role of the Jordanian parliament, which cannot propose new legislation, and of the absence of strong political parties. Without a party's established reputation to rely on, candidates must build their personal reputation as trustworthy individuals. Having 'good relations' is thus about building trust among the electorate – about showing that you will work for the benefit of those who vote for you.

Having 'good relations' also means having connections with influential people, which enables a politician to provide services to the electorate. The ideal politician is a 'fixer' – someone who can make things happen and solve problems through his connections.

Politicians spend much of their time taking phone calls from constituents who present various requests and then reaching out to others who can fulfil them. These requests might involve anything from gaining access to medical services, getting a transfer to a workplace closer to one's hometown, or solving any type of bureaucratic obstacle. The higher position someone has, the better services he can provide.

To provide services, one needs strong relationships with people who hold decision-making power. A member of parliament ideally has good relations with key figures – like government officials, business leaders, and senior officials at embassies – before they get elected (Clark 2018: 22). Even candidates for the city council – considered a position of minor importance – often have over 1,500 phone contacts. A portion of these contacts are individuals who can fulfil various requests, typically through their roles within the state bureaucracy.

The Arabic word for a connection that can help one in this way is '*wasta*', derived from the word for 'medium' or 'middle'. Having *wasta* means having someone who can intervene on one's behalf, for instance to secure a job at a private company, a better price when renting a house from a private person, or any favourable decision from the state bureaucracy. Jordanians commonly complain about the widespread use of *wasta* – according to a survey conducted in 2015, over 80 percent of Jordanians considered *wasta* a form of corruption, and two-thirds believed it was essential for finding a job (National Council for Family Affairs 2015, cited in Doughan 2024: 132). Despite these negative attitudes, few people would relinquish using a good *wasta*. Politicians, once elected, are expected to assist their constituents through *wasta*. In some districts, members of parliament have an office dedicated to *wasta* requests (Doughan 2024: 137).

Having good relations is of course partly about inheriting them; most leading politicians in south Jordan have fathers or grandfathers who held a position of influence. But it is also a social capital that one can increase through skills and talent. "Some people love relations," a kingmaker of one of the largest tribes in Maan told me, as he was evaluating the four contenders vying to become the tribe's candidate for the parliamentary elections. "Others are like a shell." The ideal candidate does not just have good relations but is intent on improving them.

Relations can also be improved through hard work. At least a year before the parliamentary election, candidates make intensive efforts to be visible at social occasions, like weddings, by showing up in person, sending someone with a gift, or at least giving a phone call to express care. Others try to improve their networks by appearing to be relevant to people of influence, and finding a way to hang out around them can be a first step to do so. In other words, Rosol's interests to use me as a springboard to improve his relations rested not just in his personal ambition but in a recognised form of political art.

Writing about the field

Employees at the university in Maan asked me to provide written recommendations, based on my experience at Swedish universities, of ways to improve the institution. When asked for my opinion, I have usually answered that one of the most important improvements would be to professionalise the university further: addressing the tendency to give better grades to students who are from the same tribe or area (or have relatives who are in a position to ask for it), ensuring that appointments and promotions are based on merit rather than

recommendations from influential people outside the university, taking stronger control over the budget to address the university's rapidly growing debt, and so on. But writing about this would involve trade-offs between impact and safeguards.

First, in the choice of language, English or Arabic. In Jordan, English is a safe language for writing about anything that might otherwise be sensitive, such as issues involving the royal family or the country's relations with Israel. A reformist leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, who was working on a doctoral dissertation in Islamic studies when I last met him, had decided to write it in English. He was criticising an influential religious ruling (fatwa) issued by a 14th century scholar – a ruling he believed was intolerant toward other faiths and lacked a basis in the Quran. But by criticising such a famous religious scholar, he might upset people. Writing in English, he explained, made him feel freer, as only two people at the faculty would be able to read it! The price of freedom is irrelevance.

Second, in the depth of the analysis. Many people working at the university were committed to further professionalising the institution, and they were the ones who provided me with detailed information and insights on the matter. They described various forms of cheating and mismanagement occurring beneath the surface and pointed out which presidents had tried to make improvements and which ones had taken a passive role, allowing problems (and the university's debt) to grow. These were often the same individuals who encouraged me to write recommendations for improving the university. They probably thought that my status as an outsider and a researcher from a European university might be helpful for their cause. It was a cause which I sympathised with, and I could have drafted a set of recommendations based on their extensive experience working at the university.

A more penetrating analysis would ask why one of the presidents who tried to professionalise the university was dismissed. And the answer to that question was very different from what the employees who looked up to him assumed. They believed he was ousted because his efforts to enforce rules and policies had created enemies among the staff, but I found out that the real reason was that his playing by the book had included refusing to grant favours to influential political figures – for instance, declining to promote someone at their request – which made them intent on destroying his career and tarnishing his reputation. The story of his dismissal involved events at the national council responsible for evaluating university presidents, the intelligence services, and the national bureau for combating corruption.

When this former university president, whose reputation had been severely damaged by these events, asked me to send my research findings to the royal court, I would have been able to combine what I had learned about the political intrigue surrounding his dismissal with what I had seen on the ground, to provide a report that might have been politically relevant, at least relevant for the prospects of that former president.

By doing so, I would risk getting in over my head. If I submitted that report, what might happen? The more detailed – and thus more relevant – it would be, the riskier. Even if I avoided naming specific individuals as far as I could, some of them would have been easy to identify. One of them, a very prominent politician who had played a leading role in ending the term of the university president, belonged to a powerful family – he was the son of an influential politician, with sons or nephews likely to 'inherit' his influence one day. When I had visited his house, I met his younger sister, who held a senior position at the royal court. I calculated that she, or anyone else in the network clustered around such a prominent

figure, would surely notify him. And if they started spreading a false rumour about me, who could counteract that? The former university president? His tribe was not one of the leading tribes of Jordan, not a Majali, Tarawneh, or Bani Sakher. That his enemies had successfully tarnished his reputation showed that he had not been able to muster tribal support, even though he told me that he had threatened them to do so. Passivity was surely the less risky option. I postponed submitting any text.

And there I was, engaging in the kind of calculations that I had – only indirectly – seen Jordanians engage in when facing an irregularity connected to an influential person. In this situation, I was dealing with what Andrew Shryock and Sally Howell (2001), writing on Jordan, have called ‘house politics’, “a mode of domination in which families (the royal one being only the most central and effective) serve as instruments and objects of power.” Shryock and Howell have noticed that while public historiography in Jordan emphasises the state, nation, and government, “in less formal contexts, when Jordanians talk to us (and each other) about their own political history or the contemporary political scene, they dwell on the interests of prominent men and their households, the importance of kinship ties, family connections to power, and the bane (or just as often, the blessing) of rampant nepotism” (2001: 249-250). As the case of the dismissed university president illustrates, this form of politics can be the actual force behind events that, on the surface, may appear to be driven by issues like mismanagement or resistance to institutional reform. In my case, this more fundamental level of politics only appeared when I risked getting involved in it.

Difficulties that are an asset

My aim in this essay has not been to question that trust and good rapport are suitable ideals of fieldwork. It was certainly easier for me to work in Jordan than in the more repressive environment of Syria (where I conducted fieldwork in 2010), and like many other anthropologists, I achieved most progress during fieldwork when I met people who understood my objectives and were interested in similar issues. My point is that the absence of trust and good rapport is not just the absence of a bunch of good things. It is something else (Carey 2017: 2; Massa 2016). And that something else presents, for all its problems, also some opportunities.

An ethnographer’s involvement with a political system can put aspects of that system into sharper relief, and I have used situations where I was more of a participant than an observer to illustrate aspects of the Jordanian intelligence services, candidate selection for parliamentary elections, and house politics. In such situations, difficulties, mistrust, and even adversity do not necessarily pose a problem; rather, they insert the ethnographer more firmly in a political dynamic and force him or her to sort out similar problems as some of our informants are sorting out. Relations of trust might be the best way to get access to a field, but thornier relations reveal more about its inner dynamics.

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