

Maintaining social cohesion in a growing and diverse population in Jordan

Mustapha TABBA and Nedal ALMASRI

With the challenges many of the SEM countries faced during the past few years, more people sought shelter in Jordan resulting in greater contact between local residents and the cultures and norms of the new residents. In this article Mustapha Tabba and Nedal Masri assess how the Jordanians have dealt with this wave of cultural exposure. Through the lens of the ALF/Ipsos Survey they discuss how both the state and people of Jordan perceive the newcomers and how they handle their own diversity.

To better understand how Jordan associates itself with other countries bordering the Mediterranean, it is important to take a step back and refer to the events that have taken place recently in the region and most particularly in the Arab world. Political reform in Tunisia and Egypt ignited by the Arab Spring were succeeded by outbreaks of instability in the Middle East and North Africa region, primarily in neighbouring countries such as Libya, Yemen and Syria. Of course, prior to these events was the Iraq War that also left a deep mark on the current situation in the region. While maintaining

stability and solidarity during these challenging periods, Jordan has been on the forefront of extending support to displaced people of neighbouring countries that have, or are, currently experiencing political changes of their own.

Since the eruption of the Syrian Civil War, almost six years ago, the region has witnessed one of the largest displacement of refugees in years, with over 4.8 million Syrian refugees now being hosted in neighbouring communities, as registered by the UNHCR. Jordan alone hosts nearly 1.3 million registered and non-registered

Chart 19.1 Jordanians' views about what Characterises the Mediterranean region

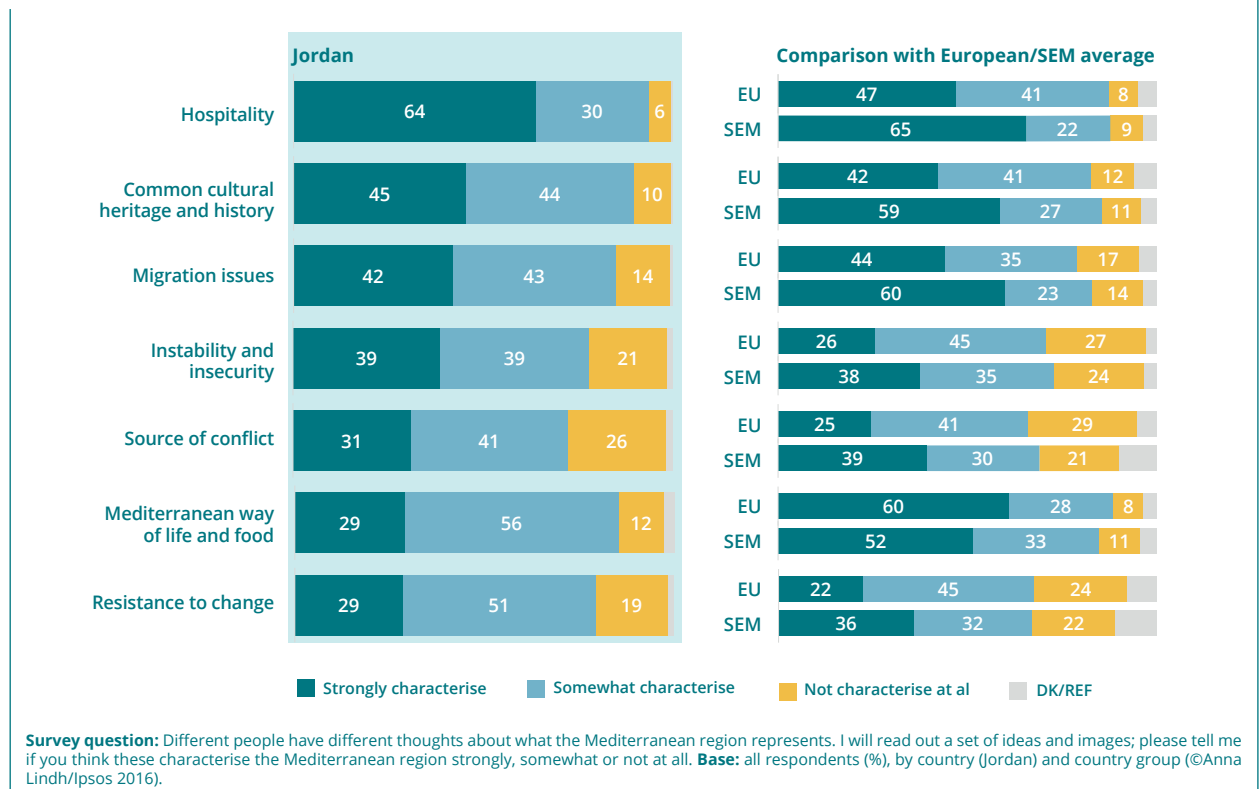
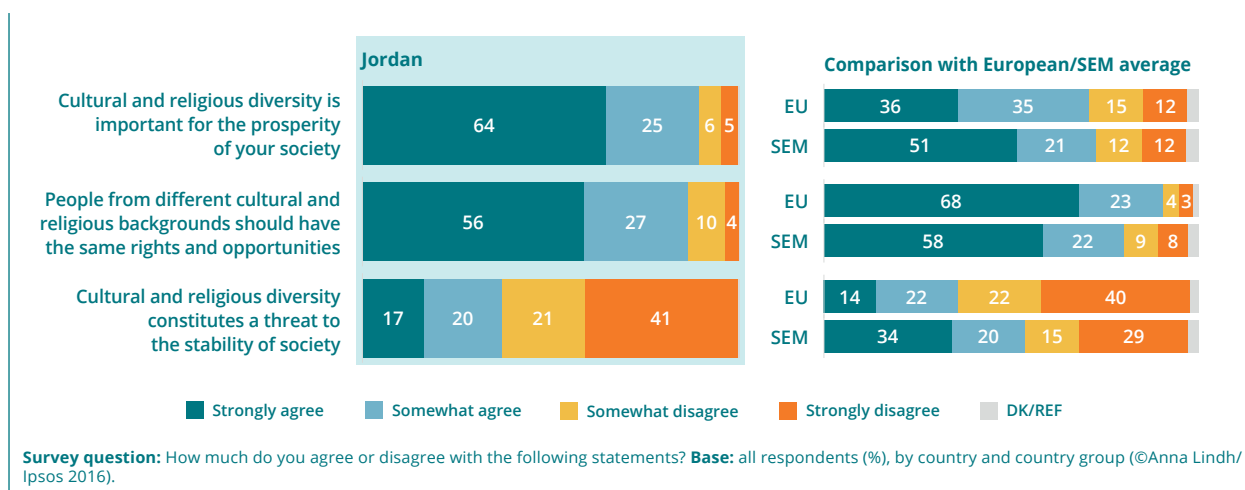


Chart 19.2
Jordanians' attitude to cultural and religious diversity



Syrian refugees. This accounts to close to 15% of the Jordanian population (Census, 2015). In addition to other migrant groups residing in the kingdom, Jordan has become a safe-haven in a region that is undergoing change. As more refugees seek shelter in the kingdom, Jordan has become more exposed to the new cultures and norms of these residents, hence highlighting direct cultural exchange between Jordan and its neighbouring Arab, as well as Mediterranean, communities.

A new definition for hospitality

As Jordanians are more in contact with neighbouring Arab countries, their sentiments toward the Mediterranean is influenced by these interactions. To Jordanians, the Mediterranean is more than just an ideal vacation hub glamorised for its way of life and exotic cuisine. According to the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey conducted in 2016, countries south of the Mediterranean were almost twice more likely to strongly characterise the Mediterranean for the lifestyle it evokes than Jordanians would. Although it cannot be argued that Mediterranean countries can certainly deliver a picture of the perfect vacation and a tourist destination that most people dream of visiting one day, Jordanians are more keen to praise the region for its hospitality. In fact, compared to the 2012 poll carried out by the Anna Lindh Foundation, hospitality as an attribute that strongly defines the Mediterranean, as perceived by Jordanians, has increased nearly 7 points (57% in 2012 versus 64% in 2016) (Chart 19.1). This is not surprising as Jordanians themselves take pride in being hospitable — a virtue that is deeply rooted within the very definition of being Jordanian. Such a sentiment is also mirrored in other Arab countries bordering the Mediterranean, such as Algeria and Tunisia. Yet for Jordan, the natural need to be hospitable is not just expressed on a familial and/or individual level, it is also quite profound on a national level which is evident by Jordan's global position on refugees and its acceptance of migrant groups whether it

be Syrians, Palestinians, Iraqi, Yeminis, or Libyans. 'We can't ignore them and just keep refugees isolated. So you've just got to be smart and you've got to think with the heart', as said by King Abdullah II of Jordan during an interview with CNN and is just another example of the Jordanian people's drive to showcase solidarity and hospitality in its most humanitarian form.

Limited opportunities in a growing population

However, the current infrastructure within the kingdom has set limits to this hospitality. As per this wave of the Anna Lindh/Ipsos Survey, many Jordanians have become slightly more reserved when it comes to the accessibility of equal rights and opportunities to people of different cultures and religions (Chart 19.2). Interestingly, such sentiments were more common amongst the youth (15 – 29 age group) who are facing hardships of their own due to limited opportunities. It should be noted that the youth account for a sizable chunk of the Jordanian population and have been a critical topic of almost all national strategic agendas. They are the movers and shakers of the country and play an important role in ensuring that cultural and social cohesion is sustained.

Despite the noticeable 8 point drop on this metric when compared to the previous wave, Jordanians are still more open to the idea of equality for people of diverse backgrounds than other South and Eastern Mediterranean countries that have participated in this survey. One of the main barriers for advocacy of equal opportunities and rights to all residents of Jordan may be attributed to the increasing demand of resources the country requires to accommodate the needs of its own citizens as well as those of the growing refugee population, particularly displaced Syrians. As such, the very fabric of Jordanian economy, legislation and security has been moulded by the unrest seen in the region as well as the influx of refugees.

A clear example of this has been seen in the worsening employment conditions affecting the kingdom, with the youth being at the very centre of this national issue. In fact, competition for jobs has been on the rise between Jordanian and Syrian labourers, whether through formal or informal means. This in turn has drawn a lot of attention from international organisations who are sent out to improve employment infrastructure in the kingdom with an emphasis on vocational training. Yet, who benefits from these programmes may be an underlying issue that will halt the wider acceptance as well as integration of new residents starting a new life in Jordan.

Attitudes toward domestic social cohesion

Nevertheless, Jordanians are proud of the way they have persevered during these pressing times and the policies that have been adopted by the kingdom to cope with the refugee crisis within the region. The public is quite open to cultural and religious diversity as has been cited in the Anna Lindh /Ipsos Survey with almost 9 in 10 Jordanians agreeing that cultural and religious diversity is important to the prosperity of society (Chart 19.2). Jordanians reported the highest score for this metric when compared to other countries that participated in the survey and was considerably higher than scores cited for countries south of the Mediterranean. To further reinforce the country's stand on this matter, Jordanians who strongly agree that cultural and religious diversity is linked to the prosperity of society has increased from 54% in the 2012 poll to 64% in this wave of the study, hence indicating growing acceptance toward people of different backgrounds.

While the public appears to be quite accepting of people of differing backgrounds and tolerant of others on various fronts – whether having people of other cultures as neighbours or perhaps colleagues in the workplace, which goes hand in hand with the hospitality virtue acknowledged earlier — there does seem to be something holding Jordanians back when it comes to the inclusion of individuals of different cultures in schools.

In fact, tolerance on this aspect was substantially lower than what was recorded by European countries and was almost on par with its neighbour Palestine. The rise of refugee groups, particularly Syrians, and their access to both public and private schools in Jordan may contribute to culture clashes, which parents may be unable to control. This may create a conflict of interest for parents and/or potential parents, who are determined to instil Jordanian traditional values. For Jordanians, the values they pass on to their children are key in ensuring that the Jordanian identity is maintained. Like the country's overall direction toward openness, Jordanian values, when it comes to raising their young, have evolved and are no longer fixated on reinforcing religious beliefs – a practice

that has witnessed a 24% drop since the 2012 wave of this survey in terms of being the most important youth upraising virtue. Nevertheless, a lack of control in cultural exchanges that exists between Jordanian children and their non-Jordanian classmates is still worrisome and it may weaken family solidarity for which Jordanians feel is among their most important values when raising their young.

Fostering systems in schools that teach children to live with diversity was viewed by many as being a potentially effective tool for helping people integrate and cultivate a society that is accepting of these cultural differentiations. Yet, implementing such a system would require the intervention of the Ministry of Education, which is already overwhelmed with infrastructure and resource constraints as it is. This in turn calls for collaboration from the international community and operating non-governmental organisations in the kingdom.

Such organisations have taken an active role in helping Jordan relieve the pressures associated with hosting displaced individuals. However, the focus of their initiative is primarily centred on assisting the government and policy makers in meeting the basic needs of refugees and Jordan's neediest segments. Programmes focusing on addressing the cultural exchanges domestically may help build confidence in the public's fear of societal instability that may arise because of cultural and religious diversification.

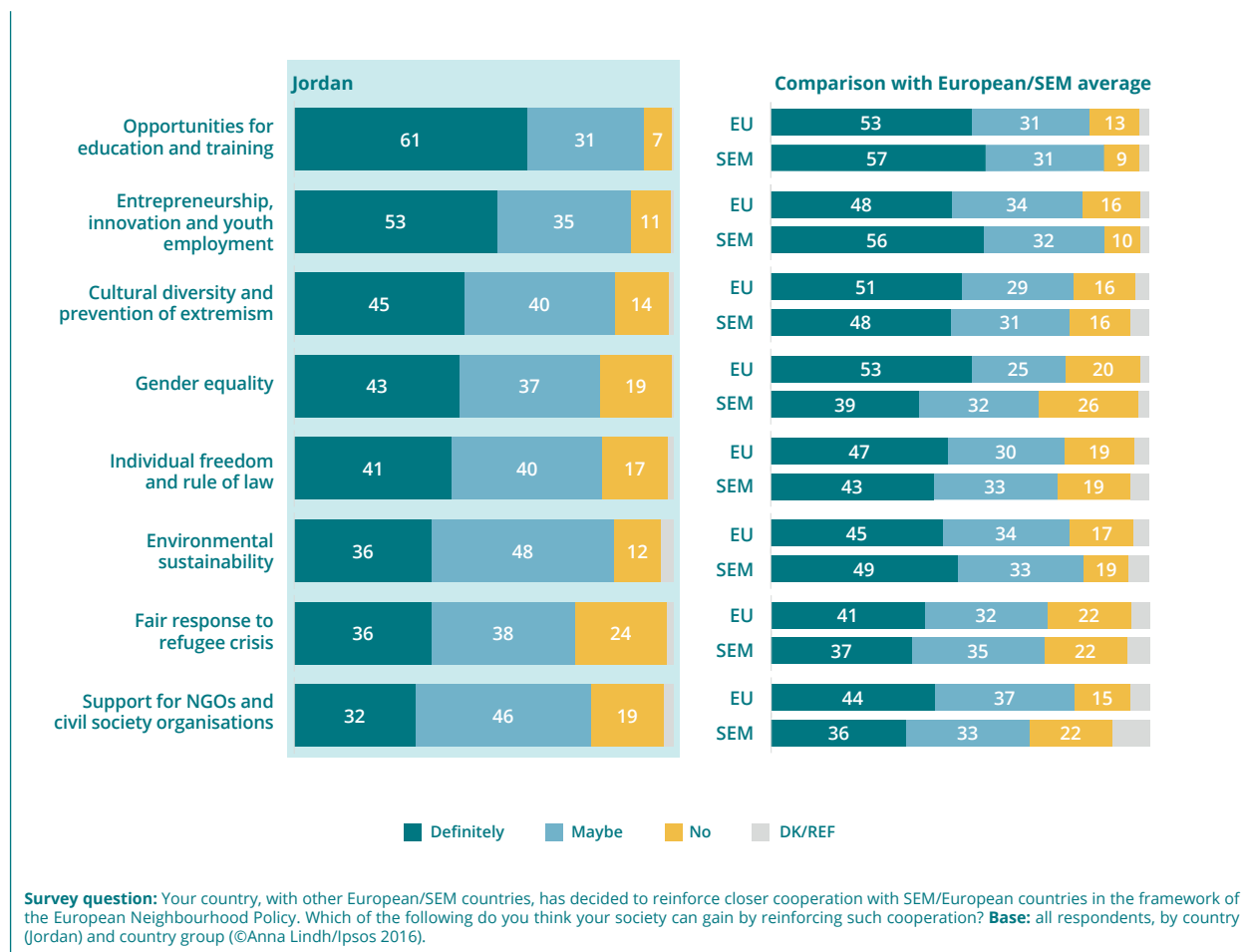
Progression through economic and educational cooperation

The Jordanian people have seen first-hand the importance of collaborating with its neighbouring countries in order to cope with the unrest and instability that have notoriously been the key identifiers of the Middle East and North Africa region for many years. As such, Jordanians have fixated their views about the Mediterranean from an Arab perspective that is quite open-minded for the region, and yet it conforms with the traditional aspects of Jordanian society. Based on this openness, Jordan has embraced a growing population driven by those seeking relief. However, its ability to cope with the domestic cultural exchanges needs further development, which in turn has welcomed more international intervention.

As assistance during these pressing times is seen by Jordanians as an international initiative, it is not surprising that 36% of the population believe that a fair response to the refugee crisis is among the many definite benefits from cooperating in the conceptualised framework of the European Neighbourhood Policy. As in other countries surveyed, the most important gains perceived by Jordanians in their participation with such a framework revolved around self-development, whereby the majority believed that 'opportunities for education

Chart 19.3

Jordanians' views about potential gains from Euro-Mediterranean Cooperation



and training' as well as 'entrepreneurship, innovation and youth employment' were definite wins for the country. This in turn highlights the need for Jordanians to equip themselves with the tools and skills they need to further adept to the changing economic, cultural and social climates occurring in the kingdom and the region (Chart 19.3). Jordanians' undeniable will to seek progression, even in the toughest of times, is admirable and has been a driving force behind the population's optimism – a virtue that could hopefully be carried on to other residents settling in Jordan and who are also undergoing hardship and a state of transition of their own.

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