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## The Jordanian Military: A Key Regional Ally

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Dana El Kurd

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**ABSTRACT:** Jordan has weathered a number of political challenges inspired by the Arab Spring in a way that has preserved the regime's control. The Jordanian military's role in these developments has been neglected but is critical to understand, particularly as the United States and its coalition partners continue to deal with violent extremist threats in the region.

Since early 2011, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has weathered a number of political challenges inspired by the Arab Spring. Analysts agree the regime has navigated the demands of its population in a way that has preserved its control.<sup>1</sup> Although on the surface, the Jordanian establishment has much less to fear from the Arab Spring in terms of its long-term power, there are important challenges the monarchy must address in the coming years.

The Jordanian military's role in these developments has often been neglected, despite its increasing importance as a crucial component of the ruling political coalition. Most academic work on the subject of the Jordanian armed forces has merely assumed the institution's acquiescence to any political change approved by the king. As such, the army is characterized as being professional and, so far, dependable.<sup>2</sup> This characterization ignores the occasionally tumultuous relationship the military has had with past monarchs and the recent strain between military officials and the ruling family, which points to fissures in the dependability of the armed forces.

In any given society, the military is one of the most powerful institutions, even when under the control of civilian officials. Particularly in the Middle East, the military has been identified as a key institutional player regardless regime, in the setting and execution of government policy.<sup>3</sup> Military forces have also played a central role in deciding the outcomes of protest movements and revolutions in countries affected by the Arab Spring.<sup>4</sup> As such, and particularly in the case of Jordan—a monarchy dependent on a tribally-dominated military to maintain its rule—an analysis of the army is crucial to understanding future political developments.

Using an institutionalist approach, this article utilizes indicators of civil-military relations to outline the army's position in Jordan today.

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1 Zoltan Barany, “Unrest and State Response in Arab Monarchies,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24 (2013): 5-38.

2 Ibid, 90-91.

3 Barry Rubin, “The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics,” in *Armed Forces in the Middle East: Politics and Strategy*, Barry Rubin and Thomas Keany, eds. (London: Routledge, 2002).

4 Derek Lutterbeck, “Arab Uprisings, Armed Forces, and Civil-Military Relations,” *Armed Forces and Society* 39 (2012): 44.

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It explores the military's unique relationship to the Hashemite monarchy, and its evolution since the creation of Jordan in 1946. While the Jordanian military establishment has so far been similar to those of other modern monarchies—playing a key role in both containing political turmoil and maintaining an acceptable pace of reforms—its increasing self-awareness and pursuit of its corporate interests threaten to challenge the monarchy's grip on the institution overall.

### Historical Development

Scholars utilizing the institutionalist approach highlight critical junctures that bind actors in certain arrangements, with greater effects as time passes.<sup>5</sup> To understand contemporary Jordanian civil-military relations, it is important to examine the historical development of the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) and identify the critical junctures responsible for its evolution.

The JAF emerged from the Arab Legion, an institution under British command, passed to the command of King Abdullah I in 1949.<sup>6</sup> The king was from a different region, and had blatantly coordinated with the British in the 1948 war. Subsequently, the ruling family lacked the “civic-myth” responsible for its legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, the rule of King Abdullah I came to an abrupt end with his assassination in 1951.

King Abdullah's grandson, Hussain, ascended the throne in 1952. In the same year, the Free Officers movement seized power in Egypt, and Arab nationalist ideology began to sweep the region. King Hussain gained intelligence that there were many nationalistic officers sympathetic to challenging his rule, and a coup was attempted a year later by officers emulating the Egyptian example. Luckily, the institutional legacy of British recruitment (of predominantly Bedouin soldiers) saved Hussain from removal, as “soldiers chose their king over their officers in 1957.”<sup>8</sup>

The king's reactions following this initial coup attempt constitutes the first critical juncture in the development of the JAF. Hussain purged officers suspected of sympathizing with the nationalists. He reconstituted his cabinet with loyalist members only, removing members of Palestinian origin.<sup>9</sup> From that point forward, the king pursued policies of patronage to the tribes and Bedouins termed “East Bankers” at the expense of increased Palestinian marginalization. The king also made clear his stance on the politicization issue: the armed forces were to remain separate from politics. King Hussain remained suspicious of the officer corps and the possibility of coups, and maintained the legal separation between members of the armed forces and political expression.<sup>10</sup>

With the onset of Black September in 1970, Palestinians with Jordanian citizenship were marginalized entirely. In this conflict, the

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5 Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor, “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms,” *Political Studies* 44 (1996): 936-957.

6 Michael Herb, *All in the Family* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

7 Mehran Kamrava, “Military Professionalization and Civil-Military Relations in the Middle East,” *Political Science Quarterly* 115 (2000).

8 Herb, *All in the Family*, 226.

9 Alan George, *Jordan: Living in the Crossfire* (New York: Zed Books, 2005), 31.

10 Kamrava, “Military Professionalization,” 90.

armed forces saw large-scale desertions by Jordanians of Palestinian descent.<sup>11</sup> The attempted coup, led by factions of the Palestinian Liberation Organization, can be considered another critical juncture in the relationship of the monarchy with the armed forces. Despite some evidence to suggest that Jordanians of Palestinian origin constitute two-thirds of the entire Jordanian population, King Hussain and government leaders pursued a consistent policy of limiting their role in the armed forces. Estimates place the proportion of Jordanian Palestinians in the officer corps at only ten percent.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the king relied heavily on Jordanian tribes for any important military appointment, striking a balance that worked to increase their ties to the regime.<sup>13</sup>

Although King Hussain consolidated his control, some groups within his coalition did not firmly support the regime. Often, groups within the monarchy's fold viewed Hashemite policies as "divide and rule," rather than any sort of "pluralist inclusion."<sup>14</sup> Each tribe supported by the king believes it is getting less patronage than others. Consequently, the continued support of the armed forces, despite "extensive royal patronage," should not be considered a certainty.<sup>15</sup> However, both the patronage offered by the monarchy and the "de-Palestinianization" of the armed forces have increased the military's loyalty to Hashemite rule, as well as its political support of Jordanian nationalism.<sup>16</sup>

The military, particularly its leadership, should be considered a crucial part of the elite coalition.<sup>17</sup> Its relationship to the monarchy is an intimate one, beyond that of a patron and beneficiary. Hussain was himself a military man, and Abdullah II, like his father, was involved in the military and came to power with its measured support. Specifically, he had to assure the dying Hussain, and by extension the military, that his half-brother Prince Hamzah would be the crown prince. Hamzah was beloved by the military, and his removal from this position in 2004 marked the beginning of tension between Abdullah and his royalist supporters, both within the tribes and their representatives in the military.<sup>18</sup> The king was also in the process of consolidating his power in the economic sphere through neoliberal measures, but his reforms began to benefit Palestinians in the private sector rather than the tribes. Consequently, tribal leaders in supposedly loyal towns and regions began to protest in support of Hamzah's return to power as king.<sup>19</sup> The

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11 Nawaf Tell, "Jordanian Security Sector Governance: Between Theory and Practice," paper presented at *Challenges of Security Sector Governance in Middle East* workshop (Geneva 12-13, 12-13 July 2004), 17.

12 "Jordan Personnel: Composition, Recruitment, and Training," *Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress, Country Studies Series*, 1989.

13 Curtis R. Ryan, *Jordan in Transition: From Hussein to Abdullah* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002), 10, 88.

14 *Ibid.*, 89.

15 Dr. Zoltan Barany, Transcript of Interview (Al-Urdun al Jadid Research Center, April 23, 2012).

16 Tell, "Jordanian Security," 17.

17 Beatriz Magaloni, "Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule," *Comparative Political Studies* 41/5 (2008): 715-741.

18 "Jordan Crown Prince Loses Title," *BBC News*, last modified November 2004, "Jordan Crown Prince Loses Title," *BBC News*, "Jordan's King Names Son, 15, as Crown Prince," *Reuters*, last modified July 2009.

19 David D. Kirkpatrick, "Jordan Protestors Dream of Shift to King's Brother," *The NY Times*, last modified Nov. 21, 2012.

ultimate outcome of these cleavages within Jordanian society remains unclear.

### Indicators

Scholars have often employed variables, such as professionalization and representativeness of the army, to assess civil-military relations in the Middle East. Indicators of professionalization include the clarity of the chain of command, the cohesiveness of the military's mission, and the politicization of the armed forces. As for the civilianization/representativeness of the armed forces, indicators include type of army and the military's domestic role.<sup>20</sup>

A cursory look at listed commanders or chiefs of staff within each service indicates most leadership positions are filled by a member of a prominent East Bank family or tribe (for example, the Al-Zabens, the Habashnehs, etc.), appointed by the king himself. This is a patrimonial trait of the Jordanian Armed Forces, as is the marginalization of Palestinian Jordanians.

### *Professionalization*

According to the Constitution, the king and his Council of Ministers are responsible for internal and external security. The chain of command between the armed forces and the state flows through this council. Although technically, the Parliament has oversight over the Council of Ministers, this council is appointed by the king and all final decisionmaking is under his authority.<sup>21</sup>

The king is considered Supreme Commander of the armed forces, and has generally sought to complicate the chain of command between the military and the state beyond this title. The Prime Minister has historically delegated the responsibilities of Defense Minister to his Chief of Staff. The Chief of Staff is nominated by the Prime Minister, but approved by the king, and accountable to him only.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the king's power over all defense matters is wide ranging.

Although within each service branch of the armed forces, the chain of command is relatively clear and conventional, the chain of command between the armed forces and the state is obfuscated by the role of the king. Essentially, the monarch makes the Council of Ministers play a secondary role in decision-making and policy creation. The Defense/Prime Minister has no oversight over Chiefs of Staff or Directors of different service branches. The only instances where the Prime Minister has had any effect on the security sector, JAF included, are when the Prime Minister had a background of security service *or* had personal connections with heads of the service branches.<sup>23</sup> This is not a formal

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20 Yezid Sayigh, "Agencies of Coercion: Armies and Internal Security Forces," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011), 404. The JAF is organized in five main service branches. The Army, the Navy, and the Air Force are the main divisions. The JAF also features the Jordan Royal Guard for the personal protection of the king and his family. Finally, the armed forces contain the Joint Special Operations Command (established in 1963). The creation of the Gendarmerie reflects an increased militarization of internal security, since the Department of Public Security (that is, the police) and the General Intelligence Department both emerged from the JAF and prominently feature paramilitary forces

21 Tell, "Jordanian Security," 18.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 18.

institutional arrangement, and thus is an unreliable check on the king or security sector's power.

The Constitution has theoretically allocated some means of control for the Parliament over the military, but the legislature does not have any security committee. Thereby, it lacks civilian expertise or direct oversight. The budget of the armed forces is passed through Parliament, but legislators are not allowed to examine how any sum is to be spent. In some instances, the budget is not passed through Parliament at all (namely, any budget having to do with intelligence). Reliance on foreign aid helps the armed forces remain autonomous from any constitutionally mandated oversight.<sup>24</sup>

The Council of Ministers is accountable to the Parliament but this arrangement amounts to very little oversight since the ministers themselves have always delegated important decisionmaking power to their chiefs of staff. In the rare event the king convenes a National Security Council meeting to address security issues, legislators are not on the list of contributing members. Instead, the king often seeks the opinions of relevant ministers, chiefs of staff, and commanders of particular service branches. Abdullah, like his predecessors, has maintained his right to convene this group and fill its seats with whomever he deems fit.<sup>25</sup>

### *Civilianization*

Jordan abolished the draft in 1992, and has since featured an all-volunteer army. The implication of a conscript army is that it is highly representative of society, barring any racist or separatist laws that limit certain segments of society from involvement in the military. With an all-volunteer army however, one must assess the backgrounds of those most likely to serve and analyze the state's recruitment policies (in terms of their target citizen) to assess representativeness.

Following the monarchy's purge of politicized members and those of questionable loyalty (in many cases, Palestinians), from the armed forces, recruitment for the military focused on East Bank tribes and Bedouins (though some ethnic minorities have also been incorporated).<sup>26</sup> Clearly, the ruling family adopted a specific strategy to maintain a mostly East Bank military to consolidate power and directly allocate patronage benefits through the state to royalist citizens. This may not be a sustainable policy in the future, however, since demographic changes among Jordanian citizens may force the monarchy to allow Palestinians within the higher echelons of the military.<sup>27</sup> The loyalty of the armed forces to their king is not unquestionable, but safe to assume for the present.

### *Internal Role*

The domestic function of the JAF has always been to protect the regime; specifically, the ruling family. The monarchy has often deployed the armed forces against real or perceived internal enemies (for example, factions of the Palestinian Liberation Organization or political dissidents).

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24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Herb, *All in the Family*; Ryan, *Jordan in Transition*.

27 Alexander Bligh, "The Jordanian Army: Between Domestic and External Challenges," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5, No. 2 (June 2001):13-20.

Some analysts make the claim internal policing is the primary function of the military, despite stated intentions.<sup>28</sup> Examining the capabilities of the military, it is clear Jordan is ill-equipped to fight any external war, yet spends increasing amounts of revenue on the Joint Special Operations Forces and newly created Gendarmerie—both of which focus on internal counterterrorism and stability. Therefore, this claim has merit.

The JAF also serve the internal role of upholding Jordanian nationalism, particularly against Palestinians as citizens of questionable loyalty.<sup>29</sup> The military exists first to be loyal to the king, embodying the tangibility of the Jordanian national state. This fits in with the concept of the nation-building monarchy, in which the king serves as a linchpin above a multitude of tribal and regional cleavages. In this manner, the monarch can co-opt potential challengers by incorporating certain societal groups within the coalition and excluding others.<sup>30</sup> The ruling family serves as the “thread that holds a divided country together.”<sup>31</sup> In Jordan, this strategy is clearly reflected in the army’s composition. It has a positive relationship with certain segments of society, but the proper “civilianization” of the JAF is questionable and has the effect of souring civil-military relations.

## Civil-Military Relations Under Pressure

### *Instability*

Recent uses of the military in internal affairs occurred following the Arab Spring in protests concerning electoral reform, neoliberalist policies, and charges of corruption.<sup>32</sup> The police forces served their purposes for a time, though the spread of protests in commonly loyal cities worried the monarch. As a result, the gendarmerie was put to good use.<sup>33</sup> This paramilitary force has been involved in quashing protests, even in gatherings predominantly filled with “East Bankers.”<sup>34</sup> There is no reason to believe the remaining service branches would not follow suit if necessary.<sup>35</sup> After all, with some semblance of professionalization comes a subordination to the regime, and the military has no shortage of experience in maintaining domestic stability, as its history proves.

However, some questions remain as to whether East Bankers, perceiving marginalization, will deploy to protect the monarchy in such a loyal fashion.<sup>36</sup> Grievances recently expressed both by military veterans, and the tribes they come from, indicate a gradual shift in the political

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Lisa Anderson, “Dynasts and Nationalists: Why Monarchies Survive,” in *Middle East Monarchies*, ed. Joseph Kostiner (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000).

31 Zoltan Barany, “Unrest and State Response in Arab Monarchies,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 24 (2013): 12.

32 Bruce Riedel, “Jordan’s Arab Spring,” *The Daily Beast*, November 15, 2012.

33 Yezid Sayigh, “Agencies of Coercion: Armies and Internal Security Forces,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011).

34 Achim Vogt, “Jordan’s Eternal Promise of Reform,” *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 4 (2011).

35 Sean L. Yom, “Jordan in the Balance: Evaluating Regime Stability,” *Combating Terrorism Center*, January 14, 2013.

36 Ibid.; Daoud Kuttab (Director General of Community Media Network), transcript of interview by Dr. Zoltan Barany, April 24, 2012.

landscape of Jordan.<sup>37</sup> More importantly, it may point to some fissures within the armed forces themselves.

### *Political Reform*

While outright mutiny may be out of the question for Jordan's armed forces, some questions have been raised over whether the army will get involved in the debate on political reform, or continue to acquiesce to the king's pace. In May 2010, a petition was raised by the National Committee of Military Veterans calling for an end to corruption, a resolution to the "Palestinian" question within Jordan's borders, and changes to the constitution to the benefit of parliamentary power by limiting the monarch's role.<sup>38</sup> This organization has significant political power, with over 140,000 ex-soldier members and high-ranking generals from the most prominent tribes.<sup>39</sup> Some analysts considered this move by military veterans, and their broad scope of demands (political *and* economic), as a "culmination of a gradual process in recent years, whereby senior army veterans interfere in politics."<sup>40</sup>

This act suggested to many the military was not a silent actor in the political arena. In fact, some demands of veterans flirted with attacking the monarchy itself. The petition emphasized the corruption around the queen and demanded an end to "elite treachery."<sup>41</sup> Some tribes went so far as to insist on the ascension of Prince Hamzah to the throne.<sup>42</sup> Protests which developed in loyalist regions, involving tribes affiliated with the armed forces, panicked the monarchy. It seemed a clear case of dissent "coming from the senior ranks of the military" and "trickling down" to entire towns and regions.<sup>43</sup>

The "Hirak" movement emerging out of royalist towns has been highly vocal about maintaining the East Bank character of the state, income inequality between rural and (mostly Palestinian) urban areas, and electoral reform.<sup>44</sup> Members of these tribes represent military officials at all levels, and there is no reason to believe tribe members within the armed forces do not share the same concerns, in spite of the patronage benefits they receive from the regime. Corruption within state bureaucracies, and within the monarchy's inner circle, has sent negative signals to the military establishment.<sup>45</sup> Neoliberal reforms have worked to privatize and reduce public resources and expenditures, again affecting public servants such as soldiers and officers to a great extent.<sup>46</sup> Despite the doling out of material benefits at any sign of unrest, it seems the military leadership recognizes the increasingly powerful role it plays in determining the country's political future.

37 Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Modern King in the Arab Spring," *The Atlantic*, March 18, 2013; David Schenker, "Will Jordan be the First Arab Monarchy to Fall?" *The Atlantic*, January 8, 2013.

38 Assaf David, "The Revolt of Jordan's Military Veterans," *Foreign Policy*, June 16, 2010.

39 Vogt, "Jordan's Eternal Promise of Reform"; Dr. Zoltan Barany, transcript of interview with Steven Tucker (USAID), April 24, 2012.

40 David, "The Revolt of Jordan's Military Veterans."

41 Vogt, "Jordan's Eternal Promise of Reform."

42 Kirkpatrick, "Jordan Protestors Dream."

43 David, "The Revolt of Jordan's Military Veterans."

44 Schenker, "Will Jordan be the First Arab Monarchy to Fall?"

45 Marwan Muasher, "Reform in Jordan: After the Vote," *The Global Think Tank, Carnegie Endowment*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/01/28/reform-in-jordan-after-vote/f6fg>.

46 Vogt, "Jordan's Eternal Promise of Reform."



Neglecting the military's grievances may prove detrimental to the monarch's long-term control. Without the loyalty of the JAF, the threat that some tribes might "follow Tunisia and Egypt" poses great risk to King Abdullah personally, and to the future of his line.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusions

Jordan has formal institutions governing politics, and in particular civil-military relations, but the monarch's increasing involvement has led to institutional decay. Nevertheless, the JAF have been recognized as highly institutionalized in comparison to other armies in the region. The Jordanian military is politicized, but the armed forces still feature a conventional chain of command internally. There is little civilian oversight with regard to their affairs and budgets, however, which suggests civilian control could be strengthened. Additionally, the marginalization of most Palestinian Jordanian citizens harms the level to which the armed forces are representative of society. Combined with the consistent use of the military in internal conflict, these traits allude to the possibility of strain between society and the armed forces. Despite continued subordination to the monarch, recent tensions arising from the military's perceived marginalization may exacerbate the politicization of JAF, and create a possible opening for their intervention in politics.

### *Implications for US Policy*

Formal institutions, particularly as outlined by the Jordanian Constitution, have the capacity to function in such a way to allow for the role of the king, but also give the military establishment space to develop professionally. The first step to reforming civil-military relations would be to strengthen formal institutions.<sup>48</sup> The United States can play a role in encouraging balanced civil-military relations through the use of conditional military aid, as well as continued joint military relationships. Since Jordan is a key ally in the region, this objective should be a priority.

Secondly, the JAF has expressed grievances as a result of privatization programs and alleged corruption. Although the military receives aid from external sources (namely, US aid makes up approximately 46 percent of the entire budget), it remains woefully behind in a number of crucial areas.<sup>49</sup> External defense capabilities are lacking, and expenditures appear focused on internal counterterrorism forces. Reprioritizing the military's expenses would reorient their mission, and transition any harmful internally focused role to the role of a modern military.<sup>50</sup> This is yet another area in which the United States can have a direct positive effect by increasing conditional aid and military-to-military cooperation.

However, this should not necessarily imply the need for deployment of American forces on the ground. Recent events in Syria have threatened Jordanian borders, pushing King Abdullah to request a limited US military presence to support "the security of Jordan." And indeed, 900 American military members are now stationed within the country, in

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47 Ibid, 67.

48 Tell, "Jordanian Security."

49 William Parsons and William Taylor, "Arbiters of Social Unrest: Military Responses to the Arab Spring," *US Army Military Academy at West Point* (2011), [www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA562816](http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA562816).

50 Bligh, "The Jordanian Army;" David, "The Revolt of Jordan's Military Veterans."

addition to an assault ship off the coast. This move has only served to exacerbate the grievances of agitated parties within the Jordanian polity, rather than bolster the stability of the regime. For instance, tribal leaders have expressed discontent at the presence of foreign forces within Jordan, and have even characterized the military personnel as a legitimate target of attack. Secular and Islamist groups have registered outrage and added it to their list of criticisms against the state.<sup>51</sup> Clearly, such a move only weakens the king and his legitimacy, and despite American interests in both Jordanian security and the Syrian-Iraq crisis, American policymakers would do well to step lightly.

Programs like military exercise "Eager Lion," on the other hand, are an appropriate level of involvement. This annual military exercise began in 2011 and encompasses Jordanian, American, and assorted Arab troops from around the region.<sup>52</sup> Not only does such an exercise help strengthen military-to-military ties between Jordan and the United States, it can be publicized to the Jordanian public as an effective way to fortify the Jordanian army during a time of increased security threats. Additionally, programs such as "Eager Lion" help to stabilize the region in the sense that such exercises foster ties amongst neighbors and pave the way for further military cooperation between Arab countries in the future. This issue is becoming progressively more important, as the conflict in Syria spills over to its increasingly fragile neighbors burdened by domestic issues and an influx of refugees. Thus, renewal of this particular exercise, and the development of more opportunities of this kind, would be highly useful for American purposes.

All in all, with political turmoil far from over in the Arab world, and on-going in Jordan, understanding the actions of significant actors such as the JAF continues to be the most important task.

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51 David Schenker, "What Have US Troops Been Doing in Jordan?" [CNN Global Public Square blog]. (July 12, 2013).

52 Rachel Badgeley and Zach Mott, *Exercise Eager Lion Begins in Jordan*, [http://www.army.mil/article/105272/Exercise\\_Eager\\_Lion\\_begins\\_in\\_Jordan/](http://www.army.mil/article/105272/Exercise_Eager_Lion_begins_in_Jordan/).

