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COMMERCIAL ACTIVITIES, POLITICAL CLIMATE DISCUSSED

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[Text] Karak--Easygoing and standoffish at the same time, this big Bedouin town of 20,000 inhabitants lies 125 kilometers south of Amman. Dwarfed by the giant ruins of its Crusader castle and forgotten on its rocky peak since the 12th century, when Etienne de Chatillon, the defeated "lady of Le Crac," was forced to hand it over to Saladin, the sultan of the Moslems, the small city seemed even recently to have gone to sleep forever.

In this region of steep hills where no foreigner had lived since Lawrence of Arabia¹ or Glubb Pasha,² there suddenly appeared the red or green turbans of Sikh technicians. They were followed by Egyptian fellahin wearing pink or sky-blue galabias, who were followed in turn by Pakistani workers in their baggy trousers. Finally, one evening at dusk in front of the mosque, the chattering stopped and all heads turned as one to watch a minibus disgorge a group of young Philippine women wearing tight jeans and made up like actresses from the year 1935.

Karak slept poorly that night, but it had sensed that like it or not, a new era had begun. Could this be the "time of progress and prosperity" that Radio Amman had been promising for years?

The Indian technicians, Egyptian workers, and pretty Asians worked hard. Roads were surfaced, fields were cleared of stones, public facilities were developed or modernized, and small processing industries were established in the valley. Tourists were brought in, and the soft snap of closing doors on official Mercedes became a familiar sound. Karak got statistics. Karak has been overtaken by the new age. For the moment the town is proud of it, but has the lot of its inhabitants really been radically improved as a result of all the commotion and all those achievements?

Capitalist Success

There is reason to doubt it when one sees teenagers smoking two packs of cigarettes a day to give themselves the swaggering look seen in advertising from across the Atlantic, when one notices that the province's nomads no longer eat anything except canned food--which they swallow without even heating it--and when one meets Abdallah,

a young herdsman who owns about 100 sheep and goats and uses a transistor radio as a pillow.

Although late in coming and attenuated, the phenomena noted in Karak do make that unpretentious district administrative center a microcosm of "rejectionist Jordan," which is what Cairo's ruler has called the Hashemite kingdom since King Husayn refused to participate in the Camp David peace process on the grounds--repeated just recently--of a theoretical "Jordanian option" that would consist of returning to Amman, at least provisionally, the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

Rejectionist Jordan is also a country that has become an example of capitalist success in less than a decade--having "rid itself" of its armed Palestinian elements following the murderous confrontation of 1970 (they are now in Lebanon) and kept its citizens of Palestinian origin, who represent approximately 60 percent of its total population and 80 percent of the population of its capital and devote themselves with talent to commerce, industry, and finance. It is an all the more remarkable example in that following the 1967 loss of the West Bank, which had been providing nearly 50 percent of the national income, there was little expectation that a Jordan reduced to the Jordan River's east bank would survive economically. Accustomed to the stereotype of the Beirut Palestinian armed with his submachinegun and dialectics, the observer now discovers that Palestinian's unexpected cousin in Amman--a cousin who smokes big cigars, reads stock market newspapers, and is the mainspring of the country's economic achievements.

Practically speaking, everything functions well in Jordan. Business, first of all, Amman hums with commercial and financial activity and, including its outskirts, has a population of 1 million (the kingdom's total population, excluding the West Bank, which has been occupied by the Israelis since 1967, is 2.2 million). In 1946 Amman was an impoverished market town with 46,000 residents, but in 1981 it is a big city bursting with health. As a new Petra--that small Nabataean Arab city in the southern part of today's Jordan which succeeded in controlling a major share of Eastern trade at the end of ancient times--Amman has been able, as a result of the weakening of Beirut and the incapacity of Egypt, to become the new hub of the Middle East. The service sector provided 63 percent of the gross domestic income in 1980.

In 1.5 years Amman opened five new big hotels that immediately hummed with businessmen from every corner of the world, including South Korea and Singapore. It built a 60-kilometer peripheral boulevard that is already being overrun by frenetic real estate development. It is building a second international airport that will perpetuate the memory of Queen Alia, killed in a helicopter accident in 1977.

The Hashemite monarchy has been held up to obloquy by the Baathist regime in indigent Syria⁴ since last year, but on the other hand, it has been coddled during the same period by the Baathist regime in rich Iraq, not to mention the benefits that have long been lavished on it by the oil dynasties on the Arabian Peninsula. In 1980, the "pension" paid to Amman in three nearly equal parts by Baghdad, Riyadh, and the oil principalities totaled the equivalent of 6 billion francs. That sum, added to Western--especially American--aid totaling 1 billion francs, has been well managed and not too badly distributed, with the result that in 1980 a nation whose exports (chiefly phosphates) cover only 15 percent of its imports was able, as in previous years, to show a comfortable surplus in its balance of payments. The Jordanian dinar is completely convertible and one of the strongest currencies in the Arab world. The

current rate of economic growth is 9 percent, while the inflation rate does not exceed 10 percent.

One Hundred Thousand Immigrants

Although Jordan has been the only non-petroleum-producing Arab state (along with Lebanon) forced to attract foreign manpower in its hour of prosperity--there were more than 100,000 immigrants from the Third World in 1980--it is also true that back in the time of lean cows, more than 400,000 members of its working population (the great majority of them Jordanians of Palestinian origin) left to go work on the Arabian Peninsula and are still there. For the moment, they prefer to invest in Jordan--especially in construction--rather than return there, and in 1979 they transferred the equivalent of more than 2.5 billion francs to their adopted homeland. So the expatriates make a good showing among the architects of an expansion which, according to UN figures, has meant a doubling in 3 years of Jordan's annual per capita income, which exceeded 5,500 francs in 1979.

Since 1975, in an effort to tone down the imported and artificial nature of its achievements, Jordan has been pursuing a determined policy for the development of its agricultural and industrial resources, which incidentally are very limited. As a result, the share of gross domestic income contributed by those two sectors has grown in 5 years from 15 to 37 percent. Fruit and vegetables from the Jordan River--including, it is true, those from the occupied bank--supply Saudi Arabia. Aqaba, Jordan's window on the Red Sea, is already dedicated to tourism and port traffic⁵ (chiefly for Iraq, especially since the war with Iran), and with the help of the French Spie-Batignolles Company, it is now putting up a huge chemical fertilizer complex along its 25 kilometers of coastline. On the Dead Sea, large-scale preparations are underway for the extraction of Lissan potash (at 2 billion tons, the deposits, which were discovered in 1972, make up the world's largest reserve of that product) and of Finan copper farther south.

Even if it is true that "the Jordanian Government, (after) demonstrating great efficiency in management.. of an economic system... based on foreign aid,... now seems to be showing the same talent for transforming that system,"⁶ the fact remains that the "Jordanian miracle" is still fragile, since it depends to a large extent on the changes in mood (or regime) that may occur in Baghdad or Riyadh and on the spurious peace that prevails in that region.

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[Text] The transformations experienced by the provincial capital of Karak, that overgrown village of 28,000 inhabitants, provide a general picture of a country--capitalist to a large extent and fueled by Arab aid--whose development is so rapid that it is already having to use 100,000 foreign workers (LE MONDE, 20 June).

Amman--It resembles a beautiful piece of countryside in Provence, with the exception that here the tops of the cypresses would be overlooked by a blue and white minaret. If you are a man and you lose your way in the dry hillside oasis making up the University of Jordan (it was established in 1962 and now, 19 years later, has 12,500 students, with another 3,000 enrolled at Yarmuq University, which was established in the northern part of the kingdom in 1976), don't take it into your head to ask your

way of one of the girls whose path you will cross and who, at the very most, allow no more of themselves to be seen than their lowered eyes and pinched lips. She would turn her head, convinced that a good Moslem woman "must speak only to the males of her blood and her husband."

As in Egypt or Lebanon, the fundamentalist phenomenon in Jordan shows up first on the campuses, where the Iranian revolution has given tremendous impetus to the ambitions and dreams of the young Islamic fundamentalists. SAWT AL-ISLAM (Voice of Islam), a clandestine student newspaper, bears witness to a passionate admiration for the Persian ayatollahs while simultaneously attacking the teachers and women students of Amman "whose minds have been corrupted by the West." To avoid turmoil, it became necessary last year to install prayer rooms in the various departments, even though a superb and huge mosque is located at the entrance to the university.

The pious students, who are represented by four or five associations, do not seem impoverished--if one is to believe concordant testimony from various sources, they offer money to girls who agree to adopt "modern Islamic dress," the chief component of which is a sort of cassock in muted colors. And they travel in private automobiles or taxis, preferably those belonging to the Al-Jihad ("holy war") Company.

The similarities with the situation in neighboring countries end there. While Syria or Iraq hunts down the Moslem Brotherhood and Egypt only tolerates it, Jordan is probably the only Arab state--if we except Saudi Arabia, Islam's "Vatican," which lives under a theocratic regime and has never been colonized--that recognizes the brotherhood, which is the traditional champion of militant fundamentalism. The Moslem Brotherhood originated in Egypt, where it was founded half a century ago, but it "knows no frontiers except those of religion." It is regarded by Jordanian authorities as a "welfare association."

Supreme Leader

It was during the time of Nasir, when Radio Cairo was promising young King Husayn on a daily basis that he would meet the same bloody end as his cousin Faisal II in Baghdad (1935-1958), that Amman offered asylum to some brotherhood members who had escaped from Egypt's prisons and even its gallows. Even today, it is one of Nasir's former compatriots, Kamil Sharif, a man who if not a member of the brotherhood is at least close to it, who is the kingdom's minister of religious affairs and holy places. And his brother, Mahmoud Sharif, publishes one of the two progovernment newspapers in Amman: AL DUSTUR (The Constitution), whose circulation is estimated at 35,000.

The brotherhood's acknowledged supreme leader ("murshid") in Jordan has for years been a lawyer from Salt, a small middle-class town 30 kilometers northeast of the capital. He is Muhammad 'Abd-al-Rahman Khalifah. He was born in 1926 and was first a judge, then a deputy from 1956 to 1961 and a member of the Executive Board of the Interstate Islamic Conference. He has no qualms about presenting himself in the Arab "Who's Who" (1978 edition) as "deputy chairman of the Executive Council of the Moslem Brotherhood for the Arab world." This eminent person sometimes expresses himself as "worldwide spokesman for the Moslem Brotherhood," as happened, for example, when condemning the Egyptian-Israeli peace.

Discreet the rest of the time, and efficient as well, Khalifah has gradually seen to it that school curricula and programs on TV-1 bear the invisible--but omnipresent--

"nihil obstat" of the brotherhood. The government has also granted the brotherhood de facto "responsibility for overseeing the country's moral health." It was about time. A new hydra--not with 1,000 heads but with 1,000 videocassettes (pornographic, of course)--was threatening Jordanian young people after corrupting the youth of the petroleum-producing principalities. It is believed in Amman that information from the brotherhood's "secret service" is what has led to police searches at import firms involved in that culpable business.

In exchange for those concessions, which do not cost much politically, the Moslem Brotherhood does not badger the government, as it does in Egypt, to enforce Koranic punishments, outlaw interest on loans, or remove Christians from responsible posts. The Christians are well represented in most of the government organizations--in some cases overrepresented in terms of their numbers in the total population (13 percent)--and it can be said that currently they are the minority living most peaceably in the Middle East. *The excessive Islamization of education does not overly disturb them, since their own schools do not appear to be threatened.*

But the assassination on 16 March of two Christian teachers in Ajlun, in the northern part of the kingdom, by alleged members of the Moslem Brotherhood (who were arrested a month later) nevertheless caused a sense of anxiety to pass over the minority community.

Will the fundamentalists always be content with their portion of influence--all in all quite limited--and will they remain one of the "objective" supporters of the Hashemite throne? A young Amman university student says: "It is not certain, because the moderate wing of the brotherhood, which is especially strong in national education, has apparently been outflanked recently by a more radical wing that is predominantly Palestinian in its thinking." Other Jordanian intellectuals compare the radical wing to the former clandestine Islamic liberation movement (Al-Tahrir Al-Islam) established by a Palestinian about 40 years ago in Jerusalem, which was then partly under Jordanian control. That movement attracted part of the intelligentsia on both banks of the Jordan River for a time during the 1950's. Whether related to that movement historically or not, an increasingly numerous faction within the Moslem Brotherhood seems to want to reject cooperation with the Jordanian Government. 'Abdallah 'Azzam, the Palestinian professor of Islamic law who was excluded from the Amman university in 1980, was probably one representative of those leanings.

Syrian Hegemony

It is also noted that one of the small student Islamist groups decided in Amman to call itself Takfir wa Hijra--which can be translated as "Anathema and Retreat"--a name already used in Egypt by a secret association of violent and anarchistic Moslem "Carbonari" who in 1977 took hostage and killed a modernist ulema in Cairo who had been a minister under President Sadat. Their leaders were subsequently tried and executed. There was renewed talk of the Takfir during the disturbances at Mecca in 1979. Does a Jordanian branch still exist? Some people think so.

The various fundamentalist sensibilities in Jordan agree on at least one thing, and that is the aid to be given to Moslem Brothers in Syria, who are waging merciless war on the Damascus regime--not so much, incidentally, because it is autocratic but because it is dominated by the Shiite Moslem minority of the Alawites (or Nocairis), "heretics among heretics" in the eyes of the Sunnites. But that support, facilitated

by a frontier running through the open desert, does not seem to have gone beyond the stage of welcoming fugitives with open arms. And that was already being done in any case before General Assad took power in 1970--as, for example, when Jordan granted asylum to Syria's two most famous fundamentalist jurists, Mohamed Mubarak and Mustafa Zaska, who have been teaching in Amman since then. The brotherhood was outlawed in Syria as far back as 1963.

Although Damascus has used the pretext of "Jordanian support for the terrorist Moslem Brotherhood" to maintain a situation of tension with Jordan since last year--due in reality to Syria's hegemonic designs on the area--it is completely obvious that King Husayn, who refused to join in the Camp David peace process in order to avoid turning his Arab neighbors against him, has not run the risk of provoking the most powerful of those neighbors by transforming his kingdom into a rear base for the Syrian Moslem Brotherhood.

The fact remains that if the Hashemite sovereign wants to prevent the holy brotherhood from someday turning into dangerous opposition in his own country, he will have to let Jordan continue as a refuge for any member who is being hunted. There is limited room for maneuver between those two exigencies, but King Husayn, who at 45 years of age is one of the youngest but also the most senior of the Arab chiefs of state, has already met many other challenges in the 30 years of his reign. So most of his subjects, who could not care less about living under a fundamentalist Koranic regime--requiring only that their monarch be a descendant of Muhammad--trust him to see that the Moslem Brotherhood remains a shadow in their country, and only a shadow.

FOOTNOTES

1. British officer and writer (1888-1935) who was one of the architects of the Arab revolt--called a "revolution" by the Arabs--against the Ottomans in 1916-1918.
2. British officer in command of the Arab Legion from 1939 until 1956, when it became the Jordanian Army.
3. In March 1981, only about 100 Palestinians remained imprisoned in Jordan for political reasons, and none was under a death sentence, according to the local section of the International League for Human Rights.
4. In February, a Syrian commando arrested in Soueileh, near Amman, allegedly had been sent to assassinate Jordanian Prime Minister Mudhir Paderan.
5. The total traffic through 'Aqaba rose from 1.5 million tons in 1974 to more than 5 million tons in 1979.
6. Francois Rivier, "Croissance industrielle dans une economie assistee: le cas jordanien" [Industrial Growth in an Assisted Economy: the Jordanian Case], French Center for Study and Research on the Contemporary Middle East, Beirut, 1981, 227 pp.