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‘Authoritarian Neoliberalism’ and Youth Empowerment in Jordan

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ABSTRACT



This article examines youth entrepreneurship in Jordan in the context of the country’s neoliberal reforms. Drawing on Foucauldian scholarship on neoliberal governmentality and the literature on authoritarian neoliberalism, we argue that youth empowerment is part of the Jordanian regime’s strategy of subject formation along neoliberal lines through the dissemination of market ideas of competitiveness, enterprise society and self-responsibility. The article presents new empirical material that includes interviews conducted in Jordan and Egypt and highlights how the King’s two initiatives display a win-win relationship for the regime and the youth alike without necessarily challenging the status.

KEYWORDS

Authoritarian neoliberalism; subject formation; entrepreneurship; youth empowerment; elite politics; Jordan

Introduction

In April 2013, the ten finalists for the King Abdullah II Award for Youth Innovation and Achievement (KAAYIA) were invited for a three-day meeting in Amman, Jordan, in the King Hussein Business Park. The KAAYIA, launched by King Abdullah II in 2007, aims to promote and support innovation, active citizenship and social entrepreneurship among youth in the Middle East and North Africa (KAAYIA 2015). These three days were filled with various meetings including mentoring sessions, short capacity building trainings as well as media strategy development. The actual interview and pitch of the entrepreneurial idea in front of the selection committee, composed of regional business elites, constituted the critical 30 min for each finalist. What was particularly striking to the observer was that a media production company was present and recorded the finalists. It captured inter alia how each of them entered the interview and came out of it again, giving instructions when and how to move in order to have a good timing for the camera rather than acting on the order of the selection committee who was deciding on the winner of the award. In several instances, a finalist tried to enter the interview several times before the media company representative was satisfied. After the interview each finalist was

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welcomed with an applause by the other finalists and was asked to give a brief statement about how the interview went.¹

This set up reminds us more of a ‘staged show’ than an interview situation and illustrates the importance of performance of entrepreneurs beyond their entrepreneurial idea. This impression was further nurtured by the coverage of the entire application process, including the production of short videos featuring the finalists and the award itself. While these features offer insights into the entrepreneurship ideas of each finalist, they also show that these entrepreneurs strongly rely on buzzwords such as self-activation, empowerment or social impact when describing their ideas and the socio-economic issues they address.²

Launched in 2007 at the World Economic Forum Middle East and North Africa (WEF-MENA) in Jordan, the KAAYIA award is the first youth entrepreneurship initiatives introduced by King Abdullah II to support young social entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Oasis500, another highly prestigious entrepreneurship initiative, was founded in 2010 with the goal of supporting young Arab business entrepreneurs. In addition to promoting youth entrepreneurship, these initiatives strive to create role models who lead by example and encourage other young people to follow suit. Both the KAAYIA and Oasis500 are linked to the King Abdullah Fund for Development (KAFD), which was established by royal decree in 2001. KAFD calls upon the business elite and the youth to work towards economic development and youth employability (Schroeder 2013; The Jordan Times 2014, 2015).

Indeed, since his accession to the throne in 1999, King Abdullah II has placed entrepreneurship at the core of the national economic vision relying on a comprehensive neoliberal transformation programme. This has been exemplified by, *inter alia*, widespread decentralization practices reaching the municipal governance structures (Clark 2012; Parker and Debruyne 2012) along with new national laws and economic reforms to facilitate privatization and foreign investment. Meanwhile, King Abdullah II has established institutional platforms to assemble the political and economic elites loyal to the regime and regime-promoted neoliberal policies (Bank and Schlumberger 2004; Knowles 2005).

We argue that a governmentality perspective is useful to illustrate Jordanian youth empowerment through neoliberal subject formation. While acknowledging the highly contested nature of the concept, we understand neoliberalism as ‘a desire to organise societies according to the expectations generated by liberal or neoclassical market modelling’ (Harrison 2010, 433). Our study builds upon the ample governmentality research within the International Relations (IR) scholarship (Harrison 2010; Joseph 2010). Governmentality is ‘the rationalization and systematization of a particular way of exercising political sovereignty through the government of people’s conduct’ (O’Farrell 2005, 107) through technologies of subjectification (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2017). We are particularly guided by debates on (neo-)liberal governmentality interventions and subject formation in the Middle East (Mitchell 2002; İşleyen 2015b; Paragi 2016) and more broadly by studies using bottom-up approaches to national and international development and community-building programmes across Africa and Asia (Ferdinand Rosén 2011; Gabay and Death 2012).

A prevailing argument in governmentality studies is that under neoliberalism the role of the state diminishes. Our investigation of Jordanian youth entrepreneurship, however, shows that the state remains a central actor in the production of neoliberal discourses

and practice. The case of Jordan speaks to the growing body of research that seeks to offer a corrective to the study of neoliberalism by illustrating the growing salience of ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ across the world (De Smet and Bogaert 2017; Tansel 2017; Bruff and Tansel 2019; Jessop 2019). Our findings provide empirical weight to and also advance the authoritarian neoliberalism literature. Rather than being confined to disciplinary and coercive methods, neoliberalism works through indirect rule resting on the active participation by subjects as conceptualized by governmentality studies. In other words, youth agency is not so much about resistance, contestation and alternative subject formation as a reaction to (neo-)liberal interventions (Bachmann 2012) as it is about a consensual form of active involvement. Through the example of the KAYYIA and Oasis500, we show how entrepreneurship is not one-sided but a win-win relationship for the regime and the youth alike. The initiatives are examples of regime-promoted neoliberalism through the dissemination and the facilitation of entrepreneurial thinking, risk-taking, competitiveness, responsibility and self-empowerment.

This study draws on semi-structured interviews conducted during field research in Jordan and in Egypt between 2011 and 2013 as well as secondary resources in the form of documents (in particular reports, news articles, press releases, speeches and websites). The analyzed documents were published by Oasis500/KAAYIA entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship support initiatives (in particular the KAFD, the KAAYIA and Oasis 500), as well as experts in the field of entrepreneurship. The same actors were also targeted as interview partners. In total, 16 interviews were conducted. Using a poststructuralist governmentality framework enables us to study the rationalities and techniques through which a particular subjectivity is formed, and to unpack how young entrepreneurs and the regime co-constitute one another. This helps to illuminate not only the formal aspects of these initiatives but also the informal practices, subjective perception and representation.

Oasis500 and the KAAYIA as royal elite initiatives are not only the dominant initiatives in the field of (social) entrepreneurship but were established several years ago which enables us to cover a time period of approximately six years starting from 2009 until 2015. Moreover, while Oasis500 constitutes an incubator that is typical in the field of entrepreneurship support worldwide, the KAAYIA is the only regional social entrepreneurship award that can draw on the personal support by an authoritarian ruler and by a leading neoliberal international initiative such as the WEF. Thus, our case selection enables us to highlight the Jordan-specific issues as well as broader (global) patterns.

Neoliberalism, subject formation and youth empowerment

Our theoretical framework brings together critical scholarship on neoliberal subjectivity (e.g. Abrahamsen 2004; Weidner 2009; Harrison 2010), the growing literature on the intersection between youth policies and economic policies (Mlatsheni and Leibbrandt 2011) and authoritarian neoliberalism (Tansel 2017; Bruff and Tansel 2019; Jessop 2019). Scholars who investigate youth empowerment under neoliberalism shed light on ‘new forms of agency and new forms of discipline’ (Abrahamsen 2004, 1454). They argue that youth empowerment programmes insert ‘imaginaries of youth transitioning to be successful, responsible and self-sufficient’ (Gordon 2013, 110). Our focus is two-fold. We not only examine the specific logics and techniques through which the KAAYIA and Oasis500 deploy their programmes of youth empowerment for purposes of neoliberal subject

formation. But we also investigate how neoliberal subjectivity is performed (Weidner 2009; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2017).

Subject formation in neoliberalism rests on viewing the population ‘as a source of energies contained within individuals’ exercise of freedom and self-responsibility’ (Dean 1999, 152). The neoliberal subject is the ‘*homo oeconomicus*’, who ‘is the man of enterprise and production’ (Foucault 2008, 147). The *homo oeconomicus* in neo-liberalism is ‘an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself’ (Foucault 2008, 226), whose behaviour is increasingly regulated by the elements and visions originating from the market (Gane 2012).

As Weidner puts it, ‘the neoliberal subject is not a natural subject’ (2009, 404). Rather, the individual ‘must first be shaped, guided and moulded’ (Dean 1999, 165) to become the competitive, entrepreneurial and self-governing neoliberal subject. Governance is then about the intervention into the social through logics and techniques that operate as power from a distance. Power does not refer to domination or suppression but functions in an indirect manner by means of subtle rationalities and techniques that stimulate behaviour, diffuse understandings and encourage individuals along neoliberal lines (Joseph 2010).

While mirroring the empowerment and self-conduct of individuals in relation to economic rationalities, neoliberal subject formation employs administrative and technical devices that interpret, sort out and normalize courses of action and societal phenomena according to particular visions, benchmarks, methodologies and performance evaluation tools developed in a market fashion (Rose and Miller 1992, 183–187). Neoliberalism brings with it an ever-expanding apparatus of performance evaluation and management, self-calculation and benchmarking and risk measurement that makes the neoliberal subject ‘both the object of improvement and the subject that does the improving’ (Abrahamson 2004, 1459).

‘Human capital’ is an inseparable element of the *homo oeconomicus*. The neoliberal individual is expected to invest in their human capital, augment it and employ it ‘to achieve the best return’ (Weidner 2009, 401). Relatedly, recent studies on governmentality emphasise the need for ‘attending to the *specificities* of *how* processes of subjectification are experienced from the perspective of those who are to be reformed’ (Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2017, 207). Adopting an ‘agency-centred way of understanding neoliberal intervention’ (Harrison 2010, 439), a governmentality perspective looks at how subjects adopt an ‘entrepreneurial self’ taking on and utilizing ‘the competitive rules of conduct’ (Joseph 2010, 228). Neoliberal subjectivity is formed and engaged in particular ‘social practices’ in line with market logics. These social practices include, for example, the displaying of such ‘habits’ as language, networks and other behavioural norms and patterns (Harrison 2010).

Resilience is a central idea integral to neoliberal governmentality. Denoting ‘the ability to withstand and survive shocks and disturbances’ (Joseph 2013, 39), resilience is not limited to societal and organizational management, but increasingly takes an individualized form (Juncos and Joseph 2020). Resilience within neoliberal governmentality entails ‘the idea that we must change our behaviour and adapt to things beyond our control’ (Joseph 2013, 43).

Recent research cautions us against arguments that the state has lost its relevance in neoliberalism. Jordan’s two youth empowerment programmes attests to neoliberalism as ‘authoritarian statism’ (Jessop 2019). What makes the concept of authoritarian

neoliberalism novel from its other widespread usages lies in its ‘emphasis on the state as a political organization that acts as a custodian of capital accumulation’ by relying on ‘coercive, administrative and legal deployment of state power’ with a view to maintaining class power (Tansel 2017, 4). The promotion of youth entrepreneurship in Jordan affirms the state’s role in the diffusion of neoliberal ideas and policies to create market-oriented, dynamic and business-minded individuals under authoritarian rule (Heydemann 2004). However, as the staged show of the KAAYIA finalists as detailed in the introductory paragraph illustrates, it is not so much about the authoritarian state’s utilization of disciplinary, repressive and coercive ways to sustain its rule and capital accumulation as argued in the literature (Tansel 2017). Rather, what we observe is the regulation of conduct based on the active participation and performance of individuals along neoliberal lines.

Scholars of authoritarian neoliberalism point out how practices of capitalism ‘seek to marginalize, discipline and control dissenting social groups and oppositional politics rather than strive for their explicit consent or co-optation’ (Bruff and Tansel 2019, 234; for an exception, see Kreitmeyr 2019). They observe ‘a significant shift away from consensus-based strategies’ to ‘coercive and disciplinary practices’ (Tansel 2017, 11). Without denying the oppressive nature of authoritarian neoliberal rule, we take seriously those governmentality studies in the field of IR, which reject the treatment of freedom and discipline/coercion as mutually exclusive forms of rule in a given society (Gabay and Death 2012). While we agree with Sukarieh’s call for including ‘class awareness and class-based consciousness’ in studying the rather antagonistic relationship between the marginalized and poor Jordanian youth (Sukarieh 2016, 1208), a governmentality perspective enables us to unpack dynamics of interaction that cannot be reduced to oppression.

Economic neoliberalism in Jordan

The succession of the Jordanian King Hussein by his son Abdullah II in 1999 proved a milestone in the history of the Jordanian national and international economic policies and relations with transnational economic institutions. As the successor of King Hussein, King Abdullah II identified economic reform as chief topics during his reign. Whereas King Hussein’s reign was characterized predominantly by a focus on regional security and foreign relations, King Abdullah II put special emphasis on issues of economic growth and technological development starting from the first days of his rule (Piro 1998; Moore 2004; Knowles 2005). Shortly after coming to power, King Abdullah II expressed his ambition to undertake a reform process that would enable Jordan to become an economic success and a model to be followed by other regional countries (Wils 2003; Bank 2004; Knowles 2005). The outcome was the introduction of large-scale economic reforms reaching different governance levels and a variety of policy areas and operating through multiple communication networks and alliances with the domestic elite (Bank and Schlumberger 2004; Alissa 2007).

The neoliberal orientation of Jordanian economic policies under King Abdullah materialized through a wide range of economic reforms. New laws have enabled the creation of favourable conditions for foreign investment, privatization and socio-economic development. Internal reforms were carried out in line with agreements with international organizations and governments, such as the International Monetary Fund and the European Union. In 2000, Jordan became a member of the World Trade Organisation, and a free

trade agreement was signed with the United States (Knowles 2005; Alissa 2007; Watkins 2019).

Neoliberal reforms also addressed local politics. Jordanian municipalities turned into major targets of neoliberal reforms employing diverse strategies of decentralization and supporting a gradual decrease of municipal responsibilities and budgetary cuts (Clark 2012; Parker and Debryne 2012). Another important attempt of the new King has been the formation of new institutional sites of communication and exchange with the Jordanian economic elite. Envisaged as an advisory body to advance strategies in economic policies, the Economic Consultative Council (ECC) created in 1999 has served this purpose by bringing together Jordanian political and economic elites loyal to the new King. What is important to note about the ECC is that the representatives of the business sector demonstrated a neoliberal economic mind-set.³ Together with the political elite, the private sector members of the ECC became powerful drivers and de facto decision-makers of economic neoliberalism in Jordan (Wils 2003; Bank and Schlumberger 2004).

In this context, entrepreneurship became an essential element and building block of Jordanian neoliberal reforms explicitly supported by King Abdullah II. Neoliberal ideas of competition, economic efficiency and competitiveness were promoted not only by the Jordanian regime but also by international organizations working with Jordanian public and private institutions in the field of structural adjustment reforms. Similar to other countries in the region such as Egypt and Tunisia, the neoliberal structuring of the economy by the Jordanian regime has encouraged and actively supported the emergence and operation of politically dynamic and business minded entrepreneurs with a global orientation (Heydemann 2004; Schlumberger 2008; Guazzone and Pioppi 2009; Hertog, Luciani, and Valeri 2013). For instance, the business elite that the Jordanian King assembled in the ECC has been ‘Jordanian economic “success stories”, symbolizing young, self-confident “winners” in globalization and have internalized the currently fashionable neoliberal jargon’. They have pushed for ‘the far-reaching economic and technological transformation of Jordan and its integration into the globalized world economy’ through ‘the abolition of trade barriers, privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and increased investments in the education sector as well as in information technologies’ (Bank and Schlumberger 2004, 41). Neoliberalism has for decades served authoritarian elites in their endeavour to hold on power and benefits by means of exploiting neoliberal reforms through the monopolization and delimitation of liberalization processes.

Neoliberal subject formation and the KAFD

In 2001, King Abdullah II of Jordan announced the establishment of the King Abdullah II Fund for Development (KAFD). The KAFD hosts a multitude of initiatives with a particular focus on youth and the development of human capital, infrastructure and entrepreneurship. In the words of King Abdullah II:

We ask to establish a special fund to serve as the institutional umbrella that contributes to supporting efforts at all levels; developmental, social and educational. This fund is to stimulate comprehensive development through projects that tie together our people’s potentials, direct them towards productivity and creativity, while providing this Fund with capable expertise to manage it efficiently and ensure its success in serving the noble goals it is meant to achieve (King Abdullah II, 2001).⁴

As becomes apparent in the King's announcement of the establishment of the KAFD, the KAFD was designed to take an active part in both the development of projects and of people in Jordan. It emphasizes the active participation and contribution of citizens to socio-economic development. Productivity and creativity are key elements in this endeavour. Two of the KAFD's initiatives, the KAAYIA and Oasis500, are outstanding in this regard and attract the interest of young entrepreneurs and business elites throughout the MENA region as well as of international actors.

Between their establishment in 2007 and 2010 respectively and 2015, the KAAYIA has selected 30 social entrepreneurs and Oasis500 has trained more than 2.000 entrepreneurs and has invested in approximately 100 Oasis500 entrepreneurs (Fayyad 2013; Al-Wakeel 2014; KAAYIA 2015). Although these are manageable numbers, many of these entrepreneurs have developed their enterprises into successful ones that reach out across the MENA. The online bookstore Jamalon, the digital education company Little Thinking Minds, the video content site Ekeif or the mobile game developer Tamatem, for instance, were all founded by Jordanians in Jordan but now operate across the whole region or even beyond. Similarly, several Jordanian social entrepreneurs, inter alia Kamel Al-Asmar (Nakhweh), Rawan Barakat (Raneen), Saeed Abu El Hassan (Irbid Youth Volunteers) have become well-known.⁵

As the following analysis demonstrates, the establishment of these two initiatives indicates an active support for the development of enterprises and the formation of entrepreneurs both in the economic and in the social sphere as envisioned by King Abdullah II. Both initiatives constitute spaces of neoliberal subject formation of the youth as productive entrepreneurs under the direct control of Jordanian elites. Subject formation takes place through rationalities that frame objectives, socio-economic issues and approaches to their solution as well as of the role of young entrepreneurs. Moreover, these initiatives exert considerable influence on the formation of young entrepreneurs with regard to their entrepreneurial projects, behavioural patterns and neoliberal mindset. In other words, the business elites dominate the development of the Jordanian entrepreneurship ecosystem and align it to the agenda of the authoritarian regime. The remainder of this analysis will focus on these logics – rationalities of entrepreneurship, depoliticization and the marketing of the self as well as elite-entrepreneur ties – in more depth.

The rationalities of Jordanian entrepreneurship

Both initiatives, the KAAYIA and Oasis500, draw heavily on the international discourse on socio-economic development. Yet, their focus is less on the systemic level than on the micro level and the Jordanian context: active citizenship, community development and economic empowerment especially of the youth are key areas of interest. Entrepreneurship functions as the neoliberal tool that guides action in these areas and promises solutions to socio-economic issues.

This being said, the KAAYIA puts a much stronger emphasis on social issues than Oasis500 does. The KAAYIA aims to support those youth

[...] who have pioneered innovative solutions to urgent social, economic and environmental challenges [in their communities]. The Award is designed to promote creative problem-solving and cross-border dialogue and cooperation among Arab youth. Through shining a

much-needed spotlight on youth-led social change, the KAAYIA seeks to encourage present and future generations of Arab Youth to assume their roles as active citizens (KAAYIA 2013, 2).

This quote demonstrates that social entrepreneurs constitute neoliberal subjects on several accounts. Entrepreneurship has been marketed as a profession and development tool extending beyond the economic sphere. In this context, the engagement of the youth, defined as the age group of 18–30-year olds, in entrepreneurship has directly been linked to socio-economic development at the local level. The notions of ‘active citizenship’ and leadership are strongly emphasized and contain the characteristics of neoliberal subjects: competitiveness, innovation, productivity, capabilities as well as moral and social responsibility (KAAYIA 2015, 6–8, 14f.). Becoming entrepreneurial subjects, and thus active citizens and young leaders, appears to be both an obligation and an opportunity. As part of its award, the KAAYIA offers not only financial support but also training in order to develop the skills and competencies of young leaders. As the initiative states ‘[w]ith the proper support, Arab youth have the potential and creativity to achieve remarkable success in all their endeavours’ (KAAYIA 2015, 3). The mixture of the active engagement of the youth in socio-economic development, capacity building and funding are framed as the solution. However, as the profiles of the KAAYIA finalists highlight, this approach clearly targets those youth who are already actively engaged in their communities and, therefore, are easy to mobilize and form into success stories (KAAYIA 2011, 2013, 2015).

Oasis500, however, focuses on innovative entrepreneurs in the fields of ICT, health technology and creative industry. The name Oasis500 refers to its mission to help 500 early stage enterprises within a 5-year-period to ‘cross the desert in seed funding and support’. According to the company, an oasis of at least 500 flourishing enterprises catches the society’s attention and exemplifies how to overcome existing challenges that impede entrepreneurial action (Personal interview, April 2015; see also Fayyad 2013). Similar to the KAAYIA, Oasis500 looks for innovative, ambitious and hardworking entrepreneurs who are already actively engaged in entrepreneurship: ‘It all starts with reaching out to those people with the entrepreneurial drive, compelling them to embrace it and submit their startup ideas to Oasis500’.⁶

Thus, Oasis500 follows a similarly selective empowerment approach as the KAAYIA. It is doubtful that such a selective approach to youth empowerment can contribute greatly to socio-economic development. Therefore, we cannot speak of a broad societal approach to youth empowerment but of a very selective one that does not touch upon the fundamental issues of youth unemployment, poverty and underdevelopment. On the contrary, this selective empowerment strategy further deepens existing inequalities and issues.

On the basis of the formal application documents and personal interviews, the selection committees of the KAAYIA and Oasis500 conduct a first screening. In the case of the KAAYIA field visits of the social enterprises and a three-day training programme for the ten chosen finalists complement the selection procedures (KAAYIA 2015). Oasis500 relies on a five-day long boot camp to further get to know potential candidates; as a final step, entrepreneurs have to pitch their ideas in front of an internal jury in order to become Oasis500 entrepreneurs. Candidates pass each step in the application process if their applications ‘score within the acceptable range’; the same holds true for the two follow up rounds of investments and mentoring as well as access to angel investment

as the final step in the competitive incubation programme. Oasis500 wants to see that candidates have not only an innovative idea but also plans how to grow this idea into a business. Scores are given for their preliminary work, i.e. market analysis, market/growth strategy, revenue streams and financial plans as well as a roadmap for the first year. Oasis500 provides guidance and in-depth information on their expectations; the pitch deck template, for instance, is 38 pages long (bilingual English and Arabic) detailing exactly how the pitch should be structured, what questions to address and gives examples for each section. Once accepted as an Oasis500 entrepreneur, scores are also given for their progress in these areas during each step of the incubation and acceleration process.⁷

The identification of enterprises that exhibit the potential for success and growth constitutes only one aspect of these extensive selection procedures. Equally, if not more, important are the entrepreneurs themselves. Both the KAAYIA and Oasis500 search for those youth who feature the characteristics of neoliberal subjects who demonstrate persistence, team-work, competitiveness, as well as stress resilience. In this context Oasis500 stresses that, although not desirable, enterprises may fail. Having said this, Oasis500 is predominantly interested in teams of entrepreneurs who complement each other rather than in individual entrepreneurs. Thus, while the entrepreneurs are the driving forces behind their enterprises, Oasis 500 features the enterprises as the outcome of entrepreneurial action and not the entrepreneurs on its website (Personal interview, April 2013).⁸

The KAAYIA also strongly focuses on the person of the entrepreneur. In fact, the individual entrepreneur seems to play a more central role than the enterprise and the entrepreneurial idea. This becomes particularly apparent not only when looking at the brochures and the KAAYIA webpage featuring their entrepreneurs but also when listening to them. Contrary to the omnipresence of the names of the entrepreneurs and their profiles, their enterprises and ideas are only briefly mentioned (KAAYIA 2011, 2015).⁹ While Oasis500 pays close attention to the entrepreneur, the enterprise and ideas, the latter seems negligible in the case of the KAAYA. One entrepreneur stated that ‘the leadership focus and the prevailing local culture facilitate a “me-instead-of-we attitude”’ (Personal interview, March 2013). This is problematic as the focus on the subject at the expense of the enterprise and the idea again questions whether fostering socio-economic development is really a concern for that initiative or whether it is the show-effect, prestige and clientelistic ties that play a more important role. In other words, this suggests that KAAYIA finalists and winners do not necessarily need to have a sound business idea but be able to act as neoliberal subjects.

Depoliticization & the marketing of the self

This contradiction becomes even more conclusive if we take the depoliticizing effects of the two youth empowerment projects into consideration. Depoliticization concerns rationalities and techniques that work to *manage* societal and political problems, inequalities, controversies and conflicts without endangering ‘the sedimented social sphere’ and ‘the foundations of the social order’ (İşleyen 2015b, 258). Depoliticization is therefore highly political. The aim is to direct individual behaviour towards activities and agendas that have little, if any, transformative capacity and potential. As a result, the existing political, social and economic status quo is left untouched and the social order is preserved (İşleyen 2015b).

Neither the KAAYIA nor Oasis500 touch upon Jordanian-specific political issues as obstacles or driving forces of socio-economic development. Instead, they focus on technocratic and practical issues such as human capital formation and financial support. Accordingly, both initiatives emphasize that there is not a lack of young entrepreneurs with good ideas. However, these entrepreneurs need guidance and support in order to become the successful entrepreneurs that they can potentially be (Personal interviews, April 2013). They have to be shaped and moulded in the Foucauldian sense to become the desirable neoliberal individuals. And this is where – despite ignoring politics in their official discourses – the KAAYIA and Oasis500 prove to be highly political in practice as we will discuss in more depth.

The formation of entrepreneurs starts already during the selection process and, for the selected entrepreneurs, continues beyond that initial period. Skill formation and depoliticization as well as the integration into the existing entrepreneurial elite networks constitute key elements of these processes. They are not particular for the KAAYIA and Oasis500 but, with slight variations, are common among entrepreneurship initiatives worldwide. What gives them a particular Jordanian character is the way they have been adapted to the local context. In particular, elite politics and informality shape these initiatives.

The formation of the skills of the entrepreneurs and the development of viable and growth-oriented businesses take place through capacity building and technical support e.g. in the form of tailored trainings and coaching to enhance the management, technological and operational skills of the entrepreneurs. Key topics during these trainings are inter alia business modelling and strategies, investments and financing as well as marketing. Moreover, entrepreneurs learn how to set realistic goals and evaluate the performance of their enterprises.

In the case of social enterprises, social impact is commonly quantified and measured in numbers of beneficiaries, events and projects an enterprise served. Both the KAAYIA and Oasis500 strongly rely on quantification. Oasis500, for instance, regularly publishes the numbers of applicants and current entrepreneurs in each incubation phase and measures their success in terms of the amount of funding they have secured. It also stresses that these numbers have exceeded their envisioned numbers by large (Fayyad 2013). Quantification and calculative forms of measurement and evaluation are neoliberal techniques of governing through the insertion of economic logics and techniques into broader aspects of human life. The objective is to ascribe the social world a level of scientific objectivity, which turns subjects into self-calculating individuals to meet the supposedly neutral and objective goals and benchmark (İşleyen 2015a).

In the Jordanian case, the formation of skills and capacities is said to be tailored to the specific needs of the entrepreneurs. However, if we evaluate it from the perspective of empowerment, then this formation appears very narrow as it reduces empowerment to capacity building. Social and political issues that inhibit youth empowerment are ignored.

The trainings are complemented by financial support (small grants and seed investments) in order to enable the entrepreneurs to immediately apply their newly acquired knowledge, to explore the world of entrepreneurship, i.e. to act as neoliberal subjects. Furthermore, both initiatives facilitate the participation in local and international competitions and pitches (Fayyad 2013; KAAYIA 2015). Contrary to Oasis500 which accompanies its entrepreneurs for several months, the KAAYIA is a short-term ‘event’ with high-visibility that lasts less than a week.¹⁰ The KAAYIA finalists and winners remarked that the KAAYIA

itself constitutes more a ‘show-off’ and engages on a minimum level with the entrepreneurs. Capacity building and support are outsourced to other actors such as individual Jordanian business actors, the British organization Mowgli Mentoring or the International Youth Foundation (Personal interviews, October 2011-May 2013). That way, global and local ideas and practices shape the subject formation of Jordanian entrepreneurs. This plays into the depoliticization strategy as the skill and business formation remain technical endeavours detached from the particular Jordanian socio-economic context.

The framing of entrepreneurship and development and the objectives and rationale of the KAAYIA, Oasis500 and the young entrepreneurs take place through the visibility of these actors in the public sphere. Both initiatives are well-known in Jordan owing to their privileged position as ‘royally certified entrepreneurship’ initiatives (Kreitmeyr 2019) and can reach out to a large local and global audience. English and Arabic are omnipresent and further facilitate this; while English helps to connect entrepreneurs globally, Arabic gives the impression of being locally rooted beyond the elite-level. Closely related to this aspect, this visibility also helps to create and enhance the reputation of the Jordanian regime and elites as committed actors and leaders in socio-economic development. Indeed, Jordan often portrays itself as an ‘entrepreneurial hub’ within the MENA with strong international ties (Personal interviews, March-April 2013; see also Baker 2012; Schroeder 2013). The WEF-MENA, for example, biennially takes place in Jordan. At this event, Jordanian entrepreneurs meet representatives of the business, political and social elites from all around the world. Also, during this event the KAAYIA winners are being announced. The WEF-MENA, and also similar events, function as a stage for the regime, elites and entrepreneurs alike.

In general, neoliberal ideas and subjects are promoted through various channels: Talks at events, promotional videos on the internet and on TV, websites, social media and brochures. The KAAYIA, for instance, uses promotional videos featuring the KAAYIA and its award winners and finalists. These videos include interviews with social entrepreneurs and are broadcasted online and on TV during the application period for the award. The KAAYIA finalists are accompanied by a camera team throughout the selection process and updates are published on Facebook and Twitter. For the entrepreneurs and outside observers, this approach creates the impression that the KAAYIA is at the same time an award and a ‘staged show’ (Personal interviews, March-April 2013).¹¹ This strong visibility in the public sphere can be seen as a strategy to dominate and control the discourse on socio-economic development and especially the role of youth entrepreneurship and empowerment. Given the privileged position of the KAAYIA and Oasis500, they have been able to overshadow and sideline alternative approaches. However, entrepreneurs do not openly scrutinize the processes of subject formation; they are eager to perform as entrepreneurial subjects that the KAAYIA and Oasis500 envision and want to become the role models and success stories that receive local, regional and international recognition. In that respect they differ markedly from local grassroots initiatives engaging in youth empowerment which have very limited global ties and visibility (e.g. Sukarieh 2016).

Furthermore, entrepreneurs who express critical views on political and social issues and come close to pushing the regime’s red lines are convinced that they will never be an awardee of the KAAYIA, Oasis500 or benefit from other similar elite initiatives. They are either being silenced through their exclusion from the entrepreneurial community and/or distance themselves from it. As one interviewee said

We would never be recognized by KAFD [or other royal initiatives] because we are challenging too much some of the red lines that exist in Jordan in politics and society. There are no open problems with the security apparatus or the government but we break taboos and challenge red lines/status quo. And we keep a distance to status quo people [social and political elites]. This is time-consuming and exhausting as it is much more difficult to implement projects, get funding and support [...], life would be easier with cooperation (Personal interview, April 2013).

Elite- entrepreneur-ties

In accordance with the neoliberal ideas which the KAAYIA and Oasis500 espouse, neoliberal rationalities permeate the mode of selecting and forming entrepreneurs. However, these initiatives employ tools of subject formation differently. Whereas the KAAYIA as an award constitutes a short-term intervention, Oasis500 offers an incubation and acceleration programme that accompanies entrepreneurs for several months. In the following, we will discuss these issues in more detail.

With regard to the selection process, entrepreneurs who apply to the KAAYIA and Oasis500 need to pass several steps before they become selected as KAAYIA finalists and Oasis500 entrepreneurs. This process functions as a litmus test for the candidates' entrepreneurial characteristics and formability as entrepreneurial subjects. Both organizations provide detailed information on their selection criteria; however, there are also aspects that shape the selection that are not readily apparent. Our analysis indicates that personality, personalism and ties play a crucial role. In particular the business elites have a tight grip over entrepreneurs.

The analysis of the application documents suggests that the personal background of the entrepreneurs (age, nationality, education, occupation) matters as much as the entrepreneurial idea and medium-term plans.¹² This being said, tribalism and ethnicity (Transjordanian/Palestinian) constitute major cleavages in Jordanian society and tribal and ethnic affiliations are visible among the Jordanian entrepreneurs (Bank 2004). However, they do not play a decisive role (as opposed to nationality). This can be explained by the fact that both initiatives are royal initiatives which, despite their selective character, do not want to openly nurture existing cleavages in Jordan. Rather, Jordanian youth are hand-picked on the basis of both their compatibility with the regime elites' agenda and their formability into neoliberal, entrepreneurial subjects under the guidance of the business elites (Personal interviews, March-April 2013). The focus on unpacking the insertion of neoliberal programmes through subtle rationalities and techniques allows us to look beyond the workings of tribalism and ethnicity in reproducing the status quo of neoliberal policy-making and authoritarian rule in Jordan.

Albeit not explicitly stated as an eligibility criterion, education matters. It is difficult to find a KAAYIA finalist without a university degree. Socio-economically marginalized, uneducated youth who first need to be mobilized to overcome their disillusioned and passive attitude, are completely ignored.¹³ A closer look reveals that there are differences not only in terms of the socio-economic background of the entrepreneurs but also in their objectives. The majority of the entrepreneurs come from a privileged socio-economic background and their families are either part of the politically relevant elites of Jordan or are located in their environment where ties to the elites exist. For them, the KAAYIA and Oasis500 offer opportunities to extend their networks and establish themselves as a

new generation of socio-economic leaders. However, those entrepreneurs who do not have such a privileged socio-economic background depend on initiatives such as the KAAIYA and Oasis500 to gain access to (im)material support and to establish ties to economic actors.

Both groups of the youth benefit from prestige, ties and access to power, i.e. it is a win-win situation for both elites and the youth and the latter seek to be co-opted. Not few of them dream of, one day, shaking the hand of the Jordanian King and Queen. Accordingly, they describe themselves as both entrepreneurs and change makers who contribute to the sustainable development of Jordan (Personal interviews, March-April 2013). Like the business elite and initiatives, these entrepreneurs ignore or downplay the role of politics in creating and addressing socio-economic issues. The Zikra Initiative, for instance, organizes excursions for middle- and upper-class Jordanians and tourists to poor and marginalized communities in one of Jordan's poverty pockets.¹⁴ The aim is to stimulate exchange of money and knowledge for traditional skills (e.g. handicraft, baking, recycling, health):

The Zikra Initiative diminishes the socio-economic gap by conducting programs where urban and marginalized community residents may engage, interact, and exchange resources. This exchange model denotes an 'equal relationship'; eliminating the 'give and take' dynamic, and replacing it with a basic exchange. [...] The model also connects the city inhabitants to their roots and history, provides them with new experiences that widen their perspective on realities that surround them and motivates them to become active agents of change. While the visitors take a trip out of town, meet new people, and discover new lifestyles, the rural community regains their pride and dignity by exchanging their rich resources and skills with the visitors. The exchange experience bridges social gaps between the inhabitants of the rural and urban communities, thus easing ethnic and social friction, leading to a harmonious, peaceful society.¹⁵

The work of the Zikra Initiative may contribute to alleviating some of the socio-economic problems in this specific poverty pocket, namely introducing entrepreneurship as an alternative livelihood strategy to public sector employment or the military. Nevertheless, it ignores the root causes and political responsibility for the emergence of poverty pockets in Jordan since the 1980s when structural adjustment measures were introduced and resulted in the emergence of poverty pockets (Lenner 2013). Similar examples can be found among other entrepreneurs and issue areas. Empowerment and development are framed as technical issues emptied of political elements and thus the root causes of these issues are not addressed. Even more, all these actors frame the solution of socio-economic problems in neoliberal terms disregarding the role of neoliberalism in the creation of these problems in the first place. There is no difference between local entrepreneurs and initiatives and the international actors in this respect (Parker 2009).

In addition to the previously discussed aspects, subject formation also constitutes the integration of young entrepreneurs into the existing elite networks and is closely related to the question of what characterizes an entrepreneur and which ideas are worth supporting. This aspect contains a strong political component and is embedded in authoritarian governance in Jordan. The KAAIYA, Oasis500 and the coaches, mentors and jury members, i.e. members of the loyal business elite around King Abdullah II, who engage in the subject formation of entrepreneurs exert great influence on defining what being an entrepreneur means.¹⁶ This approach is highly subjective and has been criticized for resulting in the

domination and destruction of ideas and entrepreneurs instead of facilitating their development and empowerment (Personal interviews, March-April 2013). At best, selective and controlled empowerment occurs, often based on political calculus and elite decisions. For example, although the KAAYIA is a regional award which manifests in the nationality of both the finalists and winners, one third of the finalists between 2007 and 2015 were Jordanian (i.e. of Transjordanian or Palestinian origin). Experts and entrepreneurs are firmly convinced that it is made sure that there are always Jordanians among the finalists irrespective of the quality of their applications. As one KAYYIA finalist remarked:

In the end, this award was launched by King Abdullah II of Jordan himself. Especially after the Arab uprisings there had to be at least one Jordanian winner to prevent an outcry in society. So, I am sure there might have been candidates with better ideas but Jordanians have to be among the finalists (Personal interview, April 2013).

Those young entrepreneurs who benefit from the recognition by royal initiatives are eager to become acknowledged and certified as ‘real entrepreneurs’ and Jordanian role models (Personal interviews, March-April 2013). This suggests that being an entrepreneurial subject means to be formable into a successful young promoter of the official regime agenda. In so doing, the status quo of the existing power relations and elite politics is preserved.

However, we can take this argument even one step further. The aging business elites also engage with these young entrepreneurs to form them into a new generation of elite actors. The political and business elites who became powerful with the accession of the King Abdullah II to the throne in 1999 are now in their late 50s and older. Contrary to many other countries in the MENA, Jordan does not have a grown elite that can be traced back over several generations. Therefore, the existing elites need to actively co-opt and form a new generation of elite actors. Their active engagement in initiatives such as Oasis500 and the KAAYIA as jury members, mentors and investors enables these elites to identify and hand-pick entrepreneurs. From that perspective subject formation also serves the authoritarian regime both with regard to the dissemination of neoliberal ideas and reforms and with regard to preserving the status quo of authoritarian power through the formation of a new generation of authoritarian elites (Wils 2003; Bank and Schlumberger 2004; Kreitmeyr 2019). In conclusion, despite the apolitical appearance of these initiatives and the actors involved, neoliberal subject formation is a highly political issue.

In the case of Oasis 500, we can see that subject formation is in many respects about ownership and power. This is a critical issue. On the one hand, entrepreneurial subject formation underlines and aims to foster the self-responsibility, empowerment and ownership of the entrepreneurs. On the other hand, an investment commonly takes place in exchange for equity. The investor, one of the elite business actors, becomes a shareholder in the enterprise and, thus, can influence the decision-making processes. In the case of Oasis500 equity amounts to 5%–20% depending on the development stage of the respective enterprise. At a later stage, when Oasis500 entrepreneurs pitch at the Angel Investor Network events organized by Oasis500 or independent from Oasis500, the entrepreneur and the investor negotiate the terms of the investment deal individually (Personal interview, April 2013).¹⁷ While entrepreneurs value the financial support, experience and connections of investors, they frequently describe investor relations as challenging.

Many entrepreneurs expressed their concern about the risk, or actual experience, of interference, the exercise of pressure or domination by business actors. They try to either carefully select ones who have a good reputation, to work without investors or, in the worst case, they close their enterprise (Personal interviews, March–April 2013). This is especially challenging if we consider that entrepreneurs seek to be co-opted by the business elite while at the same time not completely losing their decision-making power. The business elite, however, also follows a dual strategy of creating and managing a new generation of regime loyal socio-economic leaders and of establishing clientelistic ties. Ultimately, the emerging relations foster ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ and thus the continuity of the political agenda of King Abdullah II and existing power relations (Bank and Schlumberger 2004; De Smet and Bogaert 2017).

A well-known case of successful entrepreneur-investor relations is the enterprise Jamalon founded by Ala’ Alsallal at the age of 25 (in 2010). This case exemplifies the workings of neoliberal governmentality through resilience. Alsallal is the child of Palestinian refugees living in a refugee camp in East Amman. In an interview to *Entrepreneur Middle East*, Alsallal describes his journey as follows: ‘I come from a marginalized community in Jordan, where we used to think that we can’t change our reality’ and continues to explain his story of hard work, belief and perseverance. The resilient subjectivity is precisely the one that Alsallal has adopted to recollect himself and shown individual adaptability in the face of the harsh realities and circumstances surrounding his life. Alsallal’s family’s displacement and his political and socio-economic marginalization are distanced from its structural causes; namely, the broader dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Jordanian state’s decades-old policy towards Palestinian refugees. Instead, the solution is seen as lying in the individual who learns, adapts and eventually establishes the self as an entrepreneur. Alsallal started his entrepreneurial career in 2007 facing a lawsuit by Joan Rowling for having translated one of her Harry Potter books into Arabic and illegally published it online. However, this experience inspired him and the idea for Jamalon was born.

Since then Jamalon has developed into the biggest online bookstore in the Middle East and North Africa. This ‘Amazon of the Arab World’ offers over 10 million books in English and Arabic and operates several logistics centres across the region and one in London. Between 2010–2016 it raised approximately 7,5 million USD in funding inter alia by Wamda Investment/MENA Venture Investment, Endeavor and 500Startups and currently employs more than 70 persons. Aramex’ CEO Fadhi Ghandour, one of the King’s cronies and member of the ECC, has been Alsallal’s mentor for more than a decade and the first investor of his enterprise. In fact, their ties date back to the time when Alsallal volunteered for Ghandour’s social enterprise Ruwwad. Through Ghandour’s support and the Oasis500 programme Alsallal was able to receive the support to grow Jamalon into a successful enterprise. While he possessed persistence, ambition, knowledge in the field of IT and online content management, Alsallal acquired the necessary business and management skills through the Oasis500 acceleration programme. Most importantly, however, he gained access to mentors and potential investors which is a challenge for young entrepreneurs (Schroeder 2013, 128–133; Pupic 2014; Hariharan 2016). Similarly, the social entrepreneur Kamel Al Asmar is well-connected in the Jordanian entrepreneurship ecosystem. Coming from a privileged social background, however, Al Asmar has extended his ties to all key elite actors and

now also acts as jury member, mentor and business partner in the entrepreneurship ecosystem (Personal interview, March 2013; see also Al-Asmar 2015).

As the example of Ala' Alsallal and Jamalon demonstrates, neoliberal subject formation constitutes a powerful tool for empowerment. This empowerment entails economic and social aspects in the form of employment generation and the introduction of new (social) products and services. The social background Jamalon founder Ala' Alsallal underlines that entrepreneurship appeals to the youth irrespective of their socio-economic background. However, education and the personal ties to key economic actors are key requirements and therefore, with few exceptions, most Jordanian entrepreneurs come from privileged backgrounds. Thus, selective youth empowerment aims to foster at the same time the local embeddedness of entrepreneurs, existing elite politics and power relations, and their global connectedness.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the interplay of regime-promoted youth empowerment and neoliberalism in Jordan. Drawing upon critical scholarship on neoliberal governmentality and subject formation as well as authoritarian neoliberalism, the analysis of the entrepreneurship initiatives of the KAAYIA and Oasis500 demonstrates how actors beyond the elites emerge as a consequence of the opportunities neoliberal ideas and practices offer. The Jordanian youth sees entrepreneurship as an opportunity and space for employment, prestige, and social status and claims opportunities and space in the neoliberal business environment.

As such, Jordanian state-promoted youth entrepreneurship establishes an 'elite social contract' rather than an 'everyday social contract' (Belloni and Ramović 2020). In their study on peacebuilding, Belloni and Ramović (2020) point out that an elite social contract is highly selective because access to political processes is limited to particular actors and segments of the society. An elite social contract in that way serves the preservation of the political, social and economic status quo in times of pressing societal crises. The Jordanian youth-empowerment displays an elite social contract as it nurtures the political agenda of the regime while simultaneously feeding into and reproducing 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (Tansel 2017).

An everyday social contract, on the other hand, is inclusive by being attentive to the needs and demands originating directly from the citizens. It is interested in strengthening networks and relations between ordinary citizens in order for the latter to bring their input into political processes, have better access to opportunities and policy- and decision-making and make use of resources in a more socially inclusive manner (Belloni and Ramović 2020). As shown in this article, the contract formed between the elites and the youth entrepreneurs works to serve each other's interests, while critical voices on the regime as well as neoliberalism are silenced. Socio-economically marginalized, uneducated and often also disillusioned youth are largely ignored. With its attentiveness and reliance on ordinary citizens, an everyday social contract provides an alternative to substantially address poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment that for now depend on and cement existing inequalities of the Jordanian society. While the Arab Spring of 2011 has initiated the re-negotiation of social contracts, much work still needs to be done (Larbi 2016).

Notes

1. Personal observation, Amman, April 2013.
2. See for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YGLCcE6M7E> (accessed 31 May 2018).
3. Moreover, they enjoy a similar educational background and belong to the same age group as the King and have been described as the ‘Generation Abdallah’ (Bank and Schlumberger 2004, 41).
4. Speech published online, <http://kafd.jo/en/page/kafd-brief> (accessed 15 May 2014).
5. For further details see www.oasis500.com/our-startups/ as well as KAAZIA (2015).
6. <http://oasis500.com/about-us/> (accessed 31 May 2018).
7. Personal interview, Amman, April 2013; see also Fayyad (2013) and <http://www.oasis500.com/startup-investment-funds/entrepreneurs-selection-and-qualification/> (accessed 31 May 2018).
8. See also <http://oasis500.com/frequently-asked-questions/> (accessed 31 May 2018).
9. See also <http://kaayia.jo/alumni.aspx> (accessed 15 May 2014).
10. However, further support takes place but is outsourced to KAFD’s partner, the Mowgli Foundation, which is an expert in mentoring and mentor matching (Personal interviews, March-May 2013).
11. See for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YGLCcE6M7E> (accessed 31 May 2018).
12. The application documents can be accessed on the website of the initiatives.
13. Personal interviews, March-April 2013; see also Abdou et al. (2010) and Kreitmeyr (2019) as well as KAAZIA (2015, 9, 17-20) and the official videos documenting the KAAZIA finalists and their projects.
14. Poverty pockets in Jordan are (sub-)districts where a minimum of 25% of the population live below the national poverty line. For a discussion of the poverty pockets in Jordan, see Lenner (2013).
15. <http://zikrainitiative.org> (accessed 31 May 2018).
16. Mentoring and coaching are relatively recent approaches and not yet well understood in Jordan. They are often associated with clientelism instead of giving advice (Personal interviews, March-May 2013).
17. See also <http://www.oasis500.com/startup-investment-funds/angel-investor-network/> (accessed 15 May 2014).

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