

Jordan

**An e-government  
strategy that  
overlooks digital  
divides**

On March 2020 ,17, in a rush to contain the spread of the COVID19- virus, Jordan's government activated the 1992 Defence Law. Almost immediately, land borders, the international airport, and schools were closed, nearly all economic activity halted, and the government imposed a three-day total lockdown, followed by a strict daily curfew that only started to relax on June 6, but remains in place

for late evenings at the time of writing. Up until late April, people could not use cars—the main mode of transportation in Jordan—without a special permit and once the strict lockdown was lifted, people were only allowed to walk to local supermarkets for provisions.

Since announcing the lockdowns and subsequent curfews, Prime Minister Razzaz's government has relied much

more heavily on digital platforms like the Web and mobile applications to ease the burdens imposed by coronavirus containment efforts and to assist the country with the gradual reopening of different sectors.

In readiness for the surge of Internet usage, the Telecommunications' Regulatory Commission (TRC) expanded network providers' capacities in March.<sup>1</sup> Arguably,

the release of multiple digital platforms<sup>2</sup> represents what we might call the digitisation of the social compact between citizens and the government.



# Jordan's digital divide

In some ways, this techno-solutionist approach to government service delivery has laid bare the stark digital inequalities that exist in the country, and the government's slow response to mitigate the divide brought about by its digital strategy. With the urgent jump to remote learning, the government rushed to develop an online courses platform, a learning

management system, a teachers' skills platform, and an e-textbook repository, praising local private sector support in the development of all these systems. While the speed with which these platforms were developed was unprecedented, it did not pay attention to unequal Internet and device access amongst students in Jordan.<sup>3</sup> The World Bank estimates that while %84 of

students have Internet access for remote learning, only two-thirds have a computer they can use for schoolwork—below the MENA average of %75.<sup>4</sup> The government started taking action two months into the shutdown, just as school semesters were drawing to a close, distributing donated tablets (mostly from Huawei),<sup>5</sup> and building caravans equipped with computers, televisions, and satellites in remote governorates such as Tafilah.<sup>6</sup> This has led to vulnerable communities

receiving a poorer quality education during the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> To help facilitate salary transfers, ensure safer alternatives to cash payments, and monitor labor law violations, the government has started pushing the use of Central Bank of Jordan approved e-wallets,<sup>8</sup> even though polls have shown that more than half of users find them difficult to create and use.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, these e-wallet platforms are being introduced in the absence of strong privacy protection laws, and it is

unclear how user privacy is being protected.

The drive to digitisation has made people in Jordan vulnerable to a range of digital security challenges.<sup>10</sup> For instance, opportunists took advantage of the government's rush to digital platforms to launch official-looking phishing scams targeting unsuspecting users,<sup>11</sup> a situation which speaks to the challenges of digital literacy.

# The rise of monitoring tech

Jordan's Defence Law No. 13 (of 1992), activated by royal decree at the start of the shutdown,<sup>12</sup> gives the government broad authority to issue orders under the law and curb basic rights. Yet while Prime Minister Razzaz implied that the government would not infringe on basic rights and that the law 'will be used within the tightest limits',<sup>13</sup> he also indicated that

distinctions would 'be made between the right to express an opinion, which is inviolable, and defamation, spreading rumors, and false information that could cause panic. We will deal with [the latter] firmly.'<sup>14</sup> Since then, journalists have been detained for reporting on the plight of Jordanians as well as migrant workers in the country during the lockdown.<sup>15</sup> And

then in mid-April, the government introduced Order Number 8 which targets online ‘scaremongering’, punishable with up to a three-year prison sentence and fines up to 3,000 JOD (around US\$4,300/EUR3,800), thus empowering the government’s online watchdog.<sup>16</sup>

Under the Defence Law, there has been a concomitant introduction of monitoring tools, from contact tracing to reporting social distancing violations,

and enforcing home quarantine for those returning from abroad. According to the Minister of Health, Saad Jaber, these applications represent important steps ‘in the fight against the virus.’<sup>17</sup> Jaber announced, amongst other applications, a contact-tracing application called Aman, which (at the time of writing) is voluntary to download and use.<sup>18</sup> The application is closed source,<sup>19</sup> yet promises to respect privacy—the privacy policy does indeed state that data is only stored locally



and anonymously. The Ministry has suggested that it is a ‘moral and human duty towards others to download and use [the app].’<sup>20</sup> The application says it will log GPS coordinates initially, then transition to only logging Bluetooth transmissions from nearby smartphones. Some have argued the latter is a privacy-promoting move (see DP3T protocol)<sup>21</sup> while critics suggest that such a feature will exhaust older phone models’ batteries as they are not equipped with low-

energy Bluetooth chips.<sup>22</sup> At the time of writing, the application has over 600,000 downloads,<sup>23</sup> with government officials repeatedly asking people to download the application, and constantly reminding those who have downloaded the application and received notification of proximity to an infected person to visit the nearest COVID-19 dedicated health center.<sup>24</sup>

The application CRadar was also launched, which allows people to

report large gatherings and when they suspect someone has symptoms of COVID-19.<sup>25</sup> They do so by sharing the location of the incident/person with the authorities via the application. This approach has been criticized for encouraging people to report on each other, though it remained in use mostly during strict curfew.

For Jordanians returning from abroad, once they complete the -17day mandatory quarantine in government facilities, the government mandates

the use of an application called Bader during their -14day home quarantine.<sup>26</sup> There are reports that suggest that the application will be accompanied by an electronic bracelet. On Saturday, June 20, the Health Minister announced that the bracelets will be worn by people required to home quarantine; and the bracelet accompanies the application Bader.<sup>27,28</sup>

These monitoring applications, which vary in purpose and in intention, feed into

Jordan's 'panoptic' approach to containing the spread of COVID19-. In combination with a personal data protection bill that is still being debated in parliament (which currently is not in session)—there appear to be few legal provisions for citizens and users beyond the privacy policies (if any) of the applications.

The unequal connectivity and access to devices and smartphones, combined with the problems inherent to digital contact tracing and quarantine enforcement, and the absence of strong data

protection laws, means that Jordanians are unable to meaningfully and sustainably benefit from the digitisation of the social compact with their government that has emerged with the COVID19- pandemic. This may make the longer-term recovery even more challenging.

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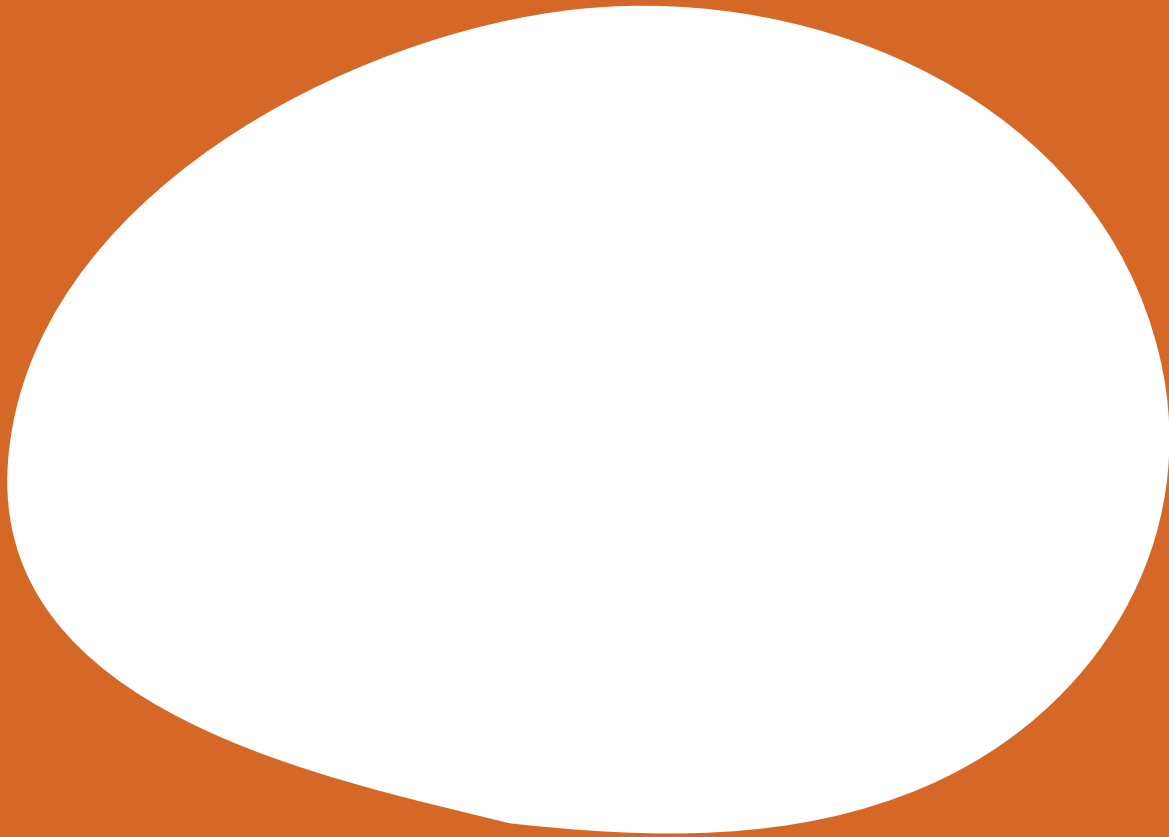
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