

# AMALGAMATION IS A SOLUTION IN JORDAN

By  
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## Abstract

This paper is about the current thinking in metropolitan governance in Jordan. In 1985, a number municipalities and village councils around Amman City were amalgamated to form what is known today as the Greater Amman Municipality. Since its inception, creating a metropolitan authority in Greater Amman was presented as a solution to a technical problem, the multiplicity of administrative units. Though, one cannot connect the assumed success of this new municipality to this process of amalgamation, it is often described as such. Accordingly, amalgamation is presented in Jordan as a solution to the problem of governance in metropolitan areas. Greater Amman became a model for good governance and steps toward implementing this model around other major cities were taken recently. This paper presents the rhetoric that produced such conclusion and argues that the idea of a unified metropolitan authority is rather a “practice” that preceded the existence of the problem.

## Introduction:

A metropolitan region is a geographical that consists of a central city that has a relatively large population together with adjacent smaller communities. The central city and its surrounding communities have a high degree of economic and social integration with each other (Rusk 1993, 6). The form of governance in the metropolitan regions varies from one country to another and from one region to another. However, those forms of governance can be categorized into two extreme models. The first is a hierarchical model in which formal power is concentrated in a central government for the whole area while local authorities are excluded from power. The second is a metropolitan government that is based on a *horizontal structure* as it has less or no executive control over the metropolitan area while the local authorities have full control over their jurisdictions (Van der Berg et al. 1997, 257). Both models have their drawbacks making metropolitan governance problematic in many parts of the world.

Like many countries, Jordan has been struggling with the issue of metropolitan governance for more than thirty years. The debate over it took different forms over the years.<sup>1</sup> In the fifties and early sixties, decreasing the number of small governments in favor of larger metropolitan ones was a dominating idea. This changed in the late sixties and the seventies as the political and popular rhetoric turned against *big governments*. In the eighties and early nineties large metropolitan governments but, perhaps, with some differences in scale and rationale were favored over fragmented small local governments (Barlow 1997, 407). The large number of local governments (municipalities and village councils) became an obstacle in the face of regional development so did the centrality of the planning responsibility in the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and the Environment (MMRAE). Each local government has its own agenda that may contradict those of the neighboring governments on the one hand, and with that of the MMRAE on the other. In addition, the planners of MMRAE often complained about the lack of willingness among these governments to cooperate. Accordingly, another form of governance became an issue that needs to be addressed before making plans.

Several events took place over the years emphasizing the hegemonic rhetoric of the time. Perhaps the most important event of those took place in 1985 when the various municipalities and village councils within the metropolitan area around Amman City were consolidated to form what became Greater Amman (GA). Since then, GA became a model that the central government wanted to implement around other major cities. Amalgamation became the solution to the problem of governance in metropolitan areas. Plans for implementing it in various part of the country began to materialize. First, the rhetoric moved northward to Irbid when several voices began

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the topic see the United Nations: Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA).Decentralization and the Emerging Role of Municipalities in the ESCWA Region. New York, 2001 (E/ESCWA/HS/2001/3).

their calls for a Greater Irbid (GI) with a unified metropolitan authority. Then, a plan was drawn for a Greater Zarqa. The talk also included Karak as the heart of another metropolitan region. The rhetoric, which was highly politicized, prompted different reactions. Some thought the idea was a threat to democracy. Others saw it as a threat to their own existence as a political influence. However, the majority of those who were concerned with the idea were mainly in favor of having a one metropolitan authority for the whole area. It is the structure of this authority that they debated. The official rationalization of amalgamation was to get the benefits that were believed to be gained in Amman, as the current minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs and the Environment states it. He has always been the major proponent of amalgamation. In his first term as a minister he proposed a legislation that entailed the amalgamation of several municipalities to form larger metropolitan authorities. The legislation was not adopted at the time, but by the year 1997, almost 250 municipalities around the country were canceled. In his current term in office, he was able to pass the legislation and the process of amalgamation swept the country.

### **The Making of Greater Amman**

The current thinking of metropolitan governance began about forty years ago. In 1963, the Council of Ministries approved the creation of the *Greater Amman Region (GAR)*. However, GAR remained very ambiguous and in terms of its boundaries and definition, and of authority and control (AURPG 1979, I-19). Not until more than 20 years later when the preparation process of the Greater Amman Comprehensive Development Plan (GACDP) was launched, has there been a clear definition of Greater Amman's geographic space and the power over it. A joint team from the Municipality of Amman and Dar al-Handasah, a private consulting firm, prepared the

plan. The planners of the team argued that "Greater Amman should be as compact as possible" (GACDP 5). Their definition of Greater Amman was based on "interdependency, accessibility, and the pattern and intensity of development" in the various administrative units surrounding Amman. Although, these criteria were not defined clearly, the planners argue that their decision to exclude from GA many of the administrative units included in previous attempts to define it, was based on these criteria.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the planners of the team had to follow existing municipal boundaries in defining the boundaries of Greater Amman. With more than 25 municipalities and village councils included, the Joint Team was able to define Greater Amman as we, today, know it.

The planners of joint team were also concerned with the administration of Greater Amman to tame the growth of the metropolitan area and control its development. The multiplicity of administrative units was probably *the* major problem in the eyes of the planners since the creation of Greater Amman. Outside Amman, each of the municipalities and the village councils functioned separately. Planning processes under their jurisdiction were directed by the MMRAE, and operated through the system of a "supreme planning council and regional and local committees" (Joint Technical Team 1985, 12). Inside Amman on the other hand, planning processes were controlled by the Municipality of Amman, which enjoyed more autonomy than any other municipality in Jordan. The Joint Team saw this multiplicity of authority as an obstacle that needed to be removed. It was important to the members of the team, "to pursue a policy of securing the co-operation of all the

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<sup>2</sup> A major attempt to define an area defined as Greater Amman was made by planners from the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and the Environment (MMRAE) in 1980. Those planners created at the time what was referred to as the Greater Amman Region, which covered a much larger area at the time than that of Greater Amman as defined in the GACDP.

authorities in recognizing that the objectives of the plan and any necessary changes are for the benefit of the whole community of Greater Amman" (Ibid 2).

Amalgamation was presented as the solution. The planners of the Joint Team envisioned a *two tier system* as a form of administration that could be applied in Greater Amman. At the first tier level, a metropolitan authority would exercise major strategic functions, including responsibility for the control, monitoring, review and implementation of the Master Plan over the whole of Greater Amman. At the second tier level, municipalities would be combined to form larger units. Those would be responsible for dealing with planning and building licenses in accordance with consultation systems that are supervised by the first tier authority. Local governments would also be responsible for initiating local plans which of course would have to be approved by the first tier government.

Since the making of Greater Amman, the idea of a metropolitan authority with a *two-tier* structure was dehistoricized by being removed from the historical context, and naturalized by being presented simply as a natural solution to a "preexisting" problem. By being naturalized and authenticated, Greater Amman became a model for the whole country.

### **The Amalgamation Fever: Irbid and Zarqa**

After the making of Greater Amman, the idea of consolidating all the municipalities and village councils within a metropolitan area was first proposed for Irbid and its surroundings in 1988. No action was taken at the time, however, for two reasons. First, the economic crises that hit Jordan that same year and continued after the Gulf war in 1991 halted every planning initiative for several years to come.

Second, Jordan's democratization program, which began with the parliamentary elections in 1989, instigated the Jordanians to rethink all of the existing institutions.

However, the continuing existence of the many problems of local governments made the idea resurface once more in the second half of the nineties. At that time, the economy was beginning to stabilize and democracy was already an established institution and the inefficiency of the local governments became part of its rhetoric. What even made local governance appear problematic in most major urban areas and amalgamation as a solution is the success story of Greater Amman. The idea of a metropolitan authority as implemented in Amman has already proven to be a better solution. Hence, several people volunteered to carry the torch including Abd al-Razzaq Tubeishat, the former elected mayor of Irbid who became the Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs and the Environment (MMRAE). Accordingly, practical steps toward implementing the idea started to take shape beginning with proposals for the city of Irbid.

Irbid is the largest city in the northern part of Jordan.<sup>3</sup> Located in the northwest corner of Jordan, close to the Syrian and Palestinian borders, on the route from Turkey and Syria in the north to Arabia in the south and to Palestine in the west, the city's location was of some importance in ancient and medieval times. In recent years, the city grew in unplanned manner. It has an area of about 37 square kilometers and a population that exceeds 200,000. The growth of Irbid and its surrounding villages was enormous during the last thirty years and the city became almost inseparable from its neighboring towns and villages physically, socially and economically. This new

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<sup>3</sup> Irbid's first municipality was established in 1884 during the Ottoman rule. The Jordanian constitution, written in 1952, legitimized the status of the elected municipal council and the elected mayor by granting them the right to run their own jurisdictions. From that point on, the municipality of Irbid and the surrounding municipalities functioned as such.

reality prompted many people to rethink the systems of governance of the city and its surroundings.

A committee was formed in 1996 within MMRAE to study the idea and define the area of concern. The committee recommended that all towns and villages within the district of Irbid (an area of 222sq.km.) and the district of Bani Obeid<sup>4</sup> (an area of 193sq.km.) should constitute Greater Irbid (see Figure 2). The total proposed area was about 415 sq.km. and the total population was 410 thousands (335 in the district of Irbid and 75 in the district of Bani Obeid). The committee's stated goal of the study was to establish a comprehensive modern city in terms of services that should function as a center for comprehensive development for the whole area. Accordingly, the objectives put forward by the committee included the unification of the planning, management and maintenance processes in order to enable a controlled growth of Irbid and the surrounding towns and villages that guarantees a just and balanced distribution of development. In addition, the committee viewed the idea of unification as a path toward the preparation of a comprehensive plan (MMRAE 1996).

The committee proposed to cancel all existing municipalities and village councils within the proposed area as a first step. The area would be divided into new administrative areas. This division would be based on the nature of the area and its population. Each area would have an administrative body that is linked to a central authority. At the same time, each area would have a representative in the central council for Greater Irbid. The central council will have the full authority of a metropolitan municipality--referred to as the municipality of Greater Irbid in the

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<sup>4</sup> The district of Irbid includes in addition to the city of Irbid, soom, Bait-Ras, Alal, Doqara, Kofor-Yoba, Howara, Hakama. The district of Bani Obeid includes al-Husn, al-Sareeh, al-Nuaima, and Azmi al-Muftee camp, a Palestinian refugee camp outside al-Husn. In addition, the land occupied by the University of Science & Technology was included in the committee's definition, but its area was not included in the total area.

official documents. However, since Greater Amman is suggested always as the model to be followed, then only half members of the council would be elected. The other half and the mayor himself would be appointed by the government. The committee also proposed to modify the legislation to grant metropolitan authorities more freedom and power. In addition, the committee suggested that this proposal couldn't be implemented without financial aid to the area to enable the new authority to carry out its duties.

The committee's proposal was made public and stimulated debate over it. The forums for the debate varied; i.e. newspapers, public seminars, election campaigns, university conferences, etc. Another proposal, similar in its nature, was written by a committee from the municipality of Irbid and published in al-Rai, the daily newspaper, heated the discussion (The Municipality of Irbid 1996). Some opposed the idea while others supported it completely. A third group supported the idea of amalgamating the various municipalities but opposed the idea of appointing the mayor. They wanted an elected mayor.

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During the same time, a comprehensive plan was being made for an area defined as Greater Zarqa. The Governorate of Zarqa lies at 20km northeast of Amman, the capital city and the heart of the governorate of Amman. The two governorates form together an urban gathering of about 45% of Jordan's population. Their area is about 4595 km<sup>2</sup>, forming about 4.7% of Jordan's total area. The two governorates are part of the middle region. Obviously, this urban gathering is highly dense and suffers from different kinds of problems. This is translated at the city scale as well. Zarqa and its surrounding cities suffer from several problems such as urban

sprawl, traffic congestion, high pollution, etc. The city is growing at a fast pace and the population in this urban gathering is increasing at a high rate (3.6%). The growth of the city, however, is limited by the military camps that border the city from the east side. This encouraged the city to grow toward the agricultural land on the west. There are several reasons for this high rate of growth, but the most important two reasons are the existence of the military camps and the light industries (Greater Zarqa Comprehensive Development Plan 1994).

The Greater Zarqa Comprehensive Development Plan was prepared in 1994. Greater Zarqa as defined in the plan covers an area of 309 km<sup>2</sup>. It includes six municipal areas (covering an area of 125 km<sup>2</sup>) and their hinterlands, and the military camps that fall on the western side of Zarqa city. The plan proposes several solutions for the various problems the plan states, but its major proposal is the administrative restructuring. What makes this restructuring a necessity is the lack of coordination between the various municipalities in the area. In addition, a large part of the area falls outside the jurisdiction of any municipality, making its planning the responsibility of the Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs and the Environment (MMRAE). In this sense, the authors of the plan viewed the current situation problematic. Hence, the restructuring proposes canceling the current administrative system and creating a new system in which a “large-scale municipality” regulates the affairs of the whole area would be created. Small administrative units handle the local affairs in the various parts of the metropolitan area. Although it is not explicitly stated as such, but the proposed system is, more or less, a “two-tier” system.

Both the Greater Irbid proposal and the Greater Zarqa plan were never implemented. However, by the late nineties, it was obvious that the government favors amalgamation as a strategy to solve the problem of metropolitan governance.

In 1998, thirteen senators submitted a request to the house of parliament to modify the municipality law. The proposed modification gives the right to the council of ministers (cabinet) to create metropolitan authorities in areas like Irbid and Zarqa with half of their municipal councils is elected and the other half appointed including the mayor himself. In other words, they were proposing a bill that would enable the government to follow the GA example in the two cities. The senators' proposal did not materialize until three years later when amalgamation was adopted as a strategy for the whole country.

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**Concluding Remarks:**

In this paper, I was trying to respond the question posed by Robert Bish as a title to an article wrote in 1996; “Amalgamation: is it a Solution?” In his article, Bish traces the thinking about tier-systems back to its origin in the 1925 when the single-tier system was presented as a model for all urban areas. The two-tier system, he argues, came as part of the recognitions of the inadequacy of the single-tier model in the 1960s. However, Bish argues that in our days it is not clear which of the two models is better for metropolitan governance. He proposes that the whole notion of “tier” thinking, which presupposes that amalgamation is the solution, denies thinking about alternative ways that may respond to the needs of metropolitan areas more efficiently. One of those alternative ways is “the multi-organizational systems” that he outlines toward the end of his piece, which does not necessarily indicate a need for amalgamation.

Amalgamation is a solution, or at least presented as a solution, in Jordan. Solution to what, one may ask. Amalgamation is always presented as a solution to the “multiplicity of administrative units”, which is often presented as the major problem

of metropolitan governance. The statement, “amalgamation is a solution”, implies two traits. First, there is a problem(s) that needs to be solved. Second, amalgamation has proven to be effective in some cases. It is obvious that municipalities suffer from several types of problems (financial, administrative, etc.) that leave them incapable of performing their responsibilities. Except for the Greater Amman Municipality, most municipalities are hardly able to perform their everyday duties, let alone planning for the future. They lack the resources. For example, Irbid’s total expenditure for the year 1999 is about JD5.8 million while its total revenue for the same year is about JD 5.6. This means that the city had a deficit of about JD 2 million (one third of its revenues) (ESCWA 2001, 36). The case is even worst in smaller municipalities. In addition, most municipalities lack the expertise required to run their affairs properly. It cannot be denied also that the Greater Amman Municipality hardly suffers from any of the problems that other municipalities have to face. However, we cannot really connect the two-tier system that is implemented in Greater Amman to the efficiency by which the Greater Amman Municipality is often described.

A quick look at the budget of Greater Amman should give an idea of where the real problem lies. The total expenditure of the municipality for the year 1999 was about JD 64.8. Its revenue is on the other hand about JD 64.8 million JD 64.6 million (ESCWA 2001, 37). Obviously there is a gap between Greater Amman Municipality and other municipalities in terms of budgets. The availability of resources for the Municipality of Greater Amman enables it to perform its duties in a more efficient manner. The shortage in those same resources to other municipalities makes it impossible for them to function with similar efficiency. Moreover, the Municipality of GA has more autonomy than any other Municipality. Unlike most municipalities, the Municipality of GA has an independent well in hiring, firing, setting salaries, making

master plans, changing land use, etc. The situation was as such even before the creation of Greater Amman. The Municipality of Amman had similar autonomy and more resources than any other municipality. So the multiplicity of administrative units, which is the problem that amalgamation is supposedly solving, is not really the problem. Lack of resources and autonomy are the real problems. The question that can be raised here is then what made the multiplicity of administrative units a problem and amalgamation its solution.

What made the multiplicity of administrative units a problem, and amalgamation its solution, is the set of rules (derived from social and political relationships) that allocates authority, responsibility and control. These rules identify some issues as problems and others as solutions and constitute objects of planning discourse. Planners act within these rules making their choices from a field of possibilities of action. In their action, they are actually responding to controlling interpretations of conduct. While amalgamation is often presented in Jordan as a solution to a technical problem—the multiplicity of administrative units—it is rather a practice in the historical sense. For something to be characterized as a practice in the historical sense, the sense that goes beyond individuals, there must be some sort of sameness or identity between the practices at different stages. As an historical practice, amalgamation, though presented as a solution, rather precedes the existence of the problem—the multiplicity of administrative units.

Amalgamation as a solution is intended as a *procedure of exclusion*, in Foucault's terms. Exclusion—often by prohibition—is a practice of power: those who exclude practice their power and ability to exclude, and those who are excluded lose a legitimate position that they could have gained had not they been excluded, and consequently they become, relatively, powerless. While amalgamation is a practice in the historical sense,

it is dehistoricized by being removed from the historical context, and naturalized by being presented simply as a natural solution to a "preexisting" problem.

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