

'They Cannot Stop Our Tongues':

Islamic Activism in Jordan

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Executive Summary

Islamic activism has emerged as one of the most dangerous and destabilizing forces inside Jordan today. The growth of the activist movement has come largely at the expense of a decades-old symbiotic relationship between the Hashemite ruling family and the traditional religious establishment.

Several external factors rankled domestic Islamic sentiment and contributed to the growth of Islamic activism, including:

- * Jordan's lukewarm opposition to Anwar Sadat's peace initiative in 1977;
- * King Hussein's personal support of the Shah of Iran in 1978;
- * Jordan's staunch backing of Saddam Hussein's campaign against Khomeini's Iran since 1980;
- * Jordan's use of the Muslim Brotherhood as a tool in the ongoing political contest with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad.

Domestically, the collapse of the oil market provided a significant boost to the Islamic movement, especially among Jordanian youth. Islamic groups have been the prime beneficiaries of the anger and frustration of even highly educated Jordanians, whose expectations of rising social and economic status are left unfulfilled in today's climate of austerity, recession and mass unemployment.

The Islamic activist movement has expanded throughout the Kingdom. Islamic organizations are now entrenched at both major Jordanian universities and popular sympathy for the movement appears strong in metropolitan areas as well as in Palestinian refugee camps.

As the challenge has grown, the Jordanian regime's response has changed from cooptation to confrontation. At first, the Crown heightened the profile of its Islamic legitimacy and tried to coopt the popular tide of religious sentiment. But cooptation often provoked more opposition, so in 1985, Hussein changed tack and opted to confront the activists directly.

Given the speed with which it grew, the Islamic activist movement must be viewed as one of the most important and portentous developments inside Jordan today. The activists, however, still lack the strength to confront the regime

directly or pose a serious threat to Hashemite rule. Yet, as the events in Irbid in recent months show, the Islamic movement has moved to the center of Jordanian politics.

Because of the Islamic activists' virulent antipathy toward accommodation with Israel, their new centrality in Jordanian politics further limits the Kingdom's room for maneuver on the peace process.

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