

# Amman's Showdown with the Muslim Brotherhood

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Brief Analysis

**By continuing to pressure the old-guard Brotherhood and cultivating more friendly Islamist factions, the palace seems intent on pursuing an ambitious counterradicalization strategy, but it still hopes to avoid a major confrontation.**

**O**n April 7, the officially banned wing of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is slated to hold internal elections for its general guide and fifty-three-member Shura Council. The government declared the group illegal in February and subsequently licensed a rival Brotherhood organization; it is now warning the MB not to carry out the balloting. Yet the group continues to say it will vote, setting the stage for a showdown between the beleaguered Islamists and the state.

## BACKGROUND

**F**ounded in 1945, the Jordanian chapter of the MB and its political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), have long been a political force in the kingdom. Over the past decade, however, more moderate, pro-regime Brotherhood elements, primarily tribal East Banker "doves," clashed with the more hardline and ascendant West Banker "hawks" of largely Palestinian origin. Much of the disagreement focused on the relative priority of jihad in Israel and the Palestinian territories, but the factions also differed on whether to participate in a systemically disadvantageous Jordanian political system. In 2007 and 2013, the MB boycotted parliamentary elections in protest of the electoral law, which has since been revised.

Over the past four years, the palace and the General Intelligence Directorate exploited these internal rifts to further divide and weaken the Islamists. In 2012, former senior IAF official Rohile Gharaibeh -- with the blessing and possible financial backing of the palace -- established the Zamzam Initiative, whose articulated goal was to end the MB's Islamist monopoly in the kingdom. The directorate is also widely suspected of backing the Islamist party al-

Wasat in the 2013 parliamentary elections, helping it win 16 of 150 seats, the single largest bloc. In 2014, MB deputy general guide Zaki Bani Irsheid was sentenced to thirteen months in prison; just weeks after his release, the government delivered the coup de grace by banning the Brotherhood, claiming it lacked the appropriate license, and accusing it of being illicitly beholden to a foreign leader (i.e., Muhammad Badie, general guide of the Egyptian MB).

Then in March, the government issued a license to Abdul Majid Thunaibat, a perennial MB leader from the "dove" faction, permitting him to establish a new Brotherhood party. Amman also transferred the banned MB's considerable assets to the new organization. Reports suggest that the new group now has 300 members, including some prominent former MB leaders.

## ELECTORAL BAN

Jordanian media indicate that Amman governor Khaled Abu Zaid issued the directive barring the unlicensed MB from holding internal elections, in response to a complaint submitted to the Ministry of Political Development by Thunaibat. The complaint objected that people were trying to "impersonate" a licensed organization. Based on this petition, the Interior Ministry determined that the vote would indeed be illegal.

Not surprisingly, the banned group's spokesman, Muath Khawaldeh, countered by calling the government's position illegal, stating, "The elections have occurred for seventy years without intervention from anyone. What is new this year?" Murad Adayleh, another spokesman, was less restrained, describing the ban as "a coup sponsored by the regime."

Despite its tense relations with the government, the MB still seemed to be trying to reconcile with Amman up until very recently. According to Quds Press, an online publication sympathetic to Islamist causes, several members of the banned group -- including IAF deputy secretary-general Ali Abu Sukkar -- have engaged in a series of exchanges over the past few months with Senate president and palace intimate Faisal al-Fayez in an effort to bridge the gaps. Brotherhood sources indicate that during these meetings, Fayez conveyed several official prerequisites for rehabilitating the organization, including: (1) declaring loyalty to King Abdullah and the monarchy, (2) pledging to engage in political life through parliamentary and municipal elections, (3) severing relations with the Brotherhood *internationale*, particularly in Egypt, and (4) reconciling with Thunaibat. Quds Press suggested that the group had accepted at least the first three of these demands, but the MB's legal status remains the same.

## THE NEW BROTHERHOOD

While Thunaibat leads the new Brotherhood, the IAF's mantle appears to be shifting to Gharaibeh's Zamzam Initiative. During a heady speech on March 26, Gharaibeh announced that Zamzam is establishing a new political party that will be Islamist in nature but also nationalist, pluralistic, reform-minded, and independent of foreign influence. Calling it "a civil party," he declared that his faction believes "in a civil, modern, democratic state that expands to all its citizens on the basis of real citizenship and belonging, and rests upon national legitimacy." He also implicitly criticized the banned MB for competing on the basis of religious piety instead of programs and accomplishments, and for emphasizing sectarianism and exclusionary politics. Support for the Hashemite Kingdom was a central element running through his address: "We believe that the strong and stable Jordanian state is in the interest of every Arab and Muslim," he said, noting that "the Jordanian national project is not inconsistent with any Arab or Islamic project in any Arab state."

While Zamzam's relatively moderate platform will no doubt be welcomed by Amman and Washington, the organization is no panacea to the problems associated with Jordanian Islamists. For example, Gharaibeh has argued that his incipient party is not a "political arm of the Society of the licensed Muslim Brotherhood group," but it continues to resemble the IAF in at least one way: its platform is preoccupied with "the Zionist occupation settlement plan" and considers Israel "the first enemy and danger threatening the Muslim community and all of the

Arab states," despite two decades of bilateral peace. In a March article in the government daily *al-Dustour*, Gharaibeh himself called Israel the first "Jewish Daesh," using the Arab epithet normally reserved for the so-called Islamic State.

## IMPLICATIONS

Last May, the Jordanian MB planned to hold a large demonstration to commemorate its seventy-year anniversary, but the government denied the group a license to hold the rally. Although the MB threatened to assemble anyway, it ultimately backed down, and the demonstration never materialized. The group faces a similar choice tomorrow, and more likely than not it will postpone the internal election to avoid a potential government crackdown. Alternatively, the group might hold the balloting in lower-profile local venues instead of the traditional location, the Cultural Palace auditorium in Amman.

It is not clear how the palace would respond to the latter scenario. Under increasing economic and security pressures related to the 1.4 million Syrian refugees currently residing in the kingdom, Amman would like to avoid a direct clash with the MB. To be sure, the organization has been weakened by government suppression at home and various developments abroad, particularly the 2013 coup in Egypt that removed Mohamed Morsi's Brotherhood government from power. In December, for example, 400 of the IAF's 1,500 members resigned from the party. Yet the MB has proved resilient in the past and continues to enjoy broad public support in the kingdom.

In addition to potential political concerns, a campaign of arrests and harassment against Brotherhood members would further tax Jordan's already overburdened domestic security services. As the war in Syria continues well into its fifth year, the kingdom is facing an unprecedented challenge from domestic radicalization and terrorist plots. Just last month, security forces in Irbid killed eight terrorists who were purportedly affiliated with the Islamic State and were in the advanced stages of planning an attack. While the outlawed branch of the MB constitutes a perennial headache for the palace, the group has abjured violence as a matter of policy. Lacking funds, distanced from its leadership in Cairo and Turkey, and facing competition from its government-licensed rival and the Zamzam Initiative, the old-guard Brotherhood is but a vestige of its former self -- a nuisance rather than a threat to Amman.

Even so, Washington is concerned about Jordan's stability and will likely be following developments closely this week. The worry is that further moves against the banned MB, while perhaps justified, would prove counterproductive. For Amman, however, dismantling the old MB and cultivating Zamzam is the keystone in what appears to be an ambitious long-term domestic counterradicalization strategy. Tomorrow's potential showdown may provide an early indication of the plan's prospects for success.

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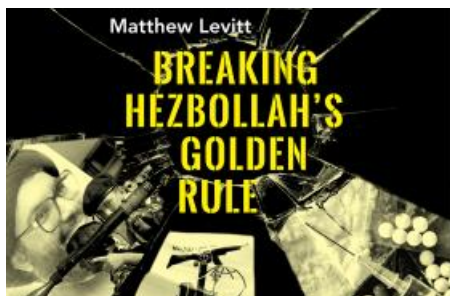
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