

The Implosion of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood

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Brief Analysis

With help from years of Brotherhood infighting, the Jordanian government has seemingly tamed the group's local chapter, but it may have complicated its fight against domestic Islamist militancy in the process.

This November will mark seventy years since the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan. The group had planned to commemorate the anniversary with a large demonstration on May 1, but it was denied a license by the government. As the aborted rally suggests, the Jordanian branch of the Brotherhood -- like the majority of the organization's regional chapters -- has little to celebrate these days. Over the past few months, longtime fissures within the local Brotherhood blossomed into a nasty public schism, which Amman skillfully exploited to further divide the group. As a result, a smaller, more government-inclined Brotherhood is emerging as the kingdom's legally sanctioned vanguard. The future of the new Brotherhood -- and its more radical elements, who are disaffected and now disenfranchised -- remains to be seen.

BACKGROUND

In Jordan, where the population is split between citizens of Palestinian origin (estimated at 60 percent) and those of tribal origin (known as East Bankers), the Muslim Brotherhood once practiced a unique brand of ethnic ecumenicism. Over the past decade, however, more moderate, pro-regime Brotherhood elements, primarily East Bankers, have clashed with more hardline members of largely Palestinian origin. Much of the disagreement has focused on the relative priority of jihad in Israel and the Palestinian territories, but the group has also split on personnel appointments and substantive domestic policy decisions. After the 2006 election of Zaki Bani Irsheid as

the organization's deputy secretary-general and the 2008 appointment of Hammam Saeed as head of its political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the "hawks" became ascendant, determining key Brotherhood policies.

THE DECLINE

Amid intense internal disagreement in 2007 and again in 2013, the Brotherhood boycotted parliamentary elections in protest of the electoral law, which the group has long claimed unfairly disadvantages the IAF. Despite the law's alleged shortcomings, the party won nearly 7 percent of the seats in the 2003 elections. Yet with the MB on the sidelines in January 2013, al-Wasat -- another Islamist party that some contend has links to Jordanian intelligence -- captured 16 of the legislature's 150 elected seats, becoming the largest parliamentary bloc.

The MB had suffered another setback two months earlier. In November 2012, former senior IAF official Rohile Gharaibeh -- with the blessing and possible financial backing of the palace -- established the Zamzam Initiative, an organization with the stated goal of ending the Brotherhood's "monopoly on Islamic discourse" and promoting a more inclusive, indigenous Islam that does not "alienate the public." The Brotherhood's highest local decisionmaking bureau -- the Shura Council (advisory council), at this point stacked with hardliners -- responded by prohibiting members from interacting with the new group, accentuating the internal conflict between Palestinian hawks and East Banker "doves."

Worse still was the July 2013 military removal of President Mohamed Morsi and his Brotherhood-led government in Egypt (home base of the movement's international Guidance Council) and the subsequent legal dissolution of the organization and seizure of its assets. Backed by Amman's leading Gulf financial benefactors, the coup reverberated in Jordan, spooking the local chapter.

And for good reason, it turns out. In late 2014, Jordanian authorities arrested and sentenced Bani Irsheid to eighteen months in prison for criticizing the United Arab Emirates after it designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Then, this past February, Amman hinted at licensing problems for the local Brotherhood, citing its connection to the Egyptian command structure. And on March 2, the Ministry of Social Development issued a permit to a new Brotherhood organization led by Abdul Majid Thunaibat, a perennial leader and prominent dove in the old group. Still to come is the anticipated court decision that will likely transfer all of the Jordanian Brotherhood's financial and physical assets to the Thunaibat-controlled faction.

THE OLD GUARD RESPONSE

The hardliners responded quickly and harshly to the licensing gambit. Hammam Saeed described it as a "coup" that undermined the Brotherhood's leadership and violated its internal bylaws, spurring the Shura Council to expel Thunaibat, Gharaibeh, and eight other doves from the organization. To be sure, the latter decision was not unanimous -- seventy leading Brotherhood members petitioned the Council to void the expulsion if Thunaibat agreed to withdraw his license request. Despite this ostensibly conciliatory gesture, however, divisions have only widened between the two factions. On March 9, Thunaibat's faction released an official statement announcing its intention to form a new leadership body, outlining plans to reach out to the Brotherhood's support base, reengage women and youths, and, most important, prioritize the group's Jordanian identity. As mentioned above, Thunaibat is also reportedly pressing the government to transfer all property and bank accounts to his newly licensed group, and to stop all activities by the "illegitimate" older group.

Amid this apparent *fait accompli*, the hawks continue to reject the new group's legitimacy, and Saeed maintains that his organization does not require a license to validate its authority. The Brotherhood's international leadership likewise refuses to accept the Jordanian splinter group. Ibrahim Munair, a London-based official on the Brotherhood's global executive council, said in March that the organization recognizes only "the General Shura Council of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, the group's Comptroller-General Dr. Hammam Saeed, and his

legitimate Executive Board."

Bluster aside, there appears to be little the hawks can do at this point. On April 23, Interior Minister Hussein Majali announced that "No group will be allowed to organize activities or events on Jordanian land on behalf of external groups that impose their agenda on Jordan," and this remains the official -- and likely immutable -- government position on the matter. While the hawks will no doubt continue to talk tough, they have few if any legal, peaceful options for reclaiming authority over the organization.

IMPLICATIONS

The implosion and dismantling of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood has been a years-long process. It resulted at least in part from self-inflicted wounds; a decade of infighting clearly had a corrosive effect on cohesion. But the Jordanian government has also played a key role in skillfully and discreetly managing the organization's splintering. So far at least, there have been few if any negative consequences for Amman. Indeed, many government officials were no doubt encouraged by the recent announcement that a new Brotherhood youth organization called the "Reformist Trend" will align with Thunaibat's licensed faction.

The developments in Jordan might also affect how other states deal with local Brotherhood chapters. In recent weeks, much has been written in the Egyptian press about how Jordan might serve as a model for dispatching the remnants of Egypt's Brotherhood. According to these unsourced reports, President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi met with several former senior Brotherhood officials earlier this month -- including prominent former spokesman Kamal al-Halbawi -- to discuss relicensing the neutered organization. Perhaps unsurprisingly, both sides have denied these stories.

In Jordan, where spillover from the war in Syria continues to threaten security, some are questioning the wisdom of the government's approach to the Brotherhood. After all, while Thunaibat's new and improved faction will soon command all of the organization's assets, the purged hawks and their sizable constituency may create other problems for the kingdom. Before the Thunaibat initiative, these Islamists were disgruntled with the palace but willing to remain within the system. Absent this pathway, some of them will likely be driven underground, perhaps to join Jordan's swelling ranks of Salafists and Salafi jihadists. The kingdom's General Intelligence Directorate is already shouldering heavy burdens, such as containing the growing contingent of indigenous radicals and monitoring nearly a million Syrian refugees. Tracking an angry cadre of erstwhile Muslim Brothers promises to further tax the beleaguered organization. In short, while Amman has tamed its local Brotherhood chapter, it may have complicated its fight against domestic Islamist militancy in the process.

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