

# Down and Out in Amman: The Rise and Fall of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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**Given the numerous external threats facing Jordan and the reversal of the Brotherhood's political fortune at home, the organization is now the least of King Abdullah's worries.**

**T**oday, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is down, if not completely out. After the Egyptian military deposed President Mohamed Morsi, a ranking Brotherhood bureaucrat, in July, Egypt's courts charged him with a litany of felonies and the army cracked down, shooting more than a thousand of his supporters and detaining most of the Brotherhood's leadership. Last week, an Egyptian court issued an injunction to dissolve the group altogether and seize its assets, outlawing "all activities" by the 85-year-old Islamist movement. As bad as things are for the Egyptian Brotherhood, however, it isn't the only chapter of the organization that faces setbacks. More than two years into the Arab revolts that saw Islamist gains in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and, at least temporarily, Egypt, Muslim Brothers in Jordan are in the middle of their own crisis.

Once a powerful voice for electoral reform, a vocal critic of palace corruption, and the leading opponent of economic normalization with Israel, lately the Jordanian Brotherhood has seen its local influence and standing erode. Other Islamists, too, are finding it hard to capture the public's attention. Groups in the Jordanian parliament that are unaffiliated with the Brotherhood tried to push forward a bill to "harmonize" legislation with sharia; the motion failed, gathering just 27 of 150 votes. To be sure, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's authoritarian tendencies, imperious style, and economic mismanagement contributed to the popular alienation of the group. Yet unlike in Egypt, where the military was ultimately responsible for the group's misfortune, in Jordan the Brotherhood's setbacks have resulted from both self-inflicted wounds and the changing dynamic of local Islamist politics.

A year ago, it would have been difficult to imagine the Jordanian Brotherhood's current circumstances. The group's power was surging as it participated in burgeoning demonstrations with tribal and secular opposition forces against

King Abdullah II's government for alleged graft, economic privation, and subsidy cuts. But by the end of last year, this loose opposition coalition had frayed, and protesters, perhaps out of fear of Egyptian- or even Syrian-style chaos, stopped coming out. In January, after failing to compel King Abdullah to overhaul an unfavorable electoral law, the Brotherhood boycotted parliamentary elections with an eye toward undermining the poll's legitimacy. But without Brotherhood participation, another less prominent, self-professed moderate Islamist political party, known as the Wasat (Center) Party, stepped in and won 16 of 150 seats, securing the largest bloc in parliament. As a result, the Brotherhood lost its claim to the mantle of Islamist leadership in the Kingdom.

Even with that blow, the Brotherhood's standing remained somewhat elevated thanks to turmoil in neighboring Syria. For a time, it looked like the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood was on the verge of a renaissance, with the regime of Bashar al-Assad close to collapse. In the 1980s, Hafez al-Assad's regime had dealt with a Brotherhood-led insurgency by killing tens of thousands of Syrian Brothers and making membership in the Sunni group a capital offense. The Brotherhood has long vowed revenge. Its potential rise in Syria would have profoundly negative repercussions for the Western-backed monarchy in Jordan, no doubt emboldening the Brotherhood in Jordan and even leading to cross-border meddling. In fact, shortly after Morsi's election in Egypt, the Brotherhood interfered in Jordanian politics from Cairo and Doha: in January 2012, it forced Abdul Majid Thunaybat -- a senior member of the Jordanian chapter -- to resign his seat in the Jordanian Senate, to which he had been appointed by the King. But the prospect of the Brotherhood's ascendancy in Jordan didn't last. Much like the response to the 2005 Amman hotel bombings that killed 60 and effectively rolled back support for al Qaeda in the Kingdom, the emergence of al Qaeda-affiliated militants in Syria's civil war drained popular enthusiasm for the Brotherhood in Jordan.

Even as the general Jordanian population grows less inclined toward the Brotherhood because of fears of creeping extremism, part of the Islamist population grows disenchanted with the Brotherhood because it is not extreme enough. As the war in Syria festers, Jordan has seen a proliferation of Islamist competitors, most notably the Salafis, who are followers of a strict, Sunni revivalist movement. Salafis have long had a presence in the Kingdom, and their domestic popularity has spread as the movement gains support in the region. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq who hailed from the northern Jordanian town of Zarqa, is but the most famous example. As of April, reports in the local press indicated that some five hundred Jordanian Salafis were fighting in Syria alongside the jihadist group Jabhat al-Nusra. The almost daily press coverage of Jordanian Salafis returning home from Syria in body bags -- and being recruited for the Syrian jihad -- seems to confirm these numbers.

Meanwhile, shifts within the Muslim Brotherhood toward Hamas have contributed to the Salafis' rise. Historically, Islamism in Jordan found equal appeal across the country's traditional social divide of native East Bankers --- many of whom have deep tribal roots in the area -- and the majority of the population that is of Palestinian origin. Lately, though, as the leadership of the Jordanian Brotherhood and its political party, the Islamic Action Front, has changed and warmed toward Hamas -- partly due to frustration with the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority, which governs the Israeli occupied West Bank and manages the peace process -- some East Bankers have started to view the organization as more Palestinian. For many East Banker Islamists, who, like their less religious tribesmen, remain suspicious of Palestinians in the Kingdom, this shift in orientation has made the Brotherhood less appealing. Along with the fighting in Syria and the regional trend toward Salafism, it also appears to have further enhanced the appeal of Jordanian Salafi groups at the expense of the Brotherhood.

These long-standing social divisions within Jordan between native East Bankers and those of Palestinian origin have also created new fissures among the country's Islamists. Since at least 2010, more moderate pro-regime elements in the Muslim Brotherhood, primarily among East Bankers, have clashed with their more hardline counterparts of largely Palestinian origin over personnel appointments and other substantive issues, such as the relative priority of the jihad in Palestine and the widespread allegations of vote-buying during internal Brotherhood elections. More

recently, in 2012, the group split over the decision to boycott the 2013 parliamentary and municipal elections. One of these East Banker "doves" -- Nabil Kofahi, the scion of longtime Brotherhood leader Ahmed Kofahi -- initially bucked the mandated boycott of municipal elections and announced that he would stand for office in the northern town of Irbid. Just days prior to the balloting, however, Kofahi withdrew his candidacy, reportedly to avoid expulsion from the organization. The boycott was ineffective anyway; it drew little attention in Jordan, and tribal candidates and businessmen close to the government won most seats.

But the Jordanian Brotherhood's own internal divisions extend beyond East Banker versus Palestinian. Last November, Rahil Gharaibeh, a former senior official in the IAF, established the Zamzam Initiative, an organization purportedly dedicated, among other political and economic reforms, to ending the Brotherhood's "monopoly on Islamic discourse" and emphasizing a more inclusive Islam that does not "alienate the [Jordanian] public." Although it is impossible to discern his motivations with certainty, Gharaibeh is a thoughtful interlocutor; based on my discussion with him, he seems sincere in his efforts to improve the image of the Kingdom's Islamists through a more tolerant and pluralistic approach. According to reports in the Arab press, the initiative currently has 700 members, including 100 prominent current and former Brothers. Compared to the Muslim Brotherhood, Zamzam is small, but the upstart organization has attracted the Brothers' attention. In December 2012, just a few weeks after Zamzam was announced, the Brotherhood's Guidance Office issued an internal statement that barred its members from dealing with the initiative.

Under increasing pressure at home, the Jordanian Brotherhood has attempted a few desperate, last-ditch plays. For one, it has tried to exploit public outrage at the events in Egypt to win support. Its Web site is replete with articles about Morsi's removal and statements condemning King Abdullah for being the first Arab leader to visit post-coup Cairo and "legitimate" Morsi's ouster. In late July, the Brotherhood's daily newspaper *As-Sabil* even posted a video of a popular Egyptian cleric named Wagdy Ghonem pleading for the army and the police force to disobey orders and restore Morsi to the presidency. In addition to waning public support, the group also fears an impending palace crackdown. The precedent set by Morsi's removal, the heightened security threat posed by the war in Syria, and the organization's currently diminished stature all contribute to a sense of vulnerability. As if to confirm these pressures, last month, the organization's Deputy General Guide Zaki Bani Rsheid issued an uncharacteristically defensive statement, claiming that the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood is not in an "emergency and is not peripheralized." Yet even as the organization criticizes the king, its leaders are currently calling for dialogue with the government -- further proof of internal discord.

For now, though, despite these challenges, the Brotherhood in Jordan doesn't need to fear a campaign of repression akin to what is happening in Egypt. If anything, Jordan's Muslim Brothers have been overtaken by rapidly changing events in Jordan and across the Arab world. Given the numerous external threats facing Jordan and the reversal of the Brotherhood's political fortune at home, the organization is the least of King Abdullah's worries.

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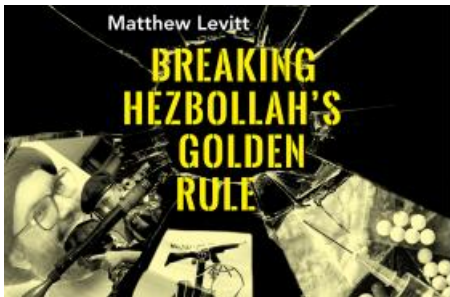
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