

# Jordan's Intelligence Chief Sacked:

## New Policy Toward Hamas?

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### Brief Analysis

On January 2, in the midst of Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip, Jordan's King Abdullah removed General Intelligence Department (GID) head Muhammad Dahabi from his post and replaced him with Gen. Muhammad Raqqad, a deputy in the organization. Dahabi, who is the brother of Prime Minister Nader Dahabi, leaves at a critical time for Jordanian security. The reasons for Dahabi's dismissal are not clear but may relate to the GID's handling of the 2008 rapprochement with Hamas or to Dahabi's unwelcome forays into the political arena. In either case, his successor is likely to take the organization on a different path.

### The Hamas Factor

Dahabi is widely believed to have been a driving force behind King Abdullah's summer 2008 decision to thaw relations with Hamas -- frozen since 2000 -- as well as Jordan's subsequent decision to improve its relationship with Syria and Qatar. Eight years after expelling Hamas leaders from Jordan, and two years after embarking on a policy of isolating the Islamist group to strengthen Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, the shift in policy toward Hamas, Syria, and Qatar suggests the GID had little confidence that Abbas would prevail.

The GID director was responsible for opening relations with Hamas, and the move appears to have been influenced by several factors: first, Dahabi mistrusted Fatah, the dominant faction in the Palestine Liberation Organization, which Abbas heads, and was concerned that Fatah elites might negotiate a peace deal with Israel at the expense of Jordanian interests; second, the GID hoped Hamas would stymie those who saw Jordan as an "alternative homeland" for the Palestinians. Simply put, Dahabi sought to protect Jordan from the "Jordanian option."

Within the GID, the working assumption was that the Palestinian Authority (PA) under Abbas would collapse in 2009, either leaving a power vacuum or allowing Hamas to take the helm. In either case, the GID assumed that Hamas would prevent the influx of West Bank Palestinians into Jordan and a spillover from the security deterioration that would likely follow the PA's collapse. Finally, Hamas held some appeal in the GID because, like most Jordanians, the organization feared Abbas's willingness to compromise on the refugee issue at the kingdom's expense.

Several articles supporting this view appeared in the Jordanian press, written by columnists close to the GID. For example, on January 8, Bassam Haddadin, a prominent member of parliament, wrote in al-Ghad that Dahabi "awoke the Jordanian conscience to the state of this looming danger." Haddadin added that one of the reasons for the

conflict between Dahabi and Bassem Awadallah, the reform-minded former chief of the Royal Court who is of Palestinian descent, was Awadallah's alleged support of the alternative homeland notion. Jordanian politicians known to have close ties with the GID claim that Awadallah and Saeb Erekat, the Palestinian chief negotiator, arrived at an unwritten agreement supporting the idea. Enraged by a media report to that effect, Erekat subsequently issued a statement denying any involvement in such an arrangement.

Dahabi may have gone too far in warming relations with Hamas. During the Israeli operation in Gaza, several political factions in Jordan, chief among them the Muslim Brotherhood, staged demonstrations in the kingdom. The regime's tolerance of these demonstrations apparently angered Cairo, whose officials accused Dahabi of being responsible for the " Hamasization " of the Jordanian street. President Abbas was also not pleased with the outpouring of Jordanian public support for Hamas or with the protesters' allegation of his collaboration with Israel.

No doubt, the regional fallout of the Gaza campaign contributed to King Abdullah's decision to remove Dahabi, but the king was likely going to replace him anyway for domestic reasons. Tolerance of Jordanian popular sympathy for Gaza is one thing, but allowing political demonstrations in support of Hamas is another.

### Power Struggle

Internal politics -- particularly a dispute between two top royal advisors -- appeared to be a key factor in the king's decision to replace Dahabi. The former chief played a prominent political role that transcended the traditional function of the GID. Important in this regard was the public clash between Dahabi and Awadallah, which played out in the Jordanian press. The GID appeared to support a media campaign to expose Awadallah as a pro-Palestinian reformer bent on implementing reforms to the social and economic detriment of tribal interests in the kingdom. This campaign was so public that the king was compelled to respond. In July, he gave an interview in which he said that the media had crossed the line. Awadallah and his supporters interpreted the king's interview as a victory over Dahabi. Even so, Dahabi refused to reconcile with the chief of the Royal Court.

The GID and many Jordanians were clearly irritated by the role that Awadallah had assumed. Indeed, the harsh public critiques of the chief of the Royal Court were unprecedented. In Jordan, where there is little freedom of the press, the GID had the authority to prevent publication of these critiques, but instead appeared to have encouraged them.

To put an end to this unhealthy power struggle, the king sacked both Awadallah and Dahabi. He removed Awadallah first and then waited a few months to get rid of Dahabi, presumably for fear of giving the impression that his actions were directed against the department itself.

### What is Next?

Many in Jordan view the appointment of General Raqqad as a step in the right direction. It appears to symbolize a return to the GID's traditionally limited role of security. Perhaps to reinforce this impression, the king relieved all of Dahabi's top deputies as well. On January 4, Rana Sabbag, a leading columnist for Arab al-Yawm, wrote that by sacking Dahabi, the king sent a clear message that he wanted the GID to focus on its original mission: confronting internal and external threats to Jordanian national security. Sabbag argued that the king sought to limit the political role of the GID, which had grown since 1996 due to the weakness of other state institutions, and for this reason chose an officer known for his professionalism and for his prominent role in dismantling terror cells in Jordan.

Raqqad's appointment may be an indication that the government has decided to end its brief flirtation with Hamas and turn inward to protect its domestic front. The suppression of demonstrations around the Israeli embassy in Amman and the severe beating of the Amman-based correspondent of al-Jazeera satellite TV who earlier had spearheaded an anti-Israeli campaign are evidence of this policy change.

Ultimately, it is unclear how this security change will affect the issue of civil liberties and reform in Jordan. There is little doubt that the new GID director is a professional who will confront the Hamas challenge in the kingdom. It is less certain, however, whether Raqqad envisions how to balance the requirements of security with the demands for reform.

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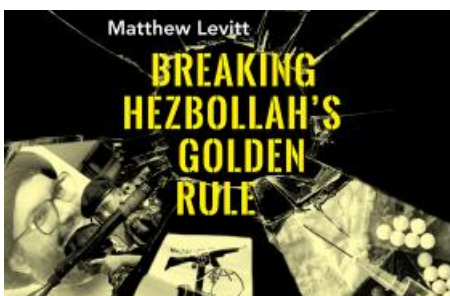
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