

Jordanian Islamists and Municipal Elections: Confirmation of a Problematic Trend?

by [David Schenker](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker](#)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

Jordanians go to the polls tomorrow to elect nearly 1,000 local representatives and 92 mayors. On their own, these elections are of minimal interest to Washington: municipalities have small budgets, limited responsibilities, and scant independence from the central government. But the voting comes just a month after the Hamas takeover of Gaza, during a spike in the violence in Iraq, and a week after a landslide victory for the Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the Turkish national elections. Adding to the significance of the Jordanian ballot is the fact that, after boycotting the 2003 contest, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), will participate in this year's elections. A potential IAF victory highlights growing concern that Islamists are on a political roll throughout the Middle East, and that Jordan may be vulnerable.

Background

Although the IAF boycotted the 2003 municipal elections, it participated in the parliamentary elections held the same year and took 17 of 110 seats. The party plans to run no fewer than thirty-five candidates in this November's parliamentary elections, potentially increasing Islamist opposition in the parliament. Notwithstanding regional political trends, instability on Jordan's borders, and significant IAF preparations in advance of the November contest, however, it is unclear whether the IAF will perform significantly better in those elections. Polling suggests that only 17.5 percent of Jordanian voters will vote on the national level for candidates affiliated with political parties.

For all its problems, Jordan is actually holding up rather well to external and internal pressures. The war in Iraq has had some negative effects on the kingdom, including the end of Saddam Hussein's longstanding oil subsidies and the influx of an estimated 800,000 Iraqi refugees. When subsidies ended, the costs were passed onto Jordanian consumers -- and borne with surprisingly little grumbling.

With the notable exception of a rise in inflation, the refugees have not proven to be a significant drag on the Jordanian economy. In fact, Iraqi refugees have been increasingly investing in Jordanian industry. In 2004, they invested about \$6.5 million; two years later, this figure reached \$140 million. During the same period, Jordan witnessed a huge influx of non-Iraqi foreign direct investment (FDI), driving growth in the kingdom. In 2002, FDI stood at about \$75 million; by 2006 it had reached nearly \$3.1 billion. All the while, unemployment figures have remained relatively constant at about 14 percent, according to the Central Bank of Jordan.

The IAF and Municipal Elections

Tomorrow's elections will be held under the newly passed 2007 Municipal Elections Law, a significant departure from the regulations governing the 2003 contest. Then, nearly half of all municipal council members and all mayors were appointed by the Jordanian government, with the public electing only 536 of 996 local representatives. (This highly restrictive voting was instituted following the strong Islamist showing in the 1999 municipal elections, during which the IAF took control of the local councils of Irbid, Tafilah, Rasifeh, and Zarqa.) This year, with the exception of the Greater Amman municipality, Jordanians will directly elect all representatives and mayors.

In Jordan, where political parties are historically weak, the IAF is the strongest of about thirty opposition groups and has exploited its position to great advantage. Indeed, like Hamas in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, the IAF has proven particularly adept at organizing itself. As Jordan's pro-Hamas Islamist weekly *Assabil* noted, as of July 17, the IAF was "the only party which announced a complete list of candidates." IAF sources say that the party has also generated political and social service platforms for its candidates. In what appears to be a conscious effort to avert the kind of legislative backlash provoked by its 1999 municipal elections victory, the party is running only sixty candidates this year.

Focus on Parliamentary Elections

Judging from its preparations for the municipal elections, the IAF understands the axiom "all politics is local." But Jordanian Islamists also recognize that the real electoral prize is increased representation in the parliament. In this regard, the IAF appears to be exploiting the municipal elections as an opportunity to realize its longstanding demands for legislative reforms before the national elections -- specifically, changes to the electoral and political parties laws.

The IAF has long complained about the Jordanian electoral law, which has been carefully crafted -- through gerrymandering and the employment of a "one-man, one-vote" format in a multicandidate district system -- to limit the electoral success of Islamists. Jordanian Islamists consider this system, with its detrimental effects on their electoral performance, as "undemocratic." Yet, even with this regulation in place, the IAF secured nearly 7 percent of parliamentary seats in the 2003 elections.

In the run-up to the municipal elections, the IAF has led opposition and centrist parties in several protests against the current system, as well as the new political parties law approved on March 19 (an amended version of the political parties law of 1992), which mandates an increase in members required to register parties from 50 to 500. The opposition believes this latter change will reduce the number of parties competing by half.

Another IAF complaint is the government's apportionment of seats for the municipal and parliamentary elections. The current arrangement overrepresents rural areas -- the Hashemites' traditional base of support -- at the expense of urban areas where most Palestinian voters and IAF supporters reside. According to Democracy Reporting International, this practice has created a situation in which "there are nine times as many voters per parliamentary seat in Amman's second district as there are in the sixth district of Kerak."

Withstanding Pressures

Although the opposition, led by the IAF, has petitioned King Abdullah to change the electoral system, the effort is unlikely to succeed. The king will resist dramatic changes to the electoral law in order to prevent further Islamist inroads into the parliament, and will continue to block changes to the political parties law because, as he told the Jordanian daily al-Ghad in May 2007, "democracy and political development cannot be achieved without the presence of a mature national party movement" -- that is, fewer but more representative political parties.

At the same time, the government arrested seven IAF members last month on charges of "threatening national security," a development that led the IAF to accuse the government of "targeting" Islamists in the run-up to the elections. Details of the arrests remain unclear, but one possible consequence may be an erosion of support for Islamist candidates in the elections.

For its part, the IAF -- like Hamas in the West Bank and Gaza -- may harbor ambitions of an Islamic state in Jordan, but the organization has traditionally respected the kingdom's red lines. With this in mind, the IAF distanced itself from Hamas following the latter's Gaza takeover. Still, developments in Gaza continue to concern the palace, and appear to have resulted in more draconian policies toward Jordan's Islamists.

Conclusion

Jordan has a long history of accentuating loyalist voting blocs through redistricting and tinkering with legislation in order to shape electoral outcomes. From King Hussein to King Abdullah II, these efforts have, by and large, successfully forestalled Islamist victories at the polls while providing the kingdom's residents with a large degree of representation. From Washington's vantage point, this system -- while less than perfect given the attendant risks -- is tolerable.

For the time being, the kingdom appears to be weathering the storm of regional pressures and the trend toward Islamist politics. Still, despite the kingdom's surprisingly good economic performance, Islamists may yet increase their political influence in the kingdom. The municipal elections will provide insight into how Jordanian Islamists are faring. Should the IAF perform better than expected, it will serve as a wakeup call to Washington and Amman, indicating that more needs to be done to counter this trend prior to the November parliamentary elections.

David Schenker is a senior fellow in Arab politics at The Washington Institute. From 2002 to 2006, he served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as country director for Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories. ❖

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