

Jordan Looks Inward:

The Hashemite Kingdom in the Wake of Zarqawi and the Hamas-Israeli Clash

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Brief Analysis

Even while Israelis and Palestinians are locked in deepening conflict over the kidnapping of a young Israeli soldier and the future of the Hamas government, political life on the East Bank of the Jordan River is increasingly focused on internal Jordanian concerns.

Comeuppance for the Islamists

The death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had direct repercussions inside Jordan. Four hawkish Islamist parliamentarians paid a condolence call on Zarqawi's family in Zarqa, with one even calling the al-Qaeda leader a "martyr." This proved too provocative for the Jordanian government, which took special pride in its role in cornering Zarqawi, given his role in the trio of terrorist bombings in Amman last year. In response, the Jordanian police arrested the Islamist parliamentarians and the Jordanian political and media establishments launched a broad campaign to discredit the Islamist agenda inside the kingdom. Just this week, the government referred to the public prosecutor the case of the Islamic Center Charity Society, amid claims of large-scale financial irregularities by this powerful Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated institution.

This was a major shift from the historic position of the Jordanian regime, which has, for decades, given the Muslim Brotherhood a wide berth as a popular safety valve for opposition dissent.

Indeed, the regime's attitude reflects the notable shift toward raising the profile of security as a centerpiece of the kingdom's domestic and regional policies. Not only did Jordan hold one its largest ever military parades last month, but government spokesmen announced that Jordanian intelligence services—already praised for their role in killing Zarqawi—have been empowered to operate beyond the country's borders to counter threats to Jordanian national security.

A Step Backward for Political Reform

One victim of this heightened appreciation for security is the on-again, off-again process of political reform. The National Agenda, charged by King Abdullah II with outlining details of political, social, economic, and administrative

reform, recommended important changes in the country's electoral and political parties laws to enhance prospects for real democratic change, and a joint committee of governmental and political parties representatives was formed to iron out the details of legislation to that effect. Just before the Ministry of Political Development was due to release drafts of both new laws, a fierce backlash from the "old guard" stopped the process in its tracks. Representative of the old guard, men at the top of the political pyramid for two generations, cited "fear of regional instability" as their main concern. Most observers believe that their real fear is creating an electoral system that would dilute the disproportionate power of tribal elites and enhance the voting power of urban voters, often of Palestinian origin.

Political activists and the Jordanian government are also at odds over the text of a new law that defines requirements for political party membership. Again, the central issue is the extent to which new laws will provide more accurate representation of the population by diluting the current level of sectarian or tribal based voting. Sources say the new draft law will guarantee parties the right to establish their own media outlets without prior permission from the government and change some technical aspects of party formation, but the major innovation will be a requirement that parties include members from at least five different governorates, essentially mandating national, rather than local or regional, representation. Nationalist and centrist parties contend that this is the most essential piece of legislation in the country's reform process; traditionalist political groupings—both secular and Islamist—are fighting anything that could shrink their advantages. Prime Minister Marouf al-Bakhit has sought to build a measure of consensus through meetings with various parties; a final decision is due before the end of 2006.

Despite these efforts to bolster civil society and make political life more inclusive and representative, public confidence and interest in political parties remain extremely low. According to a recent poll conducted by the Jordan Center for Social Research, barely 2 percent of Jordanians are considering joining a party. More than 70 percent of the respondents said they had not even heard about the draft law.

Because the state has discouraged citizens from political activity, Jordanians traditionally fear joining political parties. Moreover, the government is a major employer and provider of educational opportunities, so many people fear they may lose jobs and schooling as a result of political activism. In addition, the state's reliance on tribal and sectarian support in politics has further suppressed party participation.

Jumpstarting the Reform Process

Apart from the Islamists, most political activists in Jordan today divide along economic lines between state-centered conservatives and free-market reformers. Old-fashioned politicians animated by pan-Arabist agendas, such as Baathists and Arab nationalists, are a dying breed. This phenomenon is one of the by-products of Abdullah's economic privatization agenda and the kingdom's reliance on external aid. This dichotomy was recently reflected in a public dispute over a Bahraini company's \$415 million acquisition of a 96 percent stake in a Jordanian telecom firm. Old-line conservative parliamentarians and prominent pundits have called on the government to annul the deal because the state receives too little in the way of taxes and fees; on the other side, the government and its free-market supporters herald the deal as a success story for Jordan's commitment to economic openness.

Having purged the political scene of its secular extremists, the government has an opportunity—even before the draft law is completed—to strengthen popular participation in political activity. This would deepen the progress made to date in political reform and broaden it to include a wider range of the Jordanian population. Two steps that would strengthen the role of political parties would be requiring ministers to belong to political parties (at the moment, no cabinet members belong to any party) and requiring all parliamentary candidates to run under a party banner rather than as independents. In addition, the government could promote greater political activity through an amendment to the Jordanian Public Assemblies Law, which currently bans organizing or holding any rally or public meeting without the government's prior written consent.

A recent visit to Jordan by the UN special rapporteur on torture also provides Amman with an opportunity to strengthen its commitment to human rights and thereby invite greater political participation. The UN official called on the Jordanian government specifically to criminalize torture, in line with international laws, and to shut down special security courts that have been used to hide violations of human rights.

Conclusion

With security challenges on its east and west, Jordan finds itself in an increasingly precarious regional position. Faced with their own security challenges, countries like Egypt and Yemen have opted to slow the speed of domestic political reform. Jordan, however, does not have to choose that course. Indeed, given important political developments—such as the decline of the appeal of Zarqawi-style extremism and the comeuppance to the Islamists—Jordan retains the option of pursuing stability by continuing to invest in political reform as an essential complement both to economic and administrative reforms and to Jordan’s geostrategic alignment.

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