

Hamas Weapons in Jordan: Implications for Islamists on the East Bank

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Brief Analysis

On April 18, the Jordanian government announced it had discovered a cache of weapons -- including rockets, C-4 explosives, and small arms -- in a northern Jordanian town. Jordanian authorities said the weapons belonged to Hamas and had entered Jordan from Syria. Subsequently, Jordan arrested ten Hamas militants and cancelled a scheduled visit by Palestinian Authority (PA) foreign minister Mahmoud al-Zahar, a Hamas leader. While the discovery of these weapons underscores Hamas's continuing efforts to prepare for terrorist acts even while it proclaims a tahdiya (period of calm), it also has important implications for internal Jordanian politics and the rising influence of Jordan's own Islamist movement.

Background

Hamas was expelled from Jordan in October 1999, less than a year after King Abdullah II took power. At the time, Jordanian authorities claimed that Hamas cells in Jordan were stockpiling weapons, recruiting personnel, and "building a large base for extremism" in the kingdom. The Islamic Action Front (IAF) -- the sanctioned political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood -- criticized the action as illegal, but the challenge went nowhere and the expulsion was largely perceived as one of King Abdullah's first successes.

Last week, Jordanian spokesman Nasser Judeh announced that militants had been arrested during the final phase of planning for an attack on Jordanian targets. These militants, he said, had "received instructions from Hamas leaders . . . currently in Syria." A few pictures of some light weapons appeared on television and in local newspapers, but no details were provided regarding the captured terrorists. The announcement was unusual; typically Hamas weapons are said to be destined for the West Bank.

Hamas leaders in the PA and in Syria denied the Jordanian allegations and issued a statement accusing Jordan of implementing a plan to "push Hamas to change its positions to correspond with the American and Zionist conditions." The IAF also rallied behind Hamas. IAF secretary general Zaki Saad Bani-Irshayd raised questions about the Jordanian account of the cache, saying the official story lacked credibility. Instead, he implied that the story was part of an elaborate Jordanian conspiracy to help Fatah, the former Palestinian ruling party, oust Hamas from power.

In the aftermath of the discovery, Jordan invited PA president Mahmoud Abbas to Jordan on April 22 for briefings from the Jordanian prime minister and General Intelligence Directorate (GID) chief. In a press conference following the visit, Abbas described the discovery "dangerous and surprising."

IAF Political Ambitions

IAF accusations of a Jordanian cover-up on the Hamas weapons issue reflect the organizations' newfound confidence following Hamas's victory in January 2006 Palestinian elections. Indeed, the trajectory of Jordanian Islamists' performance in the elections on the East Bank would appear to give them confidence that they too may be on the verge of political success.

In 1989, the Islamists won twenty-two of eighty contested seats in the Jordanian parliament. King Hussein subsequently changed the electoral law from a multivote system, in which voters could cast separate ballots for family relatives and political comrades, to a one-man, one-vote format in a multicandidate district system. Thus, Jordanian voters were forced to choose between their tribal affiliation and their political views; the result was that Islamists won just six seats in 1993 elections. When King Hussein refused to modify the law, which Islamists considered "undemocratic," the Islamists boycotted the 1997 election. After King Abdullah made some minor changes in the law, the IAF participated in the 2003 elections and secured seventeen of one hundred and ten seats in the then-expanded parliament.

Traditionally, the Muslim Brotherhood's leaders have been men of East Bank origin who have developed a modus vivendi with the regime that provided them with wide latitude in social and cultural matters in exchange for political support to the Hashemite ruling family. Yet recent years have witnessed the emergence of a bolder, more strident, largely Palestinian-led faction within the organization (and within the IAF itself) that borrows heavily from the motifs and strategy of Hamas. In March IAF leadership elections, Bani-Irshayd, a representative of the "Jordanian Hamas" wing of the organization was elected secretary general, the IAF's top post. While East Banker Jordanians still control a majority of the seats in the IAF, Bani-Irshayd's election represents a trend toward a growing Palestinian presence in the organization's leadership and suggests a potential "Hamazization" of the group.

After Hamas won the January Palestinian elections, Azzam al-Huneidi, leader of the IAF parliamentary bloc, wrote on the IAF website (www.jabha.net (<http://www.jabha.net/>)) that Islamists would likewise be ready to take power in Jordan after winning a majority of seats in the next parliamentary election. The statement crossed a traditional Rubicon of Jordanian Islamists -- the specter that the IAF would take a significant position of authority in opposition to the moderate politics of the Hashemite ruling family. Bani-Irshayd has likewise indicated that should the Islamists win, they would "bring a referendum" to the Jordanian people seeking to overturn the 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty.

The IAF appears to be gearing up for a tough campaign. Already, taking a page from Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the IAF is promoting a focused message on corruption in Jordan and the need for political reform. At the same time, the IAF is leading the populist charge against key economic reforms, in particular the plan to lower government subsidies on fuel in the face of rising costs.

It is unclear how well the IAF will do in the 2007 elections, and whether the organization's message will resonate with Jordanian voters. In 2005, Jordan was the target of several high profile terrorist attacks linked to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Following the November 2005 Amman hotel attacks that killed sixty, surveys indicated diminishing Jordanian popular support for al-Qaeda and al-Zarqawi. At the same time, however, the vast majority of Jordanians continue to view Hamas as a "legitimate resistance organization."

Part of the vociferousness of the IAF's response to the "alleged" discovery of the arms cache may be driven by a concern that the Jordanian government will attempt to exploit this incident to undermine popular support for the

IAF. More than likely, Jordanian Islamists are concerned that the arms cache will provide the government with a pretext to engineer a clampdown on Islamist political activity, as the regime did in 1999.

Conclusion

The momentum of Islamist electoral successes in Egypt and the Palestinian Authority presents challenges for King Abdullah in the run-up to the 2007 parliamentary elections. Polling indicates that Jordanian public confidence in the new government of Prime Minister (and retired general) Marouf Bakhit is declining. At the same time, with the exception of economic reforms, the Palace initiative to reform the government -- the "National Agenda" -- has stalled. As with Egypt and the PA, the Islamist opposition has seized on the high profile issues of corruption and political reform and could challenge promonarchy Jordanian moderate candidates in the coming parliamentary elections.

The Jordanian government is considering a number of electoral reforms, including the establishment of a quota for women's seats in the assembly. Even before Hamas's victory in the Palestinian Authority, however, the IAF was pressing for more dramatic reforms, including redistricting to apportion more parliamentary seats to localities populated with West Banker (Palestinian-origin) Jordanians at the expense of East Banker areas as well as a change in the one-man, one-vote system.

Given the uphill battle facing King Abdullah, the Palace will likely continue to reject calls for further electoral reform prior to the next elections. Indeed, the demand for electoral reform is an Islamist plank that would further undermine the chances of moderate and secular candidates. More importantly, though, in an effort to outflank the politically astute Islamist opposition, the Palace is likely to keep the pressure on the IAF by maintaining public focus on the Hamas weapons issue. Given the links between Hamas and the IAF, this is an issue the regime could use at any time against the political ambitions of Jordan's own Islamists.

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