

Jordan and the Islamists: Unfinished Business

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Brief Analysis

As Secretary of State Colin Powell arrives in Tel Aviv today to shore up the shaky Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire, across the river in Jordan, King Abdullah is quietly coping with his own separate but related crisis. On June 14, without any prior warning, Ibrahim Ghawsheh, the Hamas spokesman expelled from the kingdom in 1999 for his political activities, arrived at Queen Alia Airport on a Qatari Airways flight from Doha. Jordanian authorities refused him entry, and Ghawsheh, who is sixty-five-years-old, has since remained in custody at the airport. The Ghawsheh standoff—which comes as King Abdullah prepares to postpone impending elections and modify the electoral law—highlights the kingdom's ongoing difficulties with its Islamists.

Background

In October 1999, King Abdullah closed Hamas offices in Jordan and expelled several of the organization's resident leaders, including Ghawsheh, Political Office Head Khalid Mish'al, and Politboro member Musa Abu Marzouk. The government justified the expulsions in the name of national security—specifically through a law prohibiting non-Jordanian organizations from participating in political activities. Jordanian authorities also claimed that Hamas cells in Jordan were stockpiling weapons, recruiting personnel, and "building a large base for extremism" in the kingdom. The Islamist-controlled professional associations in Jordan criticized government actions as illegal insofar as they did not provide the deported Jordanian citizens—Ghawsheh and Mish'al—with "due process." To defend Hamas, the Jordanian Lawyers Association established a seventy-member pro-bono "dream team," to no avail. Per agreement between King Abdullah and the Emir of Qatar, the top "outsider" leadership of Hamas was re-located to Qatar, where it has since continued to administer the organization.

Islamist Reaction

Jordanian Islamists have almost uniformly condemned their government's stance in the Ghawsheh crisis. Ali Abu Sukar, head of the Anti-Normalization Committee, termed it "unconstitutional and unjustified." The Muslim Brotherhood likewise criticized the government for "undermin[ing] the Palestinian struggle against Israel." And in an ironic reference, Khalid Mish'al pointed out that Ghawsheh's trip from Qatar merely reflected an attempt to exercise

Ghawsheh's "right of return" as a citizen of Jordan.

While the Islamists have criticized the Jordanian government, the government has accused the Qataris of engineering the crisis. The kingdom cancelled Royal Jordanian flights to Doha and banned all incoming flights from that city. Despite demands from the Qatari cabinet that the plane be allowed to return, the pilots and the Qatari airliner that brought Ghawsheh to Jordan remain in Amman. And in a bizarre twist to the saga, Jordanian authorities reportedly prevented the Qatari ambassador to Jordan from (illegally) leaving Amman with the Qatari flight crew this past weekend.

No Way Out?

Since last year, there has been a standing offer from King Abdullah to allow Ghawsheh et al. to return to Jordan, an offer contingent on the deportees' agreement to abstain from political and media activities. Thus far, they have refused. The Hamas leadership has likewise rejected mediation geared toward transferring Ghawsheh to a third state—such as Libya, Iran, or Sudan—all of which have allegedly offered to provide the spokesman refuge.

Complicating matters, reports surfaced last week suggesting that Ghawshe—who suffers from high blood pressure—was in ill health. These reports prompted Hamas to issue a statement declaring the Jordanian government and its security apparatuses "fully responsible" should Ghawsheh's condition deteriorate. Responding to the implicit threat, Jordan subsequently provided Ghawsheh with round-the-clock medical supervision and upgraded his accommodations from a transit lounge to the office of the airport director.

Other Problems

As Ghawsheh awaited his fate at the airport, King Abdullah was tackling his other pressing Islamist-related domestic dilemma: the impending November parliamentary elections. It is no secret that the combination of the Palestinian intifada, the threat of an Iraqi oil cut-off, and the depressed economy at home have created a volatile situation in Jordan.

Over the past eight months, there have been scores of pro-Palestinian/anti-Israel rallies in Jordan, including some at funerals for many of the Palestinians killed in clashes with Israel, and whose bodies were taken to Jordan for burial in family plots. In May, to curb these disturbances, the king banned all demonstrations, but the Muslim Brotherhood nevertheless organized a rally on May 11, provoking a showdown. When the government moved to suppress the march, clashes ensued, and several elderly Brotherhood leaders—including Islamic Action Front (IAF) secretary general Abdul Latif Arabiyat—were injured. Given these prevailing tensions—even before the Ghawshah standoff—Islamists had begun to describe relations with the regime as in "crisis." In this inhospitable context, King Abdullah decided to postpone the elections, then just months away. At the same time, in a conciliatory gesture toward the Islamists, the palace gave the go-ahead to reform the controversial electoral law.

Delay and Reform

On June 16, King Abdullah dissolved parliament, a tactic that provided the king with the constitutional latitude to delay elections without technically extending the assembly's four-year term. Almost immediately after a cabinet reshuffle was approved, Prime Minister Ali Abu Raghieb sent a letter to the king informing him that the new government had commenced work on a new election law, to be finished within a month. Unlike the postponement, however, electoral reform presents a number of problems for the regime. Islamists boycotted the 1997 parliamentary elections in protest of the changes instituted in 1993 by King Hussein. Chief among those changes was the move from a "multi-seat, multiple vote" format to a "multiple seat, single vote" format, forcing voters to choose between their tribal/ethnic allegiances and their political/ideological preferences. Tribalism won out, and the Islamists suffered.

Although King Abdullah has indicated that he would like the IAF to participate in the coming elections, the Islamists have said they will not do so unless "core modifications" are made to the single vote format. The challenge for King Abdullah, then, is to secure Islamist participation while providing the possibility of only moderate Islamist gains at the polls. To achieve this difficult balance, the reforms currently under discussion entail keeping the "multiple seat, single vote" format, but adding two additional votes per person—one vote at large and one vote for a female candidate. To accommodate women and "at large" representatives, the number of parliamentary seats could be increased from 80 to 100. These changes are certainly significant cosmetically, but they are not likely to have much positive net effect for Islamists at the polls. Hence, it is not clear that they are the type of modifications the Brotherhood is seeking. At the end of the day, they also might not be enough to entice the IAF to participate.

Conclusion

Almost two years after King Abdullah expelled the resident Hamas leadership, it is clear that Jordan is far from finished with its Islamist-related problems. This is not news to Jordanians. Since October 1999, Muhammed Nazzal, a top Jordan-based Hamas leader slated for deportation along with Ghawshah, has been living on the lam within the kingdom. It is a foregone conclusion that the regime knows his whereabouts, but has not wanted to arrest him for fear of re-igniting the Hamas controversy. Like it or not, the recent Israeli-Palestinian violence and the return of Ghawshah has once again thrust the Islamist issue to the fore in the kingdom. These crises present yet another test for the young king, something not lost on Jordan's Islamists. One Brotherhood leader recently described King Abdullah's policy on the Islamic movement as "hesitant and unstable." As the king works to counter this perception and defuse the current tension, the Ghawsheh crisis is a useful reminder that Jordan's perennial Islamist issue will not soon be dealt a knockout blow. Like his father, King Hussein, before him, "success" for King Abdullah on this front will likely be defined in terms of small triumphs of crisis management, rather than a decisive victory.

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