

Clampdown on Hamas: King Abdullah Strikes Out on His Own

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Brief Analysis

King Abdullah of Jordan arrives in Washington for a private visit this weekend after having implemented his boldest initiative to date--the closure of Hamas offices in Amman and the subsequent arrest of senior Hamas leaders Khalid Mishal, Musa Abu Marzuk, and Ibrahim Ghawsheh.

Background: In 1993, Hamas and King Hussein reportedly reached a "gentlemen's agreement" limiting the organization's activities within the kingdom to social and political work. Until his death earlier this year, the late king maintained a live-and-let-live approach to Hamas's political activities in Jordan. This was an outgrowth of both the kingdom's decades-old modus vivendi with Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood--with which Hamas has close ties--and its competition with Yasir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization. King Hussein's tolerance of Hamas's political activities--though not its terrorist actions--helped him to build legitimacy among Jordan's overlapping Palestinian and Islamist constituencies and to sustain political influence west of the Jordan River.

Recently, however, there have been warnings of official sanction against Hamas. In November 1998, for example, then-Information Minister Nasser Judeh noted that the Jordanian government "does not recognize the presence of Hamas leaders in Jordan because the movement is illegal . . . but there are Jordanians who are linked ideologically with Hamas and it is they who were reminded of the law." Nevertheless, the speed and severity of the recent crackdown were a surprise.

The government's action against Hamas further handicaps a weakening organization. Not only have the Islamist organization's operations within the West Bank and Gaza been curtailed by Palestinian and Israeli security measures, but for the past six months the Jordan-based "outsider" Hamas leadership has been engaged in disputes with the organization's "insider" political leadership in the West Bank and Gaza--as well as with the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan--over the future of the movement.

Both the Brotherhood and the West Bank and Gaza Hamas leadership have been reported to assert that the organization should concentrate on building its social and political infrastructure inside the Palestinian Authority (PA) and focus less on violent military operations against Israelis. The outsider leadership--including Mishal, Abu Marzuk, and Ghawsheh--were all (perhaps to varying degrees) advocates of continued violent opposition to Israel. Relative moderates in the Muslim Brotherhood-- including the organization's leader, Abd al-Majid Thuneibat, and the young centrist leadership led by Imad Abu Diyah--allegedly initiated a purge against elements known to be "close" to Hamas early in 1999. A Jordanian observer close to the Brotherhood commented in the *Jordan Times* that ". . . many [Brotherhood] leaders felt betrayed and cheated by Hamas' [sic] behavior. On many occasions, the Brotherhood negotiated in favor of Hamas and acted as a guarantor, but the Hamas people in Jordan abused that." The sentiment was echoed by Jordanian legislators; Member of Parliament Osama Malkawi charged that "the Hamas leaders here were asked to keep quiet, but they haven't, and thus violated the norms of hospitality." In July 1999, the Jordanian press reported that Ghawsheh was told he could no longer use the Brotherhood offices for Hamas business.

The September Arrests: When the three leaders were in Tehran in early September, the Jordanian authorities issued warrants for their arrest, arrested fifteen other Hamas activists, and shut down the organization's Amman offices. Despite the warrants, the three leaders returned to Jordan, where Mishal and Ghawsheh--both Jordanians--were immediately taken into custody; Abu Marzuk, who holds a Yemeni passport, was summarily expelled. After the arrests, Jordanian prime minister Abd al-Rauf al-Rawabdeh cited documents, computer diskettes, and weapons caches found by the police indicating that Hamas was threatening the kingdom's stability and regime. Officials elaborated that Hamas had been conducting paramilitary training, raising funds for subversive purposes, using forged Jordanian passports, and recruiting in Jordan's Palestinian refugee camps and universities. Rawabdeh said that Hamas in Jordan has been "building a large base for extremism that is now beyond control, even by the Muslim Brotherhood," and that the movement's activities in the West Bank and Gaza were run entirely from Jordan.

Initially, the September arrests were met with a volley of protest from Hamas's leadership in Gaza and from Jordanian Islamists, papering over whatever differences might divide them. According to Reuters, Gaza-based Hamas leader Shaykh Ahmad Yasin deplored the arrests and said that "these measures are not acceptable to us." Salim Falahat, a member of the Executive Bureau of the Brotherhood, addressed a 3,000-person-strong University of Jordan mosque sit-in and announced, "Hamas is part of us, and we will not abandon them . . . We call upon all Jordanians to stand by Hamas." Such sympathies were echoed at other Friday sermons in Jordan and elsewhere in the Arab world.

Yet there are strong signs that the Jordanian Brotherhood and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front, are not interested in upsetting their comfortable relationship with the regime. Thuneibat, the Brotherhood's leader, said he met twice with Rawabdeh and intelligence chief Gen. Samih Batikhi, and "what was said during this meeting reflected a desire to avoid escalating the situation. . . . perhaps there will be a breakthrough." He confirmed that his movement was continuing its mediation "to find an honorable solution to the crisis which both respects the sovereignty of the state and the law, and also guarantees Hamas activists their right to political action in Jordan without breaking the law."

Notwithstanding the severity of Rawabdeh's public charges against them, the Hamas leaders were indicted only with "affiliation with an illegal organization," the conviction for which carries a short prison sentence of one week to two years. Jordanian officials broadly hinted that Mishal and Ghawsheh would be released from detention in exchange for a pledge to refrain from political matters and to curb their propaganda activities, following King Hussein's long-established precedent. Such a compromise would allow the Jordanian government to forgo a potentially explosive trial while having underscored its antiterrorist credentials.

In recent days, however, the government's attitude seems to have been hardening. The government arrested the popular, radical mosque preacher Shaykh Abdul-Mun'im Abu-Zant and a Jordanian Islamist journalist for their "refusal to refrain from criticizing the government for its recent crackdown on Hamas." And reports suggest new charges may be brought against the detained activists.

Diplomatic Repercussions: With the onset of Israeli--Palestinian "final-status" talks that will reverberate in Amman no less than in Jerusalem and Gaza, curbing Hamas may be just one--though perhaps the most dramatic--element in Jordan's strategy to prepare for future changes. Since becoming king, Abdullah has pursued a number of pathbreaking initiatives, including efforts at reconciliation with Kuwait and Syria; signals that Jordan is soft-pedaling its historic national claims in Jerusalem; and, reportedly, a "secret" accord among Jordan, Egypt, Israel, the PA, and the United States to establish a "joint framework" to wage war on terror. Collectively, these moves underscore Abdullah's desire to safeguard the security of his East Bank--only kingdom, loosen longstanding Jordanian--Palestinian tensions, and dispel Palestinian fears of a renewal of some form of "Jordanian option" in final-status talks.

Striking a blow at Hamas should rattle the movement, isolate individual terrorist cells west of the river, and prevent them from receiving external support. Although Hamas may activate cells inside Israel, as recent terrorist acts suggest, cutting off the "outsider" support would be a significant achievement. Meanwhile, in Jordan, the marginalization of Hamas radicals strengthens the position of moderates within the Muslim Brotherhood who are keen to maintain cordial ties with the regime. If King Abdullah can successfully weather the backlash against the clampdown--and all signs point to that outcome--then he will have passed his first national security test with high marks.

Nicole Brackman, who holds a doctorate from Washington University, is a 1999-2000 Soref research fellow at The Washington Institute.

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