

# Islamists and the State:

## Developments in Jordan and the Palestinian Authority

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### Brief Analysis

**A**s Yasir Arafat seeks to unify secular Palestinian groups in advance of expected "final-status" talks--highlighted by his meeting this week in Cairo with representatives of George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)--important developments are also underway among Islamists. The main drama is being acted out in Jordan, the meeting-ground for Hamas insiders, Hamas outsiders, and the wider Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun) movement.

Background: In 1989, Jordan enjoyed its first free nationwide parliamentary election in thirty-three years. Thanks partly to the Muslim Brotherhood's historic accommodation with the Hashemites and partly to a loophole in the political parties ban that permitted the Brotherhood's participation as a "charitable organization," Islamists did surprisingly well, winning thirty-four of eighty seats. To forestall another Islamist success in upcoming elections in 1993, King Hussein amended the election law in a way that diluted the Islamists' voting power, changing the system from a "multiple seat, multiple vote" format to a "multiple seat, single vote" format. In the subsequent election, the Islamist Action Front--founded as the Muslim Brotherhood's "front" political party--still emerged as the largest bloc in parliament, but the regime's gambit was generally viewed as a success, given that the number of Islamist MPs was cut in half. When Hussein refused Islamist entreaties to revise the "undemocratic" electoral law, the IAF opted to boycott subsequent parliamentary elections in 1997. The result was the growing marginalization of the IAF from national politics. The front, therefore, was looking forward to local elections in July 1999 to flex its electoral muscles once again. The elections, according to IAF spokesman Jamil Abu Baker, would be a "dress rehearsal" for parliamentary elections in 2001.

Local Election Results: On July 14-15, just as Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak was visiting Washington, local elections were held throughout Jordan to pick 304 mayors and 2,046 local council representatives in seventy municipalities. Turnout was very low. Less than 40 percent of the more than 1 million registered Jordanian voters cast ballots. The IAF's decision to participate paid off at the polls. In a vote generally regarded as free and fair, the Islamist party scored impressive victories in every corner of the country. Seventy-nine of the 100 candidates fielded by the IAF took seats, including seven mayoralties. In particular, the IAF won big in the largely Palestinian

strongholds of Zarqa, Irbid, and Ruseifa. An IAF candidate was elected mayor of Irbid, the northern industrial and educational center in which IAF representatives also took four of eleven seats in the local council. In Madaba, a historically Christian town south of Amman, the IAF won six of eleven local council seats. In the capital city itself, where half of the forty local council seats were up for grabs (the other half being appointed by the Jordanian government), the IAF increased its number of seats from three to five. Overall, IAF secretary general Abdul Latif Arabiyyat described the results of the election as "very satisfying." (By contrast, women candidates were the biggest losers in the election. Of the seventeen women running for the open mayoralties, and of the thirty-seven women running for the local council seats, none was elected mayor and only three won council seats.)

The IAF appealed to voters by running on a platform that included perennial winning themes like "no new taxes," as well as the more macabre pledge to build new cemeteries in the Amman area "to ease overcrowding." Antipeace sentiments, usually strong in Islamist rhetoric, were relatively restrained, with the final item on the official IAF platform restating the organization's "refusal of normalization with the Zionist enemy."

Isolating Hamas: Perhaps most important, though, was that the elections coincided with a concerted effort by Jordanian authorities to circumscribe the Jordan-based activities of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist movement self-described as a "wing of the Muslim Brotherhood." The confluence of the IAF victory and the crackdown on Hamas suggests that King Abdullah and his intelligence advisers have decided on a divide-and-rule approach toward Islamism in Jordan that accents flexibility, dexterity, and cunning in dealing with different trends within the overall Islamist movement.

In the months leading up to elections, government agents took a number of measures against Hamas operations inside Jordan. Several Hamas officials were arrested, including two personal bodyguards of Hamas political bureau chief Khalid Mishal, and an official government "suggestion" was made that Hamas cease issuing communiques from Jordanian territory. These government moves coincided with steps by the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood to distance itself from Hamas operatives inside Jordan and even to purge some of the Brotherhood's more activist Palestinian members who themselves had close links with Hamas. In this context, the Brotherhood memberships of five prominent ikhwanis, including former parliamentarians Muhammad Abu Faris and Mahmoud Abu Ghanimeh, were frozen. Hamas spokesman Ibrahim Ghawsheh was reportedly compelled to close his office--housed in the larger Amman complex of the Muslim Brotherhood--and relocate elsewhere. Longtime IAF leader Ishaq al-Farhan even took the step of distancing himself from the Brotherhood, because of the Brotherhood's reputed infiltration by partisans of Hamas.

The growing split in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, pitting the East Bank--oriented older generation against younger Palestinian firebrands, almost surely reflects a larger phenomenon within the blurry world of Islamist groups, trends, and movements. Internal strife has plagued Hamas for nearly a year and has become particularly pronounced since Hamas spiritual leader Shaykh Ahmad Yasin and other Gaza-based Hamas officials attended the Palestine Liberation Organization Central Council (PCC) meeting in April 1999. At that meeting, the PCC authorized the indefinite postponement of a unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood, and Yasin's presence seemed tacitly to legitimize Arafat's approach to the peace process. To more radical Hamas partisans, like the Amman-based Mishal and Ghawsheh, Yasin's decision to attend the PCC meeting, if only as an observer, seemed to be the culminating event in a growing accommodationism in Yasin's approach, building on comments he had made in September 1997 following his release from an Israeli prison--through King Hussein's intercession--about the acceptability of a Palestinian state. It was even rumored that, at the behest of Arafat, local Hamas leaders in Gaza had agreed to suspend all "military" activities in advance of Israel's May elections. Since then, Yasin has reportedly condemned "corruption" in Hamas missions abroad, hinting at his preference to sidestep Mishal in favor of Musa Abu Marzuk (who had been Mishal's superior prior to his incarceration in the United States and who did not criticize Yasin's PCC

attendance). Yasin has also intimated he is uncomfortable with Hamas's links with some foreign countries, such as Iran, which Ha'aretz recently exposed as a key training ground for Hamas military operatives.

Implications: On both sides of the Jordan River, the traditional Islamist leadership--the Muslim Brotherhood in Amman and the old-line Hamas leadership of Yasin--appears (at least for now) to be pursuing a more participatory, less confrontational approach toward local regimes. This meshes well with the desire of both Arafat and King Abdullah, respectively, to forge a national consensus as they confront larger political and economic challenges. For Abdullah, the reining in of the most extreme Islamists in Jordan neatly complements his growing rapprochement with Syria at the same time as it scores points with Israel. Moreover, recent moves contribute to the quiet and little-discussed strategy advocated by the late King Hussein (as well as by Jordan's longtime intelligence chief, Samih Batikhi) of promoting the idea of an Israel--Hamas dialogue. None of this suggests that Hamas, through its Izzadin al-Qassam Brigades, lacks the incentive or capability for terrorist action; in typically contradictory fashion, even Yasin himself has recently spoken both of the urgency of "jihad" and the logic of a "cease-fire." But perhaps most important, these developments point toward the residual power of the central authorities in Amman and Gaza to exert supreme control over local politics--and especially over Islamist movements-- when they deem it necessary.

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