

PolicyWatch #1400

Amman Warms to Hamas

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August 28, 2008

This PolicyWatch is the first part of a two-part series on Hamas. [Read](#) part two.

Last week, Jordan's minister of information publicly confirmed that senior Jordanian officials have been meeting with Hamas in an effort to "solve pending security issues." These talks represent a significant shift for Amman, since relations between Jordan and the Palestinian group had been frozen for two years, following the arrest of three Hamas members in the kingdom on terrorism and weapons charges. Although the decision to renew contacts with Hamas suggests that Amman remains concerned with Hamas-related activities in the kingdom, the timing also highlights domestic and regional pressures on King Abdullah and the Jordanian government.

Hamas Plans Attacks in Jordan

In April and May 2006, Jordanian security officials detained more than twenty people on charges of being Hamas operatives, and arrested a cell of three Palestinian men -- Ayman Daraghmeh, Ahmad Rabie, and Ahmad Thiyab. The cell, headed by Daraghmeh, reportedly surveilled several sites in Jordan, including the Israeli embassy in Amman, the homes of Israeli diplomats, and the offices of Jordanian companies that dealt with Israeli firms. The three men reportedly passed on the information they obtained to Hamas members abroad.

On May 11, 2006, the three appeared on Jordanian television. They confessed their Hamas affiliation and described their plots to kill senior Jordanian intelligence officials as well as to launch rocket attacks on the Israeli embassy and the ambassador's residence in Amman. Jordanian television also displayed the materials the group had amassed, which included grenades, Iranian-produced Katushya rockets, rocket launchers, and machine guns. A month later, however, the three denied any links to Hamas and retracted their confessions, claiming the statements were extracted under duress.

Two years later, the case went to trial, and on June 12, the Jordanian State Security Court found the three men guilty. Daraghmeh was convicted of "plotting to carry out terrorist attacks" in Jordan, and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. Rabie and Thiyab were both sentenced to five years for the "illegal possession of explosives and weapons." The verdict was denounced by Hamas, which insisted the group does not target Jordan or any other Arab country.

Echoes of 1999

Hamas has been active in Jordan for many years and maintained its headquarters there throughout the 1990s under the leadership of Mousa Marzouk and Khaled Mashal. But in 1999, Jordan expelled the leadership for engaging in operational planning from inside the kingdom.

On September 22, 1999, Mashal was arrested at Jordan's Queen Alia International Airport along with Marzouk, Hamas spokesman Ibrahim Ghosheh, and four other aides on their arrival from Iran. Marzouk, a

Yemeni national, was the only one who was not Jordanian, and was deported to Iran. Mashal and Ghosheh were taken into custody and charged with being members of an outlawed militant Palestinian group. Mashal was also charged with possession of an unlicensed pistol. Several weeks later, Mashal and Ghosheh were indicted on additional weapons charges and for raising funds for an unauthorized association.

In retrospect, Jordan's crackdown on Hamas in Amman appears to have been related to the group's increasingly brazen and public presence there following Israel's botched assassination attempt of Mashal in 1997. As one former Jordanian official explained, Jordan's outrage over the assassination attempt -- and Amman's subsequent demand that Israel release Sheikh Ahmed Yassin from prison in return for the two captured Mossad operatives -- was misinterpreted as King Hussein's tacit approval of Hamas operations in Jordan.

Hamas Resurgence in Jordan

Even after its leaders were expelled in 1999, Hamas remained popular in the kingdom. But enthusiasm for the group diminished dramatically after its January 2006 electoral victory and its subsequent takeover of Gaza in June 2007. King Abdullah and most Jordanians viewed the potential for a similar Hamas move in the West Bank with great concern.

Among Jordanian Islamists, however, developments within the Palestinian Authority reenergized the kingdom's pro-Hamas elements. In March 2006, Zaki Bani Irsheid -- a Jordanian with close ties to Hamas -- was elected secretary general of the Islamic Action Front (IAF), Jordan's most popular political party. Then, in May 2008, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood voted to replace its "dovish" incumbent leader Salem Falahat with Hamam Said, a Palestinian Jordanian known for close relations to Hamas leaders in Damascus.

The elections of Bani Irsheid and Said sparked controversy within the Islamist community, pitting Jordanian "moderate" pro-regime Islamists against their "militant" rivals of Palestinian origin. Taken together, however, these two elections constituted nothing less than the complete Hamas takeover of the leading Jordanian Islamist organizations.

Despite these successes, however, the kingdom's pro-Hamas Islamists have not yet translated organizational control to increased political power. In fact, the IAF performed poorly in the November 2007 parliamentary elections, winning only 6 of 110 seats -- down from 16 of 80 in 2004 -- and would have fared equally bad in the August 2007 municipal contest if it had not withdrawn.

Pressures to Reengage Hamas

Senior Jordanian security officials now appear confident that they have contained the Hamas terror threat in the kingdom. The confluence of Hamas's resurgence and rising economic and social pressures, however, remain a concern for Amman.

Islamist trends. The Hamas takeover of the IAF and the Muslim Brotherhood suggests these two influential opposition organizations can no longer be considered "loyal" to the kingdom. These organizations used to have significant participation from East Bankers (Jordanians who are not originally Palestinian), but since these groups are now considered "Palestinian," they are far less appealing to this group. Jordanian analysts, such as Muhammad Abu Rumman, speculate that this trend could result in increased East Banker support for jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda.

Economic pressures. Rising prices in commodities, such as food and fuel, coupled with largely stagnant wages, are another reason for Jordanian concern with Hamas's strength in the kingdom. The Jordanian government continues to subsidize some staples, but in line with international commitments, in April the palace eliminated subsidies for gasoline. Today, for the first time in decades, Jordanians are paying true market prices for fuel -- in excess of \$4 per gallon -- and are not happy. The government had also planned to

end support on kerosene, but recently decided to postpone the move until the end of winter.

At the same time, economic difficulties have contributed to a widening and more pronounced gap between the Jordan's "haves" and "have nots." A study published earlier this year by the Center for Strategic Studies in Amman argued that the Jordanian middle class was disappearing. Meanwhile, in recent months, the government and the palace have become the target of considerable public anger over the controversial sales and proposed sales of government land, including the former armed forces headquarters in Amman, the King Hussein Medical Center, Aqaba port, and a tract of land along the Dead Sea slated for a casino.

Conclusion

Talking with Hamas may temporarily deflect some of the intense domestic pressure in the kingdom, and also presents Amman with the opportunity of reengaging Hamas and Israel, a role that until now had been the sole preserve of Cairo. A less optimistic explanation for Jordan's tactical change is a tacit recognition that Hamas's rule in Gaza -- and potentially in the West Bank -- is a long-term problem. Regardless of the reason, Jordan's involvement will likely tempt Saudi Arabia to press once again for a Palestinian national unity government, a development that would regrettably constitute yet another step on Hamas's road toward international recognition.

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