

PolicyWatch #1401

Reconsidering Hamas: A View from Amman

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This PolicyWatch is the second of a two-part series on Jordan's reengagement with Hamas. [Read](#) part one.

Almost a decade after expelling Hamas from its territory, Jordan is in the process of reassessing its ties with the militant Palestinian group, an organization dedicated to undermining the two-state solution. Although Jordanian officials repeatedly have stated their aversion to dealing with non-state actors, recent discussions with Hamas suggest that Jordanian policy is driven more by pragmatism than principle. Current realities, including the growing strength of Hamas and the waning prospects of peace between Israel and the Palestinians, are propelling Amman to engage in tactical shifts in its foreign policy to protect its national interests. How this will affect the peace process and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas remains to be seen.

Divergent Interests

Most Jordanians think a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is in the kingdom's best interest. Indeed, senior Jordanian officials routinely argue that any other alternative -- whether a "confederation" or the "Jordanian option" -- would be detrimental to the country. Against this backdrop, Jordan has supported the Palestinian Authority under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas and its struggle against Hamas. Amman's anti-Hamas stance is a function of its understanding of the movement's agenda; while Abbas works toward bringing about a two-state solution, Hamas is determined to undermine it. Moreover, Muhammad Abu Ruman, a top Jordanian expert on the Islamic movement, argues that Amman has excluded Hamas partly out of fear that its 2006 electoral victory could embolden the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan.

The primary reason, however, for Amman's rejection of Hamas is Jordan's desire for a strong Palestinian interlocutor both willing and able to bring about peace. Jordan had hoped that Abbas would prevail against Hamas, and that the Islamist model would be discredited in the Palestinian territories. But Hamas was more resilient than anticipated, and it is widely believed that Hamas is now better positioned than Abbas. The siege of Gaza has created difficulties for Hamas, but it also has enhanced the group's stature while at the same time emasculating Abbas and his problem-riddled Fatah. Despite the last-ditch attempt by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to foster progress on the peace process, Jordanians have slowly come to accept the grim prospects. In private meetings, officials close to the king state that he is not optimistic that the Bush administration will be able to broker a peace deal in its remaining months in office. Nevertheless, Amman continues to view Hamas as a key impediment to creating an environment conducive to peace. The question remains: why has Amman opened up to Hamas now?

Current Realities

In recent months, Jordanian officials have concluded that the Annapolis process -- and its intention to jump-start the moribund peace process -- will not yield the desired two-state outcome. The current working assumption in Jordan is that Ehud Olmert's eventual departure from the Israeli government will create a political vacuum, and his successor -- whether it is Tzipi Livni, Ehud Barak, or Binyamin Netanyahu -- will not be strong enough to pursue a peace initiative. At the same time, the impending political transition in

Washington and the Bush administration's "lame duck" status have effectively undercut American relevance in the region. Worse still, it is widely held in Jordan that instead of increasing his power in his party and that of the security apparatus in the West Bank, the Palestinian president is actually losing ground to Hamas, while his Fatah movement remains in disarray.

Perhaps not surprisingly, many Jordanians are beginning to argue that Abbas is the wrong horse to bet on. Given this new reading, Jordan's intelligence department, led by General Muhammad Dahabi, decided to hedge its bets and open a dialogue with Hamas. It remains to be seen whether Hamas will offer any concessions to Jordan, other than a pledge to refrain from further operational planning against Israel from Jordanian territory. For Hamas, the renewed contacts are a great success. For Amman, the rapprochement is neither a shift in its longstanding support for a two-state solution, nor a move against Abbas; it is purely designed to serve Jordanian interests.

Hamas still rejects the three conditions set by the Quartet (Russia, European Union, United Nations, and the United States), even though it understands that if it were to accept the terms, the group would have more normalized relations with Amman. Jordan's alliance with Abbas in isolating Hamas was designed not to punish the movement, but rather to bring about a change in the organization's attitude regarding the peace process and the Quartet's conditions. Given the relatively weakened state of moderate Arab regimes such as Jordan, the siege on Gaza and Hamas is difficult to justify, particularly when the Jordanian public views Washington as retreating from the region and the peace process as running out of steam.

Jordan's reengagement with Hamas is not a change of strategy, but of tactics, and it continues to define its interest in terms of a two-state solution. The new openness toward Hamas is a function of Amman's calculation that in the near future, the group could be the dominant player in Palestinians politics, and therefore Jordan could no longer afford to exclude it.

Jordan's new outlook does not bode well for Abbas, and the president is not pleased with the new tactics despite Jordanian assurances. Sources in Abbas's office have expressed concern that the initiative might rescue Hamas and help it to break out of isolation. In a recent visit to the kingdom, Abbas reportedly warned Amman that talking to Hamas would only further weaken his authority. He told the Jordanians that isolation, not engagement, was necessary. Abbas is particularly concerned that Jordanian intelligence, which plays a salient role in a number of important foreign policy issues, is conducting the dialogue. Moreover, the Palestinian president is adamant that Jordan not deal with Hamas politically.

For Palestinians, many believe the talks might serve as an opportunity to convince Hamas to retreat from its bloody coup in Gaza. Hamas leaders, on the other hand, are seeking Jordanian recognition of their movement, something that would greatly enhance its standing among Palestinians. As a quid pro quo, Hamas leaders are willing to pledge not to interfere in the activities of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood.

Conclusion

Jordan's decision to boycott Hamas after its 2006 electoral victory did not help Abbas. On the contrary, Hamas, which is now in complete control of Gaza, is far stronger than Abbas and his weakening Fatah movement. With no Israeli-Palestinian agreement in sight, Jordan had little choice but to change course, and grudgingly accept an open channel with Hamas. This decision, however, is tactical, and does not signal a change to Jordan's longstanding commitment to a two-state solution.

For this reason, Jordan will likely focus more on security issues than the political agenda favored by Hamas. From the vantage point of Jordanian intelligence, the first priority is to quarantine the group's influence in the Muslim Brotherhood, a compromise Hamas is expected to grant. This concession, however, might pave the way for a more foreboding development: an official state visit to Amman by Hamas's leader, Khaled Mashal.

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