

PolicyWatch #1585

## Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan: Hamas in Ascendance

By Hassan Barari  
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*PolicyWatch #1585 is the first in a two-part series discussing trends within the Muslim Brotherhood. This piece focuses on the organization's divisions in Jordan, while [PolicyWatch #1588](#) addresses the potential for the group's return to violence in Egypt.*

In early September, three senior leaders of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood (MB) resigned from the organization's executive bureau after it voted to dissolve the MB political department -- one of the few remaining components of the organization controlled by moderates. The resignations were a protest against not only the executive bureau's decision, but also the MB's increasingly close affiliation with Hamas. Today, the Jordanian MB is facing an unprecedented internal crisis, pitting the traditional moderate East Bank leadership -- Jordanians who are not originally Palestinian -- against the powerful pro-Hamas Palestinian-led element. Lately, these divisions have been aggravated by Hamas political bureau head Khaled Mashal's apparent efforts to exploit the shifting balance of power within the MB to further his own organization's agenda in Amman. Ironically, Jordanian authorities -- who have long prided themselves on managing the Islamist issue -- have done little to stem the tide.

### Two Competing Schools of Thought

Jordan's MB has always been divided ideologically between hawks and doves, a division that historically has benefited and strengthened the MB. The doves -- mainly East Bankers -- served as both the movement's leaders and as a cushion that insulated the regime from the organization's more radical base. Until recently, Jordanians of Palestinian origin never filled leadership positions. On April 30, 2008, however, Hamam Said, a radical clergyman with Palestinian roots and sympathies, was elected supreme guide, the top position in the MB.

Hamam Said's ascendance has been controversial, creating a dynamic that places the kingdom's Islamists into direct confrontation with the state. Paradoxically, this development may itself lead to increased dependence on the doves to mitigate expected tension with the state in the coming months.

While the friction between the hawks and doves is historical, two other recent trends in the MB have dramatically changed internal MB politics. These changes largely relate to the arrival of new, determined opposition groups within Jordan's political landscape.

The first group, referred to in the MB literature as the "fourth current," comprises activists who identify themselves with Hamas. Practically, this group is allied with the hawks, but when it comes to determining the MB's political platform, they set the agenda. The second group comprises reformers, largely non-East Bank MB members who seek to reform the political system in Jordan and to drive the MB away from Hamas in favor of a more nationalist, Jordanian agenda. A leading figure in this movement is Rheil Gharibeh, who in March 2009 proposed that Jordan should move to a constitutional monarchy, similar to the English system, in an attempt to limit the authority of the king. Members of this group are genuine reformers, and although religious, they are not ideologically rigid. They advocate, for example, a civil legal code as opposed to the

implementation of Islamic (Sharia) law.

According to prominent Jordanian intellectual and activist Jamal Tahat, the state is not frightened by Hamas disciples in the kingdom, but rather by East Bankers who are challenging the regime on the basis of democratic reform. According to Tahat, the regime is most concerned with the pro-democracy trend advocated by traditional East Banker Islamists. For this reason, many analysts and politicians believe that the state has been targeting the reformists in the MB, for although they constitute the moderates of the organization, this group is perceived to be a more significant long-term threat to the system than the pro-Hamas militants.

## **Hamas Factor**

Since his expulsion from Jordan in 1999, Khaled Mashal has been looking for opportunities to exploit internal divisions within the MB to strengthen his standing vis-a-vis the Jordanian state. For years, Mashal made efforts to avoid being seen as interfering in the movement's affairs. A few weeks ago, however, Mashal's father died in Jordan and the king allowed him to attend the funeral. During the ceremony, Mashal was surrounded by thousands of admirers. Although his visit was arranged for the express purpose of attending the funeral and he had pledged not to use his time in Amman to deliver political messages, he gave a conciliatory speech during his stay in which he praised King Abdullah. He also reaffirmed that he would not interfere with Jordan's internal affairs.

Despite his statements, Mashal is clearly focused on Jordan and deeply involved in the kingdom's and the MB's internal affairs. Indeed, in the struggle between Hamas and reformists, Mashal has offered himself as a mediator. Because Mashal is essentially a party to the conflict, however, it is difficult to see how he could serve as an impartial mediator. Nevertheless, if he does eventually mediate, Mashal will increase his political clout, enabling him to dominate Jordan's MB and use it to further the Hamas agenda.

Mashal's attempt to mediate is not welcome by the moderates, and even some in the pro-Hamas contingent are embarrassed by Mashal's desire to play a role. Hamam Said, a pro-Hamas hawk, is ostensibly a critic: In an interview by *Shihan Weekly* on September 13, Said commented, "When I heard in the media that Hamas seeks to mediate, I called [Mashal] and told him that these issues pertain [to] Jordan and [that] no one has the right to interfere." But few believe Said's protestations, as it is widely known that Mashal has substantial influence on Said and his colleagues. For this reason, East Bankers, such as Rheil Gharibeh and Abd al-Latif Arabiyat have been seeking a complete organizational separation between Jordan's MB and Hamas.

Negotiations about the relationship between Hamas and the MB are currently taking place in the MB's administrative offices in the Gulf. The Hamas wing within the MB, in coordination with the hawks, seeks to increase its representation in the executive bureau from four seats to twelve. So far, the internal battle has not been decided, but if Hamas uses its majority and decides on certain issues -- such as the percentage of Palestinians in the Gulf executive bureau of the MB -- the movement will become fully "Palestinianized," a development that might trigger additional fissures in the organization and defections by some important Islamist figures.

## **Conclusion**

While it remains to be seen how the internal debate will unfold, the near absence of official Jordanian intervention to date has been striking. Indeed, the moderate reformist group that led the MB from 2006 to 2008 appears to have been weakened the most by the state's passivity in the face of the Hamas takeover of the MB. Perhaps this was intentional; after all, government-sponsored election irregularities in the 2007 municipal and parliamentary elections resulted in a Hamas-wing boycott of the balloting. Because this wing of the MB didn't actively participate, the reformists lost the elections. Had they won, reformists would today be in the parliament and the dominant group within the MB.

The Jordanian state can still intervene and prevent Mashal from strengthening his grip on the Jordanian MB.

Given the stakes, Amman should start viewing developments within the MB as an issue of state security. For the Jordanian monarchy, it is time to radically rethink its MB strategy.

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