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Hamas Outreach: Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood in Crisis

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Last month, a power struggle between rival factions in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) came to a head when the Hamas-aligned "hawks" attempted to install their preferred candidate as secretary-general of the organization's political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), over protests from the "doves." Reconciliation efforts have thus far failed, and it increasingly appears that Jordan's Islamists will emerge from this crisis divided and weakened. Although King Abdullah and others would no doubt welcome this outcome at first glance, the trend toward increased militancy among the Jordanian -- and Egyptian -- Muslim Brothers suggests that ideological contagion from Hamas continues to have an impact on the region's Islamists.

Background

The conflict between the doves (the more moderate, proregime Islamists of primarily East Bank origin) and hawks (their more hardline counterparts, mainly of West Bank origin) has been ongoing for some time. In recent years, and especially since Hamas's 2006 victory in Palestinian elections, the hawks have gained the upper hand within the Jordanian MB. Last month, however, the doves began to fight back.

On May 6, the MB's Shura council convened to nominate a new IAF secretary-general, choosing Zaki Bani Irsheid -- known for his close ties to Hamas -- over his dove rival, Salem Falahat, by two votes. Officially, the IAF's own Shura council elects the secretary-general, but by tradition the MB chooses the sole nominee for the IAF to rubber stamp. Yet during the IAF Shura council meeting two days later, the doves initiated a campaign to derail the MB council's decision, with some boycotting the session and the remainder reading a statement criticizing Bani Irsheid's nomination and demanding a completely separate and open election for the secretariat. The hawks pressed forward, however, and subsequently elected a new hawkish leadership for the council's permanent bureau, the administrative unit in charge of internal affairs within the party.

In the aftermath of the meeting -- and with Bani Irsheid's candidacy pending -- some IAF doves filed an official complaint with the Ministry of the Interior asserting illegal MB interference in the party's internal matters. MB spiritual guide and prominent hawk Hamam Said publicly denounced this gambit, describing the election result as "compulsory upon the members of [the MB]; none is permitted to contravene it."

Philosophical Differences

The controversy surrounding Bani Irsheid dates back to his first stint as IAF secretary-general in 2006, when he angered the doves by supporting the right of Hamas-affiliated Palestinians residing in the Gulf states to serve on the MB Shura council. The doves opposed the policy, and in May 2009, after three years of infighting, he was forced to resign.

In general, the doves are known for their commitment to the Islamist movement's exclusive Jordanian identity. They agreed with King Hussein's 1988 decision to sever ties with the West Bank, and with King Abdullah's 1999 decision to expel the Hamas leadership. Seeking a more transnational (i.e., Palestinian) and antimonarchy identity for the movement, the hawks opposed these decisions. Indeed, Supreme Guide Said has

maintained that the monarchy is not Islamic, issuing an edict banning MB members from taking executive positions in government, which was once a routine occurrence.

Given this confrontational stance, it came as little surprise that the hawks elected Ali Abu al-Sukkar -- former head of Jordan's "Anti-Normalization [with Israel] Committee" -- as president of the IAF Shura council during last month's contested meeting. In this capacity, al-Sukkar convenes and directs all meetings of the IAF Shura council -- a major advantage for the hawks. Back in 2006, Abu al-Sukkar was jailed for attending the wake of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the former head of al-Qaeda in Iraq and a sworn enemy of the Jordanian monarchy.

At the beginning of May, the dispute over the Jordanian MB's relationship with Hamas briefly seemed close to resolution, with Said indicating that his group would consent to end official Hamas representation -- in favor of an advisory role -- in the Shura council. But this concession clearly failed to resolve the central issue of Hamas's role in the organization. Not only did the hawks move to install Bani Irsheid, they reportedly brought senior Hamas official Ibrahim Ghosheh to the May 6 Shura council meeting.

By the end of May, the ten most prominent doves -- including current IAF secretary-general Ishaq Farhan -- threatened to resign from all leadership positions in both the MB and IAF unless Bani Irsheid's nomination was withdrawn. The hawks conceded to the request, and on May 29, the IAF Shura council reconvened to elect the party's internal leadership. At the meeting, Abu al-Sukkar was again confirmed as council leader, but the more controversial elections for secretary-general (the main leader of the party) and his deputies were postponed indefinitely.

Although Abu al-Sukkar touted the postponement as a conciliatory gesture, the doves were not convinced. For one thing, some press reports have suggested that Bani Irsheid's replacement nominee could be Murad al-Udayala, another prominent -- and polarizing -- hawk. Moreover, MB official Nabil al-Kofahi described the hawks' behavior during recent meetings as "alienating" and claimed that they violated their commitment to nominate only consensus candidates for top posts. Meanwhile, until elections are held for the new secretary-general, the Jordanian Islamist movement will remain in a state of limbo.

Implications for Amman and Washington

How the intra-Islamist power struggle plays out will depend, at least in part, on how the Jordanian government handles the crisis. Popular support for the hawks has grown in recent years, not only due to their embrace of Hamas, but also because of the regime's increasingly heavy-handed measures against Islamists after 2006." For example, in July 2007, the IAF withdrew from Jordanian municipal elections alleging massive government fraud. Then, in November of that year, a divided IAF suffered a stunning setback in national elections, leading it to cry foul again -- a claim bolstered by some credible exit polling suggesting irregularities. More recently, government arrest and torture campaigns against Islamists led Freedom House to downgrade the kingdom's 2009 rating from "partially free" to "not free."

Today, regime repression appears to be contributing to growing support for a more confrontational stance in the MB. Given the current environment, however, even the doves could decide to boycott this year's parliamentary elections, marginalizing the kingdom's only coherent political opposition.

For Amman, the Islamist split will be seen as good news. For its part, Washington should be watching these internal developments carefully rather than simply celebrating. It's possible that Jordan's situation may serve as a barometer of things to come in Egypt, where the MB has also recently split along ideological lines -- instigated in part by the government -- with the hawks seemingly emerging on top. Although the particulars differ in Cairo and Amman, one factor is constant: traditional Islamists in states bordering the Palestinian Authority are contending with a virulent challenge from a more militant form of Islamism.

For the United States, neither the hawks nor doves are particularly appealing: both factions, for example, call on King Abdullah to abrogate its peace treaty with Israel. But if Jordan's Islamist opposition is decimated,

some analysts believe that more militant and nihilistic Islamists -- such as al-Qaeda and Hizb al-Tahrir -- will be the beneficiaries. Although this proposition remains untested, coping with increasingly disaffected and Hamas-aligned Islamists will remain a challenge for both Jordan and Egypt.

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