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Jordan: Rifts in the Muslim Brotherhood

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Debates surrounding the April election of Hammam Sa'id as General Guide of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood reflected the deep internal conflict within the organization. For the past sixty years, the movement has managed to maintain internal unity. Recently, however, internal schisms—traditionally underplayed and kept secret—have become much more salient and public. The movement is wrought with generational, regional, and ideological disagreements; it also faces great external pressures that threaten its unity and its ability to reach consensus on national and regional issues. Most significantly, the recent emergence of a powerful faction with close ties to Palestine's Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) threatens to divide the movement.

Debates within the Jordanian Islamist movement date to the political opening that Jordan experienced since the 1980s, and they heightened as the movement increased the scope of its political participation. The 1988 establishment of Hamas (as an outgrowth of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood established in the 1930s) and the Jordanian Brotherhood's declining influence on it also played a role in exacerbating the disagreements. When Jordanian parliamentary life was resumed in 1989, the Muslim Brotherhood did well in parliamentary elections. The movement's leadership then sought to create a political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), in cooperation with other independent Muslim figures.

Internal Brotherhood elections in 1990 brought in a new leadership, replacing a faction that had led the movement since the 1970s. The displaced faction included longtime members of the movement's executive bureau as well as parliamentarians. Although voted out of leadership positions in the movement, members of this faction remained in control of the Islamic Center Society, a religious endowment that runs an Islamic hospital, schools, clinics, and other properties.

After the 1990 elections, the Brotherhood was effectively divided into two groups: moderates and radicals, or what the press called "hawks and doves," and a struggle ensued over the movement's financial resources and organizations. The group's former leadership (the hawks), headed by Muhammad Abu Faris and Ibrahim Mas'ud began to lose control over the movement's financial

resources. Their place was taken by a group of moderates, headed by Ishaq Farhan, Ahmad al-Azayda, Abdullah al-Ukayla, Bassam al-`Amush, and Hamza Mansur.

The first victim of this struggle was the nascent IAF, still at that point in a period of formation and preparation. The old leaders were no longer enthusiastic about the party or any political project over which they had no control. But the IAF did manage to develop, and the party and parliamentary deputies began to constitute a third center of power in the movement, further undermining the authority and influence of the Brotherhood's leadership. The relationship between the movement and the party became increasingly problematic, culminating in the movement's decision to boycott parliamentary elections in 1997. Just as the 1997 boycott dealt a blow to the IAF faction within the Islamist movement, a crisis between Hamas and the Jordanian government in 1996 similarly dealt a blow to the Jordanian Brotherhood's executive bureau.

The 2002 internal elections produced a significant transformation in the Islamist movement, perhaps the most radical shift since the 1970s. A fourth faction, which drew its strength from organizational and financial ties to Hamas, emerged. Leading this faction was a group of Brotherhood activists with ties to Hamas, including Sa'ud Abu Mahfuz, Faraj Shalhub, Yasser al-Ya'atra, Kazim `Ayash, Mu`in al-Kadumi, and Zaki Bani Arshid, who became Secretary General of the IAF. This faction began to use a discourse rooted in regionalism and identity politics, exacerbating differences between Jordanians of Jordanian origin and those of Palestinian origin.

Hamas's electoral victory in Palestine in 2006 constituted a turning point for the Jordanian Islamist movement. Half of the Jordanian population is of Palestinian origin and many of them support the Islamist movement. This fact, combined with the 2005 terrorist bombings in Amman, led Jordanian authorities to exert more pressure on the movement.

The Islamist movement's weak showing in the 2007 parliamentary elections (only six seats, less than a third of their showing in several other elections) gave the Hamas faction the opportunity to call for several organizational initiatives, such as disbanding the Shura council and calling new internal elections. Following fierce competition between moderate Salem al-Fallahat and hawk Hammam Sa'id, Sa'id won the election for General Guide by a single vote. A deal was then struck to accommodate the moderate wing of the Brotherhood by giving it representation in the Shura Council and executive bureau. It is clear, however, that the Jordanian Islamist movement still is at risk of splintering. Divisions that were once seen mostly at the leadership level have now penetrated the movement in a much deeper way.

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