

American Foreign Policy Council

JORDAN

QUICK FACTS

Population: 8,185,384 (estimated July 2016)

Area: 89,342 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Arab 98%, Circassian 1%, Armenian 1%

Religions: Muslim 97.2% (official; predominantly Sunni), Christian 2.2% (majority Greek Orthodox, but some Greek and Roman Catholics, Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Protestant denominations), Buddhist 0.4%, Hindu 0.1%, Jewish <0.1, folk religionist <0.1, unaffiliated <0.1, other <0.1 (2010 est.)

Government Type: parliamentary constitutional monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$39.45 billion (2015 est.)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last updated January 2017)

OVERVIEW

Five years into the Arab Spring, the threats facing the Hashemite Kingdom, both from within the country and from outside it, continue to mount. Jordan is the most vulnerable of the monarchies affected by the currents of the Arab Spring, and in recent years has faced a growing challenge to its stability from extreme, violent and political Islamist groups. On the other hand, Jordan has weathered the collapse of both Syria and Iraq, and the takeover by jihadist groups of parts of their territory. These developments have been accompanied by large-scale refugee flows which have upset the Kingdom's demographic balance, and which could in the future destabilize its social structure and invite external interference.

For its part, the Jordanian regime has long waged a wide-ranging and determined ideological struggle against radical Islamic organizations on its soil. In this contest, the Kingdom has sought to de-legitimize Salafi jihadi ideology while disseminating a brand of moderate traditional Islam as a religious "vaccine" against it. The large and easily radi-

calized Palestinian component of the country's population, the combined influence of the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot in Jordan, and Salafi jihadi trends from Iraq and Syria, all pose real and imminent threat to the stability of the Kingdom.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islam has been a part of the political life of Jordan for entire history. In 1921, the British crafted the Emirate of Transjordan, with King Abdallah I becoming the new nation's king. Abdallah's Islamic identity, as well as the Hashemite family's connections to the Prophet Muhammad's tribe, was and continues to be a central source of legitimacy for the monarchy. Abdallah and his grandson Hussein presented themselves as deeply religious Muslims, publicly praying and taking part in rituals, as well as performing the *Hajj*. In 1952, the Jordanian constitution made Islam the kingdom's official religion and stipulated that the king could only be a Muslim, born of Muslim parents. The constitution also establishes *sharia* as a key legal framework of the kingdom. However, unlike other Muslim countries, *sharia* was never considered the sole source of legal legitimacy.¹

The radical Islamic camp in Jordan is composed of two separate—though frequently overlapping—wings. The first is the main body of Jordanian Islamists, which identifies with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) movement that originated in Egypt. The second is the radical *jihadi-Salafi* movement, which has been traditionally embodied by al-Qaeda and its ideological fellow travelers within Jordan, and more recently also by supporters of ISIS who were either Jordanian or arrived as refugees from Syria.

The radical Islamic camp in Jordan largely draws its strength from a diverse array of sources and circumstances within Jordanian society. Foremost among them are: its own organizational and ideological infrastructure inside the country; the indirect influence and public sympathy from the wider activities of the MB, which has deep roots among the Jordanian public (both Trans-Jordanian and Palestinian); the inflammatory influence of the war in Iraq and Syria; the ongoing Arab conflict with Israel; and the rise of Islamism across the region following the Arab Spring. Confronting all of these factors is a weak official religious establishment that lacks popular support and is incapable of mobilizing those with religious authority to defend the regime's views.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood is deeply rooted in Jordan and boasts a presence in the country's political arena through the Islamic Action Front (IAF) party and parliamentary faction, as well as in civil society (in mosques, schools, labor and trade unions and universities). Since the birth of the Jordanian MB in the 1940s, internal struggles have taken place between a "dovish", "moderate" faction that aspires to co-exist and

maintain sound relations with the regime, and a “hawkish”, “extremist” wing that draws its ideology from the *takfiri* doctrine of Egyptian MB leader Sayyid Qutb, and as a result attempts to confront the regime both politically and ideologically.

The Palestinian issue ranks high on the agenda of Jordan’s Islamist groups, in particular the MB and its political arm, the IAF; this for a number of reasons, including that a sizable portion of the Jordanian MB’s leaders are themselves Palestinian. Furthermore, the MB views Jordan’s Palestinian population, which traditionally has been estimated to constitute about half of the country’s entire population, as its primary constituency. The Jordanian MB also has traditional organizational ties with its counterpart in the Palestinian Territories, Hamas.²

Throughout most of the MB’s history in Jordan, the Trans-Jordanian faction led it, and tended to work in cooperation with the regime. This cooperation made the MB the only organized political force in the country and allowed it to establish a broad *da’wah* network of civil society organizations and charities.³ The extremist wing of the group has usually been affiliated with leaders of Palestinian origin, whose identification with the Hashemite regime was weaker than that of their Trans-Jordanian compatriots.⁴

In the past, this latter, extremist wing was relatively marginal in the overall operations of the MB in Jordan. In the 1980s and 1990s, it devoted most of its energies to the *jihad* in Afghanistan, and subsequently in Chechnya, Bosnia and other places. Since the early 2000s, however, this more extreme faction has gained in strength and daring, as reflected by the results of the internal leadership elections carried out by the MB in early 2006, and manifested particularly in the composition of the IAF. The MB’s religious rulings, or *fatwa*, express its identification with the *Salafi* worldview, identifying with the *jihadi* struggles in Iraq and Syria, and in Israel/Palestine. The top figures of this faction have also been founding members of the Global Anti-Aggression Campaign (GAAC), an international *Salafi*-led international umbrella organization that brings under its wings *Salafi*, *Salafi-Jihadi*, Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas leaders, aiming to coordinate anti-Western strategies under the perception that the West is at war with Islam. At least seven leading GAAC figures and/or their organizations have been designated as terrorists by the United States, the EU, and/or the United Nations for their support of Al-Qaeda and related groups.⁵

Serious disputes between the two factions continue to this day, and are expected to do so as long as in the post Arab Spring period Islamism advances in the Middle East—and as Hamas continues to gain power in the Palestinian arena. As of late 2016, Dr. Hamanm Sa’id, a member of the ‘hawkish’ faction, serves as the MB’s Inspector General, and Zaki Bani Irsheid, another ‘hawkish’ faction member, serves as his deputy.

The rapid political rise and fall of the MB in the Middle East -- especially the Egyptian mother movement, has had a great effect on the Jordanian MB as well. Internally, the Jordanian Brotherhood now seems to be divided more than ever. In October

2012, members of the “dovish” faction came up with the Zam Zam Initiative, an “Islamist nationalist framework” of national reconstruction that aspired to return to working more closely with the national establishment. Zam Zam aimed for methodical and systematic change through five phases, which included the recruitment of new cadres and membership, including youth, male and female; launching a manifesto and laying down internal laws; the launch of a new political project and the seeking of participation in national institutions and partnership with the government.⁶ In April 2014, three leading members who led the Initiative were expelled from the ranks of the movement, accused of aspiring to establish a new party to compete with the MB,⁷ and subsequently took part in the 2016 elections, winning three seats in the parliament.⁸

Another split occurred after Abdul Majid Thneibat, another “hawkish” leader, re-registered the Muslim Brotherhood Society / Association in 2015 as a Jordanian entity with no affiliation with the Egyptian mother movement. Altogether, more than 400 members left the Brotherhood during 2015 to join these and other splinter groups.⁹

In February 2016, the Jordanian MB formally cut its ties with its parent movement in Egypt.¹⁰ This tactic of separation is not uncommon among Middle Eastern offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood, as an attempt to regain credibility and avoid their own governments’ ire. However, in all likelihood the split was only a cosmetic move, and the links between Muslim Brotherhood offshoots and affiliates remain.

Salafi jihadism

The Muslim Brotherhood in general, and its “hawkish” faction in particular, have played a pivotal role in the dissemination and acceptance of the *Salafi-jihadi* message in Jordanian society, especially among the younger generation of citizens. Outbreaks of violence between Israel and the Palestinians, particularly in the Gaza Strip, and the wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, likewise have served to strengthen *Salafi* sentiment in Jordan.

The ebb and flow of *jihadist* activity in Iraq profoundly affected Islamist organizations in Jordan. The 2006 killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (which subsequently became the Islamic State in Iraq, which turned into ISIS), and coalition successes against the group thereafter (as a result of the “surge” strategy adopted by the Bush administration), along with local Jordanian pressure, all served to create fissures in the Jordanian *jihadist* movement. The result was the emergence and rise of a more “pragmatic” wing of the movement, led by the prominent Salafi cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Since his release from Jordanian prison in 2008, and again in 2014, al-Maqdisi has consistently criticized the school of thought epitomized by al-Zarqawi and more recently by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi’s ISIS, which sanctions intra-Muslim conflict due to ideological and political differences. Al-Maqdisi did not change the principles of *takfir*, the declaration of Muslims as heretics or apos-

tates. However, he made a case against *jihadist* attacks inside Jordan, thus revising his own views about the permissibility of collateral casualties among Muslims (or even their direct targeting) if necessary in order to kill “infidels”.¹¹

In the past few years, many *Salafi-Jihadi* Jordanians joined the ranks of Al-Qaeda and its affiliated *Jabhat Fath Al-Sham* (formerly known as *Jabhat Al-Nusra*).¹² In early 2015 it was even claimed that Jordanians “have enjoyed the lion’s share of power” in *Jabhat Al-Nusra*’s chain of command.¹³ More recently however, it seems that ISIS is also gradually gaining more popularity within *Salafi-Jihadi* ranks.¹⁴ Towards the end of 2015, Jordan came in fourth in the list of countries of origin of ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria with an official number of more than 2000.¹⁵ In addition concerns were raised that among the many Syrian refugees who entered the country there were also ISIS sleeper cells.

Jordan has been a member in the U.S.-led Coalition to battle the Islamic State, and fierce criticism of the group has proliferated, particularly after the capture and burning alive of Jordanian pilot Mu’ath Safi Yousef al-Kaseasbeh, whose plane went down over the city of Raqqa in Syria in December 2014. In the Spring of 2015 it was found in a poll that 94 percent of the wider Jordanian population viewed ISIS negatively.¹⁶

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

The Jordanian population is 98 percent Arab, with Circassians and Armenians each accounting for 1 percent of the population.¹⁷ 97.2 percent of the population is Muslim, and the majority of that population is Sunni, and 2.2 percent of the population is Christian.¹⁸ Strict Islamic codes enjoy a broad popular base among both the country’s Trans-Jordanian and Palestinian populace. In recent years, Islamic dress—particularly for women—has become more and more ubiquitous. Islamic bookstores selling radical tracts can now be found near almost any mosque in Amman. Pew polls found that support in Jordan for the enactment of *sharia* law was widespread. 58 percent of those polled even said *sharia* law should be extended to apply to all citizens, including non-Muslim, while 67 percent of respondents favored stoning for the crime of adultery and 82 percent approved capital punishment for apostates.¹⁹

In recent years, support for *Salafi-jihadi* groups among the wider population are declining. This is true both in the case of ISIS as already demonstrated, as well as in the case of Al-Qaeda, which in 2014 was only supported by 13 percent.²⁰ Nevertheless, *Salafi-jihadi* attitudes have multiple outlets in Jordanian society. Those outlets include popular mosques not under the regime’s supervision, and bookstands that propagate a radical, exclusionary religious worldview. The many websites of global *jihadist* groups provide a means for mass dissemination of this ideology. *Jihadist* activists arrested by authorities have been found to be indoctrinated via these outlets. A prominent example is Abed Shahadeh, nicknamed Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi, who was imprisoned for three years in 2005 and has been arrested several times since.

The Palestinian issue is a perennial interest in Jordan's politics, and of major concern to the public. The MB, as discussed previously, shares and capitalizes upon this focus. As one official with the group has explained, the MB "has a religious and national obligation to support the Palestinians and their problem."²¹ The current Inspector General, Hamam Sa'id, has gone further, stating that the MB's involvement in the Palestinian arena serves to provide "the Palestinians [with] *jihadist* assistance and support."²² Like the Palestinian issue generally, the MB's relationship with Hamas remains an important element of Islamist expression in Jordan.

In spite of the decline in the MB's popularity, which also affected its political power in the syndicates, demonstrations were held during October 2016, led by the Teachers' Union against reforms and changes in school textbooks in the Kingdom, which toned down their Islamic content and started showing women without headscarves. This act had been perceived as a threat to Islamist dominance of the education system.²³

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Salafi jihadi organizations in Jordan remain under intense pressure from the Jordanian government, which has succeeded in disrupting numerous attempted terrorist attacks inside the Kingdom in recent years. It has done so through the imprisonment of large numbers of *jihadist* activists and sympathizers, in the process wreaking havoc on their respective organizations and restricting their activities. A high point was the January 2009 trial of twelve members of a *Salafi-jihadi* group charged with attacks on a Christian church and cemetery, and with involvement in the shooting of a group of Lebanese musicians performing in downtown Amman.²⁴

Also notable was the December 2009 trial of twenty-four Islamists on criminal charges stemming from their management of the Islamic Centre Society (ICS), which had been dissolved three years prior. Before its dissolution, the ICS had served as the MB's financial arm, administering assets worth over a billion dollars, running scores of schools, health establishments and social centers. In 2006, at the height of internal tensions between the MB and the IAF, the government of former Prime Minister Marouf Bakhit dissolved the ICS. The government at that time charged ICS officials with corrupt practices, but Brotherhood leaders contended that the step was designed to deprive the Islamic Movement of its financial backing. The move was widely believed to have been one of the key reasons behind the IAF's downturn in the November 2007 elections.²⁵

The real challenge facing the MB, "hawks" and "doves" alike, appears to be the far-reaching reforms of the internal political system announced by King Abdullah II in late November 2009. The MB in particular has had doubts about the regime's in-

attention to implement the genuine political reform it promised the public. From the MB's point of view, the implementation of a thorough political reform that would introduce the principle of "one person, one vote" and pledge to hold "honest and fair elections" is a basic condition for translating their potential electoral power into a significant quota of parliamentary seats, and subsequently making political and public gains. The Brotherhood has accused the regime of not holding fair and transparent elections. Leading figures also referred to the political triumph and rise in power of Islamist movements across the region following the Arab Spring as an issue which could be translated into political leverage at home: "We use the results in the other Arab countries to say to our government: look, when the elections are fair, the Islamists win."²⁶

The Arab Spring has deeply impacted the debate surrounding governance within Jordan. Initially, the revolutionary currents did not seriously undermine the Jordanian regime. The vanguard of protests in Jordan appeared to be more the *Salafi jihadi* movement than the MB itself. The violence also exposed divisions between this faction and the larger *Salafi* movement. However, the fall of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes and the continued, unsettled situation in other countries (such as Iraq and Syria) encouraged the Jordanian MB to increase its pressure on the regime. The regime, for its part, accused the protestors of receiving orders from the original movement in Egypt and elsewhere. It has also animated the normally quiescent East-Jordanian political leadership; according to various reports, tribal leaders have warned the King that they would not tolerate a light hand in dealing with the threat, which they perceived as a Palestinian attempt to topple the Hashemite government.²⁷ This was expressed in demonstrations under increasingly radicalized slogans, along with the classic demands for an end to corruption and the abrogation of the peace treaty with Israel. These demonstrations escalated in March 2011, resulting in a number of casualties (though far less than in other Arab countries).

The MB boycotted the January 2013 elections, and continued to demand the implementations of "reforms" and the limiting of the King's power. In April 2013, the MB issued a warning letter to the King and the national intelligence services, accusing the regime of corruption and calling on him to change his current policies.²⁸

King Abdullah II, like his counterparts in the Gulf States, has expressed concern over the emerging Egypt-Turkey-Qatar "axis" that has materialized from the Arab Spring, and which has promoted Muslim Brotherhood influence throughout the region.²⁹ The MB, for its part, has pushed back against these concerns, claiming new discrimination. The Kingdom began with a crackdown on the MB which included taking over various social charities, the removal of MB sheikhs from the traditional roles they hold in mosques and more.³⁰ Irsheid, the MB's Deputy Head, was even imprisoned for several months in 2014-2015 for insulting the UAE.

In a June 2016 interview with the Islamist portal *Middle East Eye*, IAF Spokesman Murad Adaileh maintained that the levels of democracy have receded in the country while critiquing the lack of adequate political reform. Adaileh added that the new constitutional amendments granted King Abdallah dramatically more power over the security forces. He also noted that the government has continued arresting activists, most notably for criticizing Jordan's war against the Islamic State, which has intensified the Brotherhood's distrust of the government.³¹ Nevertheless, the Brotherhood's deteriorating situation caused the IAF to end its elections boycott in 2016. The Brotherhood's decision was welcomed by Queen Rania³² and the Brotherhood replied that this was a "positive" step.³³

The IAF joined a wider alliance, the National Coalition for Reform (NCR), which included candidates from various backgrounds, in the September 2016 elections. This coalition gained 16 seats in parliament, 10 of which were won by members of the group and the remaining were won by their allies.³⁴ In January 2017, the IAF announced it will try to repeat this experience by forming coalitions towards the forthcoming municipal elections as well.³⁵

ENDNOTES

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