

Viewpoints
No. 58

The Jordanian Regime and the Muslim Brotherhood: A Tug of War

Tareq Al Naimat

Jordanian journalist; former Visiting Arab Journalist, Woodrow Wilson Center; Editorial Assistant Secretary, Al Araby Al Jadeed Newspaper, Doha

The momentum of the Arab Spring has weakened, at least temporarily, in Jordan. This has returned the relationship between Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood and the Jordanian regime to its historic position of limited engagement rather than full cooperation. Having survived the initial wave of Arab Spring unrest by relying on its traditional political formula, the regime is now confident that it can maintain stability without making major compromises on political or institutional reforms.

July 2014

Middle East Program



The momentum of the Arab Spring has weakened, at least temporarily, in Jordan. This has returned the relationship between Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood and the Jordanian regime to its historic position of limited engagement rather than full cooperation. Having survived the initial wave of Arab Spring unrest by relying on its traditional political formula, the regime is now confident that it can maintain stability without making major compromises on political or institutional reforms.

An Auspicious Early History

Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood and the Jordanian government have historically benefitted from their relationship. At a time when most branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region were banned from participating in the official political process of their countries, the Jordanian organization was legal and thus could build its own institutions openly and participate in parliamentary elections. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood saw the Jordanian regime as the most accommodating it could hope for in the region's sea of secular and anti-Islamist dictatorships, especially in Egypt and Syria.

For its part, the regime benefitted because the Muslim Brotherhood remained a peaceful organization that did not intend to change the system. Nevertheless, the regime remained leery of the Brotherhood and only gave it limited legitimacy. Over the years, depending on local and regional circumstances, it subjected it to various forms of harassment, including confiscation of assets, the jailing of some leaders, and attacks on its integrity by the government media.

The Young King and the Arab Spring

The relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood took a turn for the worse after King Abdullah II rose the throne in 1999, following his father's death. The young king, whose own priority was economic development, turned the relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood over to the influential General Intelligence Directorate (GID). The GID was tasked with preparing assessments of the Brotherhood and with crafting a policy toward it. The GID's assessments led to worsening relations between the Brotherhood and the regime. A critical change occurred in 2007, when the government decided to dissolve the board of directors of the Islamic Center Society, the charitable and social arm of the Brotherhood. Moreover, several Islamist members of parliament were imprisoned, and a relentless media war was launched against the organization. The parliamentary elections in that year were allegedly fixed, resulting in the Muslim Brotherhood winning only 6 seats out of 110—the worst results yet in the Brotherhood's history of participation in electoral politics.

The Muslim Brotherhood's attitude toward the regime also changed as a result of these pressures, leading to a much-publicized internal split between a hawkish faction seeking

confrontation and a dovish faction that favored a more conciliatory approach. With conflicting visions over how to deal with the repeated blows from the regime, the Brotherhood decided to send the king a message by boycotting the 2010 parliamentary elections. The regime believed that the Brotherhood's participation in elections gave some legitimacy to the House of Representatives, which is dominated by regime supporters with tribal affiliations. Some members of the Brotherhood wanted to go further in their opposition and proposed demanding that Jordan become a constitutional monarchy with limited power for the king. The proposal was not formally adopted for fear it would jeopardize the regime's historical tolerance of the Brotherhood.

With the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011, the Brotherhood became less cautious and adopted an ambitious reform program, focused on scaling back the king's powers, including his ability to issue temporary laws and dissolve parliament. Other proposals for constitutional reform included requiring the king to choose a prime minister from the party that controlled the plurality of seats in the parliament, as well as denying the monarch the authority to choose judges for the new Constitutional Court and making it more difficult for him to dissolve the parliament. The Brotherhood also sought to transform the appointed upper house of parliament into an elected body.

The regime viewed these proposals with great concern because of the Brotherhood's popularity and opened negotiations with it. However, it made few concessions. It refused to abrogate the "one man, one vote" law, which allows citizens to vote for just one candidate even in multi-member districts. The law favors the election of local notables and tribal leaders, and the government feared that abrogating it would allow the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition parties to win control of the parliament. The regime agreed, however, to reduce the number of appointed members in the upper house of parliament and to restore the Muslim Brotherhood's management of the Islamic Center Society.

Tensions between the Muslim Brotherhood and the regime continued, with the organization refusing to participate in the 2013 elections, as it had done in 2010. The Brotherhood also declined membership in the National Dialogue Committee, which made important recommendations for political reform. It also dismissed the constitutional amendments recommended by a committee appointed by the king as too limited, in fact a ploy to avoid the fundamental reforms the opposition was calling for.

While keeping away from regime-sponsored political activity, the Brotherhood participated in the grassroots protests that were taking place in various provinces around the kingdom. These protests did not achieve the critical mass reached in countries like Egypt or Tunisia, however. Confident that street action would not escalate into demands for regime change, the government remained inflexible and continue to offer only token responses to demands for reform. The regime consciously avoided unpopular economic measures, however, waiting until December 2012 to eliminate fuel subsidies. (This move nevertheless led to several days of civil unrest.)

Hard Times for the Muslim Brotherhood

The July 2013 military coup d'état in Egypt turned the tide against all Islamist movements in the region and had profound effects on the Jordanian Brotherhood. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood was declared a terrorist organization, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates led a campaign to convince other countries in the region to adopt a similar stance toward their Islamist organizations. The new political climate in the region encouraged hardliners in the Jordanian regime to advocate stricter control over the Brotherhood.

The regime, however, did not accept these demands. From the point of view of Jordanian officials, the political situation was improving. Protests were becoming less frequent and less intense, and calls for regime change increasingly rare. With the example of Syria in front them--some 600,000 Syrian refugees have fled to Jordan and news media broadcast daily footage of displaced populations and ruined cities-- Jordanians had become more inclined to put up with their government despite its political and economic corruption. With citizens more passive, the regime resisted the hardliners' pressure for a major crack down on the Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood remained divided and one part of it had become unwilling to confront the government. Moderate had launched their own, separate effort to reconcile with the regime, which became known as the Zamzam Initiative. It opened on October 5, 2013 with a ceremony attended by high-ranking government officials. The moderates' platform called for political and constitutional reform, as well as for developing an Islamist discourse that could become a broad civilizational framework for the entire *umma* (Islamic community).

The Zamzam Initiative failed to get the support of the entire Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood. On the contrary, it led to the expulsion of the three founding members of the Initiative, including the well-known leader of the dovish faction Rheil Gharaibeh. The expulsions revealed the organizational rigidity that plagues the Brotherhood. Its detractors describe it as a sponge that soaks up all the bright and upcoming talent but does not achieve anything by doing so. The Brotherhood appears focused on maintaining its standing based on earlier political accomplishments rather than on developing its political discourse or improving its organizational effectiveness. It is also experiencing diminished influence in the social realm, especially after the Islamic Charitable Society fell under the control of the regime.

Other factors causing a decline in influence include the removal of Brotherhood sheikhs from the traditional roles they hold in mosques and a change in perception regarding the role played by Islamic organizations in society. New religious groups are emerging that believe Islamic-minded individuals should concentrate on social and moral issues rather than politics.

Despite all the problems, the Muslim Brotherhood still remains the most important political opposition group in Jordan and the only political party that has grassroots popularity. For the time being, the organization is continuing its boycott of the parliamentary elections, but it might change its position again, as it had done earlier. It boycotted the 1997 election over the "one man, one vote" law, but participated in 2003, after concluding that the boycott was not part of a strategy and only prevented the organization from having an impact in the political and social realm. It is possible that it will adopt a similarly pragmatic stance in the future.

It is thus hard to predict what the relationship between the Brotherhood and the Jordanian regime will become in the long run. For the time being, it is the continuation of the old tug of war between the regime and Muslim Brotherhood that has gone on for decades.



The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

Viewpoints Series

Tunisia's Islamists Struggle to Rule

Viewpoints No. 1 (April 2012) by David Ottaway

Fostering the Next Generation

Viewpoints No. 2 (April 2012) by Moushira Khattab

Algeria's Islamists Crushed in First Arab Spring Elections

Viewpoints No. 3 (May 2012) by David Ottaway

Syrian Refugees: Lessons from Other Conflicts and Possible Policies

Viewpoints No. 4 (updated August 2012) by Rochelle A. Davis

Morocco's Islamists: In Power Without Power

Viewpoints No. 5 (August 2012) by David Ottaway

The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?

Viewpoints No. 6 (August 2012) by Roberto Toscano, Moushira Khattab, Fatima Sbaity Kassem, and Daniel Brumberg

Iran is Reversing its Population Policy

Viewpoints No. 7 (August 2012) by Farzaneh Roudi

Voting as a Powerful Tool for Women

Viewpoints No. 8 (October 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

The Uncertain Fate of U.S.-Egyptian Relations

Viewpoints No. 9 (November 2012) by David Ottaway

The Demons Besieging Lebanon: Iran's Tighter Grip

Viewpoints No. 10 (November 2012) by Hanin Ghaddar

Iran's Nuclear Program: A Change in the Winds?

Viewpoints No. 11 (November 2012) by Shaul Bakhash

Has the Arab Spring Lived Up to Expectations?

Viewpoints No. 12 (December 2012) by Various Authors

Reflections on the Adoption of UNGA Resolution Banning Female Genital Mutilation

Viewpoints No. 13 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

In 2013, Rise of the Right in Elections Across the Mideast

Viewpoints No. 14 (January 2013) by Robin Wright

Women's Rights Under Egypt's Constitutional Disarray

Viewpoints No. 15 (January 2013) by Moushira Khattab

Repression's Diminishing Returns: The Future of Politics in Egypt

Viewpoints No. 16 (January 2013) by Joshua Stacher

Mali: The Time for Dithering is Over

Viewpoints No. 17 (January 2013) by David Ottaway

Iran's Pivotal Presidential Election

Viewpoints No. 18 (January 2013) by Shaul Bakhash

Young Saudis and The Kingdom's Future

Viewpoints No. 19 (February 2013) by Caryle Murphy

Sanctions and Medical Supply Shortages in Iran

Viewpoints No. 20 (February 2013) by Siamak Namazi

The Nuclear Issue: Why is Iran Negotiating?

Viewpoints No. 21 (February 2013) by Bijan Khajehpour, Alireza Nader, Michael Adler

The Syrian Refugee Crisis is Pushing Lebanon to the Brink

Viewpoints No. 22 (February 2013) by Amal Mudallali

The Resistible Rise of Islamist Parties

Viewpoints No. 23 (March 2013) by Marina Ottaway

As Islamists stumble in Egypt and Tunisia, the Arab Spring turns wintery

Viewpoints No. 24 (March 2013) by Adeed Dawisha

Violence Unsettles Tunisia's Democratic Transition

Viewpoints No. 25 (April 2013) by David Ottaway

Learning Politics in Tunisia

Viewpoints No. 26 (April 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Morocco: "Advanced Decentralization" Meets the Sahara Autonomy Initiative

Viewpoints No. 27 (May 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Rouhani's Surprising Election

Viewpoints No. 28 (June 2013) by Shaul Bakhash

Lebanon's Existential Threats

Viewpoints No. 29 (June 2013) by Amal Mudallali

The Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges of the New Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani

Viewpoints No. 30 (June 2013) by Various Authors

Egypt: Islamist Ascent, Islamist Descent
Viewpoints No. 31 (July 2013) by Haleh Esfandiari

Mohamed ElBaradei From Vienna to Cairo: A Transition
Viewpoints No. 32 (July 2013) by Michael Adler

Can Rouhani Resolve Iran's Economic Conundrum?
Viewpoints No. 33 (July 2013) by Bijan Khajepour

Hizbullah's Roll of the Dice in South Lebanon
Viewpoints No. 34 (August 2013) by Amal Mudallali

Iran and Syria at the Crossroads: The Fall of the Tehran-Damascus Axis
Viewpoints No. 35 (August 2013) by Jubin Goodarzi

Upcoming UN Meeting Revives Hope for U.S.-Iran Dialogue
Viewpoints No. 36 (September 2013) by Barbara Slavin

Back to the Drawing Boards
Viewpoints No. 37 (September 2013) by Nathan J. Brown

The U.S. Administration's Policy in Iraq
Viewpoints No. 38 (September 2013) by Joseph Sassoon

American Policy in Lebanon: Stabilization Through Dissociation
Viewpoints No. 39 (September 2013) by Amal Mudallali

Iran's Rouhani Puts U.S.-Saudi Ties to the Test
Viewpoints No. 40 (October 2013) by David Ottaway

U.S. Policy toward Syria: Making the Best of a Bad Situation?
Viewpoints No. 41 (October 2013) by Mark N. Katz

American Policy in the Maghreb: Counterterrorism is Not Enough
Viewpoints No. 42 (October 2013) by Marina Ottaway

Tunisia's Islamist-Led Democracy Founders
Viewpoints No. 43 (October 2013) by David Ottaway

Confrontation Over Iran's Nuclear Program
Viewpoints No. 44 (November 2013) by Michael Adler

Breaking Taboos
Viewpoints No. 45 (November 2013) by Haleh Esfandiari

Iraq's Kurdistan Takes a Giant Step Toward Independence
Viewpoints No. 46 (December 2013) by David Ottaway

The Egyptian Constitution: Mapping Where Power Lies
Viewpoints No. 47 (December 2013) by Marina Ottaway

A Dream Constitution
Viewpoints No. 48 (December 2013) by Moushira Khattab

Can the Iranian Nuclear Issue be Resolved?
Viewpoints No. 49 (January 2014) by Bijan Khajepour

The Hague Tribunal and the Hariri Assassination
Viewpoints No. 50 (January 2014) by Amal Mudallali

Egypt's Referendum: The Constitution is not the Issue
Viewpoints No. 51 (January 2014) by Marina Ottaway

Reflections on Iran's Tumultuous Revolution: 35 Years Later
Viewpoints No. 52 (February 2014) by Shaul Bakhash

Iraq: Tackling Corruption and Sectarianism is More Critical than the Outcome of Elections
Viewpoints No. 53 (March 2014) by Joseph Sassoon

Iranian Nuclear Talks Plow Ahead
Viewpoints No. 54 (March 2014) by Michael Adler

Egypt: The Closing of the Political Space
Viewpoints No. 55 (June 2014) by Marina Ottaway

Rouhani: Mixed Bag One Year Later
Viewpoints No. 56 (June 2014) by Shaul Bakhash

Lebanon without a President: Can Lebanon Weather the Neighborhood Storm?
Viewpoints No. 57 (June 2014) by Basem Shabb

Edited by Kendra Heideman and Mona Youssef
Designed by Kendra Heideman
Middle East Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars