

NOREF Expert Analysis

The role of the Jordanian Islamist movement in the Jordanian Spring

Lamis El Muhtaseb

Executive summary

The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front party (together comprising the Jordanian Islamist movement), have played a major role in the Jordanian Awakening. However, after almost two years of mobilisation and protests, the movement has been unable to rally or lead a large, unified and unrelenting Jordanian protest movement. The protests are fragmented, they overlap, and their organisation is divided among Islamist forces, emerging popular and youth forces (mostly of eastern Jordanian affiliation), and the elitist National Front for Reform. Consequently, King Abdullah II has been able to promote his own reform agenda, which does not meet minimum popular demands. The limited performance of the Islamist movement reflects Jordan's political, economic, and social circumstances and those of the movement itself. Effectively, this role is influenced by both

external factors and internal factors. External factors include domestic Jordanian issues, such as the division between Jordanians of east Jordan and those of Palestinian origin. Regional factors include the civil war in Syria and the turbulent situation in countries such as Egypt, where Islamist parties have come to power. International factors include the geopolitical and strategic importance of Jordan to the main external actors in the region. As a result, political change in the country is not welcome unless it becomes inevitable. Internal factors are the differences among the various tendencies of the Islamist movement over questions such as whether to prioritise Jordanian or Palestinian issues. Increasing internal divisions and unchanging external circumstances weaken the movement's chances of playing a more influential role in the future.

Lamis El Muhtaseb is a visiting fellow at the Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies/European University Institute, Italy. She is also a post-doctoral fellow at the Johns Hopkins University/SAIS Bologna Center, Italy. She is the author of "The intellectual and political evolution of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood" (*Geopolitics of the Middle East*, July-September 2008), "Riforme costituzionali in Giordania" (*Codice delle Costituzioni Straniere*, forthcoming 2013), and "Le rôle du mouvement Islamique dans le 'printemps jordanien'" (*Devenir Révolutionnaires. Au Coeur des Révoltes Arabes*, forthcoming 2013).

The role of Jordanian Islamists

Jordanian Islamists have played a major role in the Jordanian Spring since the very beginning of the protests that erupted in mid-January 2011. Indeed, being the major opposition force in the country since 1989, when political opening took place, the Jordanian Islamist movement – comprising the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front party – has always voiced the necessity for political reforms, and has adopted and promoted democratic ones. Following the events in Tunisia and while the Egyptian revolution was in the making, the Islamist movement seized the opportunity and joined the Jordanian protests as a major player and, to an extent, a leading force.

The demands that have united the Islamist movement, the other opposition forces, and the popular and youth emerging protest groups are largely of an economic (e.g. opposing high prices and corruption) and political nature (e.g. demanding constitutional reforms that ensure the sovereignty of the people, a representative election law, the formation of a constitutional court, etc). Thus it can be said that the demands were not “simply” to remove the regime, as in other Arab countries, but instead we had a long list of demands to reform the existing one.

The participation of the Islamist movement in the Jordanian Spring has frequently been co-ordinated with other opposition forces, both old and new. On many occasions, however, this participation has followed a chaotic pattern that reflects a lack of co-ordination over issues of time, place and even the precise nature of the reforms being demanded. For instance, the movement is part of the Higher Committee of Opposition Parties, which combines nine opposition parties with leftist, communist and nationalist orientations. The Islamist movement’s participation in the protests was sometimes under this umbrella, but more often protests were co-ordinated with emerging youth and popular groups (representing mainly Jordanians of eastern origin), either in the capital, Amman, or other major cities across Jordan. The movement has also participated under the new emerging elitist group, the National Front for Reform, which was formed by former Jordanian prime minister Ahmad Obaidat in an endeavour

to unite all opposition forces and give them more legitimacy (which it has thus far failed to do). Consequently, the movement’s efforts have been distributed across different protest groups, being unable to unite them under its own umbrella or becoming part of an alternative one.

Protests adopted by the Islamist movement and the other groups of protesters were of a peaceful nature in the form of weekly demonstrations that were often held after Friday prayers, often in Amman, but also in other cities. Another form of protest were the sit-ins occasionally held in front of specific government ministries or in popular areas with symbolic value such as the Jamal Abdul Nasser intersection in Amman. Sometimes these demonstrations and sit-ins were organised and joined by all opposition forces, but at other times there were several simultaneous demonstrations in Amman and other cities organised by the various protest groups. Open sit-ins failed because of the harsh security measures put in place by the authorities, but also because of the small numbers of protesters.

The reforms that were demanded, especially on the part of the Islamist movement, progressively expanded to include ending the peace treaty with Israel, condemning the Syrian regime and condemning the U.S. ambassador’s declarations regarding Jordanian reforms. Therefore the Jordanian protest movement – whether Islamist or non-Islamist – that has emerged in Jordan has not transmitted a picture of unity, intensity or consistency, be it in terms of numbers, activities or goals.

By the end of 2012 it became clear that almost two years of relentless protests had only produced superficial reforms. King Abdullah II has undertaken constitutional and political reforms that have not touched his absolute powers. Moreover, the controversial “one voice” election law was only slightly changed, continuing to favour the tribal and pro-regime loyalists, and marginalising the opposition and a large segment of the Jordanian population of Palestinian origin. Additionally, parliamentary elections are to be held in January 2013 as planned and the majority of political parties, including those participating in the protest movement, have decided to participate in them. The Islamist movement, the National

Front for Reform, and the popular and youth groups have decided to boycott the elections.

Violent protests broke out all over the country when fuel prices were raised in mid-November, but as usual, consistency in the protests, even on the part of the Islamist movement, was lacking and this “uprising” was over very quickly. In fact, the Jordanian monarch is currently trying to absorb the anger and frustration of Jordanians by holding meetings with the leaders of some of the popular and youth groups to exchange ideas and views. These dialogues, however, could also be viewed as an attempt to divide the protest movement and to isolate the Islamist movement. Indeed, no meetings were held with the movement itself or its youth groups.

The Islamist movement had already realised the inefficacy of its mobilisation strategy by the end of the summer of 2012 and therefore decided to make some changes. Firstly, in September 2012 the movement announced its intention to produce a properly developed and realistic programme for reforms covering the social, economic and political domains with the goal of uniting more Jordanians under its wing. However, this reform programme has yet to materialise. Indeed, the democratic reforms that the movement calls for do not fully address the economic, social and political problems facing Jordan. Furthermore, in a move that could be interpreted as a sign of the failure of the other political umbrellas, the movement formed the Higher Council for Reform by combining the executive offices of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Action Front party. Lastly, on October 5th 2012 the movement managed to mobilise more than 50,000 protesters (according to its own figures, while the official tally is somewhat lower, but does not provide an alternative one) belonging to more than 75 protest groups (youth, tribal, Jordanians of Palestinian origin, etc.) in addition to various opposition and political forces. This was the largest demonstration in the history of Jordan. Nonetheless, no other such demonstration was organised again, nor has any concrete action followed as regards the new, more realistic agenda or the Higher Council for Reform.

Factors shaping the Islamist movement’s role

When analysing the role of the Islamist movement in the ongoing Jordanian Spring, one can refer to a variety of factors that have influenced, conditioned and shaped the movement’s protest activities and its role over the past two years. Such factors can be divided into external ones associated with various interdependent domestic, regional, and international circumstances and events, and the movement’s internal power dynamics and decision-making processes.

Factors external to the Islamist movement

One of the most important domestic factors is the societal division between Jordanians of Palestinian origin and eastern Jordanians. Indeed, over the past two years in particular this schism between the two groups has often been used by the authorities to divide the people by arousing fear of and hostility towards each other. The Islamist movement, with its strong commitment to the Palestinian cause since it was founded in 1946, is not as popular among eastern Jordanians as it is among those of Palestinian origin, despite the fact that the majority of its leaders are of eastern Jordanian origin. Therefore, it has proved difficult to unite both groups under one unified, tactically effective strategy of mobilisation. The movement, in fact, has become trapped in its own non-pragmatic Palestinian inheritance at the expense of a focus on Jordanian and daily life issues that could have united and benefited the two groups in Jordan and ultimately increased the movement’s influence.

The regional influence can be summarised in terms of two major factors: fear of the consequences of a civil war in Syria, and the turbulent post-uprising environment in both Tunisia and Egypt, where Islamist parties have come to power. As for the international aspect, the movement has not received international encouragement because of Jordan’s strategic geopolitical location and the role it plays in the region as a buffer zone with the longest borders of any Arab country with Israel. As a result, political Islam in a country with such a key regional role is not welcomed by the external actors in the region, especially the U.S.

Internal Islamist movement factors

Internal factors include mainly the disputes and differences within the various tendencies of the Islamist movement over which issues and goals to prioritise. Indeed, since the movement began its political participation in the late 1980s it was clear that two diverse tendencies coexisted in its ranks: the doves or moderates and the hawks or conservatives. The difference was basically over issues relating to democratic principles such as gender equality and participating in a multiparty political system, among many others. Later the Wasat group emerged among a younger generation who were more politicised than the moderates and less conservative than the conservatives. However, this group was divided into two tendencies: the pro-Hamas group, which emphasised Palestinian priorities and relations with Hamas, and the Fourth group, which emphasised Jordanian issues. An alliance between the pro-Hamas grouping and the conservatives led to their dominance in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's internal elections. Recently, the leaders of the Fourth group declared a new initiative that emphasises Jordanian priorities known as the Zamzam Initiative. The terms of this initiative are not clear yet, but apparently it aims to counterbalance the influence of the other allied group and design progressive reforms in the movement in line with the unique Jordanian reality. Thus, although the movement insists on its unity, divisions are taking place.

Conclusion

In contrast with its counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia, the Jordanian Islamist movement has failed to lead or unite a Jordanian mass protest movement. This failure mirrors the complexity of the Jordanian political context and that of the movement itself. As this analysis has shown, many factors have affected the performance of the Islamist movement and have effectively hindered its mobilisation and capacity to organise protests.

Indeed, such factors as the Palestinian/Jordanian societal division or Jordan's geopolitical characteristics will continue to limit the influence of the movement and its contribution to the Jordanian Spring in both the short and long terms. This analysis also reveals that although political Islam could be the dominant power in the Middle East and North African region, each Arab country has its own specificity in terms of its prevailing internal socioeconomic, cultural and political circumstances. These differences will determine the outcome of the Arab Spring in these countries and the role of Islamists in the changes taking place.