

# The Effects of the 2015 Ban of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood

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*The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood views its legitimacy as an indispensable part of the legitimacy of the Jordanian state itself. The movement has been spreading its message and influence for decades both inside and outside of the state. Banning the movement in 2015 has motivated the Jordanian Brotherhood to hold on to its religious message while simultaneously making political concessions to the Jordanian state.*

In 2015, Jordanian authorities banned the country's 70-year-old Muslim Brotherhood. The ban occurred due to increasing pressure from Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates who had declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group. This stance came following the ousting of former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi in 2013, which ended the Egyptian Brotherhood's one year in power. When the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood was declared an illegal organization by the Jordanian authorities in 2015, it was given a choice to reorganize into either a fully political party (although it already had a political branch, the Islamic Action Front or IAF) or a preaching (*da`wa*) movement by joining forces with the Muslim Brotherhood Association. The association had been newly formed and registered in 2015 by a group of leaders who had split from the Brotherhood movement that same year. Abdel Majid Thunaibat, a former Brotherhood Controller General, became the Controller General of this new association dedicated only to preaching. In practical terms, the 2015 ban of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood meant that the movement had to separate its political activities, such as campaigning, and its religious activities, such as preaching – a development which remains unacceptable for the leaders of the movement today.

## **Political concessions**

The 2015 ban led the movement to initiate a policy of concessions and appeasement towards the Jordanian government. Firstly, it adopted a low profile by refraining from participating in protests and organizing manifestations. Secondly,

the movement cut ties with the International Shura Council of the Muslim Brotherhood, in order to demonstrate that any possible inroads of influence from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the mother organization of the international Muslim Brotherhood movement, had now been blocked. Additionally, the movement's political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), made new alliances with pro-government parties, such as the Unified Jordanian Front Party, and became open again to dialogue with nationalist and leftist parties such as the Communist Party and the National Movement for Direct Democracy Party. Their relations with the nationalists and leftists had been severed following the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011.

Lastly, since 2015, the leaders of the Brotherhood movement and the IAF have often issued statements and declarations that echo the political, economic, and social priorities of the Jordanian state. They have also increasingly emphasized the historical ties with and the unwavering loyalty to the Jordanian regime and state that began with the Kingdom's founding in 1946, when King Abdullah I claimed religious and historical legitimacy and founded the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the almost simultaneous establishment of the Brotherhood as a religious movement in Jordan worked in favor of the Hashemite king. In the subsequent two decades, the Islamic/nationalist goals of the movement were of common interest to both parties as they both sought to set themselves apart from the Arab socialist republics. Moreover, following years of boycotting the parliamentary elections (in 2010 and 2013), the IAF participated in the

2016 elections under a platform that stressed specific Jordanian priorities such as overcoming the economic crisis, fighting corruption, and building the Jordanian state. This came in contrast to previous platforms that included more focus on broader regional problems, specifically the Palestinian issue, which had often garnered concern and criticism from the Jordanian authorities. Jordanian priorities also included safeguarding Jordan from regional and neighboring geopolitical conflicts and fighting extremism, in addition to the pressing issue of how to avoid solving the Palestinian question at the expense of Jordan. The IAF also emphasized the Brotherhood's role in contributing to the nationalist and Islamic education characterized by religious moderation in Jordan. While the call for political reforms is present in Brotherhood and IAF statements, more rhetoric is dedicated to reiterating the movement's and party's concern for the state to focus on Jordanian political challenges and priorities.

### **Internal Developments and Debates**

Due to the ban on the movement, internal debates within the movement and the IAF intensified. Issues such as the civil state, the separation between the movement and the party, and participation in government—still a sensitive topic to the conservative group within the Brotherhood for ideological and political reasons – became the center of various ongoing debates among the leaders of the movement and the party. As a result of this debate, the leaders of the movement and the party loosely adopted the concept of the civil state with religious references, as indicated by King Abdullah II in his Sixth Discussion Paper. The reference to the concept made by the King aimed at clarifying and emphasizing that there is no contradiction between principles of governance as enacted by the Prophet Mohammed and representative democracy. Furthermore, participation in the government was recently called for by members of the IAF. As for the separation between the movement and the party, the leaders are debating this issue with an inclination towards a division of tasks but not a complete separation, as in the Moroccan example. However, skepticism remains due to the lack of genuine representative democratic dynamics, which can only strengthen the ideological commitments of the movement as well as the party.

### **Reassertion of Conservatism and Religious Discourse**

The ban has also led the movement to emphasize its ideology and its religious legitimacy, as this new political restriction empowered the conservative elements within the Islamist movement and its party. The increasing pressure from the state after the early stages of the Arab Spring encouraged a number of the moderate leaders to split from the Brotherhood, such as those who formed the Muslim Brotherhood Association led by Abdul Hamid al Qudah; the Zamzam Party led by Roheil Gharaibeh and the Partnership and Salvation Party co-led by Salem al Falahat. Other moderate leaders such as Hamza Mansour and Abdel Latif Arabiyyat, on the other hand, joined forces with the conservatives within the Brotherhood to form a conservative-moderate bloc. The conservatives usually adopt a more confrontational stance towards the Jordanian state and are more ideologically committed to safeguarding and maintaining the organizational and ideological unity of the Brotherhood. This new bloc now particularly stresses the movement's religious references and legitimacy. The leaders are keen to point out that their commitment to the message of Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, is resolute. They believe that Islam addresses all domains of life, and thus that religion should not be separated from politics. They also defend the Islamic state, arguing that, if implemented according to their ideology, it would be a civil and democratic state open to all cultures and peoples. Furthermore, they stand firm against the separation of the movement and the party, except in terms of tasks. To them, members of the party should remain committed to the vision of the movement, as is currently the case.

Efforts by some key moderate figures, such as Zaki Bin Irsheid, to lead a progressive agenda that included the separation between the movement and the party failed in the presence of this conservative-moderate bloc. Bin Irsheid tried to mobilize members within the movement and the party to support his ideas, but to no avail. He lost the party's elections in 2018 to Mohammed Awad al-Zayyud of the conservative camp, which signaled the triumph of the conservative-moderate alliance within the movement and the party.

## Conclusion and Outlook

The Brotherhood's dualistic approach of making political concessions to the Jordanian state and reasserting the movement's religious references and legitimacy represents a pragmatic but also opportunistic reaction to the new political restrictions imposed on the movement by the Jordanian authorities. Many members believe that splits from the movement will not succeed. It is quite clear that the break-away groups have not gained much popularity or influence thus far. These groups, such as the Brotherhood Association, the Zamzam Party, and the Partnership and Salvation Party, openly admit that they were not able to attract many members. They also complain that often they are viewed as pro-government actors and thus are not taken seriously. Therefore, despite the 2015 ban, the Brotherhood movement and its political party IAF remain the most organized and influential political actors in Jordan today.

The Muslim Brotherhood also benefits from the fact that a large number, if not the majority, of Jordanian people are conservative and/or religious and the royal family claims legitimacy based on religious heritage and descent. Therefore, religion plays a central role in Jordanian public life. This trend has increased since the failure of the Arab uprisings and the end of the 'democratic dream', with the eruption of civil and sectarian wars and the rise and 'demise' of ISIS. The severe economic crisis in Jordan resulting from regional complications (i.e. the Syrian conflict, and with it the influx of refugees into Jordan and the loss of vital trade routes and export markets) also continues to play a great role in this trend towards conservatism and religiosity amongst many people. Most importantly, though, it is the Palestinian question and the rise of the Jewish religious/nationalist narrative which remains the main factor that contributes to the popularity of the religious discourse and commitments of the Brotherhood. The Brotherhood's backbone is the Jordanians of Palestinian origin, and the movement's political commitment to solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since its foundation in 1946 has never

wavered. The political commitment to the Palestinian question is considered a *religious duty* by the movement for all Muslims. The recent developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict under President Trump's Administration, such as the move of the American Embassy to Jerusalem and the 'Deal of the Century' economic plan to solve an inherently political conflict, have actually played in favor of the Brotherhood and its religious commitments. These recent developments thus have the potential to garner more support for the movement and its political party in the future. Moreover, and ironically so, international developments such as the rise of the nationalist and populist political forces in the U.S. and Europe and the international debates on the decline of liberal democracy also play in favor of the movement. The failure of the Western model of democracy to contain the spread of populism and to prevent the rise of authoritarian ideas and figures is considered by some leaders to be proof that such a model of governance might not be the ideal model to follow. Such observations and concerns were raised by the leaders of the movement as rational political actors who are aware of both domestic and world affairs. Therefore, banning the movement under such domestic, regional, and international circumstances has produced more political moderation, but has failed to produce ideological moderation as the conservatism within the movement persists. This situation will most probably persist in both the short and medium terms.



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