

Jordan's King Hussein pardons opposition leader Laith Shubeilat

by Our Special Correspondent

When the leading Jordanian opposition figure, Laith Shubeilat, was jailed on Feb. 20, *EIR* wrote, that the case would be a weathervane for the political process in the Middle East: The scales of justice would be more sensitive to political considerations made by the kingdom's highest authorities, than to the weight of any court evidence that might be presented relating to the charges. Now, on May 18, King Hussein announced a pardon for Shubeilat, which should lead to his release. The implications of the King's action, and the manner in which he took it, are far-reaching, for the future of the country and the region.

Shubeilat, who had been arrested, convicted, jailed, and pardoned in 1992 and again in 1996, was taken into custody this time, on charges that he had instigated crowds to riot in the southern city of Ma'an, where he had delivered a Friday sermon. Shubeilat had explicitly warned against violence in his sermon, and had been arrested on his way back to his home in Amman, long before any demonstration took place. The immediate intervention of the police had led to clashes, during which one man was killed. This precipitated further demonstrations, and the city was put under siege for a week, with hundreds jailed.

The operation had all the markings of a deliberate provocation, a set-up intended to entrap the former parliamentarian. By striking a blow against Shubeilat, as in the two previous cases, the authorities were attempting to intimidate and silence the entire opposition.

The context for the arrest was defined by the escalating crisis between the United Nations inspections team and Iraq, and the rapid deterioration of the Israeli-Palestinian talks, fuelled by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's obstinate refusal to comply with agreements made. Shubeilat not only defended the rights of Iraq, but had been acknowledged as a Jordanian political counterpart by the Iraqi leadership, which agreed to his requests for the release of Jordanian citizens held in Iraqi prisons.

Shubeilat has also been the major spokesman in Jordan against the terms of the 1994 peace treaty with Israel, and the economic policy package that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has imposed on the country. Shubeilat has argued convincingly, that the peace treaty has not yielded the promised "peace dividend," but has instead led to a collapse in living standards for the Jordanian population, the majority

of whom are Palestinian. Furthermore, he stressed, the IMF structural adjustment program, with its lifting of state subsidies on consumer goods, liberalization of prices, excessive taxation, and across-the-board privatization, including strategic economic interests, would destroy the economy and impoverish the population. That the Islamist activist has been right, is underlined by the catastrophic plunge in living standards, with 30% unemployed and 40% living below the poverty line.

During the period between his arrest and his conviction and sentencing to nine months in prison, on May 12, two important developments occurred in the region. First, the tables were turned on Netanyahu in the peace talks, as the United States toughened its stance, issuing ultimatums to Netanyahu, and Hillary Clinton publicly endorsed the establishment of a Palestinian state. King Hussein also blamed Netanyahu for the deadlock. Second, inside Jordan, the powerful professional unions, which represent the engineers, doctors, lawyers, dentists, pharmacists, and so on, escalated their defense of Shubeilat, and their activities against the IMF stranglehold on the economy. At the same time, social tensions were being fuelled through the deployment of an obscure terrorist group, which started planting bombs in Amman, bringing blind terror to the capital. Significantly, the "Reform and Challenge" group later linked to the explosions, is based in London.

Finally, the crisis in Indonesia took a turn for the worse, as economic and financial breakdown was transformed into demonstrations in the streets, rioting, and challenges to reigning President Suharto.

The King engineers a shift

The scene was set for a dramatic confrontation between the forces of the opposition and the government of Prime Minister Abdul Salam Majali. And, the opposition was not the vocal but impotent opposition parties in parliament, which have been de facto a loyal opposition, but rather the 13 professional associations, which represent actual power in the economy. Shubeilat was the president of the most powerful of the unions, the Jordan Engineers Association (JEA), until replaced by his vice president after being jailed. Under Shubeilat's leadership, the associations had successfully boycotted not only economic conferences planned with Israel,

but also the last political elections in November, in protest against “a steady erosion of parliamentary authority and the lowering of the ceiling of public freedoms.” Following the elections, the King had commissioned the government to study a law regulating the associations, which would have deprived them of their political power. By making membership voluntary, instead of mandatory, the new law would have limited their constituency character, and by separating members of the public from those of the private sector, it would have weakened them. Finally, the proposal to supervise the unions through a government appointee, was obviously intended to muzzle the unions completely.

On May 2, the associations appealed to the King, to meet and hear their demands, which included changes in repressive laws regarding the unions and the press, halting a planned government takeover of pensions funds, and blocking the IMF-dictated privatizations. King Hussein signalled his willingness in principle to meet, and said he would freeze the pension fund takeover. He said that the unions and the government should reach “a consensus which will give us the opportunity to accomplish more and more for this country and the region.”

Then, on May 18, without forewarning, and escorted by a high-ranking delegation, King Hussein made a visit to the unions’ headquarters. It was during that meeting, that the King engineered his shift from a confrontationist stance to one of cooperation, or cooptation.

The meeting of the presidents of the 13 unions, representing 80,000 professionals, was taking place in order to draft a “Salvation Charter,” a list of grievances to present to the King. It was expected to contain clauses rejecting the peace treaty with Israel and also the IMF privatization plans.

During the three-hour discussion, the King told the press later, “We turned a new, bright page of cooperation and trust.” Accompanied by Prime Minister Majali, Crown Prince Hassan, and Royal Court Chief Fayez Tarawneh, the King appealed to the union presidents to undertake “serious efforts to build the future and deal with reality in a vigilant and responsible manner,” according to an account in the Jordan News Agency, Petra. He said the achievements of Jordan should not be belittled, and emphasized the importance of maintaining a “continuous dialogue” between the government and the governed. In a clear bid to depoliticize their activities, he said the priority of the unions should be to improve standards and efficiency in their professions. But, in reference to the feared law regulating the unions, the presidents “were assured that no law will be drafted without being openly and thoroughly discussed with the associations,” said Abu Gheida, president of the JEA, and former vice president under Shubeilat.

Peace with Israel

The other major issue thrashed out in the meeting, was peace with Israel. Here, King Hussein stuck to his commit-

ment, which he said was a strategic option, to peace. He elaborated on the need to prevent further wars, saying, “We must learn from the suffering that we endured in the past five decades, and from the 1967 and 1973 wars, unprepared and ill-planned steps that the Arabs took without an accurate analysis of the circumstances.” He recalled, “We went to Madrid [the peace conference in 1991] with Arab consensus,” and provided the Palestinians with an umbrella that enabled them to take part in the conference. He said Jordan would “stand by the Palestinians until they gain their rights on their national soil.” Here he stressed his support for the U.S. efforts, which he said were based on UN Resolutions 242 and 338, and for the principle of land-for-peace. Finally, he reported on initiatives undertaken with the United States and UN aimed at lifting the sanctions against Iraq.

More than any issue per se, what demonstrated the King’s position vis-à-vis the opposition, was what he said about Shubeilat. According to reports from Amman, it was Hussein Mjalli, president of the Lawyers’ Association, and also chief attorney for Shubeilat, who told the King, that all 13 unions agreed in one demand: Free Shubeilat. This, the King did, declaring to his Prime Minister and Prince Hassan, that he was thereby ordering the Islamist’s release. King Hussein said, “The Shubeilat affair is over.” He added that “his colleagues [would be] guarantors for him,” meaning that the professional unions would be charged with guaranteeing Shubeilat’s good behavior.

Why the King did what he did, is no mystery. The Hashemite monarch, who has just celebrated 45 years on the throne, is a consummate politician and fine interpreter of social processes. Having Shubeilat out of the picture was seen as useful, when one last chance was being given to Netanyahu to play ball. Once it was clear that Netanyahu was not complying, there was no way that the lid could be kept on the opposition in Jordan. Thus, releasing Shubeilat was opportune.

But, more deeply, the decision to pardon Shubeilat signals the King’s determination, that he must find a means of coopting, or collaborating with the opposition, if he wishes to maintain stability in the highly volatile kingdom. Some observers in Jordan have spoken of the King’s moves as reflecting the “Suharto effect,” or the option to acquiesce to the opposition rather than risk civil war.

If King Hussein has selected his moves with an eye on Indonesia, it will be crucial, that he fully grasp the dynamic behind the Indonesian drama and where the parallels to the Jordanian situation lie. Charges of corruption and nepotism against the Indonesian President have obfuscated the fact, that the causal force behind the unravelling of the country’s economy, the debasement of its currency, and the resulting desperation of its suddenly pauperized population, has been the IMF, and no other. Thus, if the Jordanian monarch seeks stability for Jordan, he must break with the IMF policies which have condemned his country, as well as the prospects for peace, to death.