



## Middle East Programme Roundtable Meeting

### Islamist Parties in Jordan: Perspectives on Governance and Relations with the West

Chatham House  
Monday 8 January 2007, 15:30-17:00

#### Summary of Meeting

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#### Speakers:

Jamal Al-Tahat: Writer, Al-Majal Research Center  
Dr Nabil Kofahi: Member of the executive office of the Islamic Action Front  
Nimer Al-Assaf: Member of the executive office of the Islamic Action Front

#### Chair:

Dr Claire Spencer: Head, Middle East Programme, Chatham House

Mr Al-Tahat began by commenting that the reform process in Jordan must include Islamists in the political reform process otherwise there would be a risk that the process would be marginal and not significant. This process would be a major challenge for the King.

Mr Al-Tahat said that Islamists had been part of political life of Jordan since 1946 and since then there had the opportunity to create a National Programme in which they were able to contribute. Mr Al-Tahat said that the Islamists had adopted a constitution for Jordan and stressed that there was a pressing need for the international community to acknowledge the Islamists as a positive and constructive part of the region. Mr Al-Tahat said that he could not speak on behalf of the delegates from the Islamic Action Front (IAF) but that in his opinion the meeting was important in seeking to adopt a secular reform programme in the region and a 'Common Nation Programme' in Jordan to represent both the IAF and other political parties.

Dr Kofahi said that he had been one of the founders of the Islamic Action Front in 1991. He stated his belief that the constitution and the parliament were central to the progress of the reform process in Jordan. He said that there was a very deep need for multi-party politics in the community and that the further development of such pluralism would be

beneficial to all. Dr Kofahi said that God had created variety amongst people and that therefore it was important to accept variety and difference as an integral part of life. He said that in dealing with Muslims and non-Muslims, the Qur'an states that both parties in discussion must accept diversity and difference. He pointed out that Islamist parties had not had the opportunity to govern in other states in the Middle East but noted that there were many enduring misconceptions relating to Islamists amongst the international community. He concluded by reiterating that the Qur'an stresses that civilization must be built upon toleration.

Mr Al-Assaf said that he was grateful for the opportunity to speak to the assembled audience. He expressed his appreciation of the United Kingdom saying that he had lived in Britain for a number of years in the 1970s/1980s and had met his wife there. Mr Al-Assaf said that he had enjoyed freedom and democracy in England and that, as member of the Executive Council of the Islamic Action Front of Jordan, he was keen to help foster these values in Jordan. He stated that the aim of the IAF was to bring about change in Jordan, to foster freedom, democracy and equal rights.

Mr Al-Assaf stated that the Jordanian constitution had been established in 1952 and that it had been influenced by the British constitution. Under the terms of the constitution, the King was supposed to be a constitutional monarch but Mr Al-Assaf noted that during the years between 1952 and 1976, the constitution had been amended or changed 28 times. These changes had taken power from Parliament and the judiciary system and increased the authority of the monarch. Mr Al-Assaf said that the IAF aimed to change this system. The United Kingdom had extolled the virtues of democracy, human rights and freedom: Mr Al-Assaf said that now was the time for action to be taken to ensure that the same values were applied in Jordan.

## **Questions**

### **Samir Nassif, Journalist**

Mr Nassif asked whether the delegation would like to comment on the execution of Saddam Hussein and the recent clashes between Fateh and Hamas.

Mr Al-Assaf said that what had happened to Saddam Hussein was the culmination of a process that had been constructed by the United States in the 1970s/80s and then removed by them. He said that the IAF did not agree with the court which had tried Saddam and that, in their opinion, the court was illegal since Iraq was under occupation. Mr Al-Assaf added that while Saddam had undoubtedly done many bad things, what was currently going on in Iraq was in many ways worse. Mr Al-Assaf noted that Saddam Hussein had been executed for the deaths of 140 people but at least 200-300 people are being killed each day in Iraq: he asked who would be called to account for these deaths? In response to the question concerning recent clashes between Fateh and Hamas, Mr Al-Assaf said that the situation was very sad and he called for dialogue between the factions to put an end to the conflict by peaceful means.

### **Dr Katerina Dalacoura, London School of Economics**

Dr Dalacoura asked Mr Al-Assaf what kind of action he had meant when he said that the UK should take action: if he meant that the West should apply pressure on the Jordanian monarchy, then what kind of instruments of policy should be used to put pressure on the government?

Mr Al-Assaf said that he was not there to give instructions to the British government, noting that they had sufficient experience to know how to deal with such a situation. Mr Al-Assaf said that people in the West look at Islamists and think that they are monsters but he stressed that Islamists believe in equality. He expressed his hope that the day would come when the Jordanian people would enjoy freedom as the British did.

### **Dr Kofahi**

Dr Kofahi noted that there was widespread corruption in the Middle East and that the West's support of corrupt regimes had exacerbated the problem. He said that there was fear of Islamist regimes based on misconceptions and stressed that this would have to be dealt with. He said that the IAF currently held 17 seats in the Parliament out of a total of 110. He said that the IAF had hopes of winning as many as 40% of the seats in Parliament through democratic means, perhaps in five years.

Turning to the issue of the occupation of Palestine, Dr Kofahi said that he regretted that, until now, he saw little evidence of the Arabs being accorded their rights and he said that he deeply regretted the ongoing violence. He expressed his hope that the British government would be more just in its dealings with the problem and would give the Palestinians their rights.

Mr Al-Tahat said that there was a need for a regional balance between the priorities of stability and reform, noting that the prioritization of stability tended to block the agenda. He stated that there could be such a thing as constructive instability, noting the need to dispel the misconception that the alternative to the status quo was a Bin Laden style Islamist regime. He stressed that this was not the case and was a totally misleading misinterpretation of the situation. Mr Al-Tahat said that there was a pressing need to convey to the international media that there are reformist groups in the region which need to be acknowledged and engaged with.

### **Kamilah Khatib, London School of Economics**

Ms Khatib asked the delegation what was the nature of the reform that they were seeking and asked what steps they were taking domestically to seek reform?

Mr Al-Assaf said that in 2005 the IAF had published an exposition of the vision that they have for Jordan and that this had recently been translated into English. He said that the IAF was calling for a return to the 1952 constitution and for fair elections laws. He said that if an observer asked an official what Jordanian elections involved, he would be told that the system was 'one man, one vote' but that in reality this was not the case. Mr Al-Assaf said that every constituency has a different number of representatives in Parliament and that every citizen was only allowed to vote for one individual. As a result, one citizen's vote could be worth one eighth of a vote in a different constituency. Mr Al-Assaf said that there was a fundamental issue with the differential weighting of the value of votes at the ballot box.

The speakers said that the IAF had nothing against the monarchy, stressing that many Jordanians see the monarchy as a unifying factor in Jordan and that the IAF supported a constitutional monarchy. Mr Al-Assaf stressed that the IAF did not believe in bringing about change through force, only by peaceful means. Mr Al-Assaf said that although, he had been imprisoned for 9 months in 1992 for political reasons, he retained a love for his

country which had focused his efforts to reform the laws so that this would not happen again. He stressed that the IAF had nothing against the King and nothing against the principle of the monarchy in general but stated that they wanted more participation in the Parliament and government.

Ms Khatib asked the delegation about the representation of their values and their identity as an Islamist group. Mr Al-Assaf responded that the values of the IAF were values common to all humans. He said that some had commented on the lack of explicit references to the imposition of Sharia law in the manifesto of the IAF but said that he replied to them that they believed in justice, freedom and human rights and that this was Sharia law, Islamic law. He said that people might think that the values of Islamic law were limited to certain people but said that this was not the case, they were universal.

The delegates recalled how, in 1990, the Islamist Minister of Education had tried to impose his own interpretation on the education system. A number of people who had other ideas had the opportunity to express their views and confront him. Mr Al-Tahat said that it was necessary to confront the widespread misconceptions of Islamists and engage with them, rather than defer this out of fear. Engaging with Islamist groups would help to eradicate this fear which could no longer be used as a justification for failing to engage.

#### **Dr Claire Spencer, Chatham House**

Dr Spencer asked the speakers to comment on the impact of the association of Zarqawi and Islamic extremists with Jordan in the international community.

Mr Al-Assaf said that moderate Jordanian Islamists could not be considered to be an extension of Zarqawi or connected with him in any way since they represented an entirely different phenomenon. He said that there had been attempts to use the fact that one member of the IAF had attended the funeral of Zarqawi to associate the organization with extremism but stated that moderate Islamists were extremely keen to disassociate themselves from Zarqawi. Mr Al-Tahat added that, with regard to engaging with Islamists, it would not be possible to guarantee safety and safeguard freedom in a country by resorting to exclusion – there was a need for dialogue.

#### **Dr Noel Brehony CMG, Council for British Research in the Levant**

Dr Brehony said that there was considerable interest in the international community as to what Islamist groups would do once they gained power, noting that the challenges facing such groups centred on organizing the process by which to achieve power and developing viable policies. He said that there was a tendency on the part of Islamist groups to say 'trust us, we're good Muslims' when faced with questions relating to the specifics of their policies, essentially suggesting that 'Islam is the answer'. Dr Brehony said that this was the first time he had seen a manifesto.

Mr Al-Assaf said that Islam was not a religion but an entire way of life, adding that it was time to understand each other on the basis of true equality, rather than trying to change each other. He said that politics was the art of doing the possible on the ground and that the IAF did have clearly defined economic policies, citing an example of the economic experience and expertise of IAF members. Mr Al-Assaf added that as Muslims, IAF representatives offered a pledge of honesty. He said that in elections in Morocco, Egypt

and elsewhere, Islamists had won although the elections had been stopped by authorities who feared that they would win too many seats in Parliament. Islamists had enjoyed success in Turkey, Bahrain, Kuwait, Palestine and Jordan: if people thought so badly of Islamists, then why would they elect them? He added that Islamists had viable policies and that he believed they would be able to serve people better. Mr Al-Assaf said that if there were fair elections in Arab or Muslim countries, he was sure that mainstream Islamist parties would win. He said that Islam, as a way of life, had certain basic rules and asked why this could not be accepted by the West.

Dr Brehony said that he was just seeking clarification of the specifics of IAF policies, noting that there was concern amongst private investors as to what the likely impact of Islamist electoral success would be, e.g. would there be nationalization or privatization?

Mr Al-Assaf suggested that a useful comparison might be drawn with the electoral success enjoyed by Islamist groups in Turkey, noting that Turkish Islamists had proved capable of responding to the demands of office with viable economic and social policies.

#### **Dr Katerina Dalacoura, London School of Economics**

Dr Dalacoura pointed out that, although Islamists had won a plurality of votes in countries such as Egypt, they could not be said to have won a majority of votes in the countries listed.

Mr Al-Assaf agreed to this point and said that Islamist parties had not contested all seats since they knew that a minority of the seats would be open to them and that the elections for the remainder would be rigged. He stressed that the IAF had deliberately not proposed candidates for all the seats since they were seeking to encourage democracy rather than to make the ruling party feel threatened which might be counterproductive. He said that in Jordan the vote-rigging was brought about indirectly through the different weighting of the votes in different constituencies and with the plurality of representatives per constituency. Mr Al-Assaf said that the IAF were not 'dying for power', but rather they were seeking real reforms and wanted to encourage democratic practices hence although they felt confident that they could win more seats, they had not tried.

#### **Dr Valerie Yorke, London School of Economics**

Dr Yorke noted that the IAF currently held 17 seats in parliament and that the IAF representatives had expressed the hope that they might win up to 40% of the parliamentary seats in the mid-term future. Dr Yorke asked whether the representatives thought this doubling would come from the rural or the urban communities? She went on to comment that there was the perception that the IAF had established a *modus Vivendi* for coexistence with the Hashemites, founded on certain ground rules established for relations between the King and the Muslim brotherhood. She asked the representatives to comment on the nature of the IAF's cross-border relations with other Islamic groups in the region and how their relationship with the Hashemites constrained or influenced their relations with Hamas or the Muslim brotherhood in Syria?

#### **Mr Al-Assaf**

Mr Al-Assaf said that, although the IAF had the same background as the Muslim Brotherhood, had deep feelings for them and would like to help them politically, there is

no interconnection between them in terms of the machinery or international coordination and they maintain distinct identities. He pointed out that the Muslim Brotherhood has a presence in approximately 70 countries worldwide and although these groups share an ideological background, the Brotherhood does not really have an international network. In response to Dr Yorke's first question regarding the IAF's prospects for electoral success, Mr Al-Assaf said that there was an unofficial 'allowed' quota for IAF seats in the Jordanian parliament of 15-16 seats and that consequently the IAF did not try to win more than this number. He expressed his hope that one day this would be reformed and said that if this was not the case, it would not be possible for the IAF's participation to develop. He pointed out that the 17 IAF members of parliament represented 40% of the voters and the remaining 93 seats represented 60% of the voters due to the unequal weighting of votes.

Dr Kofahi said that he was the last elected mayor of Irbid and noted that there, 4 seats had been allocated to a population of more than 100,000 constituents whilst elsewhere in smaller cities, a seat had been allocated to citizen bodies of only 15,000 demonstrating the considerable inequality of representation.

### **Richard Muir**

Mr Muir said that he thought that the meeting was very valuable and expressed his thanks to the IAF for their participation. Mr Muir said that he thought that the manifesto was an extremely valuable resource. He asked the IAF representatives whether they could see themselves working with secular reformers, such as the UNDP Arab Human Development project.

Mr Al-Assaf said that the IAF had previously entered into a coalition with 15 other parties including secular parties and had accepted the principle of democracy within the coalition. This ensured that the leadership of the coalition would be transferred every four months and held by each party. This process had been ongoing for the past 10 years.

Mr Muir asked whether the IAF representatives could see the IAF trimming their principles to arrive at a policy. Mr Al-Assaf said yes he could envisage the need to compromise.

### **Dr Heather Deegan, Middlesex University**

Dr Deegan said that in recent years there had been considerable evidence of advancement of the reform agenda amongst Jordanian women. She noted that, broadly speaking, Jordanian women were extremely well educated with a high number of professionals amongst them.

Mr Al-Assaf said that the second-in-charge of the IAF, is a university professor and holds a PhD on human rights in Islamic law. He said that the fact that ten of the members of the Consultative Council of the IAF are women demonstrated that Islam does not oppose women. Mr Al-Assaf stressed that rights for women were fully approved by the IAF. He said that he would offer the question to his wife since she had first hand experience, as a woman, of both the Jordanian and the British system.

Mrs Al-Assaf said that she had been struck when she first arrived in Jordan by the fact that there was a higher proportion of highly educated women in Jordan than in the UK. She stressed that there was no differentiation between the sexes and said that education was positively encouraged in Jordan with the family system very much geared towards guiding children through the education system. She said that she thought that in fact families were more supportive of the education of their children in Jordan, noting that there was a higher proportion of female lawyers, doctors and other professionals than in the UK.

Heather Deegan asked whether this meant that the IAF would encourage women to work outside the home.

Mr Al-Assaf said that in the recent elections, IAF female candidates had won the highest number of votes. Dr Kofahi said that in his opinion, society was built on citizens not on ideologies and said that the IAF would not seek to establish a system with an imam as the highest authority.

**Mr Kazushige Nobutani, JETRO**

Mr Nobutani asked what interaction the IAF had with Iran.

Mr Al-Assaf said that the IAF was open to relations with anyone so long as the relations and dialogue were conducted on an equal footing. He said that the IAF had had discussions with the British, the US, the Dutch, the Belgians, the Chinese, the Russians and the Iranians through their embassies and said that they were open to dialogue with those willing to treat them as equals.

**Dr Claire Spencer, Chatham House**

Dr Spencer asked the IAF representatives whether, given the constraints imposed by operating through the voting system in their efforts to achieve constitutional change, the IAF were concerned that the younger generation might become frustrated by the incrementalist approach and might seek recourse to other means.

Mr Al-Assaf said that the Brotherhood sought to offer a middle way which had been lacking. Clampdowns on the Brotherhood by regimes elsewhere in the Middle East had created a political vacuum which extremists had been quick to exploit. In Jordan the approach had been different. The King had adopted a different tactic and had legalized the Brotherhood in 1946: hence their activities had been conducted in the open and achieved through peaceful means. Clearly Jordanian society had not escaped violence altogether as the attacks on Aqaba and Amman had demonstrated. However Mr Al-Assaf stressed that the violence in these cases had not been homegrown and emanating from Jordanian society, but rather had come from outside. He stressed that if the middle-of-the-road Islamists were forced out of society, it would create a vacuum which would be filled by extremists. If young people were engaged by moderate activists, there was the potential that this would prevent them from being co-opted by those espousing violence. Mr Al-Assaf said that Jordan represented an exceptional case in this respect, since most governments in the region had traditionally seen the Brotherhood as an enemy within to be fought. None of them had been successful, as a consideration of Egypt demonstrated: there had been much killing but there was still much terror. This was because the government had rejected the 'middle way' offered by

the Brotherhood. Mr Al-Assaf said that the Islamists were not going to change and so there was an urgent need to deal with them. He expressed his sincere wish that no drop of blood should be spilled in the process.

Mr Al-Assaf said that the responsibility to counter the growth of extremism was not solely that of moderate Islamists, particularly in the years after September 11 2001. He said that there was a need to adopt an alternative strategic doctrine, stating that this was a new challenge and that old strategies and instruments traditionally employed by the West were no longer suitable, e.g. a strong leader. He said that there was an urgent need for a new strategic option to neutralize violent extremists.

### **Samir Nassif**

Mr Nassif asked what the IAF position was towards occupation and whether their main ally in Iraq was Tariq Al-Hashimi?

Mr Al-Assaf said that firstly, the IAF did not agree with any occupation and that such occupations were not recognized in their strategic perspectives. Secondly, the IAF believed that those under occupation had the right to defend themselves by all means possible. Thirdly, he noted Tariq Al-Hashimi's connections with the Brotherhood in Iraq and said that he thought that Mr Al-Hashimi was doing his best to secure the situation. Mr Al-Assaf said that the IAF would support Iraqis and would not recognize the occupation but called for Iraqis to try and solve the struggle without killing, saying that it was time to put an end to the butchery.

Mr Al-Assaf concluded by reiterating his message of inclusion and protection of diversity and re-affirmed his conviction that there was considerable common ground to be found.

Dr Spencer concluded by thanking the participants for their time and insightful contributions to the meeting, commenting that it had been a very useful and productive meeting which she hoped would feed into policy circles.