

# In Jordan, eyes are on the show trial of popular Muslim leader Shubeilat

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

In the month of October, Jordanians have been preoccupied with two events of great moment: the safe return of His Majesty King Hussein from the U.S.A., where he had successfully undergone surgery to remove a kidney and precancerous tissue, and the trial of Islamic parliamentarian Laith Shubeilat, accused of crimes ranging from slander (against the Parliament and king) to possession of weapons and conspiracy to overthrow the state by force.

King Hussein, with his 40 years' rule, is the longest reigning monarch; Shubeilat, whose father served as a trustee to the king until he came of age, is a maverick Muslim who has succeeded in attracting the highest number of votes in parliamentary elections, including from Christian voters. As the last session of Parliament was drawing to a close in August, and Shubeilat's committee to investigate corruption was naming the names of past ministers allegedly involved in kickbacks, many political analysts whispered their opinion that the energetic Islamic politician might be in line for the prime minister's position himself.

Shubeilat had all the qualifications for the post, and his policy outlook would have reflected that of the majority of the population. By the same token, he was shaping up as enemy number one of the Anglo-American establishment. He not only spoke out against Operation Desert Storm, but assailed the anti-Iraq embargo. Although his rejection of usury derived from deep religious conviction, his denunciation of the International Monetary Fund's policies was shared among secular layers in Jordan and the Third World. He had gone on record opposing the U.S.-led Mideast "peace conference" because it would ignore Palestinian rights. All admirable positions, one might say from a regional standpoint. All good reasons for the United States to want him out of the way.

## The making of a trial

Jordan prides itself on its relatively liberal political life. Since 1989, the highly politicized Jordanian intelligentsia has been looking forward to the full introduction of democracy, as political parties were to be allowed. Now, whether or not parties will be formally introduced into the electoral system has become irrelevant in the wake of the Shubeilat case, which has made a mockery of the democratic process.

The trial, which was begun on Sept. 29, opened four weeks

after Shubeilat had been detained without bail. In that period of time, he had had virtually no private discussion with his lawyer, Ibrahim Bakr, despite the fact that the seven counts against him included conspiracy to organize an armed insurrection against the state, a charge carrying the death penalty.

There was and is no evidence against Shubeilat. Therefore, the State Security Prosecution of the military tribunal had to weave together various separate threads, and present the resulting fabric as a conspiracy. For instance, the authorities first arrested Ahmad Ramzi Al Ayoubi, 45, and Abdul Hamid Sadeq Dkedik, 44, on Aug. 17, two shopowners who, after lengthy interrogation, admitted to weapons possession. Jordanian press sources reported off the record that the two had been beaten. Their confession, which turned into a guilty plea, included the assertion that Yacoub Qarrash, an Islamic parliamentarian, had provided the weapons, in his capacity of leader of the Shabab Al Nafeer Al Islami group, a hitherto unheard-of organization. Qarrash was then arrested and questioned on Aug. 27. Arab press sources reported, again off the record, that Qarrash was a Mossad agent, tooled for use in framing up others. Through Qarrash, who knew Shubeilat, the latter was implicated and promptly arrested on Aug. 31.

The indictment states that the group had been set up to overthrow the Jordanian state and install a Khomeini-style Islamic dictatorship. Since there was no evidence of the existence of the group, outside of the two confessions, and no indication that Shubeilat was associated with it, if it did exist, the ruse was developed that he was the "secret" leader of the group.

The presentation of the prosecution's case was punctuated by so many crude blunders, it was embarrassing for the small group of onlookers, which included two international observers. First, as Ayoubi and Dkedik pleaded guilty to charges of weapons possession and association with an illegal group, they stated their political aim was to fight in the Palestinian Intifada, in the Occupied Territories, not in Jordan. Shubeilat and Qarrash pleaded not guilty to the charges against them.

Witness after witness for the prosecution walked into the small courtroom and, after a loud order from a military man for all present to rise, swore to tell the truth, on a copy of the Koran. Each was asked to look behind him at the four defendants in the dock, and identify his relation, if any, with each of them. Then, witnesses were forced to keep their gaze



*Refugees from the Gulf war lined up in Jordan to receive water, days after the outbreak of hostilities in January 1991. Shubeilat spoke out courageously against Desert Storm and the anti-Iraq embargo.*

riveted on the State Security Prosecutor, Maj. Muhammed Hijazi, who sat, his eyes shifting constantly behind tinted eye-glasses, directly across from the witness stand, or on presiding judge Lt. Col. Yousef Faouri, who leaned with an air of bemused boredom on one elbow, toying with a ball-point pen in the other hand, while two other military judges flanking him watched expressionless. Major Hijazi would pose the questions, reading from a script, and Colonel Faouri would repeat the answers of the witnesses, phrase by phrase, for the benefit of the court stenographer, who wrote everything down in longhand.

Most witnesses spoke in barely audible tones, as if scared stiff.

The gist of the first days' testimonies was that a group existed in Jordan, under the leadership of Qarrash, involved in the Intifada, with backing by Palestinian groups. None of the witnesses named Shubeilat as in any way associated with the group!

Then, when the prosecution tried to implicate Shubeilat in transport of weapons allegedly made in his car, witnesses testified that a) Shubeilat lent his car out readily to friends in need; b) the trunk of his car, with a broken lock, could be opened without use of a key; and c) the parliamentarian could not see what was going on in his garage from the windows in his office. Conclusion: Weapons could have been planted in his car unbeknownst to him.

As if to illustrate the ability to plant weapons, Major Hijazi made the surprise announcement at the conclusion of the opening session, that—lo and behold—a new cache of weapons had been found just two days earlier, in the home of Ayoubi. Not only weapons, but photographs of the French, American, and British embassies had been found. Major Hijazi explained proudly that Ayoubi, interrogated again

right after the discovery, had readily confessed that the foreign diplomatic missions were targets of the group. Just days later, when the prosecution found itself in difficulties, another such surprising discovery was announced; this time, the story went that Ayoubi's father-in-law, present at the trial, left the courtroom in mid-session to go home and search his residence again. Lo and behold, he found weapons hidden on the roof, immediately called the prosecutor, etc.

The most curious development regarding the arms emerged during the testimony of Mohammed Abboud, a weapons expert working in the General Intelligence Department (GID). After holding up pipes and illustrating how the simplest explosives can be homemade, he made the startling statement that what he had in the courtroom were only "samples," because "most of the [seized] explosives were destroyed since they posed a grave danger." The thought that popped into the mind of one international observer was: "Maybe that explains why 'new' evidence has to be furnished daily!"

### **Dramatic retraction**

The highpoint of the carefully planned, but rather clumsily performed, drama came on the third day of the prosecution's case. Taking the stand was Mohammed Moghrabi, one of two brothers who had provided ample testimony during the investigation alleging that, not only Qarrash, but also Shubeilat were leaders of a group called the "Islamic Liberation Front." Since Moghrabi appeared very exhausted and quite reticent in the courtroom, Prosecutor Hijazi took his written deposition and proceeded to read it aloud to the court. Moghrabi, it appeared, was in prison for having spied for Israel. After the text had been read, Colonel Faouri asked the perfunctory question, whether these statements were his.

Moghrabi shocked the court by answering, no, that it had all been lies. When asked to explain, he said that the testimony he had given (which implicated Shubeilat) was deliberately false. Again, he was asked why. "I lied because of a promise that my sentence would be reduced from 15 years to 10 years." He neglected to name the person or persons who made the promise, and did not explain why he had decided to reveal this in court. He was whisked away, and is to be prosecuted for lying. (The next day, bright and early in court, however, Major Hijazi announced that Moghrabi had yet again changed his mind, in prison, and had upheld his original deposition!)

The prosecution had overruled objections by Shubeilat's defense lawyer Bakr, that the witness, being imprisoned for a capital offense, might not be the most credible. Now, whatever credibility the prosecution's witnesses had, was being ripped to shreds by the witnesses themselves.

The overall conduct of the prosecution was under attack. The day after the Mossad agent's dramatic retraction, the prosecution introduced 13 audio cassettes containing recordings of wiretapped telephone calls, plus two public speeches by Shubeilat. The defense argued eloquently against the introduction of the tapes, on the grounds a) that the bugging had been done on orders of the GID, not the prosecutor; and b) that wiretapping was a violation of constitutional rights. Another lawyer on Shubeilat's defense team, Zuhair Abu Ragheb, produced extensive material from Jordanian and international law to uphold his contention. He also noted, "Jordan does not have experts who are capable of analyzing voices," indicating the fragility of any testimony regarding the tapes. To justify the use of material illegally taped, Major Hijaz used the sophistic argument that since there was no law on the books which explicitly rejected the use of wiretaps, it was legal. He went further, citing as precedent an article in the legislation of Syria (hardly a model of democracy) permitting both telephone bugging and interception. As for the fact that intelligence agencies rather than the court had ordered the taps, Major Hijaz said a "specialized prosecutor" had been involved. Earlier, the court had said that the GID officer concerned was simultaneously a prosecutor of the State Security Court.

### **Inaudible, static-filled tapes**

One would have thought that the material on the tapes were crucial, with damaging content for Shubeilat. When, however, the controversial evidence was finally played to the court days later, what was revealed was ludicrous. Technically, the tapes were so badly disturbed by static at times as to be inaudible. Defense objections that they could have been doctored, cut or spliced were brushed aside with the explanation, were it so, then the expert Khaled Maqdadi, a sound technician from Radio Jordan, would have said so.

The tapes included "proof" such as the following: Qarrash and Shubeilat discuss which would attend a meeting in

Libya. Qarrash wants to go, as "deputy secretary general"—of what, is not said. Or: Qarrash speaks to someone named Khaled and says, "Laith is working in Jordan—me and Laith, but Laith is essential"—to what, is not said. And: "Laith has information" and "All information is with Laith." Another tape has a voice of Shubeilat swearing against the Parliament, after he had left the body in protest over a political matter. This tape was to substantiate charges of slander against the Parliament. In another bugged phone conversation, Shubeilat is heard objecting to statements made by Mr. Chalabi (former banker, now Iraqi opposition figure); Shubeilat's position is in defense of Iraq and Jordan. This tape was supposed to substantiate charges that Shubeilat had undermined relations between the two countries.

The most revealing statements on the tapes are those taken from public speeches attributed to Shubeilat. Talking on May 12, 1992 to the University of Jordan Alumni Club, he is quoted as criticizing "the new world order and the Arab regimes which endorse it." He attacks the West, especially the United States, for "exploiting the resources" of the Third World. "Our leaders will not be part of the new world order, if there was pressure from the people," he is heard saying. "Our leaders monitor all those who oppose the new world order." Furthermore, he says, "Everybody who remains silent over this new world order is a partner in the crime."

The possibilities are two: Either the statements are not those of the defendant or, if they are, they constitute no crime.

The final piece of material evidence presented by the somewhat shaky prosecution was a photo album. This was to prove the charge against Shubeilat that he slandered His Majesty the King. The photo is of a destroyed house, with a well-known quote of the king, regarding "building the nation." It is signed by "Sami Al Ajrab," but the court's handwriting expert testified it was in Shubeilat's script. The expert said he had not tried to find the person, since the handwriting elsewhere in the album was all Shubeilat's. The expert made one further, very revealing statement. He said, "If I like a poem, I would write it down and write the name of the poet." In other words, if the handwriting were the defendant's, it was a quote made by a person from the Jordan Valley, whose name is penned underneath. The person, according to earlier statements by Shubeilat, was a citizen from the Jordan Valley who was thus lodging a protest.

Again, regarding the evidence, it either does not belong to the defendant or, if it does, constitutes no crime.

The prosecution takes up its case on Oct. 18, after which the defense may have a chance to present witnesses and evidence. Shortly thereafter, the case will be wrapped up. Convictions are expected for all, especially Shubeilat, the main target of the operation. What will happen thereafter is an open question, one which is occupying the minds of the politically excitable Jordanian elite. Will His Majesty the King intervene, to declare a pardon? If so, the magnanimity of the reigning monarch would again be celebrated.