

Shubeilat or IMF on trial in Jordan?

by Our Special Correspondent

Jordan was rocked at the beginning of December 1995 by several events which augur ill not only for democracy in the kingdom, but for stability in the entire, strategically crucial region. On Dec. 9, a former member of Parliament, independent Islamist Laith Shubeilat, was arrested, on charges of *lèse majesté* and undermining the stability of the national economy and currency. The charges stem, reportedly, from public remarks made by the Islamist, critical of the policy of the government.

The arrest comes as the climax of a series of attacks and counterattacks, which has pitted the government and Crown, on the one side, against the opposition, and its symbolic leader, Shubeilat, on the other. The opposition has charged that the normalization process with Israel should not proceed so fast, or at all, and that economic conditions have worsened, not improved, since a peace treaty was signed with Israel in 1994. The opposition has blocked normalization, through its control over the powerful professional associations, or unions, and has found echoes to its position in the press. As King Hussein charged in a speech to the military establishment on Nov. 9, the Amman summit on economic development had not been supported adequately inside Jordan. The unions boycotted the summit, and several forbade members to have contacts with Israelis. The response of the king, in his address, was to propose revised laws, to curb political activity by the unions, and to limit freedom of the press.

The arrest of Shubeilat was meant to decapitate the opposition. It came just days after the Islamist opposition swept elections in the Engineers' Union, and as public opinion polls reported a majority of the population opposed to the peace treaty with Israel. Thus far, almost all the professional associations, including the Engineers' Union of which Shubeilat is president, have rallied to his defense, as have numerous public figures, calling for his immediate release. In addition to their protest against the charges brought against Shubeilat, which the accused has sworn he is innocent of, his supporters are charging that the arrest was carried out in unlawful fashion, and that members of his family placed under undue pressure. His wife, Rima, has not been allowed to visit him in his unheated isolation cell.

What will be on trial is not just Shubeilat the person, or the opposition to the peace process. Rather, the real issue is economic policy. If one disregards the factor of ideological dogmatism, the main reason for popular opposition to the

peace process, lies in the fact that the expected "peace dividend," in terms of a brighter economic perspective, has not materialized. The question that is being raised in the Shubeilat case is: Will Jordan and the entire region be offered up for looting by the vultures of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, as current trends would indicate, or will it be allowed a future of real economic growth?

The crime Shubeilat committed, was to utter some uncomfortable truths about the reality of IMF schemes which have been cynically imposed in the name of peace.

In remarks to the press shortly before his arrest, Shubeilat said that the unions were being threatened with political curbs, because they "have been leading the struggle of the professionals, and the masses behind them, to protest the low living standard, rise of prices, collapse of wages and the handing of the professionals to foreign investors and Zionists as cheap labor." He singled out the Middle East and North African economic conference held in Amman in late October, as the occasion on which the IMF-World Bank looting approach was heralded. Shubeilat said, "In the Amman conference, foreign investors celebrated this 'economic feast' and the victory of the slogan, 'profit is the absolute value,' while every other concept of development which has become coupled with the term 'social development,' a nice name which they mention to the unions, falls apart around that slogan. They do this in order to prevent anyone from stopping their looting the country. If the State truly says that the political conflict is gone and the means of conflict now is economic, then the unions must have a political representation, because they are the people's biggest partner and the most targeted by the conservatives, market economy capital and the International Monetary Fund."

Shubeilat had been arrested in 1992 and charged with conspiracy to overthrow the government. Though swiftly tried by a security court, convicted and given a death sentence, later commuted to 20 years' hard labor, Shubeilat was, in the end, pardoned by the king. This time, the situation is very different. Shubeilat in 1992 was a maverick parliamentarian who was respected by a multitude, but defended by very few. Today, he is the president of the most powerful of the nation's professional associations, which are far more influential than the political parties. All have rallied to his defense. Then, the charges against him were obviously contrived; the farce was organized to teach him a lesson. Today, whether the prosecution realizes it or not, it has raised life-or-death issues of economic policy, in the charges it has brought against Shubeilat: He is being accused of undermining the stability of the national economy, when in point of fact, it is the IMF policies, rammed through the Parliament, which have produced that effect. If open debate on these vital questions can not be guaranteed by the democratic structures restored by King Hussein in 1989, there will not be much of a perspective for peace, regardless of the treaties signed, sealed, and delivered.