

Shubeilat release marks Jordanian policy turn

On Nov. 8, His Majesty King Hussein of Jordan undertook a mission which few reigning monarchs would consider appropriate to their station: he travelled personally to prison, and threw open the jail gates, to let free a prisoner who had been held there nearly one year. Welcoming the newly freed man into his automobile, the king drove with him, first to his mother's home, for a short visit, and then, to the country's capital, Amman, to the prisoner's home. The action by the king signals a shift in Jordanian policy vis-à-vis Israel.

The prisoner who received such special treatment at the hand of the king, is Laith Shubeilat, formerly a member of Parliament and reputedly the second most popular person in the kingdom—after the king. Shubeilat, an independent Islamist, who had been elected to parliament by an unprecedented margin in his electoral district in Amman, had emerged in the early 1990s as the charismatic leader of the opposition. Shubeilat was a leading figure in the protest which swept Jordan, against George Bush's aggression against Iraq, in late 1990-91. In 1991, Shubeilat became acquainted with the ideas of the Schiller Institute, and studied the writings on the science of physical economy, by Lyndon LaRouche. In public fora and in the press, Shubeilat contributed to spreading the ideas of LaRouche among the Jordanian intelligentsia, and, around them, shaped an informal movement throughout the country, against the genocidal policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. At the same time, he used his position as a parliamentary committee leader, to launch probes into allegations of political corruption in government circles, reaching up to the very top.

It was in response to these initiatives, which found broad-based support in the population, that Shubeilat was set up the first time for political persecution. Accused, along with three others, of plotting to overthrow the kingdom by armed insurrection, in order to set up an Iranian-style regime, Shubeilat was the protagonist of the most controversial trial in Jordan's recent history. This was in September 1992. Evidence was fabricated by the powerful military intelligence, weapons were "found" in his automobile, and so forth. The high point of the frame-up occurred when a "secret witness" was brought in to testify, that he had personally been the courier, who transferred 200,000 German marks (\$125,000) from the masterminds of the insurrection, the leadership of the Iranian government in Teheran, to the Islamist leader in Amman. The

witness was brought into the military court in disguise, and was identified only as "a Syrian businessman," whose identity had to be protected from possible reprisals.

As the same "secret witness" later penned in an official affidavit filed with a Munich lawyer, he was actually a German citizen of Arab descent, who had been, he said, kidnapped by the Jordanian security services and forced to bear false testimony. The affidavit was made available to the Schiller Institute, which had been engaged in an international campaign for Shubeilat's release. Once the details of the entire affair had been made public, and distributed throughout the judicial and political institutions inside Jordan, the political frame-up was exposed. Shubeilat was sentenced to death initially, but under the weight of the scandal around the mysterious Mr. Shakarshi, as the "secret witness" was called, the sentence was commuted to 20 years hard labor.

It was largely as a result of an international mobilization launched by the Schiller Institute, that Shubeilat was freed on Nov. 14, 1992, following a pardon issued by the king. The royal decree wiped off the record not only all the charges against Shubeilat, but also, the charges he had been formulating in his anti-corruption probe. The "files" were closed.

Flaws in the economic approach to peace

Although his popularity had increased during the saga of his outrageous frame-up and incarceration, Shubeilat refused to enter the race for parliament in elections held in 1993, in protest against changes in the electoral law, which privileged candidates with tribal affiliations over political parties. With the signing of the Oslo peace agreement between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel, in November 1993, followed, a year later, by the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel, Shubeilat again spearheaded an opposition movement. Although his rejection of the peace accord was ideologically shaped by his commitment to restoration of all Palestinian lands conquered by Israel, Shubeilat's polemic was no mere posturing. He correctly identified the flaws in the economic approach to peace, which had been hijacked by the World Bank and IMF.

Under the rubric of the peace process and "normalization," the Jordanian government acquiesced throughout the last year to IMF dictates, to drastically revise banking, tariff, fiscal, and industrial legislation, de facto turning over economic and financial policy to the supernational body. Changes imposed on Jordan included lifting protective tariffs, opening state industry to privatization and foreign ownership, eliminating state subsidies on basic consumer goods, revamping financial institutions to facilitate speculation, and abolishing barriers to foreign control of land. Shubeilat, as president of the Jordanian Engineers Association, was able to mobilize the 35,000-membership group to boycott the measures. Despite government assurances that the economic agreements contained in the political treaty with Israel would provide a hand-

some peace dividend, nothing of the sort was forthcoming. Even in the wake of an ambitious effort, mobilized by Jordanian business and government, in November 1995, to organize economic projects through the Middle East North Africa (MENA) economic summit, little more than promises came out.

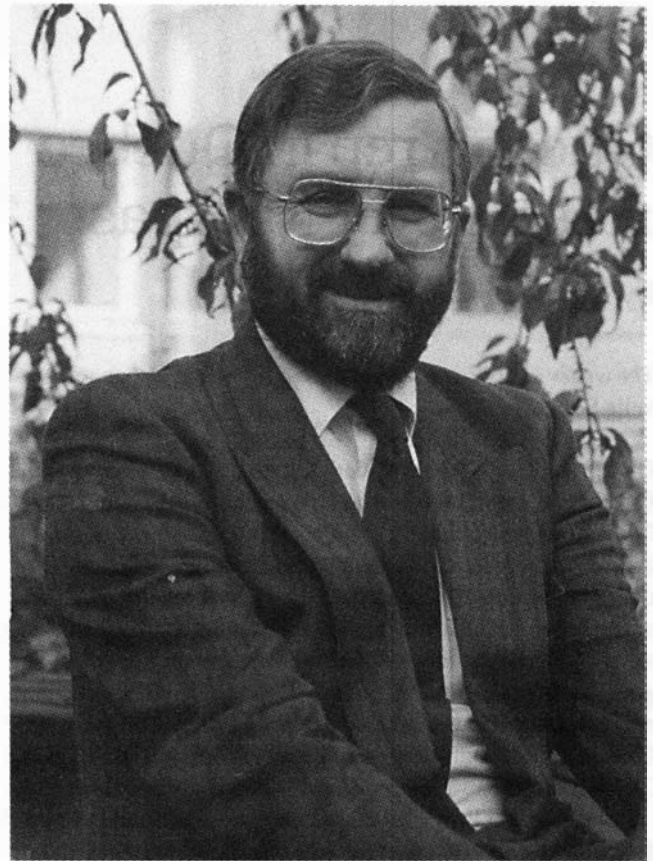
Just following the MENA summit, which was quickly overshadowed by the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on Nov. 4, 1995, Shubeilat delivered a speech in Irbid, Jordan, which was to land him in jail again. This time the charges were *lèse-majesté*, inciting civil conflict, and undermining the reputation of the national economy. In his speech, Shubeilat charged that the leadership of the country, from the Crown to the government and parliament, were pursuing policies which would lead to ruin. Reiterating his criticism of the “normalization” process, Shubeilat stressed the deleterious effects of the IMF-dictated structural reform policy, which, he predicted, would lead even to the lifting of protective subsidies for bread. Shubeilat said, that were bread prices and those of other basic goods to rise dramatically, there would be a repetition of the bread riots that had convulsed the country in 1989. Shubeilat also criticized the policy toward Iraq, which had taken shape since August that year, when high-ranking Iraqi defectors were given asylum in Amman, and Jordan moved closer to cooperation in anti-Iraqi military maneuvers.

Shubeilat was arrested on Dec. 9, 1995. The charges were *lèse-majesté*; circulating leaflets offensive to the king and queen; damaging confidence in the state currency; and, provoking sectarian and ethnic differences, and upsetting the cohesion of elements of the nation. His home and office were illegally searched, he was confined to an unheated cell without a bed, and denied all access to family or legal defense. Only one day prior to the opening of his trial on Jan. 10, was he allowed to confer with his lawyer—but to little avail, as every elementary right to defense was systematically violated in the trial. The outcome was a foregone conclusion: Shubeilat was convicted and sentenced to three years in prison, solely on the basis of the charge of *lèse-majesté*.

As if to underline the point, that it was going for all-out confrontation with any and all opposition, the government went through a radical reshuffle on Feb. 5, as Shubeilat’s trial was heading for its conclusion. The new cabinet, headed up by Prime Minister Abdul Karim Al Kabariti, was composed of persons known for their hostility to the opposition, their active participation in the “normalization” process, and their strong tribal affiliations, which meant their unquestioned loyalty to the king, in squelching criticism.

Two developments intervene

Two developments, which Shubeilat had forecast and the establishment had ignored, intervened to abruptly alter the scenario. First, the Israeli elections in the spring put into



Political prisoner Laith Shubeilat, a former parliamentarian, was freed by King Hussein personally.

power a government bent on violating every paragraph of the peace treaties signed by the Labor government; and, the final decision by the Jordanian government to lift subsidies of bread prices, led to massive riots in August 1996, which threatened to ignite civil conflict. In a short time, all the assumptions on which the Jordanian elite had been defining policy, were gone: There was no peace partner in Tel Aviv, and there was no means, not even military might, which would force a downtrodden population to accept the consequences of IMF economic dictatorship. By autumn, as relations between Netanyahu and the Palestinian Authority degenerated, the tide of opinion throughout the Arab world turned against “normalization” with *this* partner. It was no longer only Shubeilat, but Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and other staunch advocates of peace, who were convening summits and serving ultimatums to the wild-eyed extremists in Tel Aviv.

In this context, it is no wonder that King Hussein should have recognized the wisdom of liberating Laith Shubeilat. On Nov. 19, in his address to the opening session of Parliament, the king is expected to issue directives for significant changes, which may include a new government and a revised electoral law.