

Shubeilat arrest targets Jordan, threatens Middle East

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Laith Shubeilat, the independent Islamist opposition figure in Jordan, has been arrested and imprisoned for the third time in six years. As was the case in his prior terms of detention in 1992 and 1995, this time, too, the event is a political barometer of the turbulence engulfing the Hashemite Kingdom. It is the leading edge of a process threatening to destabilize the country and the region.

The facts of the case

Shubeilat was arrested on Feb. 20, after having delivered a Friday sermon at a mosque in the city of Ma'an, south of Amman. Following his arrest on his way home, about 100 persons staged a demonstration, in defense of Iraq, which at the time was under the threat of an international military strike. During the unauthorized demonstration, security forces fired tear gas into the crowd, and one man was killed. The death ignited further protests in the days following, and the city was put under a virtual state of siege for a week. Many demonstrators were arrested, later to be released.

Shubeilat, who was not part of the demonstration, was arrested, reportedly on grounds that he had been the cause of the protest action. He was jailed in the Juweideh prison in Amman (as on previous occasions), and has been held there since. He has had access only to his lawyers, and has received one visit from his son. His wife and other visitors are not allowed to see him. He is being held with violent criminals, assassins, and rapists, and is forbidden to exchange words with any prisoners.

As of this writing (March 17), he has not been served any formal charges. It is expected that he will be accused of incitement to riot or insurrection, and tried before a military tribunal, which may threaten him with a prison term of three to five years.

The background

In the weeks leading up to the incident, the Jordanian political climate was seething with rage, at the likely prospect that neighboring Iraq would be again the target of a military strike, orchestrated by the British, who intended it to be carried out by the United States. On Feb. 6, a demonstration in support of Iraq had been planned in Amman, but was postponed one week, during which time Prime Minister Majali's government issued a ban on any and all demonstrations, regardless of the issue. The ban was respected. Only in Ma'an, where Shubeilat was explicitly invited to speak, did demonstrations break out. It is highly likely that the well-known opposition figure was deliberately lured to the area, as part of a set-up to have him arrested. Ma'an, it should be added, is a center of tribal support for King Hussein; thus, the outbreak of violence was interpreted as a challenge to the authority of the King, who personally visited the area, in an attempt to quiet it down.

Why Shubeilat? Most immediately, it was Shubeilat who had led the political opposition to military action against Iraq, insinuating that Jordan would be not only passive in such an event, but actually part of the operation. Shubeilat, in addition, had just prior to the escalation of tensions, visited the Iraqi capital. There he had been received by Saddam Hussein, and had very expeditiously arranged with the Iraqi President, the release of almost 100 Jordanians, who were being held in Iraqi jails on charges of black-market smuggling. Shubeilat had accompanied the freed Jordanians back to Amman, and been greeted like a hero. The government had been negotiating long and hard—and unsuccessfully—with Baghdad for their release; Shubeilat arranged the deal in the blink of an eye. It must be stressed that it was no mean feat; earlier, a group of Jordanian businessmen caught dealing on the black

market in Iraq had been convicted and executed, despite the protests of the government.

The message which the spectacular operation sent back to Amman—and throughout the Arab world—was that this maverick opposition figure could negotiate more effectively for Jordan than its official government representatives. It also, of course, acknowledged gratitude for everything Shubeilat had done, in defense of the Iraqi cause.

More complex factors

Yet, helping to free Jordanian citizens could scarcely be construed as a crime, to be punished through arrest and detention. There are other, more complex factors which must be considered, to put the puzzle together.

Shubeilat's arrest did not occur in a vacuum, but in the immediate context of the Iraq crisis, and more broadly in the final gasps of the Middle East peace process. Since the ascension to power of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in June 1996, every paragraph of the Oslo Accords of

1993 has been systematically violated, and the entire treaty with the Palestinians ripped to shreds. Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat himself has lamented that the process "is almost breathing its last." In Jordan, which signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, the population has seen its hopes for a "peace dividend" dashed, as no economic progress has been forthcoming. None of the promised projects has been realized, and instead of prosperity, the Jordanian population (itself 60% Palestinian) has experienced only rising inflation and dwindling income. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has been directing Jordanian economic policy for years, has ravaged the country's standard of living, while the continuing sanctions against Iraq—which was Jordan's number-one trading partner—have further undermined the largely trade-based economy.

The leading voice raised against these policies, both the "normalization" with an Israel dedicated to expanding settlements, confiscating Palestinian land, provoking violence, and trampling on peace accords, and the continuing austerity of

Who is Laith Shubeilat?

Laith Shubeilat is a 54-year-old Jordanian, from a prominent political family. His father was close to the King, serving as a minister as well as an ambassador for several years. Laith Shubeilat entered Parliament as an independent Islamist in 1989, when democracy was reintroduced in Jordan. He was elected by an overwhelming mandate, from voters in the Third District of Amman. His was the highest total for any single candidate, which made him the most popular personality in the country, outside the royal family.

In 1992, Shubeilat was arrested and charged with plotting the overthrow of the monarchy. He was accused of belonging to a group called Shabab al Nafeer (the Vanguard of Islamic Youth). After a railroad trial before a security court, which involved testimony by phony witnesses, he was convicted, and sentenced to 20 years of hard labor. Later, he was freed under the terms of a general amnesty granted by the King.

Shubeilat refused to run for reelection in 1993, in protest against the change in electoral laws, which he denounced as a blow to Jordan's democratic system. After thus leaving a political career, Shubeilat was elected president of the Jordanian Engineers Association (JEA), the most powerful of the dozen or so professional unions. From that position, he has become the de facto leader of the opposition to "normalization" with Israel.

Shubeilat has campaigned in Jordan, and throughout the Arab and Islamic world, against the policies of the International Monetary Fund, and for a new, just world economic order. Although he differs with Lyndon LaRouche on Middle East policy, Shubeilat campaigned for LaRouche's liberation and exoneration, organizing broad support throughout the Muslim intelligentsia; he spoke on LaRouche's exoneration at a seminar in Washington, D.C. in April 1997. Shubeilat has also been active in efforts to forge an ecumenical alliance



Laith Shubeilat

of the monotheistic religious traditions, on the basis of a commitment to the principle, that all men are created in the image of God the Creator. He has lectured widely throughout the world, and has authored numerous articles and essays.

Friends of Shubeilat worldwide are demanding his release through calls to the Jordanian embassies.

the IMF, was that of Shubeilat. In fact, the former member of parliament had been arrested in 1995 on charges of lèse-majesté and undermining the stability of the national economy and currency. The basis for these rather unusual charges, was his having spoken out publicly, in his capacity as chairman of the powerful Jordanian Engineers' Association (JEA), against the IMF measures being pushed through at the time, including privatization of state-controlled industries. Shubeilat challenged the government's attempts to muzzle the professional unions, which represent upwards of 35,000 professionals—lawyers, doctors, engineers, and so on. The unions, especially the JEA under his leadership, had assumed the role of a political movement, which, Shubeilat said, had 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 as cheap labor.”

A fight for economic development

Shubeilat also attacked the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) summit held in Amman in November 1995. The economic gathering, which included Israel for the first time, was supposed to be the forum for economic projects which would give substance to the peace agreements. Instead, the conference signalled the apotheosis of free market economic

theories for the region. “At the Amman summit,” Shubeilat charged, “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 been 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 identified the IMF's demands for lifting subsidies on basic foodstuffs as particularly dangerous, and cautioned that food riots could be provoked by such a move.

While a prisoner in 1996, Shubeilat ran for reelection as president of the JEA and in February won a mandate of 81%, which testified to his extraordinary popularity as *the* opposition leader. In June, when the Israeli elections placed Netanyahu in power, the immediate deterioration of the political atmosphere seemed to confirm everything Shubeilat had warned against. In August, the Jordanian government lifted subsidies on bread prices and—precisely as Shubeilat had warned—riots broke out. In November, the King himself travelled to Shubeilat's prison to free him, in a gesture widely interpreted as the beginning of a shift in Jordanian economic and foreign policy.

By 1998, the situation Shubeilat had denounced two years earlier, had worsened. Now, there was the threat of renewed aggression against Iraq, which would create a far more serious crisis than during Desert Storm, both economically and politically. Now, there could be no illusions about a peace with Netanyahu. Thus, the set-up in Ma'an and the arrest.

A further complicating factor in the deteriorating situation in Jordan, is uncertainty regarding the health of the King, who has been travelling frequently abroad for medical treatment. Although it has been formally established that his brother Crown Prince Hassan is to be his successor, there are persistent rumors of a power-struggle which has broken out in the royal family and its entourage.

By keeping Shubeilat, the charismatic leader of the opposition, in prison, the Majali government is desperately trying to keep the lid on a rapidly boiling pot. But, the more tightly it closes the lid, the more powerful the explosion will be. Any further aggravation in tensions between Israel and the Palestinians, is sure to ignite an explosion, in the West Bank, Gaza, and also Jordan. If fullscale conflict erupts there is the danger that the infamous “Sharon Plan” would be implemented, whereby the Palestinians in the West Bank would be forcibly expelled into Jordan, and Jordan would become “Palestine.” The entire region would go up in flames. The most sensible move to make now, before it is too late, would be to free Shubeilat.

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