



SEPARATING ISLAM FROM POLITICS BUT NOT THE STATE: IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY IN JORDAN

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“Separating Islam from Politics but Not the State: Implications for Religious Authority in Jordan”

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Introduction

On October 16, 2016, Jordan's King Abdullah II released a discussion paper outlining his vision to strengthen the nation as a "civil state," or what he termed a state "that is governed by a constitution and laws that apply to all citizens without exception."¹ Acknowledging controversy over the term in the Muslim world, King Abdullah was careful to note that his vision "was not synonymous with a secular state," because "in a civil state, religion is a key contributor to the value system and [...] religion is also enshrined in our constitution." Yet the king also warned that "we will not allow anyone to manipulate religion to serve political interests or gains for a specific faction."

This vision reflects a common strategy in the region. In the face of opposition challenges by Islamist political parties and armed groups, most governments in the Arab world attempt to fold religion into state institutions while draining it from the realm of political contestation so that it does not serve as an effective rallying cry for mobilization against the regime.² How effective has this strategy been in Jordan? Does the public generally trust the authority of state religious figures and institutions, or are Jordanians more likely to trust opposition-inclined Islamist actors in matters of religion? And how do these perceptions of authority align with the public's preferences over the role of religion in politics and the state? To answer these questions, this report draws on survey data about religious authority in Jordan, collected by YouGov in conjunction with Rice University's Baker Institute of Public Policy in December 2017. It also relies on survey data from the Arab Barometer,³ as well as interviews conducted by the author in Amman in the spring of 2018. The findings indicate that state religious leaders in Jordan exercise relatively greater religious authority than prominent Islamists of various ideological leanings, though the data also suggests that this advantage is fragile. Reflecting the vision outlined by King Abdullah, these authority patterns appear to be rooted in a public consensus that religion should play an important role in the public sphere, but not as a tool of partisan politics.

This report first outlines the religious sphere in Jordan, before discussing the survey results comparing the authority of religious actors in the country. These results are interpreted in the context of the public's attitudes toward the role of religion in politics and the state. The report then discusses the implications of these findings for recent developments in Jordanian politics. Specifically, it focuses on the opportunities and challenges associated with the government's use of state religious leaders to bolster public support for its policies, and the manner in which Jordan's Islamist movement has increasingly downplayed its religious character in recent years.

¹ Abdullah II ibn Al Hussein, "Rule of Law and Civil State," October 16, 2016, <https://kingabdullah.jo/en/discussion-papers/rule-law-and-civil-state>.

² Nathan Brown, 2017, "Official Islam in the Arab World: The Contest for Religious Authority," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

³ Arab Barometer Surveys, <http://www.arabbarometer.org/>. Waves 2, 3, and 4 from Jordan are used in this report.

Mapping Jordan's Religious Sphere

The Jordanian state has long incorporated an official role for Islam. The Hashemites relied on their status as descendants of the prophet to legitimize their early rule in Jordan,⁴ and religious institutions have likewise been part of the state since this time. The Dar al-Ifta was founded to regulate and guide religious life in 1921, and sharia courts were given jurisdiction over personal status as part of the Basic Law issued in 1928.⁵ This role was then preserved in the 1952 constitution. The sharia courts are headed by the Department of the Chief Islamic Justice, and the Dar al-Ifta is overseen by the grand mufti. In addition to these two institutions, the state religious sphere is also influenced heavily by the Ministry of Awqaf, which is led by a minister and is responsible for supervising the country's mosques.

As part of King Hussein's feud with Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s, the monarchy also developed an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, allowing them to operate openly in the kingdom as a counterweight to anti-regime agitation by pan-Arab nationalists and communists. Over several decades, the Muslim Brotherhood used this privileged status to build an extensive network of social organizations, including the highly active Islamic Center Charity Society (ICCS), the Islamic Hospital in Amman, the Islamic Bani Hassan Welfare Center, and many others, through which the Brotherhood distributed charity and public goods.⁶ The movement also acquired significant influence within the Ministry of Awqaf and the Ministry of Education, allowing it to secure positions for sympathetic preachers and spread its message through the school system.⁷

This relationship began to fracture in the 1980s as the Muslim Brotherhood became more politically active and adopted an increasingly opposition-oriented posture. Approximately one-fourth of candidates elected to parliament in 1989 were affiliated with the organization, making it the most powerful bloc in the legislature. In 1992, several Brotherhood leaders founded the Islamic Action Front (IAF) to serve as the movement's political arm. As King Hussein maneuvered Jordan toward a peace treaty with Israel in this period, the IAF led opposition to the treaty, attempting to block its adoption and then continuing to resist normalization between the two countries after the treaty passed. This greater political engagement weakened the Brotherhood's relationship with the regime, which responded by increasingly restricting its ability to mobilize. The Jordanian security agencies intensified surveillance of mosques and began to ban preachers who spoke about political topics,⁸ while also subjecting the movement's leaders and their families to frequent

⁴ Ibrahim Gharaibeh, 2009, "A Reading into the Relationship between Religion and the Jordanian State's Constitution and Legislation," in *Religion and the Jordanian State's Constitution and Legislation* (Amman, Jordan: Al-Quds Center for Policy Studies).

⁵ Mohammad Abu Rumman and Hassan Abu Hanieh, 2017, *The "Islamic Solution" in Jordan: Islamists, the State, and the Ventures of Democracy and Security* (Amman, Jordan: The Center for Strategic Studies and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung).

⁶ Dietrich Jung, Marie Juul Petersen, and Sara Lei Sparre, 2014, *Politics of Modern Muslim Subjectivities* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan).

⁷ Daniel Atzori, 2015, *Islamism and Globalization in Jordan: The Muslim Brotherhood's Quest for Hegemony* (New York: Routledge).

⁸ Nachman Tal, 2005, *Radical Islam in Egypt and Jordan* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press).

monitoring and harassment.⁹ The election law was deliberately changed in 1993 to weaken political parties and encourage tribal voting, which reduced the IAF's representation in the next parliament. In 2006, the government seized the ICCS from the Brotherhood, installing its own leadership to limit the Islamists' influence.

The regime also responded to the Islamists' growing power by strengthening the state's Islamic institutions. The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute was established in 1980 to serve as a semi-official center of Islamic scholarship, and the Advisory Council for Fatwas was created within Dar al-Ifta in 1984 for the purpose of issuing official fatwas.¹⁰ The government also began to invest more heavily in the construction of mosques, and Dar al-Ifta started to issue fatwas at a much greater pace.¹¹

The monarchy involved itself closely in this process through the propagation of the Amman Message in 2004. Released by the king on the eve of Ramadan in that year, the message was intended to tie the Jordanian state to a global consensus among prominent Islamic scholars on key questions such as who can be considered a Muslim, who can issue fatwas, and whether it is permissible to declare someone an apostate. Following its release, the king personally hosted a conference involving more than 200 Islamic scholars from around the world to refine and endorse the message, which was eventually adopted by several international Islamic assemblies and hundreds of additional scholars. The monarchy and state religious leaders continue to emphasize the message and its focus on tolerance and moderation as a defining component of religion in Jordan.¹²

Nevertheless, the country has featured a relatively small but influential Salafi movement for decades. Traditionalist Salafis have even received support from the government, which has tried to use them to undermine the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood.¹³ Salafi jihadis exert a meaningful presence as well. Al-Qaeda launched a large-scale attack within Jordan in 2005, and public support for ISIS appeared to be fairly high until the organization burned a Jordanian air force pilot alive in 2015. In per capita terms, Jordan has sent more foreign fighters to ISIS than any other Arab country except Tunisia,¹⁴ and several small-scale terrorist attacks have occurred within the country in recent years. This violence seems to be uncoordinated and disorganized, and it is likely carried out by relatively weak local cells.

⁹ Author interview with former Islamist activist, April 2018.

¹⁰ Michael Robbins and Lawrence Rubin, 2013, "The Rise of Official Islam in Jordan," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 14, no. 1 (February): 59-74.

¹¹ Robbins and Rubin, "The Rise of Official Islam," 2013.

¹² Michaelle Bowers, 2011, "Official Islam and the Limits of Communicative Action: the paradox of the Amman Message." *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 5: 943-948.

¹³ Abu Rumman and Abu Hanieh, *The "Islamic Solution,"* 2017.

¹⁴ Efraim Benmelech and Esteban F. Klor, 2016, "What Explains the Flow of Foreign Fighters to ISIS?" *NBER Working Papers*, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w22190.pdf>.

Who Wields Religious Authority in Jordan?

In order to examine the nature of religious authority and attitudes toward religious and religiously oriented leaders in the Middle East, the author and a team of researchers worked with the global polling firm YouGov to conduct an online public opinion survey in 12 countries across the region in December 2017. As an online survey, the YouGov sample is not representative at the national level: the respondents are disproportionately male, educated, and urban. However, the survey is representative in regard to various indicators of religiosity, which is one of the most important characteristics in our study of religious authority, in addition to indicators such as employment and marital status. For a discussion of the demographics of the survey sample and the advantages and disadvantages associated with this sample, see the Survey Appendix (<http://bit.ly/2TNDpdP>). This report presents the findings from the survey data collected from Jordan, which included 673 respondents.

These respondents' views of religious authority were probed by asking them to rate the authority of national and international religious leaders—identified by the authors for their leadership positions in important religious institutions and organizations. Specifically, respondents were asked to rate their trust in the religious authority of each actor on a 5-point scale, with 5 equal to complete trust and 1 equal to no trust at all. These religious figures were identified as individuals using their full names, but they were also identified by their position in the organization or institution of which they were a part. As a result, these measures aim to speak about both their individual religious authority and the broader religious authority of their institutions.

The survey asked about four Jordanian religious leaders, including one prominent state official and three individuals selected to represent various Islamist tendencies. The state official was the Grand Mufti of Jordan, Mohammad Khaleileh. The mufti in many ways represents official Islam in the country: he heads Dar al-Iftaa and the National Fatwas Committee, holds the rank of minister, is appointed by the King, and is considered to be the most senior official religious figure in the country.¹⁵ For the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammad Zyoud was selected as the secretary general of the IAF at the time the survey was implemented, and he was identified as such in the questions. Next, Sheikh Ali Hasan Al-Halabi was chosen to represent the Salafi movement. As a student of the highly influential Salafi scholar Muhammad Nasir al-Din Al-Albani, he is now considered to be one of the leaders of Jordan's quietist Salafi movement. He has run the Salafi Imam al-Albani Center, which was used as his affiliation in the survey.¹⁶ Finally, Mohamed Al-Shalabi (also known as Abu Sayyaf) was selected to represent the Salafi jihadi current in Jordan. Al-Shalabi had been sentenced to death in 2006 for inciting violent riots in Ma'an in 2002, but he was later

¹⁵ Robbins and Rubin, "The Rise of Official Islam," 2013.

¹⁶ Joas Wagemakers, 2016, *Salafism in Jordan: Political Islam in a Quietist Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Quintan Wiktorowicz, 2000, "The Salafi Movement in Jordan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32: 219-240; Jacob Olidort, 2015, "The Politics of 'Quietist' Salafism," *The Brookings Institution*, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Brookings-Analysis-Paper_Jacob-Olidort-Inside_Final_Web.pdf.

pardoned. When ISIS came to prominence in Syria, Al-Shalabi publicly supported some of their positions while advocating for Jordanian youth to join the movement.¹⁷

In addition to these national figures, the YouGov survey also asked respondents in all countries about the authority of Muslim religious leaders across the Middle East. These international figures included the preacher Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the televangelist Amr Khaled, the Tunisian Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi, the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar Ahmed Al-Tayyeb, the Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah, and the ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

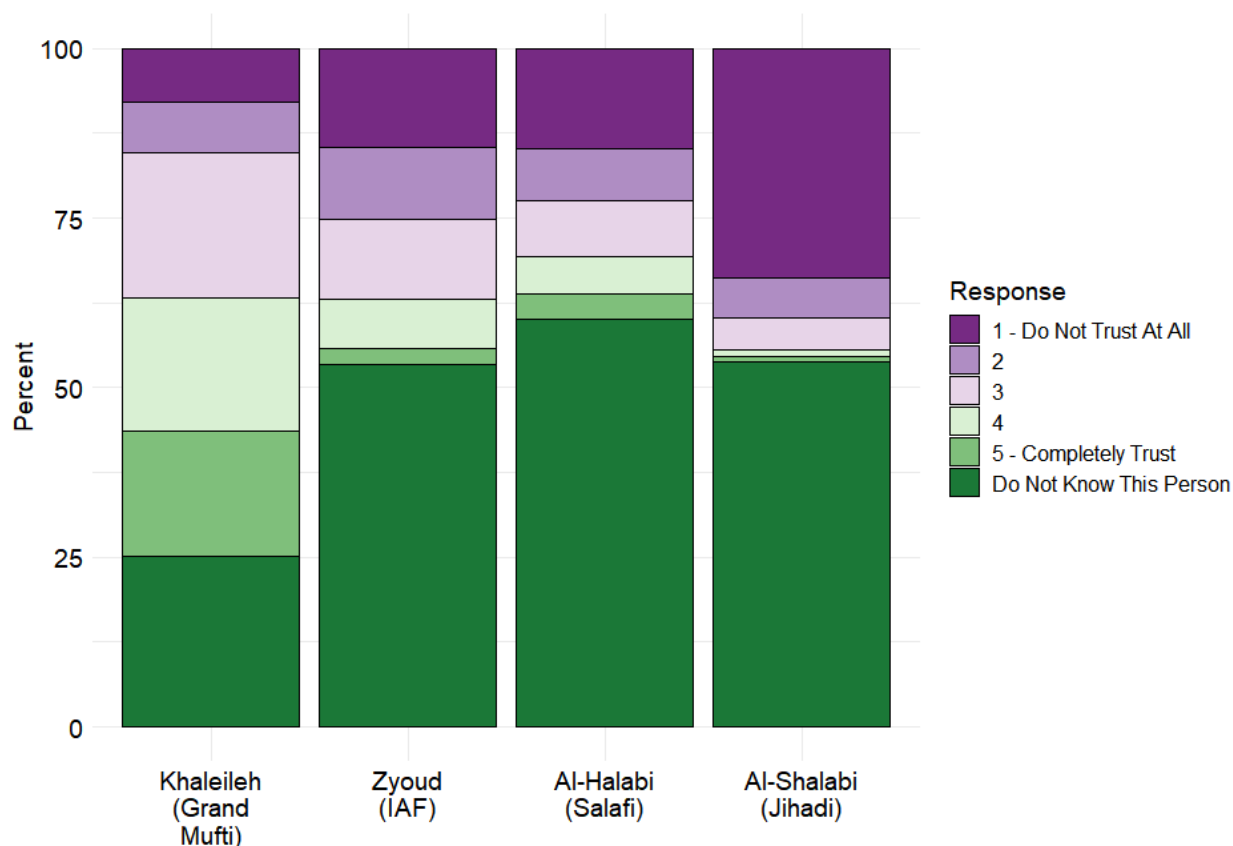
Jordanians' ratings of the domestic religious leaders are displayed in Figure 1. Among these leaders, the results indicate that Islamists are not perceived to be particularly authoritative on religious matters. Only 144 respondents (21 percent) rated their trust in Mohammad Zyoud as 3 or higher, another 117 respondents (17 percent) rated their trust in Ali Hasan Al-Halabi as 3 or higher, and 44 respondents (7 percent) rated their trust in Mohamad Al-Shalabi in this way. For all three of these figures, a majority of respondents chose to answer that they had never heard of them, including 53 percent for Mohammad Zyoud, 60 percent for Ali Hasan Al-Halabi, and 54 percent for Mohamad Al-Shalabi.

The results suggest that the grand mufti holds significantly more authority than any of the Islamists. Approximately 60 percent of respondents rated their trust in the mufti's authority with a 3 or higher on the 5-point scale, while another 25 percent of respondents said they did not know of him and 15 percent rated their trust as only a 1 or 2. These ratings suggest that the mufti has some meaningful capacity to influence the public in terms of religious issues, particularly compared to Islamist leaders, but this authority is also fairly fragile.

On the other hand, some Islamists outside of Jordan were rated relatively highly in terms of their religious authority. In fact, the figure with the highest authority rating by Jordanians in the survey was the Turkish President Erdogan, who is aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood. Approximately 70 percent rated their trust in his religious authority as a 3 or higher on the 5-point scale. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, the prominent preacher who resides in Qatar and is ideologically but not formally aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, also appears to exercise some degree of religious authority in Jordan: 46 percent responded with a 3 or higher. The relatively high authority of these two individuals suggests that Islamists outside the country are better positioned to exercise religious authority than those who participate in the political process inside the country. Another one-third of respondents responded with a 3 or higher when rating their trust in the Egyptian television preacher Amr Khaled, while respondents reported low levels of trust similar to the Jordanian Islamists described above for Rached Ghannouchi in Tunisia, the Grand Mufti of Al-Azhar, Hasan Nasrallah in Lebanon, and the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi.

¹⁷ Osama Al Sharif, 2016, "Jordan and the Challenge of Salafi Jihadists," *Middle East Institute*, March 21, 2016, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/jordan-and-challenge-salafi-jihadists>.

Figure 1. Authority Ratings of Jordanian Religious Leaders



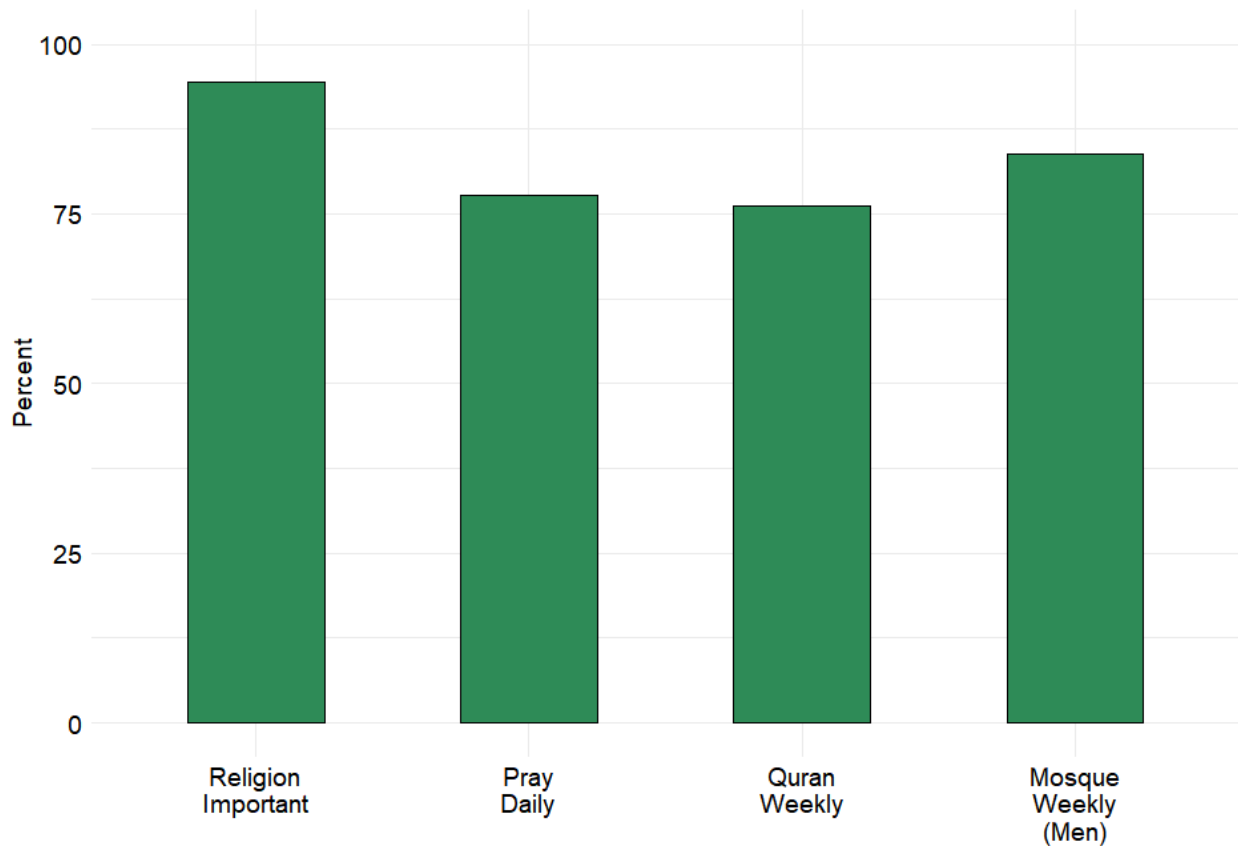
Ultimately, religious leaders may have relatively less reach in Jordanian society than is commonly presumed. When asked if they had ever consulted a religious leader, only 113 of the 673 respondents (17 percent) said they had done so in person or in writing. A large majority of respondents said they either preferred to interpret religion themselves or had never thought of reaching out to a religious leader. Combined with the relatively low levels of trust in Jordanian religious leaders mentioned in the survey, the results point to a fragmented religious scene in which local Islamists are widely distrusted and state leaders are viewed as authorities by a meaningful but not overwhelming part of the population.

Separating Islam from Politics but Not the State

To what extent can these authority patterns be explained by Jordanians' broader attitudes toward religion, politics, and the state? As in many Middle Eastern countries, Jordanians continue to demonstrate high levels of piety in their personal lives. As shown in Figure 2, more than 90 percent of Jordanian respondents in the YouGov survey said that religion was very or somewhat important in their lives. Over 75 percent reported praying daily and listening to or reading the Quran weekly. A similar proportion of male respondents reported attending mosque at least once per week. These patterns are supported by representative survey data collected between 2010 and 2016 in waves 2, 3, and 4 of the Arab

Barometer.¹⁸ In all three waves, approximately 90 percent of Jordanians described themselves as very or somewhat religious, and similar percentages said they always or mostly prayed daily. Approximately 70 percent of Jordanians also reported listening to or reading the Quran frequently across the three survey waves. These results are presented in Figure 3.

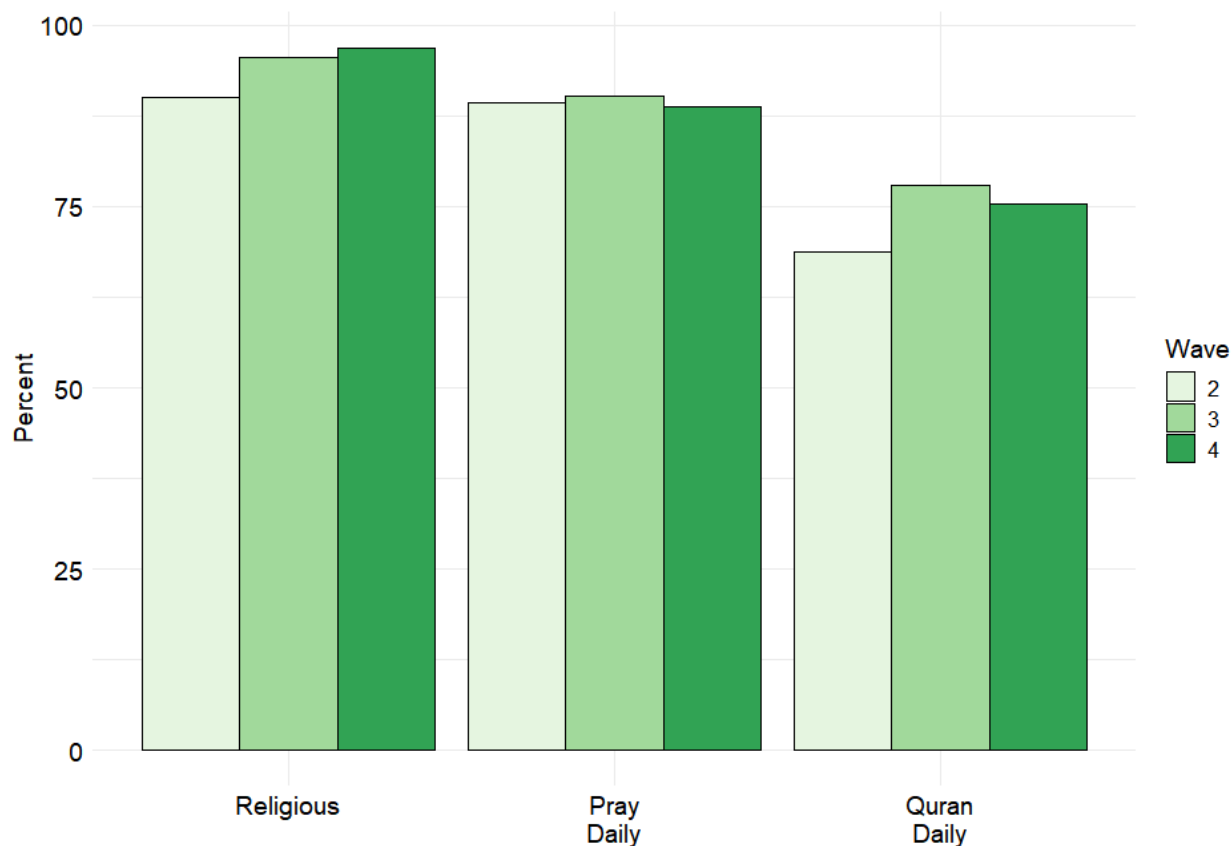
Figure 2. Religiosity of Jordanians – YouGov Survey Data



This personal religiosity is matched by a desire for religion to play a prominent role in the public sphere. As shown in Figure 4, approximately 75 percent of Jordanian respondents in the YouGov survey expressed support for a constitution that emphasizes sharia law in some capacity. This preference aligns with Jordan's existing constitution, which includes a number of provisions related to the country's sharia courts. Data from the Arab Barometer, also shown in Figure 4, again validates these views. In each of the three survey waves, approximately 90 percent of Jordanians expressed support for a legal system that maintains the importance of Islamic law. Consistent with these attitudes, Jordanians' confidence in their judicial system remains high, ranging between 65 and 80 percent across the three survey waves of the barometer.

¹⁸ The Arab Barometer runs repeated survey waves across the Middle East. Most questions are asked in all waves, allowing comparison of responses on nationally representative samples over time.

Figure 3. Religiosity of Jordanians – Arab Barometer Survey Wave Data

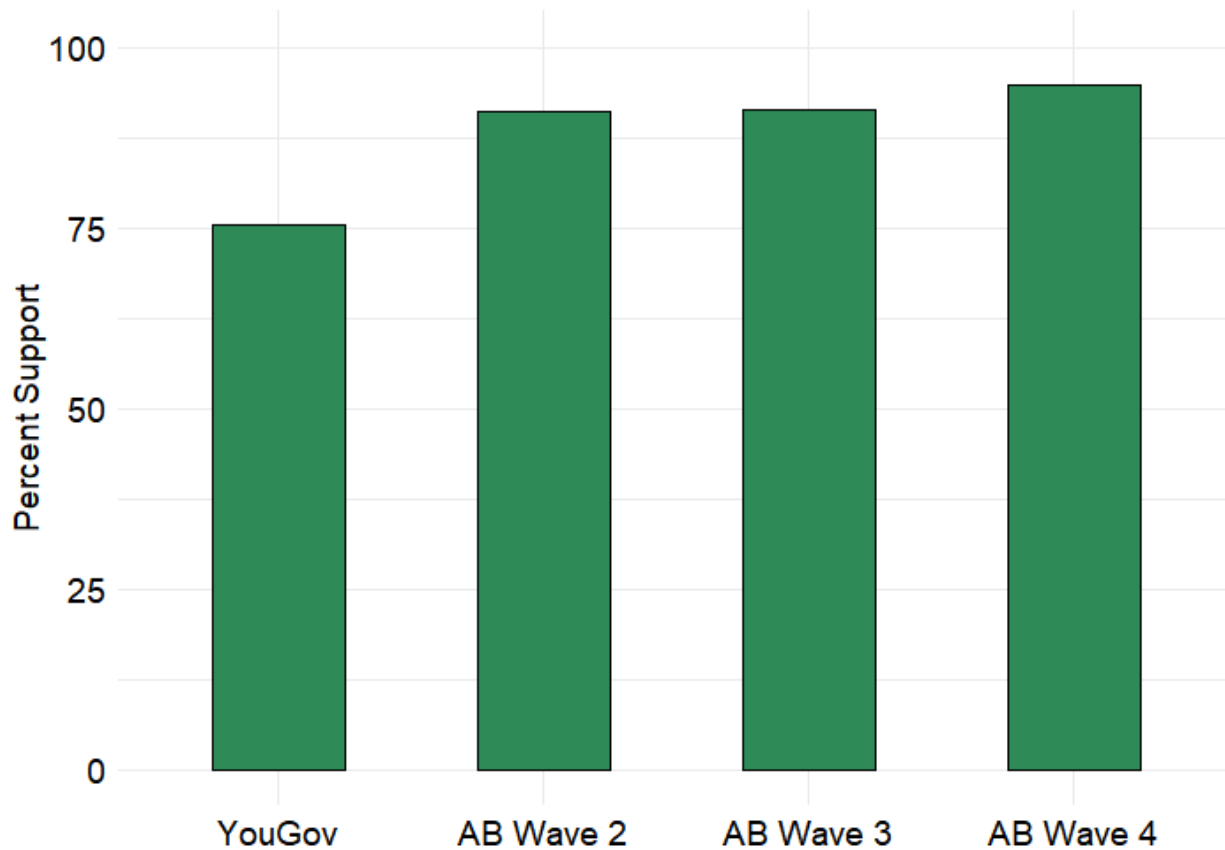


Jordanian respondents also articulated strong support for the Amman Message on a second survey designed by the author and implemented by YouGov in March 2018. The survey takers were told that the message had been issued by the Jordanian government and then endorsed by 200 leading scholars from 50 countries, and they also read a brief description of the message's core points about regulating fatwas, forbidding *takfir*,¹⁹ and defining who is a Muslim. Nearly two-thirds of the 502 respondents agreed with the statement that “the Amman Message represents Islam and speaks for me as a Muslim.” Approximately 80 percent of respondents agreed that “it is important for the Amman Message to be influential in Muslim societies like Jordan.”²⁰ Insofar as the Amman Message reflects intervention by state institutions to shape the practice and application of Islam in Jordanian society, positive attitudes toward the message provide further evidence of significant public support for keeping religion squarely in the public sphere.

¹⁹ *Takfir* is the act of proclaiming someone to no longer be a Muslim.

²⁰ More than 60 percent of respondents claimed to have heard of the message prior to the survey.

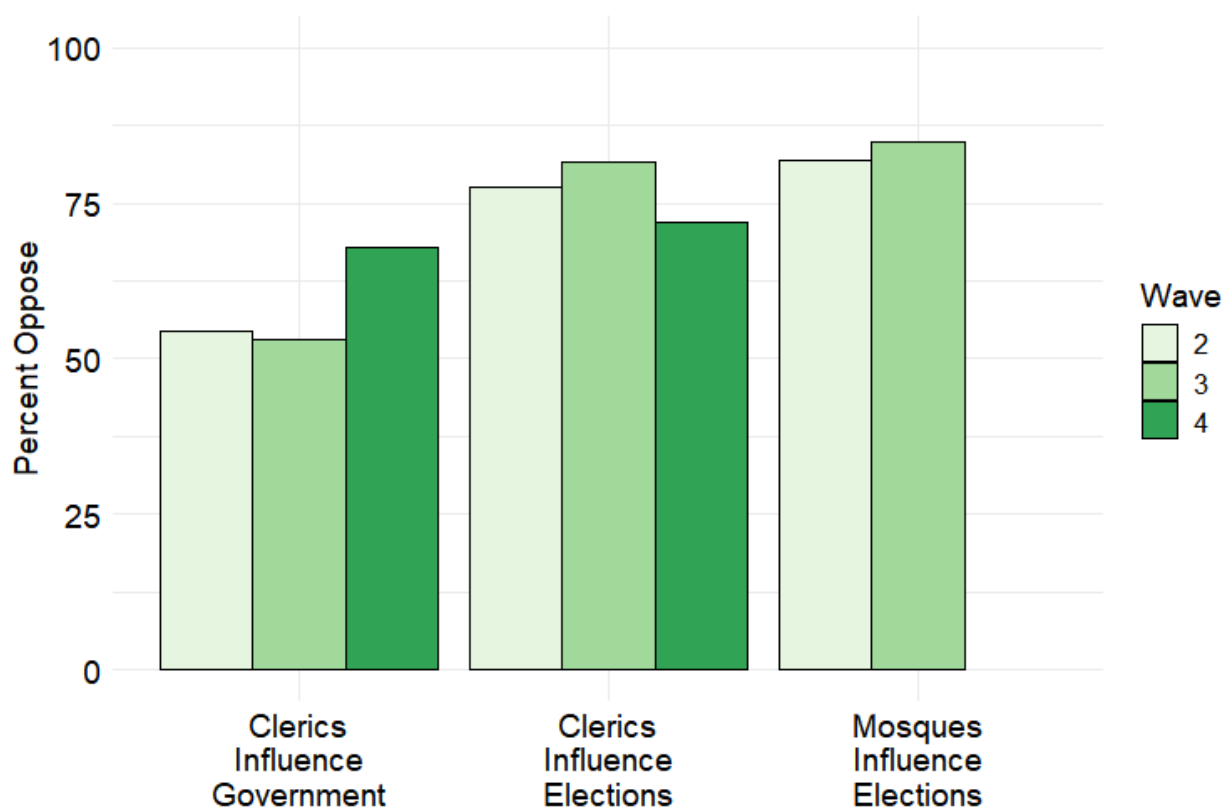
Figure 4. Jordanian Support for Constitution to Include Sharia Law



Note: AB Wave = Arab Barometer survey waves

Importantly, however, widespread religiosity and support for linking Islam to state institutions does not translate into a desire for religion to feature prominently in partisan political life. Figure 5 draws on several additional questions from the Arab Barometer about respondents' preferences for combining politics and religion. The first question asks if the country would be better off when clerics influence government decisions; the second question asks if clerics should influence elections; and the third question asks if mosques should be used for electoral politics. There is a particularly strong consensus among Jordanians that religion should not mix with elections. Between 70 and 85 percent of respondents opposed clerics interfering in electoral politics in each of the three waves, and nearly 80 percent also opposed the use of mosques for campaigning when this question was asked in waves 2 and 3. Slight majorities also felt that it would be harmful for religious leaders to influence government decisions in these earlier waves, and this opposition rose to nearly 70 percent among those surveyed for wave 4 in 2016.

Figure 5. Jordanian Opposition to Religious Influence in Politics – Arab Barometer Survey Wave Data



Note: The Arab Barometer did not ask about the influence of mosques on elections in survey wave 4.

These responses shed light on the patterns of religious authority discussed previously. Given that Jordanians demonstrate a fairly strong consensus toward a role for Islamic law and institutions in their state's constitution, it is not surprising that they would exhibit relatively greater trust in religious leaders tied to the state's constitutional religious bodies. At the same time, the equally strong consensus against mixing religion and partisan politics—particularly in elections—aligns well with the finding of especially low trust in the authority of Islamist leaders. Specifically, this consensus suggests that the tendency of domestic Islamist movements to leverage religious appeals for partisan political purposes likely undermines their religious authority in the eyes of the Jordanian public.

Drawing State Religious Leaders into Politics

The preceding sections indicate that because of their status as constitutional, nonpartisan religious officials, state religious leaders in Jordan possess an authority advantage over Islamist actors. Yet there is serious tension in this position. These officials are often drawn into politics regardless because the government leans on their authority to endorse the

state's policies, and because both the government and security institutions exert varying degrees of control over their ability to speak freely on matters of religion. Participation by state religious leaders in policy debates can provide the government with a much-needed boost in public support for specific policy proposals; however, this politicization also risks undermining the very basis on which these officials exercise their authority.

Several examples illustrate how advocacy by state religious officials can successfully increase support for government policies, particularly those related to social issues. For instance, due to a quickly growing population and the relatively few resources to sustain this rapid growth, the Jordanian government has for many years attempted to promote family planning, including the use of contraception.²¹ Due to country's conservative culture, contraceptive use has been relatively low; however, birth control is generally sanctioned within Islam, and Jordan's religious leaders actually appear to be more progressive than the general public on this issue.²² As a result, the government has called on religious leaders to advocate for family planning in their preaching and other outreach to constituents. In fact, Jordan's Higher Population Council, which is responsible for coordinating government strategies for population issues, listed the Ministry of Awqaf as one of just three other governmental bodies that would lead implementation of policy development for the 2005 Contraceptive Security Strategy.²³ A former director of the Higher Population Council insisted that support from the Ministry of Awqaf had been crucial in supporting birth control policies, because more conservative Jordanians would accept the ministry's endorsement of family planning approaches that they might otherwise resist.²⁴

Religious leaders have also played an important role in promoting government policies related to women's rights. For example, in August 2017 the Jordanian parliament repealed Article 308 of the penal code, a controversial provision that allowed rapists to avoid punishment if they married their victim. After a royal committee recommended the change in February 2017, the government endorsed it in April of the same year. Activists then pressured parliament to pass the government's proposal, and they were supported by Jordan's religious leaders and institutions in their push.²⁵ A prominent women's rights activist credited these religious actors with playing a key role in the successful repeal, noting that much of the public accepts their authority on such matters.²⁶ Amendments to the personal status law in 2010 provide another example of the ability of the state's religious officials to increase support for the government's agenda. The stated objective for

²¹ "Population and Family Health – Jordan," *USAID*, last modified July 30, 2018, <https://www.usaid.gov/jordan/family-planning-reproductive-health>.

²² Carol Underwood, 2000, "Islamic Precepts and Family Planning: The Perceptions of Jordanian Religious Leaders and their Constituents," *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 26, no. 3: 110-117, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2648299>.

²³ "Contraceptive Security Strategy," *Higher Population Council General Secretariat*, November 2005, https://www.rhsupplies.org/uploads/tx_rhscpublications/DOC48.pdf.

²⁴ Author interview with former head of Jordan Higher Population Council, February 2018.

²⁵ Zena Tahhan, 2017. "'Historic day' as Jordanian parliament repeals rape law," *Al Jazeera*, August 1, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/08/day-jordanian-parliament-repeals-rape-law-170801103929836.html>.

²⁶ Author interview with Jordanian women's rights activist, February 2018.

the changes was to strengthen women's rights—earlier attempts on related issues, which had been spearheaded by liberal activists, failed. This time, the sharia courts helped to shepherd the amendments into law: senior judges met with both religious and liberal Jordanian pressure groups, successfully convincing them of the law's merits and eliciting their support.²⁷ In the process, protections for women related to divorce, alimony, custody, polygamy, and a number of other issues were improved.

Social issues like family planning and women's rights are closely related to religious affairs in Jordan. As a result, state religious leaders appear to be well positioned to apply their authority on these matters when the government wishes to enlist their help. Yet the ability to mobilize state religious institutions in favor of government policies goes hand in hand with the regime's political control over these institutions, and such control can actively weaken their authority in the eyes of the public. In interviews with senior officials in the state's religious institutions, they are keen to emphasize their constitutional, nonpolitical duties related to regulating the religious sphere.²⁸ Nonetheless, for those whose continuation in the country's very top religious positions depends to some extent on their relationship with the government and royal court, there is a general perception that they are partisan political figures serving the interests of the regime as much as they are religious leaders. As one Jordanian stated, “the Grand Mufti fears the king more than he fears God.”²⁹ When these senior officials are called on to defend the government's interests, their authority can vanish quickly. For instance, when the Chief Islamic Justice and Imam of the Royal Hashemite Court, Sheikh Ahmed Hilayel, gave a sermon criticizing Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states for not doing more to support Jordan economically and financially, his comments sparked a public uproar. There was widespread criticism of Hilayel's public begging for the regime, in part because of understandable speculation that he was speaking directly for the government, and he was forced to resign just two days later.³⁰

Beyond these senior officials, the government has a number of levers it can pull to ensure the thousands of preachers and other religious figures in the country refrain from crossing the government's interests. In practice, Jordan's large number of mosques has meant that the Ministry of Awqaf cannot always monitor them closely or provide qualified imams, but the security apparatus has kept a close watch on preachers considered to be extremists or with connections to the political opposition. In recent years, the ministry has taken steps to increase its control.³¹ In 2014, the government increased restrictions on what preachers

²⁷ Lamis El Muhtaseb, Nathan Brown, and Abdul-Wahab Kayyali, 2016, “Arguing About Family Law in Jordan: Disconnected Spheres?” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 4 (November): 721-741.

²⁸ Author interview with senior sharia judge, February 2018; Author interview with senior Awqaf official, April 2018.

²⁹ Reported to author in private conversation.

³⁰ H. Varulkar and Z. Harel, 2017, “Following Harsh Anti-Gulf Sermon By Leading Jordanian Cleric, Jordan Attempts to Mitigate Sermon's Impact in The Gulf,” *MEMRI*, https://www.memri.org/reports/following-harsh-anti-gulf-sermon-leading-jordanian-cleric-jordan-attempts-mitigate-sermons#_ednref9; Author interview with Jordanian scholar, February 2018.

³¹ Michael Robbins and Lawrence Rubin, 2014, “How Jordan uses Islam against the Islamic State,” *The Washington Post Monkey Cage Blog*, November 19, 2014,

could say in Friday sermons while intensifying efforts to ban and arrest those who crossed the regime's redlines, including criticizing the royal family and close allies, as well as praising the Islamic State and other extremist groups.³² In November 2016, the ministry began to enforce a unified Friday sermon for which the topic and even specific Quranic verses are provided to the imams via text message beforehand.³³ Those who deviate too far from the script have been banned from preaching, though it is difficult to know how widespread this practice has been.³⁴

According to the Ministry of Awqaf, imams are still free to write their own sermons as long as they incorporate the correct topic and verses, and the topic selection policy was implemented as part of an effort to improve the general quality of the sermons and to reduce hate speech and extremism.³⁵ Yet this step has likely weakened the authority of these preachers by increasing perceptions that they are mere mouthpieces for the regime and therefore partisan actors in their own right. For one, the topics chosen by the ministry are often perceived to be divorced from Jordan's current problems. As one activist scoffed, the preachers now "talk about respecting parents [...] because they cannot talk about anything sensitive."³⁶ A prominent journalist also suggested that Jordanians have become less likely to trust state religious officials in recent years because they view them as only protecting and justifying the government.³⁷

The vulnerability of state religious officials' authority to politicization is consistent with the previously discussed polling data on Jordanians' attitudes toward religion, politics, and the state, as well as the polling data showing relatively high but soft trust in the authority of the grand mufti. Jordanians want these officials and their institutions to exist as part of the state structure, but they want them to be independent religious authorities and not pawns of the government's current political needs. This dynamic means that religious authority is often highest for the public personalities who are perceived to have maintained their integrity and independence as religious rather than political men. One name mentioned particularly often was Noah Al-Qudah, a Muslim scholar who served as Mufti of the Jordanian Armed Forces and later as grand mufti from 2007 to 2010. In general, however, few state religious officials appear to command widespread respect across Jordanian society, even if they can exercise more authority than other religious actors.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/11/19/how-jordan-uses-islam-against-the-islamic-state/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.76047f97a958.

³² William Booth and Taylor Luck, 2014, "To counter rise of Islamic State, Jordan imposes rules on Muslim clerics," *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2014,

http://wapo.st/1APGA5R?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.db4ce00caa06.

³³ Jacob Burns, 2017, "Dictating sermons by SMS, Jordan hopes to clamp down on 'extremism,'" *Middle East Eye*, April 21, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/dictating-sermons-sms-jordan-hopes-clamp-down-extremism>.

³⁴ *Al-Ghad*, 2018, "Sheikh Prohibited from Speaking at Friday Sermons for 'Going off Script on Poverty.'"

³⁵ Author interview with senior Awqaf official, April 2017.

³⁶ Author interview with Jordanian activist, February 2018.

³⁷ Author interview with Jordanian journalist, March 2018.

Islamists Without Islam?

Though Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood has leveraged its religious message to form the largest and most organized political opposition in the country, the movement has never succeeded in acquiring such widespread support that it appears to constitute a serious threat to the regime. There is little doubt that a significant part of this weakness is rooted in the government's effective use of repression. Yet the survey results discussed in this report suggest that the public's disregard for mixing religion and partisan politics has also helped to create a relatively low ceiling of support for the Brotherhood. The problem appears to be that participation in politics undermines the movement's religious authority at the same time that this authority is meant to constitute the core of its political appeal. Ruheil Ghureiba, a former Brotherhood leader who broke away from the movement to found a competing organization, Zamzam, summed up this danger succinctly when he stated that "the Brothers are not religious men, they are politicians."³⁸

According to Ghureiba, his solution to this problem was to push the organization toward adopting a more openly political and less religious identity, and he claims to have left when his proposals were stymied. Instead, he formed Zamzam, a political initiative that was meant to focus more on developing a concrete political platform as opposed to relying on Islamic slogans.³⁹ Despite this split, however, in recent years the Muslim Brotherhood appears to have moved in this direction as well, choosing to place more emphasis on its political rather than religious identity. This shift followed a period of heightened repression by the state, part of which involved the government manipulating internal tensions like those with Zamzam, as well as more direct actions like jailing one of the movement's most senior leaders.⁴⁰

Combined with a sense that public opinion was turning further against Islamism as a result of events following the Arab Spring,⁴¹ this repression succeeded in pushing the Brotherhood to abandon street politics in favor of participating once more in formal political institutions, including elections and the parliament. Notably, the decision to compete in the 2016 parliamentary elections coincided with a visible attempt to rebrand the IAF by downplaying its religious character. During the election, the IAF established the National Alliance for Reform, building a coalition with tribal figures and several Christian candidates.⁴² The alliance did not mention the Brotherhood in its campaign materials and changed its well-known slogan, "Islam is the solution," to a more nationally inclined "renaissance of the homeland, dignity for the citizens." According to Zaki Bani Ersheid, the

³⁸ Author interview with Ruheil Ghureiba, March 2018.

³⁹ Author interview with Ruheil Ghureiba, March 2018.

⁴⁰ Neven Bondokji, 2015, "The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan: Time to Reform," *The Brookings Institution*; *Al-Jazeera*, 2016, "Jordan closes Muslim Brotherhood headquarters in Amman," April 14, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/04/jordan-closes-muslim-brotherhood-headquarters-amman-160413114049536.html>.

⁴¹ Shadi Hamid, William McCants, and Rashid Dar, 2017, "Islamism after the Arab Spring: Between the Islamic State and the nation-state," *The Brookings Institution*.

⁴² Kirk H. Sowell, 2016, "Jordan's Elections and the Divided Islamists," *Sada*, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64589>.

aim was to “evolve from an Islamist movement to a national, inclusive movement that speaks for the aspirations of all Jordanians.”⁴³

The alliance performed well in the elections, claiming the largest number of seats of any party and then forming a bloc inside the parliament. Despite frustrations with alleged government interference that has limited their opportunity to leverage parliamentary institutions for challenging government policies, the group has continued to emphasize its new stance. In interviews with members of parliament and other leaders associated with the bloc, they stressed that their appeal was rooted in their higher quality candidates, emphasis on democratic reforms, political connections to the people, and opposition to Israel. Religion was not mentioned at all or was described as only one of many reasons for the group's appeal.⁴⁴ While this shift may not last, for now Jordan's Islamists appear to have embraced their political identity more directly while moving toward the broader societal consensus supporting some separation between religion and partisan politics.

Conclusion

Research on the Middle East often emphasizes the religious and political power of Islamist movements. In Jordan, the IAF is unquestionably the largest and most relevant political party, and its parent movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, has a history of actively shaping the religious sphere in the country. Nevertheless, the research in this report suggests that the religious authority of these groups is limited, in part because a majority of the Jordanian public does not support the mixing of religion and partisan politics. What Jordanians do appear to support is a role for religion in the state. As a result, the public demonstrates higher levels of trust in state religious leaders such as the grand mufti, and they broadly endorse the Amman Message propagated by the monarchy and religious establishment. Yet this authority is also fragile, because public opposition to politicized religion encompasses politicization by the government as well. When the government appears to be using or controlling state religious officials in pursuit of its own political goals, Jordanians begin to view these officials as compromised. In part for this reason, religious authority in the kingdom is fragmented, leaving room for individual personalities to acquire large followings or space for internal and external extremist ideologies to fester.

The Jordanian regime has historically exercised less control over its religious sphere than other countries in the region, and this restraint has likely contributed to the relative success of official Islam in the kingdom.⁴⁵ In recent years, however, the regime appears to have strengthened its efforts to dictate how religion can be used and interpreted publicly, and Jordanians may increasingly perceive religious officials as politically compromised. As

⁴³ Taylor Luck, 2016, “Reinvention of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood involves women -- and Christians,” *The Washington Post*, September 20, 2016, http://wapo.st/2cOSD9y?tid=ss_tw&utm_term=.100f2c2c0be7.

⁴⁴ Author interview with Saad Abu Mahfouz, MP from IAF, February 2018; Author interview with Saleh Al-Armouti, independent Islamist MP and member of Reform Bloc, February 2018; Author interview with Abdel Latif Arabiyat, leader of IAF and former speaker of parliament, March 2018.

⁴⁵ Robbins and Rubin, “The Rise of Official Islam,” 2013.

suggestive evidence of this pattern, trust in religious leaders fell from 38 percent to 32 percent between the third wave of the Arab Barometer in 2013 and the fourth wave in 2016. If this distrust continues to grow, the authority of state religious officials could weaken further, with potentially destabilizing consequences. The Jordanian government should therefore pursue the king's vision of a civil state more fully, freeing its religious leaders from their political obligations and control while maintaining their positions within the state structure. Doing so would increase the credibility of their authority and strengthen the durability of the Jordanian state in the long term.