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GENERATION FAITHFUL

Jordanian Students Rebel, Embracing Conservative Islam

By [MICHAEL SLACKMAN](#)

AMMAN, [Jordan](#) — Muhammad Fawaz is a very serious college junior with a stern gaze and a reluctant smile that barely cloaks suppressed anger. He never wanted to attend Jordan University. He hates spending hours each day commuting.

As a high school student, Mr. Fawaz, 20, had dreamed of earning a scholarship to study abroad. But that was impossible, he said, because he did not have a “wasta,” or connection. In Jordan, connections are seen as essential for advancement and the wasta system is routinely cited by young people as their primary grievance with their country.

So Mr. Fawaz decided to rebel. He adopted the serene, disciplined demeanor of an Islamic activist. In his sophomore year he was accepted into the student group affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, Jordan’s largest, most influential religious, social and political movement, one that would ultimately like to see the state governed by Islamic law, or Shariah. Now he works to recruit other students to the cause.

“I find there is justice in the Islamic movement,” Mr. Fawaz said one day as he walked beneath the towering cypress trees at Jordan University. “I can express myself. There is no wasta needed.”

Across the Middle East, young people like Mr. Fawaz, angry, alienated and deprived of opportunity, have accepted Islam as an agent of change and rebellion. It is their rock ‘n’ roll, their long hair and love beads. Through Islam, they defy the status quo and challenge governments seen as corrupt and incompetent.

These young people — 60 percent of those in the region are under 25 — are propelling a worldwide Islamic revival, driven by a thirst for political change and social justice. That fervor has popularized a more conservative interpretation of the faith.

“Islamism for us is what pan-Arabism was for our parents,” said Naseem Tarawnah, 25, a business writer and blogger, who is not part of the movement.

The long-term implications of this are likely to complicate American foreign policy calculations, making it more costly to continue supporting governments that do not let secular or moderate religious political movements take root.

Washington will also be likely to find it harder to maintain the policy of shunning leaders of groups like the Brotherhood in Egypt, or [Hamas](#) in Gaza, or [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon, which command

tremendous public sympathy.

Leaders of Muslim countries have tried to appease public sentiment while doing all they can to discourage the West from engaging religious movements directly. They see the prospect of a thaw in relations with the West, and see these groups as a threat to their monopoly on power.

Authoritarian governments view relative moderation as more of a political challenge than extremism, which is a security problem that can be contained through harsh methods.

“What happens if Islamists accepted the peace process and became more pragmatic?” said Muhammad Abu Rumman, research editor at the newspaper Al Ghad in Amman. “People see them as less corrupt and as the only real opposition. Israel and the U.S. might look at them differently. The regime is afraid of the Brotherhood when it becomes more pragmatic.”

The financial crisis only adds to the anxiety of governments in the Middle East that had hoped economic development could appease their citizens, create jobs for legions of unemployed and underemployed young people and dilute the appeal of Islamic movements. But the crisis and the drop in oil prices have hit hard, throwing the brakes on once-booming economies in the Persian Gulf region, and modest economic growth elsewhere in the region.

In this environment, governments are forced to confront a reality of their own creation. By choking off democracy and free speech, the only space where groups could gather and discuss critical ideas became the mosque, and the only movements that had room to prosper were religion-based.

Today, the search for identity in the Middle East no longer involves tension between the secular and religious. Religion has won.

The struggle, instead, is over how to define an Islamic society and government. Zeinah Hamdan, 24, has traveled a typical journey in Jordan. She says she wants a more religious government guided by Shariah law, and she took the head scarf at a younger age than anyone else in her family.

But when she was in college, she was offended when an Islamist student activist chastised her for shaking a young man's hand. She wants to be a modern religious woman, and she defines that as working and socializing in a coed environment.

“If we implement Shariah law, we will be more comfortable,” she said. “But what happens is, the people who come to power are extremists.”

Like others here, she is torn between her discomfort with what she sees as the extreme attitudes of the Muslim Brotherhood and her alienation from a government she does not consider to be Islamic enough. “The middle is very difficult,” she said.

Focus on Popular Causes

Under a bright midday sun one recent day, Mr. Fawaz and his allies in the Islamic student movement put on green baseball caps that read, in Arabic, “Islamic Current of Jordan University” and prepared to demonstrate. Mr. Fawaz carried a large poster board reading, “We are with you Gaza.”

The university protest reflected the tactics of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country as a whole: precisely organized, deliberately nonthreatening and focused on popular causes here such as the [Palestinians](#). The Brotherhood says it supports democracy and moderation, but its commitment to pluralism, tolerance and compromise has never been tested in Jordan.

Mr. Fawaz and about 200 other students stood in a straight line, extending nearly two city blocks, parallel to the traffic on the major roadway in front of the university. More than half of the students were women, many with their faces veiled.

State security men in plain clothes hurried up and down the line. “Brother, for God’s sake, when will you be angry?” one security agent screamed into his phone, recording for headquarters the slogan on a student’s placard.

At 12:30 p.m., the male students stepped into the road, blocking traffic, while the women rushed off to the sidewalk and melted back into the campus. One minute later, they walked out of traffic, took off their caps and folded up their signs, tucked them into computer bags and went back to school.

“I want to be able to express what I want; I want freedom,” Mr. Fawaz said, after returning to the campus. His glasses always rest crooked on his face, making him look younger, and a bit out of sorts. “I don’t want to be afraid to express my opinion.”

Mr. Fawaz grew up in a small village called Anjara, near Ajloun, about 50 miles from Amman. His father grew up in the Jordan Valley and worked as a nurse in Irbid. Mr. Fawaz said he was 8 years old he was first invited to “leadership retreats” with a youth organization of the Brotherhood.

When he was 13, the youth group took him on a minor pilgrimage to Mecca. So, he said, he had been enticed by religion at an early age. But he only decided to become politically active — and to join the Brotherhood — when he was denied a scholarship to study abroad.

While there are no official statistics on student membership in the Brotherhood, only a fraction of Jordan University students are formally affiliated. Yet many others say they share the same vague sense of discontent and yearning, the same embrace of the Brotherhood’s slogan, “Islam Is the Solution,” a resonant catchall in the face of many problems.

The university, with about 30,000 students from across the country, has long served as a proxy battlefield for Jordan’s competing interests.

Competing Loyalties

In Jordan, unlike Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood is legal, with a political party and a vast

network of social services. It also has a political party, called the Islamic Action Front. While some fear it as too extreme, others argue that it has sold out by working within a political system they see as corrupt and un-Islamic. On campus, the Islamists try to build sympathy, handing out study sheets or copying notes for students.

Mr. Fawaz decided this year to run as an Islamist candidate for the student council, an influential organization with its own budget and the right to put up posters, distribute fliers and hold on-campus events.

The Islamic students' movement had boycotted the elections for years to protest a change of election rules that called for appointing — not electing — half of the council's 80 members. The rule change, decreed by the former university president, was made in order to block the Islamists, who were the most organized group on campus, from controlling the council.

That is a direct echo of how the state has long tried to contain the Islamist movement in Jordan. The Brotherhood is allowed to operate, but the government and the security services broadly control the outcome of elections.

Indeed, as Islamist movements have swelled, governments across the Middle East have chosen both to contain and to embrace them. Many governments have aggressively moved to roll back the few democratic practices that had started to take root in their societies, and to prevent Islamists from winning power through the voting booth. That risks driving the leaders and the followers of Islamic organizations toward extremism.

At the same time, many governments have tried to appease popular Islamist fervor. Jordan recently granted a Muslim Brotherhood-aligned newspaper the right to publish daily instead of weekly; held private talks with Hamas leaders; arrested a poet, saying he had insulted Islam by using verses of the Koran in love poems; and shut down restaurants that had served alcohol during [Ramadan](#), though they had been licensed by the state to do so.

This year, the new president of Jordan University permitted all student council seats to be elected, but with rules in place that would, again, make it nearly impossible for the Islamist bloc to have control.

Two days before the voting took place, Mr. Fawaz was campaigning on the steps of the education building, dressed in his best suit and tie. His campaign message to the students was simply, "For your sake."

Running as an Islamist risks consequences: Mr. Fawaz said that he was approached by a student in his class who he believed was delivering a message from the security services. "He told me that they will write about me; I will never get a job," Mr. Fawaz said.

But even when the police ordered him to take down his posters on election day, he remained resolute and confident.

"Everybody knows that I am going to win," Mr. Fawaz said, without sounding boastful. "Because I

represent the Islamic movement.”

But he did not win. Instead, a candidate representing a large tribe from the city of Salt won, reflecting the loyalty to bonds of kinship and family heritage even as tribal culture has begun to absorb more conservative Islamic practices and beliefs.

Yet Mr. Fawaz was untroubled. “What is important for me,” he said, “is to serve the movement by spreading the word among the students.”

Amjad al-Absy, 28, remembers the moment when he pledged to join the Muslim Brotherhood. He was 15 and he was identified by Brotherhood recruiters when he was playing soccer in a Palestinian refugee camp. He described how the Brotherhood monitors young men — when they play soccer, go to school, to mosque, to work, as well as in the street and singles out those who appear receptive.

“Once you say yes, they put you in a ring, in a family,” said Mr. Absy. “Outside of the Brotherhood, there is no concern for young men, there is no respect. You are alone.”

Mr. Absy and his friend Tarak Naimat, 24, said that while they were students at the university, they had helped to recruit other young men.

“In the computer lab, in the mosque, you buddy up,” Mr. Naimat said. “Then you participate in events together. Then he becomes a member. If he’s advanced, it can take six months. If less, maybe two years.”

The appeal, Mr. Naimat said, was simple: “It gives you the feeling you can change things, you can act, you can be a leader. You feel like you are part of something important.”

Recruiters to the movement operate in a social atmosphere far more receptive than in the past. Every one of five young men talking near the cafeteria of the university recently insisted that the only way Jordan would have democracy was under an Islamic government, which is what the Brotherhood says it wants to achieve.

Muhammad Safi is a 23-year-old with neatly gelled hair and a television-white smile who described himself as the least religious student at the table. He said he had lived in the United States for five years and was eager to marry an American so he could return. Yet he declared: “An Islamic state would be better. At least it would take care of people.”

A Political Crossroads

The task facing Middle East governments and Islamic leaders is to figure out how to harness the energy of the Islamic revival. The young — the demographic bulge that is defining the future of the Islamic world and the way the West will have to engage it — have embraced Islam with all the fervor of the counterculture.

But the movement is still up for grabs — whether it will lead to greater extremism, even terrorism

in some cases, and whether the vague dissatisfaction of young people will translate into political engagement or disaffection.

So the cycle is likely to continue, with religious identification fueled not only by the Islamic movements, but also by governments eager to use religion to enhance legitimacy and to satisfy demands of their citizens. That, in turn, broadens support for groups like the Brotherhood, while undermining support for the government, said many researchers, intellectuals and political scientists in Jordan.

The battle lines are clear on the campus of Jordan University. Bilal Abu Sulaih, 24, is a leader in the Islamic student movement. He returned to school this year to study Islamic law after being suspended for one year for organizing protests, he said. During the year off, he said, he worked as a student organizer for the political party office of the Brotherhood. "We are trying to participate," he said of the movement's role on campus. "We do not want to overpower every one else."

But his reassurances were brushed aside as another student confronted him. "It's not true," shouted Ahmed Qabai, 28, who was seated on a nearby bench. He thrust a finger in Mr. Sulaih's direction.

"You want to try to control everything," Mr. Qabai said. "I've seen it before, your people talking to women and asking them why they're not veiled."

Mr. Sulaih, embarrassed by the challenge, said, "It's not true."

Mr. Qabai made it clear that he detested the Muslim Brotherhood, getting more and more worked up, until finally he was screaming. But what he said summed up the challenge ahead for Jordan, and for so many governments in the region: "We all know Islam is the solution. That we agree on."

Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting.

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