

# Jordan trial heralds Mideast policy shift

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Regardless of what American administration is inaugurated in January, it is increasingly clear that a fundamental policy shift for the Middle East has been decided by the U.S., British, and Israeli political establishments. The case against Jordanian Islamic parliamentarian Laith Shubeilat, scheduled to close on Oct. 31 and yield a verdict a week thereafter, is a central part of this strategic shift. Washington, in league with London and Tel Aviv, would like to force Jordan into an alignment with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and other partners of the anti-Iraq wartime coalition to create the political conditions for the overthrow of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Although *EIR* had articulated this plan as a hypothesis as soon as the Shubeilat case broke (*EIR*, Sept. 18, p. 33), confirmation came weeks later. The Oct. 26 London *Financial Times* referred to unidentified "palace sources" and "diplomats" in Amman to predict that King Hussein would "dissociate himself publicly from Saddam Hussein, while continuing to express support for the Iraqi people." The paper pointed to King Hussein's meetings with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and a planned visit to Jordan by Moroccan King Hassan as well as an eventual summit between the Jordanian monarch and Saudi King Fahd. All this, the London paper said, is to mend fences broken during the Persian Gulf war, and prepare to dump Baghdad's leader. Later that week, the motley crew known as the Iraqi opposition met on Iraqi soil inside U.S.-protected Kurdistan, reportedly to plot Saddam's ouster by a coup. One leading exponent of the "Iraqi National Congress" was Masham el-Jabouri, a man who, despite three reportedly unsuccessful coup attempts against Saddam Hussein, is confident that support within the country can be organized if all but Saddam personally are promised an amnesty by the would-be coup-makers. The idea seems to be that if the foreign-backed "opposition" can seize power without a bloodbath, it will come across as a "democratic" alternative, and by that token entice Jordan, itself in the process of democratization, to endorse it.

The pressure on Jordan to acquiesce to such a scheme is enormous. Not only has King Hussein been visited by leading players in the game, but psychological pressures were applied through ongoing negotiations with the London Club

regarding rescheduling of Jordan's immense debt. The London-based Arabic paper *Al Hayat* carried a story saying that the talks had collapsed due to Jordanian intransigence, and suggested that Jordan's commercial banks might find that their letters of credit would not be honored abroad, in retaliation. Jordan owes \$1.2 billion to the London Club out of a total \$7 billion foreign debt.

## The Shubeilat case

This is the context in which the Shubeilat case moved to a tumultuous conclusion. First, the facts of the case: After two weeks of hearings in which prosecution witnesses testified, nothing resembling damning evidence had emerged against the primary target of the trial, Shubeilat, accused of plotting the overthrow of the state. In a move dictated by despair, the State Security Court had recourse to the flimsiest of ruses: a "secret" witness. Although the trial was scheduled to proceed on Oct. 18, the military state attorney called a secret session for Oct. 17 and introduced a "secret" witness, presented as "Yassin Ramadan Yassin." The man, whose face was concealed by a shawl and whose documented identification remained a mystery to the defense, had allegedly been struck by pangs of conscience, and whisked into Amman to "tell the truth." The "truth" being that he, a Syrian businessman, had been the courier who brought \$200,000 worth of German marks from the Iranian presidential palace to Shubeilat in Jordan. This testimony of this bagman (who had to leave town immediately for business reasons) was presented as the prosecution's crucial breakthrough.

Out of respect for their office and due process, the defense teams of Shubeilat and his co-defendant announced their withdrawal from the case in protest. Court-appointed lawyers were named for the two parliamentarians, who, rejecting them, started a hunger strike on Oct. 17. Shubeilat told the court when it reconvened, that his lawyers would return to the case on condition that the "secret" witness be recalled for proper, public testimony and cross-examination and that all other prosecution witnesses be released from the general Intelligence Department custody they are held in, to be able to speak "freely." "I want to confirm that all the charges against me are fabricated and untrue," he said. "The case is a vengeful act aimed at silencing me politically."

The defense lawyers' action was crucial in transferring the case from the legal to the political arena. The lawyers announced several initiatives. Abdul Karim Dughmi, a member of Shubeilat's defense team as well as Deputy Speaker of the House, told press that on the legal level, the defense was awaiting a ruling from the Higher Court of Justice regarding the very constitutionality of the State Security Court, in a case presented by Mr. Bakr on behalf of Shubeilat's wife Rima. On the political level, he said, the parliament had formed a commission embracing all political tendencies, to follow the case "at all higher levels, including His Majesty the King, the prime minister, and others." Hundreds of sup-

porters gathered in Shubeilat's office to map out a support strategy, including circulating petitions, similar to those which were arriving daily from abroad, as prominent individuals from Europe and Ibero-America sent protests to the government.

On Oct. 24, a host of intellectuals, political and trade union leaders, and representatives of human rights organizations joined for a press conference to present a petition to the king. In their petition they supported the defense lawyers' protest withdrawal, and appealed to King Hussein to intervene for the sake of the nation. "Out of our concern for the security and stability of Jordan and to protect its shining image, we implore you to do whatever you deem fit to end this case and bolster the citizens' confidence in the democratization process."

The wording of the appeal was important, because it identified the political stakes of the trial. Indeed, if Shubeilat is found guilty and sentenced (perhaps to death), the population will be utterly disillusioned with the democratization process it had so eagerly supported heretofore. "If [Shubeilat] was framed up by corrupt former politicians who want to shut him up," explained one Jordanian Christian to *Middle East* magazine, "then there will also be a loss of faith in the system that allowed him to be falsely accused."

### **Illegal to petition the king**

The response of the prosecution was bold and immediate. In a highly unusual move, the military attorney general, Maj. Gen. Mohammed Mango, joined with prosecutors Maj. Mohammed Hijazi and Col. Hafez Al Amin, in a press conference called in order to dismiss all the claims of irregularities put forth in the petition. Furthermore, the top brass stated that making such statements was a crime punishable by imprisonment and fines. General Mango justified the use of a secret witness, and accused the defense lawyers of unethical behavior by politicizing the trial. Major Hijazi dismissed out of hand the idea (widely circulated in the press) that the charges against Shubeilat might be a response to a corruption probe he had led in parliament implicating former ministers. The gist of the military's appearance was to respond to a political challenge with the threat of force.

What will happen in Jordan is not a foregone conclusion. On the legal plane, a guilty verdict can be rejected by the prime minister, and a new court and new trial can be arranged. More likely, the king himself will intervene; how and when is an open question.

A royal intervention is necessary for a number of reasons. First, the behavior of the military court has been menacing, utterly in contrast with the "democratic" face the country has assumed since 1989. The ruthlessness with which those elements inside the country, known as the "mafia," have framed up Shubeilat on U.S. prompting, denotes a will to power which could pose a threat to the monarchy itself. If military prosecutors can declare a

humble petition to the king to be an unlawful act, is that not an assault on the monarchy itself?

Further, the indications of foreign interference into the setup are as numerous as they are sinister: Syrian law was cited by the military prosecutor as a precedent for allowing illegally wiretapped telephone conversations to be admitted as court evidence (unprecedented in Jordan); the "secret" witness who mysteriously appeared and as mysteriously disappeared, was also Syrian. Questions are raised as to whether Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, or better, his brother Rifaat, the intelligence expert recently returned to Damascus, might be aiding the Jordanian "mafia" in its railroad. More damning still, are the footprints of the Israeli Mossad; not only was one key prosecution witness a convicted Israeli agent, but the Arab press is rife with rumors that Shubeilat's co-defendant, Qarrash, and the two "confessed" defendants were "close to Israel," i.e., agents of the Mossad. Finally, a curious news item appeared just as the trial was getting into motion early in October that an FBI delegation had arrived for a visit of several days to Amman, to visit with the Public Security Department and "get familiarized with the department's role in combatting crime." Journalists calling into the PSD received curt "no comment," as to why the FBI should be in Jordan.

Something of grave import is being played out in Jordan which threatens to jeopardize the sovereignty of the country, and only the highest authority in the country, the king, can effect a solution. Although the king has been systematically pressured to sacrifice Shubeilat as a gesture of acquiescence to the Great Powers' strategic gameplan, not all avenues are closed. The most important subjective factor in Jordan is the popularity which King Hussein enjoys. When he returned home from cancer surgery, he was welcomed by the entire population in festivities that far outdid what the king himself expected. He thus disposes of a popular mandate which no other leader in the region has, and which he certainly will not want to endanger through any unpopular moves, whether against Iraq (which the Jordanian population has defended) or against Shubeilat, the independent, maverick politician who had more voters behind him than any other parliamentarian. Perhaps the king wishes to signal to the growing Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists among the Occupied Territories that their political ambitions can be curbed; perhaps he deems it appropriate to define certain limits on the democratization process—what many in Jordan refer to as the "red line" that Shubeilat crossed in his outspoken opposition to the new world order, the International Monetary Fund, etc. In which case, he may temper some form of punishment the court will rule against Shubeilat.

The king could, just as easily, declare the case closed and release the accused, no questions asked. Were that to happen, it could stymie the real enemies of the nation: those in Washington, London, and Tel Aviv who fancy that they can turn Jordan into their pawn.