

Islamic Neoliberalism for Jordan's Islamic Action Front in Islamic Banking and Finance

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Abstract: There is a paradox: why are there so many political and economic Islamic actors in the Middle East but not a large willingness on their part to adopt and promote Islamic banking and finance methodologies? This paper argues that the more vague and ambivalent these actors are on economic policy, the wider their appeal; and, by extension, the more compatible Islamic ideas and ideologies are with neoliberalism. The case of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Jordan is given as it has adopted an emphasis on Islamic middle-class values and ethical concerns of neoliberalism in order to gain political support. The case of the IAF demonstrates that there are points of compatibility between the neoliberal economy and Islamist politics. In the calibrations of the relationship between the state and Islamist party politics in line with Islamic neoliberal tenets, this approach ensures enhanced appeal for neoliberal Islamism into the future.

INTRODUCTION

In the latter half of the 20th century, the Middle East experienced a simultaneous rise of political Islam, neoliberal economic policies, and the Islamic banking and finance industry. Although political parties with an Islamic agenda and neoliberal economic policies proliferated throughout the region, and Islamic banking and finance exhibited tremendous compatibilities with neoliberalism, Islamic political actors have not largely supported Islamic banking and finance agendas in policy or practice. This raises a paradox found throughout the Middle East: why are there so many political and economic Islamic actors (and an increasingly sizable role for Islam in the public sphere) but not a large willingness on their

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part to adopt and promote Islamic banking and finance methodologies? I argue that this is because policy ambiguity by Islamic actors on the topic of Islamic banking and finance has actually been quite effective. In other words, the more vague and ambivalent Islamic political and economic actors are on policy, the wider their appeal; and, by extension, the more compatible Islamic ideas and ideologies are with neoliberalism.

The case of the Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Jordan is particularly apt for understanding this paradox. The IAF eschewed policy platforms in favor of Islamic banking and finance and instead adopted an approach to economic questions in ways that emphasized Islamic and middle-class values and engaged ethical concerns of neoliberalism from an Islamic perspective in order to gain political support. Given the real and potential points for compatibility and overlap between political Islam and Islamic banking and finance, as well as source of political capital and support, this represents a case exemplar in the Middle East. It also reveals larger points of perhaps unexpected compatibilities between political Islam and neoliberalism in the region.

As early as the 1960s, the Middle East experienced Islam-based challenges to secular political regimes and nationalist systems (Abu-Lughod 1966; Binder 1979, 116; Hourani 1983, 170–81, 245–59; Findley 2010, chapter 6; Bayat 2013, 7; Akturk 2015). Many Middle Eastern countries were embroiled in corruption at the highest levels and abuses of political power, and publics engaged in the idea that “Islam is the answer” that would drive out the corruption and abuses. This resulted in widespread public and political interest in using Islamic understandings of ethics, norms, and political structures for reorganizing society (Brown 2000, 124–25), such as through equity, fairness, and hopeful promise for individuals (Hefner 1993; Davis and Robinson 2006), and “Reciting the Qur’an, keeping the fast, wearing the veil, avoiding alcohol, giving alms; not necessarily anything strictly political” (Hefner 2005, 21). Wider calls in the Middle East for Islamized change and for more Islamic ways of organizing society were also driven by the Iranian Revolution and the demographic shifts that gave more young people, and particularly a greater number of educated ones, a wider voice in society, and their impacts on popular understandings of Islamic theology and Islamic law, or *shari’a* (Starrett 1998, 17, 212; Brown 2000, 123–25; Hefner and Zaman 2007, 242–52; Mahmood 2011, 3). Jordan too experienced such a shift during this time (Clark 2004; Schwedler 2006). King Hussein supported the Shah in Iran, continued relations with Egypt after Sadat’s peace treaty with Israel, and normalized relations with Israel

during this period, much to the chagrin of the populace (Robinson 1997, 376; Moaddel 2002; Robins 2004, 133, 190–93; Droeber 2005, 43–44). The educational system and university students in particular injected society with Islamic ideas in social and intellectual life, and mobilized Islam for economic and political life (Al-Khazendar 1997; Adely 2012, 19, 91).

In the mid-20th century, economic policies were demonstrably in favor of the idea that, when left to their own devices, markets ultimately produce disasters especially through cycles of boom and bust (Kaletsky 2011, 102–3). Thus, they need to be controlled. In the 1980s, this assumption changed worldwide. The public increasingly embraced the idea that “the economy” was the self-regulating force that could achieve the greatest good for the greatest numbers, if only left to its own devices without governmental interference (Black 2001, 112–14).

This paved the way for neoliberalism, which is a political-economic theory that argues societal and individual wellbeing are best advanced through private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey 2007, 2). It requires that governmental regulations not infringe upon capitalist arrangements and calls for a diminishing of the role and influence of the state more generally. As Foucault has discussed, neoliberalism is also about taking the “formal principles of a market economy and... projecting them on to a general art of government” (Foucault 2008, 131). Governing individuals thus becomes about the “liberation” of personal freedoms and skills in market-friendly fields. The market and the individual are ascendant. Neoliberalism enjoys wide currency as both an economic and a governance project, of markets, states and subjects. This political-economic arrangement extends into many ethical fields once thought to reside outside the logics of either including family and kin, religious observation, and domestic arrangements (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001, 14–16; Escobar 2002, 2).

These new understandings of political economy paved the way for the development and implementation of new formations of knowledge, institutions, and policies in banking and finance, especially as they converged with Islamic ideas. The ideological view that “Islam is the answer” also then became applied to Middle Eastern countries’ economic problems, which prompted new forms of banking and finance that took on distinctly religious tenets. Islamic thinkers such as Dr. Abd al-Qadir ’Awdah and Kamal El-Din Hussein utilized this opening to spearhead new interventions into economic and political problems that they believed secular leaders were missing (Tripp 2006, 51, 84).

From the 1940s in India through the 1970s in Saudi Arabia, various Islamic movements sought to transform the economy by way of directing charitable giving, or *zakat*, and forbidding interest in all economic activity (Kuran 2004, 13–15). In the earliest of contemporary forms, Islamic banks—as formal savings and investment “houses” and institutions—were established in 1956 as the Tabung Hajji in Malaysia and Mit Ghamr, Egypt, in 1963 (Kahf 2004, 18–19). While some of the first experimental Islamic financial institutions opened in Pakistan and Malaysia in the 1960s, one of the earliest Islamic institutions, Mit Ghamr Savings project in Egypt, merits a short discussion.

According to Kuran (2004, 14–15, 151n.46), modeled after West German savings accounts, the Egyptian town of Mit Ghamr opened a financial institution that paid no interest on deposits and charged no interest on loans, which helped it claim an Islamic identity in a community of pious Muslims. The institution gained some popularity and contributed well to the local economy. Regardless, it was closed down in 1968 by a government suspicious of religious activity and private initiatives. The key feature of Mit Ghamr—and in contrast to Islamic banks today—is that it was not modeled after anything especially Islamic and was quite open about its secular inspiration.

The term “Islamic economics,” the inspiration for Islamic banking and finance, was established in Pakistan by Sayyid Abul-Ala Mawdudi in the 1940s. His writings, that were later mobilized in the 1980s when Islamic banking and finance institutions were established in larger numbers, pushed for an economic life that was grounded in neither the exploitative elements of capitalism nor the limitations on property found in socialism. Rather, he desired an economy based on distinctly Islamic understandings of virtue and the public good. These efforts in turn prompted new developments in the fields of banking and finance that took on distinctly religious tenets, which derived from Islamic scholars such as Sheikh Muhammed Sayyid Tantawi (Tripp 2006, 129), especially in Egypt and the Gulf states. These thinkers helped bring forth the Islamic Development Bank and the establishment of Islamic banking and finance industry in one of the fastest growing sectors.

The creation of the Islamic Development Bank in 1974 was intended to serve as a “cornerstone” for a new economic era guided by Islamic principles, and countries throughout the region sought to localize many other attempts (Warde 2004, 93–94). The movements succeeded in establishing commercial Islamic banking and finance institutions in over 70 countries,

banning interest in three countries, and establishing these criteria for legitimate Islamic economic activities.

As other authors have argued in detail (Rudnyckyj 2010; Pitluck 2012; Atia 2013; Sloane-White 2017), there have emerged considerable compatibilities between Islamic banking and finance and neoliberalism. The first point of compatibility is the profit-seeking nature of the endeavor, an aspect that other contributors to this issue have highlighted, particularly Adraoui's. The Islamic banking and finance sector is first and foremost a set of financial services that seek a profit (Haniffa and Hudaib 2007). Second, Islamic banking and finance provides a strikingly similar set of services to individuals, corporations, and governments as conventional, non-Islamic banks (Kuran 2004, 39–49). Finally, the Islamized technologies for sales, loans, financing, bonds, mortgages, and even insurance is often criticized for being Islamic in name but not fundamentally different than those offered at conventional banks (Maurer 2005, 24–26). Furthermore, as Albertsen and de Soysa (2018) point out countries with a Muslim majority of over 50% are positively associated with free-market capitalism, and is positively associated with many markers of neoliberal economics including limited government, free trade, and low levels of regulation. This means that neoliberal policies can be easily financed by Islamic banks; there is nothing that structurally prevents Islamic banking and finance from being utilized for neoliberal ends.

As a result, Islamic banking and finance found fruitful ground in neoliberal economies of many Muslim countries. It now constitutes an over \$2.2 billion USD industry spread over more than 60 countries (Domat 2018), which reported a 17.6% rate of growth between 2009 and 2013 (outpacing conventional finance) (The Economist 2014). By most accounts, Iran holds the majority of the industry, followed by Saudi Arabia and Malaysia (Warde 2000, 117–19). Given the simultaneous rise and influence of political Islam and Islamic economics and neoliberalism, it is therefore, surprising that the relationship between Islamist political interests and Islamic banking and finance are not as close as one might think.

ISLAMIST POLITICAL PARTIES AND ISLAMIC BANKING AND FINANCE

Some states utilize only Islamic financial methodologies in their countries' banking and finance industry (such as *murabaha*, *musharaka*, *mudaraba*,

and *ijara*, among others), including GCC countries, Malaysia, Iran, Sudan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, among others. Islamic methodologies are also employed in state-based finance systems such as the Islamic Development Bank and the tax and welfare systems of Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the Sudan (Kuran 2004, 1, 22). Just 10 countries account for 95% of the world's *shari'a*-compliant assets (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Pakistan) (Domat 2018). In all of these cases, political parties are de facto required to endorse Islamic methodologies in banking and financial systems to varying degrees (Marty and Appleby 1996; Smith 2004; Andayani Budisetyowati 2018). Outside of these countries with solely Islamized assets, the possibilities for political endorsement of Islamized financial methodologies are great and often unrealized in the mainstream.

Islamist parties do not often hold platforms of economic policies that endorse Islamic banking and finance. As Saif and Sulayman Abu Rumman (2012) discuss, the four main Islamist political parties in the Arab world (Tunisia's Ennahda, Egypt's Freedom and Justice Party, Morocco's Justice and Development Party, and Jordan's IAF) have "either made a strong showing at the ballot box or are expected to do so in upcoming elections" (1). Each of these parties have offered policies that aim to overcome the key challenges of their national economies, including partnerships with the private sector, combat corruption, strengthen good governance, eliminate financial waste, and implement social justice, especially through international economic agreement (1). The programs are often ambiguous, and while they support Islamic financing as one possible means to secure funding for development initiatives, the parties all agree that Islamic finance should co-exist with conventional financing (1). Ennahda in Tunisia is the only case featured in the work of Saif and Sulayman Abu Rumman (2012) with a platform statement in support of Islamic banking and finance (Saif and Sulayman Abu Rumman 2012, 6). Egypt's FJP does not address the subject of Islamic banking at all (11), and Morocco's PJD investment plans require reduced rates on loans that may be achievable through Islamic financing (15). Jordan's IAF, the authors assert, have largely reproduced their economic platforms as almost exact duplicates since 1993, with the exception of 2007 which omits a call to bring economic and financial legislation in line with Islamic law, which is both ambiguous and signals an interest in maintaining the status quo (17). This case is discussed more in depth below.

Outside of these Arab Islamist parties, another example worth discussing is that of Turkey. The first Islamic banks in Turkey were opened in the mid-1980s under the Motherland Party (Baskan 2004, 224; Asutay 2013, 213). The banks initially were established as “Special Finance Houses” because of legal impediments to founding banks termed “Islamic,” until the law was changed in 1999 (Baskan 2004, 224). The establishment of the Union of Special Finance Houses in 2001, which provides guarantees for depositors’ money in case of bankruptcy, initially strengthened the position of Islamic banking and finance in Turkey (Artar, Okumuş, and Genç 2016). In 2005, the Special Finance Houses were converted into “Participation Banks,” which were defined as such due to the profit and loss sharing and variable rates of returns paid on deposits (Asutay 2013, 213); one “participates” in the commercial activities of the bank.

However, in the last decade or so, the current state of economic and finance in Turkey has far little to do with Islamic banking and finance, despite an Islam-friendly and supportive government being in power through the AKP (Asutay 2013, 213). Many of the financial institutions such as the Participation Banks have been penalized or closed for their close links with the Gulen movement, including Bank Asya in 2016, which was seized by the government and liquidated. Erdogan still eyes growing Islamic finance in Turkey through the state-controlled Vakifbank (Ahval News 2018), which has Islamic finance capabilities. However, “no direct correlation between political Islam and the existence of Participation Banks can be claimed” (Asutay 2013, 223). In other words, despite the appearance of religious concerns, Islamic banking and finance has been pushed forward due to economic conditions rather than religious motivations (Demiralp 2009, 324–25).

It is not only the case that Islamist political parties have shied away from endorsing Islamic banking and finance. At least some Muslim financiers have preferred aligning with the *’ulama* and *shari’a* scholars over more politicized Islamists because of the moral authority that the former exercised over potential banking clientele’ (Kahf 2004, 10). This alliance benefited both parties in several ways. As Kahf (2004, 32) discusses, “after centuries of dormancy, the *’ulama* have a new chance to play a crucial role in the development of events in their countries, without being brushed aside by political Islamic movements.” Thus, there is great potential and real ideological alignment of political Islamism with economic interests both within the Islamic banking and finance sector and with the ethics and social life of a Muslim middle class. It is,

therefore, surprising that the relationship between Islamist political parties and Islamic banking and finance are not as close as one might think.

ISLAM AND NEOLIBERALISM IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

Growing financial inclusion is a neoliberal policy that the global Islamic banking and finance sector was able to take up quickly. In the case of Malaysia, for example, Rudnyckyj (2017) argues that neoliberalization has resulted into the extension of economic ideas and aims into previously excluded domains (272). The process creates new subjectivities—particularly subjectivities that are well-tuned and formed to the demands of neoliberalism. Financial inclusion through Islamic finance, Rudnyckyj argues, occurs not through debt-based inclusion or participation in “pension plans, home mortgages and other mass-marketed financial products” (Van der Zwan 2014, 102, as cited in Rudnyckyj 2017, 273), but rather through equity-based arrangements that incorporate the Malays who are “unbanked.” The Islamic banking and finance sector is not only able to “discipline” the customers into proper banking and religious life, but to also and simultaneously convince them to overcome their moral and religious objections to participating in finance at all. Islamic banking serves as a moral and religious umbrella that can and does facilitate the financial inclusion and neoliberal interests of political actors, including Islamists. These are all lessons that could be applicable in the case of Jordan.

In the case of Turkey, we see that any tensions between Islamic ethics and neoliberalism become resolved through work. In Jenny White's (2004) ethnography, *Money Makes Us Relatives*, we see that acting in accordance with local notions of being a good Muslim can even be antithetical to the kinds of values that an Islamic economics puts forth. The ethnography is a 2-year study among in Istanbul's squatter areas where the rural and urban migrants acquire income from outsourced work, especially of knitting, from garment manufacturers and exporters. The book demonstrates the ways in which women, while seeking to fulfill localized notions of female propriety and earn some income, actually engage in an enabling of penetrations of capitalism. Through ideologies of work, women, obligation, and mutual indebtedness, the capitalist economy grows and, simultaneously, women pursue meaningful ways of being “good Muslims.”

White points out that there are localized notions of legitimate and illegitimate profits, which are solidified through ideologies of obligation and

mutual indebtedness (2004, 141–43). These notions run counter to those set forth in Islamic economics. That is, in localized, Turkish conceptions legitimate profits are those that have been earned by way of labor that has been “given” rather than “sold.” Illegitimate profit is that which is obtained by coercion. By framing the workers’ contributions as “given” rather than sold, the money they receive becomes part of a larger system of reciprocity, thereby also legitimizing delayed payments for piecework and further entrenching these relations of unequal power and reciprocity.

These localized and Islamized penetrations of neoliberal economics are anticipated given the larger political context. Further, as Atasoy (2009, 20) argues, neoliberal policy-making in Turkey is premised upon the private sphere of the market economy (as White (2004) demonstrates) with the public sphere of the administrative state. Former Prime Minister Erdogan and AKP articulated the intersection of Islam and neoliberalism as a distinctly national-Turkish formation rooted in authentic traditions along with a universal standard (Atasoy 2009, 10). This articulation of a national Islamic economy as “both-and”—that is, both local and universal—opens a wide umbrella to many along the Islamic-secular spectrum. And thus in Turkey, “Virtually all political parties agree on the neoliberal principles of privatization of public corporations, foreign direct investment, liberalization of trade, and entrepreneurship” (Atasoy 2009, 16).

The case of Egypt is one in which the compatibilities of Islam with neoliberalism have also been discussed by political parties at the highest levels. As Masoud (2014, 148–50) elucidates, Egyptian respondents in his work believed that Islamists are “more redistributive” and “more welfare-statist” than other political groups (148). At first glance, this might promote the idea that Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), who railed “against high prices, unemployment, and inequalities of wealth” as well as a new minimum wage (148–49), were more interested in economic policies that did not conform to neoliberal ideas. However, at the same time, the MB in Egypt also promoted policy positions that were more in line with neoliberal economic policy (149). For example, the Deputy General Guide Khayrat al-Shatir discussed the group’s commitment to free-market capitalism with a group of American lawmakers. Further, the head of a major Egyptian bank indicated that he found the MB promising because it was “capitalist in its thinking” (149). Masoud finds these relatively recent statements and policies of pro-capitalist agendas to actually fit a longer-range understanding of the MB (149–50). As early as the 1970s, the MB supported trade

openings, privatization and scaling down of the public sector, and private property protections. Even more recently Egypt's Salafi Nur Party in 2011 has made even stronger party statements in support of an Islamized economy. They have called for an Islamic Chamber of Commerce, the encouragement of small businesses, help "to transmit the voices of Islamic businessmen to decision-making circles," and economic legislation that is aimed to lift burdensome tariffs and taxes (Masoud 2014, 150). Thus, the general trajectory in Egypt appears to be one of political-economic Islamic actors that promote neoliberal economic policy. This paper now turns to explore in-depth the case of Jordan.

ISLAMIC BANKING AND FINANCE IN A NEOLIBERAL JORDAN

In the 1970s in Jordan, Islamists politically institutionalized their efforts (Wiktorowicz 1999). The threat of Islamist politics unseating the monarchy was relatively weak in Jordan, where Islamists had played an independent role (Lust 2011), which enabled some cooperation with the government. While the Jordanian government worked to develop the official, sanctioned vision for and content of Islam through the Advisory Council of Dar al-Ifta (Department for Issuing Fatwas) and the Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, it also carefully vetted and then either banned political Islamist parties seen as "too extreme" such as Hizb ut-Tahrir or incorporated them into the political system, as in the case of the MB charitable organization and later its political arm, the IAF. During the Jordanian civil war (1970–1971) the MB allied with the Hashemite monarchy and the widely popular King Hussein against the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The alliances between the MB and the Hashemite monarchy were vital in the establishment of an Islamic banking system.

Sami Hamoud, an economist, former employee of the Jordanian National Bank, the son of a prominent Islamic scholar, and a major proponent of the Islamization of economic practices, published his doctoral dissertation in 1976, *Islamic Banking*, and established himself and the ideas contained within his work as legitimate forces in an emergent Islamic Jordanian economy. After Arab Bank investors denied Hamoud's requests for investment in Islamic banking in Jordan, the MB stepped up to advocate for this new system. Due to the relatively cooperative relationship between the MB and the monarchy, the Jordanian government relented. Then with support from Saudi Arabia, the Jordan

Islamic Bank (JIB) was established in 1978; a second Islamic bank—the Islamic International Arab Bank—opened in the late 1990s.

Jordan experienced a series of recessions in the 1980s and 1990s that forced the hand of the Hashemites to engage in economic restructuring and reform (Pfeifer 1999). The country entered the first agreements with the IMF after it defaulted on its debt in 1989 (Yadav and Mukherjee 2015, 172). The ensuing program aimed to restructure fiscal and monetary policy, prompt deregulation, enhance privatization, and liberalize international trade. They also aimed to halt corruption. After protests against these policies erupted (Ryan 1998), inflation was reduced from 25% in 1989 to 2% in 2001, and cash reserves helped weather popular tumult in the face of subsidy reductions and abolishment (Sweidan 2004, 45–46).

The Hashemites have become quintessential neoliberal rulers: they embrace an entrepreneurial spirit and promote a pre-defined, self-regulation of spaces of citizenship and economic life (Parker 2009). By undergoing economic, political, and social neoliberal reforms, Jordanian governments established themselves as the arbiters of proper or appropriate financial arrangements, technologies, and ensuing cultural life. The Jordanian banking sector reveals this. Jordan has emerged as an economically liberal and neoliberally-oriented, but politically-restrained security state (Schwedler 2012).

The Jordanian government has historically struggled with mistrust on the part of the populace due to its history of authoritarian practices such as clientelism, corruption, cooptation, and paternalism in policy making (Yom 2009, 151, 160; Ryan 2011, 370–71, 389). The Jordanian populace felt intensely the impact of neoliberal reforms, which exacerbated the high levels of mistrust of governmental and state-affiliate institutions, including financial ones. A lack of trust in the government and the perceived risks in dealing with it are often obstacles to or even prohibitive for governmental expansions and innovations into new fields and methods for public services, including in banking and finance (Bélanger and Carter 2008; Fungáčová, Hasan, and Weill 2019). In Jordan, and throughout much of the MENA region, bank service fees are high and there are weak or unreliable banking institutions (Al-Jazzazi and Sultan 2015, 41–42). These services are particularly important, as other savings facilities are often difficult to find and access in rural areas. They are also important in instances where market liberalization has weakened confidence in banks (Scher and Yoshino 2015, 30–31), as was the case in Jordan (Harrigan, El-Said, and Wang 2006). Many Jordanians therefore opted out of banking and financial institutional practices (if they had even been in them to begin with),

which led to increased levels of financial exclusion in the country. Furthermore, these negative outcomes were not mitigated by education alone (Sarma and Pais 2011). Of obvious and immediate concern are the implications and outcomes of Jordan's privatization efforts and neoliberal reforms that contract and withdraw service offerings from the most costly populations (the poor and rural populations), and also undermine savings infrastructure.

Add to this that some, if not many or most Muslims in Jordan were reticent to participate in the banking and finance sector in general due to the interest-bearing nature of accounts in non-Islamic/conventional banks. Jordanian *'ulama* and leaders in the Islamic banking and finance sector are typically in agreement that receiving or granting a fixed interest rate on accounts as is the norm in conventional finance is forbidden in Islam, with which the populace largely agrees (Tobin 2016, 165–66). Educating Jordanian Muslims into Islamic banking and finance and especially on the Islamic prohibitions of interest on accounts has come in fits and starts at best, and it has not necessarily proven convincing (Tobin 2016, 168). As a result, financial exclusion in Jordan, even on when Islamic banks are present, is a durable issue: Jordan reports the existence of 54,000 bank accounts (Scher 2003, 9), which is well below the approximately 9 million people in the country. There are 16 Jordanian banks in Jordan and nine non-Jordanian banks (ABJ Members). Of these 25 banks operating in Jordan, there are three Jordanian Islamic banks (JIB, International Islamic Arab Bank, and Safwa Islamic Bank) and a few foreign banks that may offer Islamic banking options but do not describe themselves as Islamic. The Islamic banking sector commands a small portion of the overall economy. Commercial banks are the principle allocators of finance capital in Jordan (Al-Tamimi, Abdalla, and Obeidat 2013; Al-fawwaz and Alrgaibat 2015).

THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND THE ISLAMIC ACTION FRONT

The MB was the first major Islamist party in Jordan allowed to operate in the country. Founded in 1945 shortly after the country's independence, the MB is a loyalist-opposition group, which means it operated in opposition to the majority politics in ways that are constructive and responsible while being bounded by loyalty to the monarchy. The group was heavily influenced by the MB in Egypt, namely its founder Imam Hasan al-Banna, and

connected to the branch in Syria. Unlike the cases of Egypt and Syria, however, the MB in Jordan was able to deftly negotiate a peaceful division of labor with the regime and focus on growing the adherence to and practices of Islam in civil society and social services rather than political opposition. It was not until the 1984 elections that the MB found a focus on politics and political representation to be particularly important (Hamid 2013, 545).

In 1992, the MB formed formally its own political party, the IAF. Initial electoral support was widespread, as the IAF won 23 out of 80 parliamentary seats in their first bid for voter representation. From its origins, the IAF was first and foremost a party formed for purposes of Islamic-political/Islamist action, rather than the charitable and ethical work of the MB. According to Ishaq Farhan, one of the IAF's founders, the party is neither "a religious party nor a sectarian or regional one; rather it is an Islamic party that brings together citizens for political action from an Islamic perspective" (Al-Kilani 1994, 99).

This representation of the IAF provides too shallow a history; it fails to demonstrate "the practical application of its evolving ideas on governance" (Hamid 2013, 549). For example, the IAF has turned repeatedly to election boycotts as a political tool. They boycotted the elections in 1997, citing vote manipulation by the regime, and withdrew their candidates in the municipal elections of 2007, again citing manipulation by the authorities (Hamid 2013, 554). The IAF also initiated a series of boycotts including those in 2010 and 2013 as a means to push back against perceptions of malfeasance and corruption among the regime. However, election boycotts also kept the IAF from "practicing politics," as the party's political engagement was often a punctuated policy of electoral dis-engagement.

IAF'S ECONOMIC STRATEGY: HISTORY AND NEOLIBERAL INFLUENCES

The political pattern of "disengagement as engagement" also defines the IAF's economic strategy. The IAF's economic policies are often quite vague and lack specificity, particularly on the means by which the party will "practice economics." According to Saif and Sulayman Abu Rumman (2012, 17), "The IAF has never drafted comprehensive economic programs because its leaders never expected to reach power." As a result, they argue, the economic policy statements of the IAF are some of the least detailed and does not address the challenges facing

the Jordanian economy (17). As Powers (2019, 38) details, the moral economics of the IAF is “defined and compromised by contradiction and internal inconsistency.”

From what the IAF does put forth, however, there is an emphasis on anti-corruption efforts and pro-social justice endeavors. The party also emphasizes fighting poverty and raising employment rates (especially for youth). There is a strong nationalist sentiment, as they advocate for reducing the trade deficit, protecting national industry, and seeking alternative energy sources. According to their own statements, they advocate for “a national plan to gradually free Jordan from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund” (Na'am al-Islam 2007, 25). They are also interested in the “monitoring of foreign investment and resisting its control over the national economy” (Na'am al-Islam 2007, 22). On labor rights, the IAF supports the right of workers to unionize in both private and public industry and advocates full healthcare coverage for workers (Na'am al-Islam 2007, 26). While these statements seem to encourage the idea of engagement, the lofty ideals lack policy specificity and process mechanisms (Robinson 1997, 377; Saif and Sulayman Abu Rumman 2012, 17), similar to other Islamist parties throughout the Middle East (Hamid 2013, 549–50).

The IAF political platforms provide the most specific economic policy details. The 1993 platform professed IAF success in helping to establish a financial corruption monitoring body and in the passage of more ethical laws such as the forgiving of interest payments owed by small-scale farmers and customs duties owed on the Jordanian cars returning from Gulf countries (Malley 2011, 176). How the former could be construed as particularly Islamic is much easier to decipher in light of the prohibition against interest. How the latter is Islamic much more difficult to prove (or claim); the rationale to claim success here appears to be linked to interests in national sovereignty and an interest in an economic pivot away from the West than to anything distinctly Islamic.

The IAF dabbled in policies that more closely aligned it with Islamic banking and finance both in Jordan and beyond the borders, without specifically endorsing and supporting the sector directly. The 1993 version calls to limit or abolish interest, and it is the most clear, stating support for “providing governmental support to the existing Islamic financial institutions and working to increase their number and develop their services so that they will become models for other financial institutions” (Malley 2011, 177). However, clarity and support for this pro-position declines over time. The statement that they would “work to reevaluate financial

legislation to ensure the banning of interest and other Islamically forbidden practices and would orient toward the Islamic *shari'a*” later appears in the 1993, 2003, and 2007 platforms (Brown 2006, 9). However, this aim does not appear in their economic policy statements after 2007.

The first major economic policy that the IAF supported included a housing policy that encouraged contracts in accordance with *shari'a* and to exempt those who have benefitted from the Housing Projects from paying interest (Malley 2011, 177). Beyond these points, IAF platforms pushed for additional support for poverty alleviation programs (typically in the form of training and developmental funds) and pro-working class and economically populist political actions (Powers 2019, 38–40). An IAF statement in 1996 criticized the rising prices of water and electricity and expressed concern for a plan to alleviate unemployment and poverty (Yom and Al-Khatib 2012). Ultimately, the IAF platforms begin to point to a “cultural cure” supporting middle class, Muslim families rather than an economic agenda that emphasizes select policies in support of Islamic banking and finance.

In 2014, the IAF took dramatic measures to brand itself as *the* opposition party with an economic agenda (Martínez 2014) in the announcement and unveiling of the “Jordan Tomorrow 2020” 500-page manifesto. The document features an extensive econometric analysis of 81 sectors, focusing on 31 of which each contributes more than 1% of GDP (Al-Emam 2014). This is supplemented by 65 experts who give economic policy recommendations for comprehensive development, national utilization of natural resources, and the lowering poverty rates. Other than a broad set of policy recommendations to improve economic growth through increased productivity and GDP, decreasing reliance on foreign aid, and growing private sector jobs, the document remains scant on specific mechanisms for achieving the goals. A few minimal exceptions include pushing public–private partnerships and creating savings funds for citizens.

The Jordan Tomorrow 2020 document serves as a notable merging of neoliberal economic ideals and Islamist economics in an idealized fashion by a political Islamist group, without specifically mentioning Islamic banking and finance. The document lays out the need to enhance the entrepreneurial spirit of the populace and the government, financial inclusion that would bring in all members of the populace into greater consumptive practices, and the pushing of market-forward agendas. The document calls for this as the most ethical—and Islamic—solution to the problems facing the Jordanian economy. However, strikingly absent from the document is any suggestion that Islamic institutions in the

form of banks and financial institutions are at all capable of assisting in the efforts. The IAF's plan of "disengagement as engagement" calls for action seemingly as part of living one's everyday life as a Muslim in the contemporary Jordanian economy, rather than as an engaged Islamic citizen promoting a certain political-economic institutional agenda. The differences between the IAF in 2007 and 2014 appear to be that IAF believes less in state interventionism and more in the market as time—and the penetrations of neoliberalism—have continued. These trends are consistent with neoliberal views on the market in general.

Some political Islamists in Jordan such as Dr. Sami Hamoud pointed to the Islamic banks as a testament to the truism that "Islam is the answer" that can provide viable economic solutions to the problems prompted by capitalism (Powers 2019, 49). At the same time and contradictorily, they have criticized the same banks for not doing more for these efforts, arguing that the banks could and should be providing more interest-free loans, focus on investments that would promote the general welfare of society such as schools and education, those investments of national security such as agriculture while raising the national profile and sovereignty by limiting reliance upon the West (Malley 2011, 167).¹

It is striking that the IAF members support an expansion of Islamic banking and finance endeavors, at least their ethical principles, but then do not call for them in their major policy paper (Powers 2019). In fact, one notable way that the neoliberal ethics have come to penetrate and inform political Islamist agendas is found in their criticisms of the banks. Islamists have been part of the larger critiques of Islamic finance that point out the failures and poor performance in Islamic banking and finance in Jordan: they blame mismanagement, lack of expertise, lack of vision, lack of professionalism, taking the customer base for granted, mistreatment of customers, and administrative shortcomings on the individuals running the banks rather than on "any state laws, regulations, or restrictions hindering Islamic financial practices" (Malley 2011, 170–71). Maali and Napier (2010, 106), for example, emphasize that "tensions remain" in Jordan over the intellectual basis of Islamic banking and the Islamic scholarship employed for it. Further, they share (106) a conclusion with Warde (2000, 240) that Islamic finance is "a failure insofar as it did not fulfill its original promise of becoming an original and innovative system, based on risk sharing, that would bring social and economic benefits to the Islamic world." As Tobin (2016) points out, in an interview with a former JIB employee, "We used to take the contracts, print them out on paper with green trim and put a 'Bismillah' at the top and—

wham—it became ‘Islamic!’” (124). Indeed, the IAF had reason to be skeptical.²

The IAF recognizes that it has not done enough to define its economic agenda beyond vague and ambiguous Islamically-imbued economic ideas that particularly suit the middle class Muslims of Jordan (Powers 2019, 50). Economic affairs and policies are a weakness for the IAF which, historically, is because economic policy-making was often seen as a corrupt “dirty job” that often flirted with Islamically-prohibited areas such as interest (Malley 2011, 174). Economic platforms remain merely vague calls for a business-friendly environment paired with social justice interests.

IAF AND MIDDLE-CLASS ISLAM

Rather than supporting Islamic banking and finance in Jordan as part of the party’s economic platform, the IAF adopted an approach to questions of economy in ways that emphasized Islamic and middle-class values from an Islamic perspective in order to gain political support. It is, in fact, as part of a “cultural cure” to economic problems that the IAF lends its greatest support to Islamic banking and finance. And it does this as part of an entire assemblage of “proper” Islamic practice, rather than through institutional support for the Islamic banking and finance sector. As Powers (2019, 46) points out, “Of the thirty-two candidates [put forward by the IAF-organized National Coalition for Reform] for whom biographical information was provided, all except one held at least an undergraduate degree. Ten of the thirty-two had earned PhDs, three held MAs, two held JDs, and one an MD.” Despite the high levels of education, and the history of intellectual contributions from those such as Dr. Sami Hamoud, the IAF has not employed the expertise and intellectual power they collectively have to put forth specific policy prescriptions when it comes to Islamic banking and finance.

As a result, the strength and popularity of the IAF though lay not in its policies, as is true for Islamists throughout the Middle East (Jamal 2012). The lack of policy specificity has, quite to the contrary, actually been quite effective. The ideological frame, in its most vague and ambivalent forms, has wide appeal (Jamal 2012, 71). Hamid (2013, 550) has pointed out that the “IAF’s failure to prioritize economic issues is, in part, a function of the party’s predominantly professional, middle-class composition.” This push toward class-based Islamic ethics, in actuality, serves as the primary economic policy drivers of the IAF instead of policy and platform support for

Islamic banking and finance. Growing the Muslim middle (and consumer) class, appears to be the strategy of the IAF for growing their own political support, rather than promoting institutional development.

As Clark discusses at length (2004, 17, 84, 89), Islamic social institutions supported by the MB and the IAF play a significant—if not *the* significant role—in growing middle-class networks and a culture of patronizing Islamic institutions such as the banks and finance centers. The rise of the middle-class occupations—professional civil service and the private service sector—constitute a major impetus for the rise of the middle class in Jordan in general and characterizes much of Amman today (Schwedler 2010). As early as the 1980s, middle class Muslim actors were a sizable demographic in Amman, and they were often both driving and riding the wave of Islamism in ways that pushed for a critique of Western habits and lifestyles as well as Islamized social norms and expressions (Clark 2004). A similar trend was evident in Morocco. Jordan, as with much for the region, witnessed the public adherence to Islamic customs in many ways that were shared throughout the region: increased frequency of donning the *hijab* and Islamic dress, attendance at Friday prayers rose, more people fasted for Ramadan, and more men grew beards. And, more and more people turned to Islamic banking and financial institutions to manage their middle-class earnings and lifestyles.

Due to neoliberal political economic policies as well as the kind of subjectivity formation that Rudnykyj (2017) describes above in the case of Malaysia, Ammanis have constructed a highly discursive Islamic middle class from attachments to symbols of global cosmopolitanism and Islamic knowledge (Tobin 2016, 9–13, 186), largely bypassing and overlooking the negative and disenfranchising impact of neoliberal reforms. Neoliberalism here can be a productive and generative force for profit-oriented activities, and in ways that cohere with Islamic ethics (Atzori 2015). Attachment to these symbolic markers of modernity and cosmopolitanism—which range from Starbucks to Mecca Mall—is linked to promoting consumerism and constitutes a primary way in which these otherwise excluded populations are constituting the middle class in Jordan and participating in the global economy. The Arab Spring in Jordan failed to mobilize the masses because a large and socio-economically diverse middle class continued consuming and enacting class (Tobin 2012), and as long as such Ammanis are able to continue consuming symbolic markers, precarity will be kept at bay and nationalist sentiment will continue to include a strong class component. This renders the Jordanian, especially Ammani, populace particularly well-keyed for an IAF that

does not need to support formally Islamic banking and finance in their policy platforms. Rather, a robust Islamic middle class can see opportunities for supporting the IAF through the support of shared ethics and values rather than policies and technicalities that are only made possible through neoliberal policies. Neoliberalism, according to at least some in the IAF and the Jordanian public, is not necessarily a bad thing.

In fact, some members of the populace cite the IAF's organizational capacities as the means by which the political party achieved recognition as a legitimate and relevant organization (Jamal 2012, 70–71). Such organizational capacities are strongly linked with class (Jamal 2012, 18). The Jordan Tomorrow 2020 document aims to be freed from Islamist political ideology, which makes it simultaneously more appealing to the grassroots and mass public and applicable and viable for adoption as a basis for a national strategy (Oddone 2016). This is important because there is now a growing grassroots movement of Islamists distrustful of the government and turned off by corruption (Patel 2018). They include, among others, the Jordanian Engineers Association, the Businessmen's Prosperity Association (*Jami'yat al-Rakha*), and the Anti-Normalization Committee who all try to mobilize their own financial resources in Islamic ways for the growth and development of the economic sector. A frustration with the Islamic banks for not doing *more* to grow the general public ethics and norms of an Islamized society through economic reform is exactly the kind of frustration that can spur further engagement and give credence to the ambiguous statements of Islamic economic policy from the IAF. The IAF is not too bothered by the shortcomings of neoliberalism when there are ways to bolster its political support from amongst the general public and, in turn, push for generalized economic transformations *through* it, rather than despite it. This emphasis on the middle class can and does, in turn, create new frictions between classes who may hold aspirations and engage practices to be full members of the middle class.

This generative tension emerges most clearly in the cases of charitable giving among the Islamic banks and financial institutions. The JIB, for example is very heavily invested in charitable donations that represent their interests including a housing project for middle-class Muslims, which facilitates home ownership among, typically, those nuclear families with dual incomes seeking to live independently of paternal or maternal extended family (Wilson 1987, 220–23). The Islamic no-interest loans are a type of charity and are in high demand because they represent the merging of middle-class home ownership aspirations (precarity aversion through home ownership) with compatibilities of an Islamic life and

lifestyle. This is an example of emergent neoliberal ethics and subjectivities found amongst middle class and lower-middle class Ammani who may well support the IAF as a political party.

The Chastity Society (*jama'iyat al-'afaf al-khayriyya*) is part of a network charitable organizations stretching across the entire Middle East. They provide educational material, offer trainings, and support weddings. In Jordan, they are funded by the JIB and are close to the IAF in both person of leadership and organizational composition. The charity is directly linked to the IAF, as the former party leader, Abdul Lateef Arabiyyat, is the leader of the charity. The Chastity Society provides needy couples financial assistance to get married (Wiktorowicz and Farouki 2000), and in mass weddings (NBC News 2007). The charity provides every groom in their program a 100JOD gift (\$141). They also provide hundreds of thousands of dollars each year in the form of interest-free loans with generous donations from the JIB.

Hughes (2017) conducted an ethnography of the premarital classes offered by the Chastity Society. These cases deftly describe the ways that the working-class men are the targets of such educational efforts, as they aim to “train” young men for marriage. The training efforts are social–capital infusers: they aim to teach the young men “enlightenment out” of their ways that are “ignorant, backward, mired in blind tradition, and crying out for social uplift” (4). They do so in the inculcation of Islamic middle-class values of Qur’anic authority through marital *adab* (virtue, manners, propriety, and politesse), through the eradication of pornography and sexual self-indulgence (6–7); in science-based, biomedical authority and discourses that promote rational thought as well as emotional and sexual restraint and selflessness with one’s spouse (6–7); and in representations of the Jordanian public (read: working class) as mired in vulgar tradition, lowbrow custom, and unthinking repetition (9). Thus, with the aspirational middle class, the IAF most represents and benefits from promoting Islamic and neoliberal economics. It also sees the improvement of the lot of Jordanians to be achieved through “education to proper Islamic ethics” rather than through a fundamental restructuring of the economy. In this case, the working-class men become the uncouth who need to be educated into the predominant cultural hegemony, which is exactly what today’s neoliberalism is about.

In efforts such as these, the IAF is taking seriously an economic strategy of engagement through disengagement. While politically the group may turn away from overt political action through boycotts as prompts for government reform and disengage from acts of governance, the real work of

economic action is occurring in promoting class-based ethics and norms that make utilization of Islamic institutions—from hospitals and schools to the banks and financial institutions—the norm. Growing the consumer base through the inculcation of neoliberal values is the means by which the IAF has succeeded the most at their economic agenda, not through policy endeavors and agendas for high level change.

NEOLIBERALISM IN JORDAN'S POLITICAL SCENE

Despite the electoral challenges, the IAF and the charitable arm of the Islamists in the MB remain relatively popular. There are two compelling reasons for this (Rohac 2012). First, the IAF and the MB have a long history of legitimate and effective organization. This is key for any organization trying to navigate the economically-neoliberal but politically-repressive environment in Jordan. Islamists in Jordan are now adept at running non-profit services for the public, socializing and teaching them into specific interests and ethics, and building support for a thriving economic life. At first glance, these efforts are not the work of political Islamists with an economic agenda. However, the passage of time has demonstrated that the paradox of an Islamist political party not endorsing institutional change of Islamic banking and finance—despite quite strong compatibilities—is, in fact, changing consumers and their demands with a concomitant interest in changing political life. Second, the IAF and MB often fill the gaps of neoliberal governance by providing community services and schooling, health care, and aid, much like Atia's pious neoliberalism (2013). The IAF and MB are the most prominent purveyors of neoliberal private-sector support and aid in Jordan, even as their articulation of such work is not done in ways that clarify a central and compelling economic policy, especially in banking and finance sectors. In conditions of uncertainty and precarity, these efforts go great distances in building goodwill with the populace. Islamist Politics in Jordan is now embracing neoliberal platforms that include free markets, support for society in the absence of governmental aid, and the growth (symbolic and real) of a consumer-friendly middle class, and they do so with a tenor of social and religious conservatism. The two can and do go hand in hand in Jordan.

Year 2017 saw the growth of new and rebranded Islamist political parties in this pro-neoliberal economic environment. As of 2016 and 2017, there are now five Islamist parties in contention for votes (Timreck 2017). In addition to the IAF, there is the Muslim

Brotherhood Society (a MB splinter group that is led by a former MB official), the National Coalition for Reform (NCR; an IAF-backed alliance with Christians, nationalists, and others), Wasat Party (an Islamist-Centrist party), and the Zamzam Initiative (a MB splinter group with a former IAF lead in charge). This is largely because the laws changed in 2016 which Islamists saw an opportunity (Timreck 2017). As a result, the strategies that Islamist parties in Jordan will take on with regard to the economy will likely vary in an attempt to capture the neoliberal political economic context in which they live and operate.

CONCLUSIONS

The attempts at Islamizing economic life—both structural and mundane—have been increasing since the latter half of the 20th century. After the Iranian revolution, more and more Muslims were interested in injecting Islamic values into contemporary politics, political parties, constitutions, and political activities that went beyond the state and into services and necessary private institutions, civil society, personal piety, family and home arrangements, pedagogical approaches, and social responsibility. At the same time, neoliberal reforms were altering the field for both political Islamists and everyday Jordanians. Muslims were turning to the state and the economy as a way to become better Muslims themselves, and also to create a better society for others, even as the negative impacts of neoliberalism hammered the poor and working class. “Islam is the answer,” they heard. And, now considered a truism in the region is that Islamism “appeals to both the losers and the winners of global neo-liberal economic restructuring” (Beinin 2005 113).

Support for Islamists is not often decided by economic policy. There is no case (in Jordan at least) where support for Islamist parties is due to attitudes on economic policy (Robbins 2011). While many analysts have attempted to parse out exactly what the appeal of Islamists politics is about and how it is garnered, it is clear that the ambiguous and general statements of the IAF and others is not winning over the populace. What is also, clear, however, is that the ethical work of inculcating Islamic values into the public through civil society, necessary services, charity, and educational efforts (among others) raises their support. In turn, the demand for middle-class Islamic institutions raises the hope for an Islamic bank of the future—one that is effective and popular, and—

most importantly—included as a necessary part of Islamic party economic platforms.

Ultimately, the case of the IAF in Jordan demonstrates that the contours of neoliberalism found here are responsive to social and political realities and contingent upon the local context. In the recalibrations of the relationship between the state and civil society upon Islamic and neoliberal tenets, the IAF has pursued the applications of an economic Islamic theology that are diffuse and ethical rather than technical and bureaucratic. This pragmatic approach to Islamist politics has set the stage for enhanced appeal for neoliberal Islamism into the future.

NOTES

1. Maali and Napier (2010) argue that this is due to the historical emergence of Islamic banking in Jordan, which required some intellectual and theological compromises in order to facilitate legally the opening of the first Islamic bank in the country.

2. There are a number of discussions of these points of skepticism beyond Jordan as well and criticisms by The Organization of Islamic Conference Academy, The Islamic Fiqh Academy, and by Accounting and Auditing Organization for Islamic Financial Institutions (AAOIFI) (see Elshurafa (2012), and especially pages 351–52 for a longer discussion). See also Lone and Ahmad (2017).

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