



ISLAM IN THE CRUCIBLE

WAR IN THE MIDDLE EAST IS NO LONGER
ABOUT NATIONS: IT'S ABOUT RELIGION. IN THE
DESERT KINGDOM OF JORDAN A FEW BRAVE
SOULS ARE TRYING TO RECLAIM A FAITH THAT
HAS BEEN HIJACKED BY TERRORISTS



It's 4:40 A.M. on a chilly April morning in downtown Amman, Jordan—too late for coffee and backgammon and too early for falafel. On the second floor of a drab commercial complex, the lights burn bright and four young men huddle around a computer screen, laughing and throwing high fives.

The hushed city below smells of Islam and sex. Men who walk the streets this late give off the scent of *misk*—a reddish flower oil said to have been worn by the prophet Muhammad himself—as they make their way to mosque, bearded and robed, for the dawn prayer. They avoid looking at the buxom prostitutes who wander in high heels from one wide intersection to the next, their jet-black hair unveiled, leaving a trail of sugary perfume behind them. A long avenue's procession of boarded-up shops and gritty social halls empties into the ruins of an ancient Roman amphitheater, devoid of tourists under the starless, hazy sky.

The hour before sunrise in the Kingdom of Jordan used to be the exclusive domain of the pious and the horny—until the appearance of the World Wide Web. Now the edge of night is ablaze with streaming video images and Arabic Internet chat rooms, as I discover at the end of a long stroll when I chance up a flight of stairs into a 24-hour cybercafe. I pay one Jordanian dinar, about \$1.40, for an hour's access to e-mail and the Internet and take the last available seat in front of a computer terminal.

The four boys across from me, huddled around a 16-inch screen, appear to be college-age buddies. Two or three days' stubble on their faces, their clothes a little sloppy, they would look at home in a sports bar. At first, when they raise their arms, clench their fists and shout in unison, I figure they must be watching a soccer match or maybe an X-rated video. I lean over to get a peek and realize with a start that they are watching the beheading of 26-year-old American entrepreneur Nicholas Berg by a man believed to be the Jordanian-born Islamist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. On their computer screen, Arabic subtitles laced over the graphic images urge viewers to keep Islam's "holy warriors" in their prayers.

As the video approaches its final frame, the first call to prayer of the day is heard outside. The chant echoes across this modern city, hastening the faithful to make for the nearest mosque. "Let's go, brothers," one of the young men tells his friends. They pack up and go off into the thin light of the morning.

If the Middle East today is a whirlwind of war and civil strife, then Jordan and its ancient capital, Amman, are eerily quiet for the moment. A desert kingdom roughly the size of Indiana, Jordan is ruled by King Abdullah, perhaps America's closest Arab ally. Only 135 miles away, the Lebanese Islamist militia Hezbollah has been locked in mortal combat with the Israeli Defense Forces. Bloody civil strife in Iraq, on Jordan's eastern border, claims hundreds of lives monthly, including a steady trickle of American soldiers who occupy that country. The Palestinian territories to Jordan's west are now ruled by the radical Islamist militant group Hamas, which openly aspires to destroy the Jewish state and orders suicide attacks to that end.

Inside Jordan's 3,800 mosques, where nearly one third of the country's 6 million people attend Friday prayer services, generations of young men and women have learned to hate the West, to steel themselves for jihad and to despise Jews and the

state of Israel. Radical clerics who hailed from Amman taught both Zarqawi and Osama bin Laden, and these two are only the best known among thousands of their students. Yet somehow, under the watchful eye of a pervasive security and intelligence apparatus, Jordan has largely maintained a semblance of calm—aside from one major plot that escaped the regime's attention, a triple suicide bombing in three Amman hotels last year that killed 60 people.

Just a few hours after I watch the boys leave the cybercafe, prosecutors charge a similar group of local teenagers with plotting to kill Americans, Jews and Iraqi police recruits in a systematic terrorist campaign. The call to violence, which the boys first encountered on the Internet, was allegedly reinforced at a mosque in downtown Amman where sermons by Zarqawi and Al Qaeda paraphernalia were distributed. Committed to martyrdom, the young men went back to the Internet to shop for training in weapons and explosives. They were caught once they began e-mailing Syrian and Iraqi terrorists in an attempt to secure the logistical support they needed.

Five years after 9/11, Jordan and several other Arab governments have concluded that radical Islamism must be driven out of the Muslim world. They've cracked down on Islamist groups within their borders and pooled intelligence with Western governments and one another. They stand by nervously while Israeli and American forces attack Islamist fighters in Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq. Egyptian, Bahraini, Jordanian and Saudi leaders all pointed the finger at Hezbollah this past July for sparking war between Israel and Lebanon rather than condemning their traditional nemesis, Israel. An influential Kuwaiti newspaper editor went so far as to voice his support for Israel's initial military response.

Jordan's king has declared war on Al Qaeda, a Sunni movement, but he also rails against Shiite Islamists such as the Hezbollah fighters who he believes cast a growing shadow on regional security. He has warned of an emerging "Shiite crescent" stretching from Iran through Iraq and Syria into Lebanon, which "will be very destabilizing for the Gulf countries and for the whole region."

What else can moderate governments do? Well, only recently some Arab leaders have publicly acknowledged what was known all along: The roots of Islamist militancy lie as much in the religious teachings of radical clerics, whose presence was tolerated for decades in their countries, as in broader social and political ills. Jordan's government, for one, has resolved to change this pattern—in essence, to reclaim Islam from extremists. Seminaries, houses of worship and the clergy who teach and preach in them are being compelled to convince the next generation of Muslims to turn away from suicide, terrorism and anti-American warfare. As a result, these holy men, the imams, are caught between one set of demands from their government paymasters and another that reflects the more militant attitude shared by the many hard-liners within their flocks.

In this part of the world it is an act of bravery to mourn for the innocent civilian casualties of Israel. It is braver still to condemn Hezbollah's actions. The men who do so find themselves

by Joseph Braude



Above: Terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, born in Jordan and educated by the country's radical clerics, led Al Qaeda in Iraq until his death, in June 2006. Right: An antiterrorism rally in downtown Amman on November 18, 2005. Tens of thousands of Jordanians took to the streets following Friday prayer to show solidarity with King Abdullah after suicide bombers hit three hotels the previous month. The king has declared war on Al Qaeda.



in a spiritual danger zone at the heart of the most fiery intrareligious conflict in the world today. Whether the region's moderates can win this struggle for the hearts and minds of Arab and Muslim youth will have a sweeping impact on the safety and security of the rest of the world.

I have come to Jordan to witness firsthand how a 1,400-year-old religion will attempt to purge its violent radicals. It's going to be difficult. Al Qaeda and other jihadist groups reach millions of young people even without the backing of brick-and-mortar religious institutions. With Internet and satellite technology, they continue to preach the killing of innocent civilians, including Americans of every creed, Jews and Christians globally and any Muslims who disagree with them. Still, if these militant voices could be effectively countered in the mosques and clerical networks of Muslim states, there could be some hope for the future, hope that young Arab men will again cheer over sports, not beheadings. It is the best bet of the civilized world.

In upscale West Amman, across the street from a KFC restaurant, a gray-bearded cleric welcomes me to an austere white-walled sitting room adjoining the prayer hall of his mosque. Sheikh Mustafa Abu Romman has fielded hundreds of requests from earnest young worshippers who want to wage holy war, sometimes in neighboring Iraq or Israel, sometimes as far west as New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. "I remember a few days after the fall of Baghdad," he says, "someone came to me at the afternoon prayer and said, 'I want you to put me in touch with any organization that will send me out to wage jihad.' He said it with rage, and his body was shaking. He thought if he became a martyr, he could liberate the Muslim nation."

Sheikh Mustafa, an affable 50-something with a youthful twinkle in his eye, is a Jordanian army veteran who speaks fondly of his years as a soldier. He receives a monthly government stipend—not to keep fit for fighting but to preach in a mosque controlled by the official ministry of Islamic affairs. Though he avoids preaching politics from the pulpit, in keeping with the government's directives, he's not faking it: He's a genuine moderate known to oppose the militant streak of some of the city's imams. Two of his brothers work in Haifa, a city in northern Israel that has endured hundreds of rocket attacks from Hezbollah since July. Rather than abandon the Jewish state when the war began, both brothers chose to remain in Haifa, braving the attacks in underground shelters alongside their Israeli co-workers. Sheikh Mustafa says he has kept them in mind each Friday while the war rages, preaching to his flocks about the

unity of humankind and calling for a cessation of hostilities.

When the young aspiring suicide bomber came to this quiet room to ask the cleric for guidance, Sheikh Mustafa remembers telling him, "Please, after the afternoon prayer we'll talk together, God willing, and after the afternoon prayer, God willing, I'll direct you to the appropriate place." I wanted, you know, little by little, to calm him down." What happened, I wanted to know. "The boy didn't wait. He left and got killed."

"How do you know?" I ask.

Sheikh Mustafa sighs and motions vaguely out the window as if to indicate the dangers of the city around him. It's nightfall now, and scores of holy men in the distance, clutching their megaphones, wail the call to prayer for the fifth time today. He knows the young man is dead, he says, because other clerics in town would readily have steered him to battle—"and because he never came back." This was one he lost, though he says hundreds more who sought him out have left his company opposed to terrorism.

His lined face tightens into a mischievous smile. "Every soul has its key," he says. "We're learning to unlock them, one soul at a time."

The sheikh is a realist, however. Recently a worshipper left behind an unmarked package in his mosque. The sheikh didn't open it. He picked up the phone and called the bomb squad.

I feel a personal stake in the struggle for the future of Islam. I am an American, an Arabic-speaking American Jew who grew up hearing his mother's stories of her native Baghdad—a Baghdad that no longer exists—in which more than 100,000 Jewish Iraqis mixed freely and easily with their Muslim and Christian neighbors under a benign Muslim king. I still dream of my mother's Baghdad and a Middle East that restores that spirit of tolerance.

Yet ever since I began traveling regularly in the region, 11 years ago, I've watched the practice of Islam grow increasingly intolerant, incited by chauvinist preachers and stoked by the tragedies of warfare and occupation. It says a lot that currently one of the most commonly found books for sale in Islamic markets, besides the Koran, is the infamous *Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. This anti-Semitic forgery by the 19th century Russian secret police alleges a Jewish plot to enslave the world and drink the blood of gentiles and has been used in Europe to justify the mass extermination of Jews. *Protocols* has been translated into Arabic and Farsi, subsidized by Sunni Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and governments such as the Shiite (continued on page 78)

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"Consider yourself warned," Sheikh Mustafa says. "Be careful what you say—and watch your back."

Islamic Republic of Iran. Many Muslims, like no small number of Germans during World War II, believe the text to be gospel truth. Small wonder, then, that a bunch of college-age kids in Jordan can cheer the killing of Nicholas Berg, an innocent Jewish American, then go off to pray.

In my journey through the mosques and Islamic seminaries of Amman in spring 2006, I looked for signs that somehow these attitudes may begin to change. No thanks to the bloody violence in Lebanon, Iraq and the Palestinian territories, this oil-poor desert kingdom has urgent motivation for change. And Jordan is not acting alone.

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"Consider yourself warned," Sheikh Mustafa says, "if you choose to meet my colleague Sheikh Ahmad Nofal; be careful what you say—and watch your back."

Sheikh Mustafa has taken an interest in my safety. His friendly warning concerns an aging local cleric who happens to be a household name throughout the kingdom. Nofal is in his 60s now, though you wouldn't know it from his most recent videotaped sermons. In addition to wearing heavy makeup, he keeps his hair slicked back and, along with his beard, dyed dark brown.

"Watch your back" would seem a strange thing to say about a fellow man of God and a tenured professor at the University of Jordan in Amman. Nofal has been teaching in the faculty of Islamic law for more than 20 years, and hundreds of present-day clerics cut their teeth on Islamic texts under his tutelage. On a visit to campus I ask two young women at the Center for Strategic Studies, a short walk from the Islamic law department, what they think of the dapper professor.

"He's the sweetest man," says 22-year-old Hanin Khatir, a Lebanese-born sociology major wearing tight jeans and a revealing black blouse. "I love him." Her girlfriend Nur al-Tayyan takes a drag on her cigarette and nods slowly. "He accepts me for who I am, even though I don't wear the veil, even though I'm not that religious." She pauses to explain, "We have boyfriends. We party." The two women giggle at this small confession. "All Ahmad Nofal cares about is that I treat my fellow Muslims with respect."

Yet intelligence agencies on both sides of the Atlantic believe Nofal has a broader agenda that couldn't possibly be called benign. The professor himself broadly acknowledges having dispatched fighters into Israel in the early 1980s. Here in Amman he has been banned from the government-controlled national television network since the signing of the Jordanian-Israeli peace accords in 1994. He is also barred from entering the United States, after having extolled armed jihad at a Brooklyn Islamic conference he attended in the early 1990s at which he shared a dais with Omar Abdel Rahman, the blind Egyptian cleric now serving life in prison for plotting to take down New York's World Trade Center in 1993.

"Ahmad Nofal is a terrorist," says Steven Emerson, whose 1994 PBS documentary *Jihad in America* first exposed Nofal's connection to the blind sheikh. "He shouldn't be trusted to teach kids about Islam."

Emerson sparked controversy before 9/11 for accusing numerous Islamist charities and advocacy groups in the U.S. of having ties to terrorism. But he praises King Abdullah's Islamic initiatives in Jordan. "There is a genuine effort going on in Amman to provide an alternative to radical ideologies in the country's mosques and schools," Emerson says. "Efforts like these are crucial and should be encouraged in every Arab and Muslim country."

Nofal is an all-star of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, Jordan's sister franchise to the Palestinian Hamas. Founded in Egypt nearly a century ago, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the transnational movement has planted deep roots in nearly every Muslim country. It also claims many followers among Muslim diaspora communities in Europe and the U.S. When Israel's air war against Hezbollah commenced in July, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood led thousands of marchers through the streets of Amman, hoisting Hezbollah flags and images of its turbaned leader, Sheik Hassan Nasrallah. When U.S. and Iraqi officials announced the slaying of Al Qaeda leader Zarqawi in June, four Jordanian Brotherhood MPs paid a condolence call to his family, proclaiming him a martyr. The move provoked outrage in

Jordan largely because Zarqawi had ordered last year's deadly hit on three Amman hotels. The officials were jailed and fined.

Nofal's doctrine, the Muslim Brotherhood's party line of Islamic rule and an end to Israel, is precisely what some pro-Western Arab rulers and moderate clerics like Sheikh Mustafa are trying to roll back. But once you get to know the Brotherhood's formidable infrastructure in this country, you discover it isn't so easily marginalized.

Nofal's Thursday-night sermon in a middle-class Amman neighborhood is a jam-packed all-male affair. Inside the mosque waits an anxious crowd that is a cross section of society in the kingdom. Mustached Jordanian ethnics with leathery bedouin complexions pray in their police and armed-forces uniforms alongside bearded Palestinian refugees and their children. Before the main event gets under way, a TV film crew sets up lights, a tripod and a microphone in the center of the hall.

"Didn't you say he was banned from public television?" I ask the Palestinian cleric in his 20s who serves as tonight's master of ceremonies, in the anteroom adjoining the main sanctuary.

"Yes, and he still is," he says. A hopeful smile sneaks onto the young preacher's solemn face. "But now he gets to be on Iqraa, which is a Saudi-owned satellite network out of Kuwait, and Al-Majd, out of Saudi Arabia. People are watching him everywhere, and there's no stopping him anymore."

Back in 1970 Islamist hard-liners like Nofal served as comrades in arms to the young King Hussein of Jordan in his bloody civil war against Yasir Arafat's secular PLO. As payback for supporting the king, Jordan's Islamists enjoyed rewards unmatched by any other group in the state. They were given control of the ministries of education and Islamic affairs, which meant the authority to teach and preach to generations of Jordanian youth in schools and mosques throughout the kingdom.

According to a prominent Brotherhood thinker who quit the organization in the late 1990s, the movement used these perks to transform Jordanian society. "When I got into the Muslim Brotherhood in the mid-1970s," he recalls, "our nation was secular, barely religious, and the only people who went to the mosque were either very old or young Brotherhood members like myself." Now, he says, "the whole society has become religious. You go to the mosque, it's full of worshippers."

The brand of Islam the Brotherhood advances is on display tonight as Nofal

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"The hellfire for you, you slut!" says a bearded teen to the girl in jeans. "Fear God! Fear God!" says a veiled student.

takes center stage—his dark-brown-tinted beard hugged tight by a red-and-white-checked kaffiyeh—to hearty cheers of *"Allahu Akbar!"* ("God is the greatest!") from the worshipping crowd.

"The whole world is harnessing its troops to confront 'terrorism' and 'Islamic fundamentalism,'" Nofal says, spitting out the words. "And of course they are egged on by agents who instigate them and incite them and recruit them against the Muslims. And behind them all are the elders of global Zionism.... But by the will of God, their fate will be the hellfire. By the *will of God!*"

His eloquent Arabic flows regally, evoking a premodern world of classical Islamic texts, which tends to resonate with religious Arab Muslim audiences. But Nofal also peppers his sermon with down-home Jordanian and Palestinian slang, and he caps his lengthy statements with the quaint, melodic lilt of his parents' native Haifa, now a city in Israel. It's authentic Jordanian-Palestinian populism designed for an audience that appears to be split roughly down the middle between the two ethnic groups. The crowd loves it.

Every man-made ideology in the world, Nofal says, from Marxism to capitalism, was invented by the Jews to dissuade Muslims from their faith. The governments of America and Europe, moreover, are Islam's enemies because

they're under Jewish control. He tells the faithful to be servants of God—not "servants of women and servants of the dollar"—and he throws curses down on "Bush and Blair." He praises the armed struggle against Americans in Iraq and Jews in Palestine yet seems to refrain carefully from an overt call to violence against Western countries, inviting the audience to draw its own conclusions about methods.

If Nofal's sermon sounds vaguely familiar, it may be in part because his early career was deeply intertwined with the progenitors of Al Qaeda. In the early 1980s he pitched tent in the Jordan Valley with the legendary Palestinian-born preacher Abdullah Azzam, spiritual mentor to Bin Laden. Nofal and Azzam teamed up to send fighters across the Israeli border to attack Israeli encampments. But Azzam's ambitions went further than Nofal's; he urged armed jihad to overthrow "un-Islamic" regimes everywhere—even if the head of state happened to be a Muslim. When the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan was revving up with American and Saudi backing, he made a permanent pilgrimage to the war front, where he preached total Islamist war against Soviets, Jews, Americans and secular Arab rulers, until a land mine took his life in November 1989. Nofal stayed in

Jordan, but an Amman journalist says the elder cleric has been known to tell his students, "The spirit of Abdullah Azzam lives on in me."

Like the Lebanese Hezbollah militia, Brotherhood franchises in nearly every Arab country also operate a large network of health and human services that benefit followers from cradle to grave. They have become adept at media relations and politics and have won big in every Arab democratic election since the Iraq war—including in the Palestinian territories, where Hamas, the local Brotherhood branch, now rules.

A few days after the sermon I return to the University of Jordan campus to meet Nofal during his office hours. My guides, Nur al-Tayyan and Hanin Khatir, the young women I met earlier, tell me they were up late partying the night before but offer to walk me over to Nofal's building, "so you can see what it's like to be us surrounded by Islamists," says Khatir.

The girls' tight jeans and tops blend in among most of the students we pass near the school of business administration and the college of literature. This is a vast, sprawling modern campus, like that of a Midwestern American state school built in the 1970s, though the glare coming off the white cement promenades reminds me that we're not in Kansas. So does the range of Arabic accents I pick out among the various crowds—a girl from Bahrain or Kuwait flirting with a Syrian guy, a geek who looks Egyptian helping an attractive local girl with her textbook problem set. One brunette in a flowery skirt comes up to Khatir and embraces her. I'm later told she's also a foreign student, an Arab citizen of Israel from the port city of Jaffa.

But as we approach the chalk-white building that houses the faculty of Islamic law, curses start pelting Tayyan and Khatir like pebbles.

"The hellfire for you, you slut!" says a bearded teenager in a robe and sandals.

"Fear God! Fear God! Fear God!" says a girl, masked in black from head to toe.

"Typical," Tayyan says, puffing on a Marlboro Light. "They also hate it when girls smoke in public. They say it's okay for guys but not girls."

"You know this is why they made the law of student-council elections," Khatir adds. "Can you imagine if the Islamists got to control the campus?"

A law passed in 2000 makes fewer than half the student-council seats in any state university contestable by ballot, in response to Islamists' overwhelming success at winning elections large and small. On several campuses Islamists have taken the contestable seats by a landslide, only to see the majority bloc given away without a fight to their liberal rivals by order of the government-appointed dean.

"Are they really the majority on campus?" I ask. "It doesn't look like it from the way your friends are dressed."

"No, they're definitely not," Khatir says. "But they stick together—just like the Jews. That's how they win. And if it's a thousand rabbits versus one lion, the lion wins the election."

Large glass windows at the entrance to Nofal's building are plastered with glossy images of slain Hamas leaders, the captions reading, "Pride is restored at the price of blood" and "Bandage the wound and resist!"

"I think we'll leave you here," says Tayyan.

I walk up three flights of stairs and pick out Nofal's little office from a long white corridor of possibilities; his is the only one with a line of students waiting outside. Young women in gray gowns, heads and faces veiled in white with slits to expose their eyes, giggle nervously as they catch a peek of their teacher at his desk. Nofal holds court for a trio of young men seated purposefully around him and lets in two or three women at a time for rapid Q&A.

"Dr. Ahmad," asks the next in line, "I wanted to ask you about the Shiites. Do we view them as infidels, or are they Muslims?"

He responds instantly, "They're Muslims, my daughter, even though they worship incorrectly. We should admire them. In south Lebanon Hezbollah fought the Jews and beat them. For this, they should be respected, even though they're Shiites."

Next question: "Dr. Ahmad, the pictures of the martyred fighters downstairs—even though we admire them and we pray for them and we pray for all the brothers in Hamas, isn't it like idol worship to have their images on our walls?"

Trick question, apparently. Nofal seems to hesitate for a split second. "No, it's fine."

I sit through a discussion of one cleric in training's master's thesis, on the Koranic story of Joseph, and watch the Q&A crowd peter out. Eventually the professor looks me over and starts making small talk, meeting my peculiar dialect of Arabic halfway by affecting an Iraqi accent.

"Your mother, is she an Iraqi Christian?" he asks.

At this awkward question, Sheikh Mustafa's friendly warning—"Watch your back"—kicks in. But I choose to ignore it.

"Actually, she's Jewish."

Long pause. Nofal's cheeks flush red. I wonder whether I've made a mistake in coming here.

"And your father?"

"Also Jewish."

"And you?"

"Same deal, alas."

Not your typical office-hours visitor to the Islamic faculty center.

Nofal's eyes scan me from the bottom up, then peer out briefly through the open door. "You are welcome here as our guest," he says, "but we will fight you in Palestine and Iraq until you get out of there."

And where else would you fight? I ask, remembering his controversial talk on jihad in Brooklyn with the blind Egyptian sheikh.

Another trick question.

"Wherever there is injustice and oppression and aggression against Muslims," he replies, warming to the topic. His eyes light up with the excitement of his younger days. "Jihad is one of the pillars of Islam."

"Your young disciple who introduced you at the mosque the other day," I recall, "says the ministry of Islamic affairs won't let him travel to the United States. But his friend thinks it wasn't the ministry that banned him but actually the intelligence services. What do you think?"

"In this country, my brother," Nofal says, "the ministry of Islamic affairs and the intelligence services are one and the same, praise God."

His bearded students chortle in response.

"It's all in collusion with the Zionists and the Americans," he goes on. "You know what I'm talking about. You know there were days when I used to be on public television here three times a day, brother! Morning, noon and night! Now even my *name* you don't hear on TV."

I ask Nofal how far he thinks the attempt to marginalize him in Jordan may go. One of his students answers for him.

"All Jordanians love Sheikh Ahmad. He shows us the Islam of centrism and moderation. We defend him with our very being. To the death we defend him."

Nofal excuses himself; he has a class to teach on the interpretation of the Koran. I watch his three disciples follow him down the hall like soldiers.

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Thanks in part to generations of persuasion by the Muslim Brotherhood, one third of Jordanians attend Friday prayer. Given the many women who stay home and cook while their sons and husbands go to mosque, this statistic is probably weightier than it seems. In all likelihood, the mosque-going population embraces the majority of Jordanian households. According to the prophet Muhammad, "He who takes a bath, comes to Friday prayer, offers the prayer that was destined for him, keeps silent until the preacher finishes the sermon, then prays along with him, his sins between that time and the following Friday will be forgiven—and even of three days more."

But if you're an authoritarian ruler of an Arab Muslim country, this

prophetic advice has grave implications. It means that a Friday sermon delivered by the likes of Nofal may command the ultimate captive audience—even more than your own televised speeches. “At prayer time,” says a veteran Iraqi cleric who is an old friend of Saddam Hussein’s, “the believers’ hearts are open and ready to receive an important message. That’s why, if you ask me, the clergy in a Muslim country should be handled just like the army. You should place it under strict command and control.”

This is more or less what Jordan’s government is trying to do with its Muslim establishment. Every mosque in the country is now legally subject, at least in theory, to the detailed religious rulings of the state. And every preacher must answer to a hired staff of moderate Islamic bureaucrats housed in concrete buildings protected by AK-47s.

Jordan’s General Intelligence Directorate is located in the quiet Amman neighborhood of Abdali. Just across a sandy parking lot from this Stalinesque complex lies the four-story Ministry of Awqaf, Islamic Affairs and Holy Places; the name over the front door is embossed in white-on-green Arabic calligraphy beneath a six-foot color photograph of the young King Abdullah. Turbaned sheikhs nod to the armed guards outside and adjust their headgear before removing keys, coins and any sharp objects from their pockets and entering through the metal detector. It’s payday for government clerics.

“If you want to preach in this country today, you need a license,” explains Sameeh Athamneh, a senior ministry official, in a musty second-floor office. “We give them out, and sometimes we take them away.”

Thick texts of Koranic commentary and hadith, the oral traditions of the prophet Muhammad’s sayings and doings, clutter the desk, spread open under Athamneh’s stubby fingers, beside a half-written sermon scrawled on a blotter. The burly Islamic scholar, who wears a suit and tie, has been chosen to preach to the nation at its main-event mosque this Friday, his talk to be broadcast live on Jordanian public television. It’s the very program on which Nofal once appeared regularly, using it routinely to preach about armed jihad. But this week’s assigned topic is Islam’s view on women, in honor of International Women’s Day, a UN-designated holiday. “I’m going to demonstrate that Islam is actually very progressive on women’s issues,” Athamneh explains, “and criticize the tendency of some Jordanians to celebrate only the birth of a boy. When the baby turns out to be a girl, it’s unfortunately common in our culture to say, ‘God willing, next time it will be a boy.’”

Cultural change may be slow going, but prodding it forward is part of Athamneh's job description. An outspoken critic of the Muslim Brotherhood, he edits the ministry's monthly journal, *Hadi al-Islam* ("Islam's Way")—required reading for licensed preachers—which attempts to set the record straight on hot-button religious issues in the kingdom.

In the March 2006 edition, for example, the scholarly paper "International Relations and Respecting Treaties and Contracts in Islam" provides an Islamic argument for honoring the country's peace accord with Israel. ("Even though the Jews usurped Palestinian land," Athamneh says, "it's a virtue for all

Muslims to abide by their leader's decisions.") Terrorism gets a rough working over in another lengthy article, "Excess, Extremism and Terrorism and Islam's Position on Them." ("Just read the Muslim sources," Athamneh urges. "Today's extremists are outlaws!")

All these views, the sheikh explains, serve only to elaborate on an official statement about what Islam really means, issued three years ago by decree of King Abdullah himself. "In my view," the king remarked two years after the statement's release, "Islam is going in a direction that's very scary, and as the Hashemite Kingdom, we have a moral obligation to stand up." *Hashemite* means the kings

of Jordan claim a direct familial line to Muhammad, which gives the royal family a sense of personal responsibility toward the interpretation of Islam.

The "Amman Message," an eight-page manifesto in Arabic, lays out a tolerant vision of Islam, stressing the essential unity of all three monotheistic faiths and banning all violence against non-combatants. "There is to be no fighting against nonfighters," it reads, "no assault on civilians and their properties, on children in their mothers' laps, on students in the schools, on older men and women." Clerics in the kingdom's mosques, according to the document, have the special responsibility of serving as "role models in their religious manners, conduct and speech...[to] help our whole nation meet the challenges of the 21st century."

More than 100,000 copies of the message have been printed and distributed to schools, mosques and social halls across the kingdom, and the Islamic affairs ministry, according to Athamneh, is charged with keeping school lessons and weekly sermons nationwide on message. "The shady clerics who meet after dark are somebody else's department," he explains. "Ours is the Islam of broad daylight." The government's brand of Islam even has a name; ministry officials refer to it as Islamic centrism.

The ministry pays each certified cleric a monthly stipend of roughly \$300, slightly less than the average civil servant's salary, and provides free housing in the government-owned mosque to which he is assigned. But if a cleric defies the spirit of the "Amman Message" in his sermons, he risks losing all these perks—and may face interrogation, or worse, at the Intelligence Directorate next door.

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Sheikh Mahmoud al-Rawashdeh has grown a hip brown beard, an Arabian cross between a goatee and a Vandyke. It does little to obscure the fact that he's only 29 years old. Tall and wiry, he chants Koran up-tempo in a white skullcap and amber gown at the Mosque of Peace, a newly built prayer hall where he lives and works in the ritzy Amman neighborhood of Abdoun. But when he drives through the city, inspecting mosques, he puts on black slacks, a black sports jacket and shades—which may have something to do with the DVDs he watches in his spare time.

"Anything by Van Damme or Arnold," he says. "Do you think Schwarzenegger is going to run for president?"

Sheikh Mahmoud is the youngest preacher ever to be appointed a first cleric by the ministry of Islamic affairs, a designation he shares with about 100 other trusted holy men kingdomwide. The title means that in addition to preaching and tending to his own flock in Abdoun, he conducts weekly spot checks

on 35 other mosques in the city. He's half building superintendent, half probation officer: If the holy water isn't running in the ritual ablution room, Sheikh Mahmoud calls the plumber. And if a given cleric preaches a subversive message or otherwise deviates from the official line, Sheikh Mahmoud is the first responder for the Jordanian security establishment. How he chooses to handle a situation is up to him, though the consequences of leniency fall on his shoulders.

On a brisk Friday afternoon in April, I join 650 worshippers at the young sheikh's mosque. The sermon booming from the sanctuary's PA system hits the exact note the government is pressing for. "We must struggle against the forces of extremism and divisiveness in our midst!" he cries in his tenor voice. Feisty and defiant, the preacher trains his youthful ire not at America or secular Arab leaders but at what he dubs "the enemies of peace and security."

"We must instill respect for all humanity in our families!" After a pause for dramatic effect, he segues into the importance of charity. "How can we ever be secure if some of our brothers and neighbors do not have the essentials of food and clothing?" He urges the well-off to give to the needy and tells poor people their children's education is the key to a better future. And for good measure, at the end of his address he prays for victory against "the Jewish usurpers" and all enemies of Islam.

Asked about the sermon, he later explains that its two main themes of security and poverty were handed to him by his government superiors: "We're always asked to talk about security, and this week—because the government lifted the subsidy on gasoline in the kingdom, which will be a hardship for many Jordanians—we were also supposed to focus on the importance of charity and helping our neighbors." His mosque draws some millionaires from the Abdoun neighborhood, he says, as well as financially strapped bedouin and working-class families from the densely populated valley below.

"And notice that I didn't call for the defeat of all Jews," he adds, "just the *usurping* Jews."

When Israel began its aerial bombardment of Lebanon in July, Sheikh Mahmoud says, he faced popular pressure to pay lip service to grassroots pro-Hezbollah sentiments shared by many Jordanians. "I didn't cave," he says. "I preached that we shouldn't confuse legitimate resistance with what Hezbollah did when it kidnapped the soldiers, and I repeated several times that Hezbollah is an arm of Iran. And while I bitterly condemn Israeli war planes killing hundreds of Lebanese civilians, I also remind my congregation that

Israeli civilians are getting killed by Hezbollah rockets too. And a civilian is a civilian, no matter where he happens to live."

Gossip around the watercooler at the Islamic affairs ministry has it that Sheikh Mahmoud is on the fast track for a senior position, maybe eventually minister, a rumor he proudly confirms having overheard himself. What his

superiors see in him may well begin with ties of blood: An ethnic Jordanian, as opposed to an ethnic Palestinian, he comes from the same lush patch of villages in the kingdom's south where the present minister was born, near the red stone ruins of the ancient Roman town of Petra. His father, moreover, was a staff sergeant in the Jordanian armed forces, another obvious plus in

the eyes of a pro-government religious establishment now at war with enemies of the state.

But the junior cleric's sensitive job requires more than family ties. He has to cultivate a special talent: the ability to sniff out extremism in his countrymen, even where it's hidden from plain view. If there's truth to the old saying that it takes one to know one, Sheikh Mahmoud ought to be a terrific snoop. As he recalls at home after Friday prayer, he flirted as a teenager with Saudi-style Salafi ideology, which advocates death to infidels and the restoration of the caliphate, Islamic rule, over all nations. He was briefly recruited by the Muslim Brotherhood while a seminary student. Now he rejects all forms of radicalism; he says he has been preaching the government's "centrist" alternative ever since he got his license.

Which doesn't mean, incidentally, that Sheikh Mahmoud has become particularly liberal in the Western sense. The Turkish coffee and cake he serves in the living area adjoining his mosque are made fresh by his wife in the kitchen, but I never get to thank her for them. The sheikh carts the refreshments out himself and shuts the sitting-room door behind us, he explains, so his wife won't come into contact with a male stranger.

"We are all brothers in humanity," Sheikh Mahmoud says, a lesson he heard from his father and learned for himself over time. "That's the message of every religion, from Judaism to Islam." He quotes a saying of Ali, the prophet Muhammad's son-in-law and patron saint to Shiites: "Every man is either your brother in God or your brother in creation." These sentiments are a far cry from what he learned as a teenager from Salafi clerics, who condemn all infidels to death and preach that Ali and all Shiites are despicable characters, to say nothing of the Jewish people.

The ideal of a common humanity, he explains, helped get him excited about starting his own career as a preacher. It also appears to have insulated him from advances by the Muslim Brotherhood during his four years in religious seminary as a cleric in training. "I tried the Brotherhood for a month and a half," he says. "They'd sit together, talking and drinking tea, and talk about the jihad the same way we talk about prayer. But it wasn't for me."

"What turned you off from it?" I ask.

"Factionalism," he replies. "Factions destroyed the Muslim nation."

For his first gig as a licensed preacher, Sheikh Mahmoud took a post in Amman's skid row, at a government-owned mosque in the slummy neighborhood of Jofa, and preached his humanist Islamic message to the congregation. Though "most of them were with me," he asserts, a small clique of Salafi-oriented worshippers

were so unhappy with the young cleric that they tried to end his career and perhaps his life.

"They went around telling people I was a closet Shiite," he says. "They declared me an infidel. Eventually, when that didn't work, they went to the government and claimed I had cursed King Abdullah himself. And everything they said was a lie."

The rookie sheikh was summoned by the General Intelligence Directorate to answer hours of questions about his critics and their accusations. Had their slander stuck—particularly the claim that he'd cursed the king—he might have wound up in prison. Instead he appears to have won the government's confidence and earned kudos for unwittingly uncovering a secret nest of militants. "Among them were some people who wanted to blow things up," he says.

He cooperated fully in an investigation of the Salafis within his flock. For his patriotism—and his protection—the Islamic affairs ministry moved him to his present parish in upscale Abdoun, at one of the more prized pulpits in the city.

"I would rather have stayed in Jofa," he claims. "They needed me there. I still go back sometimes to check on my friends."

We head out on mosque patrol in Sheikh Mahmoud's company car on a chilly Tuesday after the night prayer. The road wraps gently around a vast basin of four- and five-story apartment buildings huddled in descending rows—by day a valley of winding asphalt streets and smudgy cement facades but now a stadium of lights under the darkening sky.

Each time we close in on a mosque, Sheikh Mahmoud precedes the pit stop with a tagline such as "The preacher you're about to meet is a Salafi, extreme in his views, and he's supported by

Saudi Arabia" or "This guy, I think he's sympathetic to the Shiites, and he's very active on the Internet."

"How do you know this stuff?" I ask. "They wouldn't volunteer that kind of information to you, right?"

"You'd be surprised," he says. "Some of them are very blunt. But just in case, I also have at least two or three sources in every mosque. I make sure the sheikh doesn't know who they are, but they pray there every week. And anytime the sheikh says something suspicious, they call me."

He greets each preacher with twin kisses on the cheeks, then puts his right hand to his heart in a show of deference.

Most of these men are twice Sheikh Mahmoud's age. A Saudi-trained, Kuwaiti-born man who preaches at the mosque across the street from the U.S. embassy speaks at length about his commitment to Islamic centrism, but Sheikh Mahmoud later says he feels the man is concealing something. In another mosque, Sheikh Mustafa, the Jordanian army veteran turned preacher I spoke to earlier, complains about the radicalizing influence of the local Muslim Brotherhood, and Sheikh Mahmoud nods his head in agreement.

His final spot check for the night is a "Koran study center," a mosque in practice, though not in name. One of 500 or so kingdomwide that the Brotherhood owns and operates, it's the busiest prayer hall we visit, with fathers and sons sitting together in circles on the lavishly upholstered floor, poring over holy books.

"The cleric in this mosque is my age exactly," Sheikh Mahmoud says. "We went to seminary together; only I've become a centrist and he ended up in the Brotherhood."

The two 20-somethings embrace and take seats facing each other at oak writing desks in a classroom adjoining the

main sanctuary. Sheikh Mahmoud's black blazer and slacks look as if they were cut from the same fabric as the jet-black gown of his former classmate, Sheikh Mu'tasim. The latter has cultivated a bushy black beard unlike Sheikh Mahmoud's semi-Vandyke—hip, perhaps, but to the taste of a different crowd.

"This is a private mosque," Mu'tasim tells me, "not subordinate to the Islamic affairs ministry."

"Actually, let me correct you on that," interjects Sheikh Mahmoud. "Every mosque in the kingdom is subordinate to the ministry. And the ministry can still evict a preacher, even from a private mosque."

Mu'tasim answers his old friend with an icy stare.

"I identify with the Muslim Brotherhood," he goes on, "the moderate stream in Islam."

Sheikh Mahmoud, who has taken off his shades, rolls his eyes.

The cleric proceeds to offer a salesman's pitch for his movement. "We support the jihad in Iraq, but it must be against the clear occupier, the American troops, and we don't support, for example, the attacks by some Islamists on markets and mosques. And we'll participate in the democratic game the West imposed on us, even though we don't believe in all its details."

"Like what details?" Sheikh Mahmoud asks.

"For example, the rotation of power," he replies, and I suddenly begin to see where things are going.

"So, for instance, maybe the voter will elect Islamists. But maybe in the next rotation, secularists will win. And that's a problem. The final solution for all us Muslims is the caliphate, the establishment of God's rule on earth. We have a goal the same way Bush and Condoleezza Rice have a goal. They call the world to their authority, economically or

militarily or culturally, the whole concept of globalization, and so do we.”

“Then tell me, brother,” Sheikh Mahmoud says, “if we want to rule over people just as the Americans do, what’s the difference between us and them?”

At this the Brotherhood rookie stumbles but eventually regains his footing. “If we say we want to spread Islam in the world or control the world with our ideas, it’s because we want people to benefit from what we have found. We want all people to be happy! We have found happiness, praise God, in Islam. So we oppose American rule, and we’re resisting the American Army.”

“But you want to bring back the caliphate?” asks Sheikh Mahmoud.

Mu’tasim pauses awkwardly. He’s been trapped. If he insists he wants to see a Muslim empire, he would be implying an end to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan—not a smart move in a conversation with a pro-government cleric.

“No, I didn’t say I wanted to bring back the caliphate. Did I?”

“Yes, you did.”

Whoops.

Back in the car, Sheikh Mahmoud declines to answer whether he’ll report on his former classmate. I’m guessing he will. “But I’ll tell you this,” he says. “The problem with the kind of Islam he believes in is its double standard. All empires are corrupt, from the Islamic empires of yesterday to America today. Even my own government is corrupt. So if he just wants to replace the American empire with *his* empire, what’s the difference? Why would it matter *who* occupies Iraq?”



In every Arab capital in recent months, American and Israeli flags have been set aflame. Thousands of street protesters have hoisted banners praising the leaders of Hezbollah, Hamas and, often enough, Al Qaeda. Given this atmosphere, one Middle Eastern nation’s struggle to streamline Islam may appear incredibly ambitious and perhaps naive. Weeks into Israel’s military campaign against Hezbollah, King Abdullah publicly acknowledged his people’s overwhelming sympathy with Lebanon. “The war will not solve anything,” he lamented, “and Arab peoples see now in Hezbollah a hero facing aggression and defending its land.”

Yet Jordan’s Islamic reform project presses on. The king has called for closing the religious studies programs at several Jordanian universities by 2009. The new training institute that will replace them, he says, aims to “get bright people coming out who know exactly what true, moderate Islam is all about and who are not influenced by extremist teachings and thinking.” A pilot program is even in the works to export progressive clerics from Jordan to mosques in the U.S.

and the United Kingdom, where Islamic radicalism has also been uncovered in the wake of 9/11 and last year's bloody London bombings.

Moreover, King Abdullah isn't acting alone. Similar efforts are under way in kingdoms and dictatorships across the Middle East. In Morocco, since an Al Qaeda suicide attack killed dozens in May 2003, the king has fused aggressive security sweeps with a campaign to take back the country's mosques from extremist preachers. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy has heralded the Moroccan effort as "a major change in both substance and style." Nearby Tunisia, a staunch secular dictatorship that was also the victim of an Al Qaeda attack, is now turning out spiritual leaders schooled in comparative religion—and opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood—through its state-run Islamic seminary. Classical Arabic grammar and the Koran are taught alongside Latin, Hebrew, the Torah and the Bible. Paris-based writer Lafif Lakhdar, who has studied the Tunisian system from the inside, describes it as having "no restriction on rational thinking." He credits the curriculum with insisting "that Islamic consciousness must reinstate the *other*, particularly the Jew and the Christian." Meanwhile, Tunisia's secret police, not taking any chances, have reportedly gone so far as to develop a new mosque worshipper ID card system, whereby each visit to a house of worship is automatically dated, timed and registered in a central computer database.

The movement is beginning to go international. Government religious-affairs ministries, from the tiny Gulf island of Bahrain to the most populous Arab country, Egypt, have been pool-

ing their resources. More than a dozen Arab states, including Jordan, recently signed on to a joint task force of sorts, to exchange training and expertise in a shared campaign against radical ideologies. One up-and-coming cleric I met in Amman was home on vacation from Tunis, where he is writing his Ph.D. dissertation at the state-controlled Islamic seminary thanks to a government-to-government Islamic exchange program. "What I learned about comparative religion from my Tunisian brothers is amazing," he told me. "It helps me see my own Islamic identity in a whole new light." Progressive clerics may be a minority among their robed colleagues in any one country, but bundled together across borders through coordinated government programs and conferences, they can feel encouraged and emboldened.

Some of the most remarkable changes in Islamic culture have been happening farther afield in vastly populated non-Arab Muslim countries. Take Indonesia, a Muslim-majority country of 245 million people and, for some, a feared breeding ground for Al Qaeda sympathizers. Former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid, an Islamic scholar by training, has formed a broad-based movement devoted to spreading liberal Islamic values throughout the country. The Wahid Institute aims to promote "tolerance and understanding in the world" and bring together Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. In testimony to the organization's progressive stance on women, its director and chief spokesperson is Wahid's striking 31-year-old daughter, Yenny. Radicals "have a very distorted view of what religion should be," she recently

told an American reporter. "Killing people meaning glory? It's lunacy. The prophet Muhammad said the greatest jihad is against yourself, how to make yourself a better person. It's not... running to kill people." Some 12,000 demonstrators showed their support for her leadership and ideals this past December in Jakarta, the Indonesian capital, in an "Islam for Peace" street rally against terrorism.

But will all these efforts make a difference? The answer to this question, like those to so many other questions about Muslim societies, depends on the future direction of the region's youth—my generation. Muslims aged 30 and under make up 60 to 70 percent of Arab countries' populations, courtesy of a maternity spike in the late 20th century that demographers have called the largest baby boom in human history. The Arabic-speaking generation I would have been born into had my mother stayed in Baghdad is also that of the Internet-savvy kids who cheer beheadings at Arab cafes and Sheikh Mu'tasim, the hard-line Brotherhood rookie cleric I met in Amman, as well as countless more Jordanian 20-somethings who buy into his message. Yet our contemporaries also include the Jordanian humanist Sheikh Mahmoud and Yenny Wahid. If such a vast swath of humanity tilts toward Islamic moderation, government-backed campaigns across the region could resonate and take hold, but if young Muslims veer in the opposite direction, a Jordanian king's best efforts will be judged in hindsight as too little, too late.

Recently, I have been listening to a song called "We Want Peace," an R&B single recorded in English and Arabic by Lenny Kravitz and the chart-topping Iraqi heartthrob Kazem al-Sahir. Released across the Middle East at the onset of the 2003 Iraq war, it has been heard by millions in the region. It was blasting from car stereos during my trip to Amman this year. The song begins with a Palestinian musician playing an impassioned solo on an Arabic lute; then Kravitz's R&B groove kicks in with Middle Eastern percussion fills by a Lebanese drummer. Kravitz and Sahir take turns shouting for peace in their respective languages, then join their voices for the chorus: "We want peace, we want it./Yes we want peace, we want it." Judging from its popularity, this pan-Arab, transnational track, co-produced by an American of mixed race, may more faithfully reflect the aspirations of Middle Eastern youth than any stem-winding sermon. And if it does, Sheikh Mahmoud and his message of global oneness are only the beginning of a sweeping transformation. Let us hope.

