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Stirrings in the Desert

Heavy Hand of the Secret Police Impeding Reform in Arab World

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

AMMAN, Jordan, Nov. 13 - At a cultural festival last year, Sameer al-Qudah recited a poem of his depicting Arab rulers as a notch below pirates and highwaymen on the scale of honorable professions. Within days, Jordan's intelligence police summoned him.

Mr. Qudah, sentenced to a year in jail for a similar offense in 1996, was apprehensive but not surprised. The secret police, or mukhabarat in Arabic, is one of the most powerful and ubiquitous forces in the Arab world. Jordan's network had surreptitiously videotaped his reading.

"We are hungry for freedoms like the right to express ourselves," said Mr. Qudah, 35, whose day job is supervising construction projects as a civil engineer. "But our country lives under the fist of the mukhabarat."

In Jordan and across the region, those seeking democratic reform say the central role of each country's secret police force, with its stealthy, octopuslike reach, is one of the biggest impediments. In the decades since World War II, as military leaders and monarchs smothered democratic life, the security agencies have become a law unto themselves.

Last week's terror attacks in Amman accentuate one reason that even some Jordanians who consider themselves reformers justify the secret police's blanket presence - the fear that violence can spill across the border. But others argue that the mukhabarat would be more effective if it narrowed its scope to its original mandate of ensuring security.

"The department has become so big that its ability to concentrate is diluted," said Labib Kamhawi, a businessman active in human rights. "The fact that the intelligence is involved in almost everything on the political and economic level, as well as security, might have loosened its grip on security."

In Jordan, one of the region's most liberal countries, the intelligence agencies vet the appointment of every university professor, ambassador and important editor. The mukhabarat eavesdrops with the help of evidently thousands of Jordanians on its payroll, similar to the informant networks in the Soviet bloc.

The secret police chiefs live above the law. The last head of the Jordanian mukhabarat routinely overruled the smoking ban on Royal Jordanian Airways, lighting up as he pleased. No one dared challenge him.

The State Department's annual human rights report, unusually critical of a staunch ally, particularly

one that offers widespread cooperation on terrorism issues, said the lack of accountability within the mukhabarat and the police resulted "in a climate of impunity" and underscored "significant restrictions on freedom of speech, press, assembly and association." It said the agents "sometimes abuse detainees physically and verbally" and "allegedly also use torture."

Although the Bush administration has cited the need for democratic change in the Middle East as a reason for going to war in Iraq, the threat of instability on Jordan's border may actually be restricting democratic freedoms there.

Even with the bombings in Amman as the latest reminder of the threats to Jordan's security, many activists deem progress impossible unless the influence of the mukhabarat is curbed.

"The issue of security has become a nightmare," Mr. Kamhawi said, contending that Jordan had failed to find the balance between democracy and security. "If you give a speech against the policy of the government, this is a threat to security. If you demonstrate against this or that, it is a threat to security. It hits on all aspects of life and it is a severe hindrance to any change."

Getting a senior mukhabarat officer to speak to a journalist is extremely rare. The Jordanian mukhabarat made the head of its domestic affairs branch available for this article on condition that he not be identified, but what he said offered meager insight into the agency's inner workings.

"There is no freedom like that in Jordan," he said with enthusiasm in Arabic. "You are a free man in a free country."

However, Mahmoud A. al-Kharabsheh, a maverick member of Parliament who joined the mukhabarat in 1974 and retired as its head in 1991, spoke candidly. The mukhabarat, he said, runs Jordan's politics.

"Some Parliament members allow the mukhabarat to intervene in how they vote because they depend on them for help in getting re-elected," he said. "They enter into 90 percent of the political decisions in this country."

Keeping Watch

Omnipresent secret police exist in every Arab country. Indeed, mukhabarat (pronounced moo-kah-bah-RAHT) is among the first Arabic words expatriates learn, particularly reporters.

This reporter's experience in Egypt is telling:

Once in late 2001, I was loitering outside the Cairo headquarters of the secret police, an unfamiliar building, and was detained. My Egyptian assistant and I were ushered into the office of a polite major, whose walls were hung with roughly 10 diplomas from the F.B.I., including one for interrogation.

"Is this an interrogation?" I asked.

"No, it's just tea," the major responded, grinning.

After a brief, friendly conversation about my impressions of Egypt, we were released.

But in the years since, whenever I was involved in any reporting in Egypt that state security considered

dubious, the major would call to inquire.

In Jordan, interviews over three weeks recently with dozens of people - including members of Parliament, former ministers, journalists, professional association leaders and businessmen - turned up tales of frequent encounters with the secret police.

Muhammad Atiyeh, 51, described two encounters, the first after he undertook the seemingly innocuous task of trying to set up an organization of single parents. The group was denied a license, he said, then the Ministry of the Interior's security arm rejected him as president for seven months.

The organization "had nothing to do with politics, and yet they interfered," said Mr. Atiyeh, who thinks Jordanian citizens should have a right to know what their secret police files contain. "I have never done anything against the society or the government or the regime, so I am still waiting for someone to explain why."

In another incident, Mr. Atiyeh and a few friends, in a puckish mood on a winter weekend in 2004, decided to decorate a stretch of exterior wall at his house with graffiti.

One man wrote a line from the Constitution stating that that personal freedom is protected. Another wrote, "Love is immeasurable." A third scrawled, "Life comes first." Mr. Atiyeh himself wrote an Arab proverb about the absence of choice.

Three days later, the phone rang. The secret police summoned him and ultimately ordered him to paint over the graffiti because it might be "misinterpreted."

In a recent poll by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, more than 80 percent of the respondents said they feared criticizing the government publicly. More than three quarters said they feared taking part in any political activity.

Jordan has never been a police state on the gory scale of neighbors like Iraq, and it is not surprising to find Jordanians who feel they can speak openly about political issues. But for most Jordanians, the mukhabarat remains a source of fear. Some Jordanians avoid uttering the word, whispering "the friends" instead.

Maj. Gen. Rouhi Hikmet Rasheed, a 33-year army veteran and former top military dentist, ran for Parliament in 2003 on a platform calling for a constitutional monarchy. His campaign drew the attention of the head of the mukhabarat, Maj. Gen. Saad Kheir, who warned him to stop, Dr. Rasheed said.

"He told me that if I meant we should have a monarch like Britain's, this is not in the best interests of the country," Dr. Rasheed, 62, now a Parliament member, recalled. He was shocked by what came next: "He said, 'You are a son of the regime, we trust you, but if your sons want to work in Jordan in the future, it might affect them.' "

General Kheir declined a written request for an interview, and the senior mukhabarat official interviewed for this article said he was unaware of such a call.

Poetry and Politics

Mr. Qudah, the poet, said the secret police summoned him for the first time in high school. His offense was helping to lead a 1988 protest against the death of Khalil al-Wazir, a Palestinian guerrilla leader assassinated by Israeli commandos in Tunis.

But he notes that there are far worse places in the region than Jordan. "It's not that we are better than the countries around us," he said. "We are just less bad."

Mr. Qudah was born in 1970 in Ajloun, about 30 miles north of the capital, into a sprawling east Jordanian tribal clan. The oldest of nine children, he remembers his first poem was an ode to the snow falling on the local reservoir that fed the surrounding orchards of apples, figs and olives.

Mr. Qudah's political education started in grade school, when he was particularly engaged by the history lessons surrounding the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, the British-French pact that divided the Arab world into separate countries and laid the groundwork for a Jewish homeland.

He said he eventually absorbed every history book in the school library, and grew up yearning for a pan-Arab state. Unlike many native Jordanians, Mr. Qudah takes no issue with Palestinian refugees settling here permanently.

Expressing topical ideas through poetry is an Arab tradition. Criticism of Jordan's stagnant political situation always brings an enthusiastic crowd response, Mr. Qudah notes. "It is like music, you are making a speech but in a musical way."

It also brings another kind of attention. As an undergraduate, he said, the mukhabarat questioned him 20 times after poetry recitals critical of the government.

Still, he notes, "you cannot form a political party by reciting poetry," something he would like to do to push for bigger, specific demands, like appointing the prime minister from among elected members of Parliament, rather than by the king.

Political parties were banned here for decades. Most are legal again, but are either religious or promote failed ideologies like Baathism, a vision of a secular Arab renaissance hijacked by the likes of Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad.

The personal costs of any serious organizing effort hobbles reformers, Mr. Qudah and others said.

"If you work in the daylight you might be imprisoned for a year or two, but you can still come back and work," Mr. Qudah said about overt political organizing. "But to work in the daylight you have to be very persuasive, serious, honest, and you can't quit as soon as the government offers temptations, so you compromise."

Today, the drab headquarters of six major professional associations are the hub of Jordan's unofficial opposition, a role the government has sought to curb by writing a draft law that bans their political activity. The proposed law was heavily criticized by Human Rights Watch as a step backward for democratic change. For the moment, the building is still a host of endless political seminars. On a recent night, the minister of political development showed up to discuss reform. Participants mocked his ministry as an absurd example of the top-down attempts to change the system that are doomed for lack of public participation.

Still, Mr. Qudah says he wants to change the reality that most Arabs have no say in how their countries are run. Nor can such reforms be held hostage by the likely deranged types who carry out terrorist attacks like those here last week, he believes. Good security is a separate issue.

"Why does this part of the world lack any kind of democratic practices?" he asked. "To respect your own intelligence means you cannot accept the way things are, you cannot live with the official lie that all is well in the Arab world."

An Expanding Influence

Reformers believe that King Abdullah II is ambivalent about political openness.

On his frequent visits to the United States, the king asserts he wants Jordan to become a constitutional monarchy. Yet at home, he decreed intolerable any public discussion about returning to the 1952 constitution, with its more extensive checks on royal power.

The king, the reformers note, was educated partly in the West and inculcated to a degree with democratic values. But he was thrust onto the throne unexpectedly - King Hussein designated him the heir just two weeks before he died in 1999 - so the 43-year-old king relishes the chance to rule alone, they believe.

Reformers say they are disappointed that he has not enacted more tangible changes. They often place blame for this lack of change on the mukhabarat's influence, which has expanded since the 1990's, with the death of King Hussein and Jordan's peace treaty with Israel.

While peace diminished the need for the military, the mukhabarat expanded its role to monitor widespread opposition to the agreement. After the king died, the mukhabarat helped provide stability and support while the young heir found his feet.

Many reformers, including some members of Parliament, believe a crucial reason the legislative branch of government remains so weak is that the mukhabarat grew accustomed to interfering not only in elections, but also in parliamentary votes.

The mukhabarat spokesman denied any such interference, but members of Parliament said the mukhabarat could sway any electoral campaign by getting hundreds of voters to the polls, as well as providing access to government jobs for constituents, money and other facilities.

"It's a carrot and stick," said Mr. Kharabsheh, the former mukhabarat chief and current member of Parliament. "They tell the M.P.'s that whatever they want in the future, they will support them. It is well understood that they will turn against any M.P. who fails to do what they ask."

He also expressed concern about the mukhabarat branching into business - financing companies like Al-Haq Agriculture, a major farming enterprise, as well as overseas investments, all of which involve hundreds of millions of dollars and thousands of employees. He has asked for details of all mukhabarat investments, but has yet to receive an answer, he said.

One longtime head of the agency, Samih Batikhi, was sentenced to four years in jail in July 2003 after being found guilty of fraud and embezzlement in a case involving shady loans to businessmen.

The last head, General Kheir, was replaced this year. Amman's overheated rumor mill - a symptom of its muted news media - suggests that his role in lobbying for government contracts played a role, but there is no public case.

The agency spokesman declined to detail its business investments, but said they were all registered and strictly legal.

'In the Eye of a Hurricane'

Senior security officials like the former interior minister Samir Habashneh argue that freedoms taken for granted in Western democracies cannot be practiced in Jordan because it sits, as he put it, "in the eye of a hurricane." With an unstable Iraq across one border and frequent violence across another in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, senior officials say Jordan's secret police must work overtime to ensure the kingdom's stability, its main selling point.

If the security agencies relaxed their vigilance and civil liberties were granted without condition, it would lead to more bloody chaos like the bombings here, they argue.

Any conversation with senior security officials invariably harks back to 1970, when the Hashemite dynasty held onto the throne by facing down armed Palestinian factions on Amman's streets. Security officials say that their vigilance prevents a repeat, and that with Palestinians making up 50 percent of the population, political reform must await a solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute.

Jordanians pushing for reform call this a pretext for hanging onto power. For Mr. Qudah, nothing underscores this more than his yearlong imprisonment after reciting a poem in August 1996 that criticized the way "The Manager" runs an unidentified country. It included these lines:

He has never taken any decision

Without asking for the public's permission

Or without a public referendum

What a public

Whenever something urgent comes up

The public assembles

Then there is a comprehensive speech, whipped up by the Manager

Followed by an ululation and a blessing

And the auction is open for whistling, drumming and for honking

And afterwards, the audience claps

And this is the consensus in my state

And this is freedom of expression

His 10-day interrogation, though civil, focused on whether he was trying to incite anti-government unrest and whether he belonged to any secret organization. He believes the jail sentence from the military-run State Security Court was preordained after he was charged with slander.

He spent the year at Suwaga prison in the southern desert playing soccer and leading seminars on the need for political and social change. "That year just deepened my sense that reform is necessary and made me want to challenge the system more," he said.

Trouble with the security services creates a ripple effect. Mr. Qudah says he has never been allowed to publish anything here, although Jordanian critics find his work subtle and witty.

When he was arrested again in 2004 he expected another jail sentence, but a tribal elder who represents his district in Parliament and is a government ally intervened. Mr. Qudah was sprung after 24 hours.

The spokesman said he was unfamiliar with the case, but denied the mukhabarat would jail someone for poetry alone.

Like many Arabs seeking reform, Mr. Qudah is torn by Washington pushing the issue. The pressure helps bring change, but the model offered by the Americans is Iraq.

He finds a certain hypocrisy in the official American outlook. "They gave the green light to all these Arab leaders to create police states, then the reaction was religious extremism," he said. "You raise someone for 50 years to go the wrong way down a one-way street and then suddenly tell them that they have to respect the law. I don't think any of these regimes are capable of creating a democratic reality."

Mr. Qudah wants Arabs to be able to live without fear of the mukhabarat or other forms of repression.

"If you have stability, but life is desperate, what does that bring you?" he said. "We Arabs, all of us, we are marrying, drinking, laughing, making love. So why can't we live in a free environment? Why can't our freedom just be one aspect among many in our lives. Why do we have to wait? What for? We've been waiting for more than 50 years."

Suha Maayeh contributed reporting for this article.

