**Jordan curbs Hamas**

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In a carefully choreographed move, Hamas offices will be kept closed and group members who remain in the kingdom will be barred from political activity.

"The case of Hamas is now considered closed after His Majesty the king decided to pardon all of the group's activists," the prime minister, Abdur-Ra'uf S Rawabdeh, said.

Mr Rawabdeh said four of the leaders were sent to Qatar after consultations between King Abdullah and Qatar's emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Al Khalifa Al Thani.

The prime minister declined to name the four, but officials said they were the Hamas political strategist Khalid Mashaal, the party spokesman Ibrahim Ghosheh and the political bureau members Izzat Rushoq and Sami Khater. All four are Jordanian citizens of Palestinian origin.

Mr Rawabdeh stressed the four "were neither being deported nor were their nationalities being withdrawn". But when asked whether they would be allowed to return, he said: "This is an issue which is open for dialogue."

Jordan had come under intense pressure from the US, Israel and the Palestinians to restrain Hamas. King Abdullah has accused the Hamas leaders of using Jordanian soil for illegitimate purposes, but promised a "political solution" as a gesture of support for the Palestinians.

The writing has been on the wall since August, when King Abdullah, in his boldest political move since he ascended the throne, authorised a crackdown on the Islamist group, which mounts periodic terrorist attacks against Israelis and fiercely opposes the peace process and Yasser Arafat's handling of it.

Reports say that he acted at least in part at the request of the US, Israelis and the Palestinian Authority (PA). The requests have grown more insistent now that Israel and the PA have begun final status talks, theoretically to be completed by September next year.

In breaking with the complaisance which his father, King Hussein, showed towards Hamas and its local ally, Jordan's powerful Muslim Brotherhood movement, Abdullah is also undoubtedly acting for his own, specifically Jordanian reasons.

The Brotherhood's leading role in opposing the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty has long been a thorn in the government's side.

One other Hamas leader, Muhammad Nazzal, is believed to be in hiding in Jordan, from where he has put out defiant statements, denying government claims that Hamas had been storing arms, or violating the terms of the 1993 agreement under which it was permitted to operate in Jordan. Government officials said last night that Mr Nazzal was included in yesterday's amnesty.

The government accuses the arrested officials of undertaking illegal political activities in Jordan and affiliating with a banned group.

Police have said they seized computer disks from the offices of the four exiled leaders that led them to caches of arms and explosives and to proof that the four had gathered sensitive security information.

The crackdown ends the anomaly under which Jordan, of Israel's neighbours long the staunchest advocate of a peaceful settlement in the Middle East, furnished a platform for a group which opposes Israel's right to exist.

Speaking to reporters in Palestinian-ruled Gaza, Ismail Abu Shanab, a senior Hamas leader, condemned the action."I consider the step as standing beside the enemy [Israel] against the Hamas movement," he said.