



JORDAN AND THE THREAT OF THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS) ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The recent spread across Syria and Iraq of the Islamic State (IS) has stirred fears that Jordan could be next. Jordan has an important role to play in a regional coalition against the Islamic State. In the worst-case scenario, Jordan would lean on its powerful allies, namely the US and Israel, with whom it shares a mutual interest in combating extremism.

* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

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Jordan has threatened by the advances of the Islamic State (formerly ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, and by its latest incursion into the Lebanese border town of Arsal. Propaganda broadcast online by the Islamic State's media wing suggested that Jordan and Saudi Arabia are the group's next targets.¹ The group continues to threaten expansion into the kingdom — whether from across the Iraqi or Syrian borders or from within Jordan itself.²

The Islamic State in Jordan

The roots of the Islamic State can be traced to Jordan. It was Abu Musab al Zarqawi, a Jordanian, who founded the Iraqi arm of Al-Qaeda that would eventually mutate into the Islamic State.³ The IS has “ideological supporters” in Jordan and the movement is now close to the kingdom’s borders with Syria and Iraq.⁴

Ma’an, an economically and socially depressed city of 50,000 in southeast Jordan, has long been a flashpoint of anti-government unrest.⁵ On June 21, 2014 IS supporters marched through the streets in Ma’an, raising black flags and declaring their restive city “Jordan’s Fallujah” — a reference to the extremist stronghold in Iraq, the first city that fell to the insurgents in January 2014.

In July 2014, a group of Jordanian Salafists were caught on video in the eastern city of Zarqa chanting slogans in support of the IS and pledging allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the IS. The video went viral on social media networks.

¹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/jordan-isis-islamic-state-salafist-jihadist.html#ixzz3BgfskKC9>

² Michael Pizzi, “Middle East’s stable monarchy comes face to face with extremist threat”, Al Jazeera, July 10, 2014.

³ “Islamic State's appeal presents Jordan with new test”, Jerusalem Post, August 29, 2014.

⁴ Ariel Ben Solomon, “Britain, NATO ready to support Jordan against Islamic State”, Jerusalem Post, September 1, 2014.

⁵ Michael Pizzi, “Middle East’s stable monarchy comes face to face with extremist threat”, Al Jazeera, July 10, 2014.

On August 4, 2014 an article published in the Jordanian newspaper, Al-Ghad, described a rally by IS supporters in the district of al-Zarqa and discussed whether or not IS supporters and other radicals operating inside Jordan's borders constitute a security risk.⁶

The gains made by the IS and al-Baghdadi's declaration of an Islamic caliphate in territories under his control, have sparked a fierce debate among Jordanian Islamists from the Salafist movement on whether or not to back the group, whose brutality has been criticized even within radical Islamist circles. Another disputed issue is the division between the IS and the Al-Nusra Front in Syria.

Since the eruption of the civil war in neighboring Syria, 2,000 – 3,000 Jordanians - ranging from underprivileged youths to doctors and, in one case, an air force captain - have abandoned Jordan for jihad in Syria. The Jordanians are fighting under the banner of the Al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State. At least 250 Jordanian jihadists have been killed in Syria.

Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi

The spiritual leader of the Salafist jihadist movement in Jordan, Issam al-Barqawi, also known as Abu Mohammad al-Maqdisi, was released from jail on June 16, 2014. His freedom was celebrated by many jihadists in Jordan and other parts of the Middle East, including leading figures in the Al-Nusra Front, is Al-Qaeda's official branch in Syria and one of the Islamic State's main jihadist adversaries.

Asked about the IS victories in Iraq, al-Maqdisi said: "There is no believer who does not rejoice for the victories of the Muslims no matter who they are. But the fear is for the consequences of these victories and how the Sunnis and the other preaching or jihadi groups and Muslim masses will be treated in the liberated areas and against whom will the heavy weaponry taken from Iraq and sent to Syria be used? "

Al-Maqdisi's new statement showed that he is on the side of the jihadists as opposed to the Islamic State. And while al-Maqdisi applauded the jihadists' recent gains in Iraq, he feared that the IS will use its improved position to quash its rivals.

In another interview, al-Maqdisi launched a vehement attack against the IS, accusing the organization of killing Muslims and criticizing its declaration of an Islamist caliphate. In his statement, al-Maqdisi revealed new details about his own role in the attempts to mediate

⁶ "Islamic State Supporters Rally Openly in Jordan", The Clarion Project, August 6, 2014.

between the IS and the Al-Nusra Front. He explained that he had been in contact with both Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the IS, and Ayman al Zawahiri, emir of Al-Qaeda.⁷

Al-Maqdisi stated: "I wrote to our beloved brother, the Sheikh, the Commander, the Mujahid Ayman al Zawahiri (may Allah protect him) to put him in the picture regarding my efforts at a reconciliation initiative or adjudicating between" the IS and its rivals". He promised al-Zawahiri that he "would authorize some of [his] closest students to carry this out." However, al-Maqdisi's efforts, like those of other jihadist ideologues, failed and he criticized the IS for rejecting the advice and orders of jihadist leaders, including Zawahiri.

With the IS now claiming superiority over all other jihadist organizations, al-Maqdisi wondered what will come "of the various fighting groups that pledged obedience to other leaders in Iraq and Syria".

The straightforward interpretation of al-Maqdisi's arguments and questioning is a challenge the Islamic State's demand of obedience from all other jihadist groups now that it claims to rule as a caliphate. By comparing the IS to the Taliban, al-Maqdisi pointed out just how much power al-Baghdadi's group is really claiming to now wield.

Al-Maqdisi's criticisms were attacked by a group of Salafi jihadists who reiterated their loyalty to al-Baghdadi and the IS. In a statement on July 22, 2014 they claimed to represent the majority of followers of the movement in Jordan, including Abu Mohammad al-Tahawi, one of its leaders.

The release of al-Maqdisi's statement may point to a government decision to "divide" the movement for now, but it is unlikely that such a strategy will work in the long run.

Mohammad Shalabi

Militant Salafist leader, Mohammad al-Shalabi, better known as Abu Sayyaf, has spent 10 years in prison for militancy, including a plot to attack US troops in Jordan. After his release from prison he urged Islamists to fight in Syria and indicated his support for the Islamic State as well as other groups.

According to al-Shalabi, Jordan is not a target for the Islamic State: "The Islamic State ... have no interest in targeting Jordan". He said his followers will not take action in Jordan unless_ "If we

⁷ Thomas Joscelyn, "Influential Jordanian ideologue argues against Islamic State's caliphate" Long War Journal, July 2, 2014.

felt, God forbid, that injustice is going to befall us or that the circle of injustice is expanding, we will not sit with our hands tied." ⁸

Abu Sayyaf denied reports that the IS is already present in Jordan, adding that Jordan's Salafi jihadists now number over 8,000 with many of them joining jihad in Syria. "When I have not consolidated my presence firmly enough in Iraq and Syria I cannot move to Jordan," said al-Shalabi.

He claimed that efforts were being made to end the rift between the IS and the Al-Qaeda-linked Al-Nusra Front. ⁹

Abu Sayyaf also claimed that Jordanian security forces had arrested innocent Salafists, and that some of those arrested had subsequently been released. He said: "We asked those released about the reasons for their arrest. They said the security officers questioned them about the IS and the Al-Nusra Front, and about the supporters of these groups." The security officers also warned them that they could face prosecution under new anti-terrorism laws, he added. ¹⁰

The Jordanian policy

Jordan is different from Iraq and Syria because, while sectarian governments in Syria and Iraq have provided fertile ground for the Islamic State's precipitous takeover of Sunni lands, Jordan has a more homogenous Sunni population and strong state institutions. While government armies have been unable to stop the Islamic State forces in Syria and Iraq, Jordan has powerful intelligence services and a strong and professional army.

King Abdullah has said the country has never been better prepared to face the radical threat sweeping the region. ¹¹ "I am satisfied with the preparations of the armed forces and security agencies. We had planned for surprises several months ago and we were ahead of others. I can assure you -politically, security-wise and militarily our position today is stronger than in the past." הורדתי 3 מילים

⁸ "Islamic State's appeal presents Jordan with new test", Jerusalem Post, August 29, 2014.

⁹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/08/jordan-isis-islamic-state-salafist-jihadist.html#ixzz3Bgfj3RU>

¹⁰ Mohamed Al – Daameh, "Jordanian authorities arrest ISIS, Nusra Front suspects", Asharq Alawsat, August 27, 2014.

¹¹ Ariel Ben Solomon, "Britain, NATO ready to support Jordan against Islamic State", Jerusalem Post, September 1, 2014.

In an indirect reference to Islamic State, he warned Jordanians not to fall prey to outside parties seeking to exploit their grievances.¹²

The Jordanian Minister of Political Affairs, Khaled al-Kalaldeh, said: “Historically, Jordan has been fighting all sorts of extremism and will work with other nations to confront extremism”.

In light of the IS victories in Syria and Iraq, a growing number of Jordanians believe the government should take direct and decisive action against Salafist jihadists in the country to undercut any presence or foothold for the IS. But the authorities are hesitant to wage open war against the jihadists at this stage, opting for a wait-and-see approach for now.

To meet grassroots risks, Jordan’s parliament recently approved a number of amendments to the country’s 2006 anti-terrorism bill, criminalizing attempts to join terrorist organizations or recruit on their behalf, as well as activities that expose Jordan to hostile action, harm its relations with other countries, or expose Jordanians to the danger of reprisals.¹³

The Jordanian government appointed an inspector of the Salafi movement, Sheikh Osama Shahada, who stated that Islamic State supporters have extreme ideas and have attacked people from their own movement who disagreed with them. He argued that it is highly likely that they are being used as sleeper cells.¹⁴

A Jordanian court sentenced 10 members of extremist groups to two-and-a-half-years in jail after they were found guilty of attempting to join foreign backed militants in Syria, including groups associated with Al-Qaeda. The sentencing by the state security court raised to 50 the number of extremists jailed by Jordanian authorities over links to Syrian militant groups since December 2013.¹⁵

¹² “Islamic State's appeal presents Jordan with new test”, Jerusalem Post, August 29, 2014.

¹³ Nikita Malik, “As the Islamic State’s threat grows, Israel and Jordan seek security ties”, The National, July 7, 2014.

¹⁴ “Islamic State Supporters Rally Openly in Jordan”, The Clarion Project, August 6, 2014.

¹⁵ “Jordan sentences 10 extremists to jail over Syria war”, Islamic invitation Turkey, April 29, 2014.

Military Operations Against the IS

Jordanian authorities launched a crackdown on alleged supporters of the Islamic State and the Al-Nusra Front, arresting more than 40 suspects. The arrests are thought to be a precautionary measure and came in response to recent developments in Iraq and Syria.¹⁶

Musa al-Abdallat, a lawyer for the Salafist Movement in Jordan, said that 46 members of the movement had been arrested after declaring their support for the IS. Al-Abdallat added that the arrests began in the town of Rusaifa, northeast of Amman, following a demonstration in support of IS. The demonstration began outside the home of the spiritual leader of the Salafist Movement in Jordan, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, who recently criticized the group.

Al-Abdallat said that the arrest campaign spread to other towns and cities, including Irbid, Salt, Zarqa and Ma'an, as well as the Baqa'a refugee camp north of Amman, and that most of the detainees were supporters of the IS.

Salafist leaders condemned the security forces' actions, issuing a statement that claimed that "[the] harassment of supporters of the jihadist ideology in Jordan was taking place under the orders of foreign countries."

As concerns grow over the transfer of weapons to various terrorist groups from Jordan to Syria, Jordanian security forces discovered a number of "weapons production factories (workshops)" along the common border between Jordan and Syria.¹⁷

Jordanian officials announced that eight individuals were arrested following the confiscation of several workshops or factories producing weapons and ammunitions in the Jordanian province of Northern Irbid, along the border with Syria. Meanwhile, according to a report, a terrorist group affiliated with the IS that was planning to carry out a terrorist attack in Jordan, was caught and its members arrested along the Iraq-Jordan border.

Also, Jordanian security forces are currently on a state of high alert, ready to thwart any terrorist operations in the Western Iraqi province of Al-Anbar, which borders Jordan.

In April 2014, a depot of heavy weaponry belonging to Al-Qaeda-linked militants was discovered on the country's border with Syria.

¹⁶ Mohamed Al – Daameh, "Jordanian authorities arrest ISIS, Nusra Front suspects", Asharq Alawsat, August 27, 2014.

¹⁷ "Weapons production facility discovered along Syria-Jordan border", Islamic invitation Turkey, January 12, 2014.

Jordanian sources said that members of the Jordan-based Salafi-Takfiri, which enjoys the support of Qatar's intelligence and security forces, transferred some of the weapons belonging to militants fighting against the Syrian government to a secret depot in Jordan near the border with Syria.¹⁸ "The arms depot contains heavy weapons, Grad missiles and heavy machine-guns," they said, and added; "The weapons have been transferred to Jordan from Daraa Province in Southern Syria and hidden in mountainous border regions."

On August, 24, 2014 Jordanian forces killed two gunmen and injured another as their camouflaged vehicle attempted to cross into Jordan from Syria; four other passengers were arrested and seven machine guns were seized.

International Support to Jordan

The United States

Jordan is a close ally of the United States. The Hashemite Kingdom and its General Intelligence Department (GID) is a strategic partner of the US and both countries already share intelligence. U.S and Jordanian special forces have cooperated for a couple of years in Syria, vetting opposition groups and providing limited weapons and training to those deemed worthy of assistance. The Americans will probably seek an active military role for the Jordanians in a future US-led coalition against the IS, but will need to assure them that the US is committed to the Islamic State's destruction.¹⁹

The head of the Jordanian Army met on August 27, 2014 with the head of US Central Command in order to discuss enhanced cooperation between their forces, and roughly 6,000 US troops are taking part in this year's (2014) "Eager Lion" military exercise in Jordan.²⁰

President Barack Obama, stating that contemporary security threats come from "decentralized Al-Qaeda affiliates and extremists", armed with agendas focused in the countries where they operate, intends to use money from a new counter-terrorism partnership fund of \$5 billion to defuse such threats, without sending ground forces or stirring up "local resentments".

The counter-terrorism partnership fund will allow the United States to train, increase capacity and facilitate partner countries on the front lines. If implemented successfully, the security

¹⁸ "Al-Qaeda's Heavy Arms Depot Discovered in Jordan", Islamic invitation Turkey, April 13, 2014.

¹⁹ Bradley Klapper, "Who will help the U.S. battle the Islamic State in Syria?" PBS News hour, August 29, 2014.

²⁰ <http://www.longwarjournal.org/#ixzz3BnzjLLWC>

training would greatly benefit Jordan in combating jihadist fighters who are trying to make a base in Jordan.

United Kingdom

The British Ambassador to Jordan, Peter Millet, said that the UK and NATO are ready to coordinate with Jordan to deal with the danger it faces from the Islamic State. Millet added that the stability and security of the Hashemite Kingdom are a top priority for his government.²¹

Israel and Jordan

In July 2014, Iraqi forces withdrew from Turaibil, the only legal border crossing between Jordan and Iraq. Jordanian officials emphasized that Iraqi Sunni tribesmen, friendly to Jordan, moved into the Turaibil border area following the withdrawal of Iraqi troops. Jordanian armed forces responded by sending tanks, troops and rocket launchers as precautionary measures.²²

It is Jordan, on Israel's east and Iraq's west that will serve as a crucial buffer from the terrorist movements that threaten to spill over into Israel. Israel, meanwhile, is closely watching developments in neighboring Jordan.

Amid fears that the Islamic State threat could ultimately threaten its own security, Israel has responded with plans to build a 500-kilometer security fence on its border with Jordan.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that Israel would come to the aid of Jordan if it came under threat by the IS. "I think it's our common interest to make sure that a moderate, stable regime like [Jordan] is able to defend itself," Netanyahu said in a speech at an Israeli think tank. "We must be able to stop the terrorism and fundamentalism that can reach us from the east at the Jordan line and not in the suburbs of Tel Aviv." Netanyahu has asked the world to "bolster" Jordan as a moderate Arab state.

Yaakov Amidror, a former Israeli National Security Council Director, clarified that if the Hashemite Kingdom requested Israeli assistance in protecting its border with Iraq, Israel would

²¹ Ariel Ben Solomon, "Britain, NATO ready to support Jordan against Islamic State", Jerusalem Post, September 1, 2014.

²² Nikita Malik, "As the Islamic State's threat grows, Israel and Jordan seek security ties", The National, July 7, 2014.

have “little choice” but to help. Israeli diplomats have also told their US counterparts that Israel would be prepared to take military action to assist Jordan if it came under attack by jihadist militants.

Israel has twice intervened to save the Jordanian monarchy, which is one of only two Arab governments that have a peace treaty with Israel. In 1958, Israel facilitated as the UK intervened in Jordan to crush an apparent plot by supporters of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser to overthrow King Hussein. Then, in 1970, Israel massed troops along Jordan’s border to successfully scare off a Syrian invasion threat.

In the long term, both Jordan and Israel will structure their partnership to be one devoid of any possible peril as the two partners share an interest in preventing the conflict from drawing closer to home.

Summary

There is no doubt that the Islamic State has a presence in Jordan. Support for the IS within Jordan is growing and many jihadists in the country support the Islamic State. The question is how immediately that presence is liable to pose a security threat to the country.

Jordan has an important role to play in the regional fight against terrorism, one that is likely to intensify in the months to follow, but the responsibility of combating this threat puts tremendous pressure on Jordan.

The Jordanian air force is armed with 60 F-16s as well as 25 Cobra attack helicopters, and the Jordanian ground forces and Special Forces are quite capable of defending their borders.

In the worst-case scenario, Jordan would lean on its powerful allies, namely the US and Israel, with whom it shares a mutual interest in combating extremism.²³

²³ Michael Pizzi, “Middle East’s stable monarchy comes face to face with extremist threat”, Al Jazeera, July 10, 2014.