



A Deepening Security Dilemma In Jordan

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Back in December, authorities in Jordan raided the hideout of an individual who had allegedly killed a police officer during the large-scale protests that engulfed the kingdom's south last Fall. The raid led to the death of three more officers, as well as the suspect. Over the course of the assault, however, authorities arrested nine others said to be part of a terrorist cell following "takfiri ideology," a core tenet of the Islamic State's radical creed. The suspects, who were apprehended with automatic weapons and a large amount of ammunition, were hiding out in an impoverished area of southern Jordan that had served as a hotbed of support for the terrorist group in the past. As such, the incident could serve as a troubling portent of things to come.

Jordan has thus far largely avoided a full-blown insurgency by the Islamic State (or ISIS), despite sharing territorial borders with both Syria and Iraq – where the group has operated freely in the past and even maintained a short-lived, self-declared caliphate. ISIS terrorist attacks inside the kingdom have been few and far between, thanks to robust counterterrorism operations by the country's General Intelligence Directorate (GID) that successfully foiled a number of plots (including a 2021 scheme by ISIS members to attack Jews visiting Jordan as well as Israeli soldiers stationed in the Jordan River Valley). Jordan's security services have also worked to whittle down the number of ISIS members in the country; when assessed in 2020, membership in the group within the country was estimated to have fallen from 1,250 to no more than 750. And in February, a Jordanian court sentenced three to death for membership in ISIS and staging two 2018 bombings that cumulatively killed six security officers.

Nevertheless, the kingdom has a number of vulnerabilities that make it susceptible to precisely the type of unrest that the Islamic State is prone to exploit. This includes a weak economy and widespread dissatisfaction with the government of King Abdullah II, which has made a number of unpopular socio-economic moves in recent months (including a fuel price hike late last year that sparked national protests). Also of note is the kingdom's large contingent of refugees — including an estimated 675,000 from Syria — at least some of whom may have been indoctrinated with extremist ideology prior to entering the country. Moreover, Jordan has long been a desirable target for the Islamic State, which considers Amman's rulers traitors to the faith for their cooperation with both Israel and the United States.

All this has created ample cause for concern, and recent studies have suggested that Jordan will likely experience a surge of terrorist attacks in the next decade — especially as the economy continues to deteriorate and other issues (like water scarcity and unemployment) become even more pervasive. These factors deepen popular frustration within Jordanian society, and push individuals to engage in political violence and support groups that promise radical change.

It's a vicious cycle. As groups like ISIS gain traction, the government in Amman is forced to divert funds from social welfare programs and infrastructure projects to beef up security, and by doing so inadvertently deepens poverty and exacerbates poor living conditions for many. All of which inevitably fuels popular unrest, and therefore terrorist recruitment.

These deepening problems aren't Jordan's alone, however. The kingdom is a key American ally in a volatile region, hosting nearly 3,000 U.S. troops and serving as a valuable asset in global counterterrorism operations. Jordan is also home to air bases of particular importance for U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions in both Iraq and Syria. That makes Jordan's vulnerabilities a dilemma for America, too. And as the Islamic State attempts to regain ground in the Middle East, Washington and its partners will need to help Amman to mitigate the economic and political factors aiding its resurgence.

If they don't, Jordan could soon witness a decline in its ability to serve as a counterterrorism ally. In the worst case, it could even transform from an asset into a liability, at least in security terms. That's a situation that neither officials in Washington nor their counterparts in the kingdom should want.

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