

Jordan

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This is a summary of, and update to, the Jordan chapter of the American Foreign Policy Council's *World Almanac of Islamism 2021*. To read the full chapter, visit <https://almanac.afpc.org>.

Located at the center of an already-volatile region that has experienced a surge of Islamist activity in recent years, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has faced growing internal instability and a mounting challenge from extremist actors. The country's high unemployment and public debt, endemic corruption and social inequality have all contributed to the creation of a fertile breeding ground in which Islamist groups and extremist ideas have taken root. The Kingdom's large Palestinian population, which accounts for roughly 70 percent of its 10.6 million total, has proven prone to radicalization, as well as supportive of extremist activities against Israel in support of a Palestinian state. The influx of refugees from the now-decade-old Syrian civil war and the enduring influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, meanwhile, have exacerbated challenges to the country's stability and cohesion.

During its rise to power in neighboring Iraq and nearby Syria, the Islamic State terrorist group posed a danger to the Jordanian monarchy, garnering supporters from Jordan's radical Salafi-jihadi movement. While there is some dispute over how many Jordanians joined the Islamic State during its short-lived reign, credible estimates state that around [3,000 Jordanians](#) traveled to fight in Syria and Iraq. Since the collapse of the ISIS caliphate in 2019, Jordanian authorities have grappled with the challenge of what to do with "returnees" from the Islamic State, as well as how to manage powerful – and potentially destabilizing – Islamist currents within the country, such as those embodied by the Jordanian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood.

RECENT TRENDS

Counterterrorism tensions with Israel. In late December 2019, the Jordan-based Arab Bank was served with a [multibillion dollar, precedent-setting lawsuit](#) in Jerusalem's District Court. The suit was brought on by 1,132 victims of terrorism and their families, who have accused the bank of cooperating, supporting, abetting, funding and encouraging terrorist activities. The plaintiffs claim that the bank was involved in funding terrorist attacks against Israel carried out by Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Fatah and other terrorist organizations. The case has not yet been settled or adjudicated.

Ongoing anti-Israeli sentiment. Jordan's relationship with its western neighbor remains fraught on other fronts as well. Over the past year, tensions over economic arrangements between the two countries (such as a controversial 2016 natural gas arrangement) have resulted in [rallies and other protests](#). These public gatherings, in turn, have been shaped by the country's Islamist forces, with many Islamic leaders (including Murad Al-Adaileh, secretary general of the Islamic Action Front) serving as organizers or speakers. This discontent has occasionally manifested itself in direct anti-Israel violence – but that activism is monitored, and punished, by Jordanian authorities. In June 2020, for instance, five Jordanian citizens who [allegedly had sought to carry out suicide attacks](#) against Israeli targets in the West Bank were tried by a state security court, following their arrest earlier in the year. Ongoing political and religious friction between Israel and the Palestinians continue to fuel this trend.

Opposition to the “Abraham Accords.” Islamist actors in Jordan have weighed in in opposition to the political wave of normalization with Israel that has swept the Gulf monarchies of the Middle East. In September 2020, the Islamic Action Front (the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan) heavily criticized normalization between Bahrain and Israel, terming it a [“historic crime that must be retracted.”](#) Reaction has been more muted since, perhaps owing to the current lack of clarity over how intensively the new U.S. administration plans to back the Accords and press for follow-on arrangements involving other regional states.

The Muslim Brotherhood on the outs. Relations between the Kingdom and the Muslim Brotherhood have deteriorated precipitously in recent times, culminating in the July 2020 ruling by the Jordanian Court of Cassation ruled that [the original organization in Jordan had no legal basis to exist](#) and closing its offices. (Notably, the ruling did not extend to the group’s political party, the Islamic Action Front, which remains a viable player on the Jordanian political scene). The Court’s ruling was followed by a cascade of arrests against Brotherhood members inside the country’s Teachers Syndicate in August 2020. The problems confronting the Brotherhood appear to be larger than governmental pressure, however. As the results of Jordan’s parliamentary elections (detailed below) reflect, the group appears to be experiencing a [decline in popular support](#) more broadly. Most recently, in December 2020, Jordan’s Ministry of Social Development issued an official announcement from the Court of Cassation upholding its earlier decision that the group had been [“dissolved and lost its legal status.”](#)

Islamists thwarted at the ballot box. In recent months, Islamist forces have experienced a significant reversal of fortune in the Jordanian political system. In September 2020, the Islamic Action Front announced that it would run in the country’s November parliamentary elections. Ahead of the announcement, there was heavy speculation that the IAF would boycott the elections altogether in protest over growing governmental intervention in the country’s political system, as well as the [mounting tensions between Islamists and Jordanian authorities](#). However, when it did take place, the election itself resulted in a significant loss of status for the Islamic Action Front. According to Independent Election Commission (IEC) Chief Commissioner Khalid Kalalkeh, the [Islamist party ran 41 candidates but only managed to secure a total of eight seats, half the number it won in the last parliament elections back in 2016](#). The IAF’s poor performance was attributable to poor voter turnout – [only about 29.9% of the country’s 4.5 million eligible voters participated](#) in the election as a result of fears surrounding the coronavirus pandemic.

ISIS ascendant. With the world focused on combating the coronavirus, the Islamic State, has demonstrated renewed regional strength in recent months, taking advantage of a weakened international response. The regional resurgence of ISIS has raised growing concerns in the Kingdom, which is currently estimated to have more than three hundred Islamic extremists serving jail time or receiving rehabilitation services. The resultant crackdown by state authorities has led to a number of notable arrests and trials, including the January 2021 conviction and sentencing of eleven people found to have joined ISIS and planned attacks targeting churches and security personnel in Mafraq and Zarqa.

Jordan’s large and politically volatile Palestinian contingent has proven to be a receptive audi-

ence for the ISIS message, and has garnered the terror group recruits who have mobilized on its behalf. Thus, in early 2020, a Palestinian refugee indiscriminately stabbed eight tourists at the archeological site of Jerash, located north of Amman, in an attack that was carried out in the name of the Islamic State. No notable activity in this regard has taken place since then, however.

Coronavirus and extremism. As in other nations, recruitment by ISIS and other militants in Jordan has been affected by the coronavirus and resultant lockdowns, which have affected the ability of extremist groups to recruit, mobilize and organize. Notably, however, the economic turbulence that has accompanied the pandemic has added still [greater stress to Jordan's already-fragile economy](#), and provided an additional grievance for extremists to exploit.