

# Can Jordan contain the jihadi threat?

## Two recent terrorist attacks illustrate the dangers of militant Islamist ideological spillover from the war in Syria

**THROUGHOUT THE** turmoil that has roiled the Middle East during the last five-and-a-half years, Jordan has managed to maintain its equilibrium, affected by events, to be sure, but seemingly immune from the twin catastrophes of state failure and rampant violent conflict that has characterized much of the region. However, two recent jihadi terrorist attacks, the largest experienced by Jordan in a decade, give cause for concern, especially in the context of larger trends.

The most recent attack, carried out by the Islamic State on June 21, killed seven Jordanian soldiers and injured at least twice that many at a Syrian-Jordanian border checkpoint.

Jordan quickly sealed the border and beefed up its security presence. Even earlier, it had refused to allow the tens of thousands of refugees in the encampment to cross into Jordan and join the approximately three-quarters of a million of their compatriots who had already done so since the onset of the Syrian civil war, citing both security concerns and limited capacity. That encampment, in searing heat with limited supplies, is now facing a humanitarian disaster.

More worrisome was an attack on an office of Jordan's vaunted General Intelligence Service, located in the Baq'a Palestinian refugee camp near Amman, which killed five members of the security forces. Earlier, in March, seven members of a jihadi cell in the northern city of Irbid were killed in a clash that cost the life of one Jordanian soldier.

Internal security forces are now cracking down on anyone who appears to sympathize with the jihadi current, including the criminalization of expressions of support in social media. Mohammad Abu-Rumman, a leading Jordanian analyst on radical Islamic groups, warned that the real threat to the kingdom's stability came from within.

The jihadist ISIS sympathizers of Baq'a and Irbid, he pointed out, were home grown – disaffected young Jordanians who for one reason or another had become enamored with the Islamic State, and radical Islamism in general.

Nor were they alone: more than 2,000 young Jordanians have gone to Syria to fight in the ranks of Islamic State and other radical Sunni Islamist groups against the Assad regime and its Iranian and Lebanese Hezbollah Shi'ite allies.

The Jordanian state has always had a complex relationship with Islamist groups, and with the role played by Islam in the fashioning of a modern Jordanian national identity.

The Hashemite monarchy's claim to legitimacy is directly linked to its descent from the prophet Muhammad, through King Abdullah II's great-grandfather, and the family's control over Islam's two holiest shrines, Mecca and Medina, for a millennium.

Muslim Brotherhood and caliphate-advocating Hizb ut-Tahrir activities were encouraged by the late King Hussein as a counterweight to the radical pan-Arabism championed by Egypt's Nasser and the Syrian Ba'ath Party. However, in recent times, the Brotherhood, and its political arm, the Islamic Action Front, have been more openly opposed to the political status quo in Jordan, in which the monarchy holds a monopoly on power. Hence, the authorities are currently promoting divisions within the Brotherhood in advance of parliamentary elections scheduled for September.

The Jordanian state also tolerated, and even encouraged at times, Salafist returnees from the jihad against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, who looked askance at what they saw as the Brotherhood's failure to adhere to strict Islamic precepts. As with their counterparts elsewhere, the Jordanian authorities also invested heavily in religious education and mosque-building, seeking to bolster its legitimacy with a predominantly pious public, but to the consternation of liberals who feared the consequences of excessive religiosity and intolerance.

Nearly all of Jordan's overwhelmingly Muslim population are Sunnis. As such, many view the current regional violence through a sectarian lens: they have heavily sympathized with Iraq's beleaguered Sunni minority and with the Sunni factions fighting against Bashar Assad's Alawi and Iranian-Shi'ite-supported regime in Syria.

The Jordanian state, by contrast, has been an active supporter

Jordanian special forces participate in an anti-terrorism drill at King Abdullah II Airbase in Amman, May 10

of the American-led military campaign against Islamic State: one horrific outcome was Islamic State's brutal immolation of a captured Jordanian air force pilot by fire while incarcerated in a cage. The act outraged the Jordanian public, but also raised questions as to why Jordan was involved in the conflict in the first place.

High levels of poverty and unemployment, accompanied by overall pessimism regarding the economy's future, remain the dominant concerns for most Jordanians.

For young males with blocked futures, the allure of jihadi extremism is considerable. Some children of the Jordanian elite also have been enticed by jihadism, indicating that its appeal cannot be reduced to poverty and lack of opportunity.

To be sure, the Jordanian elite remains cohesive, and most of the public has concluded that the status quo, however frustrating, is preferable to any alternative.

Still, as the Washington Institute's David Schenker recently stated, the longer the war in Syria persists, the more danger militant Islamist ideological spillover poses to Jordan. ■

*Bruce Maddy-Weitzman is a professor in the Department of Middle Eastern and African History, and Senior Research Fellow at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University*