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The Impact of the Syria Crisis on Jordan's Terrorist Threat

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In the past years Jordan has been facing multidimensional risks from some of its neighboring countries, as the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have created unstable border regions, placing Jordan in the middle of the “global red zone” of terrorism.

The external threats have included direct confrontation with militant non-state actors such as *Al-Nusra* or *ISIS* on the Syrian-Jordanian border, as well as the increased risk of terrorist attacks being carried out on Jordanian soil by experienced, battle-hardened terrorists. Previously, Jordan had been relatively spared from Islamist attacks, with the marked exemption of three simultaneous hotel bombings in Jordan's capital Amman, conducted by *al-Qaeda in Iraq* (AQI) in 2005.

Impact on border security

Since the outbreak of the Syria crisis and the threat of confrontation with militants at the Jordanian border as well as the entrance of fighters into Jordan, the Kingdom's strategic position throughout the Syrian crisis had been to especially secure its borders, as the main source of the external threat. Regarding the threat of direct confrontation at the border, this was complicated by the rocky relationship between the Jordanian and Syrian regimes over the years. There was little trust as the Syrian regime was suspicious of Jordanian actions, assuming especially that Jordan was exclusively attacking *ISIS* and no other militant groups such as *Al Nusra* (Jordan became actively engaged in fighting *ISIS* militarily after Jordanian pilot Kasasbeh was killed

by *ISIS* in 2015). The Syrian army and its allied forces pushed these Islamists, who were already based in the south, such as the *Nusra Front* or *Khalid ibn al-Walid Army*¹, towards the Jordanian border in order to encourage the Jordanians to engage with them. As the Syrian army pursued this strategy, violent clashes in border towns increased as car bombs and other attacks were launched by terrorist groups aiming to escalate the situation and to create chaos on Syria's southern borders. While Jordan managed to avoid direct conflict with any of these terrorist groups for a while, this strategy did not last for long. Jordan was forced into direct confrontation to defend its borders, which risked involvement into fierce fighting and to spread across a larger geographical area. The turning point regarding Jordan's strategy was the terrorist attack on the Jordanian access point for the Syrian refugees, at the refugee camp in Ruqban in 2016.

The Russian-Turkish-Iranian agreement that was signed in the following year, in May 2017, and which divided Syria into four “de-confliction zones”, monitored by international troops, was thus a good option for Jordan. It had the potential to prevent the southern part of the country from collapsing into chaos and meant that Jordan would not have to face the threat on its own. At that stage, the more partners engaged in the stabilization of Syria, the higher was the potential for success and the lower the risk of militant elements crossing the border into Jordan

¹ The Khalid ibn al-Walid Army (Arabic: جيش خالد بن الوليد *Jaysh Khalid ibn al-Waleed*) was an armed Salafi jihadist group active in southern Syria.

especially following the fall of Raqqa and Mossul in mid and late 2017.

Since the driving out of *ISIS* forces from both cities in mid and late 2017, Jordan has witnessed and confronted *ISIS* operatives right on its borders and feared that *ISIS* fighters might penetrate these. This fear was exacerbated by the fact that following *ISIS'* loss of its two previous strongholds Mosul and Raqqa, the group changed its tactics. It no longer had a strong base for military operations and returned to the insurgency model of operation. Insurgencies led by trained veterans of a multifaceted war that required intelligence and cunning to survive. They have battle-hardened and resilient soldiers with increased technical knowledge training the next generation of radicalized youth. They have formed dispersed and isolated cells, which has led to the creation of smaller, more radicalized groups competing to attract recruits and funding within Syria. The fear is that these dynamics might spill over into Jordan.

As a result of these two threats, the one of direct confrontation at the border as well as the one of spill-over terrorism, Jordan needed a new way of confronting these, not just militarily and logistically but also politically. Jordan needed strong relationships with Iraqi and Syrian counterparts as well as the capacity to build strong alliances with countries that would help Jordan in taking actions on the ground to confront these threats. For Jordan's national security, it was imperative to have a reliable partner on the Syrian side to coordinate security issues. After the battle of Aleppo, when the city was recaptured by the Syrian army in 2016, there were not many options other than Russia and the Syrian Army. However, Jordan was increasing its efforts to stabilize the border regions by expanding the ceasefire and encouraging oppositional groups to join the political process.

Impact on the Jordanian Jihadist Scene

As Jordan's borders have been secured relatively successfully by the Jordanian army, despite the multiple attempts to penetrate them, militant Islamist groups including *ISIS* complemented their efforts to destabilize the border region with establishing dormant cells, scattered throughout Jordan. These are assumed to be operating in relative isolation from each other especially as a

result of the fall of *ISIS* central command. These cells' strategy seems to be clear: test Jordan's national security by seeking to cause internal dispute and civil unrest. The deteriorating economic conditions within the kingdom can provide a fertile soil for such attempts. Several factors are making it more difficult for the Jordanian authorities to deal with them: The evolution of *Al-Qaeda in Iraq* (AQI) into *ISIS* in the past years was accompanied by the dramatic increase of resources of finance, commerce, exchange and weaponry to the group. Moreover, *ISIS* started building a stronger relationship with organized crime, embedding militant groups deeper within Jordanian society.

Further, the recent attacks on Jordanian soil for example in Baqa, Kerak, Fuhies and Salt² change the anti-terrorism battleground for the Jordanian authorities. Jordan's authorities have so far not been used to countering militant cells that operate locally, within Jordanian territory, as their fight against terrorism had so far mainly been an "intelligence war" with a focus on preventive measures. What makes it more difficult for the authorities to prevent such attacks is the fact that the recent terrorist attacks in Jordan were undertaken by locals who, while radicalized, were successfully able to hide their beliefs while planning, preparing and then taking the authorities by surprise. These attacks show the ability of terrorists to deal and operate within territory that is under strong security control.

Moreover, new threats are likely to emerge as the militants' battle in Syrian Idlib and the militants' losses here seem to be resulting in regroupings within the militant spectrum. Militants are

² In June 2016, five Jordanian intelligence officers were killed by terrorists in the largest Palestinian refugee camp of Baqa just outside Amman. In December 2016, a group of unidentified militants ambushed emergency responders who were dispatched to a false fire call and then moved into the city of Kerak in Jordan's south, killing 14 people and injuring 37 in total. The attackers took refuge in Kerak castle, with tourists hiding inside until Jordanian forces besieged the castle and killed the four terrorists. In August 2018, terrorists detonated a home-made bomb under a police car guarding a music festival in the predominately Christian town of Fuheis, which killed a police officer. The following day, Jordanian authorities traced the terrorists to a building in the nearby city of Salt and after hours of gunfighting the terrorists set off explosions in the building, resulting in the deaths of three of the terrorists as well as three members of the security forces. Five terrorists were also detained, and it was reported that the cell planned further attacks on security installations and other sensitive targets designed to destabilize Jordan as a pro-Western country in the region.

considering new strategies to compensate their current losses which will likely lead them further out of Syria. There is also an emerging group, with many Jordanian members, calling itself "The Guardians of Religion" *Hurras al Din*, which may rise to become a relevant terrorist group in the region. The group is known to be connected to Hamza Bin Laden, one of Osama bin Laden's sons, who is emerging now as a charismatic figure representing the new generation of *al-Qaeda*. As the group includes various Jordanian members in its Shura council, such as, Abu Jilibib Tubasi and Abu Khadija al-Urduni who left the terrorist group *Jadbaht Fateh al-Sham* in 2016 due to its reported disassociation from *al-Qaeda*, it remains open in how far this new group will impact the local Jordanian militant scene and

might reinforce *ISIS-al-Qaeda* competition over followers there. As the socio-economic situation is worsening in the kingdom, this may provide a breeding ground for militant groups also in the future.

So far the Jordanian response to these threats can be considered to have been relatively effective, as in 2018 alone over 60 attacks have been prevented. But the authorities' response has to be further adapted in the light of the new phenomenon of local terrorists with high technical knowledge gained from the Syrian experience, planning and operating within Jordanian borders.

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