

CRS Insights

The Islamic State in Syria and Iraq: A Possible Threat to Jordan?

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As Congress debates whether to authorize and fund the continued use of U.S. force in Iraq against the Islamic State (IS, previously referred to as ISIS or ISIL), lawmakers may consider if the Islamic State poses a threat not just to Iraq but to neighboring countries such as Jordan, an important U.S. partner. Recent territorial gains by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, combined with its ambition to reestablish a global "caliphate," have led to speculation that the terrorist group could possibly target Jordan. Jordan may be an attractive IS target: many Islamist extremists consider King Abdullah II an apostate ruler, and the kingdom has strong ties to the West and maintains relations with Israel under a 1994 peace treaty. (For more on IS in Iraq, also see CRS Report R43612, [Iraq Crisis and U.S. Policy](#), by Kenneth Katzman et al.)

Nearly a decade ago, during the height of the U.S. military presence in Iraq, the Islamic State's predecessor (Al Qaeda in Iraq or AQI) repeatedly plotted against Jordan. On November 9, 2005, Iraq-based terrorists carried out suicide bombings at three Western-owned hotels in Amman, killing 58 people. [Jordanian intelligence reportedly provided information](#) that U.S. forces in Iraq used to track and kill the head of AQI, Abu Musab al Zarqawi (a Jordanian), in June 2006.

Jordanian and U.S. authorities are concerned not only with IS infiltration into the kingdom, but also IS radicalization of Jordanians who have fought in Syria. Although Jordan has experienced far less social unrest and homegrown Islamist radicalism than some other Arab countries, the kingdom is home to several areas where manifestations of anti-government sentiment are high, economic prospects are poor, and sympathy for political Islam appears to be prevalent. Many Jordanians also have tribal or kinship ties with Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria, whose sense of persecution has driven support for the Islamic State and other extremist groups. In Zarqa, an industrial city near Amman that has long been a source of Islamist militancy, dozens of young Sunni residents have traveled to Syria, reportedly comprising [one third of all Jordanian foreign fighters](#) participating

in the Syrian civil war. In the southern town of Ma'an, an area prone to periodic anti-government unrest, a small group of residents unfurled pro-Islamic State banners during [a May 2014 protest](#), and IS propaganda distributed via social media has called on Ma'an residents to "wage jihad" against Jordan's "apostate criminal regime."

Figure 1. Jordanian IS Fighter threatens the Kingdom



Source: All Eyes on Syria YouTube video, accessed via Gatestone Institute, ["ISIS Threatens to Invade Jordan, 'Slaughter' King Abdullah," June 12, 2014](#).

Notes: After burning his Jordanian passport, the speaker reportedly says: "I have a message to the tyrant of Jordan: we are coming to you with death and explosive belts."

government recently released from prison several preachers who have long been associated with promoting Al Qaeda-like ideology after they publicly condemned the Islamic State. The most prominent of these clerics is [Abu-Muhammad \[Mohammed\] al Maqdisi](#), who has declared the Islamic State to be a deviant organization and calling on his followers to join the rival Al Nusra Front in Syria, a U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) allied with Al Qaeda's core leadership.

Politically, Jordan has long cultivated ties to Sunni tribes in western Iraq who have either joined the Islamic State or refrained from stopping its advance. Jordan has repeatedly criticized the political marginalization of Iraq's Sunni Arab population, and Jordanian intelligence has reportedly permitted [Iraqi anti-government groups to operate inside the kingdom](#). Some of Jordan's actions have strained its ties with its neighbor, notably after the kingdom hosted the ["Amman conference to save Iraq,"](#) in which 200 Sunni Iraqi tribal and other leaders convened in Jordan and called on the international community to end its support for the former Maliki government.

Some observers have cautioned against overreacting to the threat of Islamic State action against Jordan. According to former Jordanian foreign minister Marwan Muasher, unlike in Iraq, ["there is no enabling environment in Jordan"](#) for the Islamic State to succeed. Others assert that any expression of sympathy for the Islamic State is done in protest against the Jordanian government rather than as an assertion of loyalty to the Islamic State.

Jordanian Actions to Address Threats

The Jordanian government has taken a number of steps to prevent or contain domestic support for the Islamic State. From a religious angle, the

Additionally, [Jordan has increased its border security](#) and efforts to track foreign fighters. In late June, Royal Jordanian Airlines began requiring that all Jordanian male passengers between the ages of 18 to 38 prove that they have registered with the military before they are permitted to board an airplane. [King Abdullah II also traveled to Russia's Chechen Republic](#) in June, possibly to coordinate efforts to prevent Chechen fighters embedded with IS militants from infiltrating the kingdom's Chechen minority community. Moreover, local authorities have reportedly arrested IS sympathizers and other individuals who have returned from suspected fighting Syria. According to [Steve Simon, a former senior official at the National Security Council](#), if security forces are relatively measured in their actions, "they'll minimize the possibility of an ISIS insurgency by keeping fence-sitters where they are and not inadvertently convincing them that no matter how peacefully they protest, the police will come after them." King Abdullah II is also currently reviewing amendments passed by parliament to a 2006 anti-terrorism law that would criminalize the use of the Internet to "facilitate terrorist acts or back groups that promote, support or fund terrorism." [Some watchdog groups](#) have warned that the draft law could be used as a tool to quash domestic dissent under the guise of countering terrorism.

To date, no major confrontations between the Islamic State and Jordan have been reported, as observers believe that the Islamic State may try to consolidate and expand its presence in Iraq and Syria before confronting the Jordanian armed forces, which enjoy strong Western military backing. In the meantime, [commerce between Iraq and Jordan has slowed](#), and officials remain concerned over the risk of sporadic terrorist attacks against "soft targets" inside Jordan. But, according to one [analyst](#), "if ISIS is not rolled back in Iraq, terrorism perpetrated by the radical Islamist group will eventually reach the kingdom."

U.S. Policy Implications

On August 25, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey said that any long term strategy to defeating the Islamic State would require the assistance of regional partners such as Jordan. President Obama reportedly is seeking to build [a multilateral coalition](#) (to include Australia, Britain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates) to join the United States in countering the Islamic State. Several media reports suggest that [Jordanian Special Operations forces](#) assisted U.S. troops in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue American journalist James Foley, who had been held captive by the Islamic State prior to his recent execution.

Congress has supported efforts to bolster Jordan's security as part of an already a robust bilateral military partnership. The House and Senate versions of the FY2015 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations bills ([H.R. 5013](#) and [S. 2499](#), respectively) would appropriate \$1 billion in total

economic and military aid for Jordan. [S. 2499](#) states that a portion of these funds may be used for Jordan's security requirements along the border with Iraq and Syria. Congress also is considering the FY2015 Defense Appropriations Act ([H.R. 4870](#)). The version of [H.R. 4870](#) reported out of the Senate Appropriations Committee includes Operations and Maintenance (O&M) appropriations that may be used to "reimburse the government of Jordan, in such amounts as the Secretary of Defense may determine, to maintain the ability of the Jordanian armed forces to maintain security along the border between Jordan and Syria."