



PolicyWatch 2261

Jordan and the Syria Crisis: Mitigating the 'Known Unknowns'

[*Andrew J. Tabler*](#)

Also available in [العربية](#)

May 30, 2014

As extremists continue to move into southern Syria, growing security and humanitarian problems may soon outstrip Jordan's ability to handle spillover from the war.

On May 27, Jordan expelled Bahjat Suleiman -- Syria's ambassador to Amman and the Assad regime's former general security director -- for "repeated insults and offenses" against the kingdom. The decision came after Suleiman crashed the Hashemite royal court's Independence Day celebrations, and in response to his track record of propagandistic social media posts. Meanwhile, a week before Suleiman's ouster, Jordanian armed forces clashed with a group of twelve Jordanian and foreign fighters from al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) who were attempting to cross into the kingdom from Syria's southern Deraa region. These measures against two polar opposites in the Syrian war highlight the difficult situation in which Jordan finds itself as the crisis escalates, with potentially dire consequences emerging no matter which course of action it takes.

TENSIONS IN SOUTHERN SYRIA

Both of the main extremist rebel groups in Syria, JN and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), were born in the northern and eastern parts of the country, where they received assistance across the Turkish and Iraqi borders and via financing channels from Persian Gulf states. In the south, however, moderate rebels had been able to hold sway until last fall, due in no small part to Jordan's efforts to control its border and restrain financing to extremists inside Syria.

But following the Obama administration's decision to pull back from enforcing its redline on regime chemical weapons use and its subsequent focus on getting the opposition leadership to the Geneva II peace talks last January to forge a negotiated settlement to the crisis, jihadist/Salafist factions began moving south. This was particularly true of JN, whose approach was less harsh and more locally focused than that of groups like ISIS, and

therefore more palatable in tribal southern Syria. At the same time, Jordanian fighters -- who had been active since the war began and now number around two thousand personnel -- also moved into the area in larger numbers.

As the Assad regime refused to discuss a transition at Geneva, answering instead with a barrage of barrel bombs that sharply increased the civilian death toll this spring, Western countries and their regional allies began to worry about the sharp increase in JN activities in southern Syria. To curb the group's influence, Israel and Jordan sealed their borders and stepped up their assistance for moderate opposition groups in the area. According to a May 19 report in the *Jordan Times*, the kingdom's armed forces have also conducted border operations against extremists, including raids using aircraft against Islamist militants trying to cross into Jordan. Such operations have killed fourteen militants and wounded at least twenty-four others since late April.

For their part, moderate opposition groups in southern Syria began taking a stronger stance toward JN affiliates as well, at least rhetorically. In late April, Deraa military council leader Ahmed al-Naameh, who had reportedly just crossed into Syria from Jordan, released a video criticizing JN and praising moderate Free Syrian Army battalions in the south. On May 3, he was duly captured by JN, which accused him of handing the southern Syrian town of Kherbet Ghazalah to regime forces in a campaign last year. On May 6, a group of sixty moderate rebel groups issued a statement demanding his release, only to mysteriously rescind it shortly thereafter. Despite extensive negotiations, Naameh remains in JN's custody, even after a video "confession" in which he supposedly admitted that countries backing the rebels ordered him to allow Kherbet Ghazalah to fall. JN has also refused to release him to the local sharia council for arbitration.

Following Naameh's capture, Jordan closed the western part of its border with Syria, halting traffic and allowing only ambulances through for the wounded. This further tightened border constraints imposed late last summer, requiring Syrian refugees to cross around 200 kilometers to the east near Ruwaished. While the border closing was said to be intended for the refugees' safety, the additional distance they now have to travel could also allow for better vetting in terms of weeding out extremists.

JORDAN'S VULNERABILITIES

Even before the war next door worsened, Jordan faced domestic unrest and economic difficulties. To this has been added a series of problems stemming from the situation in southern Syria.

The "known unknowns" of Syrians in Jordan. Currently, up to 1.5 million Syrian refugees are believed to be in Jordan, but only 600,000 have registered with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and only 125,000 are living in the kingdom's two main refugee camps (Zaatari and the recently opened Azraq desert camp). While estimates vary, the status of over 750,000 Syrian emigres remains largely unknown; most are believed to be staying with extended family or friends in Jordan. This population represents Jordan's soft underbelly, from which Bashar al-Assad or ISIS could launch terrorist attacks against the kingdom. Even more worrisome is the fact Jordan is now receiving refugees from beyond the Deraa region, including eastern Syria, where JN and ISIS have a stronger grip.

Pressure from Mafraq governorate. While Homs in western Syria may be considered the center of the revolution, Deraa was where it all started, so residents have naturally been seeking shelter in northern Jordan's Mafraq governorate from the outset. The Zaatari camp, which now holds around 100,000 refugees, has been a tremendous burden on Mafraq's 80,000 natives, greatly taxing local resources and polluting the region's aquifer with sewage. But Syrians outside the camp have been an even larger burden on resources, including education, water, and trash collection. Aid programs have been started in the area to help local residents absorb the burden, but given the sheer number of refugees -- and the region's relatively powerful role in Jordan's East Bank-dominated political system -- tensions are on the rise.

Tensions with domestic Salafists. A number of Jordanian Salafists have made their way into southern Syria to fight, raising fears that they could eventually return home to stir trouble in the kingdom. Although some Salafist-related unrest has been reported in Maan, Zarqa, and Salt, Jordanian authorities have been able to contain the tension so far. Yet one Salafist leader in Maan pledged allegiance to ISIS this spring, potentially signaling a worrisome new trend. And if Assad's forces push into southern Syria in the coming months -- sending thousands more refugees across the border and forcing many Jordanian fighters who are now battling the extremists to go back home -- another wave of political and security threats to Jordan could soon arise.

IMPLICATIONS

Jordan's recent moves against the Syrian ambassador and against Islamist extremists along its border are a product of the no-win situation in which Amman now finds itself. If the kingdom allows Assad to continue his barrel bombing of the opposition and associated disinformation campaign (which Bahjat Suleiman has perpetuated via social media over the past three years) and retake Syrian territory down to the border, the resultant refugee influx will exacerbate an already tense situation in Jordan. Moreover, the Assad regime does not have enough troops to truly hold all of the territory it retakes, meaning Syria will remain unstable for years to come. If Jordan does nothing, extremists in southern Syria will expand their numbers and influence, and the palace will suffer criticism at home for doing nothing to help the Syrian opposition in its hour of need. Such sentiment could in turn inflame tribal and Salafist factions in Jordan and invite attacks from domestic extremists.

Alternatively, if Amman actively works against Assad, Damascus would likely use the "unknown" Syrians in Jordan to carry out terrorist attacks, making the plots look as if they were carried out by Jordanian Salafists, ISIS, or both. More broadly, absent a major shift in U.S. policy regarding direct intervention in Syria, the opposition is unlikely to defeat the regime anytime soon, perpetuating a state of war that will only generate more extremism.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the Congressional Research Service, Jordan already receives \$360 million in economic aid and \$300 million in military aid from the United States per year, plus \$340 million in Title VIII funding (labeled for "Overseas Contingency Operations/Global War on Terror") and additional "Migration and Refugee Assistance Funding" to deal with the Syrian refugee crisis. While that is a substantial commitment, Amman still does not have sufficient

resources to meet the vast needs created by the war next door.

The humanitarian situation for Syrians in Jordan is bad. Only 25 percent of the pledges made to cover the UNHCR's budget in the kingdom have been fulfilled, and the humanitarian needs will not end anytime soon. Even if the war ended tomorrow, there is little chance that refugees would go home in the near future given the Assad regime's scorched-earth policies, including destruction of much of the country's housing stock.

Jordan also needs to step up border security and antiterror activities, but its resources are too limited to do much more on its own. The \$5 billion Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund outlined by President Obama in his May 28 West Point speech is aimed at expanding the training and equipping of foreign militaries, bolstering allied counterterrorism capabilities, and supporting efforts to counter violent extremism and terrorist ideology. Jordan would seem a logical candidate for some of that funding. Still unknown is whether those funds could be used for cross-border activities into southern Syria, or if the money would instead have to come from the recently passed National Defense Authorization Act, which permits the Pentagon to "provide equipment, training, supplies, and defense services to assist vetted members of the Syrian opposition."

Whatever the case, security in Jordan will remain precarious so long as the Assad regime continues its vicious attacks on Syrian civilians, which in turn create refugee flows, attract foreign jihadists, and justify extremism as a tit-for-tat response. The best way to counter both the regime and extremists in southern Syria is through better training and equipping of local moderate opposition forces. That means giving the moderates more incentives to work together and shun the jihadists. The United States and Jordan should make the choice clear: moderate rebels in the south can either organize into coherent units and cease fighting alongside al-Qaeda affiliates in order to receive U.S. and Jordanian assistance, or they can continue as is and suffer defeat at the hands of the Assad regime.

Finally, Washington should expand its coordination with Israeli and Jordanian covert efforts in southern Syria. All three states have an interest in rooting out extremism there and pushing the Assad regime back to negotiating a real transition that will end the war, not simply local ceasefires that perpetuate the "dynamic stalemate" and risk generating extremism for years to come.

Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the book [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](#).