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Sustained Counterterrorism Efforts Remain Key to Preventing Attacks in Jordan

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The pandemic has not ended terrorism in Jordan, and ISIS is still a significant threat.

Last year's abnormally low terrorist activity in Jordan could be interpreted as an indication that the threat of ISIS in the country has diminished significantly. Unfortunately, this is not the case; while there are several explanations for the low occurrence of terrorist attacks in Jordan in 2020, none of them point to a future in which ISIS does not continue to pose a threat to Jordanian security.

On the contrary, the decrease in ISIS activity in Jordan last year was primarily a result of effective counterterrorism efforts, not the special circumstances of the pandemic or any other factor. Accordingly, Jordanian anti-terror institutions should not relax their guard. Rather, they should capitalize on their successes, expanding cooperation with their partners and enhancing their resources in combatting extremism.

Jordanian security forces should be especially concerned with activities along their borders. There have been several recent international and UN reports that confirmed the rising activities of terrorist groups in countries that border Jordan. Iraq in particular has seen a recent rise in terrorist attacks, including two suicide bombings in Baghdad on January 21, 2021 that killed 32 people and injured 110 others. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks. In turn, ISIS's mounting activities in Iraq have led to increased terrorist activity in the Badia al-Sham region and the Jordanian Syrian-Iraqi border triangle, where terrorist militants move in small, highly mobile groups.

This increase in activity has prompted Jordanian security forces to strengthen their presence on the borders with Iraq and Syria. Following a Russian air campaign in the Badia region in late February, in which Russian planes

launched at least 130 air strikes in one day against terrorist groups in the area, Jordan started to strengthen and tightened its security presence on the borders to prevent infiltration of ISIS elements into Jordan. Russian strikes were especially targeted at ISIS, which extends between the governorates of Homs and Deir al-Zour at the border with Iraq.

Rare Peace in 2020

The threat of terrorism has existed in Jordan since the establishment of Transjordan in 1921. Though 1951 assassination of King Abdullah bin Al-Hussein marked the first major terrorist operation in the country's history, intelligence on the king's assassination and later political killings indicated that terrorist activity had existed in Jordan since the state was founded. Since then, Jordan has only gone free of the threat terrorism for brief, intermittent periods of time.

In comparison with other countries in the region, Jordan therefore experiences a low but consistent rate of terrorist activity. Recently, Jordan has seen an average of two terrorist operations every year for the past three decades. The 2020 edition of the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), published annually by the Institute for Economics and Peace in Australia, ranked Jordan 57th globally in national occurrence of terrorist attacks, placing it among countries with "low impact" from terrorism. According to the Shorufat Center for Globalization and Terrorism's 2020 Jordan Terrorism Index, there have been a total of 133 terrorist operations in Jordan during the period from 1970 to the end of 2020, resulting in 156 deaths and 300 wounded.

As a result, the year 2020 was an exception to the rule, marking the first year since 2011 in which Jordan did not experience any terrorist operations. Other indicators have also shown that 2020 was a year of weakness for ISIS in particular. The Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate confirmed that ISIS membership has fallen from 1250 to no more than 750 in 2020, a result of some members returning to Jordan and others being killed on different fronts. This news confirms that ISIS seemed to have been weakened on all fronts after repeated strikes against its strongholds in Syria and Iraq.

Moreover, some Western think tanks like the Institute for Economics and Peace have noted a decrease in terrorist attacks and killings since the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. Analysts have also pointed out that terrorist operations have largely been carried out by lone wolves in the last year.

At the same time, Vladimir Voronkov, head of the United Nations Office for Counterterrorism, warned during a session held in the UN Security Council last January that extremist groups were taking advantage of the emerging pandemic to recruit more personnel and orchestrate more racially, ethnically and politically motivated attacks. In this regard, he particularly focused on ISIS, which lost its de facto state in Syria and seeks to reconfigure its capabilities to launch external operations. Voronkov also stressed that those terrorist organizations have been able to develop their cyber capabilities and have enhanced outreach to organized crime groups.

This lack of successful terrorist activity in Jordan during 2020 has stirred questions about the future of Jordan's terrorist threat. But despite hopes for the future, neither the decrease in terrorist attacks in Jordan during 2020 nor the observations related to the pandemic and lone wolf attacks necessarily support the hypothesis that the pandemic has generally resulted in less terrorist activity, or that ISIS poses less of a threat to Jordan moving forward.

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enhanced outreach to organized crime groups. As such, the pandemic cannot have been the critical factor in the decrease in terrorist activity in Jordan. Furthermore, while terrorist activity seems to have waned in the last year, it hasn't disappeared. Three failed ISIS operations in June 2020 exemplify the continuing terrorist threat in Jordan.

The first operation was planned for June 2, 2020, when the General Intelligence Directorate foiled the operation planned by two ISIS members targeting the intelligence building in the city of Zarqa. The plan was to use explosives against bystanders and light weapons against one of the static patrols in the Ma'asom neighborhood of Zarqa. The State Security Court investigated two suspects and found they were planning a terrorist operation for ISIS, and that they had held meetings in which they exchanged ISIS publications and news including over ISIS-run channels on the internet.

The second operation was planned for June 7, 2020, when the General Intelligence Directorate discovered and foiled it. The planned operation came from a terrorist cell that included three ISIS members who aimed to use light weapons against central security officials in Irbid, a city located in northern Jordan. The investigations of the State Security Court indicated that the cell had been exposed to ISIS ideas through social media, ISIS publications, and communication with ISIS members outside Jordan through Telegram.

The third operation was planned for June 29, 2020. The State Security Court's investigations found that a cell of four ISIS members living in Al-Wehdat in east Amman had failed to carry out an attack against a store selling alcoholic beverages and an Armenian Orthodox Church in the Ashrafyeh area near the Al-Wehdat camp. The ISIS members had planned to use automatic weapons. They had also been unable to locally manufacture explosives. The members of the cell admitted that they had heard about ISIS ideas through social media and had failed to join ISIS in Syria because of the heightened security presence at Jordan's borders.

Beyond simply exemplifying the continued terrorist threat in Jordan, these attacks indicate the rise in social media that has correlated with recent Jordanian security measures. Jordan, an active member of the U.S.-led international coalition against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, cooperates with the coalition leadership and participates in intelligence gathering on issues related to ISIS activities in Jordan and abroad. Jordanian officials have restricted travel and banned trafficking at its borders with neighboring countries, especially Syria and Iraq, in order to stop affiliates and supporters from traveling to join ISIS. Jordan has also implemented ongoing security campaigns to keep tabs on extremist activity in the country, including aggressive surveillance of social media and harsher legal penalties for ISIS members, who are now prosecuted according to the anti-terror law adopted and amended in 2006.

These measures perhaps explain ISIS's behavior over the past three years, during which they focused more on recruitment and outreach on social media (Facebook and Telegram). Furthermore, they have not prevented ISIS from carrying out attacks in Jordan leading up to 2020. The Salt and Fuheis terrorist operations of 2018 marked the first time in Jordan's history that terrorists admitted to planning to use drones and explosives against security and governmental targets. Furthermore, Jordanian officials failed to prevent a 2019 operation in which a 22-year-old Gazan refugee with a temporary Jordanian passport stabbed and wounded eight tourists in Jerash as a response to the killing of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

And beyond Jordan, ISIS also demonstrated a gain in influence in North Africa and the Sahel. The ISIS threat in Jordan is therefore not over. Rather, the organization is more likely waiting for the right time and place to go after intelligence and security targets, such as the General Intelligence Directorate or the Public Security Directorate, in addition to "soft targets" such as places of worship and churches. The planned attacks in 2020 illustrate the focus on these types of targets

Future Trends

The failure of the planned attacks in Jordan is likely a result of the General Intelligence Directorate's vigilance and the lack of experience and training on the part of those attempting to carry out the attacks, which they would usually learn in Syria, Iraq, or North Africa. However, terrorism remains a threat in Jordan, and the recent lack of terrorist attacks should not be credited to the pandemic instead of the country's ongoing counterterrorism efforts.

Looking forward, studies on the future of terrorism in Jordan suggest an increase in terrorist operations during the next decade. Moreover, problems including the continuing deterioration of economic conditions, high levels of poverty and unemployment, along with issues of water scarcity, may deepen popular frustration in the coming years and consequently push citizens into violent extremism and political violence.

Accordingly, Jordanian security officials need to continue working with the international anti-terror coalition and deepen their global partnerships in the field of anti-terrorism. On the local level, security agencies must remain vigilant and prevent any activities or movements by extremist groups, likewise preventing ISIS recruitment in Jordan and communications with members abroad. At the same time, Jordanian security officials must also make sure they do not monopolize anti-terrorism efforts. Instead, Jordan must implement laws that protect the rights of individuals and institutions and allow civil society actors and institutions to participate in efforts to combat extremist thinking and terrorism in all its forms. In sum, Jordanian security officials should continue and enhance their operations, because they seem to be the primary factor in Jordan's recent peace. ❖



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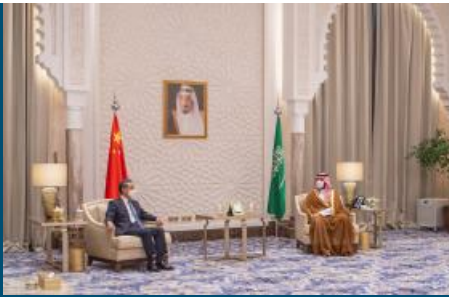
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