

Jordan's Escalating Border Threats Amid Regional Upheaval

by [Abdullah Hayek \(/experts/abdullah-hayek\)](/experts/abdullah-hayek), [Ahmad Sharawi \(/experts/ahmad-sharawi\)](/experts/ahmad-sharawi)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Abdullah Hayek \(/experts/abdullah-hayek\)](/experts/abdullah-hayek)

Abdullah Hayek is a research assistant with The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. He specializes in Iranian-backed militias in Syria and Iraq as well as the military affairs of the Levant and Gulf regions.



[Ahmad Sharawi \(/experts/ahmad-sharawi\)](/experts/ahmad-sharawi)

Ahmad Sharawi is a research assistant with The Washington Institute's Rubin Family Arab Politics Program. He specializes in political and economic affairs of the Levant, North Africa, and Gulf regions.



Brief Analysis

The kingdom is taking a firm hand against drug trafficking, weapons smuggling, drone infiltrations, and other threats, but it still needs enhanced defense capabilities and other crucial assistance from Washington.

On January 8, the Royal Jordanian Air Force [conducted \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/jordanian-jets-strike-iran-linked-drug-dealers-inside-syria-intelligence-sources-2024-01-09/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/jordanian-jets-strike-iran-linked-drug-dealers-inside-syria-intelligence-sources-2024-01-09/) strikes against suspected drug dealers and warehouses in Syria, their fourth such operation in recent months. The strikes occurred amid [military reports \(https://www.khaberni.com/news/%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84-88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-614765\)](https://www.khaberni.com/news/%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%8A%D9%84-88-%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A9-%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-614765) of increased smuggling attempts—primarily involving drugs, but also weapons—across the kingdom's northern border. Between January and August 2023 alone, a total of 194 smuggling and infiltration attempts were recorded, 88 of them involving drones. Some cross-border incidents have resulted in clashes with Jordanian security personnel, including three recent

episodes: a December 12 clash in which one soldier was killed; a December 18 battle that lasted more than **ten hours** (<https://www.alhurra.com/jordan/2023/12/18/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%B7%D8%A7-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%88%D8%B7%D9%86%D9%8A>) and marked the first seizure of antitank weaponry on the border; and **a January 6** (<https://apnews.com/article/jordan-syria-captagon-smugglers-clashes-e46c18700f4a22c195a5f5ad167409fb>) clash in which five smugglers were killed and fifteen arrested. Jordanian military officials attribute each of these attempts to pro-Iran proxy groups in Syria.

Moreover, the increasingly advanced arms that smugglers are using—including rocket-propelled grenades, mines, and drones—have led Jordanian officials to conclude that these criminal endeavors pose a wider threat to national security. Greater U.S. assistance would reinforce the kingdom’s efforts to address this threat at a time of wider regional crisis.

A Longstanding Challenge Coming to a Head

Since 2020, Jordan has been dealing with a **sharp rise** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/guns-drugs-and-smugglers-recent-heightened-challenge-israels-borders-jordan-and>) in the smuggling of drugs—primarily Captagon—across its borders. Largely orchestrated by elements of the Syrian and Iranian regimes, this illicit trade has strained Jordan’s security and law enforcement resources while heightening domestic concerns about the economic and social impact of narcotics. Amman is also mindful of how such smuggling could affect its regional standing—after all, the Gulf Cooperation Council states recently downgraded their relations with Lebanon after Beirut repeatedly failed to stem the influx of drugs across their borders.

Another major area of concern is the use of drones for smuggling. Some of these drones have been customized for illicit drug deliveries—between June and September 2023, Jordan intercepted 11 such air deliveries. In other cases, drones have been **discovered** (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/soaring-threat-drug-drones-syria>) carrying weapons such as M4 rifles, grenades, and TNT. Effectively addressing this new border security challenge requires the modernization of Jordan’s surveillance and rapid-response capabilities.

In October 2022, the kingdom achieved a significant milestone by **launching the region’s first test site** (<https://jordantimes.com/news/local/army-chief-launches-middle-east-s-first-uas-cuas-and-ew-test-site-jordan>) for uncrewed aerial systems (UAS), counter-UAS technology, and electronic warfare. Marked by a series of tests that included drone delivery and inspection flights, this pioneering initiative represents a crucial advancement in Jordan’s ability to counter asymmetrical threats, particularly drone infiltrations emanating from conflict zones like Syria and Iraq. Yet its full potential remains unrealized, primarily due to inadequate funding and development support.

Such support would not only enable Jordan to fully leverage this “living lab” for defense innovation, but also strengthen its role as a bulwark against the proliferation of asymmetrical warfare by Iran’s network of proxies. The failure to secure further support since the site was inaugurated has raised concerns about preparedness and responsiveness. By bolstering Amman’s UAS and counter-UAS capacity, the United States could significantly enhance regional defense mechanisms and reaffirm its commitment to the kingdom’s security.

The Gaza Effect

The Hamas-Israel war is further complicating this issue by forcing Jordan to focus more resources on its western border. Even before the war, increased weapons smuggling to the West Bank was stoking significant diplomatic

tensions, since the 1994 Israel-Jordan peace treaty requires both countries to prevent cross-border smuggling as part of their wider security obligations. After the Gaza war broke out, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front exacerbated these tensions by calling for border protests against Israel, echoing similar calls by Hamas leaders [urging Jordanians \(https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231125-what-about-abu-ubaidas-call-on-jordan-to-escalate-popular-mass-action/\)](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231125-what-about-abu-ubaidas-call-on-jordan-to-escalate-popular-mass-action/) to take to the streets and intensify pressure on the political leadership.

Moreover, pro-Iran militias in Iraq and Syria have reportedly launched three recent drone attacks through Jordanian airspace en route to Israel: on [November 9 \(https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/380078\)](https://www.israelnationalnews.com/news/380078), [December 22 \(https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-779131\)](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-779131), and [December 31 \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-downs-two-apparent-drones-launched-at-israel-by-iran-backed-iraqi-militia/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-downs-two-apparent-drones-launched-at-israel-by-iran-backed-iraqi-militia/). Besides jeopardizing the kingdom's sovereignty, these breaches also put Amman in a delicate position with the United States and Israel.

Meanwhile, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has upped the pressure by [disrupting Iraqi oil supplies \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-pro-gaza-protesters-block-oil-tanker-trucks-entering-jordan-2023-10-26/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iraqi-pro-gaza-protesters-block-oil-tanker-trucks-entering-jordan-2023-10-26/) to Jordan using its proxies in Baghdad's state-funded Popular Mobilization Forces. Although the main disruption lasted for just two days early in the war and did not affect the availability of fuel in the kingdom, it highlighted the multiple ways in which Tehran can exploit the Gaza crisis—from expanding the Gulf drug market through Jordan (which could affect the kingdom's youth population and wider social cohesion) to positioning the country as a transit point for weapons and or even a launching point for attacks against Israel. And if Israel achieves its goal of dismantling Hamas in Gaza, Tehran and its proxies may decide to focus even more of their energies on trying to destabilize the West Bank by using Jordan as a conduit for weapons and other support.

A History of Stronger Cooperation During Conflicts

The current attempts to destabilize Jordan harken back to the days when disruptive actors such as Gamal Abdul Nasser's Egypt and Hafiz al-Assad's Syria viewed the kingdom as the weakest link among the moderate Arab states. During such episodes, Jordan's domestic resilience, alliance with Washington, and strong cooperation with Israel enabled it to disprove those perceptions, and all three elements will be needed to overcome today's challenges as well.

Military cooperation between Jordan, the United States, and Israel has an unusual history marked by significant milestones. In 2015, Israel [transferred \(https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/24/world/middleeast/israel-helicopters-sent-to-jordan-for-border-security.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/24/world/middleeast/israel-helicopters-sent-to-jordan-for-border-security.html) sixteen of its older AH-1 Cobra helicopter gunships to Amman, bolstering the kingdom's capacity to combat the Islamic State and emphasizing the depth of their collaborative defense relationship.

Two years later, the two countries [increased \(https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2017-06-21/ty-article/.premium/israel-and-jordan-grow-closer-amid-iranian-foothold-in-syria/0000017f-efa9-da6f-a77f-ffaf85070000\)](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2017-06-21/ty-article/.premium/israel-and-jordan-grow-closer-amid-iranian-foothold-in-syria/0000017f-efa9-da6f-a77f-ffaf85070000) their military coordination in response to the Assad regime's resurgence and Tehran's growing influence in Syria and Iraq. This boost was driven in part by a shared desire to counter Iran's military and proxy activity near their borders through mutual intelligence and security assistance.

More recently, the United States inked a momentous [\\$4.2 billion deal \(https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/jordan/2023/01/20/jordan-signs-42bn-deal-to-buy-f-16-fighter-jets-from-us/\)](https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/jordan/2023/01/20/jordan-signs-42bn-deal-to-buy-f-16-fighter-jets-from-us/) in January 2023 to supply Jordan with advanced Block 70 F-16 fighter jets, furthering a plan originally approved in 2022. Yet while the current Lockheed Martin contract for twelve jets will substantially enhance the kingdom's aerial combat capabilities, [more assistance is needed \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/abdullah-and-biden-need-discuss-economics-not-just-israeli-palestinian-tensions\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/abdullah-and-biden-need-discuss-economics-not-just-israeli-palestinian-tensions) given the region's ever-evolving threats.

As for smuggling and other border problems, the Pentagon and the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency have **previously strengthened (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/jordan-us-security-assistance-and-border-defense-capacity-building>)** Amman's capabilities through initiatives such as the Jordan Border Security Program (JBSP) and Jordan Operational Engagement Program (JOEP). Spanning 2009-2017, these programs provided the military with technology, equipment, and training to better deter, detect, and interdict illicit weapon transfers.

Today, bolstering Jordan's defenses against both smugglers and hostile foreign actors will entail a strategic upgrade of its military capabilities. This includes modernizing its attack aircraft with advanced technologies for improved maneuverability and precision in the diverse border terrains it shares with Syria and Iraq.

Amman **has also asked (<https://www.reuters.com/world/jordan-says-asked-washington-deploy-patriot-air-defense-missiles-2023-10-29/>)** Washington to deploy Patriot air defense systems inside the kingdom—a request issued after Houthi forces in Yemen launched a cruise missile through Jordanian airspace in October. The missile was purportedly en route to Israel when it crashed near the southern Jordanian town of Mudawwara, likely due to a technical malfunction or fuel depletion. Amman's request is reminiscent of 2013, when Patriot batteries were **deployed (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/jordan-confirms-deployment-of-us-patriot-missiles-f-16-jets/>)** in Jordan after the Syrian uprising escalated into all-out civil war.

Amman's path through the current geopolitical turmoil is fraught with dangers, making support from the United States and other allies more critical than ever. With a combination of greater military assistance and strategic enhancement of its defensive capabilities—including Patriot deployments and other systems—the kingdom would be better positioned to demonstrate once again that it is **not the weakest link (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jordan-still-has-vital-role-play-gaza-crisis>)** among America's Middle East allies.

Abdullah Hayek and Ahmad Sharawi are research assistants at The Washington Institute. ❖

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