

# Iran-Aligned Armed Groups Are Endangering Jordan's National Security

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Brief Analysis

**Today, there is a fear of the resurgence of threats to Jordan from its eastern borders, which are de-facto controlled by armed groups loyal to Iran.**

**A**s wars evolve, it is not uncommon for the parties involved to lose control of their proxies. This is what apparently happened on January 28, when the Iran-backed Islamic Resistance in Iraq attacked the U.S. base called Tower 22, located in Jordan in the Al-Mafraq governorate's northeastern desert, killing three U.S. soldiers and injuring 40.

The base was seemingly targeted to send a message to Jordan and its American ally. From the perspective of Amman, the attack was especially notable in that it followed Jordanian airstrikes against drug and arms smugglers in several Druze-majority villages in the Suwayda governorate along the Jordanian-Syrian border, an action that the Syrian embassy in Amman protested as a breach of Syrian sovereignty.

The Tower 22 incident is a serious warning for Jordan's national security for several interrelated reasons: it is the first incident carried out by "non-state actors"—Shia terrorist groups loyal to Iran—against Jordanian territory and against Jordan's American ally and is a breach of Jordanian sovereignty. This was highlighted in a State Department [press briefing \(https://www.state.gov/digital-press-briefing-with-barbara-leaf-assistant-secretary-for-near-eastern-affairs/\)](https://www.state.gov/digital-press-briefing-with-barbara-leaf-assistant-secretary-for-near-eastern-affairs/) on February 1, when Barbara Leaf, assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern Affairs, described the attack as "an absolutely unacceptable assault on both Jordanian sovereignty and on U.S. forces."

The attack is also the first successful targeting by Shia Islamist terrorist groups of American personnel in Jordan, conducted against the backdrop of Arab-Israeli political conflict and the war in Gaza. In addition, it is the first attack against American bases in Jordan by Shia groups loyal to Iran in support of Hamas. Last, it is an unprecedented attack on the U.S. military presence in Jordan and resulted in loss of life and property, especially noteworthy given the [Defense Cooperation Agreement \(https://www.state.gov/jordan-21-317\)](https://www.state.gov/jordan-21-317) Amman signed with Washington on

January 31, 2021.

## **Terrorist Operations against American Interests in Jordan**

Over the past two decades, American interests in Jordan have been threatened exclusively by Sunni extremist Islamist groups, particularly Al-Qaeda—specifically Al-Qaeda in Iraq—and the Islamic State, along with some lone-wolf attacks. Neither Jordan nor U.S. interests in Jordan have been attacked by Shia groups loyal to Iran, in contrast to other theaters such as Lebanon. The Tower 22 attack thus marks a significant turning point in the history of terrorism in Jordan.

According to the [Shorufat Center for Globalization and Terrorism in Amman](https://media.hafryat.com/ar/blog/%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%87%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-%D8%A8%D9%85%D8%A6%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%87%D8%B1)

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The four attacks that were not stopped resulted in the deaths of six Americans. The first was the assassination of Laurence Michael Foley, an official of the U.S. Agency for International Development, on October 28, 2002, carried out by three individuals on behalf of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who were later tried and executed. The second incident, on August 19, 2005, was an attack on two U.S. military ships, the USS *Ashland* and the USS *Kearsarge*, which were anchored in the Jordanian port of Aqaba and were attacked with Katyusha rockets by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades, which was affiliated with Al-Qaeda in Iraq. While the incident did not result in American casualties or property damage, it caused the death of one Jordanian soldier and injured another.

The third operation was carried out on November 9, 2015, by Anwar Abu Zaid, a captain in the Jordanian Public Security Directorate who is believed to have acted alone. Abu Zaid killed two Americans, a South African, and two Jordanians at a training center in Muwaqqar, east of Amman. The fourth operation, on November 4, 2016, was carried out by 1st Sgt. Maarek Abu Tayeh of the Jordanian Armed Forces, also believed to be a lone wolf, who killed three American trainers at the Prince Faisal Air Base in al-Jafr in the Maan governorate, south of Jordan. It is notable that the deadly terrorist operations conducted by Sunni groups against Americans in Jordan were not carried out by well-known groups or civilians, but by individuals with military training and personnel from the Jordanian Armed Forces who had close contact with U.S. forces, whether in military bases or training centers.

## **The Threat from Jordan's East**

Over the past five decades, the Jordanian government and state have faced existential threats—from the western border with Israel, due to the Arab-Israeli wars; from the eastern border with Iraq, in the context of the Baath regime's attempts to intervene on behalf of Palestinian factions during Black September in 1970; and from the northern border with Syria. In fact, it was in 1970 that Jordan sought assistance from the United States to ensure its survival, national unity, and integrity, cementing a relationship that has helped Amman achieve these goals.

Today, however, there is a fear of the resurgence of threats to Jordan from its eastern borders, which are de-facto controlled by armed groups loyal to Iran. A gradual escalation of military operations—so far limited— is visible at the Jordanian-Iraqi-Syrian border triangle, but this escalation is occurring at a pace that is raising fears of a slide into armed conflict and continuous attrition. Such escalation could turn the area into an Iranian proxy war zone similar to that in southern Lebanon between Hezbollah and Israel, and in Yemen between the Houthis and U.S.-led coalition forces.

While this scenario may seem far-fetched and improbable to many analysts and strategists, its occurrence would be catastrophic for Jordan's national security and for Western and American interests. Preemptively negating the potential for such a development is particularly important given the frequency of 'black swan' events in the region that have warned against complacency when it comes to issues of national security.

Nevertheless, the initial Jordanian response to the attack on Tower 22 could be characterized as timid and confused. Although Jordan described the operation as terrorism, it did not give clear expression to the seriousness of the threat to its national security and the future of Jordanian-American relations, despite an official cooperation agreement between the two countries. Jordanian statements also failed to mention that this was a deliberate breach of its sovereignty by Iraq and Iran. This omission was likely due to a deep confidence that the United States would forcefully and decisively respond on behalf of Jordan as the primary victim of the attack.

Such a response did indeed occur, as the United States carried out strikes on over 85 locations in Iraq and Syria where Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps leaders and Iran-aligned armed groups were located. These included the assassination of Wissam Muhammad Saber Al-Saadi (Abu Baqer Al-Saadi), the prominent leader of the Hezbollah Brigades, in central Baghdad on February 8, 2024.

Although U.S. defense secretary Lloyd Austin did not mention Jordan's participation in strikes that took place on February 2, 2024, and Jordan officially denied involvement, some Iraqi parliamentarians have begun moves to impose sanctions on Jordan by canceling its economic privileges, which allow for the sale of oil at discounted prices. These actions cannot be separated from the hostile behavior of Iran and its Iraqi allies toward Jordan and its interests.

### **An Alliance of Necessity**

King Abdullah II's visit to Washington and his meeting with President Biden at the White House on February 12, 2024, came at a critical time for Amman and Washington. In his speech, the king emphasized that his visit carries additional significance, as Jordan and the United States celebrate their exceptional strategic partnership of seventy-five years. Both countries urgently need this alliance and this cooperation, and they should deepen their cooperation now and in the future to overcome the Middle East's endless crises and conflicts.

The targeting of the American base in Jordan will hopefully contribute to Washington's rethinking and reassessing of the risks to Jordan's national security and the security of U.S. bases in Jordan, and cause the United States to take them seriously. Specifically, given the clear security risks facing Jordan, the United States should provide its ally with missile defense systems like the Patriot, which Amman recently requested, as well as anti-drone systems. On the other hand, if the United States withdraws its military forces from Iraq and Syria—because of domestic pressure, Iraqi pressure, or Iranian pressure—this would be a nightmare for Jordan's national security. The vacuum would be filled by Iran and its Shia armed groups, as well as Russia and Turkey.

However, the United States must also be aware of the potential for popular opposition in Jordan to the presence of U.S. bases in the country, with its attendant security risks and costs—especially if Jordan becomes a new battlefield if attacks on American targets continue. Assuming that the war in Gaza continues and escalates, and that U.S. popularity in Jordan is rapidly eroded because of a perception that Washington supports Israeli actions in Gaza, I expect that political and public pressure in Jordan will increase. This is all the more so the case if parliamentary elections at the end of the year bring a significant bloc of Islamist extremists to power. At some point, this pressure might lead to parliamentary demands to withdraw the roughly 3,000 U.S. forces from Jordan. There might also be demands to cancel the military cooperation agreement between the two countries on many pretexts, including that the agreement was not presented to the Jordanian parliament in the first place. Understanding and preempting this potential challenge to the U.S.-Jordan security relationship is also key in maintaining the health of this key

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