

Iran Targets Jordan: The Kingdom Joins the Theocracy's List of Enemies

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Articles & Testimony

Tehran and its proxies have been doing everything they can to destabilize Jordan during the Gaza war, from inciting protests and increasing drug and weapons smuggling to escalating armed threats from Iraq.

Seven months into the war in Gaza, Arab states are not advertising their ongoing ties with Israel. Notwithstanding widespread public opprobrium of Israel in the region, however, quiet contacts persist. The most visible demonstration of the continuing Arab cooperation with the Jewish State came on April 13, during Iran's unprecedented missile and drone attack. That night, under US auspices, several Arab states participated to greater or lesser extent in helping Israel to track, interdict, and defeat more than 300 Iranian projectiles targeting Israel. Perhaps not surprisingly, among the Arab states involved, Tehran has reserved its harshest criticism for Jordan.

To be sure, the Gaza war has placed Jordan in a precarious position. Not only has the kingdom been at peace with its neighbor Israel since 1994, but Amman maintains close ties to Washington, the Hashemite monarchy plays a "special role" administering Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem, and nearly 60 percent of its population is of Palestinian origin. Protests in Jordan have been ubiquitous since the war started in October. While the kingdom appears to have a handle on the demonstrations, however, the increasing Iranian focus on Jordan is concerning. Tehran sees Jordan as vulnerable and is seeking to exploit the war to shake the kingdom's stability.

In the lead up to the April 13 Iranian attack, Tehran warned Jordan about interfering. Iran is "monitoring the movements of Jordan," the regime's Fars news agency [reported \(https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/04/14/iran-threatens-to-attack-jordan-if-it-cooperates-with-israel-report\)](https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/04/14/iran-threatens-to-attack-jordan-if-it-cooperates-with-israel-report), and if it intervenes "it will be the next target." Following the strike, Iran seemingly orchestrated a media and internet campaign against Jordan for its role in reportedly downing Iranian drones and allowing Israeli jets and anti-missile systems to engage over the

kingdom's territory. The theocracy also claimed (<https://alwaght.net/en/News/251492/The-Jordanian-Minister%E2%80%99s-pledge-to-Amir-Abdollahian-concerning-the-avoidance-of-using-the-nation%E2%80%99s-territory-against-Iran>) that Amman hosted the command center for coalition operations to thwart the attack.

Jordan responded to Iran's critique by downplaying the connection to Israel, instead framing the issue as a matter of sovereignty. "Whatever objects...violate our airspace, that we believe pose a danger to Jordan," said (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/jordanian-fm-confirms-amman-intercepted-iranian-drones-claims-gaza-war-is-root-cause-of-tehran-attack/) Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, "we will do whatever within our means to end that threat and that's what we did." At the same time, he also seemed to blame Israel for the Iranian bombardment, pointing to the need to "deal with the cause of all this tension, which is the Israeli aggression of Gaza."

In talks with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amirabdollahian shortly after April 13, Safadi sought a more conciliatory path. He told (https://petra.gov.jo/Include/InnerPage.jsp?ID=58900&lang=en&name=en_news) the foreign minister that Jordan wanted "good relations" with Tehran, but that among other things, this would require "stopping interference in Jordan's affairs." "Your issue is with Israel," he said. "Neither Iran nor anyone else can lecture us on what Jordan is doing, what Jordan offers, or what Jordan has historically offered for Palestine." Two weeks later, absent any progress on this front, Safadi summoned (<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2024/4/15/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%AA%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%A5%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A7-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-2>) the Iranian ambassador to complain about "insults" to Jordan by the "Iranian media, including the Iranian official news agency."

Yet Iran's interference in Jordanian affairs goes beyond public criticism and insults. Indeed, more problematically, Iranian meddling in the kingdom extends to Tehran's regional proxies and allies, who since October have been increasingly preoccupied with trying to destabilize Jordan.

Lebanese Hezbollah, for one, has criticized Jordan—along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—for countering Iran's attack on Israel. Days after the strike, the organization's deputy secretary general Naim Qassem warned (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/hezbollah-naim-qassem-exclusive-interview-war-escalation-rcna148332>) that populations of Arab states who supported Israel on April 13 would "hold them accountable." Hezbollah's Iraqi sister militia Kataib Hezbollah, (KH) an Iranian-backed Hashd or Popular Mobilization Front militia, has also threatened the kingdom. In early April, KH announced (<https://www.bbc.com/arabic/articles/cxezmep1vdo>) that it was poised to equip 12,000 fighters in the kingdom with weapons, including anti-tank and tactical missiles to deploy against Israel. "Let us begin first by cutting off the land road that reaches the Zionist entity," one KH official said.

These threats are an irritant to the Hashemite kingdom, but other Iranian proxies' activities are having a more direct impact. The closure of Bab al Mandab and disruption of commercial shipping in the Red Sea by Iran's Yemeni proxies, the Houthis, for example, is having a pernicious effect on Jordan's only port, Aqaba. Container traffic into Aqaba declined almost 23 percent in the first months of 2024 from 2023. Total exports in February fell almost 36 percent compared to the previous year. Revenues for Aqaba Port are down sharply.

At the same time, exports of illegal drugs to Jordan from Tehran's strategic partner Syria are up. 2024 saw a spike in the number of interdicted shipments of the amphetamine Captagon smuggled across the kingdom's northern border. The Jordanian military is increasingly downing drug-ferrying drones from Syria, and engaging in shootouts

with drug gangs along the frontier. Two months after the Gaza war started, the Jordanian air force bombed a Captagon factory in Syria.

Making matters worse, increasingly this smuggling from Syria into Jordan is focused on the transit of **weapons** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/09/world/middleeast/iran-west-bank-weapons-smuggling.html>), including light arms, but also anti-tank weapons, rocket launchers, explosives, and anti-personnel mines. While some of these munitions, transported by Iranian affiliated operatives, will remain in the kingdom, the vast majority are transiting—destined for the West Bank, which Tehran also seeks to flood with arms in the hope of eroding Israeli security.

Even more problematic for Jordan, however, are the actions of Hamas—another member of Iran’s so-called “axis of resistance.” In recent months, with Tehran’s apparent encouragement, Hamas has taken several steps seemingly designed to undermine stability in the kingdom. On International Women’s Day in March, chairman of the Hamas political bureau Khaled Mashal gave a **speech** (<https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1703279-%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B4%D8%B9%D9%84-%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B0%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%89-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3-%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%95%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%88%D8%B6%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%94%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%D8%9F>) via the internet from Qatar where he called for millions of Jordanians to take to the streets in protest in support of Hamas. That same day, Gaza-based Hamas leader Muhammad al Deif released a recording **urging** (<https://www.raialyoum.com/%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B2-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B0%D9%8A-%D8%A3%D8%B2%D8%B9%D8%AC-%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9/>) Arabs living on Israel’s borders (i.e., Jordanians) to join the fight against the Jewish State.

More recently, on April 24, Hamas spokesman Abu Ubaida—by now a folk-hero in the kingdom—delivered a speech marking the 200th day of the Gaza war. In his address, Abu Ubaida called on Jordanians to “escalate their actions” and “raise their voice” against Israel. Media **reports** (<https://www.aljazeera.net/news/2024/4/23/%D8%AE%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D8%A8%D9%88-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%B1%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%AE%D8%B1-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84>) indicate that the speech went viral, with #Abu-Ubaida trending on X (formerly known as Twitter). Soon after, a large crowd gathered to protest outside the Israeli embassy in Amman.

Jordan takes Hamas’ incitement seriously. No wonder, then, that Amman immediately **rejected** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/jordan-flatly-rejects-senior-hamas-officials-idea-of-moving-leadership-to-kingdom/>) the Hamas leadership’s suggestion that if it was compelled to leave Qatar, it would relocate to Jordan. The kingdom expelled Hamas in October 1999, well before the organization developed into the world-class terrorist group it is today.

In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, Jordan increasingly **sees** (<https://www.memri.org/reports/jordanian-regime-furious-hamas-muslim-brotherhood-they-are-acting-foment-chaos-kingdom>) Hamas as an Iran-backed threat. In 2004, shortly after the US invasion of Iraq, Jordan’s King Abdullah II presciently predicted the establishment of an Iran-dominated “Shiite Crescent.” Two decades on, this crescent, controlled by Tehran and its proxies, is encroaching on the kingdom, and Israel’s continuing war with Hamas in Gaza provides Iran with

previously unavailable opportunities for the theocracy to insinuate itself and try to undermine stability.

To date, Jordanian security forces have proved adept at managing demonstrations, employing tear gas and batons when necessary, and avoiding more violent and provocative methods of crowd control and dispersion.

Notwithstanding the kingdom's measured approach, however, the continuous nature of the protests and the deep identification of much of the population with the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza leaves the Palace with little room for error.

As April 13 showed, the perseverance of Jordan as a pro-West peace partner and force of moderation remains a core US interest in the region. Unfortunately, there is little Washington can do—beyond maintaining its current substantial financial support and close strategic cooperation—to bolster the kingdom's resilience in the face of Iran's current onslaught. While a more robust US policy on Iran that raises the cost for Tehran for its efforts to destabilize America's partners via its proxies might be helpful, this kind of approach is unlikely to be adopted anytime soon. As so often in the past, Jordan will have to rely on its security forces, its reservoir of domestic support, and its nimble maneuvering to weather the storm. Given the acute Iranian threat, ongoing deep but quiet Jordanian-Israeli security cooperation is also likely to play an important part in helping to secure the kingdom.

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