

Assessing Jordan's National Strategy to Combat Violent Extremism

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Brief Analysis

In mid-December 2016, a terrorist cell carried out an operation in southern Jordan that began in the desert town of Qatraneh and culminated at the historic site of the Kerak Castle. The attack left four terrorists, four police personnel, three gendarmes, two civilians, and one Canadian tourist dead and dozens of Jordanian security, civilians, and foreigners injured.

In considering terrorism's current threat to Jordan, this attack should not be considered an isolated incident. According to studies by the US Congressional Research Service (CRS), nearly 4,000 Jordanian fighters joined the Islamic State (IS) in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and other locations since 2011. Now that IS has shrunk, the possibility of returning fighters pose a major concern for Jordan, as they bring back their military, combat, and organization experience to the country. Therefore, the Jordanian government amended its counterterrorism law to criminalize joining the Al Nusra Front, IS, or any other terrorist groups, and made promoting them in any way, including on social media, illegal as well. The amended law also allowed for the monitoring of mosques and religious sermons at an unprecedented level.

Moreover, a process of review began back in 2014, when the National Policies Council (NPC) and its specialized committees launched an extensive campaign to create a comprehensive counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) strategy that involved all levels of government, including ministries of the Interior, Culture, Awqaf, Social Development, Foreign Affairs, and Education. The campaign resulted in the 2014 National Strategy for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism, the details of which were published in local media as "the national plan to counter extremism." The government also formed a counter-extremism committee and department to enact this strategy, which based its frame of reference on three axes: culture/religion, democracy, and human rights.

The culture/religion axis emphasized the need to support and promote an authentic Islamic culture based on the purposes (*maqasid*) of Islamic Sharia law, which exist to preserve the five foundational goals, described by jurists as the ultimate goals of religion: Faith, Life, Intellect, Lineage, and Property. Regarding the second axis, based on the belief that a lack of democracy often leads to a thriving culture of violence and extremism in various forms, the national strategy called for the promotion of democratic values, such as freedom, justice, equality, respect for religions and minorities, and the rejection of religious and sectarian extremism. As for the human rights axis, the

national strategy called for the promotion of tolerance, pluralism, and the culture of respecting human rights and accepting the 'Other' through institutions tasked with guidance and education, such as the ministries of Education, Higher Education and Scientific Research, Awqaf Islamic Affairs and Holy Places, and Culture, as well as youth and media institutions and the *Iftaa* Department.

These policies have stirred debate and provoked both positive and negative reactions. On one hand, these policies have been commended for consisting of a participatory strategy, in which all of the country's relevant official and non-official institutions joined forces. On the other hand, the strategy has been criticized for its content, form, and distribution of roles, as well as poor coordination among the participating authorities in its implementation.

In light of the likely increase in potential domestic instances, it is worth reexamining the national policy and outlining its limitations. The national strategy was formulated in a religious sermonic language, and most of its provisions focused only on improving the work conditions and environment in the participating ministries and institutions, not on how to combat terrorism and extremism.

One of the main points raised by critics of the national strategy is that it offered a weak understanding of the causes and pathways of extremism. The strategy has also failed to create solid links or consistent coordination between the participating institutions and ministries to construct an integrated roadmap. Even though a special authority was established to combat extremism, the official conception of this body has continued to oscillate and has remained unsure of the role it can play at the civil level. As a case in point, the strategy was initially linked to the Interior Ministry, then transferred to the Culture Ministry, which lacks any real resources or power to access the work of the relevant bodies and coordinate with them.

Although one of the main features of the national strategy is that it is participatory, it is still classified as "confidential" and placed under the supervision of the General Intelligence Directorate, the Public Security Directorate, and the Ministries of Interior, Social Development, and Awqaf. Given this focus on government ministries, it has been criticized for ignoring the socioeconomic causes of extremism, including the failure of development projects, the lack of social justice, the spread of poverty, unemployment, corruption, and the monopoly of wealth within Jordan, in addition to opting for the easy way by issuing appropriate laws, including the Investment Fund Law and amending the constitution based on the requirements of the election season.

The strategy has also been lacking in its willingness to challenge existing governmental institutions. While the strategy did work with the ministries of Education and Higher Education to update educational curricula to comply with "moderate Islam," this guiding principle remains an intellectually fuzzy term that has no accurate definition. Moreover, the national strategy has not assessed the performance of the Awqaf Ministry, which represents Jordan's "Islamic intellectual system" and has been criticized as one source of extremist teachings. Instead, the strategy has attempted to absolve the ministry of these accusations and has enhanced its ministerial capabilities by increasing the number of preachers, imams, and muezzins under its control.

This approach has enabled both the Awqaf Ministry and the *Iftaa* Department to monopolize the legitimacy of speaking in the name of Islam and the ability to offer interpretations of Islamic teachings. It offered some procedural steps that controlled the system of sermons, guidance, preaching, and mosques in order to ensure compliance with the state's religious discourse. In the meantime, neither violent or non-violent political Islamist actors recognize the Ministry's legitimacy, and the contradictory nature of the national strategy's support of the Awqaf Ministry has only strengthened these political oppositionist forces.

In order for this strategy to succeed, it is necessary to subject it to the principles of transparency, critical evaluation, and feedback. It is also necessary to facilitate access to information for scholars and journalists on a "need to know" basis, which would eventually allow the participation of all government and civil society parties in the battle against

terrorism and violent extremism without undermining national or international security. Moreover, the strategy must work proactively to involve experts in psychology, politics, sociology, Sharia law, terrorism, and violent extremism who are qualified to hold dialogues and debates with those who adopt terrorist ideologies. By involving larger segments of society beyond the traditional governmental channels, Jordan's counter-extremism policy will be able to become more effective and more adequately account for current and future threats. ❖

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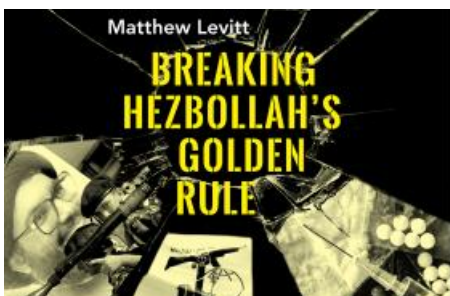
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