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# Terrorists and Territory: What Jordan Can Teach Us about Managing Jihadists

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Jacob Olidort, a 2016-2017 Soref fellow at The Washington Institute, focuses on the history and ideology of Salafi movements and Islamist groups in the Middle East.



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**The Hashemite Kingdom, known for its effectiveness in fighting terrorism, illustrates how a country can manage jihadists at home without needing to eradicate them.**

**T**he tragedies in London and Manchester are the latest reminders that territorial gains against the Islamic State do not translate into victory over the group. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the group does not need territory to survive. As the military campaign to rout the Islamic State from its strongholds progresses and the U.S. engagement in Afghanistan continues with no end in sight, policymakers might do well to consider the fact that no matter what the United States and its partners do, jihadists will retain a presence of some sort in some areas. The answer is that we can contain the problem, and Jordan offers lessons about how to do that.

Jordan's experience with its domestic jihadist problem suggests that there are situations in which allowing jihadists to maintain a presence in areas under tight central government control and surveillance serves the country's national interest and security -- with the caveat that it is where and how this is done that is the difference between success and failure.

To clarify from the outset: Tolerating *some* jihadist presence in the Middle East should in no way be understood as tolerating any aspect of their views or actions, nor does it mean allowing them to control territory or have havens. Rather, the argument presented here is that a government-controlled jihadist presence ensures that jihadists do not become a national security threat while also not diverting government resources from other threats competing for

attention. The evidence cited here focuses on ideologues for the simple reason that correlations between ideas and actions can be easily observed among those belonging to that group, but the general principle applies to both ideologues and operatives.

Like many Arab states, Jordan found a growing domestic hub of jihadism within its borders after the so-called "Afghan Arabs" -- those who traveled to Afghanistan to fight during the Soviet invasion -- returned to their countries of origin. In time, cities like Zarqa became nodes of jihadist influence and activity (indeed, the eponymously named head of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, hailed from there). However, because of Jordan's history with political activism with Islamist groups and the PLO (most famously, "Black September" in 1970), the monarchy, like the governments of most other Arab states, was on alert for any possible threat to the stability of the Kingdom.

The combination of circumstances -- a mushrooming jihadist presence within a politically sensitive environment -- created pressure on those entering the Islamist fray to reject violence and extremism. One example was Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, one of the world's leading Salafist ideologues of the last century. Known for his iconoclastic positions on religious observance (for which he was expelled from Saudi Arabia and Syria), Albani became an ardent advocate for abstaining from violence and for political activism during his final years in Jordan. His students, some of whom left the political Islamism of the Brotherhood and violent groups to join his cause, consistently weigh in publicly against jihadism.

This isn't a perfect bulwark against violence. Jordan has absorbed its share of terrorist attacks in recent years, with perhaps the most high-profile one being the hotel bombings in 2005 that killed 60 people, including the film director Mustafa Akkad. Moreover, jihadist ideologues continue to live in Jordan and disseminate their views, most famously Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.

However, Jordan is not under attack by those jihadists within its borders (with the exception of the Islamic State). Indeed, most Jordan-based jihadists do not target the Kingdom itself, preferring instead to focus on Syria and other regional issues. The Syrian conflict, and the rise of the Islamic State in particular, has provided occasions for jihadists and other Islamists to weigh in on these developments. Maqdisi continues to condemn the Islamic State as too extreme -- whether because of sincere doctrinal differences or personal concerns that the group has upstaged his global profile. Indeed, he went so far as to offer to mediate on behalf of the Jordanian government for the release of the Jordanian pilot Muadh al-Kasasbeh, who was held in captivity by the Islamic State and eventually burned to death in January 2015.

Jordanian jihadists, including Maqdisi, however, remain no less "moderate" in their views and are among the most notorious outside of Jordan's borders. Maqdisi, for example, authored a tract titled "The Religion of Abraham," which argues for a return to an original and "pure" version of the faith to the exclusion of all other interpretations. The aforementioned Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi proved too sectarian for bin Laden's tastes and as a result formed al-Qaeda in Iraq, the forebear of the Islamic State.

The contrast between Jordanian jihadists' global prominence and their relative domestic inertness suggests that Jordanian security forces have been able to create a sustainable policy towards jihadism within its borders that responds swiftly when jihadists pose a national-security threat, but at the same time can draw on its jihadists for key information on future plots and global trends. Maqdisi has been released and imprisoned several times over the years in connection to terrorist events but seems to be able to communicate and write openly (albeit under the likely scrutiny of Jordanian security). In other words, by consistently watching the movements of both jihadist ideologues and operatives -- penalizing when necessary, but avoiding maximalist approaches like clearing entire neighborhoods -- the state security agencies seem to have turned domestic jihadists into useful pawns within the counterterrorism infrastructure.

Jordan, like any country, is a product of its history and political traditions. Its experience with jihadism, moreover, could just as likely be an expression of the desires of its citizens to build relatively tranquil lives apart from the chaos on Jordan's borders as it is the result of this robust security infrastructure.

Although Jordan has not solved its jihadist problem, the country's unique history of incubating jihadist groups within the context of political sensitivity seems, despite the appearance of volatility, to have found a kind of stability with respect to the issue, to borrow from Nassim Nicholas Taleb and Gregory Treverton. In their groundbreaking article in *Foreign Affairs*, "[The Calm before the Storm: Why Volatility Signals Stability and Vice Versa.](#)" Taleb and Treverton survey trends among Arab governments during the Arab Uprisings and ask why it is that a country like Lebanon -- home to a long and bloody civil war and a history of sectarian strife -- remains intact while the control of the government of a seemingly stable country like Syria collapsed overnight. Their observation is that it is Lebanon's long experience of sustaining volatility that made the country resilient and therefore stable, while Syria only has the shell of stability that, because it had not previously experienced the same scale of volatility, proved to be fragile.

One could include Jordan and its jihadist problem in Taleb and Treverton's typology of stable yet seemingly volatile countries. Although Jordan might appear a fragile country incubating several streams of political instability (PLO, Islamists, and jihadists), it has, in fact, developed the experiences, institutions, and processes to emerge as the most stable Arab state with a domestic jihadist presence.

It is here that the Jordanian experience may have lessons for how the United States approaches jihadist networks overseas. Specifically, it suggests that routing terrorists from territory need not be necessary in order to defeat them. Rather, equally crucial could be determining what geographic areas they might be restricted to and what conditions could, like in Jordan's case, make the difference between whether or not they pose a threat.

What Jordan has been able to do is determine the threshold for when jihadism poses a threat to national security; the United States and its partners now must also do this as part of a new strategy to defeat the Islamic State. The basic fact that jihadists have a presence in the Middle East does not mean that they are universally mobilized or incentivized to launch attacks. Indeed, just like in the Jordanian case, carefully controlling their movements offers greater visibility into their communications and equips law enforcement with a consistent flow of reliable information to make their efforts more effective.

With the Islamic State, it is clear that certain territorial strongholds in the Middle East are key to its planning of terrorist operations and merit military focus. However, beyond those areas known to have this particular value for jihadists, the military could define defeat (particularly in areas with no partner government) as achieving a degree of regional stability that includes a neutralized jihadist presence. Even in areas without a partner government or without a stable state environment, jihadists can still be neutralized by conflict within the organization or with competitor groups, as is the case in Syria. Indeed, the Islamic State could be routed from these stateless areas -- at significant cost to U.S. resources -- or it could be neutralized by being surrounded by both competitor jihadist groups and Iranian forces and their proxies, whom the Islamic State opposes on doctrinal grounds. Both could achieve the same end of preventing the group from being a national security threat.

With the understanding that it is impossible to eliminate every possible existing or future terrorist, much less every sympathizer, this approach, focusing on the defense of national security, ensures that a realistic concept of defeat can be achieved without wasting resources or diverting them from other threats demanding our attention.

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