

Salafi Jihadists on the Rise in Jordan

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

The longer the war in Syria continues, the greater the threat these fighters will likely pose.

Last week, ten Jordanian Islamists who were apprehended while attempting to join the jihad in Syria were sentenced by the State Security Court to five years of hard labor. And last month, Jordanian F-16 fighter jets destroyed a convoy purportedly carrying al-Qaeda-affiliated anti-Assad-regime rebels traversing the border from Syria. These "spillover" incidents are only the latest in a disturbing trend. Over the past year, reports of Jordanian Salafi jihadists have become routine, raising the specter of terrorism returning to the kingdom.

Background

Ten years ago, Jordanian officials arrested several nationals in Amman who had arrived from Syria with three trucks of explosives. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian-born leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, later claimed credit for masterminding the failed conspiracy, which involved detonating a chemical weapon. According to the Jordanian authorities, tens of thousands would have been killed had the attack succeeded.

Jordan has long had its share of Salafists. Lately, however, the number is spiking. To some extent, this development mirrors the regionwide trend. In 2011, for example, Salafists won an astounding 25 percent of seats in Egypt's parliamentary elections. In Jordan, the proliferation of Salafism appears equally pronounced. To be sure, the war in Syria -- which pits the nominally Shiite regime against mostly Sunni rebels -- has emotional resonance for Jordanian Sunnis. But Salafism is also gaining adherents through its appeal to so-called "East Banker" tribal-origin Jordanian Islamists, who have come to see the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign Palestinian-oriented organization.

Accordingly, Salafi recruitment for the Syrian jihad appears to be making significant headway in traditionally tribal Jordanian areas like Zarqa, Salt, and Maan. Notably, during the recent civil unrest in Maan, one tribal leader pledged *baya*, or allegiance, to the emir of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the hardline militia recently disavowed by al-Qaeda.

Growing Numbers

Whatever the reason, Salafists are on the rise, and they increasingly threaten the kingdom's stability. In the longer term, the growth of Salafism among East Banker youth could erode adherence to tribal norms and weaken tribal structures among the population segment considered most loyal to the monarchy. The more immediate concern, however, is active Salafi participation in the Syrian war -- and especially the military training these fighters receive while abroad. The line between Salafism and Salafi jihadism is thin. According to the best estimates, upward of eleven thousand foreign fighters were in Syria as of December 2013. The largest contingent, numbering two thousand, hailed from Jordan. According to the *Jordan Times*, 80 percent of these Jordanians were associated with Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate.

To date, perhaps the best known Jordanian to join the jihad has been Ahmad Atallah al-Majali, an air force captain who defected to enlist with ISIS in September 2013. Majali, a member of a prominent tribe in Karak, became somewhat of a cause celebre after a postdesertion picture showed the bearded young man on a motorcycle holding an AK-47. More recently, he posted an ISIS recruitment video on YouTube.

Jordanian press reports on arrests of Salafists crossing into and back from Syria -- both leaders and rank-and-file -- are ubiquitous. So is news coverage of Jordanians returning home from Syria in body bags. To date, 250 Jordanians have reportedly been killed in action. Nonetheless, mosques throughout the kingdom are allegedly recruiting for the jihad to the north, and there appears to be no shortage of volunteers. As Jordanian Salafi leader Muhammad al-Shalabi, also known as Abu Sayyaf, tells it, "We have hundreds of true believers who are ready and willing and, thank God, are able to cross into Syria and defend their Muslim brothers and sisters."

Alas, these Salafists have an ambitious agenda that extends well beyond the defense of Syrian Sunnis. "Our aim is an Islamic government that establishes God's sharia law," Abu Sayyaf told the BBC last year. "Any regime that doesn't do this," he said, "is blasphemous and must be removed."

Abu Sayyaf's supporters have been working to implement this sharia program in Syria for some time; they now seem to be targeting the kingdom. Back in 2012, it was widely reported that these Salafists executed a citizen in Jordan accused of apostasy. This March, in an ominous development reminiscent of the 2004 Zarqawi plot, Jordanian border guards seized three vehicles "laden with weapons and ammunition" entering the kingdom from Syria.

Despite the apparently rising popularity of Salafism, the vast majority of Jordanians do not ostensibly aspire to carry out jihad in Syria or to associate with al-Qaeda. Not only is such a course dangerous, but a conviction by the State Security Court for fighting in Syria could mean five to fifteen years in prison. Reports suggest Jordan's prisons are already brimming with Salafists, some of whom have resorted to hunger strikes to protest their lengthy sentences.

This past November in Amman, Mousa al-Abdelilat -- a lawyer who has long represented Salafists -- reported his opinion that if his clients participated in elections, they would secure no less than 30 percent representation in parliament. Abdelilat may have been exaggerating, and it is unclear if and when Salafists will ever enter Jordanian politics. At a minimum, however, Abdelilat's comment suggests a striking level of confidence in the movement's trajectory.

For Jordan, where Muslim Brothers have intermittently held parliament seats since 1989, the prospect of Islamist parliamentarians is of little concern. More troubling is the very real possibility that hundreds if not thousands of battle-hardened Salafi jihadists will eventually return home, further radicalized by their experience in Syria. Not only will these Islamists consider the monarchy un-Islamic, they will deem the close U.S.-Jordan strategic relationship anathema. Meanwhile, over the long war and in preparation for the next front, these jihadists will likely have smuggled ample weapons and explosives into the kingdom.

Conclusion

With no end in sight to the Syrian war, rising numbers of Jordanian Salafi jihadists and their cross-border movement, along with that of other regional foreign fighters, will increasingly threaten the kingdom. Last August, Amman asked Washington to help bolster its border security, focusing specifically on its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. In March, Derek Chollet, assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, told the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations that in addition to nearly \$300 million in Foreign Military Financing, the Obama administration was "providing equipment and training that will supplement the Jordan Border Security Program and improve the capability of the Jordanian military to detect and interdict illegal attempts to cross the border, and detect attempts to smuggle WMD."

The U.S.-Jordan border security initiative dates back nearly two decades and is, by all accounts, a serious and well-funded program commensurate with the value of the strategic partnership. But the harsh terrain along the frontier and the sheer number of infiltrators will ratchet up pressure on Jordan's Border Guard Command and the General Intelligence Directorate, the latter of which is already responsible for monitoring the nearly one million Syrian refugees in the kingdom. The longer the war in Syria continues, the seemingly greater threat the Salafi jihadists will pose.

While Jordanian intelligence is proactive and effective, the recent trend line is not promising. Shortly after the unsuccessful April 2004 chemical weapons attack, Jordan's King Abdullah described the plot as "a crime that would have been unprecedented in the country." In November 2005, at the height of the Iraq war, al-Qaeda perpetrated several operations in Jordan. The most prominent of these attacks -- which simultaneously targeted three western hotel chains in Amman, killing sixty and wounding more than a hundred -- has since come to be known as "Jordan's September 11."

Regrettably, given current developments among Salafi jihadists in Jordan and Syria, the truly "unprecedented" crime may be yet to occur.

David Schenker is the Aufzien Fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. ❖

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