

Jordan deploys troops along border with Iraq

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The civil war in Iraq is drawing in Washington's allies in the region, including Jordan—long hailed as an oasis of stability in the Middle East—and Israel.

The Sunni Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an offshoot of al-Qaeda, on Monday announced that it was establishing a caliphate, or Islamic state, on the territories it controls in Iraq and Syria. It proclaimed the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as caliph and "leader for Muslims everywhere".

ISIS seeks to extend its rule across Iraq and Kuwait, and Greater Syria, or the Levant region, including Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Hatay, once part of the Aleppo province that was ceded by the French colonial rulers to Turkey in 1939, and Cyprus. ISIS supporters have called Jordan's King Abdullah, who is beholden to the US and Saudi Arabia, a "tyrant" and called for his execution.

Following ISIS's seizure of vast tracts of western Iraq and a string of cities along the Euphrates, Jordan's armed forces have intervened in an effort to shore up the US-installed Shi'a-dominated government of Nouri al-Maliki against its Sunni insurgent foes, including ISIS, and ensure that the border crossings do not fall into their hands.

Jordanian fighter planes destroyed and repulsed ISIS fighters who had briefly taken over the Turabil crossing, known as Karame in Jordan, the only official crossing point between the two countries, in a bid to control trade and travel. According to Jordanian military officials, the area is now under the control of Sunni tribes.

The desert kingdom has now deployed tanks and thousands of troops along its 125-mile-long eastern border with Iraq. This is in addition to forces stationed in the capital, Amman, and on Jordan's northern, 234-mile-long border with Syria to repel any possible attack by Assad regime forces in retaliation for Jordan's support for the insurgents fighting in southern

Syria. Jordan has also begun reinforcing its gendarmerie with 3,000 new recruits and calling up reservists in Amman.

Government's spokesman Mohammad al-Momani said that Jordan's armed forces were ready to deal with any development along the kingdom's borders, and that Jordan had the deterrence power to repulse any potential attack. Its borders are protected with American technology and US and Israeli intelligence. There are about 1,000 US troops in Jordan, as part of Washington's support for the Syrian "rebels" fighting Assad.

Also of concern are the Salafist jihadi demonstrations that took place last week in the impoverished city of Ma'an, 150 miles south of Amman, protesting the shooting of a local man by the police who have killed ten people over the last year. In the first public display of support for ISIS in Jordan, demonstrators chanted "Down with King Abdullah", "God is great" and "End the occupation of Ma'an". They marched towards the courthouse, the scene of near nightly gun battles in recent weeks, before dispersing in the face of riot police in armoured personnel carriers.

Police brutality, unemployment—officially put at 25 percent, but actually far higher—rampant corruption and the lack of social services have driven youth and young men into the arms of Islamist groups such as al-Nusra and ISIS. Last April, jihadis chased the police out of Ma'an, prompting security forces to surround the town with armoured vehicles and checkpoints.

The Jordanian authorities have long worked with the Salafists, infiltrating them and playing off one group against another, while being overtly hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood. Membership of Salafist groups is believed to number several thousand, with about 2,000 known to be fighting with Sunni rebel groups in Syria, at least half of them with ISIS, more than from any other country.

Recently, the government, concerned about the effect of these fighters when they return home, has switched tack, imprisoning more than a hundred Salafists and introducing a new antiterrorism law that bans association with Syria's blacklisted groups. Whereas previously Jordan had allowed, if not encouraged, jihadi militants to travel to fight in Syria and Iraq, last May the air force launched strikes against fighters fleeing from a Syrian army assault.

Royal Jordanian Airlines has just issued new travel restrictions on men of military age unless they hold a valid military service book.

A Jordanian court last week acquitted Abu Qatada of charges of "conspiracy against state security" in Jordan, although the verdict on another terrorist charge was adjourned until September and he remains in prison. An earlier court in 2000 convicted him in his absence in Britain, which had granted him asylum in 1994, on evidence acquired from his codefendants' confessions under torture.

After a long battle, the British authorities deported him in 2013 as a "threat to national security", after obtaining Jordan's agreement to exclude evidence based on confessions obtained under torture. The acquittal of Abu Qatada, who had sided with al-Nusra and al-Qaeda in their fallout with ISIS, followed his issue of a *fatwa* from his prison cell condemning ISIS.

The week before, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi was released halfway through his prison term, after signing two *fatwas* declaring ISIS followers "deviants" and telling them not to attack Jordan. Al-Maqdisi was known as the political and spiritual mentor of one of Jordan's "Arab Afghans", Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the al-Qaeda leader in Iraq, who was assassinated by a United States airstrike in 2006.

Should ISIS forces win support in the major cities, Jordan will be short of fighting forces.

King Abdullah told a delegation of US Congressmen visiting Amman on Sunday that he feared that the turmoil in Iraq could spill over into the entire region. According to the *Daily Beast*, senior US officials were quoted as saying that Jordan may ask Israel and the US to help it fight ISIS if it threatens Amman.

Amos Yadlin, a former head of Military Intelligence who heads a think tank at Tel Aviv University, said while the US was reluctant to get involved in Iraq again, he believed that Washington and Tel Aviv would

come to Jordan's aid. Israel has already indicated informally that it would provide military assistance to Jordan, while Jordanian sources told the *Ynet* news service that cooperation between the two countries was growing.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that the rise of al-Qaeda-backed Sunni extremists and Iranian-backed Shi'a forces had created the opportunity for "enhanced regional cooperation". Jordan, facing a growing threat of spillover from conflicts in Iraq and Syria, and the Kurds, who control an oil-rich autonomous region of northern Iraq, should be bolstered. The situation vindicated Netanyahu's long-held position that in the event of any agreement with the Palestinians, Israel would have to maintain a military presence in the Jordan Valley, he added.

According to DEBKAfile, which is close to Israeli military intelligence sources, the US and Israel have laid on a battery of advanced intelligence-gathering measures, including military satellites, drones and reconnaissance planes for keeping track of the Islamist fighters' rapid advance in Iraq.

Brigadier General Dennis McKean, commander of the joint US-Jordanian-Israeli underground Centcom-Forward war room established near Amman, has already received instructions to ready the 12,000 US soldiers and USAF F-16 fighter squadron positioned in Jordan.

McKean was said to be in direct communication with Israel's Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Benny Gantz, the commander of Israel's Deep Operations command, Major General Shay Avital and Israel Air Force chief Major General Amir Eshel. The Deep Operations command was established to launch operations against Iran or the Lebanese Hezbollah.



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