

Partners in Peril: Hybrid Threats Come for Jordan

Description

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In the [early evening hours](#) of October 1st, Iran conducted an unprecedented ballistic missile attack against Israel, in retaliation for the killing of [Ismail Haniyeh and Hassan Nasrallah: the political leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah, respectively](#). Helping to respond to the attack, the [United States launched scores](#) of interceptor missiles in defense of Israel. Alongside the United States, the [Kingdom of Jordan is also purported](#) to have participated in intercepting Iran's missiles that violated its airspace. During Iran's last attack against Israel in April, [Jordan](#) joined a loose constellation of Western powers—which included the United States, United Kingdom, and France—in repulsing the attack with its air force shooting down dozens of Iranian drones. “Our message to Iran is that your problem is with Israel, and any attempt to insult Jordan is unacceptable and categorically rejected,” stated Jordan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, [Ayman Safadi](#), back in April. While Safadi's statement illustrates a proximate justification, Jordan's role during this attack underscores an intimate and necessary security relationship between the kingdom and the West.

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[For over seventy-five years](#), the United States and the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan have enjoyed a close relationship. The relationship deepened further when the United States bestowed Jordan with non-NATO Ally (MNNA) status five decades later [in 1996](#). Playing a key role in the United States' regional security architecture, the kingdom collaborates intimately with the US military on issues pertaining to global terrorism and, recently, helping to counter Iran. Over two decades later, Jordan's security relationship with the West has only deepened. During the July 2024 NATO Summit in Washington DC, the alliance announced that it would establish its first regional office in the Middle East in [Amman](#), portending increased military coordination between the alliance and Jordan.

In a region increasingly beset by instability, malign state and non-state actors, and another major war, Jordan remains a symbol of stability. Despite this image, Jordan is far from secure and faces a litany of

irregular threats from Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood. Serving as a primer for future discourse, this piece identifies some of the irregular threats facing Jordan and offers potential measures the United States, as Jordan's closest security partner, can implement to combat those threats.

Jordan Under Threat

Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, Jordan's King Abdullah II has attempted to walk a very fine line between maintaining stable relations with its neighbor Israel and presiding over a Sunni Muslim Arab majority country deeply sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Notably, approximately [60% of Jordan's population is of Palestinian origin](#). In the wake of the October 7th Hamas terror attacks against Israel, [thousands gathered in the streets of Amman](#) to express their public support for Hamas chanting slogans such as "Oh Hamas, hit them with al-Qassam rockets! Bring the suicide bombers to Tel Aviv." The Jordanian government had taken steps to signal its dissatisfaction with Israel's ground campaign in Gaza by withdrawing its [ambassador](#) last November. [Abdullah](#) has also publicly condemned Israel's campaign in Gaza and in February called for an immediate cease-fire.

Following Iran's attack in April and Jordan's participation in repelling it, protests shifted some of their attention from Israel to the [Jordanian government](#), posing a serious threat to the long-term stability of Abdullah's reign as he increasingly became the object of the protestors. [Reports](#) also indicate that Hamas has played a role in instigating the protests, and unsurprisingly many of the protestors are activists belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, which the Jordanian government banned in 2016. Hamas is inextricably tied to the Brotherhood and traces its foundation to the Brotherhood's political branch in Gaza back in the [1980s](#).

In April, an address made by Hamas spokesman Abu Ubaida advocating for Jordanians to ["escalate their actions"](#) inspired a protest outside Israel's Embassy in Amman. "Hamas is inciting and trying to ignite unrest inside the kingdom. We will not allow it to achieve its goal," [stated an anonymous Jordanian official](#). Jordan is facing a [disinformation campaign](#) orchestrated by the Brotherhood that is fostering instability in the country. To the Jordanian government's chagrin, public opinion is [shifting in favor](#) of Hamas narratives and the Brotherhood. [According to a recent survey](#), 63.4% of Jordanians believe that the Brotherhood "can deal positively with the problems facing Jordan if given the opportunity." In response to persistent demonstrations, many of which turned violent, [Jordanian security forces](#) cracked down in an attempt to prevent pro-Hamas and anti-government sentiments from metastasizing. With Hamas and the Brotherhood adversely shaping the information space against the Jordanian government, the current geopolitical environment in the Middle East threatens to further erode Abdullah's reign. [Of added concern](#), the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, the political wing of the Brotherhood in Jordan, recently won 31 out of 138 parliamentary seats, becoming the largest political party in Jordan.

In addition to disinformation threats, Abdullah has also confronted increased pressure from Iran more directly which views his government as an obstacle to their regional strategy vis-à-vis Israel. [In April](#), Abu Ali al-Askari, a senior official belonging to Iran's Iraqi proxy militia, Kata'ib Hezbollah, publicly stated intentions to arm the Mujahideen of the Islamic Resistance in Jordan, to satisfy the needs of 12,000 fighters, ostensibly for military operations against Israel. If implemented, such a plan would not only threaten Israel but heighten violent political unrest within Jordan. On the eve of April's Iran drone-missile attack against Israel, where Jordan participated in countering the threat, reports indicated that Iran warned that [if Jordan intervenes, it will be the next target](#) in an attempt to intimidate the Jordanians.

Outside of messaging and rhetoric, Iran has engaged in illicit acts to support groups hostile to Abdullah's government within the country. [Jordan has intercepted](#) a series of attempts to smuggle Iranian weapons through the kingdom to the West Bank; some of these smuggling plots, however, have been destined for the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan. [According to unnamed Jordanian sources](#), these arms were intended to conduct sabotage operations against Abdullah's government. Many of these [busted weapons smuggling attempts](#) consisted of assault rifles, claymore mines, C4, and even some 107mm Katyusha rockets. This past June, Jordanian security forces discovered a stockpile of explosives in Amman connected to an Iran [terror-related plot](#). [For the past few years](#), Jordan has also been combating a serious Iranian-orchestrated drug smuggling operation that contributes to undermining Jordanian security while helping fund Iran's regional strategy.

What's at Stake

With the looming specter of a wider regional conflict, these challenges, under the current tempo, could result in the decline and eventual downfall of Abdullah's monarchy, spelling disaster for stability and security in the region. [In this extreme scenario](#), an Iranian-backed regime could assume power and fundamentally alter the regional [balance of power](#). Such an event would be a masterstroke for Iran by completing the encirclement of Israel where it could flood the West Bank with uninhibited military aid for future terror campaigns. Under those circumstances, Israel presumably could take drastic actions in Jordan or the West Bank in an attempt to secure the land border with Jordan. Saudi Arabia, a principal Iranian competitor, would meanwhile be facing an Iranian threat across its northern borders, in addition to the Yemen-based Houthis in the south, which would escalate tensions between the two major regional powers. As an adversary of the United States, Iran would be better positioned to more dangerously challenge American allies in the Middle East and further plunge the region into conflict.

The weakening of Jordan would also endanger US-led counterterrorism efforts in the region. Numbering approximately 2,500 fighters, ISIS has conducted [153 attacks](#) in Iraq and Syria as of July 2024; at the current rate, ISIS will more than [double](#) its number of attacks from 2023. Amidst this

backdrop, United States collaboration with regional allies, such as Jordan, in the counterterrorism fight is only more imperative, especially as the United States attempts to reduce its regional military footprint during a [reorientation to Europe and the Indo-Pacific](#). Jordan is an integral part of the [Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve](#) (CJTF-OIR) in the ongoing campaign against ISIS. Currently, [3,000 US servicemembers](#) are deployed in bases across Jordan in support of CJTF-OIR. In January, [three American soldiers were killed](#) in an Iranian-backed militia drone attack on one such base, demonstrating the heightened tensions that penetrate Jordan's borders.

Recently, [Jordan hosted Eager Lion 2024](#) which included 33 partner nations in a US-led multilateral security exercise focused on developing capabilities to counter both state and non-state actors. [Eager Lion] demonstrates that our coalition force can maintain a sufficient and sustainable presence in the region. It delivers a clear message that relationships matter," stated the exercise director [US Brigadier General Jason Benson](#). In addition to the enduring United States presence on the ground, [Jordan's airbases](#), such as the Muwaffaq Salti Air Base, enable American intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) efforts in Iraq and Syria to help facilitate counterterrorism operations. [With the US counter-ISIS mission](#) in Iraq coming to a close over the next year following increased scrutiny from the Iraqi government, Jordan's key role in CJTF-OIR becomes only more paramount.

What Needs to be Done

To strengthen Jordan, the United States should develop a comprehensive strategy that aims to buttress Jordan's military and preserve Abdullah's government. [In past years](#), the United States conducted the Jordan Border Security Program (JSBP) and Jordan Operational Engagement Program (JOEP) to enhance Jordan's military and intelligence capabilities against terror threats; these initiatives were [discontinued](#) in 2017 and 2020, respectively. Restarting these programs and intensifying them as foreign internal defense measures in conjunction with growing counterterrorism capabilities will help Jordan parry the range of internal military threats it faces. In the political arena, helping the Jordanian government compete successfully in the information space via Military Information Support Operations (MISO) will positively influence pro-Abdullah narratives within the country.

Enhancing Jordan's military capacity will help make the kingdom a more effective bulwark against Iran and its proxies having already demonstrated a propensity to neutralize Iranian drones in April. To that end, on June 18th, 2024, Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Jacky Rosen (D-NV) introduced the [United States-Jordan Defense Cooperation Act](#) before the US Senate to further deepen the security partnership between the two countries. Focused primarily on shoring up Jordan's military capabilities to combat more external threats, the bill emphasizes American efforts to help modernize

[Jordan's air defense systems](#) in the wake of rocket, missile, and drone attacks from Iran and its proxies.

Despite the bill's important emphasis on buttressing Jordan's air defense, it fails to identify any potential measures that can be implemented to counter the irregular threats facing Jordan and that arguably can be more damaging to the kingdom. Iran will continue to support terror plots across Jordan in an attempt to weaken the kingdom. To that end, the United States must invest more in Jordanian law enforcement to sufficiently deal with extremist demonstrations orchestrated by Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. The United States needs to focus greater military assistance measures on bolstering Jordan's foreign internal defense by specifically enhancing its counterterrorism forces that could effectively resist a comprehensive Iranian-orchestrated terror campaign.

Acknowledging that Israel's ongoing fight against Hamas and the ensuing collateral damage in Gaza is contributing to internal discontent amongst the Jordanian populace and placing strain on Abdullah's government, an eventual cessation of hostilities should conceivably reduce tensions in Jordanian society. In the interim, opportunities exist to combat disinformation and shape strategic narratives within Jordan's broader information space. As the war continues, attempting to de-demonize Israel in Jordan would be a forlorn hope since anti-Israel sentiments run too deep. Instead, working to portray Iran as the threat that they actually pose could strengthen domestic support behind Abdullah's government. [In a 2023 poll](#), although preceding the Israel-Hamas War, 45% of Jordanians viewed Iran as a competitor and 42% as an enemy. The Jordanian government could thus intensify its rhetoric against Iran, which openly violates Jordanian sovereignty, in a bid to foster greater unity. With the permission of the Jordanian government, the United States also possesses capabilities to help Abdullah compete and win in the information space against malign actors. [US-led MISO](#) is designed to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, and objective reasoning. Supporting Jordan in the information domain has the potential to improve the image of Abdullah's government while discrediting Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Iran among the Jordanian public.

Conclusion

The United States is taking active and necessary steps to support Jordan's military means to counter external military challenges; however, the current reality on the ground in Jordan warrants a more robust American response. To ensure Jordan's long-term stability, the United States must also utilize irregular means to confront the arguably more dangerous irregular challenges that confront the kingdom. A comprehensive strategy that emphasizes foreign internal defense, counterterrorism, and MISO coupled with ongoing measures to enhance Jordan's hard military capabilities will go a considerable way in strengthening Jordan and helping the West, under US leadership, enhance its

security posture in the Middle East.

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The views expressed are those of the author(s) and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

Task Force Spartan Soldiers participated in a ceremony to officially open the new Jordan Armed Forces Joint Training Center, October 10, 2018, in Amman, Jordan. ([U.S. National Guard photos by Staff Sgt. Michael Williams](#))

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