



The Future of U.S.-Jordanian Counterterrorism Cooperation

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Introduction and summary

The United States has no closer Arab counterterrorism partner than the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Military and intelligence relations between the two countries date back to the 1950s. In recent decades, the two countries have worked closely to address shared security threats, shore up Jordan's stability, and strengthen the kingdom's capacity to confront terrorism at home. The wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria all strengthened these bonds, but the rise of the Islamic State group (IS) in 2014 saw bilateral security cooperation enter a new and even deeper phase of cooperation.

Today, Jordan is a key member of the anti-IS coalition. The kingdom hosts more than 2,800 U.S. military personnel;¹ has supported train and equip efforts in southern Syria; and provides critical bases for the air campaign against the group.² For its part, the United States has significantly increased not just its security assistance, but also its economic support and humanitarian aid to help Jordan shoulder new burdens imposed by regional turmoil, including the influx of nearly 700,000 refugees from Syria.³ By 2016, U.S. assistance had reached almost \$1.6 billion annually.⁴

Despite record aid levels, the internal security situation in Jordan took a turn for the worse in 2016. In that year, the kingdom suffered a string of terrorist attacks, including its most deadly in a decade. A number of factors appear to be at play. Civil war, IS, and a resurgent Al Qaeda in Syria have increased the threat along Jordan's northern and eastern land borders. Domestic religious extremism also appears to be on the rise in Jordan. In addition, an estimated 2,000 to 4,000 Jordanians have crossed those borders to fight for extremist groups⁵ and many have begun to return home, elevating the threat of domestic attacks.⁶ Finally, Iran's presence and power projection in Syria poses a strategic threat by creating instability and conflict along Jordan's borders.

These trends do not yet constitute a strategic threat to Jordan's stability. However, the recent spate of internal terrorist attacks has raised concerns over the kingdom's capacity to fully manage a dynamic and complicated matrix of threats emanating from inside and outside Jordan. As the region enters a new chapter in the fight against terrorism, the United States and Jordan will need to make important choices about how best to further strengthen the capacity of the kingdom to manage these threats. The first step should be an honest look at what has and has not worked, particularly in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, after which the United States made significant investments in counterterrorism partners in the Middle East.

The good news is that Jordan has already taken steps to address gaps in its highly capable armed forces and security services. These institutions have historically enjoyed significant U.S. support, with most U.S. counterterrorism assistance flowing to partner organizations such as the General Intelligence Department (GID) and the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF), including its special operations forces. Following the 2016 incidents, King Abdullah II replaced the minister of interior, as well as the leadership of JAF, the GID, and other security services. The personnel changes were designed to discourage interagency competition and improve coordination, and were welcomed by Jordanian and American security professionals alike.

Other elements of the reform packages that followed the 2016 attacks deserve greater scrutiny. Of particular note is the restructuring and downsizing of the Jordanian Special Operations Command (JORSOCOM)—a longtime partner of the U.S. special operations community housed under JAF. Jordanian officials described this as a move to strengthen their special operations forces, but there is a risk that the changes could actually diminish the operational effectiveness of these forces over time. In addition, while the shake-up in leadership may have improved coordination across Jordan's security institutions, opportunities remain to strengthen the kingdom's counterterrorism services and enhance cooperation across them.

To better understand the challenges inherent in the next phase of U.S.-Jordanian counterterrorism cooperation, a research team from the Center for American Progress visited Jordan in July 2017 to interview officials and experts from JORSOCOM; the Jordanian military and intelligence community; the Border Guard; the U.S. diplomatic corps and military; local media; and academic institu-

tions. The team also spoke with U.S. military officials and experts based in the United States from July 2017 through November 2017. The team's findings build on previous CAP research on both Jordan and U.S. counterterrorism cooperation in neighboring countries.⁷

This report presents an overview of U.S. security assistance to Jordan and current threats to Jordanian security. It explains the roles played by the main counterterrorism institutions in Jordan and details the challenges that they face moving forward. Finally, the report recommends that the United States and Jordan use the security reform process to strengthen Jordan's ability to confront both internal and external threats by taking six key steps:

- Clarify the objectives of the Jordanian special forces reform plan and articulate a vision for the role of special forces in future counterterrorism operations.
- Ensure that Jordanian special forces retain adequate aviation support for counterterrorism operations and improve its personnel recruitment and selection process.
- Maintain a U.S. special forces presence large enough to maximize the outcome of the reorganization of Jordanian special forces.
- Expand the participation of Jordanian special forces in expeditionary operations with U.S. forces.
- Enhance Jordanian counterterrorism coordination at the national and tactical levels.
- Regularize recruitment for Jordanian intelligence and review opportunities for additional technical support and enhanced cooperation with the U.S. intelligence community.

U.S. security assistance to Jordan

For decades, Jordan has been a central U.S. ally in the Middle East. The security of the Hashemite Kingdom remains critical to U.S. interests in the region. Jordan plays an essential role in the Middle East peace process, and its stability and cooperation are important for Israeli security. Following the Sept. 11 attacks, Jordan supported the U.S. military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, despite its opposition to the 2003 invasion of the latter.⁸

Jordan also plays an important role in the fight against IS and Al Qaeda in Syria and Iraq by gathering intelligence, participating in limited airstrikes, and providing training grounds for coalition forces. With more than 2,800 U.S. troops alone currently deployed in the country,⁹ Jordan also provides essential access to its air bases to U.S. and coalition forces. As one senior U.S. diplomat to Jordan noted, access to Jordan alone makes U.S. assistance a “bargain” in counterterrorism terms¹⁰ due to its strategic location in the region.¹¹

Today, Jordan is one of the largest recipients of U.S. security assistance. Even as the Trump administration slashes foreign military assistance to more than 40 countries, it has recognized the long-standing U.S. strategic interests in Jordan, and its requested 2018 budget proposal preserves U.S. security assistance to Jordan.¹² The same senior U.S. diplomat observed, “Jordan is fenced off from the Trump austerity budget.”¹³

Given the constantly shifting regional security landscape, however, Jordan may not be immune to shifts in U.S. priorities in the coming years. Senior U.S. officials noted that resources for U.S. special operations in Jordan will be scaled back significantly in fiscal year 2018.¹⁴ The number of U.S. military personnel could fall by as much as 50 percent.¹⁵ These cuts are reportedly being driven by a need to redeploy special operations forces to other countries in the region to address more pressing tasks.¹⁶

Breakdown of U.S. assistance in Jordan

In 2015, the United States and Jordan signed a nonbinding memorandum of understanding that outlined a U.S. commitment to provide Jordan with \$1 billion in assistance annually from fiscal year 2015 through fiscal year 2017,¹⁷ including a minimum of \$300 million per year to be dedicated to security assistance. In reality, the United States has given Jordan at least double this amount in security assistance each year since 2015.¹⁸

TABLE 1
Jordanian security aid, 2014–2018

U.S. programs providing funding

	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018*
Direct to Jordan					
Aviation Leadership Program	\$92,147	\$9,585	– **	–	–
Coalition Support Funds	–	\$147,269,700	–	–	–
Combating Terrorism Fellowship Program	\$941,334	\$797,191	–	–	–
Cooperative Threat Reduction Program	\$30,861,159	\$14,667,701	–	–	–
Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund (CTPF)	–	\$150,000,000	\$200,000,000	–	–
Defense Institute of International Legal Studies	\$11,000	–	–	–	–
Developing Countries Combined Exercise Program	\$2,377,396	\$2,440,264	–	–	–
Foreign Military Financing	\$300,000,000	\$385,000,000	\$450,000,000	\$450,000,000	\$350,000,000
International Military Education and Training	\$3,588,000	\$3,787,000	\$3,733,000	\$4,000,000	\$3,800,000
Jordan Border Security Program	\$147,000,000	–	–	–	–
Nonproliferation, Anti-Terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR)	\$6,700,000	\$7,200,000	\$8,850,000	\$13,600,000	\$10,400,000
Regional Centers for Security Studies	\$14,069	\$50,475	–	–	–
Section 1206 Train and Equip Authority	–	\$26,762,000	–	–	–
Security Cooperation Programs	–	–	–	\$500,000,000	–
Service academies	\$603,011	\$227,182	–	–	–
State Partnership Program	–	\$347,215	–	–	–
Total	\$492,188,116	\$738,558,313	\$662,583,000	\$967,600,000	\$364,200,000
Possible additional funds for bilateral security aid to Jordan***					
Coalition Support Funds			\$562,687,000	\$1,100,000,000	\$1,000,000,000
Section 1206 Global Train and Equip			\$314,146,000		
Section 333 Building Partner Capacity (successor to 1206)				\$270,218,000	\$347,223,000
Security Cooperation Programs (successor to CTPF)				\$400,000,000	
Cooperative Threat Reduction Program			\$358,496,000	\$357,814,000	\$324,600,000

* All fiscal year 2018 figures are based on administration requests.

** After fiscal year 2015, some data are unavailable either due to a lack of reporting or the absence of funding; these cells are marked with “–”.

*** U.S. Department of Defense allocations on a country level for most programs are not currently publicly available after FY 2015.

Source: Authors’ calculations based on data and input from Security Assistance Monitor, available at securityassistance.org (last accessed September 2017).

Under the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) listed Jordan as its “top funding priority” among countries receiving support from the DOD’s Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund.¹⁹ U.S. security assistance to Jordan supports counterterrorism capacity-building—specifically training, equipment, and border security for JAF, including the Jordanian Border Guard, Jordanian Quick Reaction Force (QRF), and the Royal Jordanian Air Force. Key examples of each assistance category are provided below.

Training

- After the Sept. 11 attacks, the United States established a bilateral operations center with Jordan’s GID.²⁰ The United States has since provided funding, technical assistance, and training to many of the GID’s staff.²¹
- In 2005, Congress allocated \$99 million to build the King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center (KASOTC), Jordan’s state-of-the-art special operations forces training facility.²² The center trains both Jordanian and international special operations forces and hosts Eager Lion, a major multinational military and special operations exercise.
- The United States conducts training courses for Jordanian special operations forces in counterterrorism operations, as well as military training for JAF to conduct counterterrorism operations.
- The United States also organizes trainings for the QRF in disrupting terrorist groups attempting to operate within Jordan’s borders.

Equipment and weapons

- U.S. assistance provides operational equipment, such as body armor and ammunition, as well as special operations equipment for counterterrorism, such as night vision devices; weapons; munitions; and communication and electronics equipment.
- In 2015, the Obama administration denied requests for armed drone exports to Jordan for anti-IS operations,²³ but the Trump administration could reverse this decision and approve the request.

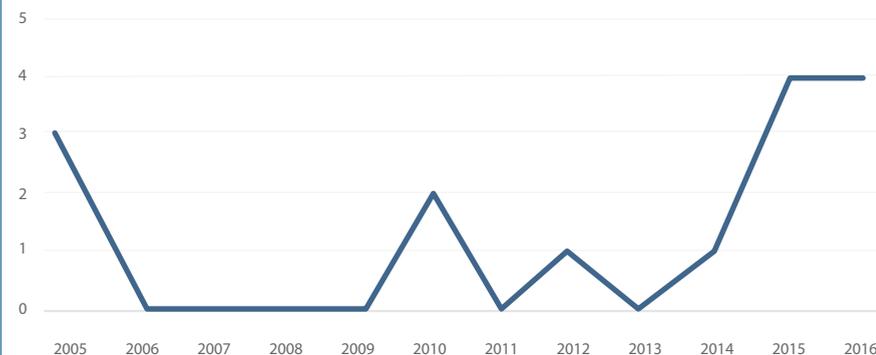
Border security

- In 2009, the United States established the Jordan Border Security Program, an “integrated border security surveillance, detection, and interdiction system”²⁴ along Jordan’s borders with Iraq and Syria.²⁵ In 2016, the system became operational.
- U.S. assistance provides vehicles, equipment, weapons, munitions, and training for the Jordanian Border Guard to respond to border incursions by terrorist elements.

Threat landscape

Despite years of regional upheaval and conflict, Jordan has remained relatively stable. The last two years, however, have seen a spike in incidents and a general increase in the severity of the terrorist threat facing Jordan. The U.S. Department of State suggested this year that Jordan had become a target “for several reasons, including its proximity to regional conflicts in Iraq and Syria, the state’s official rejection of Salafi-Jihadi interpretations of Islam, and its membership in the Defeat-ISIS Coalition.”²⁶ While terrorist threats facing Jordan remain largely domestic, the border area and foreign fighters are additional areas of concern.

FIGURE 1
Successful terrorist incidents in Jordan, 2005–2016



Source: Authors' calculations based on data from National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "Global Terrorism Database," available at <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/> (last accessed November 2017).

Domestic extremism

Like much of the Middle East, Jordan has experienced a rising tide of Salafism, an ultraconservative interpretation of Islam. Jordanian officials describe tackling this rise in extremism as a top priority across ministries.²⁷ Jordanian experts on jihadi groups estimate that there are 7,000 to 10,000 Salafi-jihadi supporters, or Salafists who support the use of violence to achieve their preferred political and social

outcomes in Jordan.²⁸ Jordanian security officials and civil society leaders alike are also concerned about the rise of the quietist Salafi community, which does not actively engage in political activities. As one leading academic observed, the rise of “soft extremism is equally as dangerous” to the long-term stability of Jordan as its violent counterpart.²⁹

On a positive note, recent polling suggests a significant drop in the broader public’s support for terrorist groups and terrorist attacks. Surveys conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan show that in 2014, support for terrorist groups was roughly 35 percent nationwide, but more recent surveys indicate that this figure has dropped to between 5 percent and 6 percent.³⁰ Several officials and experts pointed to the burning of Jordanian fighter pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh by the IS as a turning point in support for terrorist groups.³¹

Terrorism inside Jordan

Jordan suffered several terrorist attacks over the past two years, all carried out by Jordanians and mostly directed at security and military personnel.³² In particular, four key incidents highlighted new threats faced by Jordan’s counterterrorism institutions.

Amman Compound attack

On November 9, 2015, a Jordanian police captain killed two American police trainers, one South African trainer, and two Jordanian civil servants. The attack also wounded seven people, including two Americans, who were private military contractors working for the U.S. company DynCorp International. At the time of the incident, Jordanian officials cautioned against speculation that the gunman was tied to anti-American militants, though the timing of the incident generated suspicion.³³

Irbid raid

On March 2, 2016, Jordanian special forces and the Gendarmerie raided a residential building in Irbid. The suspects refused to surrender and exchanged fire with special forces. The ensuing firefight killed the head of the 71st Counterterrorism Battalion—also known as the 71st Special Battalion—and seven suspects. Jordan’s GID alleged that the men had ties to IS. Jordanian forces claimed to have foiled an IS plot to attack civilian and military targets, having seized automatic weapons, munitions, and explosives.³⁴ Experts were

concerned that it took the battalion—considered Jordan’s most effective special forces unit—more than 12 hours to defeat a cell of terrorists.³⁵ One source also reported that the operation “was said to have been severely hampered by breakdowns in communication between the security services.”³⁶

King Faisal Air Base attack

On November 4, 2016, a Jordanian soldier opened fire on a convoy at King Faisal Air Base.³⁷ The soldier killed three American military trainers, despite the American soldiers’ attempts to identify themselves. After investigation, the Jordanian government concluded that the Jordanian soldier disobeyed rules of engagement, and a Jordanian military court sentenced the soldier to hard labor for life. The Jordanian government denied the possibility of jihadist ties, but some analysts suggest the attack was intentional and premeditated.³⁸

Karak attack

On December 18, 2016, gunmen opened fire on two police patrols near the city of Karak.³⁹ The gunmen then fled to a hideout in the nearby Crusader castle, where four gunmen engaged security forces.⁴⁰ The five-hour shootout killed at least 14 people, including four members of the Jordan Public Security Directorate (PSD), three members of the General Directorate of Gendarmerie, a Canadian national, two Jordanian civilians, and the four gunmen.⁴¹ The shootout wounded at least 28 more people.⁴² Jordanian special forces also claimed to have rescued at least 10 hostages from the hideout.⁴³ This incident prompted concerns over response times and coordination across the security services. The lack of coordination allowed the attackers to travel 50 kilometers without being intercepted.⁴⁴ Moreover, a dispute between Jordanian special forces and the other security services regarding jurisdiction resulted in a less-prepared Gendarmerie taking charge of the incident.⁴⁵

With the possible exception of the Irbid cell, these incidents do not appear to have been directly coordinated by IS or other transnational terrorist groups. However, Jordanian military officials elaborated that local terrorist cells and sympathizers have been galvanized and inspired by IS’s initial successes and its call for supporters to carry out attacks in their countries.⁴⁶ They also observed that many of the attackers were prevented from exiting Jordan to fight with terrorist groups in Syria, but may not have been adequately monitored after being denied exit.

Transnational terrorism in the region

IS and Al Qaeda remain top concerns for Jordan's counterterrorism professionals. While Jordanian military officials believe that "there is no framework for external terrorist cells to operate in Jordan,"⁴⁷ they remain troubled by the group's long-term capacity to spread its ideology and inspire attacks, especially among youth. One interlocutor shared the popular view that "Daesh [IS] is out of Mosul but left their ideas with this generation."⁴⁸ U.S. security officials in Jordan are particularly concerned over an IS-aligned group known as the Khalid ibn al-Walid Army, which operates in southern Syria within miles of the Jordanian border.⁴⁹

While IS has taken center stage since 2014, Jordanian security officials have recently refocused on renewed threats from Al Qaeda.⁵⁰ One senior Jordanian military official opined that, in the future, Al Qaeda "will be more lethal than the Islamic State. They have survived, have experience and capabilities and key commanders. Some of them will melt into the Syrian community and rebrand under local groups. They will benefit from defeating ISIS and will carry out new operations to prove itself and its leadership."⁵¹

A related threat could emerge as moderate Syrian rebels in southern Syria join more extremist groups as a result of insufficient international support. The United States, Jordan, the United Kingdom, and some Gulf countries reportedly continue to provide covert assistance to rebels in southern Syria—in part to fight extremist groups and provide a cushion against terrorist activity along the Jordanian border.⁵² The U.S. element of that assistance is reportedly scheduled to end in December 2017. Tens of thousands of fighters will need to find other means of support.⁵³ Jordanian experts on jihadi groups worry that diminishing support and oversight of these rebels could push them to align themselves with groups such as IS and Al Qaeda, or their local affiliates.⁵⁴

Returning foreign fighters

As IS suffers major setbacks in Iraq and Syria, the specter of Jordanian foreign fighters returning en masse looms on the horizon. Jordanian officials said that 900 Jordanians are currently fighting with terrorist groups in Iraq and Syria.⁵⁵ However, nongovernment studies estimate that 2,000 to 4,000 Jordanian foreign fighters have joined such groups in Iraq and Syria since 2011, which would make

Jordan either the first or second largest contributor of foreign fighters on a per capita basis.⁵⁶ While many fighters joined IS, many are also thought to have joined Al Qaeda in Syria.⁵⁷

Jordanian security officials offer mixed assessments of the challenge posed by returning foreign fighters. The leadership of the Jordanian Border Guard was confident that Jordan's intelligence capabilities, counterterrorism law,⁵⁸ and the new sophisticated border security system funded by the United States were up to the challenge. According to one official, Jordan has "dealt with foreign fighters for a long time ... so it's easy to find information on them."⁵⁹

Others were less sanguine. One senior military official admitted that significant improvements in "operational and technical capabilities and intelligence" would be required in order to manage returning foreign fighters.⁶⁰ One leading Jordanian academic observed, "I don't think the government is thinking about returning foreign fighters. They don't even have real numbers."⁶¹ Another jihadism expert noted that foreign fighters could exploit corruption among the Jordanian Border Guard.⁶²

Iranian power projection in Syria

Recent Iranian power projection in southern Syria presents the Jordanian government with another long-term challenge.⁶³ Hundreds of thousands of mostly Sunni Muslim Syrians have been displaced into Jordan from Syria and especially by the fighting along the 230-mile Jordanian-Syrian border. The increasing presence of militias supported by Iran in southern Syria could deter these refugees from eventually returning home. Moreover, the buildup of Iranian proxies in the Golan Heights could destabilize the area by increasing the likelihood of conflict between Iran and Israel.⁶⁴

This past summer, Jordan, the United States, and Russia reached a de-escalation agreement in southwestern Syria. The agreement calls for Iran-backed militias to observe a 40-kilometer, or 25-mile, buffer distance from Jordan's border.⁶⁵ According to Jordanian military officials, a key goal of this buffer zone is to enforce stability in the south of Jordan and avoid the presence of Iranian-sponsored militias in the area—a challenge given the lack of a clear and credible enforcement mechanism.⁶⁶ However, the deal appears to have addressed Iran's presence in the Golan Heights in a meaningful way.⁶⁷

Security institutions and their challenges

Counterterrorism efforts in Jordan are led by Jordanian special operations forces and the GID, with the Border Guard, the PSD, and the Gendarmerie playing supporting roles. While these institutions have been successful overall, CAP's research and interviews identified areas for improvement going forward, particularly for the special operations forces and the GID.

Special operations forces

Founded in 1963, Jordanian special operations forces have a series of primarily domestic missions, including reconnaissance; counterterrorism; search and evacuation; intelligence-gathering; and the protection of key sites. Their organizational structure has evolved significantly from a multitask, company-size parachute unit in the early 1960s to a brigade-size entity in the early 1980s, with more specialized units, including a parachute unit, special forces unit, and a small counterterrorism unit.

Special operations forces gained prominence and resources in 1996 when then-Crown Prince Abdullah took charge and established JORSOCOM. At the time, Jordanian special operations forces were relatively small, consisting of three main units: the 101st, 91st, and 81st battalions. Under King Abdullah and subsequent commanders, JORSOCOM grew substantially. By 2016, the command consisted of three main brigades at a total strength on paper of 7,000 operators.⁶⁸ The central pillar of JORSOCOM has been the 37th Special Forces Brigade, consisting of the 71st Counterterrorism Battalion, 101st Special Forces Battalion, and the 82nd Airborne Battalion. The 37th Brigade has been supported by the 28th Royal Ranger Brigade and the 5th Special Operations Aviation Brigade.

In the summer of 2017, however, the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of JAF, Lieutenant General Mahmoud Freihath, launched a package of reforms across JAF—many of which appear to be driven by budgetary constraints. The

reforms included specific initiatives that could significantly change the shape of the Jordanian special operations community. The first measure deactivated JORSOCOM headquarters and downgraded the highest-ranking special forces commander from a major general to a colonel-rank officer.⁶⁹ The second measure transitioned the 28th Royal Ranger Brigade out of special operations and integrated it with the regular army as a rapid response brigade.

The third initiative similarly mandated the transition of the 5th Aviation Brigade out of special operations command to the Jordanian air force. The brigade has been supported by the U.S. 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, which carries out quarterly reviews of their Jordanian counterparts. The level of U.S. oversight and support for this brigade has made it one of the most effective elements of Jordanian special forces. While the brigade's aircraft and pilots now fall under air force control, the brigade will play a direct support role to Jordanian special forces.⁷⁰

The result of reforms is to condense a three-brigade Joint Special Operations Command down to a single army-specific group—known as the King Abdullah II Royal Special Operation Forces Group—with most support elements, including administration and logistics, stripped away. At the heart of the new group are the 101st and the 71st battalions, which were converted into Special Unit I—special operations—and Special Unit II—counterterrorism. While Jordanian special forces previously had 7,000 operators on paper, U.S. special forces officials shared that the actual number was significantly lower and that JORSOCOM had faced challenges in maintaining the force at full strength.⁷¹ Further, the official number of operators would be reduced to 1,000 as a result of the reforms.⁷² These changes could potentially affect Jordanian special forces' operational capacity and responsiveness.

Since Jordanian special operations forces are largely focused on domestic missions, the reforms will primarily affect JORSOCOM activity within Jordan's borders. However, while senior JORSOCOM officers acknowledge that they lack the logistics and communications capabilities required to operate outside Jordan's borders on a unilateral basis,⁷³ Jordanian special operations forces have deployed in an expeditionary capacity as part of multilateral peacekeeping missions and in support of U.S.- and NATO-led forces in Afghanistan.⁷⁴ Jordanian special operations forces operated alongside their U.S. counterparts in Afghanistan, but with significant caveats. While Jordanian forces participated in at least one major special operation, JAF's most significant contribution is a field hospital established

in 2002, which provided care for hundreds of thousands of Afghan civilians.⁷⁵ JORSOCOM operators also currently deploy with U.S. special operations teams in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, but in small numbers and with limited operational responsibilities.⁷⁶

General Intelligence Department

The GID, housed under JAF, retains the primary authority to investigate terrorism⁷⁷ in Jordan and is widely considered by U.S. and Jordanian officials to be the most effective counterterrorism institution at the national level. The GID is known for its strong human intelligence capabilities and claims to have made recent and significant strides in developing its signals intelligence and cyber capabilities in response to threats from IS and other terrorist groups.⁷⁸

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, the GID counterterrorism section was relatively small, with no more than 10 officers assigned to it at any one time.⁷⁹ In the wake of the attacks, the GID moved decisively with American and international assistance to expand its capability. Bilateral counterterrorism task forces were established between the GID and foreign intelligence services, including the CIA.⁸⁰ It is widely believed that the GID also assisted the CIA with the interrogation of foreign suspects transferred to Jordan through extraordinary rendition.⁸¹ By 2004, the counterterrorism directorate had been established inside the intelligence service,⁸² and in the ensuing years, the number of officers assigned to the directorate increased at least six-fold.⁸³ Wiretaps and human intelligence sources provided the original means of collection, but with international support electronic and satellite surveillance, the directorate took on an increasingly significant role.⁸⁴

Looking ahead, senior Jordanian military officials identified three main priorities. First, military losses by IS in Iraq and Syria heighten the threat posed by foreign fighters fleeing to neighboring countries. There is a “need to beef up our border capabilities and ability to contain foreign fighters returning [to Jordan] or traveling to other countries.”⁸⁵ Partnership with foreign intelligence agencies will be essential both for building the needed technical capacity and enhancing the flow of information on foreign fighters. Second, the GID needs to prioritize the recruitment of new officers. Financial constraints forced the agency to freeze the regular recruitment cycle for years, making hiring sporadic.⁸⁶ Finally, the domestic attacks over the last two years have convinced GID leadership that the organization needs to expand and deepen its presence at the local level in order to better detect threats and prevent attacks.

Other security services

Jordan's other security agencies play a role in supporting Jordanian special forces and the GID in counterterrorism operations. Gendarmerie forces, Jordan's paramilitary police force, was formed in 2008 with a focus on internal counterterrorism and stability. The force was pulled from the PSD and restructured into the Gendarmerie forces, or Darak in Arabic. The Gendarmerie consists of 15,000 personnel and generally focuses on counterdrug operations and local crime, but it also supports special operations, counterterrorism, and intelligence activities.⁸⁷

The PSD, which reports to the minister of interior, encompasses Jordan's general police force and border police. While the PSD is responsible primarily for crimes unrelated to terrorism, its special branch includes a criminal intelligence function and often supports GID counterterrorism operations.⁸⁸ It also controls the entry of all Jordanians and foreign citizens to the country.⁸⁹

Though the Gendarmerie and PSD are viewed as competent and professional, Jordanian officials and analysts emphasized that they should not take the lead on major counterterrorism operations.⁹⁰ In the case of the Karak attack, the Gendarmerie claimed jurisdiction over the attack and responded without the appropriate equipment and skills necessary to complete the operation.⁹¹ This resulted in a drawn-out operation with high casualties.

The Jordanian Border Guard, part of the armed forces, is responsible for securing Jordan's borders against incursions. It plays an especially critical role in managing terrorist and smuggling activities along the kingdom's borders with Syria and Iraq. In this capacity, the border guard controls the United States-funded border security system built to improve surveillance, detection, and interdiction along Jordan's borders. The Border Guard has evidently been successful in securing Jordan against threats along its borders, but some analysts pointed to corruption among border guards.⁹² This is specifically a concern as it relates to Jordanian foreign fighters seeking to use bribery and connections to infiltrate Jordan's borders and carry out attacks within the country.

Countering violent extremism

While Jordan's security agencies focus primarily on containing immediate terrorist threats, its other institutions are involved in programs that seek to address the spread of domestic violent extremism. For more than a decade, Jordan has experimented with various tools to address and contain the spread of violent extremist ideology. The effort began in 2004 with a state-sponsored letter by 180 scholars which promoted peaceful coexistence based on moderate Islamic principles.⁹³ By 2014, Jordan had developed a national strategy to counter violent extremism that included counter messaging initiatives, religious-scholar training, and regulating sermons at Jordanian mosques.

That strategy has been led by the Ministry of Interior to be coordinated by its Directorate for Combating Extremism. The directorate was later transferred to the Ministry of Culture and downgraded to a unit. The strategy involves a series of line ministries and other government offices, including the Ministry of Culture's Unit for Combating Extremism, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Ministry of Social Development, Ministry of Youth, and JAF. As part of this effort, the PSD also established the Community Peace Center, a deradicalization facility which works with low-risk militants.⁹⁴

While the government has shown real commitment to tackling violent extremism, experts point to gaps and weaknesses in national strategy and efforts to implement it. Jordanian media has described the role of the Unit for Combating Extremism as "vague and weak" despite its mandate to lead the strategy's coordination and implementation.⁹⁵ Some academics are concerned that national strategy does not adequately involve civil society and that it has not been properly resourced or implemented to the degree necessary for serious progress.⁹⁶ One example is lack of substantive anti-extremism content in Jordanian school books. The government sought to address this gap with new text books in 2016, but the books were pulled following backlash from conservative members and groups in Jordanian society.⁹⁷ Finally, experts are concerned by Jordan's increasingly strict regulation of the media and public dissent, much of which has been couched under its CVE efforts and enforced using its counterterrorism law.⁹⁸

Laying the groundwork for the next phase of U.S.-Jordan cooperation: Lessons learned

With the military defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria, the United States and Jordan are poised to enter the next phase of bilateral counterterrorism cooperation, both in the kingdom and the region more broadly. As they do so, it will be important to keep in mind some of the central lessons that have emerged from previous chapters of cooperation, as well as recent trends and events in Jordan.

Recent terrorist attacks exposed weaknesses in Jordan's counterterrorism institutions

Over the last two years, Jordanian security forces disrupted several terrorist plots and apprehended a number of violent extremists.⁹⁹ However, the series of attacks mentioned earlier in this report exposed weaknesses in the system. In the case of the Karak attack, a former Jordanian military official observed, “We didn’t call the right people to begin with. We sent in police with guns instead of calling in the GID and special forces.”¹⁰⁰ A senior American official compared the raid in Irbid to Operation Eagle Claw—the failed attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran in 1979, which led to the formation of Joint Special Operations Command. More broadly, the official observed, these incidents underscored the “consistent failure to execute fundamentals considering the amount of money [the U.S.] pours in” to the Jordanian security services.¹⁰¹

Robust partnership with foreign counterparts strengthened the General Intelligence Department

The GID has bolstered its counterterrorism capability significantly since 9/11. A key factor appears to have been a decision to deploy Jordanian intelligence officers alongside the CIA in the early years of the war in Afghanistan.¹⁰² Both Jordanian and U.S. counterterrorism professionals credit this experience with significantly enhancing the GID's ability to operate externally against counter-

terrorism targets. In addition, the 2003 United States-led invasion of Iraq and the subsequent emergence of Al Qaeda in Iraq compelled Jordanian intelligence to step up its external operations.¹⁰³ Still, the 2005 hotel bombings in Amman served as a watershed moment for the GID, exposing further weaknesses in the Jordanian national security system.¹⁰⁴

Finally, a former Jordanian military officer underscored that the Syrian conflict has both forced the GID to significantly expand its external capabilities and provided significant collection and training opportunities.¹⁰⁵ Today, the GID claims to be active in southern Syria and to have the capability to lead operations there independently. In both Iraq and Syria, the GID has assisted the United States' operations by recruiting informants and gathering intelligence on IS and Al Qaeda.¹⁰⁶ It has also supported U.S. training programs for Syrian rebels fighting against terrorist groups in Syria.

Jordanian special operations forces are at an important crossroads

The ultimate impact of the reform plan for Jordanian special operations forces remains unclear. On the one hand, the Jordanian military presents the reorganization as an opportunity to improve the tactical skills of elite operators, “eliminate dead weight and bring overhead down.”¹⁰⁷ U.S. officials similarly described the move as intended to cut costs and improve the readiness of the remaining operators.¹⁰⁸ This is significant, as Jordan had previously faced challenges in staffing, equipping, and training its special forces at full strength.¹⁰⁹ To date, the realignment of the Aviation Brigade has not yet diminished operational responsiveness, and the brigade has so far continued to receive support and oversight from U.S. Special Operations Command.¹¹⁰

On the other hand, the reorganization of the command and downgrade in the rank of its commander risk diminishing the operational capacity and the inter-agency standing of the command inside the Jordanian government. Furthermore, the removal of the Ranger Brigade could affect recruitment. This brigade has been the main talent pool for special operations operators, meaning the Jordanian special operations forces may need to look elsewhere for recruits.

In addition, the reorganization is being carried out at a time when the U.S. special operations presence in Jordan is reportedly being significantly reduced.¹¹¹ The smaller U.S. footprint could mean fewer resources to mentor and support the

Jordanian special operations community during what is their most significant organizational transition in decades. It could also result in less U.S. oversight for equipment maintenance, as well as a rise in accidents during operations.¹¹²

There is room for improvement in both Jordanian interagency coordination and joint operations

Jordan recently took important steps to improve coordination across the security services, but much work remains to be done. Following the recent spate of security incidents and attacks, King Abdullah dismissed the leaders of almost all security agencies, including the JAF chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.¹¹³ A senior U.S. diplomat shared that some of these leaders were known for competing rather than coordinating on counterterrorism operations.¹¹⁴ Jordanian and American security officials interpreted their dismissal as a clear signal that interservice competition would no longer be tolerated. The king also strengthened the National Center for Security and Crisis Management to better coordinate during security incidents.

At the tactical level, steps have been taken to improve coordination specifically between the GID and Jordanian special forces. Special Unit II works closely with the GID on counterterrorism, conducting counterterrorism training and operations every few months. But these joint operations are usually soft-knock missions, or missions where forces enter a target location, such as a home or other building, with permission from the occupants. While such missions go smoothly, tactical cooperation breaks down in hard-knock missions, or operations where forces encounter friction or resistance from the occupants. Both U.S. and Jordanian special forces officials were also concerned that Jordan may not be prepared to contain two security incidents in different parts of the country.¹¹⁵ If this situation arises, the National Center for Security and Crisis Management will be critical in responding to and coordinating simultaneous operations.

Jordan remains reluctant to undertake external counterterrorism operations, but opinion may be evolving

Despite membership in the anti-IS coalition, direct operations undertaken by Jordan against the group in Syria and Iraq have been limited. This can be attributed to two main factors. First, the Jordanian government is hesitant to undertake

operations against terrorist groups specifically in southern Syria because of cross-border tribal connections.¹¹⁶ Local IS and Al Qaeda affiliates are thought to have recruited fighters from tribes that straddle the border between Syria and Jordan.¹¹⁷ These tribes are an important source of support for the Jordanian monarchy and strikes against their Syrian brethren by the Jordanian military could carry political risk for the king.

Second, and more broadly, the Jordanian public is thought to be skeptical of an expeditionary role for their military, believing such operations only benefit Jordan's more powerful allies.¹¹⁸ However, public opinion on this issue may be softening. A recent opinion poll found that 38 percent of Jordanians saw airstrikes and 29 percent viewed special operations as the best tools for managing external terrorist threats. Jordanian academics and journalists observed that both options are increasingly considered a more acceptable means of confronting threats outside the country.¹¹⁹

Recommendations

Jordan's leadership should clarify the objectives of the Jordanian special forces reform plan and articulate a vision for the role of special forces in future counterterrorism operations

It will be important for Jordan's leadership to put forward a clear vision for the future of Jordanian special operations—both inside Jordan as well as to U.S. leadership and other partner nations. Jordanian military officials present the current reform plan as an effort to build a leaner, more capable special operations force. But there are real concerns that reform portends a diminished special operations force over time when there is little reason to expect that Jordan's threat environment will improve.

As the former commander of JORSOCOM, King Abdullah is perceived by many as the champion of the organization. His leadership was essential in establishing Jordanian special operations forces as among the finest in the region and in building a world-class training center at KASOTC. That leadership is once again needed in explaining how a reduced special operations force fits into the kingdom's wider counterterrorism strategy.

Ensure that Jordanian special forces retain adequate aviation support for counterterrorism operations and improve its personnel recruitment and selection process

The United States should work with Jordan's reformed special operations group to ensure that the realignment of the 28th Royal Ranger and 5th Special Operations Aviation brigades do not undercut the capabilities of the command. Specifically, the U.S. Central Command and Special Operations Command should make continued support for the Aviation Brigade contingent upon the former providing airlift and other resources to Special Unit I and Special Unit II as required and in a timely fashion. The United States should also push for joint exercises that require

the special forces units and the aviation brigade to work together in real time to help ensure that capability and response times are not compromised as aviation is separated from the command.

Additionally, the United States should focus its support of Jordan's special operations forces on maintaining the quality of recruits for the remaining special operations units, in particular Special Unit I and Special Unit II. With the integration of the Ranger Brigade into the regular army, Jordanian special operations forces will lose their main pipeline for recruitment. They may be forced to draw on regular units inside the armed forces for recruits that lack ranger, airborne, or other advanced and irregular warfare qualifications. To compensate, U.S. special operations forces in Jordan should take advantage of their close relationship with their Jordanian counterparts to maintain or even increase the rigor of the special operations forces selection process.

Maintain a U.S. special forces presence large enough to maximize the outcome of the reorganization of Jordanian special forces

The United States should maintain its engagement with and support for Jordanian special forces at levels required to maximize the outcome of the reform plan. As that plan moves forward, a series of factors is likely to put downward pressure on the size of the U.S. special forces presence in Jordan. First, U.S. special forces may have less access to the Jordanians' Ranger Brigade and the 5th Aviation Brigade as they realign out of the special forces community. Second, it is only natural that a reduction in the overall size of Jordanian special forces would lead to calls in the U.S. executive branch and Congress to reduce the American commitment. Third, the U.S. special operations presence in Jordan is reportedly slated to be downsized in 2018 due to requirements elsewhere in the region and other arenas. While the United States will need to right-size its support for a smaller Jordanian special forces over time, it should maintain a presence in Jordan large enough to ensure continuity of support for Jordanian special forces until the reorganization is finalized.

Expand the participation of Jordanian special forces in expeditionary operations with U.S. forces

The United States should use its support for Jordanian special operations forces to encourage it to participate in more joint operations with the United States outside of Jordan. This will not be easy. Jordan is understandably reluctant to adopt a more aggressive military posture in the region. Over time, however, more joint operations between Jordanian and U.S. special operations could play an important role in strengthening Jordan's ability to unilaterally manage both internal and external terrorist threats. Such capability will be useful, given the potential for continued and increasing instability across the region and in particular in southern Syria.

Jordanian military officials believe that the experience of operating alongside foreign counterparts in Afghanistan and Iraq made a significant contribution to the growth and professionalization of the GID's counterterrorism directorate.¹²⁰ However, Jordanian policymakers reportedly did not grant their special operations forces the same freedom of action in Afghanistan. As a result, Jordanian special forces had less opportunity to hone their skills in cooperation with American forces.

The U.S. special operations presence in southern Syria offers an opportunity to begin to address this shortfall. Jordanian operators already reportedly participate in very small numbers with U.S. special operations forces in southern Syria. Expanding those operations as well as the role of Jordanian special forces could provide them with useful experience. But this opportunity may be limited by the timeframe of U.S. special operations forces' role in the counter-IS campaign—particularly those forces operating out of the base at Tanf, Syria, close to the Jordanian border.¹²¹ The United States and coalition forces have closed some outposts in southern Syria and may withdraw from Tanf in coming months.¹²² In addition, the United States and Jordan may wish to explore opportunities for joint operations in theaters outside the latter's immediate neighborhood, where Amman's sensitivities and concerns may be less acute.

Enhance Jordanian counterterrorism coordination at the national and tactical levels

Jordanian security officials have recognized weaknesses in coordination among security institutions and taken promising recent steps to correct these deficits. The United States should advise and support the National Center for Security and Crisis Management to run exercises in managing and responding to incidents of terrorism. These exercises should mobilize the participation of armed forces, security services, and ministries with a counterterrorism portfolio to enhance interagency coordination and cooperation. The United States could also support the GID and Jordanian special operations forces to undertake more tactically demanding joint operations. One option would be to carry out joint operations in an expeditionary environment—in southern Syria, for example. Such joint operations could be embedded with U.S. special operations teams, much as Jordanian special operations forces are currently operating next to their American counterparts in support of Operation Inherent Resolve.

Regularize recruitment for Jordanian intelligence and review opportunities for additional technical support and enhanced cooperation with the U.S. intelligence community

The United States should focus on supporting or financing the development of a regular recruitment and intake cycle for the GID. The GID would also benefit from additional training, technical capacity development, and, opportunities for joint operations between the GID and the U.S. intelligence community. Joint operations in Afghanistan proved critical in helping Jordanian intelligence develop its own expeditionary capacity. Jordanian military officials view additional cooperation in the arena as critical to the continued development of the GID.¹²³ To the extent possible, such joint operations should be run by American officers with Arabic language skills. Finally, as terrorist organizations revert to low-tech solutions for internal communications, the United States should take advantage of the GID's willingness to provide greater cooperation on human sources.¹²⁴

Conclusion

Though the conventional military campaign against IS is winding down, the United States and Jordan will continue to face shared threats from IS operatives, Al Qaeda, domestic extremism, and Iranian power projection in the Middle East. The United States should maintain its close cooperation with Jordanian special operations forces and intelligence while building their capacity to contain internal security threats and coordinate across agencies. Support and oversight from the United States will be especially critical to ensuring Jordan's success as the country restructures its security sector. Additionally, the United States should encourage Jordanian special forces to expand their participation in operations beyond the country's borders. This would provide the forces with valuable operational experience that will prepare them to independently address evolving and increasing threats along Jordan's borders.

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