



Lauder School  
of Government,  
Diplomacy & Strategy

IPS  
Institute for  
Policy and Strategy

## IPS Publications

# The Jordanian kingdom and the threat of the Islamic State

Shaul Shay

Januaru 2017

IPS Publications

IDC Herzliya

Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS)  
Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy  
IDC Herzliya

# The Jordanian kingdom and the threat of the Islamic State

Shaul shay

January 2017

On December 18, 2016, four gunmen carried out a series of attacks in and around the Jordanian mountainous city of Karak. Police patrol were responding to calls of a house fire in the town of Qatranah in the Karak district when assailants began shooting at the officers from within the house, wounding two officers. The gunmen drove away from the house and attacked a police station in Karak, where they wounded several police officers and bystanders.

The gunmen then stormed the 12th century Crusader castle in Karak. From the castle the terrorists opened fire on a number of public security personnel and passers-by in Karak. A Jordanian joint security force tackled the gunmen holed up inside the Crusader castle in Karak and has concluded the operation after killing four terrorists.<sup>1</sup>

The Public Security Department (PSD) and the Gendarmerie department said seven of their personnel were killed in the attack, in addition to two civilians and a Canadian citizen, while 11 PSD personnel, 4 Gendarmerie members, 17 citizens and two foreigners were injured.<sup>2</sup>

The four terrorists were Jordanians, two of the terrorists were from Al-Qasr town, 20 km north Karak and the two others were from Al-Salt west Amman. Their ages ranged between 28 and 34.<sup>3</sup>

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attacks on police and tourists in Jordan in a statement published on a website affiliated with the group. The statement said that "four soldiers of the caliphate" armed with machine guns and hand grenades carried out the attacks, killing 10 "apostates." It said the four ISIS fighters were engaged in "fierce clashes lasting several hours" with Jordanian forces before being killed. The statement threatened more attacks in anti-ISIS coalition member states. "We promise the Crusader coalition countries something worse and more severe, Allah permitting ...," it said.<sup>4</sup>

The terrorist group had rented an apartment in the desert town of Qatranah, 30 km northeast of Karak in November 2016 and had told neighbors that they are planning to open a café on the desert road. Instead, the group was preparing explosive belts and bombs to commit attacks during the New Year Eve celebrations in several Jordanian areas.

King Abdullah II denounced the terror attacks during a visit to the police headquarters in Amman. He vowed that the assault "will not affect the security and stability of Jordan. It will reinforce its will and the criminals will not be able to undermine the country." The King said Jordan would respond with an iron fist to assaults or any attempts to tamper with the Kingdom's security and safety of its people.<sup>5</sup>

## The Aftermath

---

The Jordanian security forces carried out raids in several places in the Southern part of the kingdom:

- Four Jordanian policemen were killed in clashes with ISIS militants near the city of Karak on December 21, 2016 as the authorities hunted the militants who conducted the attacks in Karak.<sup>6</sup> The security forces were surrounding a house in a neighborhood in Karak where gunmen linked to the four militants who staged attack on the December 18, 2016, were taking cover and exchanging gunfire with security forces.<sup>7</sup>
- Jordanian security forces raided on December 28, 2016 a wanted duo in the District of Shobak of the Ma'an governorate in southern part of the country, killing one and arresting the other and seizing automatic weapons, in addition to live ammunition.<sup>8</sup>

## Why Karak ?

---

Tourism is the Jordan's main source of income. Karak is located west of the Dead Sea, and the city's medieval castle is a popular tourist attraction. The fact that the attackers singled out the castle of Karak points to their intention of striking the country's tourism industry.

Karak is the hometown of Jordanian Royal Air Force pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, whose plane crashed near the city of Raqqa, in December 2014. Al-Kasasbeh was then captured by the Islamic state and burned alive. Jordan responded with massive retaliatory airstrikes against the ISIS (56 airstrikes over three days) and has executed the terrorists Sajida al-Rishawi and Ziad al-Karbouli who had previously been sentenced to death. Al-Rishawi and her husband were involved in the planning of a series of attacks on hotels in the Jordanian capital Amman at the end of 2005. Sixty people were killed in the attacks, al-Rishawi survived because her suicide belt failed to detonate.<sup>9</sup>

## The Jordanian vulnerabilities

---

- Jordan is a target because it has joined the international coalition in the fight against the Islamic state. That participation comes despite measurable Jordanian civilian opposition to the air campaign.
- The country's economic situation is dire. Unemployment is at almost 15 percent, and among 15-to-24-year-olds it is 38 percent. Almost one quarter of all Jordanians live below the poverty line.
- Despite international aid, the country's budget has been heavily burdened by the roughly 1.4 million Syrians refugees that it has taken in.
- The "Jihadist tradition"- The roots of the Islamic State can be traced to Jordan. It was Abu Musab al Zarqawi, a Jordanian, who founded the Iraqi arm of Al-Qaeda that would eventually mutate into the Islamic State.<sup>10</sup>
- Jordan has been facing homegrown extremism. It is estimated that well over 2,000 of Jordanians are fighting alongside ISIS in Iraq and Syria and several thousand more are believed to support the extremist group in the kingdom. The ramifications of the return of the Jordanian jihadists are clear.

## Terror attacks in Jordan

---

The attacks in Karak were the latest in a series of attacks over the past year that have challenged the Jordanian kingdom.

**On November 4, 2016**, three U.S. military trainers were shot dead when their car was fired on by a Jordanian army member at the gate of Prince Faisal air base in the south of the country. Washington disputed the official Jordanian account that they were shot at for failing to stop, and said it did not rule out political motives.

**On June 27, 2016**, a suicide bomber killed seven Jordanian soldiers and wounded 13 soldiers on the Syrian border. According to the Jordanian army, the suicide bomber set off from the makeshift Syrian refugee camp near the Rukban crossing in Jordan's remote northeast. He then entered Jordanian territory through an opening used for humanitarian aid deliveries and blew himself up as he reached a military post. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack on a jihadist-linked news agency Amaq.

**On June 6, 2016**, five Jordanian security officials were killed when a gunman opened fire on the intelligence department's office at the Baqaa Palestinian refugee camp. The attacker was subsequently arrested.<sup>11</sup> The attack took place on the first day of Ramadan and shook Jordan. Amman's state security court sentenced Mahmud Masharfeh to death by hanging for his terrorist act against the intelligence agency.<sup>12</sup>

**On November 9, 2015**, police Captain Anwar Abu Zaid killed two American security contractors, a South African security contractor, and two Jordanians at the Jordan International Police Training Center near Amman. Four Jordanians, two Americans, and one Lebanese citizen were also wounded. Jordanian security forces shot and killed Zaid, who worked as a trainer at the center. In December 2015, ISIS praised Zaid as one of the "martyred 'lone' knights of the Khilāfah.

## Summary

---

Jordan's King Abdullah II has managed to keep his country comparatively quiet and stable and widely seen as an oasis of stability in the volatile Middle East. This is despite that fact that it lies in a very turbulent region, bordering Israel, Syria, Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

The Karak terror attacks were the bloodiest in Jordan in recent years and highlighted just how vulnerable the country is, despite increased anti-terror measures, and raised new concerns about the rise of Islamic militancy in the kingdom.

Now that ISIS is being pushed back in Syria and Iraq, it seems evident that ISIS terrorists will retreat to other nearby countries and Jordan may be the first.

It is Jordan, on Israel's east and Iraq's west that will serve as a crucial buffer from the terrorist movements that threaten to spill over into Israel. Israel, meanwhile, is closely watching developments in neighboring Jordan. Amid fears that the Islamic State threat could ultimately threaten its own security, Israel has responded with plans to build a security fence on its border with Jordan. .

Jordan is considered a strong ally of the West and is deeply involved in the international, U.S.-led strategy to counter the Islamic State. The Jordanian security forces are well trained and well equipped and Jordan can defend itself but in the worst-case scenario, Jordan can also draw on strategic support from its powerful allies, namely the US and Israel, with whom it shares a mutual interest in combating extremism.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Mohamed al Daameh, Jordan Foils Wider Terrorist Attacks Planned by Karak's ISIS Group, Asharq al Awsat, December 20, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Mohamed al Daameh, Jordan Foils Wider Terrorist Attacks Planned by Karak's ISIS Group, Asharq al Awsat, December 20, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Mohamed al Daameh, Jordan Foils Wider Terrorist Attacks Planned by Karak's ISIS Group, Asharq al Awsat, December 20, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Islamic State Claims Responsibility for Shootout at Jordanian Castle, A.P, December 20, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Mohamed al Daameh, Four Jordanian Security Personnel Killed in Karak, Asharq Alawsat, December 21, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Four Policemen Killed in Clashes with Gunmen near Karak, Jordan, Asharq Alawsat, December 20, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Jordanian policemen killed fighting gunmen near Karak: security source, Reuters, December 21, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> One killed, other injured in Jordan action against wanted duo, Al Arabiya, December 28, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Karak: An attack on Jordan, DW, December 20, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> "Islamic State's appeal presents Jordan with new test", Jerusalem Post, August 29, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Karak: An attack on Jordan, DW, December 20, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/afp/2016/08/jordan-unrest-syria-is-justice.html#ixzz4UR6khvq9>