



2018

As Assad Looks to Idlib, Jordan Sees Uptick in Terrorism: The Kingdom and the Rest of the Middle East Struggle to Strategize the Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Returning Jihadist Fighters and the Possible Increase in Domestic Terrorism

Brief

“Idlib is our goal, but not just Idlib...The military – and it is at their discretion – will decide priorities and Idlib is one of those priorities.”

–President Bashar al-Assad on 26 July 2018



Introduction:

As Syrian President Bashar al-Assad looks north to rebel-stronghold, Idlib, the civil war is seemingly coming to an end. Given this, the international community must strategize on how to effectively handle the influx of former, radicalized fighters, back into society. So far, many countries have imprisoned and made pariahs of former fighters, possibly exacerbating radicalization and adding to instances of domestic terrorism. This is especially evident for the Kingdom of Jordan, which just experienced an attack in the Fuheis District of the governorate of Balqa. On 10 August 2018, a bomb exploded under a military vehicle killing one gendarme officer and injuring several others. Jordanian Minister of Information Joumana Ghuneimat has called the attack an instance of terrorism.¹ One day later, on 11 August 2018, in response to the explosion in Balqa, the Jordanian police raided buildings in Salt, looking for suspects. One of the buildings, which was rigged with explosives, blew up during the raid killing four Jordanian officials. Additionally, the bodies of three terrorists were found under the exploded building.² While five suspects have been arrested in connection with the attacks, the Jordanian government has not yet made any statements regarding motives or group affiliation. Between the attack in Balqa and the raid in Salt, six Jordanian officials and three terrorists have been killed and over 20 people injured.

The attacks come shortly after Assad's forces have retaken Southern Syria from the opposition, and as Assad begins his military operation in Idlib. Analysts believe that the uptick in domestic terrorism in Jordan is directly correlated to Assad's military operations as both a reaction from possible sleeper cells and as a means of spreading chaos in the Kingdom.

Background:

In July 2018, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, along with Russia, secured the Daraa and Quneitera provinces in Southern Syria, a former opposition stronghold through [Operation Basalt](#). Since then, Assad and his forces have had their sights set on Idlib, a province nestled along the Turkish border in northern Syria. The strategically important hub is home to Russia's largest military base and the M5 highway, which

¹ AMMON NEWS

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/bomb-kills-jordanian-policeman-near-capital/2018/08/11/4147950c-9d5d-11e8-a8d8-9b4c13286d6b_story.html?utm_term=.23e8ae072e64



connects Turkey with Syria, Jordan, North Africa, and the Gulf and is vital for future trade routes in the region.

Idlib, which is virtually the last opposition-controlled area (experts believe that Sunni Muslim jihadists are the dominant force there), has essentially served as a “dumping ground” for evacuees from other military operations within the country. Because of the internal displacement in Syria, Idlib’s population has swelled to almost double its original size. Therefore, any type of military operation there “could force 2.5 million people towards the Turkish border.”³

Because of Idlib’s importance, it has been at the center of several de-escalation agreements. Most recently in 2017, it was included in the Astana Accords, an agreement between Russia, Turkey, and Iran, which set up four de-escalation zones in Syria: Idlib, Homs, Latakia, Aleppo, and Hama. The agreement allowed for Turkey to set up 12 observation posts in Idlib to separate the Syrian regime from the opposition groups controlling the province.⁴

On 9 August 2018, the Syrian army dropped leaflets in Idlib, which stated, “Your cooperation with the Syrian Arab Army will release you from the rule of militants and terrorists, and will preserve your and your families’ lives. We call upon you to join local reconciliation (agreements) as many others in Syria have done.”⁵ These leaflets are a clear indicator that Assad is gearing up to end the seven-year civil war, no matter how bloody and long the conflict could be. Not only could a military offensive create a catastrophic humanitarian crisis, but it will also increase the possibility of radicalized fighters returning home and could ignite reactions from other terrorist sleeper cells in the region looking to spread chaos.

Given the recent developments in Syria, both the Arab region as well as the wider world are facing an impending crisis: how to handle the reintegration and rehabilitation of thousands of jihadist fighters who will be heading home and the possible uptick in domestic terrorism. This is especially important for the Kingdom of Jordan, which has exported somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 people to terrorist

³ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-idlib/syrian-army-urges-people-in-idlib-to-agree-return-of-state-rule-idUSKBN1KU1KG>

⁴ <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/08/putin-man-middle-assad-erdogan-syria-idlib.html>

⁵ <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1353596>



organizations over the past few years and has even been the target of several domestic terrorist attacks, including the most recent attacks in Balqa and Salt.⁶ Currently the Kingdom does not have an institutionalized plan for handling the possible influx of former fighters back into Jordan. The biggest challenges facing Jordan and the rest of the Middle East are how to effectively rehabilitate and reintegrate former fighters back into society and, how to find the financial means necessary to do so.

A Hard or Soft Approach?

When strategizing which approach is most effective in handling the return of radicalized fighters, it is important to understand the two approaches governments have employed: “hard” and “soft.” More often than not, governments take the “hard” approach, which can include revoking citizenship, banning entry, prosecution, and long prison sentences. Prosecution of fighters, however, can be difficult as “returnees often do not meet the required evidentiary threshold or can only be prosecuted for relatively minor offenses.”⁷ Additionally, there is some evidence that prisons have become incubators for radicalization, diametrically opposed to their purpose of rehabilitation. This is especially true in the case of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Credited with founding the Islamic State, Zarqawi was both radicalized and successfully radicalized fellow prisoners while imprisoned in Jordan’s Suwaya Prison with Abu Muhammed al-Maqqisi.⁸

On the contrary, some governments have taken more nontraditional or “softer” approaches to handling the rehabilitation and reintegration of former fighters back into society. These approaches often include psychological counseling, religious reeducation, and assistance in reintegration into society. While these softer approaches seem to be successful, it is often difficult for government officials to garner the funds necessary to support such endeavors and the support of the general public. Many former fighters have committed heinous crimes, which is why officials often opt for the “hard” approach.

⁶ <http://time.com/4739488/isis-iraq-syria-tunisia-saudi-arabia-russia/>

⁷ <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2017/also-in-2017/daesh-tackling-surge-returning-foreign-fighters-prevention-denmark-rehabilitation-programmes/EN/index.htm>

⁸ <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-danger-of-prison-radicalization-in-the-west/>



There are varying degrees of success between the two approaches. Therefore, it is crucial to understand some of these methods to see what the best approach might be for the Kingdom of Jordan, which has contributed between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters to terrorist organizations.⁹

Regional Responses to Returning Fighters:

The Saudi Arabian and Iraqi Answers

As one of the top exporters of foreign fighters (analysts put the figure at roughly 3,000 currently with over 700 returning home), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a non-traditional system for rehabilitation and reintegration. After a series of domestic terrorist attacks in the Kingdom, Saudi officials implemented rehabilitation programs for imprisoned jihadists in 2004. Beginning with psychological counseling and religious re-education for former fighters in prison, the Kingdom effectively combined more traditional security efforts with new, ideologically driven approaches to de-radicalize fighters.¹⁰ The six-week long program is still offered in prison and has since been extended to include the transition from prison to the real world.

In 2007, former Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud, established centers for counseling and advice, which serve as pseudo-halfway houses, and focus on social and religious integration. Convicted jihadists can spend up to six months at these “psychological detoxification” centers,¹¹ where they can swim, take art classes, talk with counselors and religious scholars, and even watch TV. Counseling, financial assistance, and other services continue even after release to ensure that the men do not recidivate.

Additionally, Saudi officials provide counseling for “citizens who are not necessarily involved in terrorism, but appear to hold extremist religious views, or who are liable to be misled by other radicals onto the jihadi path.”¹² The government has poured some 367 million USD into these de-radicalization centers,

⁹ <http://ifair.eu/daesh-jordan-foreign-fighters/>

¹⁰ <https://www.cfr.org/expert-brief/saudi-deradicalization-experiment>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40061550>

¹² <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/saudi-approach-returning-jihadis>



and, of the 3,300 men who have gone through the program, only 20% have recidivated. The success rate, therefore, is 80%.¹³

Similar to Saudi Arabia, Iraq has also implemented more non-traditional programs to rehabilitate former fighters, specifically teenagers. While still fairly new, the 69-member program works to reeducate and rehabilitate prisoners through art, music, work skills, and physical activity.¹⁴ There has not been much research on the program; however, given the low rates of recidivism in Saudi Arabia, it seems that these “non-traditional” or “softer” methods could actually work.

The European Response:

European countries, along with Australia, have, overall, taken harsher measures against former fighters, often sentencing them to lengthy prison terms. Of the roughly 850 British nationals who fled to Syria since the start of the civil war, some 550 have returned. Of the 300 still at large, about 200 have had their citizenship revoked.¹⁵ Those who have returned home can be subject to harsh laws.

In 2012, the British government replaced its old control orders system with Britain’s Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPims), which requires that suspected terrorists and recently-released convicts wear electronic tracking devices for two years.¹⁶ Former fighters must also “report to the police regularly, are banned from overseas travel, are required to reside in registered homes, and are banned from specific areas to prevent the radicalization of others.”¹⁷ Additionally, those currently serving prison sentences are isolated from other former jihadists to limit their ability to radicalize the rest of the prison population.

While most of Europe has adopted the “hard” approach, Denmark, which has exported some 150 fighters to Syria and Iraq since 2012, has looked to reintegrate, not condemn.¹⁸ In 2007, the Danish

¹³ <https://institute.global/insight/co-existence/saudi-approach-returning-jihadis>

¹⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/teenage-isis-members-join-rehab-program-iraq-180807121603637.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/threat-to-britain-from-returning-isis-fighters-is-being-underestimated-terrorism-expert-warns-a3781351.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-24803069>

¹⁷ <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2017/0209/The-new-ISIS-threat-its-soldiers-are-going-home>

¹⁸ <https://www.thelocal.dk/20180216/denmark-may-have-to-accept-return-of-isis-militants-report>



government developed and implemented a program for rehabilitation and reintegration similar to the Saudis. Through their “soft” approach, Danish officials do not arrest returnees, rather they give them a counseling, a mentor, and assistance in reintegration through employment and education opportunities and even medical care.¹⁹

Tunisian Response (Or Lack Thereof):

Despite being one of the only countries to successfully “democratize” post-Arab uprisings, Tunisia has been a breeding ground for terrorism. Thousands of Tunisians have joined ISIS abroad and many former fighters have returned home – “according to UN figures, there are over 5,500 abroad, including 3,000 in Syria, while another 30,000 have been prevented from traveling to fight.”²⁰

In 2014, the Tunisian government adopted a new Constitution, which states that Tunisian citizens cannot be deprived of their nationality nor can they be refused the right to return home. Therefore, the country has been forced to absorb many of those radicalized Tunisians coming home from war. Overall, the Republic has not effectively handled the return of former fighters in both “curbing radicalization and addressing conditions that facilitate it.”²¹ It has failed to adequately prosecute returnees and the country has not delivered on many of its promises of reform, which could be exacerbating domestic terrorism. Instead, the country has strengthened its security apparatus and resorted to some of the pre-revolutionary authoritarian tactics common under former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. These include reinstating states of emergency; acting without judicial authorization when raiding residences and searching people; torturing and detaining individuals; and being placed under administrative surveillance under the 2015 Law on Combatting Terrorism and Money Laundering.²² Of the 5,500 Tunisians who left to join the ranks of terrorist organizations, some 800 or so have returned, although some analysts peg the actual number at three times that.²³ In 2017, the government announced a new program to rehabilitate and de-radicalize returning

¹⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/14/world/for-jihadists-denmark-tries-rehabilitation.html>

²⁰ <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/72642>

²¹ https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_southern_front_line_eu_counter_terrorism_cooperation

²² https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_southern_front_line_eu_counter_terrorism_cooperation

²³ https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_southern_front_line_eu_counter_terrorism_cooperation



fighters; however, it is unclear whether or not that program has begun or what it entails.²⁴ Tunisia, like Jordan, is in desperate need of a national plan.

Jordanian Response:

In 2014 in response to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq, the Kingdom adopted a new terrorism law, essentially criminalizing travel to conflict zones, funding or supporting terrorist groups, promoting terrorist beliefs, and receiving support from terrorist networks.²⁵ Despite this law, Jordan has not really been able to prosecute people under it. Additionally, according to the West-Asia North Africa (WANA) Institute, foreign fighters who return to Jordan face security restrictions; stigma and isolation; as well as mainstream religion. All of these factors push former fighters to either accept the status quo or re-radicalize.²⁶

In 2016, Jordanian Minister of Interior Mazen Al-Qadi signed an agreement with the UNDP in Jordan to support preventing counter violent extremism.²⁷ A national countering violence and extremism strategy was supposedly finalized in 2017 but the government has not yet made it public.²⁸ There is, thus, a gap in strategy and research in creating an institutionalized plan of action for Jordan's impending crisis.

Conclusion

As the Syrian civil war is seemingly coming to an end, the Jordanian government is facing two possible crises: the return of foreign fighters and an increase in terrorism. Regardless of Jordan's choice on rehabilitation and reintegration, it is clear that officials must focus their attention on the root causes of extremism to combat further radicalization while also enacting better rehabilitation and reintegration programs. The issue, however, is a double-edged sword. Jordan is in the midst of an economic crisis and cannot finance rehabilitation and reintegration programs.

²⁴ <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/center/CSS-news/2018/03/the-next-steps-of-north-africas-foreign-fighters-and-returnees.html>

²⁵ <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2017/0209/The-new-ISIS-threat-its-soldiers-are-going-home>

²⁶ http://wanainstitute.org/sites/default/files/publications/Publication_JourneyMapping_English_0.pdf

²⁷ <http://www.jo.undp.org/content/jordan/en/home/presscenter/pressreleases/2016/05/17/national-strategy-on-preventing-and-countering-violent-extremism-in-jordan-p-cve-.html>

²⁸ <http://wanainstitute.org/en/blog/countering-violent-extremism-research-jordan-high-potential-and-limited-impact>



Because of financial, technical, and security restraints, Jordan cannot effectively handle the impending crises. And, this is not an issue Jordan can handle prescriptively, it is one that the Kingdom must prepare for. There is, thus, an urgent need for international support – both fiscally and technically – to ensure that Jordan can continue in its pacifying role and that it can handle the possible, yet probably, influx of fighters and uptick in terrorist attacks.