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Jordan and the Iranian Affiliates Drug Offensive

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For years, Jordan has battled attempts to funnel narcotics across its 375-kilometer desert border with Syria. Jordan has frequently reported busting drug smuggling operations on its border with Syria, with its soldiers sometimes engaging in shutouts with smugglers trying to break through from southern Syria.¹

In recent months there has been a significant surge in smuggling activities along the border. The scale and the sophistication of the smuggling activities have transcended the realms of conventional drug smuggling and instead, they seem to be part of a well-orchestrated plan, aimed, among others, destabilize the Kingdom's internal security.

The Jordanian army has stepped up a campaign against drug dealers after protracted clashes in the last months with dozens of heavily armed infiltrators from Syria linked to pro-Iranian militias.²

Jordan is believed to have carried out an airstrike against drug traffickers on January 18, 2024. The warplanes carried out simultaneous air strikes

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on residential neighborhoods in the towns of Arman and Malah in the southeast Syrian province of Sweida, in an effort to disrupt weapons smuggling and drug-trafficking operations.³

The attack in Malah caused material damage to some houses. The strike in Arman, however, collapsed two houses and killed at least 10 civilians, including four women and two girls. There was no comment from Jordanian authorities.

The Syrian foreign ministry said that there was “no justification” for Jordanian airstrikes on its territory and Syria claimed the airstrikes caused civilian casualties of women and children. Syria also said that its border guards shot down a drone near the Jordanian-Syrian border on January 18, 2024.⁴

The attack is believed to be the third time this year that Jordanian planes have carried out air raids on Syrian territory. A previous attack occurred on January 9, 2024, resulting in the deaths of three people in the countryside of Sweida.⁵

Despite Jordan’s considerable success in countering smuggling operations, smuggling groups have continued to exploit it as a transit country, largely due to the protection and facilitation provided by the Assad regime’s security agencies and Iranian backed militias in the southern part of Syria.⁶

The Islamic Republic of Iran has established a network of proxy forces, "the axis of resistance," that include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias and Hezbollah in Syria, Shia militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen and Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and in the West Bank.

The last year Tehran begun to target the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, one of the main Western allies in the region. Iran and its affiliated terrorist groups are also leveraging the war in Gaza to undermine the stability and sovereignty of Jordan and the peace agreement between Jordan and Israel.

Iran’s presence in Syria and Iraq provides it the ability to penetrate from two directions with proxy forces and Syrian refugees and the Palestinian

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population in Jordan make it easy to exploit internal divisions. The smuggling of drugs and weapons from Syria to Jordan is seen as an attempt by Iran to expand its influence in the region and destabilize Jordan.⁷

Jordan has leveraged its diplomatic channels to raise awareness about smuggling activities, seeking international support to counter such threats. Jordan's foreign minister Safadi warned that his country will not stand idle if drug trafficking continues from Syria. "We are not taking the threat of drug smuggling lightly," Safadi told CNN. "If we do not see effective measures to curb that threat, we will do what it takes to counter that threat, including taking military action inside Syria to eliminate this extremely dangerous threat. "For us, it is a must that we end this crisis because we've suffered tremendously from its consequences," he said.⁸

On January 6, 2023, Minister of Government Communications of Jordan, Muhannad Mubaidin told the Al Mamlaka TV station that: "This continued threat to our national security won't end with a raid or confrontation ... It's a long war."⁹

The Hezbollah – Syria drug industry

Jordanian officials, like their Western allies, say Lebanon's Iranian-backed Hezbollah group and other pro-Iranian militias who control much of southern Syria are behind the surge in drug and weapons smuggling.¹⁰

Syria has become the region's main center in a multi-billion-dollar drug trade. Entities with known or suspected links to officials in Syria's Assad regime, such as Hezbollah, are producing captagon in Syria and Lebanon.¹¹

Syria is accused by Arab governments and the West of producing the highly addictive and lucrative amphetamine captagon and organizing its smuggling into the Persian Gulf through Jordan.¹²

The Syrian regime and armed forces as well as certain Hezbollah affiliates, play pivotal roles in facilitating the acquisition of drones and providing initial training to smugglers affiliated with them on their operation. This

level of support streamlines the procurement and utilization of drones, making them more accessible to smuggling networks.¹³

Iran and Hezbollah said the allegations are part of a Western plot against them and Syria denies complicity with Iranian-backed militias linked to its army and security forces.¹⁴

In March 2023, the U.S. and U.K. slapped sanctions on four Syrians and two Lebanese involved in manufacturing and trafficking captagon. The six included cousins of the Syrian president and well-known Lebanese drug kingpins. Weeks later, the European Union imposed sanctions on several Syrians, including members of Assad's family, blaming them for the production and trafficking of narcotics, notably captagon.¹⁵

The threat of smuggling weapons

The smuggling of advanced weapons from Syria to Jordan including rocket-propelled grenades, mines, and drones—have led Jordanian officials to conclude that these criminal endeavors pose a wider threat to national security. The smuggling of weapons constitutes a security threat on several levels:

- The weapon may end up in the hands of terrorist elements who will act against the regime's institutions and foreign targets on Jordanian soil.
- The weapons may end up in the hands of criminal elements organizations in Jordan and empower criminal elements, and potentially lead to an increase in violent incidents and cause damage to internal security.
- The weapons may be smuggled from Jordan to the West Bank and be used by the Palestinian terrorist organizations against Israel.

The increased availability of weapons could potentially escalate existing conflicts or fuel new ones in the broader region. This could have ripple effects on neighboring countries, exacerbating regional tensions and potentially leading to a wider destabilization.¹⁶

The Hamas-Israel war

The Hamas-Israel war is further complicating the security problems of Jordan. Tehran and its proxies are smuggling weapons to the West Bank in attempt to destabilize the West Bank by using Jordan as a conduit for weapons and other support.

The arms corridor into the West Bank

The drug smuggling corridor from Syria into Jordan became a platform for smuggling firearms and ammunition into Jordan, and then the path of smuggling them into the West Bank is short.¹⁷ Those involved in the production, distribution, and smuggling of drugs are also involved in the smuggling of weapons and equipment into Israeli territory from Iran or Hezbollah via Syria, with a focus on the West Bank.

Even before the Gaza war, in July and August 2023, several standard Iranian weaponries smuggled into the West Bank via Syria and Jordan were intercepted.¹⁸

After the Gaza war broke out, the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood's Islamic Action Front exacerbated these tensions by calling for border protests against Israel, echoing similar calls by Hamas leaders urging Jordanians to take to the streets and intensify pressure on the political leadership. Those calls are forcing Jordan to deploy more forces on its western border.

Moreover, pro-Iran militias in Iraq and Syria have reportedly launched three drone attacks through Jordanian airspace en route to Israel: on November 9, November 22 and November 31, 2023. Besides jeopardizing the kingdom's sovereignty, these breaches also put Jordan in a delicate position with the United States and Israel.

The threat of drones

Drones in the service of drug and weapons smugglers create a new and unprecedented challenge. Drones were predominantly employed for training and reconnaissance purposes, particularly for surveying routes before or during smuggling operations. The turning point came on May 8,

2023, when airstrikes orchestrated by Jordan targeted drug-related operations within Syria. These strikes marked a significant departure in Jordan's approach to its war on drugs; they represented the first known external actions taken against narcotics trafficking networks inside Syria.¹⁹

In 2023, Jordan has managed to thwart 11 drones, only one of which occurred before May 2023. The remaining 10 incidents took place between June and September 2023. The cargoes transported by the intercepted drones primarily consist of highly addictive drugs, explosives, and weapons, significantly heightening the threat to Jordan's national security. Several factors contribute to surge in use of drones: ²⁰

- Drones pose a formidable challenge for radar systems due to their minimal radar signature. However, the drones' capacity to fly autonomously at night makes intercepting them even more difficult.
- Drones offer a unique advantage for smugglers due to their cost-effectiveness and ease of operation. Examining the images of the intercepted drones reveals that these devices are priced at \$1,000 or less, representing a relatively modest investment compared to the potential profits derived from illicit activities.
- In contrast to conventional ground-based smuggling operations, which tend to follow established routes and border crossings, drones offer unparalleled flexibility. They can be launched from virtually any location within their operational range, providing smugglers with the ability to constantly shift their operation sites.
- Some, if not all, of the drones were equipped with autonomous return functionality, ensuring they return to their operators after completing a delivery, thereby maximizing cost-efficiency as they can be reused.
- Drones slip under the radar, evading detection and interception have higher success rate compared to traditional smuggling operations carried out on foot or by vehicle.
- Certain smugglers employ a diversionary tactic to boost their chances of success. This involves sacrificing a low-cost drone to

divert attention from a more significant operation. Notably, the drones intercepted on both June 28, 2023, and August 28, 2023, were reportedly found to be empty, implying that they may have served as diversions from another operation employing multiple drones loaded with drugs.²¹

The Jordanian counter measures

Negotiations with Syria

In September 2021, Anti-Narcotics Department Director, Hassan Qudah Huneiti hosted the Syrian Defense Minister Ali Abdullah Ayyoub in Amman. The discussion focused on securing the border between the countries, the situation in southern Syria, and the effort to fight terrorist activities and stem cross-border drug smuggling.²²

In May 2023 Syria returned to the Arab League following over a decade of isolation. Jordan, as well as other members of the league, have used the Syrian president's return to the Arab fold as an opportunity to increase security cooperation with Syria to deal with the cross-border drug smuggling issue. Numerous meetings have taken place between Jordanian and Syrian officials in an attempt to curb the illicit drug trade, but Amman remains dissatisfied with the outcome of these talks.²³

The highest-level meeting took place in July 2023 between Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. A statement from the Jordanian Foreign Ministry said that Safadi and Assad agreed to form a joint committee to combat drug smuggling and hold its first meeting in Amman as soon as possible.

In July 2023, the newly established forum to combat drug smuggling from Syria held its first meeting in the Jordanian capital, Amman. It was agreed during talks between Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, amid regional concerns over an influx of captagon.²⁴

Amman is skeptical that Damascus would fulfill its military and security commitments to protect the border and Jordan appears to be the only side protecting the borders. The growing focus on combating drugs reflects Jordan's halt in efforts to solve the problems through negotiations with the Syrian regime.²⁵

Declaration of a buffer zone on the border with Syria

In January 2022, the Jordanian army has declared a buffer zone on the border with Syria and, according to the new rules of engagement, no one is allowed to enter this area separating the two countries. Brig. Gen. Naji al-Manasir, head of the Eastern Command, told Jordan's Al-Mamlaka public television broadcasting service that "the rules of engagement have been changed and the army will shoot anyone who dares to come close to the Jordanian borders."²⁶

Jordanian Air Force Maj. Gen. (ret.) Mamoun Abu Nuwar said that Jordan did the right thing. "They made the correct decision by changing the rules of engagement with the aim of discovering and engaging with the smugglers at an early stage. There is a no-man's zone between the two countries where no one is allowed to enter. Jordan is now able to discover and deal with any smuggler entering that area as soon as they enter this zone," he said.²⁷

Electronic surveillance

Jordan announced in January 2024 it was bolstering border security with plans to set up an electronic fence that would bar all infiltration and smuggling attempts.²⁸

Jordanian Air Force Maj. Gen. (ret.) Mamoun Abu Nuwar said the Jordanian army has powerful electronic scanners that were supplied by the US. It also has helicopters and drones that use heat-seeking detection equipment in addition to night vision to be able to identify infiltrators. "With this system of detection, they are able to deter the smugglers while they are still in Syrian territory and defend the border," he explained.²⁹

Clashes with traffickers

Land-based smuggling routes have been the method of choice due to their established efficacy. Jordanian security forces have tightened border controls in recent years and occasionally announce thwarted drug and weapons smuggling attempts from Syria.

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On January 29, 2022, twenty-seven Syrians trying to smuggle drugs across the border into Jordan died in firefights with the Hashemite Kingdom's forces. The soldiers were operating under modified rules of engagement announced by Maj. Gen. Yousef Huneiti, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Jordan Armed Forces, after an officer died in a gunfight with Syrian smugglers.³⁰

On December 19, 2023, according to the Jordanian army, several traffickers have been killed or wounded during clashes with Jordanian border guards at the northern frontier. Several Jordanian border guards were also wounded in the clashes. In the incident also several drug traffickers had been arrested by Jordanian authorities, including nine Syrian citizens, and large quantities of drugs and weapons were seized.³¹

On January 6, 2023, Jordan's army said several drug and weapons smugglers were killed in clashes that began at dawn as they infiltrated from Syria across Jordan's northern border.³²

The Jordanian air campaign

On May 8, 2023, airstrikes over southern Syria killed one of the country's most well-known drug dealers. The attack came days after Jordan warned it would use force inside Syria to eliminate drug trafficking to its territories and from there to oil-rich Arab Gulf nations. The first strike hit a home in the Syrian village of Shuab in Sweida province near the Jordanian border, killing Meri al-Ramthan, his wife and six children. The second strike hit a facility in Daraa province used by Iran-backed groups to produce and store drugs before smuggling them to Jordan.³³

On December 19, 2023 - Jordanian airstrikes targeting drug smugglers in Syria have killed five people, including two children and a woman. The report by the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights came after Jordan's military said that several "drug traffickers" had been killed or wounded in clashes with Jordanian border guards at the northern frontier with Syria. The strikes targeted areas along the Jordan-Syria border "where drug traffickers carry out smuggling operations in a farm in the border province of Sweida", said the Observatory.³⁴

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A fifth person was killed in a separate strike on another farm which belongs to Faisal al-Saadi, a trafficker said to be close to Lebanon's Hezbollah movement and to the Syrian government's security department, the 'Monitor, which is close to the Syrian opposition, said.³⁵

On January 5, 2024, Jordan launched air strikes in Syria against suspected warehouses and hideouts of Iranian-backed drug smugglers.³⁶

On January 9, 2024, Jordanian jets conducted four strikes inside Syria in the second such raid within a week against suspected farms and hideouts of Iran-linked drug smugglers. Three strikes targeted leading drug dealers in the towns of Shaab and Arman in Sweida province near the Jordan-Syria border. The fourth strike hit a farm near the village of Malah.³⁷ But Jordan has repeatedly denied that the air force and the army had carried out operations against drug factories and smugglers inside Syria.³⁸

The US support

The United States has provided foreign assistance and training to the Jordanian military and law enforcement services performing counter-narcotics functions and to public health authorities. Since 2012, U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) has provided assistance and training to Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) on border security – building JAF's capability to stem narcotics trafficking, counter terrorism, and execute other mission sets.³⁹

Jordan has been promised US military aid to improve security, with the United States having already given around \$1 billion to establish border posts since the Syrian conflict began in 2011. Greater U.S. assistance would reinforce the Kingdom's efforts to address the cross-border threat at a time of wider regional crisis.

During a visit by General Mark Milley, the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, in July 2023, Jordan asked more US support for its efforts to curb drug trafficking by Iranian militias. General Milley confirmed in an interview that Washington was working closely with Jordan to provide

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equipment, training, and advice to deal with the growing drug trafficking threat.⁴⁰

A Jordanian army spokesperson said on January 14, 2024, that Amman had requested that U.S. Patriot missiles be deployed in Jordan. The US last stationed the air defense system in Jordan in 2013 when an escalating conflict in Syria had also raised fears of a regional flare-up that could threaten the country. Jordan's announcement of the Patriot request comes as Amman has been deepening its defense ties with Washington. It already has a list of U.S. equipment on order for its military, including 12 U.S.- built F-16 warplanes.⁴¹ Those Patriot missiles become more necessary in light of the recent Houthi attempts to reach targets in Israel via the Jordan's airspace.

Summary

Jordan has become a transit point of drugs, particularly captagon, being smuggled out of Syria which has turned into a Middle Eastern hub for narcotics. Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said on May 8, 2023: "When it comes to the case of drugs, the surge in drug smuggling is a huge threat to the kingdom, the region, and the world."⁴²

In last year Tehran begun to target the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan, one of the main Western allies in the region. Iran and its affiliated terrorist groups are leveraging the war in Gaza to undermine the stability and sovereignty of Jordan.

Given the strategic importance of Jordan in the Middle East, it is imperative to closely monitor Iran's actions and alliances and supporting Jordan's stability through diplomatic, economic and military means.

Jordan must implement a comprehensive approach that combines enhanced border security, international cooperation, intelligence sharing, diplomatic engagement, and socioeconomic development to counter these illicit activities effectively. By addressing these challenges, Jordan can mitigate the destabilizing impact of smuggling efforts and safeguard its internal security.⁴³

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The response of global powers, particularly the United States and European countries, would be critical in counterbalancing Iran's influence and preserving Jordan's stability.

The United States and its key allies must consider bolstering Jordan's defense capacities and enhancing its intelligence gathering capabilities to effectively counter the multifaceted threats posed by these drones to its national security.⁴⁴

The Department of State is coordinating with UK and European partners, as well as the Office of the UN Special Envoy for Syria and partners in the region, to press the Assad regime to curtail the production and trafficking of captagon, as part of efforts to advance regional stability and security and a political solution to the Syrian conflict in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.⁴⁵

Notes

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