



# JORDAN

## Quick Facts

Population: 10,820,644 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 89,342 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Jordanian 69.3%, Syrian 13.3%, Palestinian 6.7%, Egyptian 6.7%, Iraqi 1.4%, other 2.6% (includes Armenian, Circassian) (2015 est.)

Government Type: Parliamentary constitutional monarchy

GDP (official exchange rate): \$40.13 billion (2017 est.)

*Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated August 2020)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Jordan has faced a growing challenge to its stability in recent years from violent Islamist groups. The Kingdom has weathered the collapse of order in neighboring nations, first in Iraq and more recently in Syria, as well as the accompanying rise of the Islamic State terrorist group in both countries. These developments were accompanied by large-scale refugee flows, which have upset the Kingdom's demographic balance and which could still destabilize its social structure.*

*For its part, the Jordanian regime has long waged a wide-ranging and determined ideological struggle against radical Islamic organizations on its soil. In this contest, the Kingdom has sought to de-legitimize Salafi-jihadi ideology while disseminating a brand of moderate traditional Islam. Nevertheless, the large and easily radicalized Palestinian component of the country's population, the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood offshoot in the country, and Salafi jihadi trends from Iraq and Syria all pose real and imminent threats to the stability of the Kingdom.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Islam has been a part of the political life of Jordan for the country's entire modern history. In 1921, the British crafted the Emirate of Transjordan, with King Abdallah I as the new nation's king. Abdallah's Islamic identity, as well as the Hashemite family's connections to the Prophet Muhammad's tribe, was and continues to be a central source of the monarchy's legitimacy. Abdallah and his grandson Hussein presented themselves as deeply religious Muslims, publicly praying, taking part in rituals, and performing the *Hajj* pilgrimage. In 1952, the Jordanian constitution made Islam the kingdom's official religion and stipulated that the king must be a Muslim, born of Muslim parents. The constitution also established *sharia* as a key legal framework of the kingdom. Notably, however, *sharia* was never considered the sole source of legal legitimacy.<sup>1</sup>

The radical Islamic camp in Jordan is composed of two separate – though frequently overlapping – wings. The first is the main body of Jordanian Islamists, which has been affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The second is the radical Salafi-*jihadi* movement, traditionally embodied by al-Qaeda and more recently also by supporters of the Islamic State (IS).

The radical Islamic camp in Jordan largely draws its strength from a diverse array of sources and circumstances within Jordanian society. Foremost among them are: its own significant organizational infrastructure inside the country; the indirect influence and public sympathy from the wider activities of the MB; the inflammatory influence of the wars in Iraq and Syria; the ongoing Arab conflict with Israel; and the rise of Islamism across the region following the Arab Spring.

### *The Muslim Brotherhood*

The Muslim Brotherhood is deeply rooted in Jordan, and is one of the country's largest Islamic collectives, currently counting more than 10,000 members among its various factions.<sup>2</sup> The group's (formerly) healthy relationship with the central government and the crown allowed it to establish a broad *dawa* (proselytization) network of civil society organizations and charities,<sup>3</sup> operating via the social welfare services of the Islamic Center Charity Society (ICCS).<sup>4</sup> Since the emergence of the Jordanian Brotherhood in 1946, which formally adopted the name "Muslim Brotherhood Group" (MBG) in 1953, internal fissures and disarray over the direction of the organization have marred the its efforts.

Much of the Brotherhood's Jordan branch's formal politics has been channeled through the Islamic Action Front (IAF). Today the party and its bloc hold 15 seats – 10 of which are held by the IAF – in Jordan's 130-person parliament,<sup>5</sup> making it the largest opposition party in Jordanian government. This relative position of authority follows two cycles of IAF restraint, as the group boycotted the 2010 and 2013 elections in protest over allegedly biased referendum laws.<sup>6</sup>

Before the 2016 elections, the IAF updated its political platform to encompass a more secular and pragmatic narrative: IAF elections chairman Murad Adayle was quoted in an interview with the *Jordan Times* (which has since been removed from the outlet's website) that the party's 'main challenge would be to outperform former municipal leaders, which "cannot be achieved through ideologies."<sup>7</sup> The decision is in keeping with the National Coalition for Reform (NCR), an electoral body comprised of Jordanian religious and ethnic minority groups, of which the IAF is a member.<sup>8</sup> Despite the recent decision by the Jordanian Court of Cassation to dissolve the country's Muslim Brotherhood branch (described in detail below), the IAF has been permitted to exist – at least so far.<sup>9</sup>

Platform changes of this variety, which have brought the IAF further into the Jordanian political mainstream, continued after the 2016 elections; in January 2017, for instance, both the Muslim Brotherhood and the IAF declared an end to their boycott of the U.S.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, in June 2019, the IAF adopted political positions that, unlike previous ones, did not perpetuate demands for constitutional amendments to undermine the authority of the King. The IAF's published opinion deemed the Jordanian constitution to be "very important and advanced," and also said that "Extremism and radicalization are rejected and are condemned at the moral and human levels."<sup>11</sup>

In October 2012, internal fissures within the Muslim Brotherhood led to the formation of the Zam Zam Initiative. When the new entity was announced, its stated goals were encapsulated in five "phases." These included: the recruitment of new cadres and membership, including youth; launching a manifesto and laying down internal laws; a new political project, and; the pursuit of participation in national institutions and partnership with the government.<sup>12</sup> In 2013, the Zam Zam Initiative entered formal politics with the formation of the National Congress Party, otherwise known as Zamzam, and would go on to win 5 seats in the 2016 elections.<sup>13</sup> In April 2014, ten of the Initiative's leading members were expelled from the Muslim Brotherhood Group's ranks after calling for then-MBG Secretary General Hammam Saeed's removal.<sup>14</sup>

Zamzam is currently chaired by Dr. Rahil al Gharaibeh, one of several prominent Muslim Brotherhood figures identified by former Wilson Center visiting journalist Tarq Alnaimat as part of the organization's

“pragmatic doves,” calls for a domestic focus, allegiance to Jordan’s crown government, and cooperation with the country’s other political parties.<sup>15</sup>

Among those expelled by the Muslim Brotherhood Group was Abdul Majid Thuneibat, who would go on to form the Muslim Brotherhood Society (MBS, also known as the Muslim Brotherhood Association) in 2015.<sup>16</sup> Due to its stated goal of greater allegiance to the Jordanian Crown, Thuneibat’s faction received a license to operate in Jordan, while the MBG did not. As pointed out by the Counter Extremism Project, “The move also restricted the MBG from holding public events, prompting the group to cancel a May 2015 rally that would have marked its 70th anniversary.... That July, the Jordanian Department of Land and Survey seized seven MBG properties and transferred them to the MBS.”<sup>17</sup>

The MBG was formally dissolved by the Jordanian judicial system in July 2020.<sup>18</sup> However, the legal decision - made by the country’s Court of Cassation – was not sudden; rather, it represented the culmination of a years-long back-and-forth between the Jordanian Brotherhood and the government. In a January 2013 interview with *The Atlantic*, Jordan’s king, Abdullah II, referred to the MBG as a “wolf in sheep’s clothing.”<sup>19</sup> Although the MBG had made public overtures suggesting its willingness to comply with the established *status quo* – including renouncing ties to the global Muslim Brotherhood organization, secularizing its slogan,<sup>20</sup> and engaging in internal debates about the acceptability of a “civil state” model<sup>21</sup> – none of these steps prompted the government to adopt a more permissive attitude. Beginning in 2014, the government launched an anti-Brotherhood campaign that involved taking over various social charities and the removal of Brotherhood-aligned sheikhs from the traditional roles they held in mosques.<sup>22</sup> The government prevented the MBG from holding internal elections in March 2016 (a right given only to officially recognized groups) and shut down the MBG headquarters that April.<sup>23</sup>

Explanations for the Crown’s focus on the MBG, effectively legislating it out of legal existence, are fundamentally twofold; poor standing with King Abdullah II, and declining public relevance. As Hana Jaber, a former Senior Fellow with the Arab Reform Initiative, opined for the *Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique*, Adullah II’s reign has been marked by “hard, ultraliberal policies which increased inequalities and after a few years led to an unrestrained business culture.” Anything that conflicted with this vision (including the Brotherhood) was judged “as obsolete and jarring with his vision of modernity.”<sup>24</sup> Also worthy of note are a series of incendiary comments leveled by senior members of the MBG condemning the Jordanian government and its foreign alliances, including condemnation of the UAE, an important regional ally for Amman,<sup>25</sup> and praise for the radical Hamas movement in the Palestinian Territories.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time, the MBG had lost footing among the Jordanian public in recent years. In 2018, for instance, Muslim Brotherhood-supported groups were defeated in the elections at the flagship Jordan University.<sup>27</sup> The group also lost control of the main teachers’ union, and, after 26 years lost its dominance of the Engineers Union.<sup>28</sup>

### *Salafi jihadism*

The Muslim Brotherhood has played a pivotal role in the dissemination and acceptance of Salafi-*jihadi* messaging, especially among younger Jordanian citizens. Outbreaks of violence between Israel and the Palestinians, particularly in the Gaza Strip, and the wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, have all served to strengthen Salafi sentiment in Jordan.

The ebb and flow of *jihadist* activity in Iraq profoundly affected Islamist organizations in Jordan. The 2006 killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and coalition successes against al-Qaeda (which were aided by Jordan) created fissures in the Jordanian *jihadist* movement. The resulting product was a more “pragmatic” wing of the movement, led by the prominent Salafi cleric Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Al-Maqdisi has consistently criticized the school of thought epitomized by al-Zarqawi (and more recently by Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi’s ISIS), which sanctions intra-Muslim conflict due to ideological and political differences. Al-Maqdisi did not change the principles of *takfir*. However, he made the case against *jihadist* attacks

inside Jordan, revising his own views about the permissibility of collateral casualties among Muslims.<sup>29</sup>

Another prominent figure in the Jordanian scene is Abu Qatada, who has for many years been considered a spiritual leader of a European Salafi-*jihadi* group. In August 2017, Abu Qatada said on a TV program:

Our rivals accept only extermination – it’s either us or them. If we raise and adopt the true banner of Islam – rather than the forged version of Islam in which the Muslims surrender to non-Muslims – we will be upholding Islam of glory and of an Islamic state, an Islam that implements the noble prophecies about the dominance of the banner of the Muslims in the world, about Islam raiding each and every home, about Islam invading Rome... This would be the glorious Islam. If we accept and believe in that [true] version of Islam, there can only be one outcome: confrontation.<sup>30</sup>

Both al-Maqdisi and Abu Qatada fell out of favor with radical groups following the rise of the Islamic State. However, both remain influential and live freely in Jordan after years of sporadic incarceration, disseminating messages and communicating with their followers via social media (primarily Telegram) on a near-daily basis.<sup>31</sup>

Many Jordanians have joined *jihadi* groups in Iraq and Syria, such as al-Qaeda and its affiliate Jabhat Fath Al-Sham (formerly Jabhat Al-Nusra), or the Islamic State. The most recent available publicly figures from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, published in 2018, estimated that between 3,000-3,950 Jordanian nationals had left Jordan to join the Islamic State, and only 250 had returned. Similar numbers are corroborated by a senior Jordanian security official.<sup>32</sup> However, as one October 2019 article in *Small Wars* notes, Jordan’s process of managing the flow of returning foreign fighters is incredibly opaque. While Amman has “touted” its effectiveness in addressing the issue, only the most basic information about detained returnees, such as length of prison sentences, is released. Thus, estimates of how many *jihadists* have in actuality returned to Jordan can only reasonably be phrased as “more than 250.”<sup>33</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Strict Islamic codes enjoy popular support among both the country’s Trans-Jordanian and Palestinian people. In recent years, Islamic dress – particularly for women – has become more ubiquitous. Islamic bookstores selling radical tracts can now be found near almost any mosque in Amman. Polls have found widespread support in Jordan for the enactment of *sharia* law; a March 2019 study by Rice University’s Baker Institute reveals that approximately 75 percent of people surveyed “expressed support for a constitution that emphasizes *sharia* law in some capacity.” What’s more, “approximately 90 percent of Jordanians expressed support for a legal system that maintains the importance of Islamic law.”<sup>34</sup> It is important to note, however, that support for Islamic law does not translate into support for leaders of Islam influencing state politics. The same survey asked respondents whether or not Jordan would be better off if clerics of Islam could influence government decisions or elections. “Between 70 and 85 percent of respondents opposed clerics interfering in electoral politics...and nearly 80 percent also opposed the use of mosques for campaigning.” What’s more, “[s]light majorities also felt that it would be harmful for religious leaders to influence government decisions.”<sup>35</sup>

Overall support for Salafi-*jihadi* groups appears to be declining. This is true both in the case of IS, as already demonstrated, as well as in the case of al-Qaeda, which in 2014 was supported by only 13 percent of the population.<sup>36</sup> In a series of surveys conducted three times between 2015 and 2017, 79-86 percent answered that they considered IS a terrorist organization and a national security threat.<sup>37</sup> (More recent



polling is not publicly available at present). Nevertheless, Salafi-*jihadi* attitudes have multiple outlets, including popular mosques not under the regime's supervision and bookstands that propagate a radical, exclusionary religious worldview, as well as the many websites of global *jihadist* groups.

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Per Chapter 1, Article 2 of the Constitution of Jordan, Islam is the official religion of the state.<sup>35</sup> What's more, in an October 2016 speech titled "Rule of Law and Civil State," King Abdullah II highlighted publicly that "[i]n a civil state, religion is a key contributor to the value system and social norms."<sup>38</sup> However, in the same speech, King Abdullah highlighted his (and, by extension, the state's) approach to governance and Islam when he said "we will not allow anyone to manipulate religion to serve political interests or gains for a specific faction."<sup>39</sup>

In practice, this has meant the propagation of a "state sanctioned" brand of Islam. This takes the form of the "Amman Message," a philosophy within Islamic thought dictated in a sermon by King Abdullah II on the eve of Ramadan in 2004. The Amman Message revolves around three central "points": 1) that all *Mathhabs* (legal schools) of Sunnia, Shi'a, and Ibadhi Islam are legitimate, that 2) *takfir* (declarations of apostasy) between Muslims were forbidden, and 3) standardizing the subjective and objective requirements to issue, meet, and violate a *fatwa* (a ruling issued by a religious authority).<sup>40</sup> Since its rollout in 2005, the Amman Message has been endorsed in various capacities by over 550 secular and Islamic government officials from 82 different countries, according to Jordanian government sources.<sup>41</sup>

The Amman Message has provided the Crown with significant latitude in its relationship with Islamic groups. By using the legal measures afforded to it, the regime of Abdullah II and the government of Jordan are able to dictate which Islamist groups are permissible or impermissible based on the parameters set forth in the Amman Message, which authorities have wielded to great effect.

In an anonymous interview with Scott Williamson, the researcher of the aforementioned Baker Institute study, one Jordanian described his country's Grand Mufti as more afraid of King Abdullah II than he is of God.<sup>42</sup> This anecdote, as well as the state's selectively permissive dynamic with Muslim Brotherhood-aligned groups, demonstrates a larger trend within the government's relationship with Islam. As of 2014, Jordan was "demanding that preachers refrain from any speech against King Abdullah II and the royal family, slander against leaders of neighboring Arab states, incitement against the United States and Europe, and sectarianism and support for jihad and extremist thought." It also began providing a suggested list of acceptable Friday sermon topics, which were then made mandatory two years later, in 2016. Those religious figures who comply with state standards are provided a salary, invitations to workshops, and travel assistance for pilgrimage; all paid for by the government.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, Zaki Bani Irshaid, a prominent member of the MBG, was sentenced to 18 months in prison in 2015 after making Facebook posts deemed harmful to Jordan's relationship with the UAE.<sup>44</sup>

The Jordanian government has also partnered with prominent *imams* in the pursuit of a policy agenda that might overlap with Islam. In 2002, the government formed the Higher Population Council (HPC), which oversees the country's family planning-related programs. When the HPC published its 2005 Contraceptive Security Strategy, the Ministry of Awqaf was one of the three central coordinating bodies for the plan's implementation.<sup>45</sup> In February 2017, the Crown recommended that parliament repeal Article 308 of the national penal code, which allowed rapists to avoid punishment if they married their victims. Those offices worked with activists and religious leaders to pressure parliament in this effort. The article was repealed in April of that year.<sup>46</sup>

Jordan has been a member of the U.S.-led coalition to battle IS since 2014. In retaliation for the execution of Mu'ath Safi Yousef al-Kaseasbeh, who was captured by the Islamic State in December 2014 and immolated on camera in January 2015, anti-ISIS protests swept the country and were attended by the

country's matriarch, Queen Rania. In response, officials claimed the country was "upping the ante" against the terror group with "dozens" of air strikes against IS targets.<sup>47</sup>

March 2016 saw the first incident of Jordan's General Intelligence Department (GID) coming into direct domestic confrontation with the Islamic State during a raid in Irbid. Seven ISIS members, as well as one state security officer, were killed in the fighting. Prior to the incident, 13 people linked to the cell were detained in earlier raids.<sup>48</sup> In December 2016, 10 people were killed and 34 others were wounded in an attack by Islamic State-affiliated gunman at a tourist destination in Karak.<sup>49</sup> In August 2018, Jordanian security forces killed "several" ISIS fighters at its border with Syria.<sup>50</sup> Two weeks later, four state security officers were killed in an explosion triggered by three people subscribing the Islamic State ideology.<sup>51</sup>

The issue of fighters returning to Jordan returning home after the fall of the ISIS *caliphate* is especially pressing, given the proximity of the Kingdom to both Syria and Iraq. As already stated, at least 250 Jordanians are known to have left the battlefields in Iraq and Syria and returned home. Official government policy states that any returning fighters will be sentenced to prison and must enter deradicalization and reintegration programs before they can reenter society.<sup>52</sup> Researchers at George Washington University's Program on Extremism found, through a series of anonymous semi-structured interviews, that much of Jordan's state deradicalization program is jointly managed by the GID and the Community Peace Center (CPC), an extension of the country's Public Security Department and Ministry of Interior.<sup>53</sup> This assessment was reinforced by Dr. Saud Al-Sharafat, a former Brigadier General of the GID, who elaborated that returning fighters from Syria will "remain captive to the secretive and sensitive" GID, and that dealing with those "terrorists" and their families is perceived to be "entirely a security and military matter, not a humanitarian one" by Jordanian authorities.<sup>54</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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