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Assessing the jihadi threat in Jordan: why the attack in Karak marks a difference.

In 2016, Jordan registered a rising number of jihadi attacks on its soil. Among them, Karak large-scale assault in mid-December targeted, for the first time, civilians and was claimed by Daesh, differently from “lone-wolves style” attacks previously occurred.

In Karak, the jihadi cell (which included a Jordanian man who had already tried to reach Syria) killed ten people: together with security forces personnel, three civilians, included a Canadian tourist, died.

The monarchy witnessed several jihadi-related assaults during 2016, which targeted predominantly security forces: a shooting at the General Intelligence Directorate complex in the north of Amman (Baq'a Palestinian refugee camp, June 6, five killed among officers and security personnel), a car bomb at a military base on the Syrian border (al-Rukhban, June 21, six soldiers killed), a shooting at the Al-Jafr air base by a Jordanian soldier (November 4, three U.S. militaries killed). In March 2016, a Daesh-affiliated cell was dismantled in a Special forces' raid in Irbid. On the contrary, only one terrorist incident happened in 2015.

The attack in Karak could mark the beginning of a jihadi escalation in Jordan, since the episode suggests Daesh wants to adopt a more confrontational approach vis-à-vis Jordanian authorities with respect to the past.

According to convergent estimations, at least 2000 Jordanian fighters joined jihadi militias in Syria and some of them could return to the Kingdom. However, the main security threat to the country doesn't proceed necessarily from the outside, since the Syrian conflict, coupled with a severe economic framework, increasing unemployment and the refugee crisis, has been nurturing radicalization within Jordan's own borders.

Daesh's attack in Karak aims to convey a series of messages to the Hashemite Kingdom, attempting to delegitimize implicitly its religious roots (the Sharifean lineage) in order to weaken the political legitimacy of the monarchy. First of all, it wants to establish a connection between terrorism in Jordan to the international one, targeting also civilians, in a touristic site as Karak's ancient city, during the End of Year touristic season. Secondly, such a large-scale assault hit Jordan for its regional and international alliances (Saudi Arabia and the United States). Amman takes actively part to the Global Coalition against Daesh, as the American aircraft relies on Jordanian air facilities to strike against jihadists in Syria and Iraq.

Thirdly, Karak is a symbolic venue, inhabited by Bedouin-origins East-Bankers, who traditionally supports the Hashemite dynasty. It is not by chance that Karak's area tribes represent the backbone of

the army: this is the fiefdom of the regime. The Jordanian pilot Muath Al-Kassasbeh, imprisoned and killed by Daesh in December 2014, belonged to a prominent Karak's tribe.

Probably to better cope with these entrenched challenges, King Abdullah carried out notable leadership changes in the Jordan Armed Forces in late 2016, dismissing the whole military general staff.

Jordan's national security contributes dramatically to the stability of the whole Arab Gulf region. As a buffer, Amman has divided the highly-fragmented Levant from the GCC "oasis of stability" so far. Therefore, darker clouds over Jordanian skies stand as an alert for Gulf monarchies too. Given these premises, U.S. military aid (Jordan is major non-NATO ally of Washington since 1996), plus NATO's practical cooperation support are even more critical for Jordan.

Eleonora Ardemagni - *Analyst of the Middle East, focused on foreign policy and security issues of Yemen and the GCC region. External researcher (Mediterranean and Middle East Program) at the Italian Institute for International Political Studies and regular contributor for the Aspen Institute Italy*