



# **Border Instability and Strategic Responses: Jordan's Escalating Tensions with Syria**

**HMSC Insight  
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HMSC Intelligence Division**

## **Summary**

In January 2022, escalating violence and smuggling operations along the Jordan-Syria border highlighted growing threats to Jordanian national security.

This Insight assesses the structural drivers behind the tensions, the regional implications of continued border instability, and Jordan's emerging strategic response options.

## **Strategic Intelligence Insight**

### **I. Incident Overview**

On January 20, 2022, Jordanian forces engaged a group of armed smugglers at the northern border with Syria, resulting in the death of Captain Muhammad al-Khudayrat and injuries to three other soldiers.

The incident follows a pattern of escalating border violence, including the deadly 2016 attack at the Rukban refugee camp perimeter, which killed six Jordanian soldiers.

### **II. Structural Threats at the Border**

- **Criminal-Militia Nexus:**

Armed groups operating along the border, often linked to Syrian regime-aligned elements, facilitate a narcotics trade estimated at over \$4 billion annually.

- **Weaponized Smuggling:**

The use of narcotics and arms trafficking as a destabilization tool reflects broader regional trends of hybrid warfare through non-state proxy operations.

- **Resource Tensions:**

Syria's unilateral water management actions along the Yarmouk River — including dam construction — exacerbate tensions, leveraging Jordan's water dependency as a political pressure point.

### **III. Strategic Policy Challenges**

- **Diplomatic Inconsistencies:**

Despite advocating for Syria's reintegration into the Arab League and supporting reduced sanctions under the Caesar Act, Jordan faces escalating border hostilities driven by Syrian-aligned proxies.

- **Border Militarization Imperative:**

Jordan's advanced border control technologies and professional security forces position the kingdom for escalated defensive postures, including potential designation of closed military zones.

- **International Legal Avenues:**

The cumulative threats may warrant Jordan's recourse to international legal mechanisms — including appeals to the UN Security Council — to frame border aggression as a violation of sovereign rights.

#### **IV. Strategic Implications**

- **Regional Security Pressure:**

Jordan's border dynamics are symptomatic of broader Iranian proxy expansion and the enduring weakness of state control within Syria.

- **Rules of Engagement Evolution:**

Jordan may be compelled to alter its engagement rules to treat cross-border criminal-militant networks as legitimate military targets under self-defense doctrines.

- **Potential for Escalation:**

Sustained border instability risks triggering broader regional entanglements, particularly if cross-border violence targets Jordanian or allied assets.

#### **Indicators to Monitor**

- Shifts in Jordanian military postures along the Syrian frontier.

- Syrian regime responses (or lack thereof) to Jordanian diplomatic protests.
- Patterns of cross-border attacks or smuggling surges indicating proxy-driven destabilization.

### **Analyst Reflection**

Jordan's challenges at the Syrian border are no longer limited to conventional smuggling but represent an evolving hybrid threat environment.

Addressing these threats will require a calibrated blend of military deterrence, regional alliances, and strategic diplomacy to safeguard national sovereignty and internal stability.