**AP Interview: Jordan Says Syria Militants Try to Sneak In**

ON THE SYRIA BORDER, Jordan — Aug 16, 2015, 1:56 PM ET

By KARIN LAUB Associated Press

Militants have tried to sneak into [Jordan](http://abcnews.go.com/topics/news/jordan-jordanian.htm) from [Syria](http://abcnews.go.com/topics/news/syria.htm) by blending in with Syrian refugees, while smugglers have stepped up efforts to bring weapons and drugs into the kingdom, the commander of Jordan's Border Guard said in an interview Sunday.

Over the past year, Western ally Jordan has been thrust onto the front lines of the battle against Islamic State extremists who have seized one-third of neighboring Syria and Iraq. Jordan's role, including participation in a U.S.-led campaign of air strikes on IS targets, has raised concerns the kingdom could be targeted by the militants.

The commander of the Border Guard, Brig. Gen. Saber al-Mahayreh, told The Associated Press that his forces have so far blocked all infiltrators and smugglers, but that he expects more attempts because of the deteriorating security situation in Syria and Iraq.

This month, Syrian smugglers were intercepted by his forces with more than one ton of drugs, including hashish, and automatic weapons, he said, adding that it was one of the largest busts to date.

Jordan's borders are monitored by a partially U.S.-funded surveillance system of drones, radar and watch towers that can "spot a rabbit" trying to cross into the country, the commander said.

Border guards can potentially detect suspected infiltrators as far as 15 kilometers (9 miles) from the border, he said. The images sent back from the border area are monitored in operations rooms in Jordan, including at the Border Guard headquarters on the outskirts of the northern town of Zarqa.

"It is not possible for any terrorist groups to enter Jordan," he said at the headquarters.

Sunday's interview was followed by a trip to a Jordanian post on the Syrian border, near the Jordanian-Syrian trade crossing of Jaber.

Jordan closed the crossing in April, effectively ending overland trade with Syria, after rebels seized the Syrian side of the crossing from troops loyal to embattled President Bashar Assad.

The Jordanian border post offered a sweeping view of Syrian territory. A local commander, who could not be identified by name in line with briefing regulations, said tents and empty homes visible in the distance were manned by rebels. He said his troops did not communicate directly with the rebels who, in turn, did not seek confrontation. He said Islamic State militants had no presence in the area.

The border was marked by a low berm behind a paved patrol road. A second berm, running parallel to the first one, marked the outlines of a no-go zone. Under the rules of engagement, Jordanian border forces shoot and kill anyone entering this strip, about 70 to 100 meters wide, the local commander said.

Three Syrian smugglers were killed in separate incidents since he took command of the area four months ago.

The Syrian uprising began in March 2011 with mostly peaceful protests and escalated into a civil war after a brutal government crackdown. More than 4 million Syrians have fled the country, including about 630,000 who settled in Jordan. In Iraq, weakened by sectarian strife, Islamic State launched its swift land grab a year ago.

At the height of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2012 and 2013, hundreds entered Jordan every day at informal crossing points along the border.

Since then, Jordan has tightened control, reducing the number of potential entry points from 45 to five, including three along the western stretch of the border for wounded people and two on the eastern stretch for refugees, said another border officer, also speaking on condition of anonymity.

Jordan strictly screens refugees because of security concerns, said al-Mahayreh, the commander.

"Sometimes, terrorist groups try to enter (Jordan) among the refugees, as individuals, and exploit the refugees," he said. Jordan's security is a priority and refugees are questioned and searched to weed out potential militants, he said.

"We take into consideration the security situation more than the humanitarian situation," he added. The commander did not say how many suspected militants or armed men had been caught.

At times, large groups of refugees are stuck in a remote area just inside Jordan, waiting for permission to advance to the U.N. refugee agency's intake center or Raba Sarhan, near the Jordanian border town of Mafraq, according to the New York-based [Human Rights Watch](http://abcnews.go.com/topics/news/us/human-rights-watch.htm).

The group said in June that hundreds of refugees were stranded in that area, but updated figures were not available. At the time, HRW cited a report by another monitoring group which said there was evidence of summary deportations, with some new arrivals being sent back without being allowed to register as refugees.

Al-Mahayreh dismissed such reports, but said some refugees have been sent back to Syria at later stages in their journey, after causing trouble in Jordan.

"The border guard does not send any refugee back to Syria," he said. Screening of the newcomers takes place at Raba Sarhan and is handled by other branches of the security forces. Those considered to be a threat to security are sent to "specialized security centers," he said.

He said his forces also prevent foreign volunteers from Jordan, the Arab world and the West from using Jordan as a way station for joining up with militant groups in Syria and Iraq. In the past, hundreds of militants reached Syria and Iraq via Jordan.