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The Karak Church Attack and The Jordanian-Syrian Dynamics

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On October 23, 2026, an unprecedented sectarian terrorist shooting targeted a Christian funeral procession at the Greek Orthodox St. George's Church in Hamoud, near Karak, Jordan. The assault resulted in 9 deaths and left 40 wounded. This is the deadliest attack on Jordan's Christian minority in modern history. Jordan's Public Security Directorate (PSD) arrested three Jordanian relatives early on October 26, 2026, after a three-hour standoff. [1]

Jordan's King Abdullah II condemned the shooting and vowed to respond with an "iron fist," ordering security agencies to pursue those responsible and intensify efforts to combat extremism.[2]

The shooting prompted Jordan to declare three days of national mourning, with flags lowered to half-staff across government institutions. The attack has shaken Jordan, where such violence is rare and the Christian minority has historically lived alongside the country's Muslim majority.[3]

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Hours after the arrests, the Royal Jordanian Air Force launched retaliatory airstrikes in Southern Syria, targeting networks tied to the perpetrators.

The Syrian government, led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa, strongly condemned the uncoordinated strikes for violating its sovereignty and causing civilian casualties. In retaliation, Damascus closed the vital Nassib border crossing, cutting off Jordan's primary land trade route. But on October 28, 2026, Syria restored normal passenger and commercial traffic through the Nassib border crossing.[4]

The Attack and the Investigation

On October 23, 2026, gunmen opened fire on a crowd of peaceful worshippers attending a funeral procession in a Greek Orthodox church in the village of Hamoud, in Karak governorate.

Witnesses described a chaotic scene where assailants fired continuously for several minutes before fleeing, leaving the church floor heavily stained with blood.

Following an intensive 72-hour manhunt, Jordanian security forces cornered the suspects before dawn on Monday, October 26. Trapped inside an abandoned house in a village near the site of the attack, three Jordanian citizens - two brothers and their brother-in-law, engaged in a fierce three-hour standoff with elite Jordanian units before being seriously wounded and taken into custody. The authorities did not disclose their full names in an attempt to “hide” their identityThe three suspects are members of a prominent East Jordanian tribe in the Karak Governorate which further complicates the delicate balance in the civic society in the Governorate.

Jordan’s Public Security Directorate (PSD) identified the individuals as adherents of a "takfiri" ideology - an ultra-radical Sunni extremist doctrine that justifies violence against anyone deemed an infidel. No group has claimed responsibility for the assault, while unverified footage showed the gunmen pledging allegiance to ISIS and Jordan said the militants targeted in Syria were members of ISIS.[5]

Jordanian prosecutors on November 3, 2026 charged three men with terrorism-related offenses over a deadly gun attack last month on a church

in the kingdom's south. Under Jordan's anti-terrorism law, a conviction on the most serious charge — carrying out terrorist acts resulting in death — is punishable by death.[6]

The Jordanian retaliation

Hours after the arrests, the Royal Jordanian Air Force launched retaliatory airstrikes in the Daraa province of southern Syria, targeting networks tied to the perpetrators. Jordanian military said the operation, named "Jordanian Deterrence – Hamoud," targeted hideouts belonging to what it described as terrorist organizations connected to attack on the church.[7] Jordan said on October 27, 2026, it had killed more than 20 ISIS militants in airstrikes on southern Syria.[8]

Syria said the strikes killed seven people, including three children and a woman. Jordan regretted the civilian casualties, Government Communication Minister Mohammed al-Momani said in a post on X.[9]

It is worth noting that the Syrian authorities ignored the Jordanian claim about killing 20 ISIS militants and focused only on the civilian parents and their children who were victims of the Jordanian attack.

While the Jordanian military said the strikes were conducted in coordination with Damascus, Syria's government said they were carried out without prior coordination and announced an investigation.[10]

Chronology of Jordan's Air Operations in Syria (2023–2026)

Since 2023, Jordan has deployed its air force on several occasions to strike targets in southern Syria, as part of a campaign against terrorist organizations operating against it from Syrian territory, as well as drug-smuggling networks. These Jordanian airstrikes began during the Assad regime and have continued following the change of regime in Damascus.

Jordan May 8, 2023 — First Documented Airstrike: The Royal Jordanian Air Force launched its first unilateral strike into southern Syria, destroying a major drug production facility in Kharab al-Shahem and eliminating a Syrian drug kingpin.

January 18, 2024 — Suwayda Air Raids: Jordanian warplanes hit two villages in the Suwayda province, targeting suspected warehouses belonging to prominent Captagon drug lords.

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December 2025 – April 2026 — Operation Hawkeye Strike: Jordan, acting in a joint military campaign alongside the United States, executed massive, multi-wave airstrikes targeting resurgent ISIS and Al-Qaeda sleeper cells in Syria.

May 2–3, 2026 — Operation "Jordanian Deterrence": Air force jets struck five separate tactical targets in Suwayda, including Shahba, to crush drug-smuggling syndicates operating autonomously.

The Christian Minority in Jordan

Jordan is home to one of the oldest continuous Christian communities in the world, with roots stretching back to the 1st century AD. Today, Christians make up roughly 2% to 3% of Jordan's population (approximately 250,000 to 400,000 people) within the Sunni Muslim-majority Kingdom. The largest denomination is the Greek Orthodox Church, followed by Latin and Melkite Catholics.

Unlike in some other parts of the Middle East, Christians in Jordan are highly integrated, prosperous, and respected. The Jordanian constitution guarantees freedom of worship, and the electoral system explicitly reserves 9 seats for Christians in the 138-member parliament. The setting of the attack, the village of Hmoud in the Karak governorate, is a prominent historical Christian enclave where major clans have deep historical roots.

Historically, no major, direct terrorist attacks targeting Jordan's native Christian community had occurred prior to this shooting. While Jordan has experienced notable terrorist attacks—such as the 2005 Amman hotel bombings (which targeted Muslim-majority wedding parties and Western diplomats) or the 2016 Karak Castle shootout (which targeted state security forces and tourists)—none systematically targeted native Christians. Security analysts view this unprecedented breach as a calculated effort by extremists to shatter Jordan's social cohesion, break national unity, and destabilize its reputation as an oasis of security.

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Jordan and the Sharaa Regime in Syria

The relationship between Jordan and the new Syrian government led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa (formerly known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani) is defined by a pragmatic, security-first partnership.

Following the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024, Jordan was the first Arab nation to intensively engage and grant diplomatic legitimacy to the Sharaa administration. In February 2025, King Abdullah II hosted President Sharaa in Amman to establish a roadmap for the post-Assad era. By mid-2026, the two neighboring countries had signed over 20 bilateral agreements focusing on economic revitalization, the return of 1.3 million Syrian refugees, and the Joint Higher Coordination Council to manage border security.

However, the relationship faces structural weaknesses since the Sharaa regime still lacks absolute state control over southern Syria. This security vacuum directly culminated in the current breakdown:

Following the Karak church shooting, Jordan bypassed the Syrian government and launched immediate, uncoordinated airstrikes against militant networks in Daraa.

The Sharaa regime vehemently condemned Jordan's unilateral strikes as a violation of Syrian sovereignty. Syrian state media and the Daraa Health Directorate reported that the strikes hit residential countryside areas, killing between 7 civilians, including an elderly man and three children, and four others injured including women and children. [11]

Syria's Foreign Ministry said that it had conveyed its objections to Jordan over deadly airstrikes carried out on Syrian territory without prior coordination. The ministry expressed deep regret over the deaths and injuries in Daraa province in remarks carried by the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA).[12]

In direct response, the Syrian government closed the Nassib-Jaber border crossing, suspending all passenger and commercial transit. As Nassib serves as Jordan's primary land gateway for trade into the wider Levant, the closure threatens to impose immediate economic strain.[13]

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However, on October 27, 2026, Syria's foreign ministry said, that Damascus was coordinating with Amman and would establish a joint security committee to strengthen border security and prevent similar incidents from recurring.[14]

Summary

Jordan has historically maintained exceptional interfaith stability. Unlike past geopolitical or anti-state terrorism in the kingdom, this attack directly targeted the native Christian fabric, indicating a dangerous shift toward soft-target sectarian violence meant to fracture national unity.

The lack of a formal claim by major groups like ISIS, coupled with the PSD's findings, highlights the ongoing threat of localized, self-radicalized "takfiri" cells capable of executing highly lethal operations.

The rapid escalation demonstrates how the security vacuum in post-Assad Syria continues to threaten Jordanian domestic stability. Jordan's willingness to strike unilaterally underscores its "iron fist" policy against cross-border threats, but it comes at a high diplomatic cost.

The closure of the Nassib border crossing serves as a reminder that unilateral military actions—even when justified as counter-terrorism—will face severe pushback from Damascus, directly disrupting regional trade networks and complicating border security frameworks.

Notes

[1] Jordan arrests three suspects in deadly church attack, state media says, The Jerusalem Post, October 26, 2026.

[2] Jordan launches airstrikes in Syria in retaliation for deadly church attack, Al Arabiya, October 26 ,2026.

[3] Tarek Chouiref, Syria objects to Jordanian airstrikes carried out without prior coordination, Anadolu, October 27, 2026.

[4] Syria says main border crossing with Jordan to resume normal operations Wednesday, Arab news, October 28, 2026.

[5] Jordan says it killed more than 20 ISIS militants in airstrikes on Syria, Al Arabiya, October 27, 2026.

[6] Jordan charges church attack suspects with terrorism, Arab news, November 3, 2026.

[7] Jordan launches airstrikes in Syria in retaliation for deadly church attack, Al Arabiya, October 26 ,2026.

[8] Jordan says it killed more than 20 ISIS militants in airstrikes on Syria, Al Arabiya, October 27, 2026.

[9] Jordan carries out deadly strike in Syria in retaliation for church attack, BBC, October 27,2026.

[10] Jordan says it killed more than 20 Islamic State militants in airstrikes on Syria, Reuters, October 27, 2026.

[11] Tarek Chouiref, Syria objects to Jordanian airstrikes carried out without prior coordination, Anadolu, October 27, 2026.

[12]Jordanian Airstrikes Kill Civilians in Daraa, Damascus Denies Coordination, Enab Baladi, October 27, 2026.

[13] Jordan attacks militants in Syria in retaliation for church attack, The Guardian, October 27, 2026.

[14] Jordan says it killed more than 20 ISIS militants in airstrikes on Syria, Al Arabiya, October 27, 2026.