TAL SHIAR DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE REPORT

UNCLASSIFIED//AOR JORDAN, SYRIA

Lingering ISIS Threat in Syria: Cross-Border Risks and Jordanian Response to Attacks

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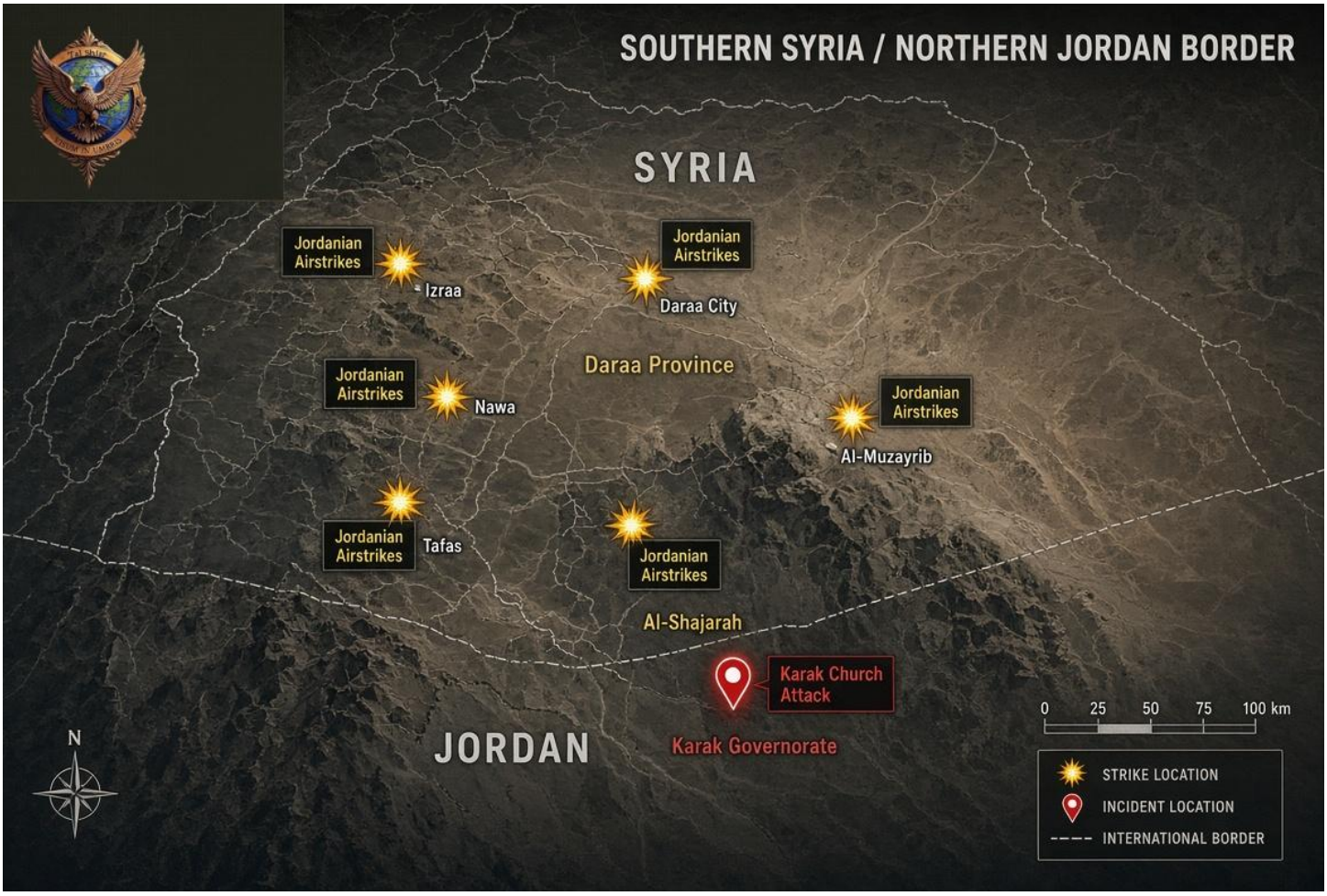
We assess that residual ISIS networks in Syria remain a persistent, adaptive threat capable of enabling or inspiring attacks beyond Syria's borders. ISIS demonstrated its cross-border capability in the 23 October 2026 assault on a Greek Orthodox church in Karak, Jordan which killed 9 people. The group has shifted toward small, compartmentalized cells that exploit security gaps in southern Syria and the Badia desert while attempting urban infiltration near Damascus. Jordan's rapid retaliatory airstrikes in Daraa underscore both the external risk and the incomplete coordination between Amman and the post-Assad government in Damascus. These dynamics raise the prospect of further external plots and friction among regional partners even as overall ISIS attack tempo inside Syria has moderated.



- On 23 October, three Jordanian gunmen opened fire on mourners at St. George's Greek Orthodox Church in Hamoud, Karak Governorate, killing nine people and wounding 34. Jordanian authorities later arrested the three suspects (two brothers and a brother-in-law) after a gunfight; a circulating statement attributed to the attackers invoked revenge "for Islam and the Islamic State," though ISIS has not issued an official claim.

- On 26 October, Royal Jordanian Air Force jets struck multiple sites in southern Syria's Daraa Province that Amman described as ISIS hideouts linked to the church attack. Jordan stated the strikes killed more than 20 ISIS militants and destroyed a weapons depot; Syrian authorities reported five to seven civilian deaths and denied prior coordination.

- Syrian security forces have continued preemptive raids against ISIS cells near Damascus and in the countryside, killing or arresting militants and seizing explosives, yet commanders warn of sleeper-cell infiltration from the desert into urban areas. ISIS retains enduring freedom of movement in the Badia desert which has been a safe haven since the Syrian civil war began in 2011.



Syrian Government Pressure and Persistent Gaps

We assess that the Syrian government under President Ahmed al-Sharaa has degraded but not eliminated ISIS's residual capacity. Estimates place roughly 2,500–3,000 fighters in small cells across the country. The group has redirected most of its attacks toward Syrian government forces following the collapse of SDF control in the northeast and the U.S. drawdown. Damascus has conducted multiple raids that have disrupted urban networks, yet desert mobility, prison escapes earlier in 2026, and uneven control in the south continue to provide operational space. Regional partners, including Jordan, are now forced to act unilaterally when they judge the threat imminent.

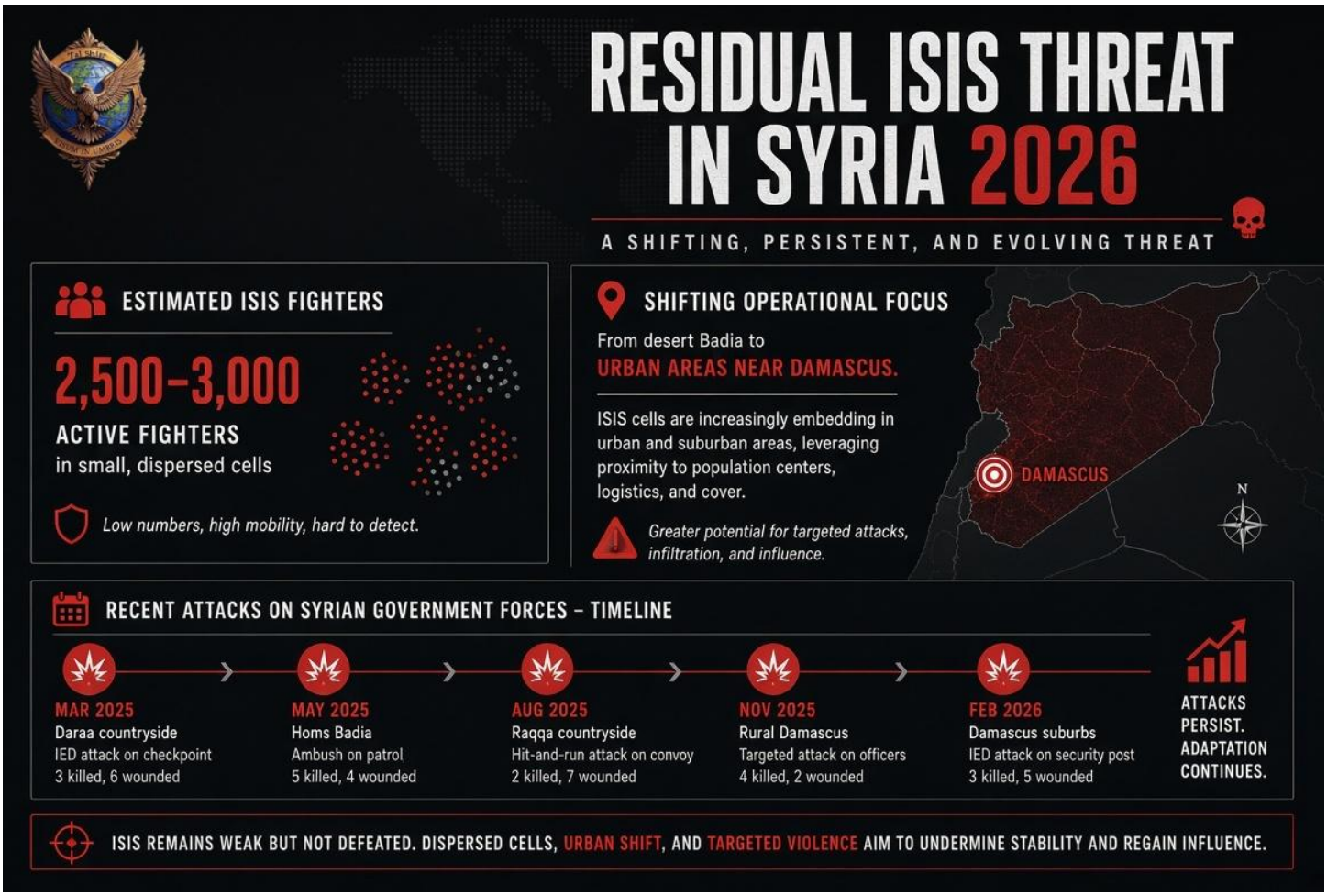
- ACLED data indicate ISIS attacks on Syrian government forces rose sharply in 2026 (52 in the first half of the year versus 16 in all of 2025), with activity concentrated in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and emerging urban fringes.

- UN and other assessments continue to cite approximately 3,000 ISIS-affiliated individuals remaining in Syria; earlier 2026 prison and camp transitions produced significant escapes that helped the group reconstitute experienced cadres. According to UN statements and ACLED reporting.

- After the Jordanian strikes, Damascus and Amman agreed to form a joint security committee to investigate the incident, strengthen border coordination, and prevent recurrence; the Nassib crossing was briefly closed then reopened.

Conclusion

The Karak church attack and Jordan's immediate response illustrate that residual ISIS networks in Syria retain the ability to inspire or support external violence even while under sustained pressure from Damascus. Coordination between Jordan and Syria is improving through the new joint security mechanism, yet gaps in southern Syria and the group's adaptive cell structure mean the external threat will persist. Continued preemptive operations inside Syria, tighter cross-border intelligence sharing, and sustained pressure on remaining desert sanctuaries are required to keep the residual ISIS threat from regenerating into larger external plots





Tal Shiar was founded by Nadeem Iqbal, a national security expert who served over 16 years as an intelligence officer for the Department of Defense from 2006-2022. His career began as a counter-insurgency analyst on the Afghanistan-Pakistan Task Force (2006–2013), followed by 9 years as a military analyst in the Syria Branch (2013–2022). He deployed five times in support of combat operations (3× Afghanistan, 2× Iraq), including two rotations with Special Operations Forces focused on counter-terrorism missions in the CENTCOM theater. Additional roles included rotations to CIA Headquarters as the military analyst for the DNI Middle East Task Force and served as the Syria Country Director for Office of Secretary of Defense Policy (OSDP). He was recognized with Joint Civilian Commendation/Achievement Medals, the NATO Medal(x3), the Secretary of Defense GWOT Medal, DoD Expeditionary Award and the OSD Excellence Award.