

A Jordanian city offers lessons on peace among Christians and Muslims

by [Taylor Luck](#) in the [July 5, 2017](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Maher Habashneh had just one thing in mind when militants from the self-described Islamic State seized the Crusader castle in Karak, Jordan, in December.

Braving stray bullets from a firefight in the city center between ISIS and an alliance of security forces and city residents, Habashneh rushed to the home of Waddah Amarien, where he stood guard until his childhood friend returned from Amman early the next morning.

Habashneh is Muslim and Amarien is Christian.

“The last thing I was going to do was let anyone intimidate my brother and his family,” said Habashneh, an unemployed university graduate, speaking recently at Amarien’s flower shop in downtown Karak. “We will not let them divide us.”

At a time when polarizing politics and extremist groups are causing strife between Christians and Muslims who have lived together in the Middle East for centuries, residents of Karak say they have their own unique model for interfaith interdependence that has withstood the test of time.

Residents say respecting each other’s religious sensitivities, putting the community first, and guarding against attempts to divide the community along sectarian lines—from outside or from within—can all help interfaith communities withstand extremist forces threatening to pull them apart.

Time and again Karak’s residents have chosen to rally around their common culture, traditions, and language in the face of forces that sought to turn Muslims and Christians against each other.

In the seventh century, when Muslim armies arrived in Karak in one of their first battles against the Byzantines, many Christian tribes sided with the Muslim army, seeing them as liberating Arab tribes against the foreign Byzantines, according to records and local historians.

Under the brutal reign of the Crusaders, Christian Arabs in Karak suffered alongside Muslims, and under the ensuing Muslim regimes, Christians in Karak gained full citizenship and rights, which they enjoyed through the rule of the Ottoman Turks.

The two groups always lived in close proximity. Christian and Muslim tribes would pitch their tents together on pastoral lands. When settlements arose in the 20th century, Christian and Muslim families built stone houses side-by-side, sharing a communal courtyard.

“We have a unique situation in Karak, where community comes first and religion is second,” said Nayef Nawiseh, a historian in Karak.

As in other historically mixed-faith communities elsewhere in the Levant, Muslims and Christians, whether merchants or Bedouin herders, would rely on each other for access to markets and the trade of their wares and livestock. But in Karak, the bonds between Christians and Muslims went far beyond economic interdependence. Over the centuries, residents would rely on each other to mediate disputes and represent each other in important rites of passage. Karak oral histories are replete with stories of priests carrying the Bible and walking between feuding Muslim groups, and with Muslim tribes brokering disputes between feuding Orthodox and Latin churches.

To this day, respected Christian and Muslim leaders represent each other’s clans at rituals to ask for the hand of someone in marriage or to request an atwa, or settlement, in the event of a feud or an accidental death. Such reliance on either side for major social milestones or for conflict resolution has transformed the community from coexisting to what many call codependent.

“Here in Karak, you cannot divide us as Christians and Muslims as we function as one and we rely on one another,” said Mohammed Maaytah, mayor of the village of Adir. “We are too intertwined; you would have to demolish the whole city and surrounding villages.”

Another key to Karak’s harmony is the role of, and reverence for, each other’s houses of worship. A Muslim tribe provided the black basalt stone that adorns St. George’s Church in Adir on the outskirts of Karak. In return, a few decades later, Christian residents donated land and raised money to expand the mosque across the street.

Many Christians still fast during the holy month of Ramadan, and older generations of Muslims had their children baptized as an extra blessing.

A key factor has been a keen understanding of each side's religious sensitivities. In 2015, when a Christian member of parliament from Karak insulted Khalid ibn Walid, a revered companion of the Prophet Muhammad, by calling him a drunkard and a "womanizer," the parliamentarian was denounced by members of his tribe the next day.

Late last year, as sectarian tensions grew in Amman over the killing of controversial Christian writer Nahed Hattar—who was gunned down for blasphemy and for insulting Islam—Karak Muslim women painted a mural of Jesus on St. George's Church to show solidarity.

"Sectarianism is very alien to us and is a challenge to our very identity," said Izdehar Soub, one of the muralists. "We respond to each attempt to divide us with a message: we still stand strong together."

Residents remain wary of attempts by outside groups—such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist preachers, or Western churches—to mix religion with politics. As part of this vigilance, Karak has developed another trait it believes other communities could learn from: de-escalation.

When a dispute erupts in the city, leaders react to it as a single case rather than a sectarian matter. When electoral violence erupted in Adir last September, vandals attempted to set fire to buildings, including St. George's Church. The church and the community dealt with the attack as something sparked by the election rather than aimed at Christians, and to this day they speak of the incident carefully.

"We are in an age when perceptions, rather than actual facts, matter and travel much faster," said Father Boulos Baqaen of St. George's Church. "We deal with such incidents on the individual level and stop to look at the motives behind each incident rather than immediately concluding 'this is Christian versus Muslim.'"

Yet with active extremist groups' long reach through social media and the Internet, Karak leaders privately question whether their community model can withstand the increased challenges.

“We look around the region,” Baqeen said, “and we have to ask at the end of the day: Is Jordan next?”

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