

Manufacturing Media Silence: Jordan's War against the Islamic State (ISIS), Arab Authoritarianism, and US Empire

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On 24 December 2014, ISIS reported and the US-led coalition confirmed that a Jordanian fighter pilot, Mu'ath al-Kassasbeh, had crashed in Syria and was now in ISIS custody. On 3 February 2015, ISIS released a video showing its own members murdering the pilot by immolation. The Jordanian regime [vowed revenge](#). Some Jordanians [took to the streets](#) in grief and anger. The Jordanian Armed Forces, for its part, [intensified its bombing](#) campaign in Syria.

Media outlets and Middle East analysts have expended considerable energy assessing whether and how Jordan's war on ISIS in the [aftermath of the Kassasbeh capture and death](#) represents a [game changer](#). It is difficult to find a sustained critique of this war on ISIS in the local Jordanian media, whether in the mainstream or the more critical online venues. This is not surprising. After all, Jordan is an authoritarian state. Both historically and in the contemporary moment, the regime has carefully drawn red lines around public speech and political opposition.

Manufacturing Silence

Immediately after al-Kassasbeh's capture, the Jordanian regime put the general public and the local media on notice. On 25 December, the day after al-Kassasbeh's capture, the kingdom's attorney general announced that the (re)publication of ISIS-issued news or media could result in prosecution. He also prohibited any "military analysis" of the Jordanian Armed Forces. That same day, the Jordanian Armed Forces issued a communiqué calling on local media to "not publish any information that harms national security," in reference to news of the Kassasbeh capture. Any discussion or debate of the ISIS capture of al-Kassasbeh and the Jordanian Armed Forces' response was now impossible. There would be little tolerance for any questioning or debate of the broader context, specific details, and future (regime) military policy.

The absence of a substantial and publicized local critique of the regime is not an indictment of Jordanians but of the Jordanian regime's silencing of dissent. Representing Jordanians as [consensual](#) and acritical subjects, as several articles that laud the regime's policies have, is a drastic misreading. This [misreading](#) legitimates the regime at a time when regional protest movements have challenged authoritarian rule in new ways.

The public discussion that does exist in Jordan focuses on the nation's purported readiness for war. One main theme focuses on [Jordan's military capacity](#) and fears of a long war of attrition with [unintended consequences](#). Another emphasizes the potential rifts within

Jordanian society. For some, there is [limited yet real support for ISIS](#) within Jordan, which could undermine the stability of the country.

In all of these discussions, what “winning” this amorphous war means is unaddressed. Many questions remain unasked (if not intentionally silenced, as [Lamis Andoni](#) points out). Are the methods of the war—even if winnable—justified? What responsibility does the Jordanian regime have in terms of international standards of state conduct? Why do Jordanians find themselves grieving the brutal murder of one their own in the first place? Is there room for Jordanians to oppose both ISIS and the regime’s war on terror? The public discourses in both Jordan and the United States foreclose these questions, though for different reasons. They effectively combine expert commentary on authoritarian states with the lexicon of the war on terror to manufacture the appearance of consent. The regime, it appears, is waging a war of necessity.

Unanswered Questions

ISIS threatens the many civilians who find themselves under its rule, in its path, or on the receiving end of its military onslaughts. ISIS is capable of killing all of its prisoners, whether military or not. ISIS is capable of setting someone on fire, filming their death, and releasing the video. This is all condemnable.

In the aftermath of the video’s release, the Jordanian Armed Forces have waged an intensified bombing campaign on alleged ISIS strongholds. Spokespersons for the regime have reported [degrading twenty percent of the military strength of ISIS](#). Media outlets and Middle East analysts have [taken such reports at face value](#). A closer look would reveal some exaggeration and uncritical celebration.

US-led bombings of ISIS positions began in August 2014 and have expanded since. By September 2014, media were reporting over 204 US-led coalition air strikes against ISIS. That number would grow to over 1300 strikes by December 2014 and then 1600 strikes by January 2015. Throughout these strikes, not once was it credibly reported that coalition forces accomplished anything approximating a twenty percent degrading of ISIS capacities.

We are now expected to believe that in less than one week, Jordanian air strikes have degraded more ISIS capacity than in the previous six months of coalition bombings. Why has revenge been the only explanatory variable for these disparate set of facts? The danger of not going beyond the “revenge factor” ultimately produces a heroic (but hardly believable) presentation of the regime. Such presentation is not benign. It manufactures legitimacy for an authoritarian regime that has denied transparency, accountability, and social justice for the majority of its population.

Furthermore, who is speaking for civilians living under ISIS rule and currently subject to the “shock and awe” and “wipe them off the face of the planet” policy of the regime’s bombing campaign? A cursory reading of reporting on Kayla Mueller’s death shows that the media is [undecided \(and perhaps uninterested\)](#) in exploring whether ISIS or Jordanian strikes killed Mueller. Mueller is not more important than the many unnamed that Jordanian airstrikes killed. Mueller’s death is exceptional only in that she is the only person that Jordanian and US mainstream media have named and acknowledged. Despite this, the lack of regard to the cause of her death reveals US and regime interests, rather than the general wellbeing of Syrians, Jordanians, or any other civilians, are driving policy. Civilians in Raqqa have

attempted on numerous occasions to name their dead as a result of US and Syrian bombing of ISIS targets in Raqqa (see, for example, [here](#) and [here](#)). When a military force (i.e., the Asad regime, the US-led coalition, or the Jordanian air force) claims it is going to bomb the “capital” (i.e., Raqqa) of their enemy (i.e., ISIS), the over 200,000 civilians living under that enemy’s rule are subject to untold horrors in addition to the devastating reality of living under ISIS rule.

Have we forgotten about the “precision strikes” and “smart bombs” of the United States invasion, occupation, and counter-insurgency policies in [Iraq](#)? Have we forgotten about the [drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and elsewhere](#)? We all know full well that the war on terror has killed more civilians than al-Qa’ida and ISIS operatives. The Jordanian regime, for its part, does not even bother to claim that it is using “precision strikes” or “smart bombs.” Clearly, that same core of an international military coalition we saw in 2001, 2003, 2011, and now in 2014 (despite the very different contexts) has not learned the lessons of Iraq and the broader war on terror. Those lessons are that foreign intervention, militarization, and short-term thinking invariably breed long-term problems. Those lessons also include the fact that the brutalization of a civilian population in the name of freedom breeds deep-seated discontent, alienation, and extremism. The refusal to learn these lessons explains in part the US administration’s support of Arab military policy. Barack Obama has deployed the rhetoric of “this is your problem, you deal with it.” With this move, the US administration has in the eyes of some shielded its “smart” military intervention from critiques that highlight infrastructural destruction, civilian death toll, and their sociopolitical ramifications.

There certainly are differences between the Jordanian war on terror, the US war on terror, and the Egyptian war on terror. Yet there is one factor that unites all of them. No one speaks for those civilians caught in the crossfire between ISIS rule and coalition strikes. Where is the disgust and disdain for the civilian deaths, incinerated bodies, and social dislocation for which US, European, and Arab states are responsible for? Where is the condemnation by these very same voices at mangled and severed bodies of Palestinians in Gaza? Why is the incineration of Mu’ath al-Kassasbeh in Raqqa any more abhorrent than the US incineration of an entire family by Hellfire missile in [Yemen](#) or a boy by white phosphorous in [Falluja](#)? Why is it more abhorrent than the daylight fatal police shooting of [Shayma’ al-Sabbagh](#) in Cairo? Who speaks for those civilians in Raqqa and elsewhere that are dying under the rain of Jordanian-launched second-hand US bombs?

We should all condemn al-Kassasbeh’s death. However, that condemnation should be just as harshly directed at the United States and its regional allies. To focus on the performative aspect of ISIS brutality is to miss the crucial connection between the two. ISIS is producing videos of its brutality as a strategy. The United States does not pursue this strategy (and US media [play along](#)). Yet US soldiers have in various ways [celebrated brutality, torture, and killing sprees](#) since the inception of war in Afghanistan. Hollywood has done this work as well through the unadulterated heroizing and celebration of US brutality in recent films such as [American Sniper](#) and [Zero Dark Thirty](#).

Historic Complicity

ISIS is a problem for the region and a threat to those civilians caught up in its networks. But ISIS is part of a much longer story that we have to rigorously take stock of. ISIS is the product of several legacies. It is the child of Saddam Hussein’s prisons, torture, and murder. It was also raised amidst the crucible of the US destruction of Iraqi state and society during

US sanctions, invasion, and occupation. ISIS was nourished by the sectarian politics and militia sponsorship of the US counter-insurgency policy in Iraq. It was inaugurated amidst the carte blanche the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey gave to anyone that wanted to fund or arm opposition to Bashar al-Asad in Syria. Some of us know this history.

It is that history that we must return to as we assess the Jordanian regime's policy. It is this history we must begin with. To forget this history, and the Jordanian regime's part in it, is to position al-Kassasbeh's murder in the mutually dependent relationship of Arab authoritarianism and US imperialism.

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