



Crime and Punishment in Jordan

by [David Schenker](#)

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For the time being, King Abdullah will extract revenge on ISIS in Syria and have a freer hand to crack down on ISIS supporters at home.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham's horrific video of operatives burning alive the captured Jordanian pilot Moath al-Kasasbeh shocked the world. King Abdullah, who was visiting Washington when the video was released, vowed to avenge Kasasbeh's death and promptly returned to Jordan. Even before he landed, two prominent al Qaeda prisoners with ties to ISIS on death row in the kingdom were hanged.

Jordanians greeted Abdullah's arrival -- and the news of the two executions -- with jubilation. But the kingdom's next moves against ISIS remain unclear. Jordanians want revenge, yet until now the kingdom's involvement in the U.S.-led air campaign against the terrorist group has been deeply unpopular at home. Indeed, until Kasasbeh's death, the trending Twitter hashtag in Jordan was #ThisIsNotOurWar.

If the past is precedent, Kasasbeh's death at the hands of ISIS could signal a change -- at least temporarily -- in Jordanian popular attitudes toward the war and presage a more robust role for the kingdom in military operations.

For the past six months, opposition to the war in Jordan was broad-based, including both secular and Islamist residents. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood condemned participation in the coalition as a violation of the country's constitution and "a campaign against Islam." Meanwhile, some secular Jordanians worried that the kingdom's role in the air war would provoke ISIS retaliation. Still others -- such as the prominent columnist Lamis Andoni -- contended that Jordan had been blackmailed by the United States, the kingdom's leading donor, into participating. The campaign, she wrote on December 30, represented a "complete subordination to Washington's

policies and wishes."

For most Jordanians, though, opposition to the anti-ISIS coalition seemed to be driven by dynamics in Syria, where, since 2011, the nominally Shia Alawite regime of President Bashar al-Assad has killed 200,000 people, mostly Sunnis. In this context, many Jordanians saw the Sunni ISIS as an effective counterforce to Assad. Not surprisingly, according to a poll published in September by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan, only 62 percent of Jordanians considered ISIS to be a terrorist organization.

Even before Kasasbeh's capture by ISIS in Syria last year, burgeoning opposition to Jordan's participation in the war was a growing headache for the palace. It became worse after. Although the Jordanian military -- known at home as the Arab Army -- remained extremely popular, Jordanian leaders were coming under increasing criticism for allowing the country to serve as the base of coalition air operations. The pilot's father, Safi Yousef al Kasasbeh, emerged as a prominent critic of the war and of the ineffectual palace efforts to negotiate or otherwise secure his son's release.

If the 2005 Amman hotel bombings -- the worst in Jordanian history -- are any indication, Kasasbeh's execution could shift local public opinion. Prior to the November 2005 attack on three downtown hotels that killed 60 and wounded 115, 61 percent of Jordanians reported that they viewed Osama bin Laden favorably. In polling after the bombing, which was perpetrated by al Qaeda's Iraq affiliate, support for bin Laden plummeted to 24 percent. And five years later, confidence in the al Qaeda leader bottomed out at just 13 percent.

To be sure, much has changed since 2005. A decade ago, for example, the region wasn't engulfed in a Sunni-Shia conflict and Jordan wasn't witnessing the exponential growth of Salafism. To wit, even after Kasasbeh, some Jordanian Islamist leaders apparently still can't bring themselves to condemn ISIS. Complicating matters, an estimated 2,500 Jordanians are currently fighting jihad in Syria -- an occurrence so common that just last week, it barely made local headlines that the son of a sitting parliamentarian was killed fighting for Jebhat al-Nusra in Aleppo.

Nevertheless, the Kasasbeh outrage and the 2005 bombing in Amman have similar implications for Jordanian policy. At a minimum, like 2005, this incident will convince many Jordanians that the kingdom is in ISIS' crosshairs, limiting, at least temporarily, opposition to membership in the U.S.-led coalition. Accordingly, Jordanians will be more amenable to proactive kinetic operations. Not surprisingly, given current popular sentiment, Abdullah's latest calls for a "relentless" and "harsh" war against ISIS in Syria have been well received. In the coming days and weeks, it seems likely that Jordan will increase the frequency and ferocity of its air operations -- and perhaps even deploy special forces -- to target ISIS in Syria.

Although an immediate robust Jordanian military response is appropriate, however, it's not at all certain that the kingdom will keep up the tempo of operations after the fury over Kasasbeh dissipates. By regional standards, the Jordanian military is impressive, consistently demonstrating a high level of commitment and courage. However, for Jordan -- indeed, for any military -- a surge of operations almost necessarily means an increase in casualties.

Six months into the air war, Jordan has lost two F-16s and one pilot, in addition to dozens of ground forces wounded and killed along the frontier with Syria. Jordan is already at the so-called tip of the spear of the campaign, but the prospect of increased casualties -- who will almost certainly hail from the country's tribes, which constitute the backbone of the military and the leading supporters of the monarchy -- holds little appeal for the king.

Perhaps the abiding tribal concept of *thar* (revenge) will mitigate future backlash against the palace for losses sustained in the fight against ISIS. Although Jordan is not a democracy, public sentiment matters, particularly in these difficult times. And the lesson of the Kasasbeh hostage ordeal is that the kingdom is quite sensitive to military casualties. Here, though, history is key. The rage in the kingdom following the 2005 bombings persisted for a year --

and coincided with increased Jordanian military and intelligence cooperation with the United States on al Qaeda, as well as draconian security measures on the home front. On both accounts, there was little popular protest.

For the time being, with the overwhelming support of the population, Abdullah will extract revenge on ISIS in Syria. He will also have a freer hand to pursue a more comprehensive crackdown on ISIS supporters at home. Over time, however, concerns about force preservation may ultimately compel the kingdom to dial back its own expanded military efforts in Syria. Committed to the coalition, Jordan will remain the base of anti-ISIS air operations and a training facility for anti-Assad Syrian rebels for the foreseeable future. But Jordan is unlikely to become a regional Sparta -- as the *Washington Post* recently described the United Arab Emirates -- any time soon. ISIS poses a clear and present danger to Jordan's stability, but so does popular discontent.

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