

# THE DEATH OF MUATH AL-KASASBEH: THE POLITICS OF MOURNING, MEMORY, IDENTITY, & POWER

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MEI - Emirates NDB Middle East Essay Competition

Captain<sup>1</sup> Muath al-Kasasbeh was a Jordanian pilot captured and subsequently killed by ISIS, or *ad-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq wa as-Sham* in Arabic, hereafter referred to by the Arabic acronym Daesh. On February 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016, a video<sup>2</sup> was released showing the grotesque execution of the pilot. He stood in a cage doused in gasoline, and was immolated. In the video as flames engulfed his body, Daesh made an appeal to the public for information<sup>3</sup> about the whereabouts of other Jordanian pilots, offering cash rewards to supporters and threatening coalition forces similarly horrifying fates. This came at the end of two months of unsuccessful negotiations between Daesh and the Jordanian government for the release of the captured pilot<sup>4</sup>. Subsequently, the monarchy promised “an earth-shattering” swift and powerful revenge<sup>5</sup>, and the escalation of military efforts<sup>6</sup>, aided by the international community.

Jordan as a nation entered a state of mourning for the loss of their martyr. Facilitated by small- and large-scale state apparatuses and grassroots initiatives, from ritual mourning and other memorial events to military action and media coverage, together with the responses of the people especially in demonstrations and silent candlelight vigils in his memory, al-Kasasbeh was transformed into a powerful symbol for the country. His death was heavily politicized by the state<sup>7</sup>, though state action can be argued to be both justified and successful. In this paper I will describe some of these state-sanctioned

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<sup>1</sup> He was posthumously promoted from the rank of Lieutenant.

<sup>2</sup> Daesh released a 22-minute video entitled “Healing the Believers’ Chests” through Al-Furqa Media Foundation—their official channel. In a technologically sophisticated video, scenes cut between the pilot’s final moments and commentary by Daesh. Due to the grotesque nature of the film, most Western media outlets refrained from showing it, limiting themselves to stills from the film. Fox News posted the entire video on their website. According to a public opinion polls conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies of the University of Jordan, about 80% of Jordanians have watched the film—either wholly or partially.

<sup>3</sup> The names and photographs of approximately twenty pilots were shown at the end of the video, with rewards of 100 golden dinars (approximately 20 thousand dollars) to those who provide information leading to their captures. By putting bounties on these pilots, Daesh was also trying to dissuade them from further participating in coalition airstrikes.

<sup>4</sup> The pilot was captured on December 24<sup>th</sup> and believed to have been killed sometime in early January, right after a failed rescue operation by Jordanian Special Forces. But the video was only released on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, and the prevailing opinion is that Daesh was negotiating for the release of their prisoners but without intending to swap for the pilot. Personally I believe the time lag was needed simply for the media team of Daesh to produce the video. It must also be noted that the fate of two Japanese citizens Haruna Yukawa and Kenji Goto was also thrown into the mix. The Japanese government worked closely with the Jordanian government and Daesh to secure the release of journalist Kenji Goto, but to no avail.

<sup>5</sup> King Abdullah II’s only worry, he said, was that he might run out of fuel and ammunition (*The Mirror*, February 4<sup>th</sup> 2015; *Fox News*, February 5<sup>th</sup> 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Jordan claims it has carried out 56 additional air strikes and bombing sorties against Daesh by February 8<sup>th</sup>, mere days after the release of the video (*The Guardian*, February 9<sup>th</sup> 2015).

<sup>7</sup> There is a difference between the state, represented by the government, and the monarchy, headed by the king. In this paper, I shall use the “state” as a blanket term to refer to both of them in concert.

rituals in brief, but mainly we aim to understand the desired narrative of the state and pay close attention to ground-up voices in response to the state. We will reconstruct the meaning of his death—for whom and to what end—and situate it in Jordan's current geopolitical position while keeping an eye out for historical struggles for power.

## TIMELINE

Date	Event
December 24 <sup>th</sup> 2014	Plane crashed and pilot captured by Daesh
December 25 <sup>th</sup> 2014	Contact between Daesh and pilot's father
Early January 2015	Possible rescue operation failed
Early January 2015	Estimated time of al-Kasasbeh's death
January 20 <sup>th</sup> 2015	Daesh threatened to kill two Japanese hostages
January 24 <sup>th</sup> 2015	Daesh released video showing Haruna Yukawa's death
January 24 <sup>th</sup> 2015	Daesh calls for release of Rishawi
January 28 <sup>th</sup> 2015	Jordan offers to exchange Rishawi for al-Kasasbeh
January 29 <sup>th</sup> 2015	Deadline offered by Daesh expired
January 31 <sup>st</sup> 2015	Daesh released video showing Kenji Goto's death
February 3 <sup>rd</sup> 2015	Daesh released video showing al-Kasasbeh's immolation
February 4 <sup>th</sup> 2015	Jordan executed Rishawi and Karbouly
February 5 <sup>th</sup> 2015	Jordan carried out air strikes against Daesh
February 6 <sup>th</sup> 2015	Peace march led by Queen Rania in Amman

## METHODOLOGY

Research for this project was conducted over a year in Jordan, based off the School for International Training<sup>8</sup> and the University of Jordan<sup>9</sup>, through interviews<sup>10</sup>, informal conversations<sup>11</sup>, and fieldtrips to key sites. I conducted former interviews<sup>12</sup> with a former minister, a current security expert, a former senior government employee, a professor, and a student<sup>13</sup>. I also conducted various informal interviews, including group discussions

<sup>8</sup> I studied abroad at SIT Jordan's Modernization and Social Change program in the Fall of 2015, headed by Dr Ashraf Alqudah.

<sup>9</sup> I studied abroad at the University of Jordan in the Spring of 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Certain interviews were made possible through connections of the SIT program.

<sup>11</sup> The length of time for these conversations varied; some were as short as the length of a taxi ride, or even just in short comments with fellow passengers in a vehicle when we passed by the al-Kasasbeh mural. Others were longer, extended conversations, especially with Jordanians whom I managed to establish regular contact with.

<sup>12</sup> Formal interviews lasted between half-an-hour to two hours, and all took place face-to-face. The former minister was able to talk about the sentiments of the people seen from the top, with an informed view of the role of the media, and with keen ideas about Jordan's fight against terrorism and religious fundamentalism. The current security expert brings in decades of experience working with dissenting voices and was able to discuss the military effort and also the relationship between tribal systems and the rule of law. The former senior government employee was knowledgeable about foreign relations and affairs at the time of the incident, and attune to the voices of the people, especially the youth. The professor was extremely candid about the politicization of key issues, and acutely aware of the foreign actors that have contributed to the current turmoil in the Arab region. The student, while not being representative in views but perhaps representative in idealism, brings an interesting alternative voice that while slightly anti-authoritarian, is highly important in understanding the future of Jordan.

<sup>13</sup> These designations have been self-selected by the interviewees, and are intended to be ambiguous and non-specific so as to protect their identities.

with multiple students<sup>14</sup> from the University of Jordan, a pair interview with two engineers involved in the reconstruction project of the Martyr Memorial<sup>15</sup>, and conversations with journalists. Throughout my year I also had many informal conversations with many sectors of society, including journalists, university students from Amman, Irbid, al-Mafraq, and al-Karak, construction workers involved in the renovation project of the Martyr Memorial, shopkeepers in al-Karak and Amman, managers and supermarket employees in al-Mafraq<sup>16</sup>, cabdrivers in Amman, and various other participants. Some participants were chosen<sup>17</sup> because of the office they were holding or the capacity at which they engaged with the issue. Fulfilling the purpose of understanding the responses of the state to al-Kasasbeh's death and the variety of state apparatuses utilized was chief to the selection. Others were sought<sup>18</sup> not for their leadership positions but for interesting voices that they might be able to present. I also made two fieldtrips to the city of al-Karak and the town of Ay, the hometown of al-Kasasbeh, numerous trips to the Martyr Memorial in Amman, the city of al-Mafraq—headquarters of the Third Division of the Jordanian Army and home to an airbase of the Royal Jordanian Air Force, and numerous other memorial structures across the country such as mosques, airplane memorials, and graffiti walls. I also visited the home of Muath al-Kasasbeh, and met with his father, uncle, aunt, and brother<sup>19</sup>.

## A NOTE ON ETHICS & SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Because of the sensitivity of the topic, special care was taken to ensure that no one was made to recall dreadful memories, even if this comes at the expense of the loss of valuable data<sup>20</sup>. Participants—and Jordanians in general—liked that a Singaporean<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Some of them—including my language partners—eventually became my friends and we were able to have frequent and deeper conversations after trust was developed.

<sup>15</sup> A chance encounter—during my site visit—turned into an impromptu informal tour and interview session. They were happy to be photographed with me, and joked that they would become famous after being interviewed by a Singaporean.

<sup>16</sup> An arranged meeting with a tribal chief was canceled, but I spent most of the day in a supermarket for refugees, and had meaningful conversations with some of the employees.

<sup>17</sup> Most of the interviews with politicians and other high-ranking members of society were arranged through Dema Aloun, my advisor at SIT.

<sup>18</sup> Others were arranged through perseverance: I cold-called numerous journalists, and sometimes showed up at offices uninvited and spoke with whoever would speak with me. I also managed to develop a network of friends through my host family earlier on and through other contacts from the University of Jordan.

<sup>19</sup> The interview with the father of the slain pilot was one of the most difficult and rewarding in my life. I made a trip with my Arabic teacher and translator to their home, facilitated by an important intermediary. At their home, they showed me pictures of Muath in his earlier days, and some of his trophies, medals, and plaques that displayed his achievements. I showed them pictures of the mural in Amman, some of the airplane memorials, the site-under-construction in the Martyr Memorial, and screenshots of some things that people were saying on social media. After the exchange of pictures we had a conversation about his son and a discussion about politics and religion. At the end of the meeting, he fixed my Jordanian *shemagh* (a traditional Jordanian headdress) on my head, declared me Jordanian, and we smiled for pictures.

<sup>20</sup> A small number of students felt unqualified to talk about this topic, or were not comfortable with continuing after the interviews were started, so I canceled them and assured them that the interviews were over and no information was recorded.

<sup>21</sup> It must be noted that being a university student-researcher from Singapore accorded me some privileges. I was treated as a special guest of their country, and my efforts—and shortcomings—at speaking Arabic in their dialect—the Jordanian/Palestinian version—went a long way in making people feel comfortable.

researcher<sup>22</sup> is interested in something they deem important and sacred. They were aware that the death of al-Kasasbeh is no ordinary death, not just for Jordan, but also for the entire world. That a Singaporean is cognizant of Jordan's issues, and even keen to conduct research in such a specific topic, is testament to how deeply intertwined Jordan is with the rest of the world. Eventually it was decided, upon consultation with my research advisor<sup>23</sup>, that all names would be withheld. This is despite that many interviewees have signed consent forms for their names to be published. This decision was made because of sensitive information revealed by many participants, and also because of the recentness of this event, and the on-going memorialization process. Participants were unaware of the direction of the paper and might disagree with the way their words were interpreted; it would therefore have been unfair for them to be misquoted.

## BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Any attempt to understand the geopolitics of Jordan today must begin with an examination of Jordan's modern history. I will attempt a cursory summary<sup>24</sup> of both sides of this parallel historical coin: Jordan's successful self-determination and Palestine's struggle likewise, set in the age of United Nations and nation-states. After four centuries of Ottoman rule, the end of World War I also saw the break-up of the empire<sup>25</sup>. Prior to the break-up, Great Britain and France redrew the borders of the Middle East in the secret 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement to partition the Ottoman Empire into zones of British control (Jordan, Palestine, southern Iraq) and French control (Syria, Lebanon, northern Iraq, and parts of Turkey). Jordan fell under the British mandate for over twenty years from 1922 until 1946 when the country became independent, and recognized by the then League of Nations. The British allocated Jordan to King Abdullah I bin al-Hussein as a consolation prize after his brother was given the role of the King of Iraq<sup>26</sup>. There were serious challenges to his rule over Jordan, with many much stronger tribes vying for power and staging rebellions. To aid King Abdullah I, the British maintained a military force—with a small air force—to suppress these tribal uprisings<sup>27</sup>.

Meanwhile, in 1917 the British issued the Balfour Declaration, which supports the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, in tandem with the Palestine Mandate around 1922 at the same time as when Jordan fell under the British Mandate<sup>28</sup>. In 1948 when the United Nations voted to partition Palestine into two separate Jewish and Arab states, a war broke out. This was known as the War of Independence (to Israelis) and the Catastrophe—*al-Nakba* (to Palestinians). During this war 700 thousand Palestinians fled

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<sup>22</sup> I observed that most people seemed to be fond of, or at least neutral to, the student-researcher identity, whereas they were wary or tired of speaking with journalists. Many people began by first asking if I was a journalist, and happily continued upon the knowledge that I was not.

<sup>23</sup> Dema Aloun, a criminal lawyer by training, was my project advisor. She is of Bedouin descent and comes from a military family.

<sup>24</sup> It is not the purpose of this paper to delve into Jordan's modern history or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We simply ought be cognizant of the demographic background of Jordan.

<sup>25</sup> Salibi (1998).

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> For more on Jordan's tribes, refer to Allinson (2016); Alon (2009); Abdul-Jabar & Hosham (2003); Lynch (1999); and Khoury & Kostiner (1990).

<sup>28</sup> United Nations Department of Public Information (2008).

and became refugees, many of them settling in Jordan<sup>29</sup>. In 1967 during the Six Day War, another 300 thousand Palestinians fled the West Bank for neighboring countries as refugees<sup>30</sup>. These mass exoduses of Palestinians created the demographic situation of Jordan today: a split between Jordanians of Jordanian origin (JJOs) and Jordanians of Palestinian origin (JPOs)<sup>31</sup>. And so while Jordan is a fully legitimate nation-state today, with successful monarchical rule up till the current King Abdullah II, this tension is as relevant as ever between on one hand, the various tribes vying for power against Hashemite rule, and on the other hand, the Palestinian demographic issue<sup>32</sup>.

## RITUALS PERFORMED, OBSERVED, MEMORIALIZED

Here I pull together a picture of the aftermath of the death of al-Kasasbeh. Owing to the limitations of length, this section is intentionally truncated, though certainly thicker descriptions could and have been done. Some “facts” provided by interviewees holding high portfolios in politics and government are stated as they are independent of verification. Many of these ideas are not unique and certainly there is a plethora of news articles, video clips, and audio recordings to corroborate the narrative. Here and throughout, readers are to assume information or opinions as provided by participants, and analyses as inspired through discussions, if citations are not supplied. This paper should foremost be read as an ethnographic reflection of the myriad ground voices<sup>33</sup>.

### State Action

The state organized a prompt and impressive response in the immediate aftermath of the release of the video (February 3<sup>rd</sup>) by Daesh. King Abdullah, away on a diplomatic visit to the United States, cut short his trip and returned to “be with his people”<sup>34</sup>. He released a speech on national television<sup>35</sup> vowing revenge and quoting from the movie *Unforgiven*<sup>36</sup>. On the 4<sup>th</sup>, state-held prisoners Sajida Mubarak Atrous al-Rishawi and Ziad Khalaf al-Karbouly, who had ties to Daesh, and who were part of the negotiations between the possible swap of prisoners, were executed<sup>37</sup>. On the 5<sup>th</sup>, the air force carried out multiple air strikes and bombing sorties, and produced a video response to Daesh<sup>38</sup>. They also

<sup>29</sup> Some sources put this figure as high as 900 thousand (Al-Abed 2004); a conservative estimate of around 700 thousand is suggested by the US Department of State (Morris 2014). Refer to <<http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS-idx?type=goto&id=FRUS.FRUS1949v06&size=M&submit=Go+to+page&page=973>>.

<sup>30</sup> The United Nations Department of Public Information report (2008) puts this figure at 500 thousand. Here I cite Bowker’s more conservative estimate (2003).

<sup>31</sup> Muasher (2008).

<sup>32</sup> As of 2006, there are slightly over 1.8 million registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan, according to the United Nations Department of Public Information report (2008). The total number (including non-registered refugees) is likely to be higher, though an estimate is hard to arrive at, given that census data by Jordan are not released.

<sup>33</sup> Disciplinarily I am an anthropologist, though I have intentionally left out social theory in my discussion in anticipation of a wider political science/ international relations audience.

<sup>34</sup> Announced on Twitter through the Royal Hashemite Court’s official account. Can be accessed via <<https://twitter.com/RHCJO/status/562679077472309250>>. See also *The New York Times* (February 4<sup>th</sup> 2015).

<sup>35</sup> His speech can be accessed via <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nROJy6XtpfA>>.

<sup>36</sup> *The Independent* (February 4<sup>th</sup> 2015).

<sup>37</sup> *Al-Arabiya* (February 4<sup>th</sup> 2015).

<sup>38</sup> The video can be accessed via <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYQEU9y1z4I>>. In response to the video released by Daesh, Radio HLA—the state radio of the Jordanian Armed

flew the Missing Man Formation over the town of Ay to coincide with the King's visit to the al-Kasasbeh family<sup>39</sup>. Schools across the country observed a minute of silence, followed by an hour of speeches appreciating his deeds. All throughout, he was referred to as a martyr<sup>40</sup> for the country. On the 6<sup>th</sup>, Queen Rania led a silent vigil and unity march, which thousands of Jordanians from all walks of life attended<sup>41</sup>. The local media was a critical driver throughout this period: agencies such as state-owned *The Jordan Times*, and *al-Rai*, and privately-owned *al-Ghad*, *ad-Dustour*, and *Assabeel* published countless articles<sup>42</sup>. Radio and television stations, such as state-owned *Television Urdoni* and privately-owned *al-Roya*, *Normina*, *al-Haqqiqah*, and *Seven Stars*, also gave round-the-clock coverage. The constant media coverage then is arguably the main reason al-Kasasbeh is so well-known<sup>43</sup>.

### People Power

But the actions of the state were dovetailed—perhaps dwarfed—by the actions of the people. According to interviewees, upon seeing the video, it was believed that there was no need for the country to do anything, for the acts speak for themselves, and “no story can breathe more than this story because it is real”. Rare moments like these see a convergence point for the entire country where raw emotions were collectively experienced, and everywhere people were crying and feeling the loss of a close kin. Interviewees reported not merely crying themselves, but witnessing their young children—as young as 8—crying and vowing to join the military to avenge the brutal death and rid the country of terrorism. But even before Jordanians learned of the horrific death of al-Kasasbeh, upon his capture two months prior (in December), people were already amassing in the *Divan* (reception home for all the tribes) to offer their support and proffer their ideas in negotiation. Some people even offered to trade positions with al-Kasasbeh, willingly volunteering to be a prisoner of Daesh in exchange for his return. The majority of the people were not interested in politics nor any wider governmental strategy; they merely wanted to see “the son of Jordan” returned safely to his home. Nonetheless, this two-month brewing period was critical in heightening awareness and developing social drama.

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Forces—replied with their own version of a revenge video that was one-minute forty-second long. In the video, Royal Jordanian Air Force personnel were shown arming their aircraft and preparing for revenge missions. Service members also scribbled scriptures from the Qur'an onto their aircraft and bombs, decrying Daesh as un-Islamic, and proclaiming that they are the enemies of Islam. They then carried out the air strikes, filmed by aircraft cameras showing explosions on the ground, and vowed to return for more.

<sup>39</sup> *Daily Mail* (February 6<sup>th</sup> 2015); *Al-Arabiya* (February 5<sup>th</sup> 2015).

<sup>40</sup> In the Arabic language, there is an important distinction between being dead (*mayyit*) and being killed as a martyr (*qateel*). Here and throughout, al-Kasasbeh was referred to as having been killed as a martyr.

<sup>41</sup> *Reuters* (February 6<sup>th</sup> 2015).

<sup>42</sup> *The Jordan Times* (December 24<sup>th</sup> 2014; February 3<sup>rd</sup>; February 3<sup>rd</sup>; and February 7<sup>th</sup>).

<sup>43</sup> A point of comparison can be brought to the light: another pilot, Lieutenant-Colonel Ibrahim Hassounch, lost his life two months after the video release of the death of al-Kasasbeh. But because his death was not as graphic or political, and there was a lack of media coverage—with the exception of an article written in the *Jordan Times*, it was known by only a small minority of society. An interviewee estimated that at most 60 thousand people might have known about this death, as opposed to the entire country about al-Kasasbeh. That different deaths are treated differently by the media, with some achieving martyrdom and others falling away into the sidelines, is something that should be considered in light of the troves of people signing up to join the military wishing to sacrifice their lives for the country.

Immediately upon the release of the video, people from all walks of life congregated in the area of Dabouq. An interviewee who was there estimates this to be between 700 and 800 people within an hour. 139 babies who were born on this day were named Muath to honor him, in yet another of multiple ways in which people tried to show solidarity. Eventually, after the al-Kasasbeh family returned to al-Karak, people streamed to visit them there and to mourn their loss. During vigils, many held candles or pictures of al-Kasasbeh and were waving the Jordanian flag. Chants of “We are all Muath” and “Hold Your Head High” could be heard. The first is a proper hashtag that has been retweeted over hundreds of thousands of times since his initial capture<sup>44</sup>. The second is a phrase popularized by King Abdullah in his speech promising vengeance<sup>45</sup>. Some even shouted “death to Daesh” and burned the effigies of Daesh leaders.

### Carved in Stone (Physical and Digital)

Following the initial mourning period, more permanent homages in the form of memorials were built. Most overt among them is the renovation of the Martyr Memorial in Amman, where over 3000 martyrs from 1910 to 1995 are honored<sup>46</sup>. It is no coincidence that the reconstruction project began in March 2015—a month after the death—scheduled to be completed in 2016. This project, costing hundreds of thousands of dollars, will see the addition of al-Kasasbeh’s name, the construction of additional structures, and upgrades to all three sections of the memorial and museum<sup>47</sup>. This memorial will chisel into stone al-Kasasbeh’s name and deed, elevating his death among many others to sacredness, and bounded by a narrative of sacrifice to the country. Apart from this monolithic structure, several other smaller-scale memorials have been constructed, and with more underway. At the University of Jordan, and at Sabha in

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<sup>44</sup> Magdy, Darwish, and Weber (2015) embark on a quantitative study of tweets to examine support and opposition of Daesh, particularly during seismic events, including the death of al-Kasasbeh. They believe that they are able to successfully determine someone’s stand vis-à-vis Daesh based on their language choice, and also said person’s future stand with 87% accuracy. They proffer several reasons for their formula and built profiles of people in both camps. Figures 3 and 4 in their paper show key events that tipped the scales in either side (2015: 5). For instance, pro-Daesh tweets generally peak upon incisive victories or the release of propaganda materials, whereas anti-Daesh tweets usually occur most during severe human rights violations. The single most surprising finding from their research is that Daesh supporters sometimes use—and re-appropriate—anti-Daesh hashtags for their own purposes. During the massive out-pour of grief for al-Kasasbeh, #we\_are\_all\_Muath was created and used by anti-Daesh people who were standing in solidarity with al-Kasasbeh. But according to Magdy et al., Daesh actively used the same hashtag to spread their own messages (4-5). The death of al-Kasasbeh was tragic to Jordanians and most of the world, but it was interpreted dichotomously as both as an atrocity committed and a victory earned by Daesh.

<sup>45</sup> Refer to Footnote 35.

<sup>46</sup> There are 34 plaques, each engraved with 3 columns of approximately 30 names respectively.

<sup>47</sup> On the top-most level, additional names will be added—including that of al-Kasasbeh—to existing plaques, together with the construction of a new star of Jordan structure as the centerpiece that will be erected high and surrounded by trees. Overlooking these will be the emblem of the military—the eagle—together with all the divisional flags with all branches represented. In the corner will be chamber-museums for the late Kings Abdullah, Abdullah I, Tala, and Hussein. On the middle level, cabinets with photographs and stories mounted onto walls will be designed so that the younger generation can learn about some of the sacrifices made by the heroes of Jordan and understand the history of the country. On the lowest level will stand a massive Islamic dome structure together with the state crest of Jordan.

Mafrag, airplane models of the fighter jet that al-Kasasbeh was flying before his capture have been constructed together with descriptions of his actions and life. These serve as physical reminders of his sacrifice. Some of these airplane models were newly constructed; others merely were renamed and reappropriated<sup>48</sup>. Numerous mosques have been or will be constructed in his name<sup>49</sup>. Schools, buildings, and streets across the country have also been renamed after him.

But some other acts are more organic and occur at a grassroots level. The wall on Queen Noor street in Amman, near to the Palestine Hospital and Duwwar ad-Dakhiliyah, has been painted with graffiti. A soldier—presumably al-Kasasbeh himself—stands, saluting into the distance, flanked by words of encouragement<sup>50</sup> and tributes to his heroism. This has been called the al-Kasasbeh mural by many Jordanians, and is a testament to the ground-up sentiments towards him. There are also several Facebook pages devoted to him, with the most popular and still regularly updated page: Lovers/Fans of the Hero Muath al-Kasasbeh (translated from the Arabic) drawing close to 150 thousand likes<sup>51</sup>, and several Twitter hashtags that have been retweeted hundreds of thousands of times in support of him<sup>52</sup>. The combination of acts undertaken by the state, wealthy donors, and the common people together show that this is much larger than any regular death, and is beyond the control of the state. As much as the state may be involved, many actions by the people prove that it is through the people that the structures of feeling are manifested.

## KEY STATISTICS

Following the death of al-Kasasbeh, The Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan conducted public opinion polling<sup>53</sup> from February 15th to 17th<sup>54</sup>. Sections 5 and 6 of the survey specifically aimed to measure attitudes about the death of al-Kasasbeh, and

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<sup>48</sup> For instance, the memorial at the University of Jordan was reappropriated for al-Kasasbeh. The plane memorial was merely repainted, and a plaque was added to detail the deeds of al-Kasasbeh.

<sup>49</sup> Among them is a massive structure in al-Karak funded by Muhammad Jaber al-Ramahi, a rich Jordanian businessman, who wishes not just for the family of al-Kasasbeh but also the wider community to benefit from learning about his deeds, and about Islam. Another donor, Dr Muhammad al-Jarah from the United States, donated a thousand umrah trips—a pilgrimage similar in structure to the Hajj but at a different time of year—on behalf of al-Kasasbeh.

<sup>50</sup> Painted in calligraphy is a poem that states that he has gone to meet (in heaven) Wasfi al-Tal, the highly-respected prime minister of Jordan who was assassinated tragically in 1971 during the Black September uprisings. Wasfi al-Tal's contributions to Jordan are aplenty, and it is a great honor to be considered his equal. Beside the poem is the popularized "Raise Your Head High" refrain. Close by is a smiling drawing of al-Kasasbeh within a seven-sided star, and several air planes that are dropping onto a city, not bombs, but hearts of various sizes.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/mo3az.alksasba/>; <https://www.facebook.com/moathlight/>; [https://www.facebook.com/%D9%83%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7\\_%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B0\\_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9-692086104244676/](https://www.facebook.com/%D9%83%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7_%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B0_%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9-692086104244676/); among others, some of which were more popular but have been taken down recently.

<sup>52</sup> #IamMoath; #WeAreAllMuath; various other Arabic hashtags

<sup>53</sup> This is in order to "measure the attitudes and trends of Jordanian citizens about some of the current national issues" (Center for Strategic Studies, the University of Jordan 2015).

<sup>54</sup> There is a "national sample of 2001 respondents aged 18 years and above, 50% males and 50% females[,] chosen randomly from 168 locations (Blocks) in Jordan". This covers all 12 governorates of Jordan and all demographic groups are represented. (ibid).



Jordan's responses. Here, some key statistics are reproduced<sup>55</sup>.

<i>Adapted from Figure 20:</i> Did you watch wholly or partially the video that shows the martyrdom of the pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh?			
<b>Yes</b>	77	<b>No</b>	23

<i>Adapted from Figure 21:</i> Did you participate in any of the following to express your solidarity or anger as a result of Muath al-Kasasbeh's martyrdom?	
<b>Participated in the solidarity march</b>	5
<b>Participated/ contributed in the consolation</b>	10
<b>Expressed your emotions via social media</b>	15
<b>I didn't participate</b>	32
<b>Prayer on the soul of the martyr</b>	37

<i>Adapted from Figure 22:</i> Do you think that the burning of the pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh by ISIS had a religious justification, or is it not religiously justified?			
<b>Justified</b>	1	<b>Unjustified</b>	99

<i>Adapted from Figure 23:</i> To what extent do you think that security services succeeded in handling the crises related to ISIS? (The negotiations to release martyr Muath, and the Jordanian response after his murder by ISIS)?	
<b>Was successful to a large, medium, small extent</b>	90
<b>Were not successful at all</b>	6
<b>Don't know/ refused to answer</b>	4

<i>Adapted from Figure 24:</i> There are several options for Jordan to deal with threats that ISIS poses. Which option do you agree with more than the other options?	
<b>Don't know/ refused to answer</b>	13
<b>Launching a ground war by Jordan and the Arabian part of the alliance</b>	6
<b>Launching a ground war waged by Jordan alone</b>	6
<b>Launching a ground war waged by Jordan, the Arabian alliance and the West</b>	15
<b>Continue directing air strikes as it is now</b>	60

<i>Adapted from Figure 25:</i> The Jordanian government executed the two prisoners: Sajida al-Rishawi and Ziad al-Karboly as an initial reaction to the murder of the pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh, Do you agree with the execution of the two prisoners or not?		
<b>I agree</b>	95	92
<b>I don't agree</b>	3	3

<sup>55</sup> I have made minor stylistic and typographical changes but refrained from changing word choice or grammar in order to retain the flavor of the survey.

Don't know	2	5
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## OFFICIAL NARRATIVE

The sacralization of the death of al-Kasasbeh has led to the creation of a bifocal symbol with two separate but interconnected messages. He is at once a symbol of the fight against religious fundamentalism (for the world) and a symbol of what it means to be Jordanian (for Jordanians). Prior to his death, Jordanians were split in opinion as to whether the fight against Daesh was justified. Those in opposition cited various reasons: that despite their atrocities, Daesh are Muslims afterall, and that Jordan should not be waging war against other Muslims; that Jordan should not be fighting “someone else’s (i.e. America’s) war”; and that Jordan should focus on internal issues such as poverty and unemployment. Those in support opined that the good name of Islam must be defended, and that religious fundamentalism should be nipped in the bud before it spreads to Jordan. But after al-Kasasbeh’s death, the tide turned towards wholehearted support, and public opinion polling by the Center for Strategic Studies<sup>56</sup> corroborates the sense of the interviewees. Jordanians are certainly happy to claim al-Kasasbeh as their hero defending Islam and setting a good example for the rest of the coalition. But more importantly, we must examine the symbol turned inwards: that al-Kasasbeh represents Jordan because he made the ultimate sacrifice for the nation. He did not die for his tribe, solely for his religion, or even for *JJOs* (as opposed to *JPOs*). Rather, his sacrifice was claimed by the nation; despite that he intersects various demographic groups, it was chiefly for his nation—not tribe nor religion or origin—that he died. In the era of United Nations where the nation-state, not the tribe, is the most legitimate form of polity, it is for the nation that deaths are claimed.

## ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE (OR, WHAT DO THE PEOPLE THINK?)

Interviewees are accustomed to discussing the first symbol especially with foreign journalists and those unfamiliar with the intricacies of Jordan, but generally believe it to be a straw man, with the second symbol as more important. Central to this symbol of Jordanian-ness is identity politics and the entrenched power play between parties. In other words, the demographic threat trumps religious fundamentalism in Jordan’s hierarchy of problems. Let us consider the demographic situation that is unique to Jordan: *JPOs*, in responding to the martyrdom of al-Kasasbeh, are likelier to voice disapproval for the war against Daesh, citing the Palestinian issue as worthier of attention and resources. While the world has turned its attention to the Syrian crisis, Palestinians feel that their crisis has been forgotten or ignored. Western obsession with Daesh is often misinformed and simplistic, whereas any solution to any Arab issue has to begin with addressing the Palestinian conflict.

*JJOs* may be equivocal about their support, but are completely unequivocal over their understanding of the heart of the issue: tribal power play. To understand the region is to understand systems of kinship, lineage, and tribal relations<sup>57</sup>, and the symbiotic

<sup>56</sup> Center for Strategic Studies, the University of Jordan (2015). Refer to section on “Key Statistics”.

<sup>57</sup> Tribes often occupy a liminal space in society and are usually marginalized or disenfranchised in numerous parts of the world. They are usually considered primitive people who are less refined and who are lost in time—uncivilized and undeveloped. But not so in Jordan, for there is an intricate power-sharing system among the monarchy, government, tribal leaders, and religious

relationship the state shares with its tribal leaders<sup>58</sup>. Because the monarchy has been facing tensions from various powerful tribes—this is not a secret—and is finding difficulty in appeasing dissenting factions, this symbol of Jordanian-ness is crucial in attempting to unite them. The al-Kasasbeh tribe<sup>59</sup>, which is part of the Bararsheh tribe from southern Jordan, is influential but not powerful: a perfect sweet spot for effective politicization. On one hand, because the tribe has traditionally been a firm support for the monarchy and has a strong representation in the military, the king is cognizant of its importance, and thus paid a visit immediately to the family upon receiving news of the downing and capture of the pilot. On the other hand, because the tribe is not outwardly challenging the monarchy, al-Kasasbeh could be transformed into a prime illustration of a martyr putting the nation before the tribe, and for the tribe to set an example for other tribes to unite in face of a common greater enemy that is Daesh (less significant) or anyone sullyng Islam (extremely significant).

It must be mentioned that many interviewees highlighted structural problems—apart from the fight against religious fundamentalism or the power politics—that the state should address, and which require policy changes and tangible effects that no symbol or power struggle can ameliorate. They have raised such concerns as rampant poverty, high unemployment and the lack of jobs, severe water shortages, and the repercussions of the refugee crisis. These are especially prevalent in peripheral zones such as the *Badia* (the desert areas), but spill over into the city centers as well. Also deserving of recognition is the existence of several versions conspiracy theories. There is a belief that U.S. foreign policy—together with the aid of Israel—directly created Daesh through the training, equipping, and advising of rebel forces. Some even believe that Daesh fighters train in military bases in the United States. This is believed to be of benefit to the Zionist cause, and further disenfranchise Palestinians and other Arabs. Another theory—discrediting American creation of Daesh—is that al-Kasasbeh was shot down through American intervention so as to incite public upheaval and harness support in fighting an American war that Jordan was not motivated in participating in. That the event garnered huge support for Jordan's involvement in the coalition force is often used as evidence to support this theory. On a macro-level, there is also assertion that there is an American grand strategy to destabilize the region to serve American interests in preserving and extending her power. These conspiracy theories—whether true or not—highlight the deep mistrust between Jordanians against their state and other foreign actors. But it is not the purpose of this project to provide solutions for any number of these current seemingly intractable problems in the Arab region, or determine the veracity of these conspiracy theories. Putting them aside, we shall focus on identity politics and the power

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imams. The narrative goes far back in history, with the Bedouins as the original inhabitants of the land. Despite strong attempts by the present King Abdullah II to “modernize the people” and bring in democratic reforms that are not based on tribal affiliations, the latter cannot be given enough attention in any political discussion. See Khoury and Kostiner (1990) for interrelations between, circumstances leading to, and patterns developing from, tribes and state formation in the Middle East.

<sup>58</sup> The state required the support of tribes from the onset, and currently effectively uses “familiar tribal traditions and practices ... [to buffer] society against the abrasive waves of change” (Khoury and Kostiner 1990: 17), for if there exists resistance to the state, the tribe is still a polity that is able to negotiate for the individual, and indeed arbitrate among large populations. Tribes also rely on the state “simply to survive ... [and] leverage on the state to enhance their opportunities vis-à-vis other competitive groups” (18) in an era increasingly difficult for tribes to hold on to older ways of being.

<sup>59</sup> *The New York Times* (January 31<sup>st</sup> 2015).

struggle.

## DOMESTIC ISSUES VERSUS EXTERNAL ISSUES

What this research aims to propose is that while foreign commentators are overwhelmingly prioritize Syria, and while there seems to be an obsession with Daesh, perhaps due to their graphic mode of operation, domestic issues far outweigh external issues. This is not to say that the state is unconcerned with extremism; of course it is. An interviewee mentioned that the state has been pouring in steady funds for developmental projects<sup>60</sup> planned for fringe communities in the *Badia* precisely to preempt any growing support for extremist movements (Daesh, but also others, such as the Salafists). Certain cities such as Ma'an, al-Mafraq, and az-Zarqa are known to be hotspots for anti-government movements, and are being carefully scrutinized by state intelligence agencies. But the deeper and more pervasive issue—for the state, and perceived by the people—is indubitably internal, and can be distilled to the entanglement of two facets: the Palestinian issue (which I categorize as domestic for simplicity) and the tribal issue.

In 2011 King Abdullah II of Jordan wrote a book about his take on the Arab-Israeli conflict. In *Our Last Best Chance: The Pursuit of Peace in a Time of Peril*, he explains the internal struggles of the state set in the geopolitical situation—and catastrophes—of the region, littered with anecdotes of his childhood experiences of war and diplomacy, foreign education, military career, and marriage. While ostensibly a book “for the people of Jordan,”<sup>61</sup> as stated in his dedication, the book—written in English and not Arabic—is really for Western policy makers—especially the Obama administration<sup>62</sup>, and politicians of both sides of the Israeli-Arab conflict. He claims that it really is a 57-state solution, because the creation of a Palestinian state in Israel—and not any peace treaty or empty initiative that promises plenty but delivers nothing—would allow many Arab states to normalize relations with Israel and prioritize real peace over any lofty ideas of justice. But because of various factors—such as the expansion of settlements, and the changing political climate—time is running out, and “our last best chance” (the title of the book) is now (i.e. before the end of the Obama presidency).

From the pilot we can see deep fissures in the structure because he is at once a symbol employed by the state and a jumping-off point for citizens to voice their opinions on a wide variety of issues. Despite the imminence of the Syrian crisis, it is projected to be temporary, whereas the future of the Palestinian crisis looms with greater uncertainty. Some have suggested that, failing a two-state solution in Israel, a similar proposal can be pursued in Jordan<sup>63</sup>, where land is more abundant, and where settler-inhabitant tensions

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<sup>60</sup> For example, the Jordanian Hashemite Fund for Human Development (JOHUD) runs various developmental projects, such as microfinance programs, fodder cultivation enhancements, livestock productions, and various training centers.

<sup>61</sup> The dedication of the book reads: “This book is for the people of Jordan.” (2011).

<sup>62</sup> In the book, King Abdullah II reminisces about his close working relationship with former United States president Bill Clinton, and how they worked together on numerous peace deals, but unfortunately success eluded them. Now, he writes to the Obama administration in a plea for furthering the two-state solution before time runs out. Commentators on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict note that this is increasingly difficult to achieve (i.e. two states) due to the surge in the expansion of settlements.

<sup>63</sup> Because it is increasingly difficult to hypothetically annex land in the state of Israel for the state of Palestine, some have suggested that a state of Palestine in Jordan (i.e. the East Bank rather

are less protracted. But of course, this would not be agreeable to the indigenous tribes of Jordan, who are already at odds with various state policies that seem to favor city-folk (especially in Amman) and trickle down to *JPOs* more significantly.

### **COROLLARY: OUTWARD SOLUTIONS FOR INTERNAL PROBLEMS**

Accepting that domestic issues far outweigh external ones, I propose that a corollary is that the state looks outwards for solutions, and especially to legitimize itself. Let us first consider two important treatises. In 2004, religious scholars in Jordan delivered the *Amman Message*,<sup>64</sup> a statement advocating tolerance and unity within the Islamic world. Subsequently in 2005, over 200 Muslim scholars from 50 countries adopted a three-point ruling that determined what it meant to be Muslim<sup>65</sup>; of supreme importance is the assertion that it is forbidden for Muslims to declare other Muslims as *kafir* (non-believers)<sup>66</sup>. Since 2009, a document *The 500 Most Influential Muslims* has been published yearly<sup>67</sup>. It sets out to name the most powerful Muslims in the world, containing politicians, scholars (i.e. the *ulama*), scientists, businessmen, philanthropists, and even celebrities. Doubtlessly, power is overwhelmingly concentrated among the politicians and scholars, and the top spot is usually reserved for the former—kings, presidents, prime ministers—or the latter—*muftis*, *sheikhs*, and *imams*. In the most recent publication in 2016, King Abdullah II of Jordan came in at the number one spot for being in the “eye of two hurricanes”<sup>68</sup> (i.e. the Syrian and Palestinian crises). It is necessary to note that this project is headed by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center based off Amman, Jordan.

As with the *Amman Message* and the *Top 500* list, the content itself is not controversial; most people do stand behind the principles of harmony within the Islamic world, just as most do agree with the list, even if there may be slight disputes over who is more deserving or representative. But it is the act itself—the coordinating of popular opinion backed by scholarly affirmation—and the motivations behind it, in both these cases, that

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than the West Bank) might be more viable. See Zahran (2012) for why Jordan is surely disagreeable to this.

<sup>64</sup> The Amman Message (2004).

<sup>65</sup> (1) Whosoever is an adherent to one of the four *Sunni* schools (*Mathabib*) of Islamic jurisprudence (*Hanafi*, *Maliki*, *Shafi'i* and *Hanbali*), the two *Shi'i* schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*Jafari* and *Zaydi*), the *Ibadi* school of Islamic jurisprudence and the *Thahiri* school of Islamic jurisprudence, is a Muslim. Declaring that person an apostate is impossible and impermissible. (*shortened*)

(2) There exists more in common between the various schools of Islamic jurisprudence than there is difference between them. [...] Disagreements between the '*ulama* (scholars) of the eight schools of Islamic jurisprudence are only with respect to the ancillary branches of religion (*furu*) and not as regards the principles and fundamentals (*usul*) [of the religion of Islam]. Disagreement with respect to the ancillary branches of religion (*furu*) is a mercy. Long ago it was said that variance in opinion among the '*ulama* (scholars) “is a good affair”. (*shortened*)

(3) Acknowledgement of the schools of Islamic jurisprudence (*Mathabib*) within Islam means adhering to a fundamental methodology in the issuance of *fatwas*: no one may issue a *fatwa* without the requisite personal qualifications which each school of Islamic jurisprudence determines [for its own adherents]. (*shortened*)

Accessed via <<http://ammanmessage.com/the-three-points-of-the-amman-message-v-1/>>.

<sup>66</sup> Daesh and other fundamentalist groups often resort to declaring other Muslims as non-Muslims.

<sup>67</sup> The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre (2008).

<sup>68</sup> The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre (2015: 37).

suggests an attempt at the consolidation of power—through naming—and at legitimization of the state—through mass external support. Traditionally, the power struggle (within the Sunnis) in the Islamic world has been between Saudi Arabia—through the Salafist movement<sup>69</sup>—and Egypt—through Al-Azhar University, the most prestigious university in the Islamic world<sup>70</sup>. Here one is able to witness the entrance of a new actor (Jordan) not by challenging the legitimacy of the aforementioned, but by setting an example of moderate Islam and leading the majority of the Muslims in the world through it.

At the bottom of the page of the blurb on King Abdullah II, a small section is dedicated to Muath al-Kasasbeh, with a short description of his deeds, fate, and posthumous promotion, and even a still picture of him just prior to when flames engulfed his body. A sentence reads, “Despite *all efforts* by HM King Abdullah II and the Jordanian government *to secure his release*, DA’ISH killed the pilot while still pretending to negotiate with Jordan”<sup>71</sup> (emphasis mine). The official narrative is set in stone (through memorials) and fixed in black and white (through books, news articles) without a trace of any alternative versions. Here I raise a somewhat rhetorical question: is the state using the pilot to further its legitimacy of rule through dark times, and using the support of not just the Arab world but also the West and the rest to quell internal discontent?

### **BACK TO AL-KASASBEH (OR A CONCLUSION?)**

Al-Kasasbeh death and the tale of his sacrifice to nation will go down as a key episode in Jordan’s modern history. The transformation of al-Kasasbeh into a symbol has been extensively discussed. This is through concrete actions by the state, but also from the visceral reactions of the people, married into a unique situation that is at once polarizing and unifying. Individual affiliations notwithstanding, al-Kasasbeh has been made into a suitable rallying point for all demographics. Regardless of tribe, religion, or origin, Jordanians have put aside their differences to mourn their martyr and remember his service to and sacrifice for the country. His death came at an opportune moment for the country struggling against a plethora of domestic and foreign problems to justify herself and her self-determination.

The state and the people want the world to know that he is a symbol of their sacrifice in spearheading the efforts of the fight against terrorism that goes beyond mere rhetoric. And to the outside world, he is a synecdoche for Jordan. His death embodies the atrocity of Daesh and affirms Western belief in their various interventions in the Middle East. Today, almost all news articles by foreign media about Jordan—regardless of the topic at hand—will reference al-Kasasbeh and his immolation by Daesh. Al-Kasasbeh—which is at once the standard shorthand to refer to him and the name of his tribe—becomes a landmark for the international community together with Jordan to rely on.

By inviting discussion about the state of the nation, its direction and challenges, his death is at once a rallying point and a point of contention. On the surface, Jordanians do not deny that al-Kasasbeh is a hero. Most do not even deny that the politicization of his death is necessary. Delving deeper, there is a split of opinion over whether the actions by the state are successful or not. Some insist that the fight against Daesh is unjustified or

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<sup>69</sup> Ayoob (2008).

<sup>70</sup> *The Washington Post* (March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012).

<sup>71</sup> The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre (2015: 37).

imprudent; others mourn the diversion of attention away from Palestine; yet others propose systemic and structural changes. On a more nuanced level, there is an awareness of the power struggle—both internal and external—and an agreement over the strength of the symbolism generated through al-Kasasbeh because of the alignment of various factors beyond state control.

He is a symbol of the fight against Islamic fundamentalism but a bigger symbol of what it means to be Jordanian. He also represents the real issue: that Jordan is enmeshed in the Syrian crisis and the conflict with Daesh, but the heart has been and still is the twin internal problems of Palestine and the tribes. He has been a powerful tool for Jordan to use external influence to solve internal problems. Today, he is the second most famous person in the kingdom after the king himself. And in years to come, it will be him that Jordanians will remember – not any specific policy or even event. It can perhaps be argued then, that in his death, he did more for his country than he ever could have in his life.

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## PLATES

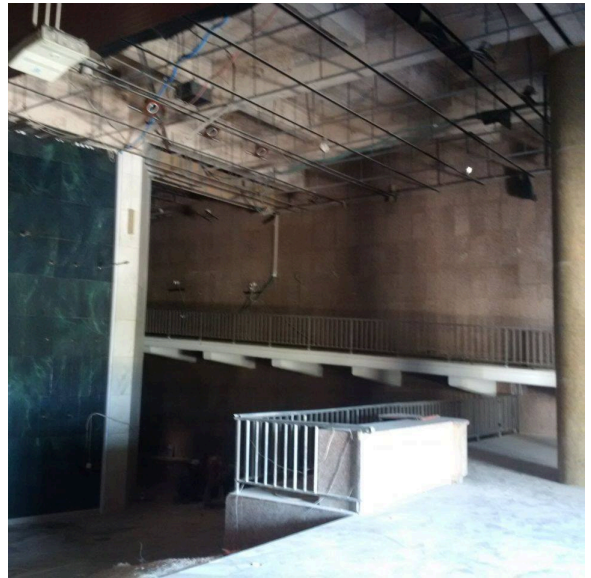


**Plate 1:** al-Kasasbeh memorial at the University of Jordan



**Plate 2:** al-Kasasbeh memorial in the town of al-Sabha





Plates 3, 4, 5 and 6: Martyr Memorial in Sport City, Amman





Plates 7 and 8: Top Level of the Martyr Memorial



Plates 9 and 10: al-Kasasbeh Mural on Queen Noor Street



