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## The Western Coalition and ISIS: Benign State Violence vs. Barbaric Terrorism

By Matt Peppe

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*Seven months ago, UK Prime Minister David Cameron lamented the “sickening murder” of Jordanian pilot Moaz al-Kaseasbeh by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). President Barack Obama also decried the “viciousness and barbarity” of the act. Obama even declared al-Kaseasbeh’s murder demonstrated ISIS’s “bankrupt” ideology. In his home country, al-Kaseasbeh was remembered as a “hero” and a “martyr” by government officials. The killing was seen by the Western coalition and allied Arab monarchies fighting ISIS as a symbol of the evilness of their enemies, which necessitated their own righteous military intervention.*

The act that precipitated such a strong reaction was the purported execution of the 26-year-old al-Kaseasbeh. He was burned alive inside a cage after several months in captivity. As part of ISIS’s propaganda campaign, they posted the video on Youtube. The authenticity of the video has since been questioned, but there is no doubt that regardless of the method used, he was indeed killed.

Al-Kaseasbeh was not an innocent civilian. In fact, he was a pilot in the Royal Jordanian Air Force who was bombing territory controlled by ISIS when his F-16 fighter jet crashed. That is to say, he was an active combatant in military hostilities. His combatant status would be equivalent to an ISIS pilot (if they had an Air Force) apprehended after bombing New York City or London. Though it was reported in the British newspaper The Telegraph that al-Kaseasbeh was “kidnapped,” a military combatant engaged in armed conflict on the battlefield cannot be kidnapped. He was captured.

According to the Geneva Conventions, Prisoners of War enjoy protected status that guarantees their humane treatment and eventual release at the end of hostilities. “POWs cannot be prosecuted for taking a direct part in hostilities. Their detention is not a form of punishment, but only aims to prevent further participation in the conflict. They must be released and repatriated without delay after the end of hostilities,” writes the International Committee of the Red Cross.

ISIS would have no legal grounds to kill al-Kaseasbeh, but it was cynical and sanctimonious for the Western coalition to react with such outrage when he was killed. Those same countries have embraced and celebrated summary assassinations and executions on a scale far more massive than anything ISIS could ever be capable of.

Several weeks ago, Cameron ordered the assassination of two British citizens in Syria alleged to be ISIS militants.

“The strike against British citizen Reyaad Khan, the ‘target of the strike,’ was committed without approval from Parliament. British citizen Ruhul Amin, who was killed in the strike, was deemed an ‘associate’ worthy of death,” writes Kevin Gosztola in Shadowproof.

The British government has not declared war on Syria and has not released any legal justification for its actions. Naturally, any legal documentation they did produce would be merely pseudo-

legal cover that would never withstand real judicial scrutiny.

Cameron's actions in ordering the murder of his own citizens follows the well-treaded path of Obama, whose large-scale drone program in as many as seven countries (none of which the US Congress has declared war on) have killed more than 2,500 people in six years. The President has quipped that he is "really good at killing people."

By any measure, the drone assassination program has been wildly reckless and ineffective. One study determined that missile strikes from unmanned drones, launched by remote-control jockeys in air-controlled trailers in the American desert, kill 28 unknown people for every intended target. In Pakistan, a study revealed that only 4% of those killed have been identified as members of al Qaeda.

Among the victims have been 12 people on their way to a wedding in Yemen, and a 13-year-old boy who said that he lived in constant fear of "death machines" that had already killed his father and brother before taking his own life.

"A lot of the kids in this area wake up from sleeping because of nightmares from then and some now have mental problems. They turned our area into hell and continuous horror, day and night, we even dream of them in our sleep," the now-deceased boy, Mohammed Tuaiman, told The Guardian.

Before Cameron did so, Obama also targeted citizens of his own country for assassination without trial. The most well known case is of Anwar al-Awlaki, killed by a drone strike in 2011. The government claimed he was operationally active in al-Qaeda, but this was never tested in court.

"It is likely the real reason Anwar al-Awlaki was killed is that he was seen as a radicalizer whose ideological activities were capable of driving Western Muslims to terrorist violence," writes Arun Kundnani in *The Muslims Are Coming!*.

In other words, the Obama administration decided his speech was not protected by the 1st amendment to the US Constitution, and rather than being obligated to test this theory in court they unilaterally claimed the right to assassinate him, the way King John of England would have been able to order the execution of one of his subjects before signing the Magna Carta 800 years ago.

Three weeks later, al-Awlaki's 16-year-old son was killed in a drone strike. An Obama adviser justified the strike by saying he should have "had a more responsible father."

Writing on his blog, former British security services officer Craig Murray claims that in light of the decision 20 years ago by the European Court of Human Rights that targeted assassinations when an attack was no imminent were illegal, the British government cannot claim its drone strike in Syria "is anything other than murder."

“For the government to claim the right to kill British people through sci-fi execution, based on highly unreliable secret intelligence and a secret declaration of legality, is so shocking I find it difficult to believe it is happening even as I type the words. Are we so cowed as to accept this?” Murray writes.

In the United States, the targeting of certain civilians for elimination was recently enshrined in the Pentagon’s “law of war manual.” The guidelines make the dubious claim that journalists in war zones may be considered as belonging to the fictional legal category of “unprivileged belligerents,” and as such be killed. A West Point Professor soon after went as far as declaring that critics of the War on Terror could be considered “lawful targets,” though he has since resigned.

ISIS is undoubtedly a brutal organization with little respect for human rights, as accounts of survivors and defectors attest. They have been credibly accused of ethnic cleansing on a “historic scale,” torture and forced sexual slavery. But certain actions such as the execution of American and Japanese journalists and execution of the Jordanian pilot are represented as a unique incarnation of evil itself, as if colonial Western nations didn’t have a history of hundreds of years of similar genocidal behaviors.

This ahistorical demonization ignores not only the political roots of the group as a product of the invasion of Iraq, horrific torture at Abu Ghraib and intervention promoting sectarian conflict in Syria, but the fact that the US and UK governments have committed equally horrifying violence that they themselves, the media, and even human rights groups dismiss as either a necessary reaction to the violence of their adversaries or as an unintended consequence of justified policies.

So what makes ISIS’s executions supposedly morally outrageous compared to those of the Americans and the British? Are ISIS’s killing really less morally justified? Are they indicative of the group’s medieval savagery compared to Western decency?

Al-Kaseasbeh was a combatant who had been dropping bombs on the people who eventually killed him. That much is beyond dispute. The US and UK kill people – including their own citizens who enjoy Constitutional protections of due process – through drone strikes merely for being *suspected* militants who might *one day* seek to attack those countries.

Certainly burning a human being alive is a sadistic and cruel method of killing someone. But is it any less so to incinerate a human being by a Hellfire missile? Former drone operator Brandon Bryant told NBC News that he saw his victim “running forward, he’s missing his right leg... And I watch this guy bleed out and, I mean, the blood is hot.” Is a drone strike less cruel because the operator is thousands of miles away from the bloodshed, watching on a screen rather than in person?

The late Mohammed Tuaiman attested that he and his neighbors were terrified by the omnipresence of the “death machines” that could at any second of the day blow him to pieces without warning or the possibility of escape. Were the people in ISIS controlled territory as

terrorized as Tuaiman by the burning of the Jordanian pilot, who was specifically targeted because he had been caught after bombing the same people who now held him captive? Surely they were not *more* terrorized, though perhaps they might have been equally so.

It would be hypocritical to justify one form of extrajudicial killing while demonizing another. Yet that is exactly what happens when one form of violence is undertaken by a state and another is not. The New York Times is indicative of broader public opinion when it decries the “fanatical vision” of ISIS that has “shocked and terrified the peoples of Iraq and Syria,” while accepting Obama’s rationalizations of deaths via drone strikes as collateral damage, maintaining only that he should “provide a fuller accounting” to enable an “informed debate.”

Such apologies for state violence allow those in power to evade accountability, and open the door for other states to undertake similar violence and then claim they are simply following accepted international standards. The same nation that introduced the world to nuclear weapons – and now selectively condemns those it opposes having such weapons themselves – may well be blazing the trail of an even more immediate and omnipresent international scourge.

“Pakistan is the latest member of a growing technological club of nations: those who have successfully weaponized drones,” writes Spencer Ackerman in The Guardian. “In addition to the US, UK and Israel, a recent New America Foundation report highlighted credible accounts that Iran, South Africa, France, China and Somalia possess armed drones, as do the terrorist groups Hamas and Hezbollah. Russia says it is working on its own model.”

One day in the not too distant future, the skies across the world may be full of drones from every country dispensing justice from Miami to Mumbai via Hellfire Missiles, relegating the rule of law and its method of trial by jury to the ash heap of history. And it will not be because of terrorist groups like ISIS that governments and the media are so forceful to condemn, but because of governments themselves and their lapdogs in the media who refuse to apply the same standards when judging violence to states that have their own Air Forces.