

Jordan and Emirates Carry Out Airstrikes in Syria Against Islamic State

By HELENE COOPER and ANNE BARNARD

WASHINGTON — Fighter jets deployed by Arab allies launched a series of airstrikes in Syria in the early hours Tuesday, as the United Arab Emirates returned to combat missions against the Islamic State for the first time since December, and Jordan separately continued its escalation of strikes against Sunni militants.

A squadron of Emirati F-16 fighters struck Islamic State targets in Syria and returned safely to base in Jordan, the U.A.E. Armed Forces announced.

Emirati officials said the concerns that had prompted them to suspend combat missions — that the United States Central Command had not deployed sufficient assets closer to the battlefield to rescue downed pilots — had now been addressed.

Jordan also stepped up its

Helene Cooper reported from Washington, and Anne Barnard from Beirut, Lebanon.

raids; Mansour Jaboor, the head of Jordan's Air Force, said that Jordan had carried out 56 airstrikes against the Islamic State in recent days, as King Abdullah of Jordan continued to make good on his promise to avenge the immolation of a Jordanian pilot by the militant Sunni group.

Bahrain's ruler issued a public statement that his country was ready to assist Jordan in the fight against the Islamic State, according to a statement released by Jordan's palace.

Jordanian officials denied reports of a large movement of ground troops toward the Iraqi border, and asked journalists to "be careful and to abide by the information that is issued by the concerned agencies and the Jordan Armed Forces."

"There is no talk about a ground war," one official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity in accordance with government protocol. "We will not be reluctant to face this criminal gang in any place in the world to

defend our religion, our nation, and the future of our country and our sons.

But in other ways, since last week, when the video of the pilot being burned alive was released, King Abdullah has been stepping up raids on the Islamic State — or at least increasingly publicizing them — and working to increase Arab participation in the coalition against the group.

The public announcements of increased Arab participation in the fight against the Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, is welcome news for the Obama administration, which has sought to characterize the fight against the Sunni militants as an international coalition with Arab participation.

While American pilots have by far carried out the bulk of the combat missions in Iraq and Syria, the United States is loath to appear as if it is acting alone. So the suspension of Emirati combat missions in December came as a blow.

American military officials maintained that Islamic State fighters captured the Jordanian pilot, First Lt. Moaz al-Kasasbeh, within minutes after his plane went down, and said that search teams did not have enough time to locate him before he was captured. A senior military official said that Lieutenant Kasasbeh's parachute had been spotted quickly by the militants and that he had landed right in their midst.

But his capture raised questions about whether rescue teams would have been able to get to him within the so-called golden hour, after which time chances of survival from a crash or injury drop sharply. When United Arab Emirates officials discovered that most of the rescue teams and aircraft were based in Kuwait, they said that their pilots would not fly until there was a system in place for more rapid search and rescue.

Last week, the United States Central Command notified Unit-

ed Arab Emirates officials that they had sent additional rescue helicopters to Erbil, Iraq.

In an interview on Tuesday, Yousef al-Otaiba, the United Arab Emirates ambassador to the United States, said that Emirati concerns had been addressed.

"The suspension of combat operations was made for purely operational and planning reasons, not political ones," Mr. Otaiba said. He added that the Emirates was "fully committed" to defeating the Islamic State "and will not back down."

But far more than the oil-rich Gulf Arab states, Jordan is dealing with poverty and unemployment, said Hasan Abu Hanieh, a Jordanian expert on Islamist groups. The Obama administration has increased aid to Jordan, and Congress is prodding the White House to increase military assistance as well.

Jordan, however, "needs to make sure the public feels they have a real say in this," Mr. Hanieh said. Other analysts said

that the most significant contribution that Jordan could make could be through its intelligence contacts, strengthened by clan and tribal links to Iraqis across the border.

President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, in a rare interview with the BBC on Monday, denied the widely documented use of indiscriminate barrel bombs by Syrian government forces against civilian areas.

"I know about the army," Mr. Assad said. "They use bullets, missiles and bombs. I haven't heard of the army using barrels, or maybe cooking pots."

Mr. Assad also maintained that Damascus was being informed about airstrikes against the Islamic State, and said that they could help his government if they were "more serious."

But the Pentagon press secretary, Rear Adm. John Kirby, said the United States was not "communicating or coordinating our military operations with the Assad regime."

Proof of Death in Hand, Family Honors Hostage

By RUKMINI CALLIMACHI and ERIC SCHMITT

For one tortured weekend, the parents of Kayla Mueller refused to believe that their daughter was dead. From their home in Prescott, Ariz., they issued an impassioned plea to the Islamic State, which had held her captive since August 2013, and urged the extremist organization to contact them privately with proof of her death. The militants acquiesced and sent at least three photographs of her corpse.

Those photos are among the few clues about her life and death in captivity, as is a letter that she wrote from her cell last year and that her family made public on Tuesday.

Two people briefed on the family's communication with the Islamic State said that her parents had received at least three photos. Two showed Ms. Mueller, who was 26, in a black hijab, or Muslim head covering, that partly obscured her face. Another showed her in a white burial shroud, which is used in traditional Muslim funerals. The images showed bruises on the face, but both people, who reviewed the photographs and asked not to be identified given the sensitivity of the matter, said it remained unclear whether her injuries were consistent with being killed in the rubble of a flattened building, as the Islamic State reported.

The group, also known as ISIS or ISIL, said on Twitter last week that Ms. Mueller had died in a building that had been demolished by Jordanian airstrikes, a claim that both the White House and Jordan's government said was unfounded.

Yet the images sent to her family did not completely rule out death in that manner.

One of the two people briefed on the evidence said that Ms. Mueller's face did not show puffiness or other concussive effects associated with a bomb blast, making it unlikely that she was killed when the area was hit, as the Islamic State said. But the same person said that she could have been in a nearby building or struck by flying debris.

American officials confirmed that the structure was bombed in coalition airstrikes last week.

The authorities insisted that the building, a weapons storage facility, was a legitimate target

Rick Rojas contributed reporting from Prescott, Ariz.

and explained that they had conducted detailed surveillance to make sure that no hostages were seen going in or out. But a senior American official who requested anonymity to discuss classified information acknowledged that they had not been able to survey the building around the clock.

"We have no definitive evidence of how, or when, she died," he added.

Described by friends and family members as a deeply idealistic young woman eager to help those less fortunate, Ms. Mueller was just shy of her 25th birthday on Aug. 4, 2013, when she disappeared in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo.

She had arrived in Syria a day earlier with a Syrian man who has been described as her boyfriend or colleague.

He had been contracted to fix the Internet connection at a Doctors Without Borders office, and employees of the international charity were flabbergasted when Ms. Mueller showed up with him.

Syria was then a no-go zone for most international aid workers, said employees of the charity, who explained that they had reluctantly housed her overnight and agreed to drive her to a bus station for what was supposed to be her trip back to Turkey.

Her car was ambushed on the way, and she and her Syrian companion were abducted. He was later freed and has declined to speak about what happened.

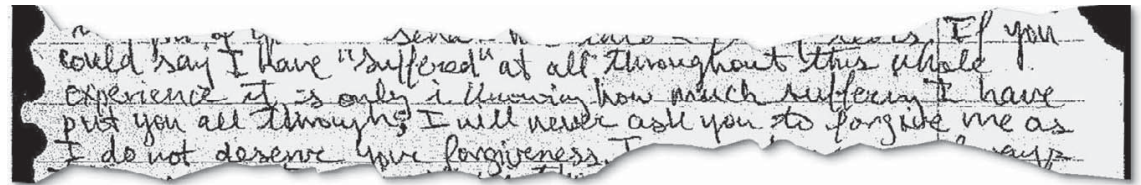
Once in the hands of the militants, Ms. Mueller was forced to wear the hijab and was placed in a cell with female detainees, according to two former hostages held in the same facility. She was moved a number of times, and witnesses saw her inside a potato chip factory near Aleppo and later at a prison set up on the grounds of a gas installation in Raqqa, the capital of the group's self-declared caliphate.

While many of the male hostages were tortured, the female captives, including three staffers of Doctors Without Borders, were treated relatively well, according to a European hostage who met Ms. Mueller during his month-long captivity last year. The women were not beaten, he said, and he said he believed that they were not sexually molested.

This seemed to be confirmed in a letter that Ms. Mueller wrote to her family last year and that her parents released on Tuesday. On a piece of lined notebook pa-



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JAROD OPPERMAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Kayla Mueller, above, wrote about her captivity in a letter that her family made public Tuesday. At left, Ms. Mueller's aunts, Terry Crippes and Lori Lyon, paid tribute to her.

per, she wrote in crowded, cursive script: "Everyone, if you are receiving this letter it means I am still detained but my cellmates ... have been released."

"Please know that I am in a safe location, completely unharmed + healthy (put on weight in fact); I have been treated w/utmost respect + kindness."

She begged her family for forgiveness: "If you could say I have 'suffered' at all throughout this whole experience it is only in knowing how much suffering I have put you all through," she wrote. "I will never ask you to

forgive me as I do not deserve forgiveness."

In Arizona, her extended family and friends gathered by the steps of the Yavapai County courthouse to ponder what had driven her to such a dangerous place. They and others described a deeply committed young woman who refused to avert her eyes from the suffering of others.

"Kayla has touched the heart of the world," said her aunt Lori Lyon, speaking on behalf of the family.

Her desire to help solve world problems was already on display

in high school, where she became involved with a campaign that aimed to stop Flagstaff, Ariz., city officials from using recycled waste water to make snow on a set of peaks considered sacred to the Hopi people. By the time she enrolled at Northern Arizona University in 2007, the Save the Peaks campaign was just one of an array of causes she was engaged with, said her former classmate Leslie Alamer, who helped set up a website honoring her friend's legacy.

"Every time I ran into her on campus, she was organizing something, or talking about a new issue, or else inviting me to an event. She was so active," said Ms. Alamer, 28, rattling off the causes Ms. Mueller had joined, including one that called attention to atrocities in Darfur, Sudan.

In college, she began researching accusations of mistreatment of detainees at the military base in Guantánamo Bay, Ms. Alamer said.

After graduating in 2009, Ms. Mueller moved to India, and soon

after to Israel. In 2010, she volunteered with the International Solidarity Movement in the Palestinian territories, according to Abdullah Abu Rahma, the group's coordinator in the village of Bil'in.

He said Ms. Mueller had joined them in using nonviolent means to protest the Israeli occupation. She lived with families in East Jerusalem in order to try to prevent the demolition of their homes. On her blog, she described sleeping in front of half-destroyed homes, using her body as a shield against the bulldozers they feared were coming.

Kathleen Day, head of the United Christian ministry at Northern Arizona University, remembered how Ms. Mueller used her blog as a way to encourage her peers to get involved. She did not just write a blog post and leave it at that: She sent it to friends and family, asking them to forward it to others and to take action.

"It's not that she's so angelic," Ms. Day said. "She saw things and did what she could, whatever she could, however she could."

Rapper, Shaped by Tumultuous German Youth, Is Designated a Global Terrorist

By ALISON SMALE

BERLIN — Denis Cuspert was drawn early to gangsta rap, and later to Islam. Born and raised in West Berlin, jeered at as a half-African child and often at odds with his American stepfather, he fell in with Salafists in Germany, left for Egypt in 2012 and made his way, eventually, to Syria. By last spring, the German authorities said, he had joined Islamic State guerrillas and swore allegiance to their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

This week, Mr. Cuspert was transformed again. The American State Department announced Monday that, as "a willing pitchman" for the extremist group's "atrocities," Mr. Cuspert was now a "specially designated global terrorist" sought worldwide.

The designation means that Mr. Cuspert, 39, has gone from being a notorious figure in Germany to one recognized everywhere, and it puts him in the cross hairs of American intelligence in the Syrian region.

Eric Schmitt contributed reporting from Washington.

The potential evidence against him includes a July 2014 video that, a German report says, shows Mr. Cuspert and a pile of corpses in civilian clothes, apparently victims of a battle for control of the much-contested Shaer gas field near Homs in Syria.

"Cuspert has been on the radar for a while, mainly because he's so high profile," said a former senior American counterterrorism official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss confidential intelligence reports.

The announcement in Washington followed declarations by President Obama and Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany on Monday, during her visit to the White House, about their continuing cooperation in tracking terror suspects and gathering intelligence in the region.

The relationship between Germany and the United States on intelligence-gathering was shaken in 2013 after Edward J. Snowden revealed the extent to which ordinary Germans were affected and Der Spiegel reported that the Americans had eavesdropped on Ms. Merkel's cellphone.

At the White House on Monday, Mr. Obama appealed to Germans, who are sensitive about government surveillance because of their Nazi and Communist pasts, to trust Americans not to overstep the line. Ms. Merkel, in turn, stressed how Germany relies on the United States' intelligence-gathering capacity to guarantee public safety.

State Department officials in Washington said on Tuesday that the designation of Mr. Cuspert had been published without fanfare in the American government's Federal Register on Jan. 27.

Mr. Cuspert, a.k.a. the rapper Deso Dogg, now goes by Abu Talha al-Almani, according to German and American officials.

He became one of the best-known singers of nasheeds, or Islamic devotional music, in Germany. According to security officials and excerpts from videos posted online, Mr. Cuspert sings of the comradeship of battle.

His themes include martyrdom: "I wish for my death and can hardly wait for it/Armed with bombs and grenades," goes one

song from 2013, according to a report on Mr. Cuspert compiled by security officials in Berlin.

That report concluded that "in just four years, he developed from a respected, but financially not very successful, 'gangsta rapper' to an internationally recognized propagandist of jihad and Salafism."



Denis Cuspert

Mr. Cuspert was born in Berlin to a German mother and a Ghanaian father who soon left the family. His American stepfather, a former soldier, was a strict disciplinarian, and conflicts at home increased until Mr. Cuspert spent five years in a home for troubled children. "I grew up with racism," he told The New York Times in 2011.

He said he had joined youth gangs because he was in search of an identity. From an early age, he trained in Thai boxing, taekwondo and jujitsu.

His rap career reached its zenith when he went on tour with DMX in 2006.

By 2010, according to Berlin security officials, he had appeared in a video with Pierre Vogel, a well-known Salafist preacher, who asked about rap connections and what might happen if other rappers embraced Islam.

In 2011, when a 21-year-old immigrant from Kosovo, Arid Uka, fatally shot two American airmen at the Frankfurt airport, he said he had opened fire after seeing a video that claimed to show a Muslim woman being raped by men in United States military uniforms. Mr. Cuspert acknowledged posting the video, which Mr. Uka copied. American officials said it was staged.

In 2012, Mr. Cuspert fell in with an Austrian, Mohamed Mahmoud, and they started a group, Millatu Ibrahim, that was banned after a clash with the police. The two men left for Egypt, reportedly heading for Mali, but landed eventually in Syria.

There, according to German intelligence officials, Mr. Cuspert suffered head wounds in battle in

September 2013, but after hospitalization in Turkey returned to the fighting last spring.

The Berlin report on Mr. Cuspert, published last September, concluded with mention of the video that it said showed him among the pile of corpses.

Frauke Köhler, a spokeswoman for the federal prosecutor's office in Germany, declined to confirm a news report that Mr. Cuspert was being investigated on suspicion of committing war crimes, along with another German jihadist, identified as Farid S., whose wife is on trial in Düsseldorf on charges of delivering 11,000 euros and camera equipment to her husband in Syria.

Robert Rigney, a Berlin-born American who said he had spent almost 15 years here, teaching and writing about immigrant communities, said he had come across Mr. Cuspert in Berlin's Kreuzberg district around 2009.

"Everyone in Berlin knows this guy," he said, alluding to immigrant neighborhoods and the high school dropouts, and rap fans, he teaches. "I don't know what happened to him."