Landscapes of Absence

A Project by Brandon Bauer

Lebanon
Syria
Israel Jordan
Iraq

■ Areas of ISIS control and support
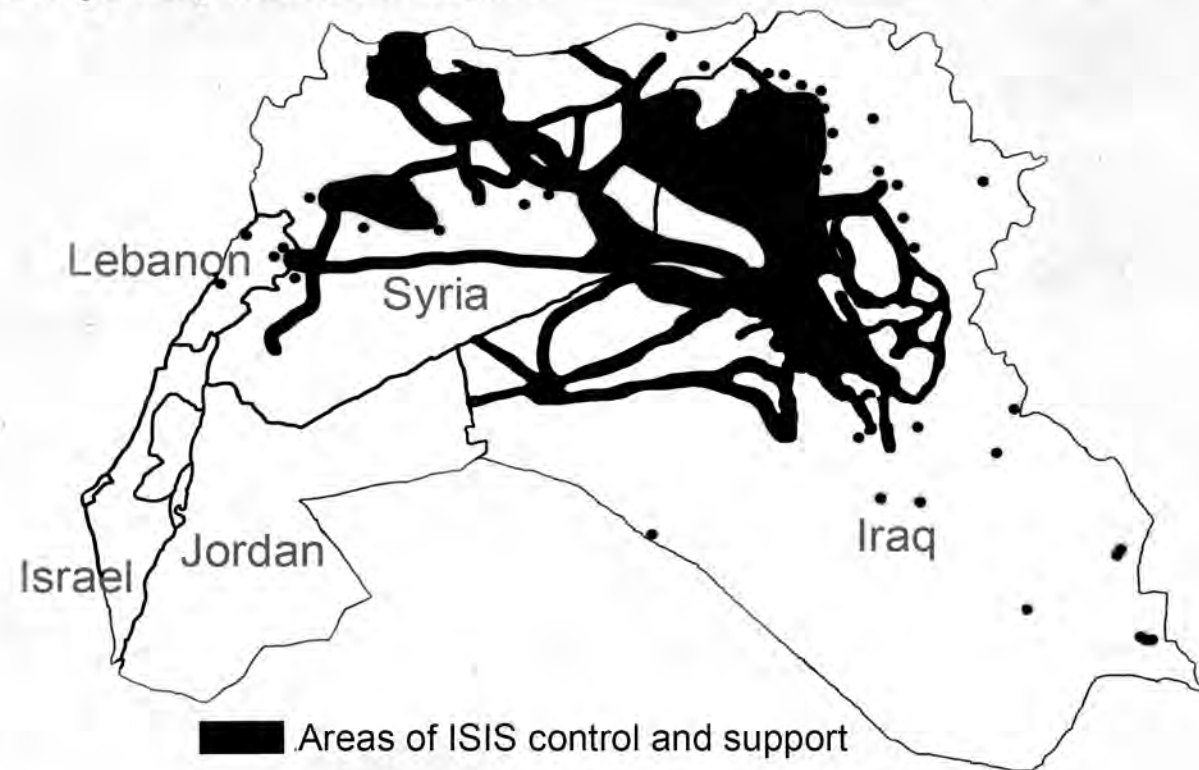
Artist Statement

The project *Landscapes of Absence* explores ethical issues around the use of ISIS propaganda images within the media. In particular, the project examines the use of propaganda images in the absence of reliable and journalistically objective images from the territory controlled by the self-proclaimed Islamic State, since the brutal beheadings of western journalists and aid workers made it too dangerous to report from areas under ISIS control. The project uses images drawn from eight beheading incidents disseminated through ISIS media outlets. The work erases the dehumanized image, leaving only the landscape and the absence of image as a metaphor for the larger issue of the absence of reliable reporting. The project includes a series of 22.5"x30" print works, large landscape mural prints, a single channel video, and a print publication with information about the project.

The Islamic State as a Landscape of Absence

The terrain under which the self-proclaimed Islamic State exerts its control has become a landscape of absence.[1] Since the succession of brutal beheadings of journalists operating in ISIS territory during the autumn of 2014, objective reporting has effectively ceased. News agencies have stopped sending journalists into the region due to the dangerous situation on the ground, and major global news agencies will not accept work from freelance reporters so as not to encourage others to risk their lives.[2] ISIS themselves issued rules for journalists operating in their territory, the first rule insisting that all journalists operating in their territory must swear allegiance to the Islamic State.[3] Given the lack of regular and reliable reporting, little is known about daily life within the "governmental amoeba" that constitutes the self-proclaimed Islamic State, a state of constantly shifting zones of control, who's borders extend only as far as ISIS militants stand with guns to

defend it.[4] ISIS propaganda directed at the west focuses on war, provocation, and intimidation, but in the areas it controls or is attempting to take over, it paints a picture of the caliphate it wishes to build as a family friendly Islamic utopia.[5] Reports from refugees, and others who have escaped ISIS territory reveal a different reality. As a United Nations report outlining ISIS war crimes in Syria states:

> ISIS has perpetrated murder and other inhumane acts, enslavement, rape, sexual slavery and violence, forcible displacement, enforced disappearance and torture. These acts have been committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack against the civilian population […].[6]

Without regular and reliable news reporting these horrific conditions are essentially out of sight, while at the same time the 24 hour news cycle churns out the Islamic State's own sophisticatedly crafted propaganda images of shock and horror, or the ISIS battle footage of black clad ISIS militants marching defiantly and triumphantly into cities as B-roll footage and visual shorthand. As Emily Horne, spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department's special envoy leading the international coalition against ISIS, stated: "When that file footage gets out there it actually risks bolstering their image, and can contribute to foreign fighter recruitment and supporting the myth of their invincibility".[7] These images inspire fear and outrage as they cycle on again and again in the media, and they are meant to. The U.S. State Department and the Pentagon have urged broadcasters to use alternate images of the conflict, for instance footage of U.S. troops training Iraqi security forces or video of airstrikes against ISIS targets.[8] These suggestions would supplant a narrative of the conflict with an official U.S. counter-narrative, but would unfortunately get us no closer the truth on the ground for those living within the self-described Islamic State. In the absence of objective counter-images uncovering the reality of the situation, the propaganda ISIS creates is a seductive spectacle, yet these images continue to underscore the narrative they intend for us to see.

Artist Biography

Brandon Bauer is a Wisconsin-based artist. He uses art as a space for critical and ethical inquiry, discourse and dialog. His work explores themes of social justice, democracy, war and critical histories embedded in cultural ephemera. Brandon's work has been exhibited and screened nationally and internationally.

Special Thanks

Notes
1. The Islamic State is variously known as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham), ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), or in Arabic as ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fīl- Irāq wash-Shām, leading to the acronym Da'ish, Da'eesh, or DAESH 2. *Covering the 'Islamic State'*, Correspondent: Behind The News - Agence France-Presse, 17 September 2014 3. *Isis issues rules for journalists forcing them to 'swear allegiance as subjects of the Islamic State'*, The Independent, 7 October 2014 4. The term "governmental amoeba", and the fluid state it describes was coined by Brian Fishman in his March 2007 essay titled: *'Fourth Generation Governance'*, written for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. The essay describes the theoretical foundations for the justification of a modern Islamic nation-state by ISIS in their document *'Informing the People About the Birth of the Islamic State of Iraq'*. 5. *To Its Citizens, ISIS Also Shows A Softer Side*, Vocativ, 20 March 2015 6. *Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria*, United Nations Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 November 2014 7. In May of 2015 the Obama Administration, the State Department, and the Pentagon began urging broadcasters to stop using ISIS propaganda videos as B-roll footage in their broadcasts: *Stop using ISIL footage, Obama administration asks networks*, Politico, 13 May 2015 8. Ibid.

James Wright Foley, an American journalist and freelance war correspondent was abducted November 22, 2012 while working as a reporter during the Syrian Civil War. He was beheaded on August 19, 2014 in response to American airstrikes in Iraq, thus becoming the first American citizen killed by the self-described Islamic State.