



INSIDE JORDAN'S PET TRADE

As more Jordanians purchase pets, supposedly purebred dogs and cats are being turned into commodities to make a quick and easy profit by unregulated breeders, pet shops, makeshift veterinary clinics, and anyone, really.

By Elspeth Dehnert

A stolen dog is chained up and displayed at Amman's "Thieves Market." Photo by Elspeth Dehnert.



At one time an uncommon sight, Jordanian families walking their dogs in Amman's affluent neighborhoods have become melded into the surrounding landscapes. "The values of individuality are increasing in this society because of Western influence, higher education, smaller families, and a more independent style of life; everyone wants a car, a place, a pet, so on and so forth," says Dr. Ala Shehadeh, founder and head veterinary doctor at the Vetzone small-animal clinic. With the emergence of an increasingly individualized, secular, and progressive lifestyle enjoyed by many middle-to-upper-class Jordanians has come a rapidly flourishing pet culture, which is currently taking the Kingdom – especially its capital Amman – by storm. "I can definitely see an increase in pet ownership since I opened the center 12 years ago," says Margaret Ledger, director and founder of the Humane Center for Animal Welfare (HCAW) in Jordan. "However, many Jordanians won't go for a blind cat or a three-legged dog; they like breeds."

While a demand for purebred dogs and cats may not be much of an issue in countries where adequate animal protection legislation is thoroughly enforced and those breeding and selling animals are licensed, strictly regulated, and held accountable for mistreatment, this scenario in Jordan is a cause for concern.

Despite the passage of a set of animal welfare regulations in 2010, the country's dog and cat breeders are operating freely, without any restrictions.

According to the Director of the Animal Welfare Department of the Greater Amman Municipality (GAM), Shtoura Al 'Udwan, this is due to the fact that "there is not a single law or regulation in Jordan regarding breeding." And although, at least on paper, there are regulations on pet shops, Ledger argues that they are not being implemented: "None of the pet shops are suitable to have animals; some don't even have water or air circulation."

The result of this lack of regulation and enforcement is that literally anyone can breed and sell animals in Jordan without consequence – whether or not the animals are sick or mistreated; whether or not the conditions are unsanitary; whether or not the purchased animal dies from a pre-existing health problem after arriving at the new owner's home. According to journalist and animal-welfare advocate Kristen Gillespie, even though many of Amman's pet shops are banned from selling animals, they continue to do so anyway due to a lack of repercussions from the Jordanian authorities. Alternatively, many of the prohibited pet shop owners will open fake veterinary clinics in which to sell animals. "You have an examination table, a fridge, some medicines, and a few scissors, they will give you a license," says Dr. Shehadeh.

Furthermore, according to Gillespie, it is becoming more and more common for pet shop owners to acquire the puppies and kittens that they sell from their own breeding operations. "It's a big problem. Anybody in Jordan, even a 14-year-old kid, can decide to make good money out of breeding. They are taking advantage of people's interest in owning pets," says Ledger. With its easy access, inconsequential nature, nonexistent income taxes, extremely low overhead costs, ability to operate and advertise almost anywhere, as well as its easily replaceable merchandise, Jordan's pet trade is an appealing market to tap into if you're looking to make a quick and easy profit. "Before, it was only three to four people breeding dogs in Jordan. But, now, it's getting much bigger because



Photos of unregulated dog-breeding operations are openly displayed on the "Buy & Sell Dogs in Jordan" Facebook page.



“ Anybody in Jordan, even a 14-year-old kid, can decide to make good money out of breeding ”



“Hundreds of dogs crammed into makeshift buildings in rural areas where no one can see is very common”

A wounded dog rests under a car in Amman.



An injured Turkish Angora kitten receives medical treatment at HCAW.



A photo of a dog on the “Pure Dogs 4 Sale in Jordan” Facebook page.

it’s a good business for them. While other people are making JD400 for a whole month, this guy is getting JD300 from selling one dog,” continues Ledger.

Unfortunately, the animals and those who purchase them are the ones who pay the price for this unsupervised, out-of-control industry. In addition to being kept in unsanitary conditions, the animals are usually malnourished, diseased (mainly with the deadly parvovirus), covered in parasites, overbred, and inbred (resulting in deformation). “What I see is that people usually buy their pets because the dogs and cats are so starved, dirty, and pathetic that they feel like they are rescuing them. What people don’t realize is that this tactic of placing half-dead animals on display is savvy marketing. For every puppy purchased, 10 will be produced to replace it. It’s a simple question of supply and demand,” says Gillespie. Omar Barrishi can testify to this. As he explains, he purchased a supposedly purebred Doberman puppy for JD200 after arriving to a breeder’s house and seeing its dirty surroundings and weak, feeble body: “He was dangling the puppy by its paw. I felt bad, so I bought it.” Despite providing the puppy with food and medical treatment, it died a mere two days after he brought it home.

Alternatively, some breeders will err on the side of caution and not allow interested buyers to view the breeding location for fear that the individual will realize that the animals are, in fact, not being kept in adequate conditions and good health. Instead, the breeder will insist on bringing the puppies or kittens directly to the

inquirer. Another ploy that many of Jordan’s breeders use is to sell puppies and kittens before signs of illness and disease are evident. “They are crooks. They know that the internal immunity weakens at seven to nine weeks, so they sell them just before that at six weeks. This way, the owner will get an apparently healthy animal, and the immunity will vanish at home; it then becomes the responsibility of the owner,” says Dr. Shehadeh.

In addition to a large chance that the purchased animal will have a pre-existing health problem, there is no guarantee that the advertised-as-a-purebred dog or cat is just that. “Sometimes breeders mix breeds. They’ll tell someone it’s a Husky when it’s not,” says Ledger. Utilizing newspapers, word of mouth, unethical veterinary clinics and pet shops, as well as the Internet, breeders in Jordan flagrantly display ads accompanied by images of their “product” – newborn puppies photographed in filthy surroundings, for instance – and taglines such as “100 Percent Pure Siberian Huskies With Crystal Blue Eyes For Sale.” There are even several Facebook groups solely dedicated to the sale of purebred animals in Jordan; like the appropriately-named “Pure Dog Breeds In Jordan 4 Sale” page.

In order to meet the demand for purebred dogs and cats in Jordan, many of the country’s breeders have graduated from small operations run in backyards to large-scale ones run in spacious farms and abandoned run-down buildings – also known as puppy or kitten mills – to mass produce the most popular dog and cat breeds.

Dr. Shehadeh speculates that there are about five or six puppy mills in the outskirts of Amman, but the exact number is not known. Although not as common, there have been unofficial reports of at least one kitten mill currently operating in Jordan. “Breeding operations are getting bigger and bigger because it’s an easy business due to lack of regulation,” says Ledger.

Up to now, only one Jordanian breeding mill has been successfully closed down. This feat was undertaken about two years ago by Princess Alia with assistance from HCAW. “We confiscated 70 dogs from a notorious female breeder who had been running a large-scale breeding operation for many, many years. It was the first time in Jordan that this was done. It shook the country and people were happy,” says Ledger. Unfortunately, though, it was not long before another breeder realized the void in the pet trade and swiftly took her place. “He once told an undercover activist posing as a buyer that he has a showroom for his puppies in Irbid and that the factory is close to the Syrian border. Hundreds of dogs crammed into makeshift buildings in rural areas where no one can see is very common,” says Gillespie.



Dogs are rescued from a puppy mill in Irbid, Jordan. Photos courtesy of HCAW.



“... breeders will employ groups of individuals to steal purebred dogs from people’s homes”

With an increasing demand in Jordan for “prestigious” dog breeds coupled with a high fatality rate among overbred dogs – due to being overworked, physically abused, malnourished, and diseased – breeders will employ groups of individuals to steal purebred dogs from people’s homes. “We receive many calls from people whose animals are stolen for breeding purposes. It’s a cycle. In fact, some of the dogs that we rescued during the puppy mill raid had been stolen,” explains Ledger. After spotting a purebred dog on someone’s property, the individuals will either take the animal from the backyard or, as in one reported case, break into the house if it is being kept indoors. According to Al ‘Udwan, GAM’s Animal Welfare Department does not currently have the legal authority to apprehend dog thieves. “Until we have the law on our side, we are working with the police on this issue,” she says. “But, up to now, we can’t say that we’ve caught any of them.” Gillespie argues that this nonexistent success rate has to do with the Jordanian police’s apathy when it



Dr. Ala Shehadeh and his team pose for a portrait. Photo by Dia Saleh.

comes to the welfare of animals: “Police regularly laugh in the face of heartbroken dog owners who complain about thieves breaking into their property.”

However, not all of the stolen dogs in Jordan are taken for the sole intention of breeding; some of them are instead used to turn a quick profit. More specifically, these animals may very well end up at the notorious so-called “Thieves Market,” located in the inner depths of downtown Amman. “If someone says that their dog is missing, I tell them to go to the Friday Market to see if it’s there. It’s a very undercover thing, and I think there is a lot more going on than we know about,” says Chris Larter, volunteer and former employee at the Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad (SPANNA)-Jordan. Located on a small street off the beaten path of the downtown market area, the “Thieves Market” consists of hordes of men buying and selling various animals that are stuffed into cardboard boxes and rusted cages or chained up outside one of the many shop fronts scattered along the dusty sidewalk.

Another adverse side effect of Jordan’s nonexistent breeding regulations and relaxed animal welfare oversight is a rise in illegally-wagered dog fights. Not surprisingly, the illicit, clandestine nature of animal breeding in Jordan has created a nefarious network of individuals who aim to take full advantage of the financial opportunities that these creatures have to offer. “I see young people raising Pit Bulls, Rottweilers, and Dobermans for the purpose of dog fighting, which takes place in various places and is on the rise. It also injures the animals very badly,” says Ledger. According to Al’ Udwan, the Jordanian authorities are aware of the pet trade and its horrendous side effects.

That is why the Ministry of Agriculture and Princess Alia Foundation have joined forces in order to revise the current animal welfare regulations, which Al’ Udwan admits are somewhat vague and not expansive enough. But both Ledger and Gillespie argue that one of the biggest problems in terms of curbing the immoral treatment of and trade in pets is the inability of the Jordanian authorities – specifically GAM’s Animal Welfare Department – to efficiently implement rules. “I don’t see regulations being enforced by them. There is enough staff, but they need to make things better for both citizens and animals. If it continues like this, I don’t think it will reach anywhere; it’s very sad,” says Ledger.

Although the implementation of strong animal welfare legislation may, indeed, help to alleviate the suffering of the animals forced into Jordan’s pet trade, societal awareness of animal rights is arguably the biggest factor in determining the fate of the country’s innocent non-human lives. According to a popular *hadith*, the Prophet Muhammad once said, “Whoever is kind to the creatures of God is kind to himself.”

HOW TO HELP

- Spread awareness
- Adopt, don’t buy
- Make a long-term commitment to your pet
- Neuter/spay and vaccinate your pet
- Don’t leave your pet outside

For more information, please visit:
www.hcaw-jordan.org