

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SAUDI ARABIA AND ISIS?

At Politico, Will McCants has an excerpt from his new book, in which he argues that ISIS differs from Al Qaeda in its apocalyptic vision.

The Islamic State's brutality and its insistence on apocalypse now and caliphate now set it apart from al-Qaeda, of which it was a part until 2014. We're used to thinking of al-Qaeda's leader Osama bin Laden as the baddest of the bad, but the Islamic State is worse. Bin Laden tamped down messianic fervor and sought popular Muslim support; the return of the early Islamic empire, or caliphate, was a distant dream. In contrast, the Islamic State's members fight and govern by their own version of Machiavelli's dictum "It is far safer to be feared than loved." They stir messianic fervor rather than suppress it. They want God's kingdom now rather than later. This is not Bin Laden's jihad.

He argues the difference arises, in part, because violence works.

But the Islamic State has deliberately provoked the anger of Muslims and non-Muslims alike with its online videos of outrageous and carefully choreographed violence. It showcases the beheading of prisoners—something Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda today, had expressly warned against—and dumps enemy soldiers in mass graves while the camera is rolling. The State revels in gore and wants everyone to know it. And yet it has been remarkably successful at recruiting fighters, capturing land,

subduing its subjects, and creating a state. Why?

Because violence and gore work. We forget that this terrifying approach to state building has an impressive track record.

My immediate response to the piece was to suggest the proper comparison was not between al Qaeda and ISIS, but between Saudi Arabia and ISIS. McCants mentions Saudi Arabia, but only to support a historical argument about the efficacy of violence.

More brutal too was the Saud family and its ultraconservative Wahhabi allies, who came to power three times between 1744 and 1926, when the third and last Saudi state was established.

Guess what?! The Saudis are still beheading people, even if Zawahiri is too squeamish to do so. It does so to punish those who question the apocalyptic ideology the Saudis have long used to police order, and never (that I've seen) to punish ISIS terrorists.

Though there aren't many cameras rolling – at least not Western ones – not in Yemen (because they've been expelled) and not in Saudi Arabia (because the Western press has little interest in showing the many beheadings our allies carry out).

That's a point Rosa Brooks makes in this piece arguing that ISIS' violence is not much different than that used throughout time as part of state-formation (while she talks about our own fight over slavery during the Civil War, she doesn't mention America's genocide against native people, annihilation we counted by counting scalps).

The Islamic State can keep right on beheading people, and if we can't destroy the Islamic State, perhaps we'll

eventually tire of fighting them and decide to cut deals with them. And then, let a few decades pass, and presto! The Islamic State will have a seat at the U.N. – if the U.N. still exists – either as a new state or as a globally acknowledged non-state something or other, and all those terrible atrocities will be politely ignored.

Needless to say, although history suggests that the commission of horrific and widespread atrocities is no bar to entry into polite global society, history also suggests that nothing is inevitable. Plenty of brutal insurgencies and regimes have lived to see their crimes whitewashed and forgotten, but plenty of others have gone down in flames.

When it comes to predicting the future of the Islamic State, there are lots of wild cards. The 24/7 global media environment is quite new, and it's impossible to say how this – or the universalization of human rights – will affect the Islamic State's longer-term ability to sustain itself or the international community's determination to defeat the group. State sovereignty is changing in complex ways, and it's hard to know what forms global, political, and military power will take 10, 20, or 50 years from now. Elections in the United States may change American military dynamics; China or Russia or any of a dozen other states could decide to cut deals of their own with the Islamic State. Finally, the group remains relatively opaque to outsiders; internal dynamics could also alter its trajectory.

Even so: If I were a bookie, I'd put long odds on the Islamic State being defeated by the United States. The White

House can issue as many statements as it wants claiming to have “made considerable progress in our effort to degrade and ultimately destroy” the Islamic State, but I suspect the group will still be going strong five or 10 years from now.

One of the only things that makes ISIS different than Saudi Arabia – other than the latter has been recognized as a legitimate government by other nations, while those same nations recognize Bashar al-Assad as the leader of Syria – is that media, particularly the degree to which the Western press focuses on its beheadings rather than Saudi ones.

So who is responsible (even setting aside the Iraq War’s role in ISIS’s rise) for the effect of its violence, for the efficacy McCants claims it has?

ISIS is doing the same kind of things we tolerate in our Saudi allies. The US would do well to consider why it finds one tolerable and the other the prime enemy.