

## Hey, who you calling a ‘Crusader’?!

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Given I analyze political conflict for a living—yes, you can actually get paid for that sort of thing—I’ve spent relatively little time on this blog writing about such topics. Avoiding a busman’s holiday, I suppose, or maybe, just maybe, I find it less depressing railing against degree-granting sports franchises, [corporations](#) whose business model is taking your intellectual property for free and then selling it back to you, or the institutionalized insanity that supports that sort of thing.

But as this past week was spent first coding the activities of ISIS [1]—and they are really, really not nice people at all—and then participating in a workshop on the coevolution of tactics of violent groups, it struck me that not only have we seen the ISIS pattern before, but the number of parallels are quite remarkable: ISIS looks like the First Crusade and the subsequent Latin Kingdoms of the twelfth century.[2]

There is, of course, exquisite irony in this given that one of the prime rhetorical motifs of ISIS, as well as various al-Qaeda franchises for the past thirty years, has been arguing that they are opposing “Crusaders”, often including Israel in that category, a bit of an anachronism given the persistent Crusader penchant for getting into the swing of things by first slaughtering Jews in the Rhine Valley. And I’m not trying to use the “I don’t have cooties, *you* have cooties” rhetorical technique, which most of us learn quickly on school playgrounds, but eventually out-grow unless experiencing the misfortune of winding up in the U.S. Congress, where this has become virtually the *only* rhetorical technique. No, I mean this has a serious historical analogy with, of course, the usual caveat that “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes.” [3]

<b>Factors</b>	<b>First Crusade and the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem 1096-1187</b>	<b>ISIS 2014</b>
Opportunity provided by weak states	Pressure on Byzantium Empire (particularly the catastrophic military loss at Manzikert in 1071) and the Abbasid Caliphate by the expanding power of the Seljuk Turks	Syrian civil war and Sunni alienation from Shia regime in Baghdad. Though ultimately the parallel to the disruptive role of the Seljuk Turks can be traced to George “Mas’ud” Bush and his merry band of think-

		tank inspired ghazis
Religious motivators	Urban II, Peter the Hermit, etc Internet not required.	Numerous self-styled jihadi leaders. Internet enhanced.
Religious reward	Temporal remission of sins	Some ambiguous heavenly reward, possibly involving access to virgins and/or white raisins
Ample supply of seasoned fighters	Europe anxious to divert the attentions of poorly supervised young men with no prospects of gainful employment or inheritance but nonetheless wielding sharp objects with reckless enthusiasm	Multiple generations of experienced jihadi fighters dating back to the Soviet-Afghan War, with almost uninterrupted opportunities in between
Multinational, decentralized leadership	Particularly true of the First “Baron’s” Crusade, which was the only one that was militarily successful [9]	See above, with additional recruiting in 2014 after establishing territorial control
Excessive use of violence	Contrast massacres following Crusader capture of Jerusalem with Salah-ad-Din’s later treatment of the city. They couldn’t post videos of this, but based on the approving treatment of the slaughter by most contemporary chroniclers, they certainly would have were they able.	Trademark. With videos.
Apparently come out of	Which is how it looked from the perspective of Baghdad,	Which is how it looks from the perspective of

nowhere and rapidly establish extended territorial control	Damascus and Cairo	Baghdad, Damascus and Washington
Idealized model from distant history	Some Christian variant on the kingdom of David and Solomon, apparently	Caliphate

So far, so bad. But after a rather inauspicious start, the Crusaders settled down and expansion stopped completely—despite concerted efforts—with the Latin Kingdoms beginning to contract starting with the fall of Edessa in 1149. What accounted for the decline?

- Inability to maintain a sufficient colonizing or military force: once the First Crusade finished, most surviving Crusaders went home to deal with whatever mischief had occurred in their absence.[11] The remaining military force was not even sufficient to maintain control over existing territories—and hence alliances of convenience were quickly made with local Moslem elites—much less expand. Attempts to attract new settlers were almost entirely unsuccessful, in large part due to immigration restrictions: The nobility across Europe had exactly zero interest in having their serfs move to Palestine. Or anywhere.
- Local rulers “went native,” or at least turned down the level of violence, and generally ruled with at least modest levels of responsibility, particularly given the rather low standards of the day. Politically, ruthless rampaging and terror tend to have a rather limited shelf life, with the apparent exception of the Assyrians.
- Surviving adjacent Moslem states got their military act together, notably Damascus under the Zangas, and the Crusaders no longer had the advantage of surprise: the attempt to take Damascus in the Second Crusade was an abysmal failure.
- In a much slower process, the Muslims eventually achieved a two-front political consolidation under Salah-ad-Din.
- Non-stop dynastic squabbles weakened the Latin leadership internally, even in the face of severe external threats. This was further complicated by external meddling from Europeans—political and ecclesiastical—with little or no knowledge of the local conditions. Assisted by

the equally unenthusiastic Byzantines who did understand the local conditions.

- A few out-of-control elements—famously, Raynald of Chatillon—wrecked efforts to maintain truces and other pragmatic compromises in the face of an increasingly weak position.

How many of these conditions might we expect to see affect ISIS in some modern form?: pretty much every single one, and every one of these points, translated into a modern era, becomes a potential leverage point, as David Ignatius [pointed out last week](#) in the *Washington Post*. Such policies probably have a reasonably good chance of success because, through the lens of history, we can “see around the corner.” Or at least see through a mirror, however dimly.

Lots of similarities, but two obvious differences:

Most conspicuously, due largely to changes in technology, the time frame has sped up enormously, probably by a factor of at least 10: I’d put the current ISIS situation as similar to that of the Latin Kingdom around perhaps 1105. Correspondingly, due to globalization the ability to modify resource flows to meet the threat once the political situation has stabilized is also much faster: I rather doubt ISIS is going to last 90 years, or even 90 months.

Second, there’s one conspicuous feature of the Latin Kingdoms we have *not* seen yet: the emergence of formally structured autonomous military movements independent of the state, as occurred with the two major military monastic orders, the Templars and the Hospitallers.[10] Unless, in effect, we’ve already seen that development in the form of al-Qaeda, but al-Qaeda generally used a fairly unstructured franchise model rather than the highly structured bureaucratic model of the monastic orders, which arguably were the most “modern” institutions of their time. Alternatively, the “swarm”/franchise model of al-Qaeda might itself be an effective adaptation in the current environment.

So, coincidence, policy-relevant, or merely yet another over-generalized rant by an aging amateur medievalist with way too much time on his hands and [Philip Daileader’s Great Courses lectures](#) on audio while stalled in traffic on I-66?[7] Well, clearly the last, but to the extent that analogical reasoning is a valid analytical tool in human behavior [8], the momentum on this one is pretty strong and, for example, ISIS’s weakness in numbers has long been noted.

Again, history does not repeat itself, it only rhymes, but as with the Latin Kingdoms, I see the future of ISIS as the dustbin of history, not a new caliphate. And that can’t happen too soon.

## Footnotes

1. I will not indulge in the silly rhetorical game of calling them ‘ISIL’: they are holding territory in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, which is not part of the Levant in most historical uses of that word. To say nothing of the political agenda underlying the campaign of pretending that they are in the Levant, which I’m even less fond of.

2. In the real Levant, not ISIL Levant.

3. But Phil, don’t you realize that “jihad” and “crusade” are exactly the same thing?—Crusaders simply copied the Islamic “jihad” model! Or was it the other way around?

Uh, well, no, it isn’t that simple. It isn’t anywhere close to that simple. The two movements clearly influenced each other, presumably initially with Christian envy of the Islamic military expansion in the seventh and eighth centuries, though this was in the quite distant past by the time Urban II preached the Crusade. And as we see with ISIS, and countless other Islamic military rivalist efforts in the past two or three centuries, Islamic invocation of the need to counter Christian “Crusader” colonial efforts is common, motivated in part by those efforts helpfully invoking Crusader imagery themselves, as I can attest having been raised with ample exposure to Protestant missionary appeals.

Once one gets into the specifics, however, comparisons begin to break down because both concepts have been thoroughly mutable across centuries and in my [less systematic than it should be] reading, those justifications—and allowing that at least *some* Crusaders/jihadis sincerely believed them—have generally been driven by make-it-up-as-you-go-along theological approaches that from the outset have been quite distinct in the two religions.

Specifically, the individual motivation for a Christian warrior to engage in a crusade was to gain a temporal indulgence for the remission of sin, concern which plays a far greater role in Christianity than in Islam (or pretty much any other religion). The collective motivation for jihad in Islam, in contrast, was to expand the territorial area within which Islam could be practiced—the Dar al-Islam, or Abode/Zone of Peace—but, contrary to common representations in the West, this is not a central part of Islam, and in particular it is not one of the Five Pillars. In most orthodox Islamic theology, “jihad” is a fairly minor and decidedly ambiguous concept and, Fox News notwithstanding, certainly not central.

Where things start getting complicated—and mutual influence could well be relevant here—is when these two motivations start intermixing. In particular, after the Latin Kingdoms fail in the [real] Levant, the Crusading concept is moved to Europe where it is, indeed, employed with the primary purpose of expanding the territorial reach of [Latin] Christianity, specifically against

Moslems in Spain, [pagans](#) in the Baltics, Cathars in the south of France, and eventually against whatever Catholic dynasties the Papacy happened to be at odds with at any given moment.[13] The indulgences thing also got a tad out of hand, eventually leading to that unpleasantness in Wittenberg in 1517, which, man, went like *totally* viral.[4]

Contemporary jihadis, meanwhile, have taken to emphasizing the prospect of heavenly reward, which is beginning to look at least similar to the Christian concept of remission of sin, though theologically—and by the way, not only am I not a lawyer, I am not a theologian [5], so if you suffer eternal damnation following my advice, I take no responsibility: please consult on issues dealing with eternal damnation and perpetual hellfire with an experienced and properly trained authority from your chosen faith.[12] I digress...—*as I was saying, theologically* that is distinct given Islam's greater emphasis on practice compared to Christianity's emphasis on the primacy of sin (individual and collective) and the difficulties escaping the consequences thereof.

And all this before we get into such issues as the legitimacy of forced conversion: orthodox Islam pretty clearly rejects this but that point has been lost on numerous jihadis across the centuries; Christianity is more ambivalent due to the sacramental power of baptism. And the issue of tolerance for “peoples of the book”: orthodox Islam is quite unambiguous on the importance of this but again, that point has been lost on numerous jihadis; there is nothing comparable in Christianity, which instead saw the development of anti-Semitism from about the second century forward, and ironically those anti-Semitic arguments have been adopted pretty much totally by contemporary radical Islam.

But if you are still reading this—yes, both of you—you really should be looking into the serious scholarship on these issues, and there is a fair amount of it, though it takes a bit of digging —and not trying to get the information off a blog. Really.

And as for the practical manifestations of Crusade versus jihad for those on the ground: alas, pretty much total convergence here. You are sitting in your village minding your own business and along comes a heavily armed horde comprised of a few folks probably sincerely motivated by radical theological interpretations accompanied by a whole bunch of opportunistic hell-raisers bent on rape and pillage [6]. You will almost certainly not have a very nice day.

Which I will then [code](#).

4. Without the internet. But moveable type helped. Though moveable type by most accounts got the indulgence thing totally out of control in the first place.

5. Though in recognition of the season, I [repeat](#)—as in [link to](#)—my appeal that we all return to [respecting the spirit of Yule](#) rather than obsessing on how much crap we can purchase at WalMart and Best Buy.
6. These days both ISIS and Boko Haram seem particularly into the “rape” part, possibly an unpleasant side effect of the dominant media available on the internet.
7. I-66/stalled in traffic: I repeat myself here, of course.
8. The geeks making billions of dollars predicting your likely behaviors based on your activities on the web also believe it is the case. Shortly after reading this you will probably start getting Amazon ads for swords, armor, and group excursions to the Holy Land. Or suggestions that you join the jihad from your friendly local DHS entrapment specialist.
9. Frederick II’s Sixth Crusade actually secured—through negotiation—access to Jerusalem for pilgrims and Christian control of Bethlehem and Nazareth. Which only pissed off Pope Gregory IX, who had excommunicated Frederick. Anticipating [Goldfinger](#) by several centuries, His Holiness’s attitude was “I don’t expect you to secure Jerusalem, Mr. Hohenstaufen. I expect you to die!”
10. And eventually, implementing the Crusades against pagans in northeastern Europe, those beloved [Teutonic Knights](#).
11. By the Third Crusade, note in particular the interactions between [Lackland, John](#) and Lion-hearted, Richard t.
12. I’m sticking with Odin, who appears particularly skilled at causing lightening-induced delays to connecting flights at Dulles which would otherwise have taken off without me. And that whole crow thing is really cool.
13. Kicking off this theme, the [Christian] Fourth Crusade famously besieged and then sacked [Christian] Constantinople, but the motivations for this were almost exclusively commercial rather than theological. The as-ever-subtle Pope Innocent III was furious with this outcome, [noting](#) among other points “[The Greek Christians will see] in the Latins [Crusaders] only an example of perdition and the works of darkness, and with reason, detest the Latins more than dogs.” I believe we can also infer from this that Innocent III did not exhibit any particular fondness for dogs.

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