

## On McCant's ISIS Apocalypse

By Charles Pennington

William McCants' *The ISIS Apocalypse: the History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* dismantles the idea of ISIS, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria as a hive-minded leviathan with a singular goal that sprang forth in and spread through the Middle East and North Africa and the Islamic world like wild fire. In his book McCants tracks the terrorist group from its inception as an attention-starved affiliate or subordinate of Al-Qaeda portraying it as a problem child who when left alone became insubordinate, uncooperative and cruel that grew into its own right and became a catalyst for social change in the Islamic world. McCants demonstrates that although it is a terrorist organization with 'end of days' machinations and consumed with religious fervor and piety, it is capable of practical actions and is preoccupied with public perception of it and its legitimacy as an institution.

McCants portrayal of ISIS as a problem child begins in the first chapter of the book when he describes in detail the nature of the relationship between ISIS and Al-Qaeda which is considered the group's parent organization. He identifies the main idea maker and figure head of ISIS as a youth whom was craving revolution and a failed Jordanian terrorist, Abu Musab al Zarqawi who McCants describes as a "Jordanian street-tough turned jihadist."<sup>1</sup> Al Zarqawi is a man with the spirit for change but no direction as one Al-Qaeda spy tasked to follow and evaluate Zarqawi for possible membership into the organization, reported that although Zarqawi wanted to elevate the status of Sunni Muslims he "did not have a lot specific ideas on how to do

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<sup>1</sup> McCants, William Faizi. *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015. 7

it.”<sup>2</sup> McCants also uses the spy’s testimony to highlight what he would later determine to be a crucial characteristic of Zarqawi that he will use to explain ISIS actions toward other Muslims noting “that Zarqawi frequently argued with other jihadist because of his extreme views on who should count as a good Muslim.”<sup>3</sup> This report caused the leaders of Al ‘Qaeda such as Osama Bin Laden while not inviting Zarqawi to join Al ‘Qaeda agreed to work with him to further a common goal. The crux of McCants argument distinguishing Al ‘Qaeda from ISIS and making the reader long for Bin Laden’s Al ‘Qaeda long for the time of Zarqawi’s ISIS, is based on three distinct differences between the two groups. The first of which is an ideological one including how other Muslims were viewed, the two major sects of Islam and Muslims are the Shi’a and Sunni which disagree about how the religious and political leaders of the Muslim community are chosen. McCants illustrates that the leaders of ISIS and Al ‘Qaeda were from different sects noting that Bin Laden was of Shi’a descent and Zarqawi was a Sunni also stating that “Zarqawi especially dislike the Shi’a”<sup>4</sup> and that “Zarqawi believed that the modern Shi’i state of Iran colluded with the West to oppress Sunnis.”<sup>5</sup> Zarqawi hatred of the Shi’a was defined by McCants as “all consuming”<sup>6</sup> and that Zarqawi believed that “Sunnis were servants of the Antichrist”<sup>7</sup> These feelings also created the other problems. McCants suggests that another problem between the two groups was the time schedule each group decided to accomplish their shared goal of declaring a caliphate, an Islam state, which was a signal of the end of days and the return of the Muslim savior, the Mahdi who would unite all Muslims and fight for Muslims against evil. The problem is that Al ‘Qaeda and “Bin laden wanted to build popular Muslims support specifically

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<sup>2</sup> *The ISIS Apocalypse*. 7

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Sunni Muslims, before declaring the caliphate,”<sup>8</sup> while the “Islamic state wanted to impose a caliphate regardless of what the masses thought.”<sup>9</sup> McCants highlights the different experience and strategic reasoning between the two leaders of the respective groups as he makes a point to explain the reason Bin Laden wanted to unite all Muslims before establishing the caliphate was because the Sunni tribes in the various areas often had a lot of influence and “without this support the Islamic mujahidin movement would be crushed from the shadows.”<sup>10</sup>

While McCants shows that both groups are apocalyptic, there is a difference in how fast the respective groups want the apocalypse to come, the method used by each is unique and influenced by the respective leaders of the group. Al’ Qaeda is shown to care about media perception more than ISIS did and this influenced how each group interacted with other Muslims and the introduction of what was termed the Hearts and Mind policy, as defined by an Al’ Qaeda official when he said that they were in a “media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our [Muslim] community.”<sup>11</sup> ISIS methods were shown to have changed over time but what remained constant was its lack of care for how it was perceived putting more effort on whether it could function well and worked like the true Islamic State. McCants shows that ISIS largely ignored the advice given to it by Al’ Qaeda and others who suggested that the group not needlessly attack the Shi’a Muslims which was part of Zarqawi’s plan for provoking civil unrest, the advice believed that such attacks would “alienate them through oppression.”<sup>12</sup> Another suggestion was that ISIS “not make any major strategic decisions without first consulting Bin Laden and other Al’ Qaeda officials.”<sup>13</sup> Zarqawi was also advised to be lenient when applying

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<sup>8</sup> *The ISIS Apocalypse*. 8

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 12

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 13

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *The ISIS Apocalypse*. 13

harsh hudud punishments specified in the Quran and the hadiths, that the group should attempt to better the “livelihood of the people,”<sup>14</sup> and not “beat women for not fully covering themselves.”<sup>15</sup> Despite what most people thought at the time inducing senior leaders of Al ‘Qaeda and McCants himself given their lack of social grace and care for people’s opinion toward them as much as other believed was necessary for the establishment of the Islamic state, Isis “ignored popular opinion and established a caliphate by force of arms.”<sup>16</sup> ISIS had setbacks including warring with local Sunni tribes and foreign forces like the United States hunted them to near extinction still survived, expanded its network and was able to come back and declare the caliphate.

McCants believes that this was due to the symbol that it chose to represent its organization. Its choice of the black flag implies that while it does not care about public opinion, its leaders were very knowledgeable and capable of stirring feelings and inciting revolutionary spirits in people. The black flag with the “Salam” is a simple symbol but it is a symbol that has a lot of meaning behind and is instantly recognizable, these things were likely part of the reason that it was chosen. McCants explains how Isis uses the flag and an apocalyptic prophecy about the coming of the Mahdi to recruit new soldiers and includes the following prophecy “If you see the black banners coming from Khorasan go them immediately even if you must crawl over ice because among them is the caliph al-Mahdi.”<sup>17</sup> McCants also says that the color of the flag is multifaceted and is not only a “color associated with mourning but also with revenged for a wrongful death.”<sup>18</sup> He uses Islamic history to further his explanation of the actions ISIS and the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p 65

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p 128

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p 26

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p 27

significance of the flag noting that “black flags were also flown by the prophet in his war with the infidels.”<sup>19</sup>

William McCants’ *the ISIS Apocalypse: the History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* gives a clear and picture of what ISIS is and its history from conception to its modern day states. McCants knowledge and explanation of Islamic history gives the book an immersive feel that makes it easy to lose track of time when reading. His through explanations about the nuances in the complicated middle east and North African situation connecting groups like Boko Haram in Northern Nigeria to Isis makes the reader feels justly that they are more knowledgeable about the complicated situation for having read the book. McCants also succeeds in making a reasonable against ISIS and indirectly for Al’ Qaeda that it is easy to find oneself view Osama bin Laden and Al ‘Qaeda as the good guys of the books.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 26