

A Saudi Beheading is an Islamic State (IS) Beheading?

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The beheading took place in Makkah. A Burmese woman named Laila Bin Abdul Muttalib Basim, who lived in Saudi Arabia, was first dragged on a public street. Then, she was grabbed by four policemen, while a man took a sword and cut off her head.

It took three blows to do this, until the head was finally severed. Until then, the woman could be heard screaming and begging for her life, a plea that is of course completely ignored. "I did not kill! I did not kill!" she screams.

Then, she is silent and dead.

Little is known about Laila other than her alleged crime: the murder and sexual abuse of a seven-year old girl who was her husband's daughter from another marriage.

As is the case with the opaque Saudi brand of justice, little is known regarding whether the accused was permitted any means to a defence or whether she was convicted simply on the basis of the allegations against her.

The only part of justice that is visible to all in Saudi Arabia is, after all, the punishment; gruesome, grotesque in a way only a kingdom grown fat with liquid gold can afford to be.

Normally, a beheading such as this one, despite its barbarity, would be shrugged and ignored. Saudi Arabia is after all littered with the blood of executed immigrants, men and women who came for jobs, to escape the hardscrabble and thankless penury of their own lives. Their heads and bodies are likely gathered up and, before the sun has set, committed via the labour of others just like them to nameless unmarked graves, becoming one with the sand of the Holy Kingdom. So it would have been with Laila.

It was not so because of a curious accident of geopolitics, one which betrays the facile vacuity of moral rights and wrongs in the scale of world opinion.

Since the summer of last year, when the black swathed fighters of IS marched into Syrian and Iraqi cities, beheadings have become interesting and condemnable.

The cynics among us would pronounce this the consequence of the IS-inaugurated theater of brutality, in whose grisly episodes one, then two and then even more Westerners have been slain before video cameras.

Of course, non-westerners have also met the merciless blades of IS executioners, but brown

is imagined as accustomed to brutal, somehow complicit. There is no fairness in the order and scale of world mourning.

Saudi Arabia has been at the forefront of the march against the IS, aggressively drawing in the United States, whose own geo-politics are now tied to a global war on terror that must go on into perpetuity. This collaboration is not a departure from routine; the Saudis and the American are long-time chums, such that even 9/11 and its Saudi origins could not sunder.

Indeed, all would be well in the cosy camaraderie were it not for the sudden realisation in the follow-up to a routine beheading that Saudi Arabia, the jolly ally, is meting out the same sort of brutal punishments meted out by the blood-thirsty baddies of IS.

The Americans do not like their allies and their enemies to look the same. It is embarrassing.

Of course, none of this would be at all problematic if no one had found out.

The problem the Saudis immediately encountered in the conclave that undoubtedly took place somewhere deep in the kingdom was that a video had been made; the similarities in the brutalities of the alleged good guys (Saudis) and the known bad guys (IS) that they want the world to fight was exposed.

The Saudi policeman who took the video was immediately arrested, charges of “cyber crimes” slapped on him for his transgression to send a message to future unauthorised videographers of beheadings. Saudi Arabia cannot bear to look like IS, even if it acts just like it.

The damage, however, may already have been done.

Those in countries like Pakistan, whose cultures and ideas of faith have been transformed by Saudi Arabia’s protracted and dogged export of its brutal and ascetic brand of justice, can testify to the extremist underpinnings of the Saudi state.

Saudi-funded madrassahs exist on every street corner of Pakistan and churn out a steady stream of extremism untempered by rationality or compassion. Similarly, Pakistanis recount scores of accounts of poor migrant workers whose heads have met Saudi swords without any opportunity to offer defenses.

The battle between IS and Saudi Arabia never was and never will be an ideological battle, with the former standing for tolerance or moderation.

The Saudi trick of dressing up strategic interests in the shiny new clothes of anti-extremism may fool the Americans, whose Secretary of State recently called the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia a “moderate Muslim nation.”

It does not fool Pakistanis. (***)

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