

Why The 'Star Wars' Rebel Alliance Is Nothing Like ISIS

[Erik Kain](#) 06:00am EST

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Spoilers for the 'Star Wars' films, as well as parts of 'The Hunger Games' and 'Harry Potter' as well as 'Jessica Jones' follow.

It's become quite popular for various writers to suggest that the Rebel Alliance in *Star Wars*---and the newly minted "Resistance" of the new film---are in fact terrorists, an insurgent group not that much different to ISIS.

The meme above is one such example. Another you can find in Breitbart, where writer Milo Yiannopoulos suggests much the same thing. In a provocatively titled piece proclaiming that "[Star Wars Is Garbage](#)" he writes:

The Alliance is a ragtag band of fighters from many

different cultures bonded together by a hatred of the Empire, fighting an asymmetric war resulting in massive collateral damage and loss of civilian life. They take their lead from mystics hiding in caves and swamps, and want to return the galaxy to a primitive religion that hasn't changed for 600 years. That's right nerds: the Rebel Alliance is ISIS.

Neither the meme above or Milo's humorous take-down of the Rebel Alliance hit their intended mark. Nor do the [host of other arguments](#) that we see online about Luke's terrorism, the loss of life on the Death Star, and so forth, regardless of the political points they're trying to score.

The Rebels vs ISIS

For one thing, simply killing civilians in war does not make someone a terrorist. To be a terrorist, one must purposefully use civilian death to achieve one's objectives. Or, as Charles C. Camosy [argues in the *Los Angeles Times*](#), "If the death of an innocent person was either your goal or the means by which you accomplished your goal, then you're a terrorist. If the death of innocent people was not intended, then you're not (though your action may be morally wrong)."

The goal of the Rebel Alliance in the original trilogy was to prevent the Empire from taking more lives and spreading

their dark brand of galactic fascism any further. (Arguments that the Empire are the "good guys" only work if one accepts fascism as a decent form of governance. A quick glance at the effects of fascism on the peoples of the 20th century should be enough to dispel that notion.)

So let's look at the Rebel Alliance through this lens.

The rebels never once target non-military installations. You do not see Luke or any other group of Rebels attack civilians. Even their most brutal acts---destroying the Death Stars---are military targets.

This is in contrast to say, the final *Hunger Games* book/film, in which the rebels of District 13 absolutely target civilians and engage in acts of terrorism. The rebels use children, no less, to achieve their goals. It's the straw that breaks the camel's back for Katniss Everdeen.

Destroying the Death Star(s) was morally sound.

The second question is whether the destruction of the Death Star(s) is proportionate, or a morally sound decision on the part of the Rebel Alliance.

"It wasn't terrorism," Camosy writes, "but was it proportionate? If the history of the first battle station is anything to go by, the rebels could be confident that an

unmolested Death Star II would have gone on a genocidal killing spree by destroying dozens of planets. The rebel attack, therefore, saved billions of lives, and was therefore a proportionate response."

Certainly the events of *The Force Awakens* back this argument up. The First Order, the successors to the Empire's quest for galactic domination, simply followed through with Palpatine's final solution. This time, the Resistance was too late to stop them and the result was the death of tens of billions of innocents. Preventing such a heinous, genocidal attack could hardly be described as "terrorism" by any reasonable person. In Episode VII, the attack on the First Order's Death Star 3.0 was very clearly a defensive action as well, since the Resistance's home world was the next target.

But what about the Jedi?

Milo, among others, backs some of his critique of the Rebels, and his likening them to ISIS, by labeling their Jedi leaders not just as a "Mother Gaia-style progressive cult" but also a pretty sadistic set that "abduct children from their families and raise them in a cult indoctrination centre to turn them into fanatical soldier priests called Jedi Knights." He couches all of this in pithy references to modern-day international politics, feminism, and so forth, which makes

the post a bit harder to excerpt, but I'll do my best.

For what it's worth, I actually agree with Milo to some degree here.

The Jedi aren't exactly "good guys" in the strictest sense of the word. Indeed, their powers mirror that of one of the most villainous figures of 2015: Killgrave of *Jessica Jones*.

For anyone who's seen *Jessica Jones*, we can certainly testify to the horrors of mind control. Mind control is scary stuff, and even in the right hands, who knows? At one point in *Jessica Jones*, the lawyer Hogarth muses about how much good someone like Killgrave could do if he was on "our side." Jessica angrily shouts back that there's no room for such power on "our side." Mind control, at least in Jessica Jones' worldview, is purely evil. And while we see only fairly benign use of the Jedi mind tricks in *Star Wars*, I can't disagree with Jessica. The show even makes a little *Star Wars* reference, as if its writers had much the same thought about Jedi and their manipulative powers.

Jessica Jones is hardly the only pop culture reference we can drum up, either.

In Harry Potter, there are only three "Unforgivable Curses." The Killing Curse, *Avada Kedavra*, is fairly self-explanatory. The Cruciatus Curse, *Crucio*, inflicts torturous pain. And the

final of the three, the Imperius Curse, *Imperio*, causes its victims to do whatever the caster wishes them to do.

This is no different from Killgrave's power; and it is no different from the mind-control of the Jedi. Obviously there's something to the argument that Jedi mind-control is, as Milo puts it, the work of "sick bastards." Voldemort could have worked his will on people just as easy as Killgrave, but so could Obi-wan Kenobi, at least in theory. The Jedi's mind control never seems quite as strong as the Imperius Curse, or Killgrave's commands. But maybe that's because nobody in the films is very good at it.

Indoctrination and Balance

Milo's second argument against the Jedi---that they abduct and indoctrinate children---is hardly far-fetched either. In fact, David Houghton and Pheobe Wood-Wheelhouse argue [much the same thing](#) in a very clever dissection of the prequel trilogy.

In that piece, Houghton and Wheelhouse argue that George Lucas very nearly stumbled on a good story in the prequel films, but simply missed the mark in his portrayal of Anakin as the one who would restore balance to the Force, and to those who wield it. [They write:](#)

While they might be merry old samurai hippies in the Original Trilogy, the organised, prolific, altogether more militarised Jedi of the prequel period are a hardcore conservative faction, incredibly rigid in their doctrine, code and methods. They are ubiquitous, unchallenged, and if anything, slightly too powerful. They have restrictions on sexuality, a strict religious code, make free use of mind control for 'the greater good', and enforce stoicism to the point of detachment. They demand utter devotion, are run by an oligarchy, and almost entirely cut themselves off from the outside world. Sound a bit cultish? It is.

The Sith, on the other hand, are staunch libertarians. They accept no oversight or control from the state, practice a self-centred philosophy, and value personal freedom over social responsibility. Both sides are arguably problematic in their own ways, their extremist attitudes to their own philosophies making all elements of their conduct potentially rather dangerous. Suddenly the simple, unambiguous lines between the Light and Dark sides are rather blurred. They're binary opposites in terms of ostensible alignment, but in practice, neither is entirely good or bad. Wherever it stems from, extremism always tends to boil down the same way. And that really raises questions about 'balance in the Force'.

The prequels, they argue, should have been about Anakin Skywalker actually wanting to bring some semblance of balance to the Force, something neither the Sith nor the Jedi truly want. The Jedi could have played a much more antagonistic role here; rather than simply having Anakin seduced by Palpatine, the Jedi themselves could have forced his hand. Anakin would have been in a unique position to break through the rigid Jedi radicalism of his time for one simple reason: He began his training much older. Here's Houghton and Wheelhouse again:

We're broadly told that the Jedi only recruit *really* young, and that Anakin's ripe old age of nine puts him way over the hill. We hear vague talk that he has 'too much anger'. We're told that training him will be impossible. But we've already seen Luke successfully trained, at the age of around 17, despite also apparently being "too impatient", "too angry" and "unfocused". There must be another explanation.

How's about indoctrination? After all, it's a hell of a lot easier to make a recruit accept a dogmatic lifestyle if they start too young to remember anything else.

In other words, there is room to interpret the prequels, the Jedi, and the Dark Side itself in much less black-and-white language. Anakin's shift to the Dark Side is certainly more believable here, since the Jedi really are pretty awful in their

own right.

Balance in the Galaxy

But none of this makes the Rebels themselves anything like ISIS or any other terrorist group. For one thing, the Force is hardly the all-encompassing religion that Islam is. The Jedi are not really religious leaders, even in the prequel films. They are military and political leaders and they wield mystical powers, but there is nothing like a zealous religious following for the Force. Nobody is called to prayer. No religious fanatics are asked to strap bombs to their chests and blow up enemy spacecraft.

The Jedi may be a flawed institution---something the films should have explored more---but they are nothing like fanatical religious leaders, and the Rebellion itself is a distinctly secular movement, as is the Resistance. The Republic is a democratic government usurped by the fascistic Empire. (And while the Emperor was elected, well, so was Hitler---which is sort of the point.)

Attempting to paint the Rebels as a terrorist group---either to point out that the Empire is actually the "good guys" or to draw parallels between Luke Skywalker and the unintended consequences of US foreign policy---is simply wrong. A better argument can be made that the Jedi themselves have

too much power, that balance is needed, that the Dark Side isn't necessarily just evil but also about individuality and so forth.

But simply hand-waving away the Rebels as terrorists is cheap and uninteresting and very much misses the point. Cheering the Empire as the "good guys" is equally lazy unless, of course, you're okay with fascism, genocide and the like. It's the same kind of lazy that made the prequels so unsatisfactory, glossing over meaningful questions and relationships only resulted in a trilogy of shallow, poorly executed space dramas.

Ultimately, having a flawed dichotomy between the heroes and the villains of these stories is a good thing. To recall *The Hunger Games* once more, the flawed extremism of District 13's rebellion is something I quite liked about those stories. As bad as Snow and his government were, that story illustrated how meeting the enemy on their own terms is a mistake---for the fictional characters of that world and for our own governments.

And plenty of historical revolutions have resulted in bloodbaths as bad or worse than the governments they sought to topple. *Star Wars* never tackles that question, because in the *Star Wars* universe Dark and Light are far more dichotomous, at least on the surface. I think there's more depth beneath that black-and-white exterior, but

rarely in the political realm. *Star Wars* is a story about inner struggle, the war within over our dark and light selves. That's why the prequel trilogy failed: Anakin's struggle never felt real, at least not compared to Luke's or even to Darth Vader's final turning point.

Hopefully the new trilogy, which I suspect will follow Kylo Ren's own war within as closely as it follows its other protagonists, succeeds where the prequels failed.

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