

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

The Seductions of Ideology

by Jon B. Alterman

For a supposedly religious movement, the Islamic State group (ISG) attracts an awful lot of sinners and not so many saints. While its complete membership is a mystery, its ranks seem to include a fair number of drug dealers, petty thugs, pickpockets, and muggers. By contrast, it counts few seminaries among its key sources of recruitment and few senior clerics among its boosters.

A virtual industry is arising to combat the ideology of the ISG, effectively endorsing the group's ideological pretensions. In fact, while the ISG uses ideology to justify many of its atrocities, the group is "just ideological enough" to provide cover for its activities. Looking closely, there is little evidence that either the group's recruitment or its actions are especially motivated by religious ideology. Attacking the group's ideology, however, is more palatable for many governments than attacking the real drivers of ISG recruitment: disenfranchisement, sharply discriminatory treatment, and poor governance.

Although it claims to be the sort of messianic movement the world hasn't seen in a millennium, the ISG is fighting a classic insurgency. It is contesting space that weak governments are unable to control, and it governs in equal measure by protecting vulnerable populations from the predatory behavior of outsiders and by intimidating insiders who might oppose it. Something like 180 such insurgencies have sprung up since World War II, and upwards of 35 are ongoing right now.

Two things distinguish the ISG from an ordinary insurgency. The first is its willingness, and even eagerness, to fight globally. The ISG has assimilated many of the operational lessons of al Qaeda, both in its centralized planning phase of the 1990s and the decentralized phase of the 2000s. The group effectively uses small cells against soft targets to gain massive global attention. The strategy requires few resources and only a tiny number of fighters to gain worldwide notoriety.

The second is its concerted effort at global recruitment. Most insurgent groups are wholly local phenomena, fighting for local grievances. The ISG, by contrast, has a relatively light sprinkling of Iraqis and Syrians outside of leadership positions, especially compared to Syrian rivals such as Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, and

(continued on page 2)

Seoul Music

Some treat diplomacy in the Middle East like political theater—but for South Korea, it's more of a musical.

For decades, Korea's relationship with the region has been staked in an exchange of energy and construction contracts. Now, Korea sees a chance to deepen and broaden ties with Gulf states pushing to diversify their economies. Seoul is positioning itself to be a top GCC partner in everything from agriculture to IT innovation to medical tourism. To draw closer into the Gulf's orbit, it is turning to a familiar playbook of cultural exports.

While many states view cultural diplomacy as window dressing, Korea's leaders have adopted it as a central soft power tool. Spreading Korean pop culture—long a juggernaut in Asia—is seen as a way to expand markets and energize tourism.

To woo the Gulf, Korea broadcasts radio programs in Arabic on K-pop hits and celebrities, while corporate Korean events might close with a band flown in from Seoul. Korean soap operas are hits on Arab television. Their social conservatism resonates well with local culture, and they portray an orderly and glamorous lifestyle that is appealing.

The UAE, Korea's strategic partner in the region, has become a laboratory for the attempt to build a love for all things Korean. A top Korean media promoter plans to fill a 25,000-person arena in Abu Dhabi for a K-pop concert this month. The top-tier tickets, costing \$250 each, are already sold out.

Korea and Gulf states already share broad economic interests. With a youth-minded campaign to capture hearts and minds, Seoul is hoping they'll find more to share. ■

Middle East Program Works on Religious Radicalism

The Middle East Program's ongoing work on political, security, and socioeconomic issues related to extremism and insurgencies includes an edited 2014 volume, *Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings*. In the introduction, "[The Changing Geopolitical Landscape](#)," Jon Alterman analyzes how radical groups in the Middle East have responded to upheaval in the region since 2011. In his chapter "[Jihadi-Salafi Rebellion and the Crisis of Authority](#)," Haim Malka examines competition among jihadi-salafi groups for dominance and influence over a new generation of youth. All of the book's chapters are available [HERE](#). ■

Jaysh al-Thuwar. One of the ISG's most successful innovations is building on al Qaeda's ability to unite the globally aggrieved.

Still, the group is not nearly as innovative as it pretends to be. The ISG's appeal to youth from the Middle East and beyond derives principally from its ability to turn grievance into purpose. Youth who are bored or stifled enjoy the sense of adventure, youth whose community is under threat enjoy the sense of responsibility, and youth who are wholly disaffected enjoy the sense of meaning. In the Arab world, one of the most important recruiting tools for the ISG is its members' experiences with security services before joining the movement. The harassment and arrests, the violence, and the disrespect all create willing participants. The lack of jobs, the humiliation, and infantilization that comes from prolonged unemployment play a role as well (and in a disproportionately large number of cases, some form of mental illness). The absence of family responsibilities loosens potential recruits' ties to the societies they leave, and the presence of friends and relatives in the fight makes the battlefield an attractive alternative social structure.

Addressing these problems not only takes years of effort, but it takes the full cooperation of governments that are often disinclined to change ingrained practices. Security sector reform is brutally difficult not only because it requires powerful security people to behave differently, but also because so many of those powerful security people consider it reckless to do so. They are rough with problem cases not only because it is what they know what to do, but also because they fear what would happen if they stopped doing it.

Addressing the economic challenges is no less fraught. Western governments have labored mightily to promote economic reform in the developing world, with decidedly mixed results. Middle Eastern governments have pursued economic reform efforts for more than a half-century that have generally resulted in weak private sectors and large public payrolls, both of which reinforce the power of the state. In the meantime, technology has brought violence of all kinds into living rooms, fomenting rage and putting a premium on the urgency of success. It all constitutes a daunting agenda.

For many governments, there is tremendous appeal to focusing on an ideological battle of "Countering Violent Extremism," or CVE. Most importantly, efforts to promulgate a more benign ideology moves them from being part of the problem to being part of the solution. In the meantime, police and security officials are left to do what must be done, and diplomats assure Western powers that fundamentally common interests bind our governments. Earnest conferences are held, and speeches are delivered, but the approach requires (and fosters) little fundamental change in conditions on the ground. In the wake of the Arab uprisings, many U.S. allies find the approach appealingly cautious, conservative—and convenient.

A CVE framework also reinforces regional governments' authority over the clerical establishment, creating a powerful tool for compliance. In a CVE framework, religious dissent can be portrayed as a form of treason, lining up clerics to support governments. Governments insist that the answer to radicalism is not liberalism but orthodoxy, of which they and their religious institutions are the arbiters and the enforcers.

A principally ideological approach doesn't do much to blunt the appeal of jihadi groups to what is, in reality, an angry minority among the disenfranchised and disaffected. Amidst pools of the angry and embittered, some fraction will still seek to undermine and often destroy the system they believe betrays them.

No conference will sway them, and no conference will sway their tormentors. Addressing the problem of violent extremism requires approaches that go far beyond words and ideologies, and it will require efforts that last far beyond the Obama administration, and the president who follows him as well. ■ 3/09/16

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman participated in a panel discussion at the Valdai Discussion Club in Moscow on February 26 titled "[Cooperation Opportunities for Global and Regional Powers in the Middle East.](#)"

Russia Direct quoted Jon Alterman in "[The implications of the Turkey factor for US-Russia relations.](#)"

Russia Today interviewed Jon Alterman for a [video segment](#) of "In the Now."

Agence France Presse quoted Jon Alterman in "[U.S. claims to kill top Islamic State operative with airstrike in Libya, but is wary of deeper engagement.](#)"

The Middle East Notes and Comment electronic newsletter is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). © 2016 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The CSIS Middle East Program

Jon B. Alterman
*Senior Vice President, Brzezinski
Chair in Global Security and
Geostrategy, and Director, Middle
East Program*

Haim Malka
Deputy Director and Senior Fellow

Rebecka Shirazi
Associate Director

Margo Balboni
Research Associate

Emily Burlinghaus
Bryce Feibel
Interns