

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

To Fight Jihadi Violence, End the Wars

by Jon B. Alterman

The spread of jihadi violence in the Arab world is as obvious as it is painful. Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya all have groups that use the slogans and symbols of Islam to recruit, to radicalize, and to justify violent campaigns against the status quo. The distribution of another cinematic video last week, showing the grisly murders of more than a dozen Egyptian Christians in Libya, suggested that these groups share more than an ideology across borders. Making the video required an international collaboration among cameramen, editors, and scriptwriters.

Western governments have concentrated on ways to wipe out the groups—first al Qaeda, and more recently Daesh, or the Islamic State. These governments focus on airstrikes, intelligence cooperation, financial countermeasures, and ideological delegitimization. They have focused less on the fact that each of these groups thrives in the midst of a proxy war—one that is often conducted between U.S. allies.

At first glance, that shouldn't make sense. All the governments of the region share revulsion at the tactics of jihadi groups. These groups all seek to demolish the boundaries of the Muslim world, replacing national governments with a single, unified Islamic one. Their victory would not only represent a huge setback for the West; it would be suicidal for Western allies in the Arab world, South Asia, and beyond.

But the groups have two things going for them. The first is that some governments and individuals see them as useful. If the greatest threat to the Middle East is Iranian expansionism, the thinking goes, then why should states move aggressively to destroy some of Iran's most implacable foes? While states have been alarmed at the prospect of fighters from their own countries joining jihadi groups (for fear of their return), they have often proven happy to turn a blind eye to more fleeting elements of jihadi networks in their midst: fundraisers, arms dealers, and even transiting fighters. None of these carries with them the immediate threat of bringing jihad home, and the governments find it far preferable to battle the Iranians overseas rather than battling them in their own countries. Kuwait, Qatar,

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Doodling Dissent

Soon after the fourth anniversary of the uprising that overthrew President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, a cartoon appeared online showing the date "January 25" in handcuffs. Another evoked the footage of Islamic State militants burning Jordanian pilot Muadh al-Kasasbeh—but those caged were Egyptian journalists and protesters, and the man holding the torch was labeled "Sisi's judges."

Political satire has a long Arab history, and much of it has been through cartooning. The Egyptian satirical journal *Abu Nadhara* did to Egyptian political figures what Thomas Nast did to Boss Tweed in the United States in the late nineteenth century. Lebanese political cartoonists famously took on regional leaders like Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s and Lebanese warlords in the 1970s and 1980s.

Since 2011, governments have increasingly targeted those who dissent through drawing. Syrian security forces crushed cartoonist Ali Ferzat's fingers in 2011 days after he drew Assad struggling to stay on top of a chair whose springs had burst through the seat. Though Ferzat had been subtly critiquing Syrian politics and society for over forty years, the government judged his bold satire as too great a threat amidst Syria's uprising.

The rise of online publication has fueled a new audience for political cartoons. Egypt's As7abe Sarcasm Society posts anonymous amateur comics often directly critical of the Sisi government on a Facebook page followed by over 8 million people. It remains unclear how much governments know about who follows the cartoons. It is also unclear how much the readers care. ■

New Multimedia Releases

The CSIS Middle East Program recently put out more materials related to our new book, *Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings*. Jon Alterman appears in a new video discussing "Challenges of Religious Radicalism in the Middle East." We also launched an iTunes U course featuring materials from the book.

CSIS also released a podcast featuring Jon Alterman, "Saudi Arabia's New King and Yemen's Disarray," that looks at unfolding events in the Middle East, the implications of the upheaval in Yemen, political transition in Saudi Arabia, and the contentious relationship between Netanyahu and the West. ■

Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have all been accused of abetting the operations of jihadi groups, if not by acts of commission, then at least by acts of omission.

The second and much more pervasive advantage these groups have is their ability to thrive in the chaos of proxy wars, even if they are no party's proxy. The wars drive vulnerable populations to seek protection, and they create war economies that thrive on corruption, mercenary fighters, and black-market weaponry. The wars weaken already dysfunctional governments unable to provide services, making the stumbling governance of jihadi groups seem more acceptable by comparison. The wars disrupt the lives of millions of young people, making at least some feel even angrier and more powerless, and driving them to support the gruesome violence that has become the calling card of jihadi groups.

What is striking about these wars is that so many Western allies are party to them. Libya's proxy war pits a group in the west of the country that includes many Islamists called "Libya Dawn," which reportedly receives assistance from Qatar and Turkey, against an anti-Islamist government that Egypt and the United Arab Emirates strongly support in the east. In Syria, the government receives support from Iran and Russia, while a wide range of regional countries and Western allies have supported diverse opposition groups that include both the Islamic State and the al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front. In Iraq, both the United States and Iran are supporting the Iraqi government as well as the Kurdish Peshmerga, while Arab states seek to work with the country's Sunni tribes to preserve their future interests. Yemen is the most recent country to fall into disarray. The Houthis, who have seized control of much of the north of the country, receive at least some support from Iran, while some of the tribes in the oil-rich Marib Province and some of the separatist groups in the south receive Arab funds—and arms—to prevent a complete Houthi takeover. While the United States is party to only some of these wars, its allies play a role in each of them.

The way out of these wars is not merely for the United States to declare victory and go home, hoping they will resolve on their own. What is needed here is a renewed understanding that these struggles need to end, and that this will require some sort of negotiation between parties on the ground and those supporting fighters from afar. The United States has a key stake in how this turns out, and it should pursue the strategic objective of improving the U.S. bargaining position in these eventual negotiations. Ultimately, that would involve working with allies and enemies alike to bring these conflicts to a close.

Part of improving the U.S. bargaining position is understanding what steps the United States can take that others would find disproportionately onerous. It is also to understand what countries' vulnerabilities are, and what their leaders' susceptibilities and desires are. This approach is not about sounding out allies to see what they would agree to, nor is it settling on a least common denominator among friends. More than anything, it requires a negotiator's mindset that is less focused on designing a specific outcome and pushing parties to accept it than using tactical tradeoffs, compromises, and bargaining to end violent conflicts.

This approach requires pulling back from the particularities of each individual negotiation to see the commonalities and differences between them, and the ways in which parties' interests can be met in one place to compensate for concessions in another. It will require time, and it will require a willingness to commit resources. If done unartfully, it would look like concessions across the board. If done with energy, focus, creativity, and commitment, however, it would demonstrate a simple fact: the United States has the power, the resources, and the diplomatic skill to move the world away from conflict. No one else does; the United States needs to do so. ■ 2/20/2015

Links of Interest

The International Business Times quoted Jon Alterman in "Putin in Egypt: Hero's Welcome A 'Slap in the Face' For Washington."

Fox News quoted Jon Alterman in "Jordan's King Abdullah a formidable foe against ISIS, experts say."

CBS News quoted Haim Malka in "Yemen instability reveals limits of U.S. counterterrorism strategy."

Jon Alterman appeared in an ABC News segment titled "ISIS Hostage Pleads for Prisoner Swap in New Video."

BBC quoted Jon Alterman in "US-Saudi ties: Obama pursues stability, not human rights."

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