

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Monsters, Inc.

by Jon B. Alterman

It's not hard to find Americans who want a victory over the Islamic state. The hard part is finding any with a good sense of what victory would look like. The late Justice Potter Stewart's famous description of hard-core pornography, "I know it when I see it," isn't very helpful.

It's especially unhelpful because there have been so many moments in the last 15 years when it looked like the battle against religiously inspired extremism in the Arab world had been won. After Saddam Hussein fell in 2003, there was a self-satisfied feeling in Washington that freedom was nigh in the Middle East, and that liberalism (in the classical sense, and most certainly not in the U.S. political sense) would soon follow. When uprisings spread throughout the Middle East in 2011, commentators suggested that the events would marginalize extremists, who had argued that change could only come at the end of a gun. When Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011, another turning point seemed upon us.

And yet, as one looks at the Arab world today, extremist movements have been reinvigorated. The Islamic State group (ISG), one of the most brutal of these movements, is drawing wide attention and gaining adherents. After almost a year of onslaught by more than 60 wealthy and well-armed countries aligned with the United States, the ISG may not be winning, but it's hard to argue that they are losing.

A key problem arises from treating this movement like the state it claims to be. It is not a state, and it does not seek to operate in a world of nation-states. It is much more like a criminal enterprise, and even more like a business. Understanding the ISG in that context gives us better tools to deal with it.

Like any business, the ISG has a successful front office that is able to articulate strategic goals and pursue them, while adapting to shifting circumstances.

It is also successful at pursuing investment, even issuing an annual report (in Arabic [here](#)) with infographics that help explain performance across 14 key indicators,

(continued on page 2)

Cycle of Violence

"Now we've seen it all!" groused the street seller. Years of civil war have produced any number of surreal sights in Damascus's Shaalan district, but he was still unprepared for this one: a young woman whizzing past on a bike.

In Syria's capital, checkpoints have paralyzed motor traffic. To avoid the gridlock, young Damascenes, including a growing number of women, have taken to bicycles. In response, municipal authorities have begun licensing cyclists and even created bike lanes.

As a cheap mode of independent transportation, cycling holds an illustrious place in the history of women's emancipation movements. Damascus women report wider freedom, too, as families grow more permissive because of the sheer difficulty of moving around by car. While female cyclists have their detractors, they have also found support in unexpected places. Several years ago, an online cleric gave a favorable ruling to women on bicycles, noting that in the time of the Prophet Muhammad women rode camels. A Saudi religious authority has also approved women's bicycling, as long as it is for recreation and not transportation and a male guardian is present.

War-torn Yemen is another story entirely. While the country suffers paralyzing fuel shortages, a Facebook-led effort to promote women's biking last month got just 15 participants and provoked a storm of protest. Images of women on bicycles—their black abayas pressed tight in the breeze, revealing a hint of skinny jeans beneath—seemed to many to be a threat to all they hold dear. Said one commenter, "This is what this war has brought." ■

Yemen's Crisis

On May 21, 2015, the CSIS Middle East Program hosted Cédric Schweizer, head of delegation in Yemen for the International Committee of the Red Cross, for a conversation about the ongoing violence and humanitarian crisis in Yemen. Dr. Jon Alterman moderated the discussion, which also featured Dr. J. Stephen Morrison, senior vice president and director of the CSIS Global Health Policy Center, and Kimberly Flowers, director of the CSIS Global Food Security Project. Schweizer discussed ongoing challenges facing humanitarian operations in Yemen including fuel and water shortages, lack of access to basic medical supplies, and difficulty accessing remote areas due to insecurity. You can watch video or listen to audio of the event [HERE](#). ■

and region-by-region monthly metrics suggesting that the ISG embraces the ideal, “I can’t manage what I can’t measure.”

Like leading businesses, the ISG has excelled at branding. Organizations from Nigeria to the Philippines are hoping some of the ISG magic will rub off on them when they pledge their allegiance to the group, although the practical effect of their allegiance remains unclear. The organization enhances its brand partly through highly produced videos and partly through an innovative social media effort that would put almost any Fortune 500 company to shame. Armies of volunteers rebroadcast messages immediately, making it a trivial task for the curious to track down the latest “banned” video online.

These branding efforts have been a boost to worldwide recruitment, which is a more challenging task than it would seem. Not only does the group seek people willing to die, but it also has to do so across a baffling array of languages. Unlike al Qaeda, which operated almost exclusively in Arabic, the ISG must integrate forces that speak Arabic, English, French, Chechen, Russian, Turkish, and more. In a basic human resources function, it must assess the skills of new recruits and find ways to match those recruits with suitable placements. Doing so is no small undertaking, and managing the ethnic rivalries that surface is a constant struggle.

Perhaps most surprisingly, the ISG must have a successful government relations function. It not only negotiates the passage of people, money, and supplies into and out of territory it controls, but also gains intelligence, frees prisoners, and gets acquiescence if not support from key actors. This work all falls somewhere between diplomacy, intelligence, and lobbying, but it is vital to the organization’s success.

Through all of this, the ISG has to ensure that it maintains scalability as it expands the area and depth of its operations. That the ISG can do all of these things, and do so in a dynamic environment, is impressive. That it can maintain dominance in a field in which there is such a low barrier to entry—after all, anyone can start a utopian terrorist group—is even more so.

The group’s dynamism is one key to its success, and another is that it is able to portray its mere survival as a victory against steep odds. That is to say, every day the ISG does not lose, it wins; every day the United States does not win, it loses. Unfortunately, the United States’ efforts play to the ISG’s strengths.

The U.S.-led campaign against the ISG is heavy on weaponry, and that makes it heavy on impatience as well. Planes fly out every day, find targets, and drop ordinance. While the overall campaign plan has multiple lines of effort, the lines that are easiest to surge—and to measure and report on—are the military ones. Yet, sustaining a sense of progress in a military campaign is hard. Over the last year, Henry Kissinger has been fond of observing, “I have seen four wars begun with great enthusiasm and public support, all of which we did not know how to end and from three of which we withdrew unilaterally.”

Successful U.S. wars have been fought against states; insurgencies (such as the North Vietnamese) have proven much harder foes. Thinking about the battle against the ISG in traditional military terms will do no good.

The more apt comparisons are wars that the United States has fought but never had much chance of “winning”: the “War on Poverty,” and “War on Drugs.” Each has required many years of effort, and each has taken a whole-of-government approach. While there are moments of action and excitement, much of the work is done in meeting rooms where no weapons are present. Most importantly, their goals are not to completely eradicate the enemy, but to systematically reduce the threat that it poses over time. The goal is making progress. It may not be a satisfying form of victory, but at least it builds support for sustaining the fight. ■
6/25/2015

Links of Interest

Al Jazeera quoted Jon Alterman in “[Will Egypt send Morsi to the gallows?](#)”

Military Times quoted Jon Alterman in “[U.S. to send up to 450 more troops to train Iraqis.](#)”

The *Los Angeles Times* quoted Jon Alterman in “[Obama raises possibility of allowing U.N. vote on Palestinian statehood.](#)”

Bloomberg Business quoted Jon Alterman in “[Delta’s Unorthodox Fix-It Man Is Feuding With Rivals Again.](#)”

New Perspectives in Foreign Policy featured an [interview](#) with Jon Alterman in the journal’s Summer 2015 issue.

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). © 2015 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

Carolyn Barnett
Research Fellow

Rebecka Shirazi
Associate Director

Margo Balboni
Research Associate

Hamad Abdulaziz Al-Fahad
Cassandra Bryan
Interns