

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

The Islamic State (Re)Writes History

by Jon B. Alterman

History, we are often told, is written by the winners. Modern states and peoples are the products of success; historians seek the origins of their glory. The victors make it easy: they leave voluminous records and they ransack the records of those they have defeated.

What would history written by losers look like? It would look a lot like the history that the Islamic State group (ISG) is writing now.

Islamic history has a good amount of winning in it. Not only did medieval Muslim armies conquer lands from Spain to India, but Muslim traders spread the religion still further into the Far East and Southeast Asia. For centuries, Islamic math and science led the world, and Muslim scholars helped preserve the manuscripts of antiquity. Renaissance scholars relied on them as they rediscovered ancient Greece and Rome.

This winning is not central to the historiography of the ISG. The group's followers swim in a sea of victimhood, resentment, and vengeance, and they luxuriate in paranoia and xenophobia. The group's central organizing truth is not about the power Muslims hold but instead the power that Muslims have lost. Grievance motivates them, and it is precisely the group's abject weakness that drives and legitimates its most barbaric acts against symbols of global power. If one looks at the ISG's videos, a single theme is overwhelming. The ISG desperately seeks equivalence to infinitely stronger and more capable foes. Its imagery is all about promoting feelings of agency among its fighters; often times it is accompanied by an effort to enfeeble a symbol of some hostile force.

The ISG did not invent the instrumentalization of history. Saddam Hussein reveled in the symbolism of Babylonia, and the Shah of Iran sought to tie himself to Persepolis and the empire of Cyrus the Great. Benito Mussolini sought to rebuild the glories of Rome, and Ataturk moved Turkey's capital from cosmopolitan Constantinople to the Anatolian heartland in order to engender an "authentic" Turkish identity.

(continued on page 2)

Gulf Roundtable: "Where Do We Go From Here? The World After The Iran Deal"

On September 25, 2015, the CSIS Middle East Program hosted Amb. Nicholas Burns, Professor of the Practice of Diplomacy and International Relations at the Harvard Kennedy School and Dr. Vali Nasr, Dean of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, for a discussion on the implications of the nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 in the Middle East and beyond at a roundtable entitled "Where Do We Go From Here? The World After the Iran Deal." Burns addressed the diplomacy and U.S. domestic politics involved in implementing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Nasr analyzed the various ways in which regional actors are responding to the deal and how those responses are shaping the emerging strategic context in the region. In the post-JCPOA period, the speakers agreed, the need for U.S. attention in the region is likely to grow rather than diminish. You can access a full summary of the event [HERE](#). ■

Policy Goals

The "cold war" between Saudi Arabia and Iran is waged with many weapons—heavy arms, proxy forces, petrodollars—but many forget about the soccer balls. Yet, when these countries' national teams face off, as they have 15 times since 1975, the stands become ground zero for airing political and historical grievances. Even club matches between Iranian and Saudi teams are combustible contests of national pride.

Fans have long touted banners glorifying their sect of Islam or affirming the "proper" name of the Gulf—which Arabs emphatically do not consider Persian. But as Iran and Saudi Arabia's rivalry has grown hotter since 2011, fans are increasingly directing their potshots at the other country's foreign policy. At a 2011 game, Iranian fans raised a flag reading "Death to al-Khalifah"—a reference to the ruling family of Bahrain, where Saudi forces helped squelch dissent that spring. At another match, Saudi fans waved the Free Syrian Army flag in a jab at Tehran's support of the Assad regime.

And it is not just superfans who take the "beautiful game" so seriously. In 2012, a Saudi player sparked an uproar when he celebrated a goal against a Tehran club team by flashing the crowd an undershirt emblazoned with his nickname, "F-16." Iranian media accused the player of making veiled threats about Saudi air power, and the president of Tehran's Sports Council called on Iranian authorities to summon the then-Saudi ambassador. In May, a major match coincided with Saudi airstrikes on Iranian-backed rebels in Yemen, and an Iranian newspaper with ties to the IRGC declared that the game's meaning "transcended soccer."

Recent events do not suggest any slowdown of the competition between these regional hegemons. And in the stadium at least, no one can deny that it is a zero-sum game. ■

What the ISG is doing is different, though. It is more like Adolph Hitler's reliance on—and sometimes invention of—Aryan history to inspire and guide a modern society. Common to both projects is the passionate marriage between a utopian social vision and a conspiratorial worldview—a society locked in endless battle against myriad enemies. The utopian vision inspires, and enemies help preserve solidarity. History helps bind the two.

But it is a certain kind of history at play. Real history is chaotic, messy, and full of ambiguity. Its lessons are hard to discern, when they can be discerned at all. The history peddled by these groups is different. It is streamlined, possessing a clear moral objective and a clear enemy. It not only projects legitimacy on its adherents but also connects them to an eternal truth. Groups use this kind of history to grasp at immortality. In her book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, the scholar Svetlana Boym discusses how history can permit the “transformation of fatality into continuity.” Everyday acts can be sanctified because they are invested with the spirit of lost generations. Each generation struggles to remain as true to its ancestors as the preceding generation did, despite the temptations of innovation and modernity.

Some of these traditions have shallower roots than one might suppose. More than three decades ago, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger gathered a series of spectacular nineteenth-century efforts to weave modern traditions from the threads of historical evidence. Perhaps the most colorful example was the Victorian effort to create a unified Scottish culture full of kilts and proprietary clan tartans. The truth was much more of a muddle, involving cloth merchants and a rising sense of Scottish nationalism.

Adherents to the ISG are engaged in a spectacular act of invention, seeking to dress their modern reign in ancient garments. They insist on the timelessness of what they claim to be ancient and holy customs, and they harshly punish those who depart from those customs. But are those customs really ancient and holy? One of the most visible symbols of Islamic practice, women’s veiling, certainly is not commanded in the Qur'an, and it is largely an interpretation of the privacy afforded to women in the Prophet Muhammad’s family.

Did the Prophet Muhammad lash his followers for smoking cigarettes? He couldn’t have, as cigarettes were invented more than 1,200 years after his death, and tobacco itself did not come to the Middle East until 950 years afterwards. Bans on television, recorded music, soccer games and the like all reflect innovations.

What the ISG is, in fact, is a wholly modern movement that seeks to look ancient. Like the photo booths in tourist towns that produce sepia-toned photographs of contemporary subjects in period clothing, its wink toward the present is part of its appeal. Its followers are not recreating a holy seventh-century society of pious believers. They are gathering the dispossessed and disaffected to an invented homeland that strives to provide certainty, intimacy, and empowerment to a population that feels too little of any of them.

There is little use quibbling with their distortions of history, which are too numerous to mention. Instead, what is risible is their solemn use of history at all. This group is wholly modern and wholly innovative. It is wholly disruptive, as it seeks to be. Its followers should not be ennobled by their purported connection to history.

Western governments and their allies in the Middle East should not fall into the trap of seeing the ISG and its ilk as groups hostile to modernity. Instead, they should highlight how truly modern these groups are, and how selective they are in their readings of history. They do not guide their followers back to the well-worn path of tradition, but instead blaze a new trail of confrontation with the rest of the world.

Stripped of their historical costumes, we can see them as they are: the angry and the weak, preying on those even weaker than themselves. There is glory to be found in Islam. It is not to be found in them. ■ 10/20/2015

Links of Interest

Jon Alterman delivered a [keynote address](#) on U.S. human rights policy in the Middle East at the Marine Corps University’s Fall 2015 Middle East and North Africa Democratization Seminar.

The *Washington Post* quoted Jon Alterman in “[Afghanistan, and why presidents shouldn’t make foreign policy promises](#).”

The *Los Angeles Times* quoted Jon Alterman in “[With Afghanistan decision, Obama abandons goal of ending wars he inherited](#).”

The Associated Press quoted Jon Alterman in “[Saudi crush was deadliest hajj tragedy ever](#).”

The *Los Angeles Times* quoted Jon Alterman in “[Obama tries to define his legacy abroad—while the rest of the world tests it](#).”

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

Rebecka Shirazi

Associate Director

Margo Balboni

Research Associate

Amira Khemakhem

Eric Rogers

Interns