

THE WEST'S IDEOLOGICAL VACUUM

One point I tried to make in this post on George Orwell's fighting in Spain is that the fight between Bashar al-Assad and ISIS is one that has become an ideological magnet. I was trying to argue that we're offering little by way of positive ideology to combat ISIS, particularly among those most susceptible to its draw.

Two recent commentaries have made related points. This Jocelyne Cesari NYT op-ed on Europe's need to more fully embrace Muslims notes the "collapse" of ideologies in Europe.

Third, the collapse of all major ideologies in Europe – nationalism, Communism, and liberalism – has left room for new radical options. For some young Europeans, adherence to radical Islam provides a viable alternative ideology, comparable to that of radical leftist groups in the 1970s.

And at the New Yorker, Steve Coll notes that ISIS is the kind of thing that arises when people feel they have no other avenue for security and justice.

The group's lightning rise is a symptom, however, of deeper instability; a cause of that instability is failed international policy in Iraq and Syria. If the United States is returning to war in the region, one might wish for a more considered vision than Whack-a-Mole against jihadists.

The restoration of human rights in the region first requires a renewed search for a tolerable—and, where possible, tolerant—path to stability. ISIS feasts above all on the suffering of Syria, and that appears to be unending. The war is in its fourth year, with almost two

hundred thousand dead and nine million displaced, inside the country and out. The caliphate now seated in Raqqa is the sort of dark fantasy that can spring to life when people feel they are bereft of other plausible sources of security and justice.

Though the very terms Coll discusses may betray part of the problem – and the neoliberal ideology Cesari doesn't account for in her piece.

It is not yet clear that ISIS will endure as a menace. Fast-moving extremist conquerors sometimes have trouble holding their ground. ISIS has promised to govern as effectively as it intimidates, but its talent lies in extortion and ethnic cleansing, not in sanitation and job creation. It is vulnerable to revolt from within.

Conceiving of governance as “job creation” may undersell what a destabilized region is looking for – not to mention ignore what ISIS has done in Syrian areas they control.

The group also has a surprisingly sophisticated bureaucracy, which typically includes an Islamic court system and a [roving police force](#). In the Syrian town of Manbij, for example, ISIS officials [cut off the hands](#) of four robbers. In Raqqa, they [forced](#) shops to close for selling poor products in the *suq* (market) as well as regular supermarkets and kebab stands—a move that was likely the work of its [Consumer Protection Authority](#) office. ISIS has also whipped individuals for [insulting](#) their neighbors, confiscated and destroyed [counterfeit](#) medicine, and on multiple occasions summarily executed and [crucified](#) individuals for [apostasy](#).

Members have [burned](#) cartons of cigarettes and destroyed [shrines](#) and [graves](#), including the famous [Uways al-Qarani shrine](#) in Raqqa.

Beyond these judicial measures, ISIS also invests in public works. In April, for instance, it [completed](#) a new *suq* in al-Raqqa for locals to exchange goods. Additionally, the group runs an [electricity office](#) that monitors electricity-use levels, [installs](#) new [power lines](#), and hosts [workshops](#) on how to repair old ones. The militants [fix](#) [potholes](#), [bus](#) people between the territories they control, [rehabilitate](#) [blighted medians](#) to make roads more aesthetically pleasing, and [operate](#) a post office and [zakat \(almsgiving\) office](#) (which the group claims has [helped](#) farmers with their harvests). Most importantly for Syrians and Iraqis downriver, ISIS has continued [operating](#) the Tishrin dam (renaming it al-Faruq) on the Euphrates River. Through all of these offices and departments, ISIS is able to offer a semblance of stability in unstable and marginalized areas, even if many locals do not like its ideological program.

I'm not saying this is the societal solution the Middle East seeks. But I am saying the US would be wise to understand that ISIS aspires to offer governance, not just brutal war, and it's more likely than, say, AQAP to be able to pull it off.

Meanwhile, Henry Kissinger has an almost plaintive piece calling for a new world order (because the world order he was central in creating is showing signs of cracking) in the WSJ. He ends it with a reaffirmation of purported American exceptionalism, even while he suggests that we must temper our promise of

“individual dignity and participatory governance” in places that need stability within a global order first.

A world order of states affirming individual dignity and participatory governance, and cooperating internationally in accordance with agreed-upon rules, can be our hope and should be our inspiration. But progress toward it will need to be sustained through a series of intermediary stages.

[snip]

For the U.S., this will require thinking on two seemingly contradictory levels. The celebration of universal principles needs to be paired with recognition of the reality of other regions’ histories, cultures and views of their security. Even as the lessons of challenging decades are examined, the affirmation of America’s exceptional nature must be sustained. History offers no respite to countries that set aside their sense of identity in favor of a seemingly less arduous course. But nor does it assure success for the most elevated convictions in the absence of a comprehensive geopolitical strategy.

But earlier in Kissinger’s piece, he admits that globalization destabilizes political order (even while he overstates the number of winners in the current globalized system).

The clash between the international economy and the political institutions that ostensibly govern it also weakens the sense of common purpose necessary for world order. The economic system has become global, while the political structure of the world remains based on the nation-state. Economic globalization, in its essence, ignores national frontiers. Foreign policy

affirms them, even as it seeks to reconcile conflicting national aims or ideals of world order.

This dynamic has produced decades of sustained economic growth punctuated by periodic financial crises of seemingly escalating intensity: in Latin America in the 1980s; in Asia in 1997; in Russia in 1998; in the U.S. in 2001 and again starting in 2007; in Europe after 2010. The winners have few reservations about the system. But the losers—such as those stuck in structural misdesigns, as has been the case with the European Union’s southern tier—seek their remedies by solutions that negate, or at least obstruct, the functioning of the global economic system.

The international order thus faces a paradox: Its prosperity is dependent on the success of globalization, but the process produces a political reaction that often works counter to its aspirations.

The rise of ISIS presents several challenges to the US, in my opinion. First, we (and Europe) need to offer something to compete with ISIS’ ideology. As loathsome as ISIS’ ideology it is, it does aspire to deliver on promises the West increasingly fails to deliver to all.

Part of that, though, requires acknowledging that we do have an ideology – neoliberalism – one that increasingly fails to offer the kind of stability and benefit for all that must offer a better alternative than ISIS (and even more importantly, has failed to provide real nation building in those countries we’ve destabilized in the Middle East).

ISIS aspires to fill potholes. That’s not even something the US can manage (at least not here in MI). That requires a commitment to building society that we’ve significantly lost of late.

We've been promising for decades that the "free market" will deliver justice everywhere. It seems not to be working. Maybe we need to offer more than that to ideologically combat the dangerous new forces out there?