

ISIS 'Nihilist'? No, And It's Not 'Contained' Either.

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Writing in the Guardian, Scott Atran examines the appeal and the ideology of

ISIS. It's well worth reading the whole article, but here's the nub:

Radical Arab Sunni revivalism, which Isis now spearheads, is a dynamic, revolutionary countercultural movement of world historic proportions, with the largest and most diverse volunteer fighting force since the second world war. In less than two years, it has created a dominion over hundreds of thousands of square kilometres and millions of people. Despite being attacked on all sides by internal and external foes, it has not been degraded to any appreciable degree, while rooting ever stronger in areas it controls and expanding its influence in deepening pockets throughout Eurasia.

I'll take the opportunity to interrupt with something I posted in May:

Historical parallels are dangerous to draw, and they often lead to some wildly incorrect conclusions, but ISIS's position in Syria and Iraq reminds me more than a little of the situation in which the nascent Soviet state found itself during the early years of the Russian Civil War. The Bolsheviks were encircled by hostile forces, who, on paper, were far stronger, but lacked the will and the coordination to defeat a Communist enemy that (like ISIS) enjoyed the benefits of a relatively solid core of territory, fanaticism, and a belief that the future was theirs. We all know what followed.

Back to Atran:

Simply treating Isis as a form of "terrorism" or "violent extremism" masks the menace. Merely dismissing it as "nihilistic" reflects a wilful and dangerous avoidance of trying to comprehend, and deal with, its profoundly alluring moral mission to change and save the world. And the constant refrain that Isis seeks to turn back history to the Middle Ages is no more compelling than a claim that the Tea Party movement wants everything the way it was in 1776. The truth is more complicated. As Abu Mousa, Isis's press officer in Raqqa, put it: "We are not sending people back to the time of the carrier pigeon. On the contrary, we will benefit from development. But in a way that doesn't contradict the religion."

The Tea Party analogy is a touch "Guardian", but there we are. I'd rather refer, again, to the Bolsheviks. At its core, Lenin's revolution was 'just' another

millenarian upheaval of a type that Europe had come to know in the Middle Ages or China had witnessed, with its 'Heavenly Kingdom', in the mid-nineteenth century. However, not only did Bolshevism not reject the future, it embraced it. Its vision of the 'radiant future' would be industrial, modern and, at times, tipped over into something close to science fiction. ISIS, like most millenarian movements believes in a cleansing fire (and, in its case, in setting it), and ideologically it explicitly looks back (to the teachings attributed to Mohammed) in a way that the Bolsheviks could never admit to doing, but to think that this also involves an embrace of the technologically pre-modern is evidently a mistake.

Atran:

A July 2014 ICM poll suggested that more than one in four French youth between the ages of 18 and 24 have a favourable or very favourable opinion of Isis, although only 7-8% of France is Muslim. It's communal. More than three of every four who join Isis from abroad do so with friends and family. Most are young, in transitional stages in life: immigrants, students, between jobs and mates, having just left their native family. They join a "band of brothers (and sisters)" ready to sacrifice for significance.

And, I would add, who enjoy the excitement, the violence and, as (grotesquely) we have seen in the lands of the 'Caliphate', the sexual opportunity offered by jihad with ISIS.

Atran still subscribes to the view that Europe's low birthrate makes mass immigration essential and thus inevitable (an opinion that avoids the reality of a post 'peak labor' world: the unemployed are not going to be able to pay for the retired). He sees the resulting pushback by "xenophobic ethno-nationalist movements" (his term, not mine: as I said, The Guardian) against such immigration as an opportunity for ISIS. In that such a pushback would

likely contribute to the way that some Muslims see themselves as a persecuted minority, he's probably right.

But there is something else. The larger the number of immigrants of a particular group relative to the overall population of a country the less likely it is that they will choose to abandon their own culture. That's commonsense, but this report by Britain's Institute for Fiscal Studies is still helpful in explaining why. Here's an extract:

When the minority (immigrant) group is small relative to the majority, assimilation occurs. Multiculturalism and [self-]segregation [occur] only once the share of the minority group in the population exceeds particular (different) thresholds. Above a certain threshold, there is a large enough 'critical mass' of immigrants that if the group maintains its distinct culture then, for any immigrant, the cost of switching culture outweighs the benefits of increased interaction. This threshold result is due to complementarities: maintaining a distinct minority culture is only 'worth it' if others do so, therefore either no one maintains the immigrant culture or a large group of immigrants does. And if that minority culture includes *some* room for sympathy for ISIS,

and if the numbers of that minority are now being reinforced by a large (by definition) unassimilated cohort, going through the often alienating experience of immigration, made even more alienating by the circumstances of its departure from Syria and elsewhere, well...

It's hard to be optimistic.