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Book Reviews

Explaining the Aims, Rise, and Impact of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham

Review Article by Gareth Stansfield

From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and Its Jihadi Legacy, by Jean-Pierre Filiu. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 311 pages. \$24.95.

ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror, by Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan. New York: Regan Arts, 2015. 270 pages. \$22.95.

The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution, by Patrick Cockburn. London: Verso, 2015. 172 pages. \$16.95.

Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate, by Abdel Bari Atwan. London: Saqi Books, 2015. 258 pages. \$24.95.

ISIS: The State of Terror, by Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger. New York: Ecco, 2015. 385 pages. \$27.99.

The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency, by Charles Lister. London: C. Hurst & Co., 2015. 500 pages. \$24.95.

The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State, by William McCants. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015. 242 pages. \$26.99.

Before the fighters of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) appeared on the outskirts of Mosul in June 2014, the attention of those academic observers following the already difficult politics of Iraq and the tortuous unfolding of the civil war in Syria were certainly aware of the latest manifestation of Sunni-led insurgency in Iraq and its spreading into Syria. But there was little academic focus upon it, and for good reason: the threat posed by violent jihadis in Iraq — under the banner of the al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) organization led by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi until his 2006 killing in a US military strike in 2006 and then by its successor organization, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) — had been largely suppressed in Iraq. This had been achieved by a coalition of Sunni Arab tribes rising up against what were seen as foreign radicals (the Awakening movement), combined with a highly effective US strategy of supporting these tribes while also surging additional American forces into Baghdad and Anbar Governorate, and eliminating those fighters who could not be reconciled.

By 2010, Iraq in particular had seemingly entered a new, more peaceful phase of its post-2003 development. Yet appearances were deceptive. Far from developing in an inclusive manner, bringing Iraqis of different communal backgrounds together, the government-formation process continued to be dominated by the politics of sectarianism and ethnicism. The Sunni community being far removed from the levers of power in a state dominated by Shi'a parties, with Kurdish support given while they also enjoyed their own continued and deepening autonomy in the Kurdistan Region. The parliamentary election of 2010 was telling in this regard. Even though the 'Iraqiyya party list of Iyad 'Allawi — a largely secular

nationalist slate that brought together a range of parties emanating from different parts of the Sunni Arab community — achieved a marginal victory over the State of Law Coalition of the incumbent, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, the resulting negotiations saw the former marginalized by an alliance of different Shi'a blocs. Maliki not only remained as prime minister, but also became acting minister of both defense and the interior.

With the power of the state at his disposal, Maliki would then embark upon a policy of suppressing Sunni political activism, and particularly upon the final withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in December 2011. Arrests of provincial leaders in Sunni governorates culminated with the charging of Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, Deputy Prime Minister Salih al-Mutlak, and Finance Minister Rafi' al-'Isawi. Throughout the next few years, the situation in Iraq's Sunni-dominated governorates deteriorated further, with significant demonstrations taking place, only to be met with an increasingly violent response by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).

It was in this environment that a new manifestation of Sunni militancy in Iraq began to grow. Regrouping in Mosul from 2008, ISI had become a more thoughtful, observant organization. Under the leadership of the relatively unknown Ibrahim 'Awwad al-Samarra'i, who would fight under the moniker Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and eventually proclaim himself Caliph Ibrahim, ISI from 2010 had become a different organization from those that preceded it. Not only did ISI learn from the mistakes it had made, but from the lessons meted out to it by the departed US forces. As an organization led by Iraqis, ISI embarked upon an aggressive program of rebuilding. Starting in July 2012, it attacked Iraq's prisons as part of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign, to release imprisoned fighters. In April 2013, Baghdadi announced the expansion of ISI to include the Syrian al-Qa'ida affiliate, the Nusra Front or *Jabhat al-Nusra* (though the latter continue to exist since their leader, Syrian-born former ISI commander Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, would reject ISI's command). The new organization — the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, also referred to as ISIL with al-Sham being translated as Levant or as Da'ish, short for the Arabic *al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-l-Sham*) — would go on to bigger and ever more spectacular operations. From July 2013, they targeted ISF forces for over a year as part of its "Operation Soldiers Harvest," instilling fear and nervousness into an ISF that no longer could call upon US military assistance; they began to operate with relative freedom across Iraq's Sunni-dominated governorates, taking control of much of Anbar and the towns of Falluja and Ramadi. Then, on June 4, 2014, they began their assault on Mosul, perhaps surprising themselves by the fact that they conquered the city so easily, routing the ISF, and then spreading their domains across the north of Iraq to the borders of the Kurdistan Region in the north and the outskirts of Baghdad to the south in an orgy of violence that terrified the government of Iraq and shocked the world. The proclamation of the Islamic State (*al-Dawla al-Islamiyya*) on June 29 and of Baghdadi as Caliph served notice to all that not only had political realities in Iraq and in Syria fundamentally changed, but that a new force had risen whose visions were far greater.

ISIS moved with such swiftness, and from such inauspicious, weakened beginnings that, beyond warnings appearing in more insightful analyses of Iraq's politics that there would be some form of backlash from the Sunni community to Nuri al-Maliki's unfolding policies, observers of Iraq's politics had become more focused upon other aspects of the country's political and economic life. Yet the questions posed by the rise of ISIS were legion, and with three of them standing out the most: What were their origins? What are their aims and aspirations? And, related to the final question, what will it take to defeat them?

The many books under review tend to cover all of these questions, and at times many more. Four of them focus primarily on providing a contextual analysis of ISIS's rise and development and give the reader a considerable grounding in Iraq's modern politics and, with hindsight, the dynamics that led to Baghdadi's Islamic State; three place the rise of ISIS within a broader regional context of instability in Iraq and in Syria, or of the interaction of modern Middle Eastern states with jihadism. Finally, one book provides an erudite analysis of what may be best referred to as the doctrine of ISIS — or why they do what they do. They all, of course, suffer from one glaring weakness, and that is the inability to conduct mean-

ingful fieldwork inside ISIS territory, or to interview any of the main actors responsible either for the formation of the entity or its current operation. But by employing detailed analysis of available materials and placing them within wider political, historical, and theological contexts, these books still manage to provide as good an analysis and assessment as is realistically possible of what is, in effect, a very much closed and impenetrable system.

The first group of books covers similar ground although each offers different insights and emphases. Taken together, they expose the reader to a great deal of historical detail that moves into fascinating analyses of what can be discerned about the organization, ideology, and operations of ISIS. Patrick Cockburn's *The Rise of the Islamic State* was one of the first books to appear following the fall of Mosul in 2014. *Rise* performed a valuable service in making available a much-needed analysis and assessment of ISIS, written by one of the foremost journalists of the Middle East. I can say from my own experience that Cockburn had been thinking deeply about ISIS, in terms of their constituting a serious threat to Iraq at least, for some time before the events of June 2014. He spoke at an event I organized in 'Amman on June 6, 2014, that addressed the situation in Syria. We were also following closely the news of ISIS's assault on Mosul, yet even at this moment in time and in expert company, the salience of what was unfolding was acknowledged only by a few of us, with Cockburn being very vocal in expressing his fears for what ISIS was, and what it could become. His book provides a fast-moving account of the rise of ISIS, the fall of Mosul, and the role played by regional powers, their policies, and a insightful if bleak analysis of what the future may hold for Iraq, Syria, and the Middle East as a whole. His final sentence, written in October 2014, noting that the "disunity and differing agendas [of the enemies of ISIS, including the US and Western countries] mean that the Islamic State is fast becoming an established geographic and political fact on the map" was particularly prophetic (p. 161), and worryingly remains as true today as when Cockburn finalized his book.

Two books which are often compared side by side are *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* by Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, and *ISIS: The State of Terror* by Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger. Both of them give a detailed account of the subject, with Weiss and Hassan in particular providing a granular account of the formative influences underpinning ISIS, commencing with the early efforts of Zarqawi. Perhaps more so than other similar books, and maybe because Hassan hails from Albu Kamal — a town on the Syrian-Iraqi border controlled by IS today — *Inside the Army of Terror* has a different sort of feel to it, one which seems more sensitive not only to the political reasons underpinning ISIS's successes, but also to the social reasons. Without ever portraying ISIS as being a positive development, Weiss and Hassan do provide a valuable corrective to those views that imply that the ISIS organization simply sits on top of local communities, governing them harshly but with no connectivity or roots into the society itself. This view of the situation then leads to rather simplistic notions of "removing" ISIS, and then leaving behind communities that would then need to be rehabilitated and supported as they recover from the trauma of their existence in the failed Islamic State. The picture drawn by Weiss and Hassan is more nuanced. They consider the impact of the activities of Sadrists and Iranian-run Special Groups in 2006, as they executed Sunni captives with power drills, and the way in which innocent Sunnis would be "disappeared" at police checkpoints "in an elaborate show of officialdom that was in fact a Sadrist form of ethnic cleansing" (p. 60). Weiss and Hassan note how ISIS reached out to local populations, bringing justice and order and protecting civilians from, quoting a resident of the Syrian town of Manbij, "the worst people in the area" (p. 223). Far from sitting on top of society, a reading of *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* leads one to view ISIS as being not only a political, insurgent, and terrorist movement rolled into one, but also a social movement that is constructed significantly from the inhabitants of Sunni Arab areas of Iraq and Syria and, for some, also acting very much in their interests. Clearly, if this is the case, then any counter-ISIS strategy that may be unveiled in future months or years would need to consider not only how to remove ISIS as a military and security threat, but how to win over the hearts and minds of Sunni Arab communities that have, at least in part, viewed

ISIS as being an authentic, home-grown organization that only has to be better than any possible alternative. When this alternative would likely be seen as the re-imposition of the authority of the central state, but now mediated through the offices of the powerful Shi'a militias of the People's Mobilization (*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*), then the hurdle of acceptance set for ISIS's performance will be very low indeed.

A similar book to that offered by Weiss and Hassan, Stern and Berger's *ISIS: The State of Terror*, offers less detail but ventures into the realm of policy-relevant commentary. As with other books, and especially Abdel Bari Atwan's *Digital Caliphate*, Stern and Berger provide a lucid chapter on the expert manner in which ISIS utilized new cyber methods, and also how Twitter responded with suspensions, only to see the cyber jihadis returned in what turned into a virtual game of Whac-A-Mole. They conclude with what is perhaps the most thought-provoking policy-related chapter in this collection of books. Stern and Berger argue convincingly for the military effort to be matched by a strategy to oversee political change in Iraq and Syria, but note that "Absent a military invasion that would somehow — improbably, magically — transform both Iraq and Syria into truly viable, pluralistic states in which Sunnis and Shi'a both feel secure, ISIS would likely remain, at least as a terrorist group, for many years to come" (p. 234). They undermine even further the logic of a "full-scale military intervention to defeat ISIS" by exposing the incongruity of doing so while Bashar al-Asad of Syria remains in power. It would be interesting to know how Stern and Berger would modify their analysis based upon the events of the fall of 2015, when Russia came to Asad's aid, and thus brought Western powers into an uneasy interaction with the Syrian regime through the need to manage the astonishingly complex and sensitive relationship with Moscow, which also then became even more troubled following the downing of a Russian Su-34 Flanker bomber by NATO-member Turkey's F-16s at the end of November. Now, there exists the very real possibility that ISIS could be squeezed from the west (by the Syrian regime and Russian forces) and from the east (by Western, Russian, and Iranian forces operating at the invitation of the government of Iraq), which would surely make ISIS's continued existence, at least in military terms, questionable. But this would it make its appeal to the radicalized, war-traumatized, fearful, and also to a degree apocalyptically minded (at least in some quarters of the jihadi community) even stronger and prone to even greater outbursts of violence not only in the Middle East, but also in Western Europe, North America, and Russia as well? Hopefully, we will see the new complexities of the unfolding situation addressed in a second edition.

Perhaps placed incongruously in a listing of books focused primarily on Iraq, Charles Lister's *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* presents a useful, and massively detailed, appraisal of the emergence of the Islamic State but from the starting point of the Syrian revolution and the transformation of Syria from being part of a network facilitating the travel of jihadis to fight in Iraq, to being a place which jihadists would fight for. Lister provides unparalleled detail about the 2011 formation of the Nusra Front by the ISI emir of Nineveh Governorate, Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, at the behest of ISI leader Baghdadi, and continues in the same vein, covering the next four years with the same level of detail as the first. For this reason alone, *The Syrian Jihad* will maintain its place in the literature on the Islamic State for years to come, as no other source can come close to providing this level of empirical richness. In addition to being a diligent archivist of the Syrian jihad and its Iraqi counterpart, Lister is also a skilled analyst and turns his attention in the final chapter to discussing how the future may unfold in Syria in particular, now that jihadi organizations — including ISIS, Nusra, and Ahrar al-Sham, among others—have such a strong hold over significant segments of popular sentiment, and over considerable swathes of territory. He is markedly pessimistic in his views, concluding that

the longer the conflict in Syria lasts, and the longer jihadists such as IS manage to retain control over territory sufficient to claim the existence of an "Islamic State," the more foreign fighters will continue to stream into the country, further bolstering the long-term potential and threat posed by the jihadists (p. 393).

He might be right. Indeed, all ISIS and Nusra need to do at present is to survive, and their very continuation will be presented as success. Yet it may also be the case that the internationalization of the Syrian jihadi side of the equation may be its undoing; just as it had been in Iraq for ISI, as Iraqi tribes turned their weapons onto the foreign jihadis rather than on the government of Iraq or its Western allies in 2007/8. The power of nationalism, Iraqi and Syrian, is a dynamic that many works on ISIS and other jihadi movements in the region often now overlook, or consider to be a historical feature of countries that have been so massively transformed by sectarian-focused violence that it is now no longer relevant to today's analyses.

The final book in this category of holistic analyses of ISIS and the Islamic State is *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* authored by the renowned journalist Abdel Bari Atwan. As someone who interviewed Usama Bin Ladin twice and has been a close observer of Sunni jihadi groups for several decades, Atwan is exceptionally well placed not only to write an account of ISIS, but also to identify what makes ISIS different to antecedent organizations. The clue to what Atwan chooses to address is given in the title to his book. Referring to the Islamic State as “the Digital Caliphate,” Atwan identifies from the beginning of his book the importance of the bringing together of the message of the organization with the opportunities provided by the Internet and the cyber world. Not only does Atwan note how social networking platforms are used to great effect, but how ISIS has its own cadre of highly skilled web developers that have produced their own version of Facebook— Muslimbook—and developed software to coordinate members' Twitter accounts to greater effect. The discussion of the size of the “Cyber Caliphate” and its capabilities presents a reality that, in its technical and clinical way, should be seen as just as troublesome in the threat it poses to the West as terrorists plotting attacks on soft targets with the more traditional weapons of firearms and explosives. Atwan's analysis then moves onto covering similar ground to others— history, organization, structure, foreign fighters too—and, as a skilled and very knowledgeable writer, Atwan managed this material expertly. However, the real contribution of *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* is to be found in his early expose of the theme of his title.

The Islamic State is not only a product of Iraq and Syria, it is a product of the broader milieu of instability that has stalked the Middle East and North Africa since 2011. It is no coincidence that ISIS and its extreme jihadi message took root in a region that was experiencing sociopolitical upheavals arguably of a “one in a century” kind, as several Arab countries saw their nondemocratic regimes overthrown, but with only Tunisia seemingly making a transition to some form of democratic endgame—the sustainability of which is still tenuous. Other countries— Egypt, Syria, and Yemen— saw their autocracies become “counterrevolutionary,” and use whatever means they could to curb the democratic demands of their people, including the targeting of Islamists in Egypt, and the freeing of them and even supporting militant groups, such as Nusra, in Syria. One book in this now extensive list addresses these more regional dimensions, to varying degrees. Jean-Pierre Filiu presents what is perhaps the most contentious argument concerning the rise of the Islamic State in these books by linking its establishment and subsequent expansion to a hypothesized “deep state,” a term that has often been used to refer to speculated secretive, ultranationalist, collections of elites in Turkey that control the affairs of state from the shadows. While Filiu may take the notion of the “deep state” to a level that is perhaps unnecessary (there was nothing particularly secretive about Bashar al-Asad's techniques of keeping hold of power or how the Egyptian military has consistently controlled the affairs of state for decades), Filiu presents a compelling and challenging overview of the disastrous state of Middle East political life, and how and why the promises of the Arab transition, which seemed to be so tangible just a few years ago, have largely evaporated in the heat generated by the struggle for power between autocrats and jihadis.

In what is a timely shift in approach, William McCants's *The ISIS Apocalypse* moves the focus away from providing an understanding of the chronological development of the organization and the background of its key actors to one in which the beliefs, doctrine, and aims of ISIS are made central to the analysis. Beginning with an analysis of the symbolism

of the black flag of ISIS, McCants considers the apocalyptic rhetoric that has been a common feature of from the earliest days of Islam through modern jihadi thinkers to the current Islamic State and presents the fascinating conundrum that must be facing the leadership of ISIS around Baghdadi — of the tension in embracing prophecies of the Apocalypse and the End of Days while also having to meet the more mundane and worldly requirements and demands of running a state, providing social services, maintaining law and order, and keeping the whole system working. Arguably, it is only by appreciating that a form of organizational schizophrenia runs through the ISIS initiative that its many varied actions begin to make sense. Its state-building efforts in the Jazira region of Iraq and Syria, for example, need stability and a degree of regional normalization and acceptance (even if tacit or covert) to work and, to a degree, since the fall of Kobani a more conservative approach to territorial expansionism has perhaps been evident. Yet this is countered by actions that then serve the apocalyptic agenda, such as the destruction of a Russian passenger aircraft over the Sinai Peninsula or the encouragement and possible organization of the November 13 terrorist attack in Paris. McCants provides a powerful analysis of this tension within the system, of the prophecies clung to by ISIS ideologues juxtaposed with the successes and failures of jihadi groups that have grappled with having to combine the visions of prophetic futures with the realities of managing the affairs of the present.

These books give the reader a comprehensive spread of information and analyses not only of the rise of the ISIS and the Islamic State but, to a degree, the failings of the post-2003 process in Iraq (a process that was bought with huge amounts of Iraqi and Western blood and treasure) and of the wider and tragic stalling then collapse of the Arab transition process. They all tend to give a similar historical account of the rise of ISIS, with some variations, and suggest that, for a range of reasons, the so-called Islamic State may be somewhat more durable than many in government would openly suggest. They also suggest that, far from simply being a collection of thuggish, uneducated, blood-crazed foreigners who have failed to achieve anything of significant in their home countries, and so seek greatness in the Caliphate, the Islamic State organization is something quite different, or, to be more precise, something that is this and more. ISIS seems to be many entities and trends. It has brought together jihadists from Iraq and Syria and augmented them with foreigners that are very much under an Iraqi leadership; it is the beneficiary of Sunni Arab tribal support lost to the government of Iraq by the unwillingness to accommodate those forces that had stood against ISI in the past; and it is the recipient of a broader based support that fears the alternative to the Islamic State more than it fears the Islamic State itself. There is much, of course, that these books — any books at present — cannot tell us about the Islamic State as it is nearly impossible for outsiders to visit Raqqa or Mosul, or any of the lands under the black flag. Much is left to speculation, for example, about the economy of the Islamic State: Is it centralized or decentralized? How do public services work? Where does the cash come from? And how much does it cost to run the Islamic State? And questions about the social contract between ISIS and local societies are again unknowns that desperately need to be known, as Western policy-makers consider what ISIS's weaknesses are, and how they can be best targeted. But these are impossible tasks to fulfill—until, at least, ISIS begins to invite academics to visit Raqqa and Mosul to undertake fieldwork in an unhindered fashion, which is unlikely to happen soon, and would probably not see many acceptances either.

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