



Book Review

The ISIS Crisis: Reviews

by Richard English



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- Daniel Byman, *Al-Qaida, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)
- Patrick Cockburn, *The Jihadis return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising* (New York: Or Books, a2014)
- Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (London: William Collins, 2015)
- Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016)
- William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2015)
- Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015)

One of the enduring challenges involved in analysing terrorism is to avoid an over-obsession with the present. In the period after the 9/11 atrocity, an explosion of academic and other studies focused on al-Qaida; many of these treated the movement as though little that we knew from previous terrorist groups was now relevant or helpful. As I write this current essay, everybody is absorbed with ISIS. This is understandable, but it has its dangers. Knowing what is unique about an organization is only possible if one engages in proper comparison, the latter allowing for recognition of continuities and echoes as well as differences. If we really want to explain and adequately respond to the ISIS crisis, then we need to think more historically than has been fashionable in recent years.

The books under consideration in this essay all have strong merits and, between them, they provide a basis for some helpful understanding of the Islamic State phenomenon in its historical context and origins.

Daniel Byman's *Al-Qaida, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement*, traces the roots and origins of ISIS very well. This involves some admirable honesty about how far US-led responses to al-Qaida helped to provide the context within which ISIS made appealing sense to so many people, to such an extent that the Islamic State 'now rivals al-Qaida for leadership of the global jihadist community'(2). This reflects one deeper historical pattern, of course: the mutually shaping interaction of non-state terrorists and their state adversaries represents an often ugly, antiphonal process (English, 2015). Yet here it is again: the War on Terror had as one of its component parts the invasion of Iraq, and the fractured aftermath of that endeavour created part of the space within which ISIS offered disaffected Sunnis a sense of purpose, revenge, direction, and leadership.

Byman's book is calm and informative about the well-known al-Qaida narrative, and also about the complex effects of the American response to the group's worst atrocity in 2001. Al-Qaida suffered huge damage from the War on Terror, but global jihadism also gained ground through the creation in parts of Iraq of a theatre of anti-Western mobilization. From that crucible, through complex routes, emerged ISIS.

Byman notes that 'The Islamic State focuses on consolidating and expanding its position in Iraq and Syria'



(49) and I think that this is correct. But as that position becomes increasingly eroded by enemy assaults and the degrading effects of ISIS's own actions upon its population, the logic of expanding its branded attacks in the West surely grows. We have seen some of this in the attacks in France, Belgium, and the United States. Others, tragically, will follow. As they do so, will Western leaders and societies act proportionately and effectively? Perhaps. If they are to do so then they must be prepared to acknowledge the ways in which hubristic foreign policy in the past fifteen years has made many aspects of the terrorism crisis worse, rather than better. The War on Terror witnessed an increase, not a diminution, in the levels of terrorist attack and terrorist-generated fatality (English, 2016). It undoubtedly also helped to produce the Islamic State. As Byman coldly states it: 'The Islamic State is al-Qaida's most important progeny' (163). He notes that millenarianism plays a part in the group's appeal, and also identifies the importance of sectarianism in motivating and sustaining its activities.

If Byman offers a valuable scholarly reading of ISIS, then Patrick Cockburn complements this with an example of high-grade journalism. *The Jihadis return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising* offers rather a bleak analysis: 'Iraq has disintegrated. Little is exchanged between its three great communities – Shia, Sunni, and Kurds – except gunfire' (9); 'At best, Syria and Iraq face years of intermittent civil war; at worst, the division of these countries will be like the partition of India in 1947 when massacre and fear of massacre establishes new demographic frontiers' (15).

Like Byman, Cockburn is blunt about the role that the US-led invasion and transformation of Iraq from 2003 onwards played in the narrative which generated ISIS. He stresses the twin foundations of the Islamic State's emergence ('the Sunni revolt in ... Syria, and the alienation of the Iraqi Sunni by a Shia-led government in Baghdad' (31)). And he makes a strong case for there having been, over the past fifteen years, a Western myopia about the importance of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the sustenance of violent jihadism.

In Iraq itself, Cockburn emphasizes the issue of sectarianism as being crucially significant; regarding Syria, he rightly criticizes those in the West who assumed that President Assad would disappear from power. And Cockburn is relentlessly critical of Western interventions: 'The four wars fought in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria over the past twelve years have all involved overt or covert foreign intervention in deeply divided countries. In each case the involvement of the West exacerbated existing differences and pushed hostile parties towards civil war' (99). The causes of the ISIS crisis lie in very complex events, and clearly much of this has little to do with the United States, the UK, and its allies. But the evidence adduced by one of the most astute of journalists here makes grim reading none the less.

No more encouraging is the analysis offered in Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger's fascinating study, *ISIS: The State of Terror*. Indeed, these authors are arguably the gloomiest in their reading of recent events. ISIS, in their view, 'is rewriting the playbook for extremism ... it has instituted transformative changes in strategy, messaging, and recruitment that will linger long after its so-called caliphate has crumbled to dust' (6-7).

Again, there is a haunting clarity about the group's origins in the 2003 Iraq invasion. (How many times in the history of terrorism has an over-militarized response worsened the situation rather than improved it?) Again, there is good detail on the enmity between al-Qaida and the Islamic State. (How many times in the long history of terrorism has violent competition *within* one's own community and constituency helped to determine tactics and even strategy?)

Stern and Berger describe ISIS as having become 'the richest terrorist organization in the world' (46). It has also been one which has appealed to thousands of foreign fighters, to whom the Islamic State has devoted much attention: 'ISIS propaganda and messaging is disproportionately slanted toward foreign fighters,' Stern



and Berger observe, 'both in its content and its target audience' (77). Attracting foreign recruits (through a mixture of ideological and personal motives, and a combination of push and pull factors) is not in itself new, of course; but the scale here seems greater than what has been previously seen. The reasons for people becoming involved are heterogeneous and complex; the effects of their involvement have often been starkly brutal for the victims of their ISIS violence.

Stern and Berger attribute much skill and innovation to the Islamic State: 'ISIS was rewriting the rules of jihadist extremism using sophisticated tactics of manipulation and distribution' (99). It is important not to overplay this, I think. Much of the ISIS argument is demonstrably crass in its readings of local, national, and international politics, and this will increasingly be the judgment of most observers. Moreover, the very public celebrations of brutality by the group secure for them ambiguous publicity: some are attracted by such vicious and merciless acts, but most are clearly repelled by them. Again, the echoes of earlier terrorist campaigns (from ETA to the West European leftists of the 1970s and 1980s to the Provisional IRA to al-Qaida) are clear to hear: violence, especially against defenceless civilians, tends often to be counter-productive in the longer term for terrorist organizations in terms of public support.

Stern and Berger devote appropriate attention to the ISIS-al-Qaida rivalry, and are clear about al-Qaida's ongoing capacity for violence too. They are emphatic that ISIS's headline goals are 'impossible, ludicrous' (235), but that this does mean that the group will disappear speedily. (Again, echoes of earlier terrorist experience shout out clearly enough.) And they wisely clarify that, despite what some have claimed, ISIS 'does not represent an existential threat to any Western country' (236).

The group does, however, pose an existential threat to its victims, and most of these are Muslim. One of the many merits of Fawaz Gerges's *ISIS: A History* is that it firmly locates the Islamic State's emergence and appeal within the specific regional context in which it mainly operates. 'It is easy to dismiss the Salafi-jihadists of the so-called Islamic State' – Gerges suggests – 'as monsters, savages, and killers'; but such condemnation 'overlooks a painful truth: that an important Sunni constituency believes in the group's utopian and romantic vision of building an Islamic state' (ix). ISIS has offered a response to a crisis of Sunni identity in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere; the chaotic politics of Iraq and Syria, and the illegitimacy of their regimes in the eyes of many Sunnis, have meant that ISIS has been able for some Sunnis to fill 'an ideational and institutional void': 'Since 2003 Iraq has descended into a sustained crisis, inflaming the grievances of the Sunni population over their disempowerment under the new Shia ascendancy and preponderant Iranian influence' (12).

Gerges is right to stress that the group's appeal is not entirely ideological or religious: resistance against despised authority plays its part also, as does the Islamic State's seeming capacity to offer a well-resourced order. Gerges's book is also strong in its recognition of the role played in ISIS's rise by Saudi Arabian tensions with Iran. The battles may have been fought out in Syria and Iraq, but the background struggle had much to do with Saudi-Iranian enmity.

Not that Professor Gerges dismisses ISIS's Salafi-jihadist ideas as of negligible importance. Nor does he ignore the ruthless implications of the group's philosophy: 'ISIS possesses a totalitarian, millenarian worldview that eschews political pluralism, competition, and diversity of thought' (27). Ultimately, he sees their trajectory as likely to end in self-destruction ('the group has monstrously miscalculated by overextending itself and turning the entire world against it' (43)), but he pays close attention to the thinking of their key theorists, and the way in which such ideas have appealed to people trying to regain influence over their countries and their lives.

As noted already, the ISIS story is very much an intra-Muslim tale. This has involved sharp rivalry with



al-Qaida (whose 'hegemony and monopoly on transnational jihadism' (235) Gerges now considers to have ended). And it also involves some complex theological roots, deftly scrutinized in William McCants's book, *The ISIS Apocalypse*. 'Like all fundamentalist attempts to revive the early days of their faith, the Islamic State's leaders had to choose among contrasting scriptures and histories from their religion's past to paint a portrait of what they aspired to in the present and future' (21). ISIS's choices included the apocalyptic option now so famous. Focusing on this distinguished them from al-Qaida, as did their attitude towards the declaration of a caliphate. Does the heralding of a supposedly apocalyptic battleground in Dabiq in Syria help with recruiting? 'The apocalyptic pitch "always works"' (100), McCants quotes one ISIS fighter as having claimed. The Dabiq prophecy is centuries old and – while political historians such as myself should generally avoid predictions—the prophecy seems unlikely to come to fruition. Dr McCants gives admirable detail of the ideas involved, and of their appeal to ISIS, as he does of the establishment of the caliphate in 2014. He suggests that the 2013-14 successes of the Islamic State were partly caused by its being 'left alone' (153). That condition has not, of course, endured, and the erosion of ISIS will jaggedly define the politics of those parts of Syria and Iraq where it has flourished for a time.

What will that erosion leave behind, though? Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan's *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* offers vivid, first-hand detail which hints at elements of that future. In their view, 'ISIS has destroyed the boundaries of contemporary nation-states' (xvi), and certainly it is hard to see Iraq or Syria enduring after the ISIS crisis has abated. The Islamic State is not the only cause of this fracturing, of course. But it has played a major role in redrawing regional boundaries. Those borders are unlikely to match popular opinion and preference in any neat way. (Again, the echoes of previous terrorist conflicts are loud.)

Weiss and Hassan are also clear-sighted about just how brutal ISIS's violence has been, and the legacies of the sectarian and other kinds of killing will mean that intra-Muslim enmities have been renewed in blood-stained form. The long history of terrorism again and again shows groups being more effective at producing revenge and polarization than at achieving their headline goals. So also with ISIS. Weiss and Hassan's book draws well on interviews, and these show the role played by contingent, small-scale, and even individual initiative in determining the journey that the Islamic State has pursued. So again in the future: the capacity for new battle lines of violence will be locally decided in many cases, and the potential for new fire-centres of killing is undoubtedly evident.

The accounts valuably offered in these six books ably demonstrate the contextual uniqueness of ISIS, and the novelty of some of its endeavours. The foreign fighter phenomenon has, as suggested, exceeded what previous groups managed to generate. And, ultimately, every terrorist group is unique and deserves to be understood as such.

That said, the echoes with earlier experience in terrorism and counter-terrorism are unavoidable. We have here a case of an over-militarized state counter-terrorist project (after 9/11) actually generating new waves of anti-state terrorism; we have an episode in which terrorists have exaggerated what their violence would produce, and in which revenge and polarization have been brought about far more than have headline objectives; we see intra-communal conflict and inter-terrorist tensions playing a decisive role in the trajectory and actions of a terrorist organization; we note the crucial role played by small-scale, even individual, initiative and planning and determination; we have multi-causal routes into recruitment, drawing on a complex mixture of the personal, political, and religious, on the instrumental as well as the emotional; we see the creation through violence of ultimately ambiguous publicity; and we see the part played by regional neighbours in sustaining painful conflict. In all of this, the ISIS crisis turns out not to be as new as many



observers seem to think.

About the author

Richard English is Professor of Politics at Queen's University Belfast, where he is also Distinguished Professorial Fellow in the Senator George J. Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice, and the University's Pro-Vice Chancellor for Internationalization and Engagement. Between 2011 and 2016 he was Wardlaw Professor of Politics in the School of International Relations, and Director of the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV), at the University of St Andrews. He is the author of eight books, including the award-winning studies *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (2003) and *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (2006). His most recent book, *Does Terrorism Work? A History*, was published in 2016 by Oxford University Press. He is also the co-editor/editor of a further six books and has published more than fifty journal articles and book chapters. He is a frequent media commentator on terrorism and political violence, and on Irish politics and history, including work for the BBC, CNN, ITN, SKY NEWS, NPR, RTE, the Irish Times, the Times Literary Supplement, Newsweek, the Guardian, and the Financial Times. He is a Fellow of the British Academy (FBA), a Member of the Royal Irish Academy (MRIA), a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (FRSE), a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society (FRHistS), an Honorary Fellow of Keble College Oxford, and an Honorary Professor at the University of St Andrews. He has delivered invited Lectures about his research in over twenty countries.

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