



The Rise of Islamic State

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Though capable of staging spectacular attacks like 9/11, jihadist organizations were not a significant force on the ground when they first became notorious in the shape of al-Qa'ida at the turn of century.

Today, that's changed. Exploiting the missteps of the West's wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, as well as its misjudgments in relation to Syria and the uprisings of the Arab Spring, jihadist organizations, of which ISIS is the most important, are swiftly expanding. They now control a geographical territory greater in size than Britain or Michigan, stretching from the Sunni heartlands in the north and west of Iraq through a broad swath of north-east Syria. On the back of their capture of Mosul and much of northern Iraq in June 2014, the leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has been declared the head of a new caliphate that demands the allegiance of all Muslims. The secular, democratic politics that were supposedly at the fore of the Arab Spring have been buried by the return of the jihadis.

Writing with customary calmness and clarity, and drawing on unrivaled experience as a reporter in the region, Cockburn analyzes the unfolding of one of the West's greatest foreign policy debacles and the rise of the new jihadis.

About the Author

Patrick Cockburn is currently a Middle East correspondent for the Independent. His book on Iraq's recent history, *The Occupation: War and Resistance in Iraq*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics' Circle Awards. He won the Martha Gellhorn Prize in 2005, the James Cameron Prize in 2006, and the Orwell Prize for Journalism in 2009. He was named Foreign Commentator of the Year by the Comment Awards in 2013.

The Rise of Islamic State Details

Date : Published by LeftWord

ISBN : 9380118252

Author : Patrick Cockburn

Format : Paperback 132 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Politics, History, War, Terrorism, Religion, Islam

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From Reader Review The Rise of Islamic State for online ebook

Mathew Argument says

A really good book! So much info and REALLY opened my eyes to how many sides there are to this war!!

Benjamin Stahl says

A quick and easy, though quite troubling read. I am glad to have obtained more understanding on the Islamic world ... its complexities, its turbulent sectarianism. My ignorance is slightly rectified as I can at least appreciate that many Muslim people suffer religious extremism in their own countries and are most certainly not to be branded as one and the same thing. As far as the presentation goes, I guess it felt a little unfocussed. It lacked any sense of order. It barely gave a comprehensive overview regarding the rise of Islamic State. Rather - as another reviewer observed - this feels like sharing a conversation with an experienced journalist, hardened by the constant threat of danger in the Middle East, telling random stories and observations. One is left with two overruling notions. Firstly, ISIS and Islamic fundamentalism is a force to be reckoned with. Secondly, us westerners don't know half of what is going on.

ka?yap says

I was expecting a more deeper analysis of the historical, socio-economical, and political roots of the current conflict, But this turned out to be a very short and superficial overview of the contemporary events surrounding the rise of the Islamic State. There is no historical insight here. This is more of a collection of detailed reports lacking cohesion. Patrick Cockburn, however is a good journalist and he manages to show how the US'S hypocritical policies had such devastating consequences in the midde east.

Kate Raphael says

I found this book super-helpful in understanding what's going on in Syria and Iraq. Cockburn gives the impression - I have no way of knowing whether he really is - of "objectivity" in its best sense, someone who is not promoting a particular world view or set of policy prescriptions, but really trying to figure out what the facts mean. It's a jumping off point for other books like the newer Burning Country. There are a lot of facts in the book and I don't always remember them, have to go back and read certain parts over and over, but it's clear and carefully researched.

Mayim de Vries says

Of all the non-academic books I read on the Islamic State this one is by far the best. Imagine yourself sitting in a cafe in Baghdad with somebody sharing their knowledge on Middle Easter affairs over a cup of strong coffee in a vivid, informal way. The Rise of the Islamic State will get you there. In this respect it reminded

me of the acclaimed From Beirut to Jerusalem.

It might not be as well researched as others , but at least it is written by somebody who is familiar with the region, has been there many times, knows things first hand and is not writing something to prove a pre-conceived, ideologically-anchored thesis . Not to mention that it is simply well written as opposed to some of the garbage that has been published.

The book consists of 9 chapters that follow the rise of ISIS from many different perspectives. Certain themes are recurring, but this is only to be expected in such a multifaceted conflict with numerous players and numerous interests both on and under the proverbial table. Yet, the book is coherent and takes the reader smoothly through a conundrum of actors, places and events. Mr. Cockburn is a skilled journalist and offers his readers a balanced mix of the background information, anecdotal detail and personal insight. No info dumping, no ideological rants, no conspiracy theorising.

Personally, I would love to have the possibility of following up the sources he used (hence the minus one star for lack of any notes, references and bibliography) but overall, I do recommend this book without any qualms.

David M says

Extremely important resource, even if it's now a few years out of date.

It's difficult to fully fathom what a complete and utter catastrophe the 'war on terror' has been. With the rise of ISIS, the most pessimistic predictions of the antiwar movement were met or exceeded. While the world hasn't literally come to an end yet, we've seen the largest refugee crisis since ww2 and the region permanently destabilized in a death spiral of sectarian violence. No one who supported the invasion of Iraq should have any place in American public. The fact that this is a controversial opinion - that, for Christ's sake, the 2016 Democratic Party nominee was a strong exponent of the war - shows how far we still are from anything like an honest reckoning.

Neither Bush nor Obama was ever serious about countering the actual source of Whabbi terrorism. Anyone with the most cursory knowledge of the phenomenon can tell you Saudi Arabia is far and away its main international sponsor. Yet from its inception the 'war on terror' was dedicated to suppressing this basic fact. Through the years the Saudi regime has remained one of our main allies and a chief customer of the US arms industry. Instead we've destroyed other countries (Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria in part), creating chaos and carnage in which violent Sunni extremists grow from strength to strength.

Alex Jutte says

Enlightening read for the most part, offered new insight into the secret machinations of Iraq's neighbours, but most of the other information contained was information readily available elsewhere.

Adrielle says

If you are looking for an in depth socio economic look at the rise of ISIS this isn't the book for you. This is more of a superficial look of the spread and conflict.

Babak Fakhamzadeh says

An important little book, even if Cockburn repeats himself often, while the book lacks structure. Cockburn, in a nutshell, gives much needed, if basic, information on how the key players in the current Middle Eastern conflict relate to each other.

In short, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

ISIS benefited from the rise of Sunni resistance in Syria as well as the Sunni repression In Iraq. Effectively, ISIS managed to hijack the anti-Assad movement in Syria, while the blanket anti-Sunni sentiments in Shia-dominated Iraq result in, for most Sunni, ISIS being seen as the lesser of two evils.

Add to that the support of specifically both Turkey and Saudi Arabia for opposition movements roughly aligned with ISIS and, in part, the US' desire to unseat Assad and, therefore, also effectively supporting ISIS in their anti-Assad actions, it was also the much earlier mistake of the US, after 9/11, to not address the elephants in the room, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, as the main supporters of anti-US terrorism, that has led to the current entanglement of objectives by the many players in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, by insisting that Assad should go as a precondition of peace, while knowing this is not going to happen, his enemies are in practice ensuring that the war will go on.

Barry says

This is a pretty decent account of the positions and strategy of ISIS from around 2013 to 2015. Sadly, the book does not read as a coherent narrative and largely seems composed of a series of long articles from other sources. Although each chapter exists as a standalone narrative and covers a general theme, the composition of the book does lead to much overlap in the chapters and subsequently, there is some overlap.

The tone is conversational and precise. Cockburn's journalistic style is very much in the present and there is a tone in the book that conveys well how fluid the situation in the region is (and was at the time of writing). There is a sense of immediacy as ISIS's expansion is documented almost as it is happens.

The book is rather short and what one doesn't really get is the historical perspective on the formation of ISIS. It is also a snapshot of time in that it predates the arrival of Russia into the conflict. As other reviewers have stated, the book conveys well how the region is a cauldron of conflict due to 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend (but also probably my enemy)'.

Some of the more interesting observations in the book follow below. Of course, a few years later much of this has entered into the common discourse and shared knowledge of the region but Cockburn had his finger on the pulse at the time of writing.

The US and Britain's absolute failure in Iraq led to a power vacuum, civil war and subsequently sectarian

government in Iraq that favoured Shia and neglected Sunni Muslims. Likewise, whether you think the West's overthrow of Saddam Hussein was justified or not it is clear that despite the millions of dollars invested in training the Iraqi army and supplying them with advanced military equipment they were completely unprepared and incompetent to stop ISIS. It is shuddering to think that so few fighters were able to overthrow a better equipped and far more numerous Iraqi army. Also, when regime change occurred, although there was a friendly West government in place it was totally corrupt. The West's interventions in Iraq have destroyed the region and the infrastructure. It's horrible to think of the suffering the Iraqi's have suffered as a consequence.

The roots of ISIS are well covered and where the funding comes from (Saudi Arabia and Qatar). It is absolutely ridiculous that Saudi money funds ISIS whilst nominally Saudi Arabia is fighting ISIS. It is abhorrent that Saudi Arabia is considered an ally of the West whilst it is both the main buyer of weapons in the region from the West (along with Israel) but also the major exporter of terrorism. (One is reminded of Donald Trump not banning entrants to the US from countries where terrorists are free to radicalise and raise funds!)

Turkey's role in the region is well covered. Turkey are quite happy for ISIS to fight Kurds, quite happy to help ISIS overthrow Assad in Syria yet again, nominally are a member of NATO and an enemy of ISIS. The US rebuke of Turkey is well covered and the book details quite well the mess Turkey are in as a result of using ISIS as a proxy whilst ISIS are threatening them. Events after the publication of the book have seen ISIS attacks in Turkey. Turkey's gamble failed.

The best section in the book for me covers the relationship between ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates in Syria and covers that started as allies and became enemies. Even today, it is still not clear in the West exactly WHO the moderate rebels are who are fighting Assad in Syria. This was another failed gamble by the West. In wishing regime change they hoped for Assad to topple quickly. Instead, his persistence, and Russia's refusal to lose influence backfired on the West. What we ended with is the West were directly arming Al-Qaeda / ISIS whilst also bombing ISIS. It is clear the geo-political games of the actors have led to immense suffering for ordinary people.

The media war in Syria is well covered. In the UK we have seen the siege of East Aleppo end recently. What we never see is 'West Aleppo'. We never see fighters in East Aleppo. The evacuation showed no men. The media - very deliberately painted Assad as a war criminal (with some justification) but neglected to mention they were working with jihadi's and supporting jihadi aims. (I'm amazed with the fluency and immediacy of the 8 year old girl tweeting from Aleppo and how quickly she got out of Aleppo to meet the Turkish government.... hmmm....)

This week in the UK there have been stories about the end of the siege of Mosul and why the Iraqi's won't / can't help. Of course, this book highlights how relatively easy it was for ISIS to overrun the city due to the actions of the Shia against the Sunni majority in the city.

So, the book is brief, is a snapshot of time and has it's limitations but nevertheless it's a pretty good read. Recommended.

Some good articles about Syria and the West's role - <https://cultureandpolitics.org/catego...>

Antony says

During the battle for Mosul, local civilians poured into barracks and demanded that Iraqi soldiers leave. Events like this help us understand how a group like ISIS could get going. Journalism is the first cut of history, and Cockburn's book is worth it for that sort of detail.

MT says

Part of the strengths of this book are the way Cockburn details the environment in which ISIS began and flourished. He dismisses the notion of an Iraq crying out for democratic protection and instead presents one that is deeply cynical of any governmental service or representative. Something I took for granted was how deeply destructive the years of conflict and governmental instability have on Iraq and the greater region.

Philip Girvan says

A good read at least as concerns Da'esh's emergence from what was left from Al-Qaeda of Iraq following Zarqawi's death and their territorial advancements throughout 2013-14.

Would be interested in a follow up discussing the organization's capacity and morale after the 2015 setbacks

Daniel says

A very accessible introduction to the politics of the conflict in Syria and Iraq. I picked this up in a Verso sale, so I knew it would be pretty out-of-date, but I found it useful (if quite obviously stitched together from articles or bits of articles). There are certainly places where it could press harder, and the minimal attention paid to Turkey and the Kurdish struggle seems incredible in retrospect, but it's a good piece of journalism.

Nithyanand says

Much of the bewildering complexity of Middle East politics boils down to a simple principle, it seems: the enemy's enemy is my friend. In practice, things can get tricky. It's not always clear who the enemy is, especially because there seems to be no clear boundary that separates the two sides. Thus, today's sworn enemy becomes tomorrow's unwelcome, but unavoidable, ally.

The U.S., which wanted to overthrow Shia Iran-backed Assad in Syria, funded, along with its Sunni Gulf monarchy allies, jihadists which it believed – and this is unbelievably foolish given past experiences – would be moderate and would topple Assad and be done with it. It poured arms into the region, thus creating the black hole that threatens the entire region today. The West is now fighting against the serpent it helped feed. And it finds itself on the same side as Assad and Iran. At the same time, it appears they're still funding "moderate" rebels who they believe will fight both Assad and ISIS.

This much can be guessed without too much difficulty from news reports. Which is essentially what this book is a collection of. This isn't really the author's fault. The editors seem to have done very little to bring about some cohesion. But I can't really blame them either. Even a cursory dip into this toxic cauldron can be disorienting. I did, however, hope to get some historical perspective. I still have zero insight into the Ottoman Empire and its breakup, the mistakes that led to the creation of artificial nation states with arbitrary boundaries drawn by imperial powers, the historical fratricide between the Shia and the Sunni, the sheer number of distinct ethnic groups which found themselves minorities in nations ruled by their rivals. This isn't unexpected – Patrick Cockburn is a journalist, a war reporter, not a historian or political analyst. There's also little about Wahhabism, the Saudi-fuelled radical version of Islam, beyond that it is the underpinning ideology of modern Sunni jihad that's now being exported with oil money. More analysis would have helped – the social and economic conditions that fuel sectarian violence especially.

But I think that's also a virtue of this book. I feel too much is made of the influence of radical and extremist ideology. No doubt they're toxic, repulsive and powerful, but they do not operate in a vacuum. Any young Sunni in ISIS-held territory, I would think, has little choice but to join their ranks to protect his family. And that becomes abundantly clear with the wealth of ground reporting that the author has done over the years.

A most delightful part of the book, if I may use such an inappropriate expression, is his evisceration of the absurd Western propaganda that Facebook and Twitter were somehow the weapons in the so-called Arab Spring that toppled authoritarian governments (which were propped up and defended by the West in the first place, and then brought down, also by the West), only to be replaced by sectarian regimes that were no less authoritarian. But then two can play at that game. The same social media are now used by jihadists to recruit from around the world. Some 20,000 have now joined the ranks of ISIS from abroad, including Western countries. According to recent media reports, the jihadists are winning online.

The author makes clear the Western meddling, their hubris that their form of government and their values are universal, and their tragically foolish belief that this can be enforced through military hardware and cultural software. The result is that entire generations of kids in these troubled regions have known little but strife, war, hunger, violence and suffering. Western media almost always talk about the number of their soldiers who have been killed. Last week saw reports that a prime ministerial candidate in the U.K. promised, if elected, to apologise for his one of his predecessor's part in the criminal, media-driven, mass deception that led to the Iraq war. It went on to quote the number of British soldiers killed: 179. Just place that number next to 21 million, the population of Syria – a country which has effectively dissolved and its people displaced – which, I might add, is about the same as the population of Mumbai. While they destroyed Iraq, they also destabilised Syria, seemingly unaware that the violence it encouraged would soon spread to Iraq.

That the West has had, and still has, two massive blind spots is clear to anyone with even the most cursory interest and knowledge of events in the Middle East – Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The latter does not need too much explanation, while the former is more mysterious but nonetheless not unfamiliar. The third major actor in this hate-filled drama is Iran, which remains as enigmatic to me as it did before reading this book. But the most perplexing of all is Turkey: a member of the NATO, a Westernized, apparently secular country of Muslims, a covert supporter (until recently, at least) of ISIS. It is now fighting ISIS, but it is also fighting the Kurds who seem to be the only force capable of resisting ISIS on the ground. And there's no mention of the elephant in the room, Israel, who are surely not disinterested observers.

The highlight of the book, for me, is a quote from the late Richard Holbrooke, U.S. special representative to Af-Pak, who I believe put it best: "We may be fighting the wrong enemy in the wrong country." If you make a mistake and don't correct it you're making two mistakes.
