

## BOOK REVIEW

Fawaz A. Gerges, 2016. *ISIS. A History*, Princeton University Press, USA, 368 pages, ISBN: 978-0-691-17000-8

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In the summer of 2014, the movement known as Islamic State seemed to appear almost out of nowhere, exploding onto the centre of both Iraqi and Syrian politics. With their enemies often fleeing in disarray before the inferior numbers but highly motivated cadres of the movement, images of the black flag triumphant were witnessed by many millions around the world and also by the millions on the ground who found themselves under its rule. Yet its presence and triumph were no quirks of history, but rather symptomatic of a malaise with deep roots in the geopolitics of the Middle East, debates over what role Islam should have in modern society, and, perhaps most importantly, the capacity of radical ideas to inspire generations of men and women to die or kill in their names.

In his book, *ISIS. A History*, Fawaz A. Gerges has taken up a challenging task. Throughout its pages, he seeks to bring this task to a successful resolution through an approach which, while still concentrated in form, manages to point to the many sides of the rise and expansion of Islamic State. The book itself is organized into eight chapters, ranging from the worldview of ISIS and that of its founders, the nature of Iraqi politics, the interaction between Baathists and jihadists and, lastly, the role of the Arab uprisings and the Syrian Civil War in

influencing the movement, complete with its struggle against Al Qaeda for the leadership of the great jihad against both the near enemy and the far enemy. Significantly, Gerges dedicates his work to the courage and resilience of Yazidi women, who have suffered the most from the atrocities perpetrated by Islamic State.

The first chapter, looking at the worldview of Islamic State, points from the onset to the fundamental importance of ideology, “a superglue that binds Salafi - jihadist activists and combatants to each other and allows the movement to renew and revitalize itself after suffering setbacks” (p. 23). It is this binding power that makes it so dangerous, particularly as it has grown ever more sophisticated, with its rituals and theorists working to prove their coming victory in a grand struggle (p.23). Gerges links Abrahamic fundamentalism to a series of factors, such as “dualism (absolute evaluations of good versus evil), authority (of a sacred book or leader), selectivity (choosing certain beliefs or practices over others), and millennialism (confidence in eschatology as God’s will)” (p.25). Yet the key point here is the presence of hostility towards secular modernity, directed towards all groups who are not part of the “true believer” core group. In the author’s inspired turn of phrase, “the world according to ISIS is frozen in time and space”, as it seeks to incorporate the laws of 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia into 21<sup>st</sup> century societies (p.26). Moreover, for at least some of the men who lead the movement onto the path of struggle, this is necessary since it is meant to bring about the time of the Mahdi (“The Rightly Guided One”), the key figure in Islamic eschatological traditions, whose presence is meant to bring about an era of universal justice. The author makes a good job in portraying the influential Salafi-jihadist manifestos, such *The Management of Savagery* (Abu Bakr al-Najji), *Introduction to the Jurisprudence of Jihad* by Abu Abdullah al-Muhajjer and *The Essentials of Making Ready [for Jihad]* by Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (Abdel-Qader Ibn Abdel-Aziz). In this, he is right to point out that, while most authors choose to focus on *The Management of Savagery*, the other two works are also important for dealing with the subject.

In rightly placing the initial – and arguably most important – focus on the ideological dimension, Gerges also points to the impact of the personalities involved in the development of what he calls the “totalitarian-religious

movement” (p.29) that is Islamic State. From the figure of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an individual belonging to a “new wave of Salafi-jihadists who are obsessed with identity politics and the struggle to purify Islam and Islamic lands of apostasy” (p.82), to the rivalry between Abu Mohammed al-Joulani and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (whose evolution is detailed in the fourth chapter) in their conduct of the jihad in the Levant, the second chapter paints a clear picture of the mixture of deeply held beliefs mixed with human material desires that is often at the heart of Salafi-Jihadist politics. Over and over, Gerges shows the important impact which prison life had on such figures and how it ultimately intensified their willingness to use violence, as well as the sense of urgency with which they pursued their goals. It remains relevant in tracing the evolution of Al Qaeda in Iraq into what would eventually become Islamic State.

Perhaps most importantly for his overall vision, Gerges sees the destruction of Iraqi state structure in the wake of the American-led invasion of 2003 as the primary reason for the revival of Islamic State, which he describes in the third chapter. He argues that out of all the factors which led to the later resurgence of the Jihadist movement the single most important was “the inability of the coalition and the Iraqi political establishment to put forward an inclusive national project and rebuild the political landscape” (p.117). One other crucial aspect – which Gerges turns to in the fifth chapter – is the importance of the alliance between the Baathist remnants and the jihadists. He consistently places himself against the narrative that it was the Baathists who took over the jihadist movement, revolutionised its military capabilities and ensured its control of the population, especially since the narrative itself had been disseminated by other Islamist rivals, such as the movement once known as Jabhat al-Nusra (currently known as Hayyat Tahrir al-Sham). Instead, Gerges argues that it was the Baathists themselves who had already been Islamized and then essentially converted to the Salafi-jihadist worldview, an ideological transformation which only intensified after the invasion, in the context of the armed resistance which followed (pp.142-143). At the same time, Islamic State would not balk at arresting and killing its former Baathist and nationalist allies, for instance after the conquest of Mosul (p.128). Nevertheless, it was the imposition of a

professionalised military structure by al-Baghdadi which enabled Islamic State to survive the combined blows of the United States and Iraq.

The sixth chapter of the book shows how, along with the dysfunctional Iraqi system, the Syrian Civil War as essential for the movement's expansion, even as it led to its final, violent split from al-Nusra. It also reiterates how its regeneration was greatly aided by its ideological cohesiveness and certainty. In this respect, the Jihadist belief in both the justness of the cause and its inevitable final victory can form a powerful combination: "[...] Salafi-Jihadists have a different take on time not measure success in months or years but rather in decades. Loss and suffering are seen as God's will to test the faith, endurance, and conviction of the mujahideen. The road to salvation runs through trial, sweat, blood, and pain. The greater the sacrifice, the greater God's rewards would be" (p.147). Indeed, as Gerges rightly points out, the greatest strength of Islamic State has been its adaptability and its synergy between ideology and praxis, which allowed it to monopolize the identity narrative of delivering the Sunni community from Shia domination (p.194). Lastly, Islamic State managed what no other jihadist group could, dissolving the borders between two states and using this gesture to reaffirm the strength of a pan-Sunni identity over national ones.

The final chapters focus on the way in which the Jihadists managed to infiltrate and take over the energies of the Arab uprisings, which bin Laden had interpreted as struggles between the Islamic community and world atheism (*Al-kufr al-'alami*), part of the greater conflict between the West and Islamdom (p.205). Being willing to take the battle even to the mainstream Islamists such as the once powerful Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan*) of Egypt, the Salafi-Jihadists can also argue that it is their pursuit of God's Sovereignty (*Hakyimiyya*) and their ability to assert themselves through military means that proves them right, rather than any participation in democratic systems. The pursuit of *Hakyimiyya* thus becomes a struggle against the Qutbian inspired *Jahiliyya* (ignorance of the true path), ignorance which encompasses every political system based on man's laws, rather than divine commandments (pp. 216-217). The final chapter serves to reinforce the importance of this utopian notion that lies at the heart of Salafi-Jihadism as a whole, and which includes both Al Qaeda and Islamic State.

Defining Islamic State as a youth movement at its core, Gerges argues that, in the case of Muslims living in the West, its allure can be explained by the fact that it offers its recruits a greater purpose in life, which is to be part of a grand historical mission of restoring Islamic unity (p.229).

One may invoke a number of limitations to the way in which the book reaches certain conclusions. For instance, the author points very briefly to the role played by earlier iterations of radical political Islam. The role of Sayyid Qutb, populariser of the *Hakyimiyya-Jahiliyya* division in the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, could have been expanded upon, as could have the historical role of Wahhabism and the similar patterns encountered in premodern Islamic eschatological movements, such as North-African Mahdism. In spite of such shortcomings, the book never truly falters in its relentless pursuit of the subject matter.

Islamic State is now facing swift territorial collapse in both Syria and Iraq. Yet, just as before, when the movement appeared crushed and held no important territory, one should never underestimate the openings for a future revitalisation. In this and other aspects concerning Islamic State, the book makes for an essential reading on a movement and phenomenon representing one of the key challenges facing 21<sup>st</sup> century modernity.