
**Deconstructing the Islamic State**


Since the proclamation of the Islamic State in June 2014, scholars, government officials, and journalists, along with other observers, have struggled to understand the nature of this organization and to explain its rapid pattern of successes. The swift rise of the Islamic State, the capture of Mosul, and the announcement of a worldwide caliphate in the early summer of 2014 shocked the global community, the West in particular. Pledges of support from dozens of jihadist groups soon followed. By 2015, ISIS was claiming responsibility for or inspiring terrorist attacks around the world. The ability of ISIS to utilize social media to publicize its often brutal actions and to inspire or recruit followers has proved to be particularly troubling.

But what exactly is the Islamic State? Is it a military and political insurgency focused on redrawing the borders of the Middle East as a preliminary step toward fulfilling its goal of creating a global caliphate and establishing its authority over the world's Muslims? Is it a terrorist organization? Is it both? These and other questions are addressed in three publications: *The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, by Patrick Cockburn; *The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction*, by Charles R. Lister, and *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, by William McCants. Each of them traces the origins of the Islamic State from its earliest days when Abu Musab al Zarqawi founded it to its present incarnation under the leadership of an Islamic scholar, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and attempts to clarify the nature of ISIS.

Published first in February 2015, a few weeks after the attack on *Charlie Hebdo*, Cockburn's *The Rise of Islamic State* notes the complexities of the situation in the Middle

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East and excoriates the West for failing to understand them better. Cockburn, an
award-winning journalist who has been covering the Middle East for more than
30 years, relies primarily on his own reporting and interviews as he develops his
arguments. Cockburn believes that the war on terrorism is a failure because it
failed to target two of the most important supporters of jihadism, Saudi Arabia and
Pakistan. Because they are important American allies, Cockburn asserts, the United
States has tried to avoid offending both. By doing so, he argues, the United States
has contributed to the resurgence of jihadism in the Middle East. Cockburn also
holds other states accountable, such as Great Britain and Turkey, for the success of
ISIS. Saudi financing of jihadist groups has, he adds, contributed significantly to the
violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims in Iraq and Syria.

Much of the book is focused on the Civil War in Syria. Cockburn argues
that the West miscalculated in regard to the struggle there. This was partly due to
a failure to understand the multiple conflicts taking place in that worn–torn state,
but also to the assumption that Assad would be swiftly deposed. The inability of the
original revolution against Assad's dictatorship to remove the Syrian president has
led to the present stalemated situation, while the conflict itself has descended into a
Shia–Sunni standoff and a revived “cold war” between Russia and the West in that
part of the world. Cockburn describes the present situation in Syria as analogous to
the Thirty Years’ War in Europe, with the multiplicity of players involved unlikely to
produce a peaceful resolution to the conflict any time soon. As a result, ISIS was able
to take advantage of the Syrian Civil War in order to expand the territory under its
control. The resolution of the situation in Syria and Iraq, Cockburn concludes, most
likely rests with the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, assuming that they
can find a way to balance their competing interests in the region.

Ultimately, Cockburn sees a future filled with ferment, at least in the short
term, for Syria and Iraq. The Civil War has no end in sight and the inability of the
foreign states involved in the conflict to help bring a resolution to the fighting there
have the people of Iraq and Syria at the mercy of events that may lead to the Islamic
State becoming an “established geographic and political fact on the map.”

In The Islamic State: A Brief Introduction, published in March 2015, Visiting
Fellow at the Brookings Institution, Charles R. Lister describes the essential aspect
of the organization as “lasting and expanding.” Drawing mostly on secondary sources,
with some primary ones, Lister describes this process as the fundamental modus
operandi of the organization. He argues that despite its lack of Islamic legitimacy, the
declaration of a caliphate by ISIS was an extremely audacious decision. Nonetheless,
he asserts that ISIS will pose a significant challenge to the security of the Middle East
and the international community, as a whole, for years and only a clear understanding
of ISIS will lead to its ultimate defeat. Lister describes ISIS as “a qualitative evolution
of the al-Qaeda model,” but with a more professional military and the ability to have
created a practical model for social governance that has been relatively successful,
particularly in “unstable environments.”
Militarily, the author describes the strategy of ISIS as having a dual nature. On one hand, the organization carries out mass casualty attacks in urban areas, targeting Shia, Alawi Muslims, and others, primarily in civilian localities. And, as recent events have shown, ISIS has demonstrated the ability to carry out these types of attacks in Western Europe, as well as within Iraq, Syria, and other parts of the Middle East. The second aspect of the military strategy of ISIS is described as a process of attrition against its opponent’s morale and capabilities. This requires a process of eroding the enemy’s capacity to maintain the security of a targeted objective. The fall of Mosul, for example, was the result of carefully planned, intelligence-led operations that undermined the ability of Iraqi forces to control the periphery of the city while simultaneously carrying out covert operations designed to intimidate government officials, including the assassinations of the most experienced, senior officials. By doing so, the ability of government personnel to control the city was weakened and ISIS was able to create a shadow authority that operated covertly during daylight hours and, often, more openly at night. Alliances with other Sunni factions have also been an essential feature of ISIS military strategy.

Internally, Lister notes the professionalism of the senior leadership of ISIS, many of whom were former Iraqi military officers. ISIS has also taken the decision to operate as a nation-state, with a well-organized bureaucracy and the ability to generate revenue through taxation, extortion, and the sale of oil. ISIS has proved particularly adept at social media both for the promotion of its actions, especially through media exploitation and social networking, and for recruiting purposes. As for governance, Lister shows that the implementation of sharia law and the favoring of Sunni Muslims over all others is key, as is intimidation through the use of swift and brutal punishments.

How to defeat ISIS? Lister argues that defeating ISIS will take time and the leadership of local actors is supported by the West. It will also be necessary to treat ISIS as more than a terrorist organization. He calls for bolstering moderate opposition groups in Syria while persuading Russia and Iran to suppress military assistance to the Assad regime and joining in the effort to bring about a peaceful transition in Damascus. The existing agreements for the provision of military assistance to Iraq need to be honored, he believes, but future assistance must be made conditional. On a broad front, in both Syria and Iraq, Lister states that a strategy must be developed and implemented to weaken the strengths of ISIS—its revenue stream, effective leadership and command structure, mobile forces, use of social media, and the exploitation of regional stability. He notes that this will require an intensive intelligence collection, analysis effort, and improvements in key leader engagement especially at the local level. Lister argues that the “only real hope for neutralizing” the threat posed by ISIS it to correct the current political failures regionally and strengthen local opposition to it. While the international community will have to play “the vital role of facilitators, guarantors, and enforcers,” Lister concludes that “it is the local players who will come to define the long-term fate of IS.”

William McCants, Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution, offers readers the kind of insights that may lead
to the clear understanding of ISIS that Lister, his colleague at Brookings has called for. In The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State, McCants provides readers with a detailed analysis of the mission and message of ISIS. Proficient in Arabic and Islamic history and theology, McCants presents himself as uniquely qualified to dissect and evaluate the methods and message used by ISIS to attract followers and justify its actions. Backing up his claim, McCants cites numerous primary sources, including secret al-Qaida and ISIS documents written in Arabic to support his views.

The key to understanding ISIS, McCants argues, is in its vision—one that combines the long held dream of reviving the Islamic Empire with a vision of the coming End of Days. While these ideas may seem contradictory, the author points out that they became fashionable following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The outbreak of sectarian violence that followed soon after made a vision formerly held by fringe elements more appealing to a wider number of Muslims, Sunni in particular. The chaos unleashed by the events of the Arab Spring in 2012 only fueled belief in a coming apocalypse further. Polls conducted in the Middle East, McCants notes, revealed that 50 percent of Arabs responding believed that the Muslim savior, the Mahdi, would appear at any time, while reports of “End-Time heroes” being sighted and the increasing violence in Syria made doomsday prophecies more believable.

Like Cockburn and Lister, McCants traces the emergence of ISIS from its roots in earlier Islamic extremism, but in greater detail. He effectively outlines the increasing split between al-Qaida and what was to become the Islamic State, demonstrating that ISIS has moved far beyond the vision of Osama bin Laden in terms of the meaning and conduct of holy war. The contradiction between Bin Laden and ISIS is notable on several fronts, particularly in the use of violence and the establishment of a caliphate. While Bin Laden argued for winning popular support for al-Qaida before instituting a gradual implementation of sharia, ISIS prefers to use intimidation and brute force to establish control over the areas they have seized. Likewise, ISIS has ignored restrictions on the killing of Muslims, which earned several rebukes from Bin Laden and undoubtedly contributed to the eventual split between them. As McCants notes in his introduction, al-Qaida “tamped down messianic fervor and sought popular support,” leaving the caliphate for the future. But ISIS fights and rules according to the Machiavellian principle that “It is far safer to be feared than loved.” ISIS riles up messianic fervor, McCants writes, and they “want God’s Kingdom now rather than later.”

Despite the apocalyptic views embraced by ISIS, McCants cautions that these do not necessarily “demand rash and irrational behavior. “A severe religious theology is not incompatible with practical considerations.” Even so, he notes, the political impact is still the same. What ISIS has created is a “brutal government at war with its neighbors.” Will it modify its doctrine in order to survive in the long run, or will it cling to it in the belief that it “is destined to be a world-encompassing state.” Whichever, McCants states that “the world can’t afford to wait and find out.”
Rejecting the presence of a large American military force to fight against ISIS because the move will be unpopular at home and the mission will not be successful, McCants also argues that this will also “absolve local governments from making the tough political choices required to end the Sunni disenfranchisement that fuels the insurgency.” Continued use of air power to degrade the ability of ISIS to raise money and fight is recommended, along with the identification and careful use of proxies to combat ISIS. Ultimately, McCants believes that ISIS will be defeated, as no “modern jihadist statelet has provoked international intervention and survived.” He warns, however, that the elimination of a jihadist statelet does not mean that the jihadists themselves will disappear. As long as political instability exists in the Middle East jihadism will continue in some form.

Something missing, not only from McCants’ work, but also from the books by Cockburn and Lister, is more attention to the adept use of social media by ISIS. While not entirely overlooked, the subject might have been examined in greater depth. The skill ISIS has shown in producing technically excellent videos highlighting its successes (and atrocities), and its adroit use of social media to promulgate its theological and ideological views in order to inspire and recruit fighters and supporters that deserves more attention than it receives in these books. Setting aside the terrorism component of ISIS, an examination of how ISIS has used social media for recruiting purposes alone would have added a much needed dimension to each book.

Each author also notes the importance of local elements in bringing the current conflict to a resolution. While the major powers all have interests to protect in this part of the world, it is evident to all the writers that a true settlement of the present situation will have to involve the nations of the Middle East, not only as participants but as leaders in the process. Exactly how this will be accomplished, however, remains elusive as the recommendations each offers for defeating ISIS suggest.

Together, this trio of books provides insightful and disturbing analyses of ISIS. But the question of what, exactly, ISIS is remains unanswered. The November attacks in Paris, the shootings in San Bernardino in December, and the Brussels bombings all were inspired by or conducted by cells or individuals loyal to the Islamic State. Yet ISIS has also used conventional military tactics to carve out what is, at least, a proto state from Syrian and Iraqi territory. At this point, ISIS seems to be a hybrid—part terrorist organization and part military insurgency, flexible enough to use violence in a variety of ways in pursuit of its ultimate goal. Each of these authors, taken together, paint a portrait of an organization that has used a military insurgency to carve out a geographic stronghold, while demonstrating the ability to attack its enemies in their respective homelands with terrorist violence. ISIS rules through fear and brutality in the regions it controls, while using terrorist tactics to try and intimidate the populations of those nations that oppose it. This forces those combatting ISIS to develop strategies and tactics that are designed to stabilize the situation in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Iraq, while also applying counterterrorism resources to defend their respective homelands. Interestingly, each author focuses on the former rather than the latter as they consider methods that might lead to the defeat of ISIS. That might be due to the fact that ISIS directed or inspired terrorist attacks on the West began to take place mostly after each of these books was published. More than two-dozen terrorist events related to ISIS have taken place since the announcement of the Caliphate in June 2014; the majority of them occurred in 2015, culminating in the Brussels bombings in January.
This raises the peril of publishing while events continue to unfold. The rise of ISIS and its declaration of a Caliphate naturally led these writers to concentrate on the military insurgency taking place in Syria and Iraq, and less on the potential for terrorist attacks. That is understandable, given the events of the period in which these books appeared. And, Lister and McCants have continued to develop their ideas both on the Brookings website and elsewhere. Cockburn likewise continues to comment on ISIS in various sources. Even so, each of these books and the views expressed by their authors run the danger of becoming out of date rather quickly. Nonetheless, taken together, these three books provide an excellent introduction into the nature of ISIS. They offer a useful survey of the Islamic State’s theological justification for its actions, how it operates and the threat it presents to the world. All are worth reading and the time taken to absorb the ideas presented in them will be worthwhile.

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