

ISIS: A HISTORY BY FAWAZ A. GERGES



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The Islamic State has stunned the world with its savagery, destructiveness, and military and recruiting successes. What explains the rise of ISIS and what does it portend for the future of the Middle East? In this book, one of the world's leading authorities on political Islam and jihadism sheds new light on these questions as he provides a unique history of the rise and growth of ISIS. Moving beyond journalistic accounts, Fawaz Gerges provides a clear and compelling account of the deeper conditions that fuel ISIS.

The book describes how ISIS emerged in the chaos of Iraq following the 2003 U.S. invasion, how the group was strengthened by the suppression of the Arab Spring and by the war in Syria, and how ISIS seized leadership of the jihadist movement from Al Qaeda. Part of a militant Sunni revival, ISIS claims its goals are to resurrect a caliphate and rid "Islamic lands" of all Shia and other minorities. In contrast to Al Qaeda, ISIS initially focused on the "near enemy"—Shia, the Iraqi and Syrian regimes, and secular, pro-Western states in the Middle East. But in a tactical shift ISIS has now taken responsibility for spectacular attacks in Europe and other places beyond the Middle East, making it clear that the group is increasingly interested in targeting the "far enemy" as well. Ultimately, the book shows how decades of dictatorship, poverty, and rising sectarianism in the Middle East, exacerbated by foreign intervention, led to the rise of ISIS—and why addressing those problems is the only way to ensure its end.

An authoritative introduction to arguably the most important conflict in the world today, this is an essential book for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of the social turmoil and political violence ravaging the Arab-Islamic world.

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Most helpful customer reviews

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

An important book for our time

By DAB

I am a lay reader who is interested in current events in the middle east, particularly the growth of ISIS, and happened to catch an interview with Fawaz Gerges on Book TV. I ordered his book immediately and have not been disappointed. The book is comprehensive and detailed, but if you have followed the general events in Iraq and Syria since 2003, the book is very readable. There have been one or two passages that are confusing or difficult to read and I am not sure if that is due to my lack of familiarity with the characters Gerges discusses or the way they are described. But on the whole, this is an authoritative and very readable book. It adds a great deal of insight not only to the history of ISIS, but also the shifting allegiances of the many factions in the region and the very negative influence of foreign intervention. While the seeds of what is today ISIS existed prior to the US invasion in 2003, that event allowed them to fully sprout and enjoy a growth spurt. It immediately calls into question any simplistic description of causes and solutions regarding the situation in the middle east.

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Gives the reader an understanding of the depth of the ...

By miles jaffe, non-angry Kindle devotee

Gives the reader an understanding of the depth of the ISIS challenge, a rejection of the centrality of the nation state as the inevitable political structure. Isis wishes Islam to be a single state with its laws and structure based on the Koran.

(ED NOTE: I may have confused this with *The Long Game*, in which case do not publish this note)

40 of 43 people found the following review helpful.

Five Stars

By History Reader

Written by an insider, the book dispels myths and misconceptions about global jihadism and examines the conditions that enabled IS to seize vast swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria and proclaim a 'caliphate' in June 2014. Fawaz A. Gerges delivers a robust rebuttal of recent ahistorical accounts that variously portray IS as the invincible and unassailable leader of a monolithic jihadism; a linear progression of Al Qaeda (AQ); or as a product of the Arab Spring. *ISIS: A History* contests all of these narratives.

The book shows how, by 2010, the group founded by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq was on the brink of implosion. Its targeting of civilians, suicide bombings, kidnappings and beheadings had met with increasing Sunni resistance, most notably from the *sahwa* – or awakening councils – which were at war with al-Zarqawi's brand of genocidal sectarianism.

While the Syrian conflict might have begun as an uprising against an unfair and corrupt autocrat, just as Libyans, Egyptians, Tunisians, Yemenis, and Bahrainis did in 2010 and 2011, it is true that soon became a giant three-way proxy war going on between Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. Those countries are paying the bills of the proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia/Qatar, Turkey and Iran in any number of countries across the region.

But the linking of salafi jihadism with the Arab Spring is given short shrift in this history, not least because parliaments and participation in electoral politics are considered blasphemous by IS, which seeks a return to *hakimiyya* – God's sovereignty and laws and the rules of seventh-century Arabia.

The evidence that Gerges pieces together presents a picture of a movement that perhaps owes little to the charisma of its leaders, but a great deal to the US-led invasion of Iraq and the post-war dismantling of state structures. A point made with emphatic clarity throughout the book is that: '[t]he destruction of the Iraqi state in 2003 was the most important variable in the emergence of Al Qaeda in Iraq and its subsequent rebirth as ISIS'.

The book narrates how, during the disastrous post-war era, the process of de-Baathification and the establishment of a sectarian-based political system polarised Iraq along Sunni-Shia lines. This sectarian rift deepened and widened under the premiership of Nouri al-Maliki. Increasingly, authoritarian rule that centralised power in the hands of Shia Islamists further fuelled the sectarianism on which IS feeds.

Critically important for the ascent of IS was the exclusion of the *sahwa* under al-Maliki's leadership, which led senior Baathists to defect to AQ and IS in Iraq, providing the military prowess that enabled its fighters to sweep into the country's Sunni heartland. The second driving force behind the ascent of IS was, of course, Syria's descent into war – the book further narrates how this empowered IS, principally through the formation of alliances of convenience with Sunnis in revolt against the regime of Bashar al Assad.

Another dominant theme that emerges in *ISIS: A History* is the extent to which IS has been riven with internal dissent and beset by external opposition. In chronicling the bloody struggle for leadership of the jihadist movement, Gerges documents how this is fiercely contested by AQ in Syria and by other salafi-jihadist groups. The seizure of territory and resources in Iraq and Syria cannot be ascribed to one united monolithic jihadist movement. While IS has proved adept in the formation of alliances of convenience to achieve its war aims, these have been, and will continue to prove, temporal and divisive. The defining characteristic of IS in this history is its mastery of the art of making enemies and strategic miscalculations, which have left the movement over-extended, waging war in multiple battles on multiple fronts.

The conclusions reached in this analysis are unequivocal – the writing is already on the wall and the movement cannot live up to its motto of remaining and expanding: '[t]o think the unthinkable, a collapse of the “Islamic State” might not be imminent but it is conceivable in the near future'. Although many caveats and qualifications may delay the penning of IS's obituary any time soon, these do not detract from the author's principal conclusions that IS is a doomed, structurally defective movement, lacking any manifesto for governance and bereft of ideas or policies. This analysis should not invite complacency about the menace of IS. The book has already proved prophetic in its assessment that as the movement loses territory, it will make spectacular strikes elsewhere. The attacks in Brussels took place shortly after the book went to press.

With little to offer Sunni communities in the future other than genocidal war, the worst of the distant past and the destruction of fourteen centuries of progress and enlightenment, the movement cannot sustain its hadanah sha'biyya (social base) or establish the broader constituency it will need to survive. Its military prowess and spectacular attacks in the region and the west may prove attractive to young fighters, but it is essentially a hyper-sectarian youth movement bereft of sustainable support. Professor Gerges asserts that no prominent Muslim scholar supports the 'caliphate' or its self-anointed caliph – indicted even by radical Islamist scholars as a 'theocratically illiterate mediocrity' with 'no leadership skills'.

If this reading of recent history is correct, then the implications and magnitude of the challenges are clear: remove the conditions through which IS thrives – despair, sectarianism, abject poverty and war – and the group will atrophy and wither. If IS is a manifestation of the breakdown of state institutions, then fragile sectarian and authoritarian state systems must be rebuilt on more legitimate foundations, which will require inclusive and representative government that can meet the needs of their citizens. If IS is above all a youth movement that appeals to the alienated and poor, then the needs of the region's massively growing youth, currently beset by poverty and unemployment, must be given an alternative other than political authoritarianism, economic and developmental failure and poor governance.

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