

III. Book Reviews

Patrick Cockburn, *The Jihadis Return: the Rise of ISIS and the new Sunni Uprising*. New York and London: OR Books 2014.

144 pp., US\$ 15.00 / £ 9.00 [Paperback]; ISBN 978-1-939293-95-6.

Loretta Napoleoni, *The Islamist Phoenix: the Islamic State and the Redrawing of the Middle East*. New York and Oakland: Seven Stories Press 2014.

136 pp., US\$ 11.95 [Paperback]; ISBN 978-1-60980-628-6.

Reviewed by Teun van Dongen

With the Islamic State (also known as ISIS) continuing to make gains in Syria and Iraq, where it controls large swaths of territory, the need to understand the insurgent group is paramount. The problem, however, is that it is exceedingly dangerous to obtain the type of inside information that is necessary to develop a deep understanding of the way the group functions. The Islamic State's atrocities are well-documented, of course, but we have little to go on when it comes to the group's inner workings. Against this background, one would be inclined to welcome the fact that in recent months Patrick Cockburn and Loretta Napoleoni each published a book about the Islamic State. Cockburn is a veteran Middle East correspondent for the British newspaper *The Independent* and wrote several books about the conflicts that followed the fall of Saddam Hussein, and Napoleoni is a well-known expert on the financing of terrorism and author of a book about Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who led al Qaeda in Iraq, one of ISIS' predecessors. But while Cockburn and Napoleoni both have good credentials to write on these issues, their books show that they, too, are finding it difficult to shed new light on the Islamic State's emir Al-Baghdadi and his forces.

Cockburn's book, *The rise of ISIS and the new Sunni uprising*, is strongly focused on the contextual factors that enabled the Islamic State to emerge victorious in the current Iraqi/Syrian conflict. Cockburn convincingly explains that the Islamic State's rise was made possible by the anti-Sunni bias of the Iraqi Shi'ite government, the export of Wahhabism from Saudi-Arabia and the susceptibility of the Sunni population to media outlets other than state propaganda and unreliable Western reporting.

But while he does a good job explaining the context in which the Islamic State seized power in the portions of territory under its control, the group itself is strangely absent from Cockburn's account. Perhaps because he lacks the information needed to do so, Cockburn says almost nothing about what the Islamic State itself did to get where it is today. Thus, the rise of ISIS comes across as a natural phenomenon that followed necessarily from a confluence of several enabling factors. Some ham-fisted comparisons to Nazi Germany and fascism aside, Cockburn does little to elucidate the nature and actions of the group whose rise he tries to explain.

Unlike *The jihadis return*, Loretta Napoleoni's *The Islamist Phoenix: the Islamic State and the redrawing of the Middle East* does discuss the Islamic State directly. Napoleoni ably chronicles the origins and resurrection of the organisation that became the Islamic State and compares it to other terrorist groups that controlled territory, arguing that what is new about the Islamic State is the group's swift success rather than its terrorist nature as such.

Unfortunately, Napoleoni's book, like Cockburn's, is hamstrung by a lack of reliable inside information. The Islamic State puts out vast amounts of propaganda, but keeps a lid on its inner workings, the result being that little is known about Al-Baghdadi's organisation beyond its cruelty and its military successes. As Napoleoni's

book is largely based on media reports and analyses of these successes, her account is less than balanced. Indeed, she is so impressed by the Islamic State's sudden rise that she frequently overstates the group's political ingenuity. For instance, she repeatedly stresses the Islamic State's political skills and pragmatism, but fails to observe that the group's publicly displayed cruelty was instrumental in mobilising the international coalition that is currently blocking its northward offensive. Add to this the puzzling claims Napoleoni occasionally makes, the most bewildering being that "[t]he Caliphate is no more violent and barbarous than any other armed organization in recent memory" (p. 45) and that the Islamic State wants to rule "with the consent of the governed" (p. 36), and it is clear that her book is seriously flawed.

All of this is not to say that the two books are outright failures. They adequately lay down the background and history of the current conflict and will be highly readable introductions for readers who are new to the topic. At the same time, though, lacking new information, Cockburn and Napoleoni do not add much to the freely available media reporting and commentary on the Islamic State, which begs the question to what extent we can know and understand the Islamic State at all. After all, if even the books of two seasoned and rightfully celebrated authors like Cockburn and Napoleoni are ultimately forgettable efforts, perhaps we should accept that the Islamic State will remain a black box, at least for the time being.

About the reviewer: Teun van Dongen is an independent national and international security expert. In November 2014 he successfully defended his PhD dissertation 'The Science of Fighting Terrorism. The Relation between Terrorist Actor Type and Counterterrorism Effectiveness' (579 pp.) at Leiden University.