

Counterterrorism Bookshelf:

12 Books on Al-Qaida and ISIS-related Subjects

Reviewed by Joshua Sinai

Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 304 pp., US \$ 74.00 [Hardcover], US \$ 16.95 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-19-021726-6.

This is a concise, authoritative, and useful primer on the origins, evolution, ideology, objectives, tactics and operations of al Qaida, the Islamic State, and their jihadist affiliates. The volume's nine substantive chapters cover topics such as, in the case of al Qaida, its history, key attacks and plots, strategy and tactics, ideology, organization and recruitment, relations and conflicts with states such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, the impact of the Arab Spring on the organization, the nature of its affiliation with like-minded groups such as al Shabaab and al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula. The Islamic State is discussed in a separate chapter, including how it differs from al Qaida in terms of its approach to governing territories and warfare. The final substantive chapter discusses the components of counterterrorism against al Qaida, the Islamic State and their affiliates, such as the use of measures that are military (including drones), intelligence, diplomatic, legal, financial, countering radicalization and 'winning the war of ideas.' A concluding short chapter suggests books and articles for further reading on these topics. The author is a Professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and a Senior Fellow in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, in Washington, DC.

Brian H. Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Have, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 376 pp., US \$ 30.00 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-0-300-22149-7.

This is an account, as described by the author, of the "history of people and the strategic and operational decisions they made to create the Islamic State." (p. x). A way to understand the ideological principals that formed the basis for the Islamic State's jihadi strategy, the author explains, is found in the master plan, produced in 2005 in Iraq, "that predicted the caliphate would be reestablished in Syria between 2013 and 2016," and served "to identify critical decision points, risks, and benchmarks." (pp. x-xi). The critical decision points that led to the master plan's formulation are discussed in chapters that cover its origins in the activities of Jordanian-born Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, who had trained at al Qaida's camps in Afghanistan and eventually made his way to Iraq. In the second chapter, "The Eye-Opening Stage (2003-2006)," Fishman outlines the master plan's seven stages, which also form the book's seven chapters, as (1), "The Awakening Stage (2000-2003), (2) "The Eye-Opening Stage (2003-2006), (3) "The Stage of Standing Upright (2007-2010), (4), "The Stage of Recuperation (2010-2013), (5), "The Stage of Declaring the State (2013-2016), (6) "The Stage of Absolute Confrontation (2016-2018), and (7) "The Stage of Final Victory (2018) – 2020). (pp. 34-35). Regarding the Islamic State's primary jihadi competitor, al Qaida, the author observes that its "geographic reach and continued assertions that it leads all Muslims everywhere means that it is likely to continue to clash with al-Qaeda." (p. 255). At the same time, he notes that "Neither al-Qaeda nor the Islamic State are likely to attract the mass movement they would like." (p. 258). While much of the author's analysis is sound and well-informed, one may disagree with his blanket assertion that "prejudicial policies directed at refugees and Muslims in Western countries are counterproductive," (p. 258) particularly when such policies are not explained by the author, and that a "massive, semi-permanent American intervention in the Middle East" is necessary to "truly defeat" the Islamic State – given the fact that it is really up to the local Middle Eastern states to defeat it, and, in the case of Syria, the U.S. would have to cooperate with Russia in defeating IS (and al Qaida's affiliate, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, formerly known as the al Nusra Front) in that country. (pp. 258-

259). The author is a counterterrorism Research Fellow with the International Security Program at New America Foundation, Washington, DC.

Michael T. Flynn and Michael Ledeen, *The Field of Fight: How We Can Win the Global War Against Radical Islam and Its Allies* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 208 pages, US \$ 26.99 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-25010-622-3.

With this book's primary author, Lt. General, U.S. Army (Retired) Michael Flynn appointed by President-Elect Donald Trump as the President's National Security Adviser, and head of the National Security Council, this is an important account of his approach to countering radical Islam, its primary organizations, the Islamic State and al Qaida, and their affiliates and adherents worldwide, including in America. Although Michael Ledeen, the book's co-author, is also listed in the title, as a veteran author and expert on this subject, his role was to amplify General Flynn's thinking and approach to these issues, so General Flynn will be referred to as the primary author. As explained by the author, the book's title and overall theme are derived from Homer's *Iliad*, in which an epic battle is being fought "involving both men and gods." (p. 3). As the author explains, "Our most fanatical contemporary enemies think they are in a similar battle with us. Most of them believe their cause is blessed and supported by the Almighty. We must prove them wrong." (p. 3). This book, accordingly, was written to explain the full magnitude of the war being waged by the jihadists, which the Obama Administration "has forbidden us to describe our enemies properly and clearly: they are Radical Islamists." (p. 3) The book's second purpose was "To lay out a winning strategy," (p. 3), which the author outlines as two-pronged: (1) organizing "all our national power, from military and economic to intelligence and tough-minded diplomacy," and, (2) "They must be denied safe havens, and countries that shelter them have to be issued a brutal choice: either eliminate the Radical Islamists or you risk direct attack yourselves." (p. 8). Applying his extensive experience in military intelligence, including as a former Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, the author concludes that a "winning strategy" consists of the following elements, which are to be fought in the physical and digital environments: "1. Properly assess your environment and clearly define your enemy; 2. Face reality – for politicians, this is never an easy thing to do; 3. Understand the social context and fabric of the operational environment; 4. Recognize who's in charge of the enemy's forces." (p. 169). Such a "winning strategy," according to the author, also involves the inclusion of America's close military allies in the Middle East: Israel, Jordan, and Egypt.

Sebastian Gorka, *Defeating Jihad: The Winnable War* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2016), 256 pp., US \$ 27.99 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-62157-457-6.

In this short book (144 pages of text and 84 pages of appendices), the author's objective is to propose a framework for understanding global jihadism and formulate a "winnable" strategy to defeat it. This is a noble ambition, but the author spends too much time at the book's beginning to compare the Western world's war against global jihad with its Cold War's counter-Communism campaign – when Soviet-style (post-Stalinist) Communism bore little resemblance to the religiously fundamentalist jihadists, even devoting (as a 'space filler,' one might presume) 74 pages in the appendix to reproducing George Kennan's historic "Long Telegram on the Soviet Threat to America". After a cursory overview of the origins of jihadism's ideologues (e.g., Abdullah Azzam, Sayyid Qutb, Ayman al-Zawahiri, etc.), the readers' expectations of a new "winnable" strategy to defeat global jihad are quickly disappointed. What is the author's strategy to defeat the "totalitarian" global jihadism, which he terms "a direct existential threat to America and the whole of Western civilization"? (p. 120). They must be attacked on three fronts: first, "Deploy the truth: you cannot win a war if you cannot talk honestly about the enemy"; second, "Take a step back: help others fight their own wars"; and third, "Winning the war at home: education and human intelligence." (pp. 129-133). A pretty weak strategy, considering what other military strategists are proposing and the U.S. military and intelligence agencies are

already doing in Syria and Iraq and the FBI is doing domestically. The author is Vice President and Professor of Strategy and Irregular Warfare at the Institute of World Politics in Washington, DC.

William Kilpatrick, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Jihad* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2016), 256 pp., US \$ 21.99 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-62157-577-1.

The “Politically Incorrect Guides,” in words of the publisher, are intended to “provide an unvarnished, unapologetic overview of the topics every American needs to know.” As such, they are likely to appeal to some, while infuriating others. Given these ground rules, like other publishers’ best-selling *The Complete Idiot’s Guides* or the *For Dummies* books series, this volume is well-organized and cleverly illustrated, with every chapter including whimsical ‘politically incorrect’ section headings and call-out boxes on topics such as “Did You Know?,” “Back-to-the-Past Alerts,” “Advice We’re Ignoring,” and “A Book You’re Not Supposed to Read.” Beginning with an introductory overview entitled “The Untold Story of Our Time,” the volume is divided into three parts: Part I, “Jihad is Back” (“The Resurgence of Jihad,” “Are ISIS and Boko Haram Un-Islamic?,” “The Roots of Jihad,” and “What’s in a Name? What Jihad Really Means”); Part II, “Jihad Without Bombs” (“The Quiet Kind of Jihad,” “Immigration and the ‘Baby Jihad,’” “Western Enablers of Jihad,” “Information Wars,” and “Christian Enablers of Jihad”), and Part III, “Defeating Jihad” (“Strategies for Victory” and “Psychological, Spiritual, and Ideological Warfare”). In the chapter on “Strategies for Victory,” after discussing how to win the propaganda war by winning “the shooting war” and undermining jihadist recruiting, the author proposes nine general measures, including these: “Build our military back up – or at least quit gutting it,” “Ground our counterterrorism strategy in reality, not fantasy,” “Take the threat of nuclear jihad seriously,” “Bring down the price of oil with fracking and nuclear power,” “Use foreign aid as leverage,” “Wage cyberwar,” “Educate for victory,” and “Discredit political correctness.” (pp. 217-225). The author, who had taught at Boston College, is the author of numerous books and articles.

Sami Moubayed, *Under the Black Flag: At the Frontier of the New Jihad* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 256 pp., US \$ 18.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-78453-308-3.

This is a well-informed account of the ideological foundations of the Islamic State (IS) from its beginning to the present time, with its claim to lead a newly reconstituted caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Also discussed are IS’s leaders, particularly Iraqi-born Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (real name – Ibrahim Awward Ibrahim al-Badri), who, at the age of 39 became the IS’s emir in May 2010, the organization’s other leaders, the establishment of its capital in al-Raqqah, in Syria; and, in the areas under its control, the formation of its police, civil service, schools, funding mechanisms, and media of communications. Other chapters discuss the role of foreign fighters and women in IS, as well as its affiliates in Egypt, Libya and Nigeria. Also discussed are IS’s primary rival, the Syrian-based al Qaida-affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra, and its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Golani. In the conclusion, the author observes that al-Baghdadi “wants recognition as an official head of state – a de factor ‘president’ of all true Sunni Muslims.” (p. 212). The author observes, nevertheless, that al-Baghdadi is not likely to succeed because “If the conditions were ripe and the caliph were a capable and same leader, many would not be complaining about him.” (p. 212). The author, a Beirut-based journalist and historian, was Research Fellow at the Centre for Syrian Studies at St Andrews University.

Robert G. Rabil, *Salafism in Lebanon: From Apoliticism to Transnational Jihadism* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2014), 304 pp., US \$ 49.95 [Hardcover], US \$ 29.95 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-62616-117-7.

This is a detailed and authoritative account of the evolution of Salafism as an important player in Lebanon’s Sunni confessional community in terms of its “theology, religio-political ideologies, political programs, visions, and outreach initiatives (*infatih*)...” (p. 4). Three schools of Salafism in Lebanon are identified:

the “quietest Salafists, *haraki* (activist) Salafists, and Salafi jihadists. Also examined is the impact of the interaction between Salafists and the overall Sunni community on one hand, as well as the conflict between the Salafists and the multi-confessional state (including the Shi’ite Hizballah), and their implications for regional and international security on the other hand. The impact of these interactions is examined through the author’s hypothesis that “Hezbollah’s ascendancy in Lebanon, coupled with the Syrian rebellion, has generated new sociopolitical dynamics in both Lebanon and Syria, creating immediate and long-term political uncertainties and challenge to Salafists. In response, Salafists, gripped by feelings of discontent and revanchist impulses, have been compelled to address political matters that go beyond their theology and religio-political ideologies, forcing them to consider rationales for political strategies.” (p. 14). The factors underlying these rationales are then examined “in relation to (1) the different schools of Salafism and the emergence of charismatic preachers, (2) the Sunni community and transnational networks of Salafists, (3) the intracommunal and intercommunal relations in Lebanon, and (4) the Syrian conflict.” (p. 14). The author concludes that “Salafism, as a fundamentalist ideology separating the believers from unbelievers, poses an ideological and practical threat to Lebanon’s plural society and to the region,” (p. 244) and that it has “emerged as a prominent ideological and political driver of the Sunni community...” (p. 245). By addressing these important issues, this book is invaluable in explaining some of the drivers that are crucial to address in attempts to understand Lebanon’s current political turmoil, particularly the Sunni-Hizballah conflict. The author is professor, Department of Political Science, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida.

Paul Rogers, *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threat From the Margins* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 224 pp., US \$ 29.95 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-78453-488-2.

In this account, the author advances the thesis that “ISIS and related movements are part of a much wider phenomenon: what might loosely be called ‘revolts from the margins.’ It does not regard Islam as the fundamental issue for the coming decades and is more concerned with the risk that we are moving into an ‘age of insurgencies’ – rather than one of a ‘clash of civilisations’ between the West and the Islamic world – and towards a global environment of fragility, instability, increasing violence and irregular war.” (p. 4). He adds that “although ISIS is certainly a major security problem, the real drivers of current and global insecurity are quite different: deepening socio-economic divisions, which lead to the relative marginalization of most people across the world, and the prospect of profound and lasting environmental constraints, caused by climate change. ISIS, in short, should be seen as a warning of what could be to come, not as a fundamental trend in its own right.” (p. 5). Although one may agree with the author’s thesis that the global environment is heading towards greater fragility and instability due to various fault lines, his downplaying of the greater focus by jihadist groups such as ISIS, Boko Haram, and other affiliates in implementing a totalitarian and brutal Islamist regime at the expense of improving the lives of the populations under their control through economic development, human rights, and, particularly the advancement of women’s rights (among other issues), stands in opposition to his thesis about the origins and objectives of such insurgencies. The author is Emeritus Professor of Peace Studies at University of Bradford, West Yorkshire, England.

Mark Silinsky, *Jihad and the West: Black Flag Over Babylon* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016), 264 pages, US \$50.00 [Hardcover], US \$ 22.00 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-0-253-02712-2.

This is an interesting and well-written comprehensive primer of the full magnitude of the Islamic State’s jihadi war against the West, the extremist religious ideology that animates it, Western Muslim individuals who have been radicalized, indoctrinated, and mobilized to fight on its behalf, and their terrorist operations against the West. Also discussed are the responses by Westerners to this threat, ranging from appeasement to denunciation, such as Michel Houellebecq, the French writer’s controversial novel *Submission*, which imagined France in 2022 to be ruled by a partnership of French Socialists and Islamists. (p. 37). Following the author’s introductory overview, each of the volume’s nine chapters are organized into short sections, with each chapter

beginning with a short introduction, a discussion of the chapter's topic, and a total of 37 relevant profiles of individuals, whether as terrorists or Western intellectuals who criticize them, as well as significant events that illustrate those topics. The author's analysis is well-organized, with topical themes explained on what he terms several levels. For example, in explaining the role of families in influencing Westerners to become foreign fighters in Syria, the author usefully breaks it down into three levels: family as primary drivers, family as unaware of radicalization, and family as active dissuaders (pp. 103-107). In another example, in explaining three reasons some Westerners decide to leave the Caliphate, he posits them as "disappointment and discomfort," "fear," and "cruelty was not in their nature." (pp. 110-115). The concluding chapter presents the author's "musings" on the Islamic Caliphate on topics such as is the Caliphate Islamic? (yes), can the West negotiate with IS? (probably not), and can IS be "completely defeated"? ("not in the near term"). The author is a veteran analyst in the U.S. Department of Defense.

Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla, *ISIS Defectors: Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (McLean, VA: Advances Press, LLC, 2016), pp., US \$ 24.95 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-935866-71-8.

This is a highly interesting and important, field research-based account, which reads like a dramatic television documentary, of the stories and reflections of 38 individuals who joined the ISIS jihad in Syria, but became so disillusioned that they defected, ending up across the border in Turkey, or, in some instances, back in their Western home countries, where the authors conducted in-depth interviews with them about their experiences. These interviews, which included videos and photos of the sessions, were conducted from September 2015 to May 2016, as part of the authors' *ISIS Defectors Interview Project*. As described by the authors, the interviews provided "a window into ISIS reality in full-living horror. From motivations to joining; the manipulation of children and their use as suicide bombers; the treatment of women; ISIS' sex trade; finances through seizures, taxation, oil sales and sex slaves; unexpected allegiances among political enemies; the killing of Sunni Muslims; mental health consequences, and more..." (p. 15). It is crucial to explain and publicize these issues, the authors argue, because "disillusioned ISIS defectors who tell their authentic stories about life inside the Islamic State are *the* most influential tool to counter ISIS' robust propaganda and prevent others from joining" (p. 16). In a follow-on to these transcribed and filmed interviews, they are being packaged by the authors and their team "into short video clips, memes, written and audio stories to feed onto the Internet and social media, to counter and compete head-on with ISIS's successful (as of yet) unchallenged online campaign." (p. 17). These interviews were made possible by Dr. Yayla's previous service as Chief of Counter-terrorism and Operations Division for the Turkish National Police in charge of administrative oversight of counter-terrorism actions along the Turkish-Syria border from 2010 to 2015, and Dr. Speckhard's extensive experience in conducting research interviews worldwide with former terrorists, their family members, and associates. Both authors are associated with the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ITCSVE), in McLean, Virginia, where Dr. Speckhard is the Director and Dr. Yayla is the Deputy Director.

Robert Spencer, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to ISIS* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2015), 384 pp., US \$ 19.99 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-62157-453-8.

The "Politically Incorrect Guides," in words of the publisher, are intended to "provide an unvarnished, unapologetic overview of the topics every American needs to know." As such, they are likely to appeal to some, while infuriating others. Given these ground rules, each chapter in this well-informed, well-organized and cleverly illustrated volume includes whimsical 'politically incorrect' section headings and call-out boxes on topics such as "Did You Know?," "Not that This Has Anything To Do With Islam," and "Ostrich Alert." Following an introductory overview, the book's ten chapters discuss topics such as inside the Islamic State, what the Caliphate means and its violent history, "Is the Islamic State Islamic?," the Islamic State's "To-Do-List," and ISIS in America. In the concluding chapter, entitled how to defeat ISIS, the author recommends

“utterly defeating it and destroying the wellsprings of its ideological indoctrination.” (p. 289). The author is the director of *Jihad Watch*, and the author of numerous books attacking not just jihadists but being critical towards Islam in general.

Erick Stakelbeck, *ISIS Exposed: Beheadings, Slavery, and the Hellish Reality of Radical Islam* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2015), 288 pp., US \$ 29.99 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-62157-377-7.

This is a well-written account by a veteran investigative television reporter of the origins and operations of ISIS in the Middle East, as well as the types of adherents in Western Europe and the United States who are being radicalized and mobilized into terrorism by ISIS and its allies. What makes this account especially interesting is the author’s travels to hot spots such as Minneapolis-St. Paul, Denver, London, Amsterdam, as well as Israel, to interview local officials about the local Muslims who became ISIS adherents, and the nature of the threats facing them. Some of the book’s insights concern the characteristics of the types of individuals who join ISIS. Quoting Patrick Skinner, a former CIA case officer, ISIS fighters in Iraq can be categorized as the pious, or true believers; the Sunni pragmatists, such as Iraqi tribal sheikhs; and the psychopaths, who have “more taste for grindhouse than Islamic jurisprudence,” and include several notorious foreign fighters. (pp. 92-93). With regard to the Westerners who join ISIS, the author describes them as “The vulnerable, the impressionable, the lonely, the desperate, the troubled, the sinister, the violent, and the psychotic [who] are leaving the comfort of Western societies behind to join the Islamic State.” (p. 93). In another interesting insight, the author cites a *New Republic* article that compared the online magazines of ISIS and al Qaida as “Al Qaeda is like AOL – outdated, unhip – while “The Islamic State is Google,” replacing al Qaida as “the go-to-organization for young jihadists.” (p. 123). The author is the host of *The Watchman with Erick Stakelbeck* on CBN News.

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