

Resources

Omar Ashour. *How ISIS Fights. Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt.* (Edinburgh, Scotland, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2021). 243 pp. US \$ 123.99 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-4744-3821-6; US \$ 29.42 [Paperback], ISBN: 978-1-4744-3822-3; ISBN: 978-1-4744-3824-7 (E-publ).

Reviewed by Alex P. Schmid

Omar Ashour's book seeks to explain the puzzle of how the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (known as ISIS or IS) was able to control millions of people around the world for more than a thousand days since its coming into pre-eminence in 2014 against overwhelming odds and without consistent state support and with very limited uncoerced local popular assistance. It is a masterly work that actually manages to unravel this puzzle by a detailed, in-depth study of how a massively outgunned and ludicrously outnumbered IS fought, won rapid victories and continues to endure to this day. The author's clinical analysis is, as he himself admits, "often going against the tide of conventional wisdom regarding insurgencies" (p.28). He does so by looking mainly at the tactical innovations employed on the insurgents' side, leaving out the policies, strategies and blunders of the incumbents in their counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism campaigns. This might be considered a short-coming but this limitation is more than compensated by the tour de force of his quasi-anatomical dissection how IS's tactical skills could stand up for so long against overwhelming military forces from more than twenty countries.

Combining urban terrorism, guerrilla operations and conventional warfare tactics in ingenious ways, the current Islamic State, which operates worldwide, and its predecessors (IS in Syria) and ISI (IS in Iraq) achieved almost miraculous victories with looted but also homemade arms and—something which the author strange enough hardly mentions—the help of tens of thousands of foreign fighters.

Omar Ashour combines field work (incl. 58 personal interviews) and use of IS primary sources (incl. the analysis of 228 issues of IS' *al-Naba'* newsletter) to cover developments from its early activities in October 2002 up to March 2020. He focuses mainly on IS combat performance in 17 battles (incl. Fallujah, Mosul, Ramadi, Raqqa and Sheikh Zuweid) across ten war zones (including Derna, Sirte and North Sinai), where IS fought over 80 armed nonstate actors and at least 22 armed state actors who engaged with it on the ground and/or from the air (pp.23-24). Ashour describes one recurring tactical modus operandi of IS on the town/city-level that was successful in Iraq (and copied elsewhere): softening other armed rebel units by targeted assassinations and absorbing them and creeping into their territories (**SC**), coalition-building (**C**), and liquidating-consolidating (**LC**) when IS was on the offensive - with the third phase of these **SCCLC** (pronounced as 'skulls') operations involving the treacherous murder of 'frenemies'—its former local militant allies (pp. 47-48).

Another modus operandi the author identifies goes under the acronym **iALLTR**. It involves building up intelligence capabilities (**i**), absorbing like-minded organisations and recruit youth (**A/R**), looting regime arsenals and stocks of other armed groups (**L**), leading operations by relying on battle-hardened commanders (**L**), and transferring know-how of tactical and military skills to other theatres of war (**TR**) (p.83). Ashour discussed in detail IS' 15 categories of tactics (including IED tactics, tunnel tactics, assassination tactics, drone tactics, sniping tactics as well as various suicide tactics) in changing combinations of terrorism, guerrilla and conventional warfare operations. These gave IS the edge, especially in 2014 and 2015 when its enemies were still surprising by IS' shock tactics (pp.206 ff).

ISIS is still a significant terrorist actor worldwide despite former president Donald J. Trump's premature boast on 7 October 2019: "Over 100 percent of the caliphate. I took over quickly. Nobody else...I took it over..." (cit. p.195). Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Quraishi, who took over as caliph from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi on 31 October 2019, can still claim to rule over 14 'provinces' (down from the 35 'provinces' IS claimed in July 2016) in conflict zones ranging from the Congo (DRC), Mozambique, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Niger and Yemen to Afghanistan where IS groups continue using innovative tactics developed by the parent organisation in Iraq

and Syria.

How will this end? Omar Ashour notes: “At the strategic level, IS has no *viable* grand strategy. Simply put, the organisation’s resources are way too limited to achieve its ultimate objective (a Wahhabist-style ‘Caliphate’ with political-military dominance over some or all Muslim-majority states, and with the capacity to ‘invade’ others) [p.204].

This study’s meticulous and detailed examination stands out among the many books that have been written on IS. By going narrow and deep in its discussion of tactics, *How ISIS Fights* is mandatory reading for all those studying and practicing urban warfare in the 21st century.

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