



Book Review

Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger. *ISIS, The State of Terror*. London: Harper Collins, 2015. 416 pages. \$27.99 Hardcover

reviewed by Housseem Ben Lazreg



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

Behadings, mass executions of captives, women being raped and the destruction of cultural sites have been making newspaper headlines in the past few years. The jihadist organization called “ISIS” or “*Daesh*” (Arabic equivalent) acquired many territories in Syria and Iraq. Motivated by these advances, ISIS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared the establishment of the “Caliphate,” a move that, despite being criticized by Muslims and non-Muslims, sparked off many questions: Who is ISIS? What are its origins? What does this organization aim to achieve? How do they recruit fighters from Muslim and non-Muslim countries? Why are their tactics very brutal?

Most of the answers to these questions can be found in *ISIS: The State of Terror* by Jessica Stern, a lecturer at Harvard University, and J. M. Berger, a terrorism analyst and researcher. This book, which is divided thematically into ten chapters, analyzes in a journalistic style the rise of ISIS, beginning with the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 to the organization evolution and its split from al-Qaeda and its establishment of the new Islamic Caliphate. By using social media, modern technology and highly sophisticated propaganda strategies, ISIS has managed to recruit fighters from all over the world.

In the first chapter, “The Rise and Fall of Al Qaeda in Iraq,” Stern and Berger provide a portrait of Abu Musab al-Zarkawi, the founding father of ISIS. They claim that he “brought a particularly brutal and sectarian approach to his understanding of Jihad” (12) due to the violent and bloody attacks on the Shiites. Furthermore, the authors give an account of “The Management of Savagery,” a document that represents the roadmap for the use of violence and the perpetuation of chaos in the wake of the weakening and disintegration of central states in order to eventually create the caliphate. Despite the importance of this document, Stern and Berger ignore the role of Wahabism in inspiring the ideology of ISIS, which is based on a radical, exclusionist and puritanical interpretation of Islam. One of the main tenets of Wahabism is the idea of Takfir. According to Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of this doctrine, Muslims can be deemed infidels or apostates if their opinions do not conform to the ruler’s (or the caliph’s), and thus can be executed. The list of apostates includes the Shiites and the Sufis whose belonging to Islam was questioned.

In the second and third chapters, respectively, “The Rise of ISIS” and “From Vanguard to Smart Mob,” Stern and Berger shed some light on how al-Qaeda Central dissociated itself from ISIS. On the one hand, the authors portray al-Qaeda as an exclusive “vanguard movement... a cabal that saw itself as the elite intellectual leaders of a global ideological revolution that it would assist and manipulate” (55). On the other hand, they describe ISIS as a populist organization that plays two roles: First, it acts as a permanent government that offers services to the people living under its rule; and second, it attracts thousands of supporters who have adopted and shared its ideology through social media platforms and tech-savvy recruiters (71). Although this shift from an “elitist” exclusive movement to a “populist” inclusive one that uses modern technology to attract



sympathizers from all over the world demonstrates a significant development in Jihadi thought, Stern and Berger fail to examine the dynamics of this development.

In chapters four through nine, Stern and Berger delineate the main focus of the book. Specifically, they switch to investigating the sociological and psychological aspects of ISIS's use of social media. They posit that in using Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, ISIS does not only promote itself as a violent jihadist organism, but also adapts its propaganda in order to radicalize and recruit fighters from all over the world. Moreover, the authors highlight the sophistication of ISIS's usage of social media and digital films and their impact on the psychological dimension of modern warfare. By posting and circulating bloody scenes in the media and on the internet, ISIS can boost the morale of its supporters and terrorize its adversaries (199). Stern and Berger note that the extensive use of Twitter by ISIS is highly successful. Once a Twitter account associated with ISIS is shut, dozens emerge. Their metaphor, "whack a mole" (136), sounds relevant and indicative of the complexities of cyber war. Although the technological prowess of ISIS is extensively examined, however, there is no mention of how this organization maintains its access to the internet despite numerous airstrikes against its infrastructures. Neither do the authors disclose the sources, origins, and capabilities of ISIS's media and film production, given that many Arab states do not possess the means to produce propaganda materials of similar sophistication level.

In their final two chapters, "The Coming Final Battle" and "The State of Terror," Stern and Berger explore the state of ISIS in 2015 and offer some insights on how to deal with it. In fact, they call for a different approach from the one implemented in the past to fight al-Qaeda. They disapprove of the military solution because the "current US strategy against terrorism, which is heavily focused on decapitation, could eventually prove to be ISIS's greatest asset" (191). The book concludes with a survey of the views of some Western scholars, such as Karen Armstrong who asserts that fundamentalists- such as ISIS- associate modernity with crisis, not with progress. For such scholars, secularism aims at wiping religion out (Armstrong, 2002: 165).

In spite of the insightful perspective on the subject, Stern and Berger rely only on Western sources, thus presenting a one-sided perspective on ISIS. The lack of references from the Muslim world, as well as research done by Middle Eastern scholars, is one of the limitations of this book. Despite the journalistic style, *ISIS, The State of Terror* offers readers an idea about the history of ISIS, but the authors' account of the origins of the Islamic Organization seems to be limited. They fail to consider the international, regional and geopolitical changes in the wake of the Iraq invasion in 2003. Nor do they provide an account of daily life under ISIS, its military strategies and tactics, its sources of funding, as well as the ways in which it governs its territories. For the general reader, *ISIS, The State of Terror* is informative about the historical rise of ISIS and its uses of state-of-the-art technology to radicalize and recruit fighters. Finally, the book features a helpful glossary and an appendix that provide a concise history of Islam and the frictions between the Sunna and the Shiites.

About the reviewer: Housseem Ben Lazreg is currently a PhD student at the University of Alberta with the Department of Translation Studies.