



**Michael Griffin. *Islamic State: Rewriting History*. London: Pluto Press, 2016. 176 pages. \$20.00 Paperback**

reviewed by Richard C. Dietrich



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### Abstract

*This is a review of the book Islamic State: Rewriting History by Michael Griffin. It provides a chronological account of the organization's emergence and the role that external global actors had on its development. In addition it examines ISIS' use of media and the possible effects of its expansion on regional relations.*

**Keywords:** ISIS; Caliphate; Jihad; Syria; Iraq; terror; Turkey

Despite continuing, serious setbacks on battlefields in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State (IS) remains a force to be reckoned with not only in the regions bordering these two countries, but also further afield, in Africa, Europe and the United States. Among the numerous works that deal with IS is Michael Griffin's recent book *Islamic State: Rewriting History*. In the preface to his book Griffin describes it as "a chronological approach to IS in the Middle East, and not its subsequent expansion from Afghanistan to Nigeria" (p. xxi). Within these parameters Griffin delivers a concise, readable account of the rise and development of the IS from its origins in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003 up to late 2014.

The "Preface" provides a fine introduction to the scope (mentioned above), and the two main claims of the book, first, that the rise and development of IS is "... a phenomenon that obeys none of the narrative rules previously encountered" (p. xxii), and that very little about the organization can be known or confirmed from outside sources. Second, Griffin asserts that the "...history of the rise of IS, perforce, constitutes an account of the many US failures to develop a consistent policy focus in the Middle East after the withdrawal of forces from Iraq at the end of 2011..." (p. xxii). While development of the first claim constitutes the majority of the book, the second claim is the main subject of chapter 11.

The first four chapters give a condensed account of events and developments in Iraq between 2003 and 2008. The first chapter begins by discussing the role that Camp Bucca, an American detention facility near Umm Qasr, Iraq in use from 2003-2009, played as a training ground for extremists. This section is brief, but sufficient to give readers an idea of the somewhat ironic role the camp played in preparing numerous detainees for carrying out terrorist acts, often against the Americans, after their release. The remainder of chapter is a bare bones biography of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

In the second chapter Griffin documents the emergence and rise of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi to a position of leadership among the insurgent groups in Iraq. In contrast to the scant information provided about al-Baghdadi in the first chapter, here Zarqawi's background, how he went about implementing his strategy of creating a Sunni-Shi'i sectarian war, his difficult relationship with al-Qaeda, and his media strategy to publicize his activities are all given much fuller treatment.

The brief third chapter covers the continuing tensions between Zarqawi and al-Qaeda, the fortunes and transformations of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) after Zarqawi's death in 2006, and the emergence of Abu Bakr al-



Baghdadi at the head of the Jaysh Ahl al-Sunnah wa'l-Jama'a (consistently written as Jaysh Ahl al-*Sinnah* wa'l-Jama'a). In addition, the factors that led to the beginning of the Anbar Awakening, or *Sahwa*, are discussed.

Chapter Four describes the impact of the US surge in Iraq on AQI, now known as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), during 2007-2008. Externally, ISI not only faced larger and more aggressive US operations against its organization, but it also faced continuing opposition from Sunni tribes that were part of the *Sahwa*, violent disputes with other rebel groups, as well as Kurdish *peshmerga* forces in the north around Mosul. Internally, al-Qaeda's leadership was becoming increasingly critical of how ISI was being led. Griffin does a commendable job of concisely describing all the factors that contributed to the near elimination of ISI in this period.

In Chapter Five the regrouping and re-emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq in the period just prior to and immediately after the American withdrawal from Iraq at the end of 2011 is concisely and clearly related. Although short (six pages), in this section Griffin skilfully navigates through the complexities of Iraq in this period, tracing how al-Baghdadi was able to use events and Baathist disaffection to his advantage, and even begin to establish a presence in Syria.

In light of current events, the following chapter, Chapter Six, which provides a clear account of Qatari activities in the Arab world in the wake of the Arab Spring, is particularly timely. While this chapter does not discuss relations between Qatar and IS, it does describe Qatar's links to the Muslim Brotherhood, and, more specifically, Qatar's support for Islamist parties or groups in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. This chapter not only provides excellent background for understanding Qatar's later moves in Syria, it also provides insight into the roots of the current conflict between Qatar and its Arab neighbours.

Chapters Seven through Ten discuss the international, regional, and military context in which IS arose. Chapters Seven and Eight describe the events leading to, and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, and the responses of the US, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to it. Chapter Nine shifts to Iraq in the period from mid-2011 to the end of 2013. It covers both the events in the country during this time, as well as ISI's early operations and territorial conquests in the Sunni regions. In Chapter Ten the focus is once again on Syria. Here the development, actions and rivalries of various opposition and Islamist groups (other than ISI) are recounted.

Griffin presents his main arguments for the link between indecisive US policy in Iraq and Syria and the growth of ISI in Chapter Eleven. In particular, he cites the US' failure to attack the Syrian regime after it launched several chemical attacks in the summer of 2013, a previously declared US "red line", and the US' later acceptance of a Russian proposal to put Syria's chemical weapons under international control as a major turning point in the conflict since it clearly demonstrated US reluctance to get directly involved. Griffin sees this as giving the regime and opposition groups a free hand to conduct operations without fear of US intervention.

The next three chapters continue to document the transformation of the conflicts in Iraq and Syria and the shifting fortunes of the various Islamist groups there in relation to the growing power of ISI. Chapter Twelve looks at the conflicts between Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) on one side and ISI and AQI on the other in 2013, and notes that ISI changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in this period. In Chapter Thirteen the full imposition of ISIS' brand of Islamic rule on the town of Raqqa is recounted, while Chapter Fourteen describes the disputes between JaN and Ahrar al-Sham, and the expansion of ISIS' control in Iraq which culminated in its capture of Mosul in June 2014.

Chapter Fifteen shifts the focus to the evolution of IS' use of print, electronic and social media and the role



it has played in spreading its message and attracting members. This chapter not only traces the development and increasing sophistication of IS' media use, it particularly focuses on the organization's use of Twitter to reach a wider audience.

In Chapter Sixteen ISIS' decision to change its name to the Islamic State (IS), and the possible reasons for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate in late June 2014 in Mosul are discussed. In addition, the role and number of foreign fighters in IS, particularly after the declaration of the caliphate, are investigated.

The following chapter, Chapter Eighteen, is devoted to a critique of US responses (or lack of them) to IS as its control over territory in Syria and Iraq continued to spread through the second half of 2014. In this context Griffin discusses the events related to rescuing the thousands of Yezidis who had fled from IS and taken refuge on Mt. Sinjar in northern Iraq, and how they led to greater US action against IS later in the year.

Finally, Chapter Eighteen concerning Turkey's activities in Syria through late 2014 provides an important background to Turkey's current efforts to influence events in Syria and Iraq in its favour. It traces the somewhat indecisive approach the Turkish government took in its approach to IS, particularly in light of its ambivalent attitude towards the Kurds in both northern Syria and Iraq. In particular, Griffin points out the complex relations Turkey has with both regions and the Turkish government's clear reluctance to become deeply involved militarily in these areas.

While *Islamic State: Rewriting History* is overall a well-written and informative work the book does have some weak points. These tend to fall into one of two categories. The first is a failure to provide fuller information on subjects that, even in a book intended as a concise introduction to IS, require it. The second is raising intriguing issues, hint that there is more to them than meets the eye, and then drop them without further comment.

As examples of the first category, in the passage in the first chapter (p. 3) describing how the *emirs* ran their section of Camp Bucca Griffin states that the emirs' orders were issued in accordance with "an extreme version of Sharia law, known as *takfiri*." Since this book is clearly intended for a non-specialist audience, and considering the centrality of the concept of *takfir* to extremist groups like IS, even a brief explanation of what *takfir* is and its significance would have been helpful.

Likewise, the information in the first three chapters related to the backgrounds of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi are extremely concise, lacking the deeper analysis and detail that this topic deserves considering their roles in the emergence and rise of IS. More information regarding what initially turned al-Zarqawi and al-Baghdadi onto the path of extremism, and what motivated them to create their respective organizations would have been welcome.

Examples of the second category can be found beginning with the "Preface" where Griffin writes (p. xxi), "...IS has never seriously menaced Israel...indicating a tacit understanding between the Islamic state and the Zionist state not to meddle in one another's affairs." If this is so, it is significant, but nothing follows this statement leaving the reader to speculate on where this information came from, why such a tacit agreement would be made and how it would specifically benefit IS and Israel.

Two paragraphs later the author speculates that after the American withdrawal in 2011 the rise of IS' forerunner in Iraq was linked to a large influx of money. He then lists several possible financial sources for the organization, but does not believe that any of them would be sufficient to cover IS' expenses. Griffin concludes that "...no convincing, open-source material is available to explain how IS operates financially day to day, and there is remarkably little interest in securing more precise data on the question." This point



is raised again at the end of Chapter Sixteen (p. 114), but in both cases the reader is left to speculate on IS' finances without even a hint from the author on what these sources of revenue might be.

Similarly, in the second chapter (p. 10) the author makes the observation that it does not seem credible that Zarqawi was able to create a complex insurgent organization in Iraq using "...nothing more advanced than a mobile phone, a contacts book and word of mouth..." The clear implication is that there was more behind the creation of Zarqawi's organization than this, but there is no further discussion of, or even speculation on this point.

Chapter Fifteen, "Twitter Caliphate", vividly describes IS' effective use of various media, and stresses the importance of IS' media savvy. In particular, Griffin points out the dramatic change in IS' use of media in 2014 (p. 101), stating that "...it unveiled, seemingly out of mid-air, a structured campaign of psychological operations in print, video and social media..." Further down the page he notes a "compelling sense of a new intelligence behind ISIS' psychological operations". On the following page (p. 102) the author speculates that this new media sophistication suggests "...the involvement of convert consultants from the Indian subcontinent or perhaps one of the more Twitter-literate Gulf sheikhdoms." Both are intriguing suggestions, and in light of how important IS' media operations are to the organization, knowing who is behind them could be significant. However, the point is dropped without even a note to point the reader where to begin further investigation.

Finally, in the postscript, Griffin proposes that an American-Iranian agreement would be the strongest counter to IS' threat to the security of the region, but does not suggest how such an agreement could be made between the two parties, or how neighbouring countries could be convinced to support such an agreement if it were reached. While his arguments may still be valid, current conditions would seem to make such a rapprochement between the US and Iran even less likely.

One final critique of this work is that while the writer has consulted a very large number of sources in writing this book, they are almost entirely English language sources, with only a very small number of translated Arabic sources. He has presented a number of viewpoints on all the issues that are raised, but the vast majority of these views are Western views.

Despite these criticisms, the positive qualities of Griffin's work outweigh the weak points. First, he has taken IS' very tangled history with its numerous actors, and presented it in a very comprehensible fashion—at the end of each chapter the reader is left with the sense of having successfully navigated through difficult terrain. Not only does Griffin provide a clear understanding of IS' rise in within the political and strategic contexts of both the Middle East and beyond, he does so in a very enjoyable style that keeps the reader's attention. For the points that are developed in the text, the endnotes provide a wide variety of sources with differing perspectives from English language media.

Griffin has shown in his book is that IS has been a tenacious, adaptable organization throughout the course of its history, making it unlikely that IS' current defeats in both Syria and Iraq will result in its immediate demise. As a result, there will remain a need for works that document its development and expansion. *Islamic State: Rewriting History* is an excellent starting point for the reader seeking a concise history of IS in order to better understand the background of the current state of affairs of IS in Syria and Iraq, or the reader who requires a more general background of IS before delving into more specialized research.

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