



ISIS in Its Own Words: The History, Strategy, and Ideology of the Islamic State

The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement

by Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter

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Since 2014, ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) has become both a well-known brand name in the global discourse and al-Qaeda's successor as the leading actor in the global jihad movement. Yet despite the enormous media exposure it has received, relatively very little was known about ISIS in the first few years after it declared the establishment of a caliphate and began a global terrorism campaign: its early history, before 2014, was almost unknown, and

key figures in the organization—aside from its leader at the time, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (who was killed in a United States raid in October 2019), and its spokesperson until 2016, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani (who was killed in an air strike in August 2016)—were unfamiliar. This lack of basic knowledge, at least in the first years of the organization's regional and international expansion, hindered the military and political attempts to contend with ISIS.

Academic research on ISIS subsequently took place against the backdrop of the Arab Spring, which rocked the Middle East in 2011-2012 and changed the geopolitical picture of the region's security order: many commentators saw the rise of ISIS as a natural result of the instability in the Middle East that erupted during the mass uprisings in Arab countries, which strengthened radical Islamic groups in the region and weakened the existing regimes. ISIS did not play any role in the Arab Spring: the organization did not take part in encouraging or organizing Arab Spring demonstrations, and the book by Haroro Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter barely mentions this watershed. However, the organization benefited from the regional chaos and the undermined state order that emerged following the Arab Spring, and sought to exploit this turmoil in order to advance its objectives of regional expansion and establishment of a jihadi state in Syria and Iraq. In addition, in its speeches, the organization highlighted and radicalized the sectarian discourse in Iraq, which was forbidden until 2003 and became legitimate after the United States occupation of the country. This discourse intensified throughout the Middle East after the Arab Spring, and especially after the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011.

Against this backdrop, it is important to understand the contribution of the *ISIS Reader*. Written by three leading researchers on ISIS, the book presents primary sources published by ISIS translated into English. Some of these sources, such as al-Baghdadi's speech at the al-Nuri mosque in Mosul in July 2014, are familiar

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to ISIS researchers, while others are presented in the book for the first time. Some of the texts included are official publications disseminated as part of ISIS propaganda efforts, while others were written as internal documents for its supporters or leaders.

The ISIS Reader joins a series of books published since the September 11 attacks that have sought to present the ideas behind the global jihadi movement by making primary sources from central organizations and leading figures accessible to the general public (Lawrence, 2005; Ibrahim, 2007; Kepel & Milelli, 2010; Holbrook, 2018; Mansfield, 2006). The preference in the *Reader* for documents with organizational, practical content over the religious-apocalyptic texts that have so far captured a central place in works on ISIS is welcome. The sense is that at the current time, the religious framework in which the organization operates is important but familiar, and now there is a need to uncover other areas in research of the organization. At the same time, the religious framework of ISIS must not be overlooked. The correct analysis of ISIS must include both approaches, the religious-ideological and the practical-organizational, which are in constant struggle in the organization's actions.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part traces the roots of ISIS and contains two speeches by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, who is considered the ideological father of ISIS. The second part, called "Baqiya!" after the motto of the Islamic State of Iraq (an earlier version of ISIS) from 2006 whereby the Islamic State "remains," refers to the first "state" period of the ISIS movement: the Islamic State of Iraq, which the organization declared in October 2006, a short time after the death of Zarqawi.

The third part, "The Caliphate," refers to the organization's most famous period, from its expansion into Syria and name change to ISIS in early 2013 to its announcement of the caliphate in June 2014 and afterwards. This

part also includes a document on the role of women in the Islamic State, which was written by women supporters of ISIS, and a guide for ISIS media activists—two documents that were never publicly disseminated by ISIS itself. The fourth and final part of the book, "Purification," includes statements from the current period of ISIS' decline. They emphasize the theme of the continuity of the Islamic State and the importance of patience and faith on the part of the organization's members and supporters in light of the setbacks and the blows it has suffered over the last few years.

The insight about ISIS's rationality helps analysts understand and cope with ISIS, much like researchers learned to approach many terrorist and guerrilla movements in the past, and not as an invincible force of nature or a superhuman expression of pure evil.

Most of the inquiries into ISIS in the Western and Arab media begin in the summer of 2014, when the organization declared the establishment of a caliphate, or in a few cases, in April 2013, when it declared its independence from al-Qaeda and changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Daesh is the Arabic-language term formed from the initials of this name). In contrast, Ingram, Whiteside, and Winter take a much broader look at the organization's development: starting from the two speeches by al-Zarqawi, from 1994 and 2004, through al-Baghdadi's final recorded appearance in April 2019. This choice of primary sources reflects the approach of the three *ISIS Reader* authors to the organization: despite frequent name changes since the mid-2000s, in the authors' eyes they are all part of what they call "the Islamic State movement," and this name enables relating to the ISIS phenomenon holistically, encompassing the different historical stages and the name changes that the organization went through over the years (p. 2).

Beyond making the sources accessible to the general public, the *ISIS Reader* enables an understanding of the organization in its own words for the first time. For the most part, the vast majority of what is known about ISIS is based on information provided by the organization's various enemies or testimony of local and foreign fighters who defected from the organization. These reports created a partial (and often distorted) understanding of ISIS, its aims, and its motivations. These of course are joined by the atrocity videos of beheadings and other executions that ISIS itself produced and distributed, which helped position it within a short time as the ultimate symbol of evil. Following the atrocities depicted in these videos, the French political scientist Olivier Roy defined ISIS as "nihilistic" (Roy, 2017), while then-US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel claimed that ISIS is "beyond anything that we've seen" (Ackerman, 2014).

However, the primary sources compiled in the *ISIS Reader* paint a different picture, of a rational, organized, and disciplined organization: as the authors note, "The movement's extreme violence seems like fanatical brutality, but it is typically deployed with the intent of achieving specific operational, strategic, and propagandistic aims" (p. 7). Despite this strategic rationale, it seems that often the extreme brutality of its actions actually unified its enemies against it, for example in the establishment of the international coalition against ISIS, which was formed in September 2014, comprising 83 member countries (Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, 2020). This unification against it does not necessarily contradict the organization's political and ideological objectives, which include a complete polarization between the West and the "heretical" Arab states on the one hand, and ISIS on the other hand. However, this intentional provocation ended up working against the organization, undermined its strategic success, and helped defeat its territorial project in the long term. Despite this tension between ISIS's

radical ideology and its rational-strategic conduct, the insight about ISIS's rationality helps analysts understand and cope with ISIS, much like researchers learned to approach many terrorist and guerrilla movements in the past, and not as an invincible force of nature or a superhuman expression of pure evil.

One of the central texts in the book that deals with the processes of formation of the Sunni resistance in Iraq, first toward the American occupation and subsequently toward the Shiite government, is the document that the authors call "The Fallujah Memorandum" (even though it was not written in Fallujah, and the city is not mentioned in it). It is not clear if the document is authentic, and it is not known exactly who wrote it and when (although the authors date it from 2009); more importantly, it is not clear how central it is to the organization. The central motif in the document is the need to prepare for a full American withdrawal from Iraq (which occurred in 2011) and the attempt to work via the tribes and to recruit those who served in the "Sahwa."¹ An important point in the document is the organization's concern about the success of the Iraqi Islamic Party, the most important Sunni religious party in Iraq, in gaining a grip in the Sunni region in Iraq. That is, the Islamic State in Iraq wanted to maintain Sunni dissatisfaction and channel the Sunni sense of deprivation and rage to intensified ethnic tensions toward the Shiite majority in Iraq and toward the creation of a Salafi-jihadist political project that aimed, from its perspective, to replace the Iraqi state.

Another contribution of the book is its presentation of the ISIS concept of victory in the global war that the organization has waged in recent years. Many leaders, including US President Donald Trump and former Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, were quick to declare victory over ISIS, and Trump even justified his order to withdraw the US forces from Syria in December 2018 in saying that the US had "defeated ISIS" (Trump, 2018). In stark contrast, the organization's leaders have

presented a completely different message. In a famous speech in May 2016, the organization's spokesperson at the time, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, warned America that "the war [with ISIS] has not yet ended" and downplayed the importance of the organization's territorial losses: "Do you, O America, consider defeat to be the loss of a city or the loss of land? Were we defeated when we lost the cities in Iraq and were in the desert without any city or land?... Certainly not! True defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight" (p. 251). Instead, Adnani claimed, "Victory—from our perspective—is to live as *muwahiddin* [those who practice *tawhid*, pure monotheism], to disbelieve in *taghut* [idols, the Salafi-jihadist term for the rulers of the Arab states], to fulfill al-Wala' wal-Bara' [loyalty and disavowal, a central principle in Salafi-jihadism], and to practice the religion [Islam]. If these conditions exist, we are already, and under all circumstances, victorious" (p. 255).

These ideas, which have since become a central theme in ISIS publications, present ISIS's uncompromising ideological approach, whereby the organization's sole *raison d'être* is to practice what it considers to be pure Islam and to struggle against the enemies of Allah, as the organization defines them. ISIS's next spokesperson, Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir, repeated this definition of victory in his speech in March 2019, during the campaign for ISIS's last stronghold in Baghuz: "The Islamic State has already won [since the Islamic State's soldiers] still declare their undisputed faith [in Islam] and their proud doctrine" (p. 282). There is a dual message in his words: not only that ISIS's definitions of victory and defeat differ from those of its enemies, chiefly the US, and are not measured in manpower or territory, but also that the war never ended. From ISIS's perspective, this is a never-ending war, and any declaration of victory over the organization is baseless as long as there is even a small core of supporters and activists imbued with ideological passion who are willing to work to implement its doctrine.

Alongside these important contributions of the book, the authors' analyses of the statements are at times problematic. In several cases the authors put forward fairly hasty theses. For example, they rely on a late publication in *al-Naba* (ISIS's weekly newspaper, which is published in Arabic) regarding a raid carried out in 2012 by Islamic State in Iraq operatives on the town of Haditha, in order to draw conclusions regarding ISIS's objective in conquering Mosul. In this raid, the organization attacked Haditha and withdrew from it; according to the authors, ISIS's conquest of Mosul in June 2014 was also a raid that was subsequently expanded in a decision to conquer the left bank of the Tigris in order to capture retreating Iraqi soldiers. Is it possible that the organization planned to conquer only the right bank of Mosul? Is it possible that it intended to withdraw when the time came? The authors do not provide an answer to these questions.

Moreover, the book overlooks three important stages in the establishment of ISIS. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is responsible for two, and passing over them somewhat diminishes the contribution of the person who established the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and who later declared it a caliphate. The first stage was the establishment of miniature Islamic states in different regions of Iraq in 2006-2007, during the civil war and at the initiative of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

The second stage was the appeal to disgruntled Sunni soldiers, veterans of Saddam's army, to join the organization. These figures joined ISIS between 2012 and 2014 at al-Baghdadi's initiative, and it is especially thanks to them that the organization attained significant military achievements, first in Syria and then in Iraq. During the heyday of ISIS (2014-2016), there was a debate among journalists and researchers about the level of importance and the real contribution of these former officers in Saddam's army to ISIS (Helfont & Brill, 2016; Baram, 2016; Coles & Parker, 2015; Orton, 2015). Yet even if their real importance

to the management and success of ISIS is not clear, the organization saw fit to try to recruit them to its ranks. These men replaced the al-Qaeda operatives and the non-Iraqi volunteers, who usually did not have significant military or terrorist experience and did not know how to manage clandestine organizations.

The third important stage was the ability to work with the tribes in Iraq. The documents in the *Reader* show the ISIS leaders' soul-searching regarding their inability to work with the tribes during the period from 2003 to 2008, which cost the organization dearly and contributed to its temporary defeat. If there was a warming of relations with the tribes, it occurred between 2008 and 2014, by exploiting the hostility between the Sunni tribes and the Shiite government in Baghdad during those years. The conquest of Fallujah in February 2014 was the climax of ISIS's cooperation with the local tribes.

But more important than ignoring these stages, the authors, in their choice of documents and their analysis, define ISIS as an Islamic-Salafi-Wahhabi-*takfiri* organization, from the family of global jihad organizations and a product of al-Qaeda. This is the accepted way of viewing the organization in the research on ISIS in terrorism studies and in the research on global jihad, which has studied ISIS widely in recent years. But the authors do not define ISIS as a *Sunni* organization. This definition has special significance in the Iraqi context: it denotes who are your enemies, whom you will invite to your ranks, alongside whom you will fight, and whom you will represent in a situation of social division. Explicitly referring to ISIS's Sunni identity situates ISIS in a local context instead of in a more general global jihad discourse.

As researchers, we must ask to what extent ISIS was a Sunni-Iraqi organization and whether the organization is now undergoing a "glocalization" process in all its areas of activity. Consequently, relating to ISIS as a Sunni organization is of the utmost importance. Even

if the ISIS state of mind and the Islamic State's aspirations were formulated by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian jihadist, it is hard to imagine ISIS's success in taking over cities in Iraq and recruiting thousands of activists to its ranks without relating to the sense of Sunni marginalization in Iraq after 2003 (which, as the authors themselves describe early in the book, Zarqawi consciously planned to intensify and exploit in order to push the Sunnis in Iraq into his arms). Explicitly relating to ISIS's Sunni identity, at the beginning of the organization's path and also today, would have helped explain its survival and success of the organization in the Iraqi arena, and not only its development as a leading player in the global jihad.

Despite these weaknesses, *The ISIS Reader* is a very important book for understanding ISIS's strategic thinking, as well as the development of this thinking over time. Readers who are not familiar with the organization will find the book to be an excellent introduction to the history and ideology of ISIS, while researchers who are well-versed in the history of the organization will find the book to be a useful source for its statements over the years. Toward late 2020, ISIS reminded the world again of its existence and of the threat posed by its murderous ideology: the beheading of a teacher who depicted caricatures of the prophet Muhammad in a suburb of Paris by an ISIS supporter in October 2020, and shortly afterwards two attacks carried out by ISIS supporters in Nice and in Vienna, are new vivid demonstrations of the continued terrorist threat posed by the organization. *The ISIS Reader* is a welcome contribution to the research literature on ISIS and Salafi-jihadi organizations, and will undoubtedly expand the scholarly debate on ISIS and enable new researchers to answer fundamental questions about its development.

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Notes

- 1 The Sunni "awakening" that fought against al-Qaeda in Iraq and succeeded in almost completely obliterating the organization in 2007.