

[Originally published in the *New Left Project*, 6<sup>th</sup> October 2014, before the publication shut down]

Review of *The Jihadis Return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising* by Patrick Cockburn

With the killing of aid worker David Haines, the brutal jihadist group ISIS, which has proven to be more violent than even Ayman al-Zawahiri's Pakistan-based al-Qa'ida group, rose to international notoriety. In *The Jihadis Return*, Baghdad stationed journalist Patrick Cockburn attempts to make sense of their rise; focusing on developments in the Middle East which, he predicts, will 'soon affect the rest of the world'. Cockburn's style is, as usual, calm and the evidence he collects – supplemented by numerous interchanges with intelligence officials, journalists and locals – persuasive.

At a time when many commentators unhelpfully fail to distinguish ISIS from other forms of jihadism in the region, one of the book's major strengths is its focus on the intra-jihadi conflicts ISIS is engaged in in Syria with groups like Jabhat al-Nusia and Ahrar al-Sham. The reason ISIS has only recently been making headlines in the West, according to Cockburn, is that 'Western governments and their security forces narrowly define the jihadist threat as those forces directly controlled by al-Qa'ida central or "core" al-Qa'ida'. This tactic permits these governments to promote a far more optimistic picture of their long-term successes in the 'war on terror' than reality would allow.

Indeed this level of dishonesty over the destruction caused by radical Islam actually flies directly against David Cameron's claim that 'national security' is his primary goal as prime minister. The West plays up al-Qa'ida connections when it needs to (as with the armed opposition to the US-UK Iraq invasions) but also plays them down when convenient (as with Libya's anti-Gaddafi, NATO-backed rebels). Another crucial point in the book is that al-Qa'ida is 'an idea rather than an organization', its adherents being self-recruited, not centrally controlled, contrary to the imagination of the press. It is only the West which has labelled jihadis as, for instance, 'head of operations' or 'second lieutenant'. No jihadi group would use such terminology, and Whitehall and Washington use it purely to intensify the imagined threat.

According to Cockburn, jihadists have capitalised on the West's failures in Iraq and Libya and proclaimed their intention to establish a caliphate. Iraq's infrastructure and economy have been destroyed and virtually the only thing exchanged between Shia, Sunni and Kurds in the country now, Cockburn notes, is 'gunfire'. The collapse of the Iraqi state is so devastating that Baghdad has recently been compelled to rely on sectarian militias like Asaib Ahl al-Haq – a splinter group most believe is controlled by Iran – to protect the capital from ISIS. Cockburn cites Iraqis who point to the UN sanctions in the 1990s, which 'destroyed Iraqi society', as a core reason for Iraq's continued levels of corruption, which operate at virtually all levels of public life.

The book identifies the key date of ISIS's success to be June 10th 2014, when it captured Mosul, Iraq's northern capital. The fact that the Iraqi army has 350,000 soldiers and ISIS only 1,300 leads Cockburn to describe this as amongst the top 'military debacles in history'. ISIS has also achieved many symbolic victories which have likely boosted its appeal and established its 'anti-American' credentials, such as the capturing of Fallujah (the city brutally seized by US-UK forces during the Iraq War) and the assault on Abu Ghraib prison in 2013 (the site of the infamous abuse scandal). In the latter case, Cockburn writes, the jihadists 'fired 100 mortar bombs into the jails and used suicide bombers to clear the way as inmates rioted and started fires to confuse the guards'. Despite the Western media's claim that the murder of Osama bin

Laden in 2011 dealt critical damage to private terrorist organisations, Cockburn points out that the greatest successes of al-Qa'ida-type groups have been in the past three years: ISIS's capturing of Fallujah, the Mosul Dam and Raqqa in eastern Syria.

Whilst Western largesse to the Syrian opposition failed to oust Assad, it is nevertheless succeeding in destabilising Iraq. Taking the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Syria, Cockburn notes that 'the involvement of the West exacerbated existing differences and pushed hostile parties towards civil war'. Cockburn's most optimistic prediction for Syria and Iraq is that they will be faced with years of civil war, whilst any potential break up of these countries will likely be similar to the 1947 partition of India, with bloodshed being the primary determiner of state boundaries.

The book briefly sketches how ISIS have effected what some – mainly on the right – are calling Cold War II. The tension between Moscow and the West has grown considerably since Libya 2011, and more recently Ukraine 2014; whilst across the Middle East there is a stand-off between the US, Saudi Arabia and the Sunni states on one side, and Iran, Iraq and the Lebanese Shia on the other. This is in turn sustained by the Sunni-Alawite struggle in Syria, which grew out of the initial popular revolt in 2011. ISIS, then, currently has a special place as one of the focal points around which the region's larger conflicts – Sunni-Alawite, feeding into Shia-Sunni, feeding into Moscow-West – are oriented. Despite Obama's pledge to 'eradicate' the 'cancer' of ISIS, in June the president asked Congress for \$500m to equip members of the Syrian opposition to fight the jihadists, ignoring the intimidating and controlling presence ISIS have amongst the Syrian opposition, with many weapons and supplies ultimately falling into their hands. This is one of the reasons Cockburn concludes that 'there is no dividing wall between [ISIS] and America's supposedly moderate opposition allies'. Meanwhile, Wahhabism, the official ideology of the Saudi state, is infiltrating mainstream Sunni Islam, boosted by Saudi Arabia's funding of mosques and preachers, with 'dire consequences for all'.

The later chapters of the book stress that 'until the United States and its allies in the West recognize that [Saudi Arabia and Pakistan] are key in promoting Islamic extremism, little real progress will be made in the battle to isolate the jihadists'. '[T]wenty-eight pages of the 9/11 Commission Report about the relationship between the attackers and Saudi Arabia,' Cockburn notes 'were cut and never published, despite a promise by President Obama to do so, on the grounds of national security'. Of course the US *does* realise how key these states are to spreading the influence of jihadism, but prioritises oil revenues and strategic partnerships above human life, as has long been the case.

Cockburn spends the final chapter of *The Jihadis Return* arguing that, instead of pledging allegiance to Riyadh and its funding of extremists, the West should promote nationalism, since 'intervention in Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011 turned out to be very similar to imperial takeovers in the 19th century', with the 'absurd talk of "nation-building" to be carried out or assisted by foreign powers, which clearly had their own interests in mind'. For all its flaws, without nationalism, Cockburn argues, 'states lack an ideology that enables them to compete as a focus of loyalty with religious sects or ethnic groups'. But since 2003, Iraqi nationalism has been fraught with sectarianism, and Cockburn's promotion of nationalism seems in many ways short-sighted: Shiites welcomed the Bahraini uprisings in Pearl Square and denounced the Syrian opposition, whilst the Sunni position was the polar opposite. The prominent secular block Iraqiya List crucially does not have the backing of the US, with the Whitehouse not wanting to anger the Shiite majority.

The term 'war reporter', Cockburn writes 'gives the misleading impression that war can be adequately described by focusing on military combat'. A guerrilla skirmish 'requires interpretation', not simple recording and reporting as in the mainstream tradition of the BBC News at Ten. It is astonishing how rare it is for journalists to investigate the facts and figures and not merely regurgitate state pronouncements. The radical left, meanwhile, focuses too much on deconstructing the rhetoric of Obama and Cameron's speeches (witness Russell Brand on his YouTube show 'The Trews' joking about Cameron's hair and referencing *The Empire Strikes Back*), while leaving aside the more important business of documenting their actual response. Far too many commentators seem to treat the world as some kind of text to analyse, highlight and add notes to in the margins, and not something to directly influence or participate in. *The Jihadis Return* is an admirable example of what is sorely needed in the debates surrounding contemporary jihadism; an account concerned as much with what needs to be done as what needs to be said.