

BOOK REVIEW

***The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution.*
Patrick Cockburn. London: Verso, 2015. Pp. 172**

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Well before it carried out spectacular terrorist attacks in the French capital on November 13, 2015, which killed more than 160 people and sent shockwaves across the globe, ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) had come to be recognised as the most powerful and lethal terrorist group in the world. ISIS had earned this notoriety due to its merciless treatment of its opponents, primarily the minorities and the women. The ISIS' dramatic rise has created immense interest among Western policy makers, academics and journalists to understand the reasons behind its emergence and rise. This interest has resulted in a plethora of policy papers, newspaper features and books, which have looked at the phenomenon from a variety of angles. Patrick Cockburn's is among the latest of such books.

Cockburn, a veteran British correspondent, who has covered Middle East for such prestigious newspapers as the *Financial Times* and the *Independent*, and has penned three books on Iraq's recent history, tries in his own way to explain the dramatic rise of ISIS. Cockburn marshals his deep and up-to-date knowledge of developments in Iraq and Syria to narrate the story of ISIS's rise in a compelling way.

According to Cockburn, the most to blame for ISIS' rise is the US foreign policy in the Middle East whose failure created space for violent radicalisation among Iraq's Sunni minority, which led to a civil war in the country, adeptly exploited by al-Qaeda to draw recruits not only from amongst the Iraqi Sunnis but also from other parts of the Muslim world. The author's indictment of the failure of the US policy is frequent and always compelling, particularly when he says that the organisations with beliefs similar to al-Qaeda's today have a base in Syria and Iraq far larger

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than anything they enjoyed in Afghanistan prior to 9/11 (p. 98). He has also devoted a chapter to discuss the role of Saudi Arabia, whose Wahabi ideology he blames for the rise of the global militancy, including ISIS. Cockburn has also discussed the role of Turkey in the Syrian conflict, with a special emphasis on its policy, during the initial phase of the conflict, to turn a blind eye to Sunni militants entering Syria from Turkey to join anti-Assad forces, which, he maintains, was partly why the militants were able to hijack the Syrian uprising.

Cockburn shows in detail how the hubris of the Maliki-led Shia government in Iraq fuelled Sunni resentment, which paved the way for ISIS' emergence and dramatic rise in the subsequent months. His account of Shia leadership's tendency to shrug off ISIS threat even at the time when the terrorist organisation was knocking at the doors of Baghdad is an eye-opener, revealing not only their hauteur but also incompetence. The meltdown of Iraqi forces in the face of ISIS fighters is another example that he uses to underline Maliki-led government's failure and incompetence.

The book, on the other hand, also suffers from a number of flaws, foremost being the journalistic treatment it has accorded to the subject. Though one would not normally expect a high degree of academic rigour and theoretical finesse in such a work, the book leaves much to be desired even in terms of coherence of the argument and relevance of the discussions to the central theme of the book. The writer is frequently seen changing track of the discussion, making sweeping statements and drawing inferences which may not stand factual scrutiny. The discussion in the chapter "If It Bleeds, It Leads" seems more relevant to media ethics than to ISIS' rise as the chapter is mainly a critique of how badly, and at times how unethically and unprofessionally, most of the Western journalists covered the wars in Iraq and Syria, as well as the developments during the Arab Spring.

It would not be unfair to say that other than providing some useful factual details of the events in the story of ISIS' rise, the book does not break any new ground in terms of analysis of the meteoric rise of this terrorist organisation. In fact, at times the reader gets the impression that

the book was more an effort on the part of the author to draw upon his vast journalistic experience in the region to cash in on the growing demand for the writings on ISIS, and less a carefully thought out exposition of the factors that led to the emergence of what has become the world's most lethal terrorist outfit.

Yet, the most disturbing, and factually flimsy, aspect of the author's arguments is to implicate Pakistan in the rise of global terror. He has made this allegation more than once, going so far as to declare Pakistan, along with Saudi Arabia, "the other parent of al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Jihadi movements in general" (p. 58). Such assertions show that either the author is ignorant of the history of global terror and Pakistan's counter-terror efforts or is deliberately leveling false accusations against a state which has suffered most at the hands of such terrorists, and which has done more than any other state to fight this menace. In either case, Cockburn's credibility as an objective and well-informed writer gets seriously undermined.