

BOOK REVIEW

***ISIS/ISIL: The Islamic State Exposed, the Dangerous Truth You Need to Know: Origins & Ideals, Islamic Extremist Terrorism in Iraq and Syria.* Darrell D. Culbertson. USA: Lexington, 2015. Pp. 123.**

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The Jihadist group, Islamic State (IS), Da'aesh in Arabic, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), surfaced on the international scene in June 2014 when it captured the Iraqi city of Mosul and rapidly made military advances in Northern Iraq and Eastern Syria. The IS has developed into a dangerous organisation which is destabilising the Middle Eastern region. Despite efforts, key regional players and major international powers are unable to root out IS from the Middle East.

Against this backdrop, Darrell D. Culbertson in his book titled *ISIS/ISIL: The Islamic State Exposed, the Dangerous Truth You Need to Know: Origins & Ideals, Islamic Extremist Terrorism in Iraq and Syria* has made an attempt to put forward some solutions to confront the IS threat. The author asserts that in foreseeable future, IS is going to expand its influence, and it cannot be contained if regional and international players do not clearly understand IS. He has tried to expose IS in terms of its evolution and development of its ideology; its success and expansion of its influence; its atrocities and status of Caliphate; its revenue streams; its propaganda machine; and its impact on the stability of the Middle East.

Culbertson's main argument revolves around the fact that IS is a current reality of politics in Middle East and military option alone is not the solution. It can be defeated by looking through its evolution and development. To support his argument, Culbertson highlights that IS

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swiftly evolved with the help of many groups in Iraq. It gained recognition in June 2014, after capturing Mosul and then making rapid military advances in Northern Iraq and Eastern Syria. This swift rise of IS was a direct result of dysfunctional foreign policies of major international players which were involved in faulty occupation of Iraq. It was germinated in American-run prisoner facilities like Camp Bucca which provided a nurturing environment for militancy and extremism in the Middle East. Staying under harsh conditions, extreme pressure, and divisions along cultural, religious, and sectarian lines, when the inmates of these prisons were released, they wanted to avenge the injustice and humiliation and found IS as one of the options.

Culbertson further argues that the effort of Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), under the administration of Paul Bremer, to create a shared democracy, was a misadventure and non-starter. The actions of Nouri Al-Maliki government served as a definite catalyst for the emergence and success of IS. Al-Maliki turned the system in his favour by privatising Iraqi infrastructure and institutions; by utilising financial resources to protect his interests; by purging Baghdad of key Sunni leaders; and by providing information and resources to Shia death squads which alienated Sunnis and resulted in the growth of fundamentalism and sectarianism in Iraqi society. The resistance started from street protest and turned into Arab Spring.

Exposing the development of the IS ideology, Culbertson argues that Iraq was a country ravaged and defiled by conflict and sanctions. More than a million Iraqis died in sanctions and thousands more were killed after the occupation of Iraq due to suicide bombings, torture and by death squads because of their religious and political affiliations. These conditions created a perfect atmosphere for groups like IS, to make their ideological appeal more attractive. Since IS was strongly affiliated with a branch of Sunni Islam known as Salafism, they interpreted extreme characteristics of Salafism and generated hatred for those Muslims who did not concur with them. IS termed them apostates and infidels and declared them legitimate target for elimination. Their whole belief system and strategy was centred on bringing about a day of judgement after a total subservience to the Caliphate. As a result, IS ideology emerged as

an unshakeable commitment as they believe that they are chosen by God to carry out His will on earth. When IS declared Caliphate after gaining territorial control, they were trying to turn back the clock to the 7th century. Based on their ideological belief, they considered that over 200 million Iraqi Shias were their legitimate target and any Muslim leader who had not implemented Sharia law or made them secondary to secular or human made laws would be treated in the same manner. As a result, IS emerged as a highly militarised organisation and its growth was rooted in fighting different sectarian groups in post-2003 Iraqi invasion.

Referring to the atrocities under the IS Caliphate, Culbertson argues that it has used oppression to survive, as IS considers itself surrounded by non-Muslims who must be killed. IS adopted punishment and overt enslavement as necessary components of its ideology and carried out violence and coordinated suicide attacks across the Shia districts of Baghdad. In 2013, around 10,000 Iraqis were killed by suicide bombings and tit-for-tat revenge attacks. IS also caused maximum destruction of civic life, cut off main roads, pipelines, power and water supplies, and destroyed cultural and religious archaeological heritage. The author believes that the list of their atrocities is expanding and it will continue to expand in future.

To strengthen his central argument, Culbertson also explains main reasons behind the success of IS. He argues that uneven economic conditions and lack of access to basic amenities have turned people towards charities and religious organisations. These economic and social insecurities caused Arab Spring and key Gulf and Arab states tried to change the outcome of this revolution. They poured in their financial resources to support their respective sectarian groups including IS. With this financial support, IS was able, at one point, to control around 25% and 40% of Iraqi and Syrian territory, respectively. Furthermore, IS also allowed freed prisoners to join their ranks as they were already radicalised during their imprisonment and wanted freedom from arrest, detention, and torture. In addition to this, when IS took control of Mosul, 300,000 Iraqi regular military soldiers deserted in the face of 1,000 IS fighters, leaving behind sophisticated weapons for IS fighters. The author argues that another factor of IS' success was the inability of Al-Maliki

government to manage divisions within Iraqi society. Furthermore, the relative decline of US military and diplomatic power also worked in favour of IS.

The author maintains that although IS has strong economic connections to elements in different countries, it has also developed various strategies to fund itself independently. These strategies include *Jizya* or head tax, exploitation, extortion, oil smuggling, and theft. IS has control of approximately 60% of the Syrian oil production capacity and has become the wealthiest fundamentalist organisation in the world. The author argues that removing these revenue opportunities is a must to defeat IS on the ground.

Culbertson has also tried to expose the power of IS propaganda machine in this book. He explains that IS employs different modern social media tools and latest communication technology to propagate its cause. IS military machine and propaganda is intertwined. They are spreading their ideology of dying for a righteous cause through Twitter, Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram, and attracting people from the Middle East and Eurasia. The author believes that the influence of IS propaganda in terms of pace and volume is unprecedented and it is continuing. They are securing pledges and allegiances from other jihadi groups from around the world. IS multimedia communication centres are continuously recruiting domestic and foreign fighters. However, there is no equivalent counter-narrative to the propaganda of IS.

Culbertson asserts that geopolitical interests of key regional players, policies of regime change and role of external players have always complicated the regional situation. The situation in the Middle East has created a space for IS and future military and political battles are bound to occur in this region and it can engulf the entire Middle East into a downward spiral of conflict. IS' ideology is serving as a gravitational pull for fighters from all around the globe. However, IS is not a cohesive and invincible agency. He argues that IS could not be crushed by military means only. The secret to defeat IS lies in its ideological defeat by reorganising power structures across the Middle East. The main political solution is to compel the current Iraqi government to distance itself from its predecessor by undertaking a holistic approach to governance. All

agencies which have an interest in stopping IS should be promoting a regional approach which involves full participation of all Muslim countries.

Culbertson has been successful in defending his main argument. His argument represents a practical approach to deal with the threat of IS. This book can serve as a quick background guide for students of Middle Eastern politics and policy planners to truly understand the evolution and development of IS as a deadly organisation, and offer ways to effectively deal with this threat. By looking at the solutions provided in this book, one can identify the true nature of the threat and can draw real and practical solutions.