

2016

ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror, by Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss

Craig Whiteside

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Whiteside, Craig (2016) "ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror, by Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 69 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss1/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

lives. More Americans were killed as a consequence of the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 than on 9/11 itself. But there is also the long-term causal impact of the U.S. invasion. The existence of ISIS is another unintended consequence of the American invasion.

It is true that there are dangers in this world. But Preble and Mueller's volume constitutes an antidote to America's tendency to imagine grave peril, and serves as an important counter to the American proclivity to overstate the benefits and understate the costs of an assertive global military posture. The editors argue that America is largely free of threats that require military preparedness or balancing behavior. In his chapter, Fettweis argues that America's tendency to exaggerate the world's dangers can be altered, since it is based on a system of beliefs that can be changed over time. Let's hope he's right.

ANDREW STIGLER



Hassan, Hassan, and Michael Weiss. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. New York: Regan Arts, 2015. 288pp. \$16.95

The surprising success of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in seizing control of large parts of northern and western Iraq in 2014 has generated many questions for policy makers and the public. How was this group so effective so quickly? Where did it come from and how did so many observers miss its rise? What threat does ISIS pose to the region and beyond?

Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss address these questions in this recent book about ISIS. The work is part history of

the ISIS movement and part analysis of its nature and strategy. The authors' backgrounds—Weiss is a prolific journalist and Hassan a knowledgeable Syrian analyst at the Delma Institute in Abu Dhabi—combine brilliantly to explain the rapidly evolving events on the ground within the context of the political-military issues in the region. Hassan and Weiss interviewed current and former ISIS movement fighters in Syria, dissected ISIS propaganda videos and statements, and combined other scholarly analyses of ISIS to produce what I consider to be the most accurate assessment of ISIS currently available.

The overwhelming strength of the book is that Hassan and Weiss get the history of ISIS right. Although it is often mistakenly thought of as a recent phenomenon, the authors correctly trace the group's evolution as a core of Salafist-oriented fighters who joined together under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Iraq in 2002–2003. Zarqawi's unique outlook, based in the same Salafi-jihadist school as Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda, imprinted on the ISIS movement early and has been the biggest factor in the popularization of its distinct ideology and the evolution of its tactics and strategy. The authors capture this dynamic, as well as ISIS's subsequent transformation from a foreign fighter-based organization to a more indigenous Iraqi-led group that eventually split with Al Qaeda.

Because of their understanding of ISIS history, Hassan and Weiss are able to demonstrate the ideological foundation behind ISIS's strategic targeting and why the group takes on such a large spectrum of enemies at once. The authors are also able to explain ISIS's genocidal strategy and how the group promotes its own atrocities to inspire fear in its enemies.

This book illuminates the strategic debate over the importance of uncontrolled spaces to groups like ISIS. ISIS's effective use of low levels of indiscriminate violence to take over large parts of Syria and Iraq since 2013 demonstrates the opportunity that ungoverned space affords malignant actors such as ISIS. The ISIS movement began in the Kurdish areas of Iraq outside the reach of Saddam Hussein in 2002, and moved quickly into Anbar after identifying a security vacuum following the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The collapse of the Assad government in eastern Syria and the defeat of the Sunni Awakening militias and their Iraqi security partners in several Iraqi provinces (2008–12) once again created space for the ISIS movement—this time to recover from its 2007 defeat in Iraq. Despite today's blistering air campaign, ISIS maintains control over most of the Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria, and arguably continues to develop deep roots of support among the population.

The authors also highlight the problems of both the Bush and Obama administrations' war-termination strategies for Iraq, in what has become a recognized weakness in the American way of war. Comfortable with outsourcing security in Sunni areas to an untrained civilian militia, both the Iraqis and Americans turned a blind eye to the fact that ISIS would make the Sunni Awakening an important target in order to reestablish core sanctuaries inside Iraq. The authors point with amazement to the gradual release of hard-core ISIS prisoners (2008–11) back into their communities as one of several factors that helped fuel the growth of ISIS from its post-surge nadir. While the reasons for this shortsighted approach were undoubtedly political and legal in nature, these

policies surely have contributed to the untimely deaths of thousands of Iraqis and the loss of much territory to ISIS. As of 2015, nineteen of twenty of ISIS's top leaders were formerly in American custody at Camp Bucca before being released or escaping from custody.

Overall, I highly recommend this book to policy makers, educators, and military professionals who seek a deeper understanding of the ISIS movement. The authors have provided a very believable representation of a contemporary group that I believe will be vindicated by additional research in the future. Until that time, this book will become the basis for most of our understanding of a highly secretive and effective pseudostate that remains a threat to the region and beyond.

CRAIG WHITESIDE



Muth, Jörg. *Command Culture: Officer Education in the U.S. Army and the German Armed Forces, 1901–1940, and the Consequences for World War II*. Denton: Univ. of North Texas Press, 2013. 376pp. \$29.95

Dr. Jörg Muth has written a serious comparative account of the German and American precommissioning courses and general staff colleges from 1901 to 1940. Any new work comparing German and American military effectiveness in the first half of the twentieth century is guaranteed to be controversial, and Muth certainly achieves controversy. However, there exists a significant revisionist school of thought that offers an interpretation much different from Muth's.

The May 2010 Society of Military History annual meeting, held at the Virginia