

**Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*  
(New York: Regan Arts, 2015), 270.**

**Reviewed by: Hajira Asaf Khan**

*ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, gives a thorough analysis of Islamic State (IS) and its operational strategies in Iraq and Syria. Co-authored by Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, both experts on Middle Eastern policy, and among some of the most well-known names in policy analyses, the authors are well equipped to deal with the subject. One of the authors of the book, Hassan Hassan, is from Syria, a country affected by the brutal regime of IS.

Spread out over fourteen chapters, the book pans out from the very beginning of the story of what we now know as “The Islamic State”. The first two chapters deal with bringing out a character sketch of Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi the “Founding Father” of IS. Zarqawi’s personal and political history is discussed, setting the tone for the book and also of the nature of the “terrorist organization” that he subsequently fathered. The second chapter moves on to unravelling his ideological differences with Osama bin Laden. Zarqawi considered Bin Laden’s brand of jihadism as weak and flawed. Later on, this difference was seen more clearly as the conduct of Al-Qaeda—which served as the initial recruiting and training ground for modern-day ISIS fighters before its leadership parted ways with Al-Qaeda and morphed into a strikingly different and more brutal organization in comparison, with Al-Qaeda, in Syria and Iraq. This can, in the opinion of the writers, be attributed to the difference of opinion that Zarqawi had with his contemporaries on policy issues with other Jihadists around the world.

Any analysis of insurgent militant organizations in the Middle-East would be incomplete without a thorough look into the sectarian and ethnic divides that drive the alliances and enmities of these organizations. This book is no exception. The subsequent chapters take a close look at the political divide between sectarian and ethnic groups, their role and limitations in armed militancy, and their dynamics in relation with the Islamic State’s mission of total Sunni domination of the region. Moreover, the relationships

between Iraq, Iran and Syria's Sunni/Shia/Alawite governments and citizenry is also discussed throughout the book as to how that plays out with respect to ISIS objectives. Even though ISIS is a Sunni organization, it has also been opposed by Sunni groups in Iraq.

Perhaps the latter half of the book is the most interesting and engaging. The tenth and eleventh chapters in the book which draw a psychological profile of the kind of individuals most likely to find their calling with ISIS. The book gives an example of a young boy in the introduction who leaves his family to join Islamist groups in Syria in order to live "the honorable life". The authors have interviewed many individuals affiliated with the Islamic State, relatives of such individuals, and military personnel who have fought against them, to gather as much information about IS and what is in it that draws teenagers and young-adults to join it. The book documents the workings of the organization from the eyes of insiders, some of whom have previously served and defected and others who still serve the Islamic State in all its violent glory, which gives a greater sense of clarity to the reader about the nature of this organization. Moreover, they take a thorough look into the organization's use of social and print media as tools for propagating the glory of "al-Dwala" The State. Much of the recruiting is also done through social media and ISIS members get in touch with young people through mediums such as Skype and convince them to join the Holy War against "infidels" and "apostates".

The "Takfiri" doctrine so dear to the Islamic State has also found strong footing in Pakistan over the recent years and causes alarm at the rate and magnitude of violence that such ideologies generate. Moreover, the insight provided the military action being taken against the organization by the US and Western allies could be useful as lessons for other states facing such situations. The book argues that though Western forces may have pushed back IS in some areas, the basic structure of the organization remains intact. These "wins" have been dubbed as tactical successes by the authors as the founding principles of its organizational structure go unchallenged. The rate of their expansion may have been encumbered by military force against them, but the authors are of the view that without a

strategic defeat to the organization, sustained tactical losses will only slow them down but will not amount to much in the longer run.

The strongest points of the book are a) the gripping narrative which transforms this academic work into a page-turner; and b) the impeccable balance of the narrative which, presumably comes from the fact that it is co-authored by a Syrian and an American, injecting both Eastern and Western sensitivities in the development of the arguments. It is definitely worth a read not only for those with an academic inclination to understand extremism and militancy, but also for the laymen who wish to acquaint themselves with the working of the World's most dangerous and most successful terrorist organization.