

public relations’—and even more insidiously because MPs, like most people, instinctively strike up a rapport with outsiders from similar backgrounds to themselves. It is a point which merits wider discussion and analysis.

These anthropologist’s observations are enjoyable and insightful: Crewe has a great eye for humanity and humour, and writes (very) engagingly. But alone they would not sustain a book, let alone an academic one.

As she writes of her experiences, though, the tone shifts, progressively, from observation to something more heartfelt: a defence of the House of Commons, and of democratic politics itself. Not only does Crewe believe that most MPs belie their (un)popular image by being hard-working, sacrificing privacy, family time, respect and (often) income, to genuinely want to ‘do good’; she also argues that public expectations are unreasonable—even dangerous. Politics is by nature about compromise, she observes: indeed, the contradictions necessary to do this are inherent in most if not all of our lives. So politicians have to at once be considering individual constituents, their constituency as a whole and the national good, as well as special interests and their own consciences; they must also be aware of history, act in the present and be mindful of the future consequences of their actions. To expect them to follow one path unwaveringly would be to ask them to betray many others whom they are elected to serve. A good example is individuals and groups lobbying MPs both ways on voting to legalise gay marriage, while some also had strong personal views, often informed by their religion and/or views on individual liberty.

Sometimes Crewe’s defence stretches the credulity of even someone like myself, whose experience has made them so much more respectful of MPs: she quotes a Labour backbencher saying that they can ‘say “I fully support my Leader” to the media and then [go] to the tearoom and discuss how to get rid of him. This is politics.’ To which Crewe adds: ‘This is not just politics: that is how people are.’ Others might argue that not all people are hypocritical or deceitful, and at the very least we can expect better of people we elect to power. But this does not detract from her more important concern:

‘Politics has to be murky, relying on compromise and deals, because different and rival interests, truths and traditions exist under a common rule,’ she writes. ‘To renounce politics is to destroy the very thing that orders pluralism in non-violent ways and keeps despotism at bay.’

*Juliette Jowit writes for The Guardian*

## Three different takes on ISIS

Gilbert Achcar

*The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution*, by Patrick Cockburn. Verso. 172 pp. £9.99.

*ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, by Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan. Regan Arts. 270 pp. £12.99.

*ISIS: The State of Terror*, by Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger. William Collins. 385 pp. £14.99.

Most people prefer to keep referring to the self-proclaimed Islamic State by the acronym of its previous name: ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (or, more accurately ‘al-Sham’—Greater Syria—approximately translated by some as ‘the Levant’, with the acronym hence turned into ISIL). On this thus-named ISIS, close to forty books and counting have been hitherto published in English, of which the three reviewed here are the best-selling in the UK.

Of these, Patrick Cockburn’s was one of the very first books written on ISIS. It came out in 2014 under the title *The Jihadis Return*. The one reviewed here is an updated edition with a new title. It recapitulates the views that the author developed in his coverage of events in Iraq and Syria for *The Independent*. It is written in a most readable journalistic style by an author who is well acquainted with this part of the world, having covered it for many years (especially Iraq). However, the book contains hardly any references to substantiate its numerous assertions other than Cockburn’s personal testimony, often quite anecdotal.

Yet, what is most questionable about this book is its author’s heavy political bias, which transpires at the end of the preface when Cockburn quotes Vice-President Joe

Biden's statement about the lack of civilians of the 'moderate middle' in the ranks of a Syrian opposition which, so says Biden, is exclusively composed of 'soldiers'. Biden was trying to justify the Obama administration's refusal to provide the Syrian opposition with the defensive weapons it requested—primarily anti-aircraft weapons. Patrick Cockburn's immoderate comment on Biden's statement is much telling: 'Seldom have the real forces at work in creating ISIS and the present crisis in Iraq and Syria been so accurately described.'

Any reader familiar with the region would know what to expect from the book henceforward. Indeed, a few pages later Cockburn cites an anonymous 'intelligence officer from a neighbouring country' (obviously Iraq, whose Iran-dominated government backs Syria's Assad) to the effect that ISIS is pleased when sophisticated weapons are sent to anti-Assad groups, because it can always get them by force or cash. In the same spirit, Cockburn explains that he couldn't fly directly to Baghdad in the summer of 2014 because, he was told, ISIS had obtained shoulder-held anti-aircraft missiles 'originally supplied to anti-Assad forces in Syria'—a statement that is doubly untrue as, first, no such weapons were supplied to anti-Assad forces in Syria and, second, the most sophisticated weapons on which ISIS managed to lay its hands are actually those supplied by the US to *the Iraqi army*, which abandoned them ignominiously in its debacle during the summer of 2014.

This erroneous account is matched soon after by a highly disputable assertion: 'It is the government and media consensus in the West that the civil war in Iraq was reignited by the sectarian policies of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in Baghdad. In reality it was the war in Syria that destabilized Iraq...' This assertion flies in the face of the well-known fact that the vast mass protests that started in Iraq's Arab Sunni regions in 2012 and laid the ground for ISIS's subsequent expansion in those same regions were not about Syria in the least, but about Al-Maliki's sectarian drive, which had swung into high gear as soon as the last American combat troops left Iraq.

The truth is that Cockburn can barely conceal his contempt for Iraq's Arab Sunnis, whom he often lumps together in a

homogeneous category 'the Sunni', facing a no less homogeneous 'the Shia'. Thus, he tells us that 'the Sunni' are 'unlikely to be satisfied' with regional autonomy and a larger share of jobs and oil revenues, and would not be content with less than a 'full counterrevolution that aims to take back power over all of Iraq'. One is left wondering how an informed author like Cockburn could attribute the fantasy of an excited fringe of Iraqi Arab Sunnis to a whole community. The fact is, however, that he seems to have taken that fantasy for a *fait accompli* since he asserts that, after ISIS's offensive in Iraq, the Shia leaders have 'not grasped that their domination over the Iraqi state... was finished' and that 'only a Shia rump was left'—an astonishing overstatement indeed.

Patrick Cockburn's pro-Assad bias is also blatant in the double standard with which he judges 'conspiracy theories' depending on which side they emanate from. Thus, says he, 'a conspiracy theory much favoured by the rest of the Syrian opposition and by Western diplomats, that ISIS and Assad are in league, was shown to be false as ISIS won victories on the battlefield'. But Cockburn does not tell the reader by which logic ISIS's victories on the Syrian battlefield were in and by themselves a refutation of the claim by the Syrian opposition and Western diplomats that the Assad regime had favoured ISIS's establishment and expansion in Syria in order to weaken and discredit the Syrian insurgency.

This claim was made in light of the widespread conviction that Assad's intelligence services have been manipulating Iraq's jihadists from the time the US occupied that country in 2003. In any event, the above-quoted categorical dismissal of that 'conspiracy theory' stands in striking contrast with Cockburn's indulgence towards another that is favoured by the opposite side. On the allegation that the resurgence of ISIS was aided by Turkish military intelligence, which he attributes again to 'one senior Iraqi source', Cockburn has this to say: 'This might be dismissed as one more Middle East conspiracy theory, but a feature of jihadist movements is the ease with which they can be manipulated by foreign intelligence services.' In sum, the ease with which ISIS can be manipulated by intelligence services only applies

to Turkish services in Cockburn's view, not to the Syrian ones.

Cockburn's contempt for Iraq's Arab Sunnis is matched by his dislike of the other component of what he calls 'the new Sunni revolution', namely the Syrian opposition. His summary of the Syrian tragedy is unashamedly biased against the latter: 'Syrians have to choose between a violent dictatorship, in which power is monopolized by the presidency and brutish security services, or an opposition that shoots children in the face for minor blasphemy and sends pictures of decapitated soldiers to the parents of their victims.' With such a Hobbesian description of the options, the barbaric atrocities and crimes against humanity committed by the Syrian Leviathan, composed of the whole range of Assad regime's armed forces and their allies, are conveniently forgotten while the opposition is reduced to killers of children—even though the Syrian regime has killed far more children than the opposition. The author makes no secret of his personal choice.

Cockburn's leniency towards the Assad regime even leads him to find 'some truth' in one of the latter's most blatant lies about the early peaceful protests in 2011: 'The government insists that protests were not as peaceful as they looked and that from an early stage their forces came under armed attack. There is some truth to this, but if the opposition's aim was to trap the government into a counterproductive punitive response, it has succeeded beyond its dreams.' Likewise, Patrick Cockburn goes so far as to give credit to a common argument of all authoritarian regimes confronted with popular mobilisations, an argument that is itself steeped in 'conspiracy theory'. He asserts that 'the revolutionaries of 2011 had many failings but they were highly skilled in influencing and manipulating press coverage. Tahrir Square in Cairo and later the Maidan in Kiev became the arenas where a melodrama pitting the forces of good against evil was played out in front of the television cameras.'

In conclusion, Patrick Cockburn blames the United States for 'balking at giving military assistance to those who were fighting ISIS, such as the Syrian army'—meaning the Assad regime's army, of course. Thus, unlike

the knee-jerk 'anti-imperialist' circles who reject any form of intervention by Western powers in any situation as a matter of religious taboo, and who abundantly quote Cockburn on Syria, the *Independent's* reporter himself thinks that Washington ought to support the Assad regime. 'If the US had been serious about combating the extremist jihadists, then it would have realized it had little alternative', he affirms. Of all stances on Syria, the idea that supporting the Assad regime is the best way to fight ISIS—an organisation that thrives on Sunni resentment against the two Iran-backed governments of Damascus and Baghdad as well as against the United States—is the most preposterous indeed.

For a good and serious work on this whole topic with none of the flaws of Cockburn's, one should read the book by Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan—by far the best on ISIS to this date. Both authors are journalists like Cockburn, and write for a variety of publications. Yet their book is a serious piece of research, based on interviews with various actors across the range of parties involved in the tragedy or concerned with it—from US military to Iraqi and Syrian officials or former officials, and to ISIS members—as well as various experts. It is backed by numerous references, including a host of reports from sources ranging from governmental agencies to human rights organisations. The authors' experience and familiarity with Syria are qualitatively different from Cockburn's. In their own words, 'one of the authors is a native Syrian from the border town of Albu Kamal, which has long been a portal for jihadists moving into, and now out of, Iraq. The other author has reported from the Aleppo suburb of al-Bab, once a cradle of Syria's independent and pro-democratic civil society; today, it is a dismal ISIS fief ruled by Sharia law.'

In the first chapters, Weiss and Hassan describe the rise of Al-Qaeda in Iraq during the disastrous American occupation, its radicalisation into the 'Islamic State of Iraq', its subsequent marginalisation when US strategy shifted towards co-opting Arab Sunni tribes and how this was jeopardised by Al-Maliki's sectarian policy once freed from the constraints of US occupation. They then explore the duplicity of the Assad regime in

dealing with US-occupied Iraq and how this preceded ISIS's emergence in war-torn Syria. They describe the Assad regime's direct role in fostering the 'jihadisation' of the Syrian insurgency as well as the way it provoked sectarianism by unleashing a criminal sectarian militia; they then assess the role of Iran and its regional proxies in propping up Damascus, how the Arab Gulf monarchies played a key role in promoting that same 'jihadisation' and how the corruption of the Syrian opposition by Gulf money facilitated the spread of an ISIS that projected the image of a law-and-order enforcing 'state'. Finally, they describe the contours of this so-called Islamic State and provide a profile of their fighters and how they are recruited.

This last aspect is central to the book by Jessica Stern, who lectures on terrorism at Harvard, and J. M. Berger, a journalist who has written on American jihadists. Although it is quite substantial, their book reads as if it were written for the *For Dummies* series, sounding like a briefing for the kind of US security personnel and politicians who would have some difficulty spotting the Middle East on a world map. The inevitable supplements of the genre are there: a

glossary that includes definitions of basic terms along with more uncommon ones, and an appendix written by a doctoral student who offers a historical survey covering the fourteen centuries between the founding of Islam and that of ISIS—all in twenty-four pages.

Stern and Berger's book contains much padding: for example, several pages summarising articles or videos produced by ISIS. It says little on the Syrian and Iraqi context and the role of the US occupation in the emergence of ISIS, with only an occasional hint at the 2003 'blunder' of the invasion and occupation of Iraq. A few interesting insights, such as a comparison between ISIS and other brands of apocalyptic terrorism, are frustratingly short. The book ends with the authors' policy advice on how to counter ISIS propaganda, not without some platitudes such as the following statement on its last page: 'King Abdullah of Jordan, who has shown himself to be extraordinarily courageous, argues that fighting ISIS will require the Muslim world to work together.' Sigh!

*School of Oriental and African Studies*