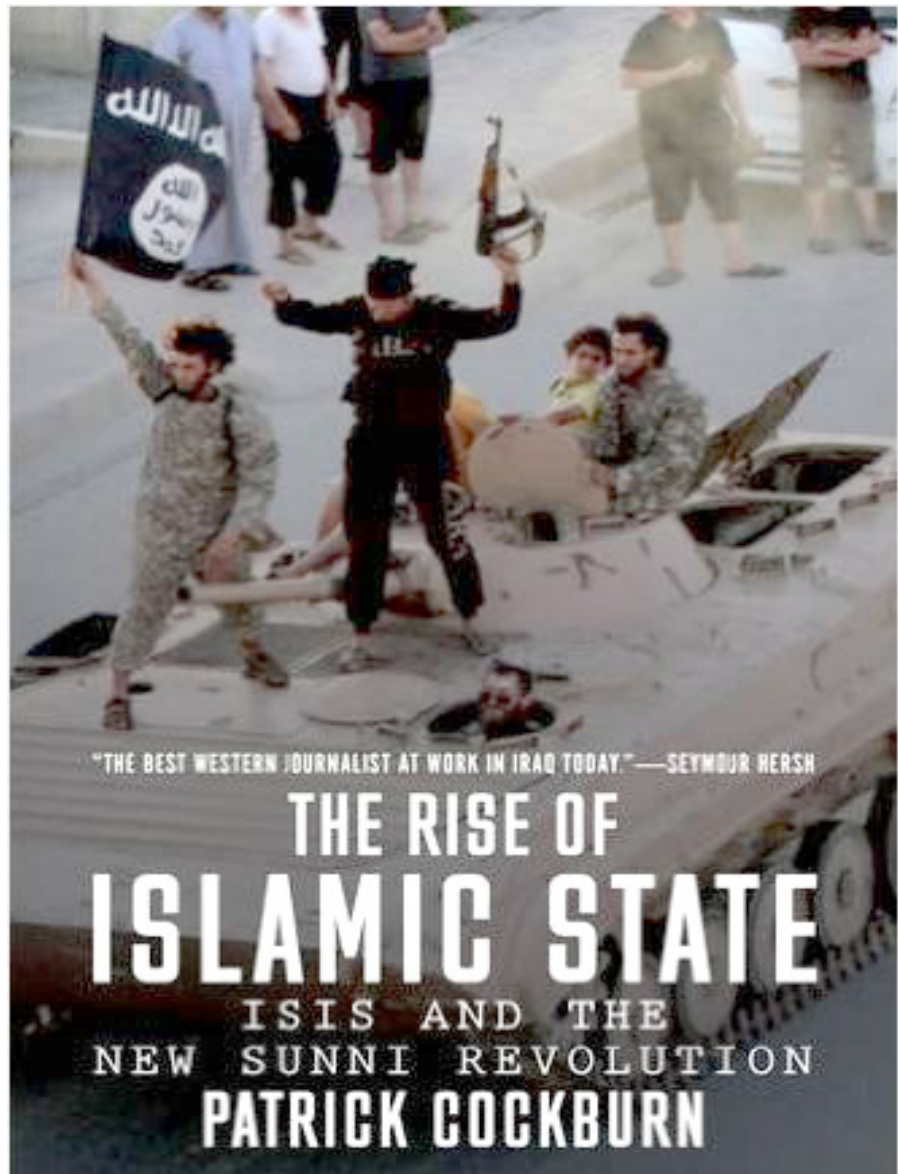


## The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution

THE enemy of my enemy is my friend, or so the old saying goes. Cockburn's examination of the rise of the Islamic State clearly emphasizes the extent to which this sentiment is still relevant, and how the strategic logic behind this oft-cited proverb is driving decision-making with regards to Iraq, Syria and other areas impacted by the rise of IS. Cockburn offers his explanation for the rise of IS from the inside, presenting his account for the sudden and remarkable rise of the group with the journalistic authenticity that results from a career covering the Middle East. Throughout the text, the author draws regularly from a web of (largely anonymous) local contacts, and clearly states 'there is no alternative to first-hand reporting' (p.122), despite the risks to journalists reporting in the area. This sets Cockburn's account apart from other works on this topic: The Rise of Islamic State is not the result of conversations with key US intelligence personnel or western academics, or social media analytics, but with those experiencing the actions of IS first-hand. Cockburn scolds (as he does throughout) those who rely too heavily on one-sided accounts, suggesting that 'unexpected developments and nasty surprises ... [are] likely to continue' (p.133), if this overreliance persists.

IS are described in emphatic terms as 'experts in fear' (p.Xiv) and 'a hundred times bigger and better organized than the Al-Qaeda of Osama bin Laden' (p.38). Cockburn highlights the importance of the Ba'ath party and key instruments from the Saddam Hussein regime to the establishment and



military successes of the group (pp.44, 76), but for a book focused on IS, the text focuses far more on the popular uprising in Syria, the ethno-political fragmentation of Iraq, and the influence of external parties in the years following the 2003 invasion. This is not necessarily

detrimental: one of the great strengths of this work is that it clearly outlines how the various internal and external stimuli have created the conditions in which IS could thrive. Thus, this text should be seen as an explanation of how it was possible for IS to emerge, rather than

an account of their actions.

When discussing Iraq, Cockburn paints the picture of an Iraqi 'state' on the brink of full-on sectarian conflict, a scenario that the country witnessed in 2006 and 2007. The author draws on the recollection of one Shia soldier stationed in Mosul before iS took the city, and how the local (predominantly Sunni) population turned on the Iraqi military: 'They threw stones at us ... and shouted: "we don't want you in our city! You are Maliki's sons! ... You are Safavids! You are the army of Iran!"' (p.16). Meanwhile in Shia-dominated Baghdad, the Sunni community, Cockburn reports, 'were afraid that the Shia would be tempted to carry out a pre-emptive massacre of the Sunni minority in the city as a potential fifth column' (p.20). The importance of the sectarian dynamic is highlighted throughout the work.

Cockburn apportioned some of the blame for this situation to former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, who stoked sectarian divisions by 'present[ing] himself primarily as the leader of the Shia who would quell a Sunni counterrevolution centred in Anbar' in parliamentary elections in

early 2014 (p.47). The resultant 'Sunni hostility to Maliki ... enabled iSiS to ally itself with seven or eight Sunni militant groups with which it had previously been fighting' (p.47). It was in these conditions that IS fighters became 'preferable to Maliki's Shia-dominated government forces' to Sunnis in Mosul and other parts of Iraq. The picture in Syria is described in similarly bleak terms in which 'Syrians have to choose between a violent dictatorship, in which power is monopolised 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' (p.81). In both countries, binary distinctions of identity have become a matter of life and death.

One of the key arguments of this work is that the internal circumstances of Iraq and Syria, result from the machinations of external forces. The widening of the sectarian divide in Iraq is attributed to the 'hot and cold war between the US and Russia', or more specifically their proxies: 'Saudi Arabia and the gulf monarchies, backed by the US, facing off against Iran, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, supported by Russia' (p.71). The conflict in Syria is even more complex, described by Cockburn as 'five different conflicts that cross-infect and exacerbate each other' (p.94). No solution, Cockburn argues, will be suitable to all parties (p.147). The gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are described as 'the foster-parents of ISIS' whose aid was 'central to the ISIS takeover of Sunni provinces in northern Iraq' (p.35). It is said that whilst this group 'may not like ISIS ... they like the fact that ISIS creates more problems for the Shia' (p.156). Furthermore, Turkey's role is highlighted as key, and it is suggested that Ankara is more concerned with the

kurds than IS (p.156).

Thus, the actions of the Assad and Al-Maliki regimes, and the politicking of global powers exacerbated division – especially along sectarian lines – and spawned conflicts that reinforced one another. In this situation, a zero-sum calculus has emerged in which enemies have become friends, and unlikely alliances have formed. Cockburn's work focuses both, therefore, on the intensely local – the political tensions in Mosul and Baghdad and the locals scared to leave their houses after dark for fear of sectarian militias – and the global – the jousting of superpowers and their regional proxies. To some extent, the author's focus on the role of external parties does (at times) seem to remove agency from those involved in the Islamic State, with the group described as a 'child of war' (p.8) and their sponsors as 'foster-parents' (p.35). Whilst Cockburn acknowledges the 'strong indigenous roots' of iS (p.35), there is a sense that iS and those who join it are a product of the tortuous environment in which they exist. In summary, Cockburn's work provides a rich account of the conditions in Iraq and Syria that allowed IS to grow so sufficiently that they were able to capture Mosul in June 2014. The picture Cockburn paints is of two conflicts, mutually reinforcing, that are being directed and shaped by external forces, with devastating consequences for those in Iraq and Syria. Solving these problems, he is clear, will be next to impossible. The upshot of this is that, in the meantime, unlikely alliances will thus continue. Cockburn's account is engaging and is to be thoroughly recommended to anyone studying the political situations in Syria and Iraq, and the rise of IS.\*

(Sumber: *Journal Intelligence and National Security*, Volume 32, 2017 - Issue 1)

### Judul Buku

The Rise of Islamic State: ISIS and the New Sunni Revolution

### Penulis

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### Penerbit

London, Verso Books, 2015

### Jumlah Halaman

xx+172

### ISBN

9781784780401

### Peresensi

Nick Brooke

**Penanggung Jawab:** Masykuri Abdillah **Dewan Redaksi:** Didin Saepuddin, JM Muslimin **Pemimpin Redaksi:** Nanang Syaikhul  
**Staf Redaksi:** Alfida, Adam Hesa **Fotografer:** Arief Mahmudi **Desain/Tata Letak:** na2esha **Distributor:** Ajo Zakaria, Ahmad Shodikin, Anen Suwandi **Tata Usaha:** Retno Wulansari **Alamat Redaksi:** Gedung Sekolah Pascasarjana Lt 3 Jl. Kertamukti No. 5 Pisangan Barat, Cireundeu, Ciputat Timur 15419 Telp. (021) 7401472-74709260 ext. 308 Faks: (021) 74700919, **E-mail Redaksi:** sps@uinjkt.ac.id **Penerbit:** Sekolah Pascasarjana UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta Terbit dua bulan sekali

