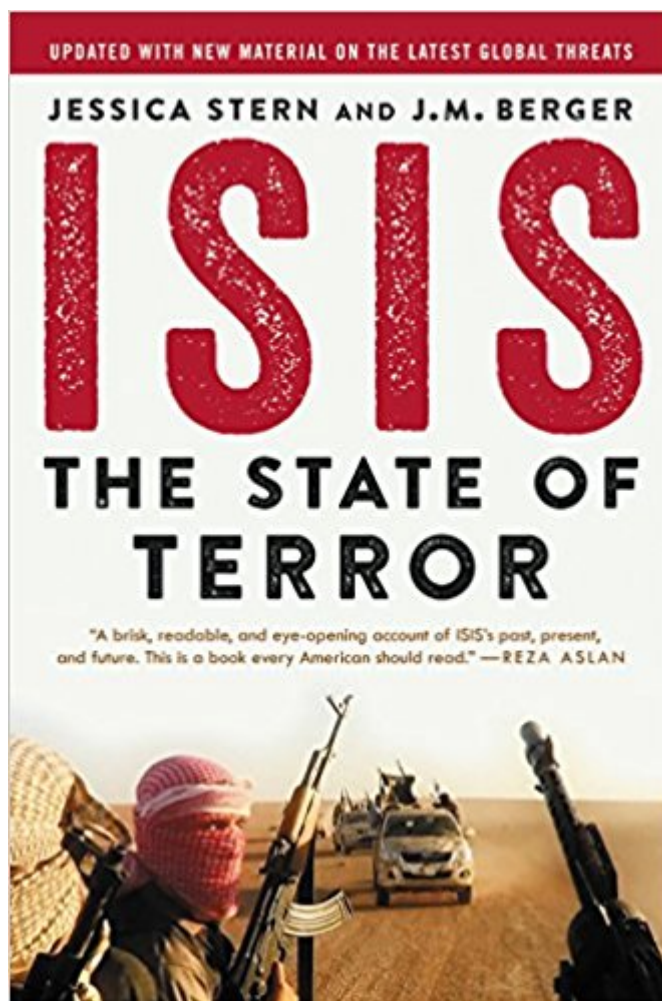


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# ISIS: The State Of Terror



## Synopsis

The Islamic State, known as ISIS, exploded into the public eye in 2014 with startling speed and shocking brutality. It has captured the imagination of the global jihadist movement, attracting recruits in unprecedented numbers and wreaking bloody destruction with a sadistic glee that has alienated even the hardcore terrorists of its parent organization, al Qaeda. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, two of America's leading experts on terrorism, dissect the new model for violent extremism that ISIS has leveraged into an empire of death in Iraq and Syria, and an international network that is rapidly expanding in the Middle East, North Africa and around the world. *ISIS: The State of Terror* traces the ideological innovations that the group deploys to recruit unprecedented numbers of Westerners, the composition of its infamous snuff videos, and the technological tools it exploits on social media to broadcast its atrocities, and its recruiting pitch to the world, including its success at attracting thousands of Western adherents. The authors examine ISIS's predatory abuse of women and children and its use of horror to manipulate world leaders and its own adherents as it builds its twisted society. The authors offer a much-needed perspective on how world leaders should prioritize and respond to ISIS's deliberate and insidious provocations.

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## Customer Reviews

"Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger's new book, *ISIS*, should be

required reading for every politician and policymaker. Their smart, granular analysis is a bracing antidote to both facile dismissals and wild exaggerations. Stern and Berger offer a nuanced and readable account of the ideological and organizational origins of the group. (Washington Post) "By far the most important contribution yet to our understanding of an organization that remains cloaked in mystery and misunderstanding . . . A brisk, readable, and eye-opening account of ISIS's past, present, and future. This is a book every American should read. (Reza Aslan, author of No God but God and Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth) "A timely and urgent book that is essential reading for analysts and policy makers alike. In what is already a cornerstone contribution, Stern and Berger offer the kind of cold-blood analysis so desperately needed on the poorly understood phenomenon that is the so-called Islamic state. (John Horgan, author of The Psychology of Terrorism) "The first serious book to analyze the rise of ISIS . . . Stern and Berger write clearly and persuasively and marshal impressive primary research from ISIS's prodigious propaganda to help explain how ISIS became the dominant jihadi group today. It's a terrific and important read. (Peter Bergen, author of Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad) "Stern and Berger pull back the curtain to expose facts and myths about the violent Salafi apocalyptic cult calling itself the Islamic State. A must-read. (Mike Walker, former undersecretary and acting secretary of the United States Army) "ISIS emerged in territory occupied by American soldiers, governed by dictatorial regimes, and fought over by sectarian extremists. Stern and Berger provide context for understanding ISIS's past and considering how its media model may affect future extremist movements. (Kecia Ali, associate professor religion, Boston University) "A penetrating analysis . . . The book provides important context for an evolving organization and proto-state that is attempting to rewrite the jihadi playbook. (Aaron Zelin, Washington Institute for Near East Policy) "ISIS: The State of Terror is a timely and important history of a movement that now defines the 21st century. (Sam Kiley, Evening Standard (London)) "This book should be required reading for every politician and policymaker. (Washington Post)

In *ISIS: The State of Terror*, two of America's leading experts on terrorism dissect the new model for violent extremism that the Islamic State, known as ISIS, has leveraged into an empire of death in Iraq and Syria, and an international network that is rapidly expanding. Stern and Berger offer a much-needed perspective on how world leaders should prioritize and respond to ISIS's deliberate and insidious provocations in this compelling, essential

account. “ISIS should be required reading for every politician and policy maker....[Stern and Berger] smart, granular analysis is a bracing antidote to both facile dismissals and wild exaggerations....A nuanced and readable account of the ideological and organizational origins of the group.” •Washington Post

Among my frequent, and just as oft dismissed, complaints to my wife has been the lack of a scholarly work on the Islamic State. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger have filled a significant void in the literature with their impressive and comprehensive offering, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (I loathe the poor translation this acronym represents, but the authors justify their use of it). Though a bit uneven in the middle, the book begins and ends powerfully and leaves the reader fully informed on the roots and history of the Islamic State (IS). Additionally, they offer a series of suggestions on countering the messaging of the self-styled Caliphate. The book is an impressive collection of sources that will enrich any reader who wants to understand and overcome the phenomenon represented by Al-Qaeda (AQ) and the IS. The authors begin with the beheading of James Foley and subsequent shattering of the “jayvee” reputation of the IS and conclude the introduction with their explanation on the use of ISIS as the acronym throughout the book. Chapter One focuses on Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The authors detail the humble and surprising beginnings of Zarqawi through his rise to power and pseudo-alliance with Al-Qaeda Central (AQC) in Afghanistan. The authors outline the ideology behind the group and its takfiri (declaring others apostates) ideology. AQI died with its creator and the IS rose from the ashes. Chapter Two chronicles the rise of the so-called state to include theological influences and the role of the Syrian conflict in solidifying the fledgling insurgency with dreams of claiming the mantle of Caliphate. Chapter Three winds the clock back and details the rise of AQC after the end of the Russian efforts in Afghanistan. The chapter explores the divisions within the group as it expanded and the shifts in communication strategies, highlighting the significance of an American in ash-Shabab for taking the jihad to the online mainstream. Chapter Four focuses on the importance of foreign fighters in the proliferation of the IS, exploring the allure of the group for both genders. Chapter Five details the messaging efforts of AQC and the IS from initial forays into print to online efforts and the shift towards propaganda videos with their now-notorious execution scenes. Chapters Six and Seven explore the significance of social networking tools in the proliferation of AQ and the IS from the early forum days to the current Twitterstorm. The authors note that suppression has been effective and that even more sophisticated methods may be on the horizon to stifle the groups’ ability to promulgate their message, noting the necessity for continuous efforts to

"Weed the social networks. Chapter Eight details the rifts and power struggles between AQ and the IS concluding with the rise of "lone wolf" terrorist activities around the world. The book strays a bit in Chapter Nine into an exploration of evil itself, addressing such topics as beheadings, child soldiers, slavery, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Chapter Ten delves into the apocalyptic dreams and machinations of the IS to bring about the end times. Chapter Eleven concludes the main portion of the book with the authors' explanations of the importance of understanding the mindset of the leaders of the IS and the difficulty of fighting an ideology. The authors suggest that the focus must be on eliminating the illusions of simplicity the IS uses to paint the world in black and white while refusing to play into their apocalyptic fantasies. Stern and Berger insist that the IS state has well-defined, but vulnerable messaging that can be countered or suppressed to reduce their reach. The authors note the importance of the moral high ground and of carefully measuring calls for action against what we hope to accomplish. The authors conclude with their assertion that democracy cannot be forced, advocating a patient approach while noting the willingness of regional partners like Jordan to shoulder at least some of the load. The book is fantastic. It is extremely well referenced and is as entertaining as it is informative. While some of the middle chapters seem like essays that were added to a work that could have stood without them, they do provide additional layers of fidelity on the nature of the IS and its meteoric rise into the world's consciousness. The book fills a significant gap in the literature and will be important as we continue to study and understand the role of these dangerous movements. The appendices and notes sections are as enjoyable as the book itself, adding incredible levels of detail to the chapters. Historians, students of the region, and policy makers all could benefit from reading this book as well as anyone who wants to understand the complicated entity that is the Islamic State.

"ISIS: the State of Terror" is a good book about the hideous mutation of al-Qa'ida in Iraq that the so-called "Islamic State" happens to be. This said, I have to disagree with the sentiment of at least one other review here that it is an "authoritative" work about this murderous group. Rather, it is a book that is authoritative on certain aspects of ISIS:-the ideology of the group is thoroughly detailed-the millenarian aspects of the group as discussed in the book are very helpful and informative-the social network "marketing strategy" of ISIS is exhaustively covered (almost too much)-there is a very well-written appendix that will provide readers who do not know much about Islam and its relationship to this particular terrorist group with a good grounding about that topic. One thing in particular I thought was thought provoking was the proposition that unlike al-Qa'ida, ISIS

does not market itself as the avenger of the weak Islamic community (the "ummah"). Rather, ISIS presents itself and its "caliphate" in war-torn Syria and Iraq as an expression of Muslim strength and victory. But like other reviewers have noted, the book lacks depth on a number of areas: -There is little discussion of events on the battlefield...in particular, the stunning successes the group enjoyed in 2014. -The book lacks substantive discussion of key personalities and leaders in ISIS apart from its self-proclaimed "caliph." -The authors don't provide very much in the way of prescriptions for beating ISIS, although they seem to favor the idea of "containing the group" (probably with the expectation that if ISIS fails to expand, it will eventually fall apart) One thing that struck me as rather jarring and dubious was the assertion that ISIS's minions engage in extreme acts of violence and cruelty in order to blunt their members and subjects' empathy. I can't help but think that it's other way around...that ISIS seeks to reduce empathy in order to enable atrocities and terror that it markets as a sign of its strength. Bottom line: This is well-worth reading, but I think a reader will want to keep an eye out for the slew of other books about ISIS I imagine will be coming out in the next few years.

The authors provide a scholarly and highly readable account of the development of Islamic fundamentalism. Stern and Berger recount the historical, cultural, geographical, and religious traditions that have contributed to current global Islamism. The book describes the differences between Sunni and Shiite Muslim beliefs and practices as well as tracing the evolution of Al Qaeda, ISIS and IS. The role of social media in promoting the philosophy and terror of ISIS is examined in detail. Stern and Berger also offer a variety of approaches that could be used to defuse ISIS, in contrast to the ineffective and wrong-headed approach of the "war on terror".

ISIS: The State of Terror by Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger seems likely to be overtaken by events of the ground. This isn't meant to detract from the work, but rather to point out a fact of many works on contemporary topics. In this book, one learns about the beginnings of ISIS, how it compares and differs from other terrorist organizations and maybe even a little bit about how Western Governments can fight the propaganda of ISIS. While on the above topics it does a passable job, it feels at points like it is trying to make a broader point about religious terrorism in general rather than a sole focus on ISIS. One could of course counter that without an understanding of religious terrorism, one cannot understand the ways and means of ISIS. Nonetheless, I think one has to appreciate the effort put in here because it is so difficult to write about a contemporary topic without being yesterday's news. A solid first effort at tackling ISIS.

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