

How ISIS Fights?: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt

By Omar Ashour

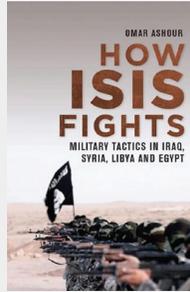
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Reviewed by Cenkay Uyan, Ibn Haldun University

Jihadism, terrorism, radicalization, and extremism have been on the agenda of the world, especially after the 9/11 attacks. Following that event, al-Qaeda gained popularity among other radical groups, and more al-Qaeda-affiliated groups started becoming effective in various regions. One of the groups that outshined was al-Qaeda in Iraq (later on becoming ISIS), which succeeded in controlling areas of Iraqi and Syrian territory by mid-2015.

The U.S.-led coalition started a military campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The coalition was composed of more than 70 nations and some non-state armed organizations on the ground. Although ISIS was outnumbered and outgunned, it managed to endure for years. In *How ISIS Fights?: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt*, Omar Ashour examines how ISIS expanded and endured despite its limited power compared to its foes in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt. The book has 2 main hypotheses for explaining this issue. The first is that ISIS has been able to effectively shift between 3 combat strategies: conventional, guerilla, and terrorism. The second hypothesis is that ISIS has been able to invent innovative tactics within the 3 combat strategies in different ways, even in harsh conditions (p. 20).

The book consists of 6 main chapters. The first chapter starts with the introduction of the research question of the book: “how can the en-



durance and the earlier expansion of such an organization be militarily explained?” (p. 4). The chapter continues with an overview of the ISIS expansion and endurance in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt. Moreover, it illustrates ISIS’ endurance by comparing other examples in recent history. For instance, the

Taliban could survive only 60 days after the U.S.-led airstrikes started, and Saddam Hussein lost Baghdad less than 30 days after the U.S. invasion. In the case of ISIS, the organization lasted over 1,065 days in both of its capitals Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria (p. 4). Ashour refers to previous literature about insurgencies and offers definitions for some critical terms, such as jihadism, Salafism, and terrorism giving the book’s research design at the end of the chapter.

Chapter 2 spotlights the journey of ISIS in Iraq by firstly giving an overview of the organization’s military build-up in the country. ISIS’ predecessor was al-Qaeda in Iraq, and its leader was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. He was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2006, and its organization was almost destroyed by 2007. However, they reemerged as ISIS in the following years, due to the chaotic conditions caused by the failed state. ISIS was able to loot weapons from both Iraqi and Syrian state and non-state armed actors between 2011 and 2014. It also started to design and manufacture its weapons (p. 41). In addition, ISIS pos-

sessed heavy military ranged weapons, such as artillery guns. For example, it captured the American-made M1 Abrams, and the Soviet-made T-72, T-62, and T-55 tanks (p. 42). As a result, ISIS could complete its military build-up within only 4 years, from 2011 to 2014. Ashour highlights the ability of the organization to compensate for the loss of commanders and leadership in such a short period.

Chapter 2 further examines ISIS' tactics in the battlefronts of Fallujah, Mosul, and Ramadi. It indicates analysis for each battlefront in terms of their specific conditions. The most intense warfare was seen in Mosul, and it is one of the best examples of ISIS' intriguing tactics. For example, ISIS employed over 270 SVBIEDs (Suicide/Vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices) in the battle of Mosul, which is the most prolific usage of SVBIEDs as a battlefield weapon in history (p. 60). Moreover, ISIS flew over 300 drone missions in one month. This is the most intensive usage of drones employed by any non-state armed organization (p. 61). What is also astonishing is that ISIS used drones as tactical decoys and guides in combination with SVBIEDs and guerilla factions. The chapter ends with the author's expectations about the future of ISIS in Iraq.

Chapter 3 analyzes the formation and growth of ISIS in Syria. It elucidates the early phase of the organization starting with Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahl al-Sham (JN). Accordingly, JN rapidly developed its military power with the assistance of ISI (Islamic State in Iraq) after the Syrian civil war started. In 2013, Baghdadi declared that JN was a part of his organization, the newly formed ISIS, but JN rejected this merger and pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda (AQ). Some of the JN fighters shifted to Baghdadi's side, and AQ's general command declared that it had no ties with ISIS in 2014. Since then the remaining JN fighters and

ISIS have been fighting against each other (p. 81). The chapter focuses on the battlefront of Raqqa, to interpret how ISIS fought in Syria. Again, the most intensely used weapons were SVBIEDs. The author made 2 observations on how ISIS used SVBIEDs differently from other organizations. ISIS was able to adapt its SVBIEDs tactics regardless of environment, theatre, or target. In addition, the organization preferred to use SVBIEDs even when it had more advanced weapons, such as tanks. The reason behind this choice is that the organization became an expert in SVBIEDs, and it used them effectively with new innovative tactics (p. 102).

Chapter 4 and chapter 5 examine the military expansion and endurance of ISIS in Libya and Egypt. In comparison to Iraq and Syria, ISIS had fewer resources and less manpower in Libya and Egypt, and it also had more powerful and centralized enemies. During its battles there, the organization strategically shifted between conventional, guerrilla, and terrorist forms of warfare to avoid annihilation. These innovative tactics came with know-how transfer from veteran commanders who had been in Iraqi or Syrian battlefronts (p. 145).

Chapter 6 summarizes ISIS' successes and failures, and it indicates some features that are unique to ISIS. Ashour emphasizes that ISIS' military success is based on its tactical innovations and efficient warfare shifts between 3 combat strategies. A UN commander's words show ISIS' tactical effectiveness: "If you retreat to the left, you die with sniper-fire. If you go to the right, you die with the simultaneous SVBIED explosion. They gave you no choice in counterattacking" (p. 207).

Overall, *How ISIS Fights* provides a satisfying explanation for ISIS' expansion and endurance in different regions by focusing

on the Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt battle-fronts. ISIS has been examined previously in various aspects including ideology, politics, and economy, but there is a lack of military analyses of ISIS in the literature. Therefore, *How ISIS Fights* fills this gap by focusing on combat effectiveness and tactical innovations of the organization. However, combat effectiveness does not explain adequately some cases. For instance, Mosul was captured by ISIS in 2014, even though they did not plan to capture the whole city; instead, it aimed to take a few neighborhoods (p. 51). Although the Iraqi government had prior intelligence, there were not enough military precautions in Mosul against a possible ISIS attack. In-

terestingly, many Iraqi soldiers fled because they believed that their commanders had abandoned them (p. 52). More interestingly, nobody knows why commanders behaved in this way, and who gave the order to abandon the fight. Moreover, Iraq started a big military campaign with U.S. airpower assistance to retake Mosul 2 years after the fall of the city. Why did Iraq and U.S. wait for 2 years? These are obscure points that make it difficult for us to explain the success of ISIS in terms of its military effectiveness alone. In short, the book is beneficial for those who are interested in terrorism, political violence, military tactics, and the Middle East. The book is a pioneer for further studies in similar issues.

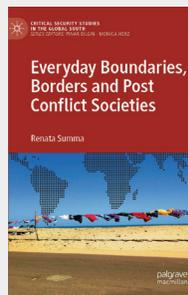
Everyday Boundaries, Borders, and Post-Conflict Societies

By Renata Summa

Palgrave, 2021, 249 pages, €74.89, ISBN: 9783030558178

Reviewed by Deepika Dahiya, University of Delhi

Border disputes are a common source of political unrest and armed conflict throughout the globe, both in the present day and throughout history. Summa's book *Everyday Boundaries, Borders and Post-Conflict Societies* is a product that adopts a wide definition of post-conflict boundaries, which focuses on how borders and boundaries are created, replicated, challenged, and diverted in post-conflict societies by taking the everyday as a serious field of analysis. Summa's underlying objective here is to explain that the production of boundaries does not happen in the ways we usually think it does, nor where we usually expect it to happen. She conceptualizes a distinct type of analysis, which define boundaries not



(only) by looking at the map or by taking into account how they were created and institutionalized (primarily) by the 'international community' and 'local' leaders seated at the peace table (p. 46).

The first chapter presents how boundaries are enacted and re-employed, altered, and displaced in the everyday of post-conflict societies looking with greater attention to the cases of Sarajevo and Mostar (p. 6). Here Summa argues that boundaries are related to the practices of demarcation and will not be restricted to solely geographical aspects or spatial features. They have been reorganized by peace agreements, which have restructured the society in ways