
From Deep State to Islamic State: The Arab Counter-Revolution and Its Jihadi Legacy

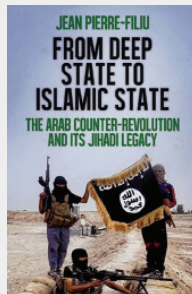
By Jean-Pierre Filiu

New York: Oxford University Press, 2015, 311 pages, £15.99, ISBN: 9781849045469.

Reviewed by Osman Türk, Turkish National Police Academy

Major changes have taken place in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since the eruption of the 'Arab Spring' in 2010. Concepts such as the new world order, democracy, freedoms and human rights have widely circulated in the Arab world, particularly after the invasion of Iraq. Moreover, the progression of what turned out to be a civil war in Syria triggered an array of academic studies on the past, present and future shape of the region. Within that volatile context, the emergence of jihadi groups that constantly renew themselves and spread over a wide territory with the claim to defend religion makes it all the more necessary to comprehensively study the structure of the region.

The title of Filiu's book, *From Deep State to Islamic State: the Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* may lead its readers to assume that this is an exclusive discussion of jihad organizations. Instead, the book examines the deep-seated structures and processes that prepare the ground for the emergence of these groups. Filiu starts with the fundamental argument that global jihadist groups such as al-Qaida and ISIS [the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria] did not fall from the blue sky. Each built itself upon major critical events, a group of frustrated or ruined people and a sound ideology. A historical perspective is therefore the *sine qua non* for understanding the social and political structure of states



in the MENA region. In this regard, Jean-Pierre Filiu, who has extensive first-hand experience of the region as a diplomat, offers an informed comparative analysis to identify, for instance, the structure of military and intelligence agencies, which can be deemed guardians of the state in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen and Algeria.

The author begins by analyzing the deep state, which as a term originates from near Turkish political history and is usually composed of high-level elements within intelligence services, the military, internal security, the judiciary, and the mafia. Structures of deep state in the region provide the real reason for the spread of jihadi groups like al-Qaida and ISIS. For instance, according to Filiu, the political and social structure of Egypt before the Arab Spring prepared the appropriate environment for Hosni Mubarak to take over the country after Enver Sadat was assassinated. When the popular revolts offered a key democratization prospect in 2011, the Egyptian deep state helped strangle it in another coup d'état by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (pp. 54-55).

Syria and Egypt merged to form a new state under the name of the United Arab Republic in 1958. The Syrian Ba'ath executives strongly desired to establish this state, but the result was not what they expected. Under the strong control of Nasser, the Syrian Ba'ath Party rap-

idly weakened and the situation of officers deteriorated. On top of this, a group of Ba'ath people, including Hafez Assad, took over with the coup. His son, Bashar al-Assad, who was the new dictator after Hafez Assad's death in 2000, maintained the same empire of fear that his father had established. However, the authoritarian regime in Syria did not dodge the popular waves in the region after 2010.

Filiu claims that the most important reason for the failure of the momentous attempt at revolution is the Arab deep state. According to his analysis, the Arab deep state uses a number of arguments, tools, and mechanisms to consolidate the presence and legitimize the continuity of the current regime, among them the worn-out argument of defending Arabs against the Zionists and the Crusaders. These tools were successful in legitimizing the incumbents' clamp on Arab society in the same way that Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser or Houari Boumedienne of Algeria had done in the past. This attitude actually caused jihadi organizations to become widespread in the region. According to Dr. Filiu, the democratization movement that took place with the Arab spring has not succeeded in target countries such as Egypt, Libya and Syria.

Filiu makes a useful analogy between how the above-mentioned, strategically-used argument of defending Arabs against Zionists and Crusaders, and that of the Mamluks, who had claimed they fought against the Mongolian hordes in order to defend their nation. Hence, Filiu calls modern Arab security establishments 'modern Arab Mamluks' (pp. 47-48).

On the other hand, counter-revolutionaries played an important role in the escalation of radicalization, especially after the Arab spring. In this context, Salafi-Jihadi groups

have received significant support from the Arab deep state. It is now a well-known fact that once the revolutionary fire was lit in Syria, the Syrian deep state did two things in particular to hijack the revolution: it first released extremist prisoners from Syria's infamous prisons to hijack the revolution and force the West to eventually come to a point where it had to choose either 'radicals' or 'Assad.' It therefore actively colluded with ISIS and al-Qaida, using regional actors to reach its target of maintaining its hold on power. The regime also collaborated with the PYD and its armed wing the YPG, both being the PKK's Syrian franchises, in order to prevent Kurds from joining the revolution, therefore cutting a crucial support base for the revolution.¹

Despite his impressive knowledge and experience, Filiu underestimates the influence of Salafi ideology on the region. This movement first emerged after the Ottomans started losing their dominion in the first half of the 18th century. The ideology sprang up in Saudi Arabia, supported by the British empire, and was based on the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya, who was a significant supporter of traditional Islamic jurisprudence. The movement took its final shape from Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. This indicates that the sectarian nature of current conflicts in the region plays a supportive role for jihadist terrorist organizations which is far too great to be underestimated. That is, not only the exploitation of jihadi groups by deep states but also misinterpretation of religious scripts deepen sectarian rifts in the region and are used to extend sectarian ideologies, the most obvious example of which is Wahhabism. Filiu also downgrades the influence and politics of Iran in the region. The destruction of the Baghdad administration after the invasion of Iraq and its replacement with a sectarian Shiite structure with Nouri al-Maliki as Prime Minister from 2006 and 2014 resulted in the

oppression of Sunnis, which created a well of resentment and frustration in the country, thus paving the way for ISIS to emerge.

Another slight weakness in the book is that although it is very rich in details and anecdotes, the sheer number of names, groups, and dates makes the book difficult to follow. Filiu's account also suffers from a technically false depiction of the historic borders of al-Sham (Bilad al Sham has been described as the country of al-Sham, Sham also being the name of Damascus in Arabic and in Turkish) (p. 25). However, al-Sham is the region bordering the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, usually known as the Levant or the region of Syria, i.e. modern Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Cyprus and the Turkish Hatay province.

Also, Filiu fails to make a right connection between the dictatorial administration of the Arab countries and the political atti-

tude of Erdoğan in Turkey. Filiu constantly puts forward the Islamic identity of Erdoğan, arguing that Erdoğan's dictatorial attitude reveals his dark side (p. 11). In this context, it must be understood that some of the author's allegations are based on newspaper headlines.

Filiu has presented this work to us by combining deep experience and extensive research on the region. *From Deep State to Islamic State* should be studied by scholars and researchers who want to do in-depth work, especially on the Middle East and North African.

Endnote

1. Phil Sands, Justin Vela and Suha Maayeh, "Assad Regime Abetted Extremists to Subvert Peaceful Uprising, Says Former Intelligence Official," *The National*, (January 21, 2014), retrieved from <https://www.thenational.ae/world/assad-regime-abetted-extremists-to-subvert-peaceful-uprising-says-former-intelligence-official-1.319620>.