

## Book Reviews

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**Paul Rogers. *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threat from the Margins*. I.B. Taurus: London, 2016. ISBN: 978-17-84-53488-2. Pp. 244. Paperback, £18.99.**

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford, and additionally collaborates with various organisations. As a Global Security Consultant with the Oxford Research Group (ORG), he writes monthly briefings where he analyses international security issues; acting as International Security Adviser to openDemocracy, he contributes a weekly column on global security-related topics. The present title, *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threat from the Margins* is his third major publication on the topic of global terrorism.<sup>1</sup>

What makes *Irregular War* such a fascinating and even, perhaps, mandatory read has less to do with its topic, ISIS, or indeed with the author's thesis as such. Rather, the book's greatest value lies in the approach chosen to tackle such a subject. Rogers does not come up with an argument based solely on theology, history, sociology or political science, as one would expect. Students in the field of War Studies are taught at the earliest stages of their undergraduate studies that this sector can best be defined as multi-disciplinary, combining several fields, including these three, but also anthropology, economics, sociology, and many more. Likewise, Rogers's argument is constructed based upon a multi-disciplinary method, combining methodologies from various academic fields with a far-reaching result. Indeed, he does not simply come up with a unique perspective on the so-called Islamic State, but convincingly connects the phenomenon to a wider issue, that of global security, as well as expanding on the failures of the West to address the former, which –in his view– will impact the latter.

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<sup>1</sup> His other works include *Why We're Losing the War on Terror* (Polity, 2007), and *Losing Control: Global Security in the 21st Century* (Pluto Press, 3rd edition, 2010).

The book's thesis is detailed in the opening chapter which makes it the strongest of the entire book. The classical understanding of ISIS is that of 'an extension of the global Salafi-jihadist movement', the product of a 'marriage between an Iraq-based AQI and an identity frame of politics' as Fawaz Gerges brilliantly argues.<sup>2</sup> Rogers does not deny the impact of ISIS as a 'major security problem'. However, he argues that the group is merely the symptom of the contemporary global insecurity. Such manifestations will allegedly repeat in the near future, resulting in a predicted 'age' of irregular war. In other words, ISIS 'and related movements' are part of a 'much wider phenomenon', what he calls 'revolts from the margins'. (p. 4)

Rogers identifies two major factors for current conflicts. (p. 5) The first one consists of economic marginalisation of a significant part of the world's population, as a result of continuous and expanding socio-economic divisions. The second feature is climate change, and its resulting constrictions. Rogers details the argument, as he lists six factors that further strengthen his view that ISIS must be understood as a 'revolt from the margins'. (p. 9) These features range from the asymmetric character of modern warfare to the failure of the world, especially the West, to grasp the social, economic and political trends that also are at the base of the issue. Importantly, they also include the inherent –and yet often disregarded– complexity of conflicts that appear to be motivated by religion. The book also engages with the policies applied by the West over the past fifteen years or so, emphasising several of the mistakes that were made, and how these led to the current state of affairs.

Throughout the eight chapters, the author provides a deep insight into ISIS, whilst focusing continuously on explaining why, to his view, this organisation must not be reduced to a threat specific to local circumstances. One illustration comes with the eponymous chapter 'Irregular War'. (pp. 152–173) Rogers develops the characteristics of current conflicts, which have to do with insurgencies. Recent technologies have allowed the West to come up with Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles (UCAVs), in other words, drones, a perfect tool to fight without putting the lives of soldiers at risk whilst making use of force projection. This trend characterises what the author calls the 'war by remote control'. (p. 159) However, such tools deepen the gap with non-Western states, thus the local

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<sup>2</sup> Fawz Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 24.

populations in response are increasingly making use of asymmetric warfare, and will plausibly continue to do so in the future.

As previously stated, Rogers's strongest chapter is the first one where he puts forward his interpretation and build on his unique approach. However, the most interesting chapter is arguably the one dealing with a sensitive topic: 'Weapons of Mass Destruction and Political Violence'. (pp. 88–120) Is there a genuine long-term risk that non-state actors might use WMD? As the author explores the possibilities of such outcomes, he addresses all the different aspects of this issue. Does a paramilitary group have the technical capabilities to develop such weapons, or alternatively, or the means at its disposal to acquire any? Does it have the competence to manipulate them? Does it have the political will required to use such weapons? Would such an attack constitute an existential threat to the target, be it 'local' or a Western state?

Although this book is undoubtedly engaging, it is by no means an easy read. Beyond focus, it does require prior knowledge of the topic, as well as a good understanding of strategy, political economy, or security studies overall. Be that as it may, it is a great achievement, as it puts forward a compelling argument which stems from a refreshing perspective on ISIS. This makes *Irregular War* a useful addition to the bibliography, both for practitioners and students interested in a wide variety of issues resulting from radicalisation, violent extremism, and terrorism, issues ranging from the reasons that favoured the creation of ISIS, to possible implications for the future.

*Irregular War* is a captivating book which should be a core reading, alongside works like those of Jason Burke, Peter Bergen, Fawaz Gerges, Shiraz Maher or Peter Neumann. If anything, Rogers makes a convincing argument that violent organisations are not solely responsible for global insecurity.

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