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BOOK REVIEWS

The Syrian Jihad. The evolution of an insurgency, by Charles R. Lister. London: Hurst & Company, 2017, pp. 520.

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“The Syrian Jihad” is an interesting, detailed and comprehensive account of the emergence, evolution and subsequent revolution of Sunni Jihadism. Lister indeed reconstructs the early phases of the Syrian revolution, which since 2011 have unfolded around issues of socio-economic and socio-political grievances such as anti-corruption, freedom, liberty, and democratic governance. The author further points out how the repressive measures of the Assad’s regime through its security forces consolidated, rather than discouraging, opposition and also encouraged the mobilization of Syrian jihadists, local militias such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and a fledging anti-government insurgency.

Lister argues that the reason behind the proliferation of jihadism could be found in Syria’s recent past, when the leadership of the country established, exploited and later attempted to manage a relationship with jihadist militants for the purpose of exporting likely threats against perceived enemies instead of facing them at home. This was also facilitated by Syrian geographic proximity to other jihadist

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hotspots such as Lebanon and Iraq. In essence, the repressive nature of the regime, the exploitation of jihadists coupled with their ideological quest to spread Islamic rule are all elements which eventually contributed to the transformation of the revolution into the Syrian Jihad.

Whereas on the one hand Lister looks at endogenous variables and internal actors, on the other hand the book critically takes into consideration the role of international actors. In fact, according to the author, the failures of the international community in supporting Syrian moderate and nationalistic opposition constituted a boon to groups who hold violent and exclusionary ideologies, by reinforcing the emergence of Jihadists as the dominant players in Syria. Lister further expounds this argument by adding that such failures include the United States' quest to resort to a dialogue which neither Assad nor Russia were willing to concede, as well as the Americans' decision to disengage from the North of the country, where there was the bulk of jihadists' presence. Accordingly, in the author's view, Syria's future profoundly depends on Western commitments.

"The Syrian Jihad" has several elements of continuity with other pieces of literature focusing on the same subject. First, the book portrays Syria as a notable hub which appeals to jihadi groups such as al Qaeda because of its unique status in Islamic apocalyptic prophecies. Second, it recalls the ideological underpinnings and interplay of the Sunni Jihadism with Salafism (see, for instance, Maher 2016). Third, Lister is among the authors paying special attention to the strategies and instruments of propaganda employed by the Jihadist groups, especially in their attempt of demonstrating their reputation of professionalism gained from the battlefield.

The very novelty of the book lies in its methodological approach, as the author draws on primary sources collected over four years of fieldwork which comprises of interviews with the Syrian insurgents in Syria to weave a rich and informed account of this experience. A further strength is the well thought out narrative of trajectories of identity-building undertaken by both the Islamic State and its predecessor, that is, the Islamic State in Iraq and Asham, and al-Qaeda. It is thanks to such endeavours, indeed, that these actors stand as unavoidable reference points for other Islamist factions that emerge by alignment with them or emancipation from them. In parallel to these inter-group dynamics, particularly interesting is the account of the discrepancies within the jihadist movement on how to establish Islamic rule which eventually led to its split into two camps.

Despite the book includes a thorough study of the “statics and dynamics” of Jihadist groups in Syria, the bulk of Lister’s argument seems to put Western actions (or lack thereof) under the spotlight. In doing so, the author may expose his argument to the criticism of overlooking the role played by the regime’s past exploitation of jihadism. Likewise, it overshadows how poor leadership and suppression of open dissent made long-simmering grievances degenerate into violent conflict. In essence, mainly blaming the international community for the role it played in addressing the conflict instead of setting precedence of the state’s failure in managing the revolts is debatable. Meanwhile, this very aspect opens up to further debate as regards the Syrian Jihadism.

References

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