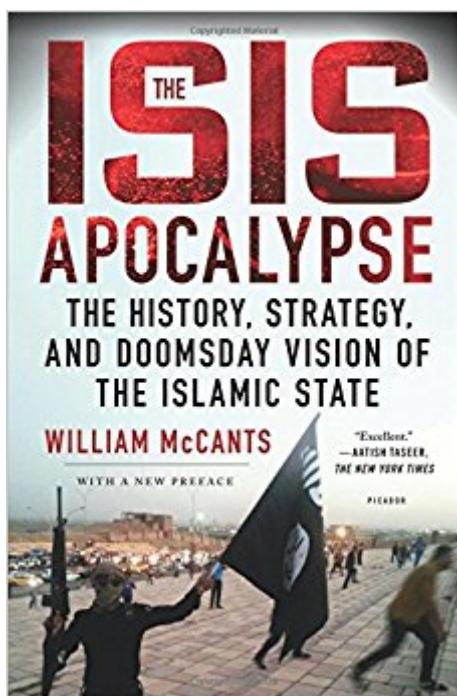


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# The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, And Doomsday Vision Of The Islamic State



## Synopsis

The Islamic State is one of the most lethal and successful jihadist groups in modern history, surpassing even al-Qaeda. Thousands of its followers have marched across Syria and Iraq, subjugating millions, enslaving women, beheading captives, and daring anyone to stop them. Thousands more have spread terror beyond the Middle East under the Islamic State's black flag. How did the Islamic State attract so many followers and conquer so much land? By being more ruthless, more apocalyptic, and more devoted to state-building than its competitors. The shrewd leaders of the Islamic State combined two of the most powerful yet contradictory ideas in Islam—the return of the Islamic Empire and the end of the world—into a mission and a message that shapes its strategy and inspires its army of zealous fighters. They have defied conventional thinking about how to wage wars and win recruits. Even if the Islamic State is defeated, jihadist terrorism will never be the same. Based almost entirely on primary sources in Arabic—including ancient religious texts and secret al-Qaeda and Islamic State letters that few have seen—William McCants' *The ISIS Apocalypse* explores how religious fervor, strategic calculation, and doomsday prophecy shaped the Islamic State's past and foreshadow its dark future.

## Book Information

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\*\*One of The Wall Street Journal's 10 Must-Read Books on the Evolution of Terrorism in the Middle East\*\*\*\*One of ABC News's Books of the Year in 2015\*\*“Excellent...Aatish Taseer, The New York Times”The story [of Zarqawi's rise] is well told by William McCants in his excellent new book, *The Isis Apocalypse*” David Ignatius, The Atlantic“Every

policymaker and any concerned citizen who wants to understand the rise of ISIS should read this insightful and essential book by one of our greatest scholars of Islamist movements.

Lawrence Wright, author, THIRTEEN DAYS IN SEPTEMBER: Carter, Begin, and Sadat at Camp David and LOOMING TOWER: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11

“It’s hard to imagine anything more alien or revolting than the brutality of the Islamic State. Yet Will McCants’s ISIS Apocalypse is lucid, thoughtful and illuminating on the group, its history, ideology and personalities. McCants understands every nuance of the religious concepts that drive the ISIS leadership, and he does a masterful job of explicating them and laying out the group’s strategy. This is much the best work yet on the Islamic State.

Ambassador Daniel Benjamin, State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism (2009-2012)

“No one knows more about ISIS’s doomsday theology than Will McCants. McCants listens to the group with uncommon care and subtlety, and policymakers need to read this book to understand ISIS’s origins and plans.

Graeme Wood, Edward R. Murrow Fellow, The Council on Foreign Relations Contributing editor, The Atlantic Lecturer in political science, Yale University

“An excellent account of how ISIS came into being...As to the future, McCants wonders if ISIS’s grotesque brutality will prove its undoing. Not necessarily. Up to a point, he argues, brutality works”

The Economist

William McCants directs the project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Brookings Institution. He is adjunct faculty at Johns Hopkins University and a former U.S. State Department senior adviser for countering violent extremism. McCants has a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Studies from Princeton University and lives in the Washington, D.C. area.

Will McCants writes with expertise and aplomb about the Islamic State, its history, and the foundations of its efforts at regional dominance. While, some of the zig-zagging back and forth in time requires a bit of gymnastics from the reader, the book is both educational and entertaining. Anyone interested in learning about this organization from a truly qualified scholar would benefit from a read of this book. Dr. McCants proclaims himself, rightly, as a guide, proficient in Islamic theology and history, modern jihadism, clandestine bureaucracies, and Arabic. The good doctor flexes his linguist muscles with translations of original Arabic texts, providing crucial context to the situations he describes. The book covers the history of the organization, beginning with distinctions between Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State; such as, AQ wanted to build popular support for caliphate, but IS wanted to impose a caliphate, regardless of the acquiescence of the masses. The book details Zarqawi’s rise to prominence and obsession with Nur al-Din and Saladin.

Zarqawi linked his organization in Iraq to AQ [forming Al-Qaeda in/of Iraq (AQI)] but his brutality drew censure from Al-Qaeda Central. Once Zarqawi was killed and al-Baghdadi became commander of the faithful, AQI dissolved and was absorbed into IS with Masri as minister of war. From there the book focuses attention on the Islamic State’s flag symbolism and parallels with historical references to the Abbasids. After Masri and Baghdadi killed in 2010, the focus shifted yet again. The group floundered until the Americans left and the Arab Spring happened. The next section details the beginning of the online presence through magazines and Twitter. Cautionary tales and lessons learned by the IS are presented in the rise and fall of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), as well as failure to govern by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM) and Ash-Shabab (Somalia’s offshoot of violent jihadism). The book turns to the unlikely rise of Baghdadi and details sectarian divides, apocalyptic guidance, and the seizure of Mosul, while detailing some distinctions between the Abassid dynasty and IS. Dr. McCants concludes noting many of the contradictions make the group hard to explain, noting that IS is “too entrenched for quick solutions.” The group does not rely on outside funding. McCants believes that airstrikes can degrade, but not destroy, the organization. The only way to damage the Islamic State is to hurt its “ability to endure and expand,” thereby eroding its legitimacy. Sectarian governments must give way to true representation, meaning that Shia governments have to accommodate Sunnis. Noting that Iranian support for Shia militias probably means less attention is required from Coalition partners for those militias, freeing them to focus on Sunni efforts at countering the IS. The one surprise for me was that the book was really 47% book, 5% translations, 34% endnotes, 14% index and acknowledgements. The translations add value to the manuscript and provide an interesting comparison for anyone interested in comparing Dr. McCants’ translations to other sources. The endnotes show the level of research that went into the work. While the index makes the work more approachable to those without time to read the entire book.

If you are interested in understanding ISIS and its underlying apocalyptic vision for the Middle East then look no further. William McCants in, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* takes you on a bloody and violent tour of this doomsday cult in the words and writings of their leaders. To be sure this was not what I would call a fun read, in fact the history of ISIS reads more like a real life horror story on the scale of the French Revolution or Nazi Germany but nevertheless I believe it is history which anyone interested in the subject would be well served in pursuing. The Spanish poet and philosopher George Santayana wisely observed

that “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” There is no doubt in my mind that ISIS and its brutal doomsday apocalysm will go the way of other such abominable regimes but the question is what will we take away from this tragedy so that future generations do not have to experience this terror? That’s the real value in reading this book in my opinion.

ISIS Apocalypse by Will McCants could not be more topical. Just last week ISIS talking heads intoned their intentions to attack various capitals, including Rome. “Ah hah!” I said to myself. “That’s right out of the main prophesy. It’s in the McCants book!” While dumb-founded Italian security personnel went scrambling after terrorist cells that may well not exist, they would have been better served to search in ancient parchments for the deeper meaning of the threat. For it turns out that the intellectual/ideological basis for the ISIS vision is driven by a sincerely-held belief in a myth structure developed in medieval times. The central myth is that of a final battle between the forces of good (purist Islamists) and the forces of evil (everyone else), the outcome of which will usher in the End of Days. This End of Days thinking—the apocalyptic world view—renders trivial the means of bringing it about: The exquisitely filmed and widely broadcast torture-murder of large numbers of opponents and innocent civilians. Far from fearing the opprobrium of the West, they welcome it. Indeed, it is precisely what they want: An army of infidels rolling into Syria (al-Sham in the prophesies) for the Final Battle that leads to the Final Hour. President Obama’s refusal to take the bait has led to some very scorching criticism of late, but I can’t help wondering how many of the critics have even a faint idea of what drives ISIS and why they have attracted such a large following. McCants, a Brookings think-tanker conversant with medieval Arabic, is about as expert as one could find in the West on the subject of Islamic end-times thinking. Yet his cogent analysis traces the rise of ISIS from around 2005 to mid-2015, and clearly explicates their troubled relationship with our more familiar nemesis, Al Qaeda. Although nominally having allegiance to Al Qaeda (at least initially), and through Al Qaeda to Mulla Omar, “commander of the faithful” among the Taliban of Afghanistan/Waziristan, the leaders of ISIS set a course of their own around 2006 and brought the wrath of God down on their heads. Something that is easy to forget is that the early incarnations of ISIS (in Iraq, Somalia, Yemen and Mali) were shattered by US and allied military opposition in 2007-2010, with many if not most of its key leaders killed and its forces scattered. In intercepted messages between ISIS leaders and Bin Laden (and his partner/successor Zawahiri),

this was precisely what Al Qaeda predicted would happen, and it drove them absolutely bananas. The key issue was the proclamation of a Caliphate— an Islamic state that combines all temporal and spiritual authority. Bin Laden was clear, based on his own experience and observations, that a Caliphate cannot sustain until the groundwork has been done. Thus, you must start by winning the hearts and minds of the people you would rule, not try to terrify them into submission. You need to leave tribes alone to avoid blood feuds from ruining your plans for stability. You need to apply Sharia law and its strict (and bloody) punishments leniently (at least at first) until the people have come to a point of religious purity where they will accept it.

Finally, if you plan to form a state, you must accept that in the Arab world, the people expect the state to guarantee the basics of life: Food, water, medicine and (hopefully) electricity. As McCants points out, if you didn't know that Bin Laden was a world-renowned terrorist, you'd think he was a director of AID. And here are three more things about ISIS I didn't know: The current leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has a PhD in Islamic studies. Islamic scholarship is very important to these guys (and Al Qaeda too), so if you think disputing them in theological argument will be easy, you are mistaken. They may be murderous in the extreme, but stupid they are not. Second, there is virtually no difference between the ISIS understanding of Islam and that of the Wahabists who dominate legal thought in Saudi Arabia. Good to keep in mind if you think our Saudi allies have anything against the ISIS ideology. Third, the current ISIS leadership no longer play up the emergence of the Mahdi—the rightly guided one—who will play a Savior role. Instead, the focus is on the Caliphate as an institution, not a Mahdi as a personal savior. To the degree that some ISIS scholars point to a coming a savior, the one they name is none other than Jesus. Shocked? Well, I was. Anyway, to Al Qaeda's immense consternation, a reborn ISIS did it all backwards and succeeded anyway (at least so far). ISIS in many ways has marginalized Al Qaeda—the child eating the father—and there is an excellent chance that the forces and militias formerly loyal to Al Qaeda will throw in with ISIS. Many have already. So why is it working for ISIS this time, starting around 2010-2011, when they failed so miserably before? The short answer, according to McCants, is that this time they were left alone. The Shi'a-dominated government of Iraq under Prime Minister Maliki had effectively lost control of Iraq's Sunni provinces, and there was no US military presence to haul his chestnuts out of the fire this time. (Recall that Maliki was so anxious for the Americans to leave—and leave him a free hand—that he had refused to negotiate a status of forces agreement that would have allowed us to stay (even if we had wanted

to.) The breakdown of central authority left a power vacuum filled by a variety of self-appointed Sunni militia groups, but these proved to be little more than armed thugs imposing protection taxes but providing no protection. (Nor trash collection, water and power supply, medical care or food, when it and came to that.) Next to them, ISIS was seen as a relief. The one lesson ISIS took from Al Qaeda's playbook was to try to provide at least rudimentary public services. Chopping the hands off thieves struck the local merchants as all to the good--and the apostles of ISIS most assuredly did not come across as corrupt banditos in their own right. They definitely showed some good government chops, so to say. The second big break ISIS got was the civil war in Syria, a war that left the (largely Sunni) Syrian hinterland ungoverned. The disparate, disorganized and fractious rebel groups in that region were unable or unwilling to fight sustained battles against the central government forces under Bashar Al-Assad, which made it excruciatingly difficult for the West in general and the US in particular to find reliable recipients of US military aid. The only group that really pushed the battle forward was the Nusra Front, and they were allies of Al Qaeda. For his part, Al-Assad was (and is) only too happy to let ISIS do his Sunni-on-Sunni dirty work. Truly a foreign policy problem from Hell from the US standpoint. The third big break ISIS got was the Arab Spring, a movement of popular revolutions that unhinged government after government but which led not to a birth of a new Arab freedom but chaos and further economic dislocation. Disaffected youth (and not just youth) hears a resonance in these End Time prophesies as their world has turned upside down. Utopianism has a strong appeal to the marginalized and disaffected, whether it's the weird Bible thumping of a Jim Jones or a restoration of a more pure and primitive society as preached by Pol Pot. When the Utopians are heavily armed, the myth plays out exactly one way—the dubious peace of mass slaughter and unburied death. So what is to be done? None of the choices are especially attractive, but McCants shows (in a few paragraphs) why most of the obvious ones won't work. The best hope probably lies in helping proxies prosecute the fight, but it will be long and arduous. Moreover, the Caliphate may be defeated (and I believe it will be), but the jihadists drawn to it will still be around to give it another try when the opportunity presents itself. To his great credit, McCants avoids pointing the finger of blame at the many political actors on whose watch many terrible things have happened. McCants remains singularly fair-minded, dispassionate and analytical throughout a refreshing respite from the avalanche of drivel that passes for a national discourse in this day and age. Finally, I will add for my own part, that the neocon shibboleth, We don't do nation-building, must be seen as among the most disastrous brain failures in the history of American foreign policy. Nation-building is precisely what the ISIS Caliphate is about, and we ignore that

inconvenient obligation to our peril.

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