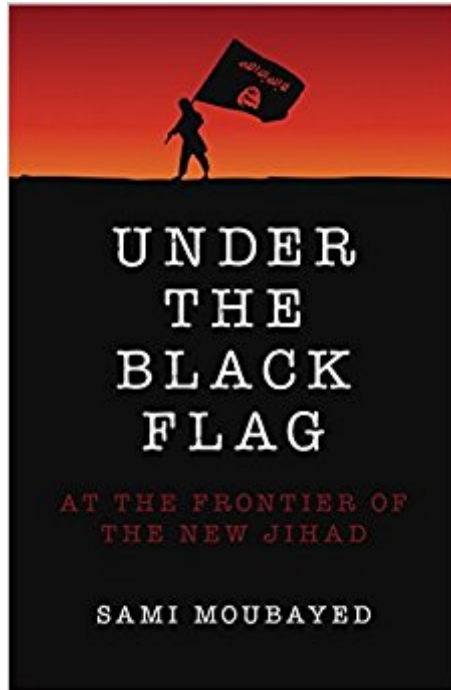


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Under The Black Flag: At The Frontier Of The New Jihad



Synopsis

The Islamic State movement (ISIS/IS) burst onto the world stage in 2014. From its heartland in Syria, where it arose from the chaos of the Syrian Revolt, the organisation has expanded in ideology and membership and now poses a significant threat to the region, if not to the wider world.

Moubayed, a Beirut-based journalist who has been analysing Syria and the region for 20 years, has unrivalled access to the movement and its participants. His book is the first inside account of an organisation which has dominated the headlines with a dangerous mix of barbarity and military prowess. In looking at the historical background of ISIS: where it came from, how it evolved, where it stands today and what its aims are for the future to reveal, it will provide, for the first time, a fully-fledged picture of what lies at the heart of the Islamic State.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: I.B.Tauris (November 30, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1784533084

ISBN-13: 978-1784533083

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.8 x 7.7 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (12 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #223,196 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #44 in [Books > History > Middle East > Syria](#) #451 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Middle Eastern](#) #541 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Specific Topics > Terrorism](#)

Customer Reviews

Sami Moubayed is a Syrian historian and Beirut-based journalist specializing in pre-Baathist Syria. In *Under the Black Flag*, he turns his attention to the history of Islamism in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State, which led to the current civil war. Moubayed writes in English, so this is not a translation. In his own words: "This book will delve into the ideological foundations of the Islamic State and the caliphate, taking the reader from the late Ottoman era up to the present." Moubayed explains where the Islamic State came from, how it has flourished, and where it might be heading. He digs into the personalities involved, rivalries, finances, life under the Islamic State, who the soldiers are and where they came from. A history of Islamism in (mostly) Syria in ten

chapters. First the author introduces us to the history of Muslim caliphs and the quest for a more pious, purer Islam that was the foundation of modern Wahhabism. The Islamic state of the 18th century was approximately where the modern kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932. In 1924, the new secular government of Turkey fatefully abolished the Ottoman caliphate, leaving a void that has begged to be filled ever since. The self-declared caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is the latest attempt to fill that void. Moubayed, who is Sunni himself, argues that there is a vacuum in Sunni Islam, not only for a caliph, but in Sunni leadership in general. Sunnis perceive themselves as leaderless and victimized, a condition exacerbated by their disenfranchisement in Iraq. The chapters on political Islam in modern Syria are particularly interesting, as they set the stage for the clash between the Syrian government and Islamist factions that exploded into war in 2011.

This book on ISIS is different in that it is written by a Syrian who actually lives in Syria, and is a Sunni Muslim. Sami Moubayed is an accomplished Phd historian and journalist as well, with 6 books to his credit and numerous journalistic accomplishments. His area of expertise is in pre-Baathist Syrian history, though his set of skills translate well to analyzing the current situation in Syria. Reading this book gave me an understanding of the roots of the schism between Shi'a and Sunni sects of Islam. Moubayed explains the importance of the caliphate in Islam. The book explores the birth of Wahhabism and its role in Saudi Arabia and ISIS. We see how Saudi Arabia and the US have wittingly and unwittingly aided in the growth of al-Qaeda. The author does a good job explaining how the US and Saudi Arabia, through their support of Saddam Hussein in the Iraq/Iran war, have planted seeds of discontent in Iraq. We read how the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 ironically created the conditions for terrorism in the form of ISIS. Moubayed explains that the growth of ISIS is partly about Islam and ideology, but it is to a large degree due to social and economic conditions. He sees the root cause as the failure of Baathism. It was supposed to be an Arab renaissance, but it ended up as a bloated bureaucracy. Add to that oppressive military regimes, sectarianism, lack of social mobility, joblessness, unequal distribution of wealth, and mediocre education and you have fertile ground for jihad and ISIS. The author spends several chapters on changes that ISIS have brought to al-Raqqa as they try to build the city-state. We see what is haram, forbidden, and what it is like to live under the rule of ISIS. It is eye-opening and chilling. From my perspective it seems doomed to fail.

In a world where terrorist attacks are becoming more frequent, more difficult to predict and tragically more deadly, most of us have heard of the Islamic State movement by one or more of its acronyms:

IS, ISIS, ISIL or Daesh. We are aware of the damage being done, so graphically reported by the media, but what do we know about it? Where did this movement come from, how is it funded and what is its attraction for the (generally) young and (frequently) disaffected people who join it? In this book, Sami Moubayed – a Syrian historian of pre-Baathist Syria with a PhD in Middle East Politics – has presented a well-researched account of the factors behind the rise of Daesh, of the historical, political and religious factors which have both enabled its rise and spread. This is not a small disorganised movement with limited funding. It is well placed to consolidate and expand its territory, to function as a state at least in the short to medium term. The Islamic State is rich. Unlike al-Qaeda, which relied on donations from members and sympathizers, ISIS earns its own money. So, where to from here? How do we move from reacting to terrorist attacks to anticipating and preventing them more effectively? How do we make the prospect of joining Daesh less attractive to the disaffected? Daesh is expanding to fill a power vacuum, and is (at least in the short-term) has no difficulty attracting followers to its cause. This book provides a wealth of information, and raises a lot of questions. I recommend this book to anyone looking for more information about the background to the rise of Daesh. I need to reread it, in order to absorb more of the information provided.

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