Shatter the Nations: ISIS and the War for the Caliphate

Mike Giglio (PublicAffairs, 2019), 303, index.

Reviewed by Brent M. Geary

At its peak in 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) controlled territory in those two countries roughly the size of Great Britain and home to some 10 million people. It is inarguably the most militarily successful terrorist organization in history and its influence has stretched across the Middle East and many parts of the world. In *Shatter the Nations*, journalist Mike Giglio chronicles the rise and fall of what ISIS leaders referred to as its "caliphate." He tells us his story from the ground level and from the perspective of those who fought with and against ISIS, those who lived on the margins of the caliphate, and those who suffered from its depredations. Giglio—a foreign correspondent for *The Atlantic*—infuses his book with indelible stories of people struggling to survive in a chaotic time, stories he argues that precious few Americans know or care to know, even as Arabs, Kurds, and others across the region fought our common enemy. His book will help to fill that gap for those who take the time to read it, including intelligence practitioners whose areas of expertise do not include the ISIS fight.

Essentially a tragic travel saga, Giglio shares his own personal journey across the Middle East in the last decade, from bearing witness to both a revolution and counterrevolution in Cairo, to traversing the frontier between war-torn Syria and southern Turkey, to interviewing ISIS defectors, to riding into battle with elite but overstretched Kurdish and Iraqi special forces. The book is divided into three parts, beginning with Giglio's virtual interview in early 2011 over chat messaging with "El Shaheed"—Arabic for "The Martyr"—the now-famous Egyptian cyber activist Wael Ghonim, who told him of the stark repression his country suffered under then-President Hosni Mubarak and how he feared for himself and his family. Weeks later, protests erupted across Egypt that quickly led, at the urging of President Barack Obama, to Mubarak's ouster, perhaps the high-water mark of what became known as the Arab Spring.

Giglio argues that the ensuing revolution in Syria was obviously inspired by the events in Cairo, Tunisia, and elsewhere, but to those who rose up against their rulers in Damascus, there was one tragic difference. By the time Syrian President Bashar al-Assad turned his regime's army against his own people, Syrian oppositionists believed that the rest of the world was not prepared to help them in their hour of need. "I would meet rebels and activists in the ensuing years who never got over the sense of betrayal," Giglio writes (19), and many would see that betrayal turn into rage against the West and lead them to join groups like ISIS. Others, mainly the foreign fighters who rushed to join the jihad, were simply bored with their lives or were attracted by a chance to gain power in a world that had otherwise denied it to them. "They imagined they would be bigger people than was possible at home; they dreamed of the glamour of violence, having no real sense of it." (76)

From Egypt, Giglio quickly transitions to Syria and the rapid devolution there from peaceful protest movement to all-out civil war. He chronicles the way Syrian activists had held out hope that President Assad, the British-educated ophthalmologist and political heir to his brutal father Hafiz, would choose to embrace reform and democratize Syria. Instead, we now know, Assad chose open warfare, driving thousands of oppositionists into dozens of militant groups, ranging from the secular, pro-democracy Free Syrian Army to jihadist terror groups such as al-Qa'ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusrah and ISIS.

When Syria began to crumble, the jihadists vied for power with everyone else, and ISIS began to expand its territory. While that was happening, though, Giglio returned in 2013 to Egypt to cover the military counterrevolution against the government of Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood leader who had succeeded Mubarak. Giglio recounts being beaten and arrested along with other journalists by Egyptian security forces for filming their crackdown on Morsi supporters. When the military regained control, under now President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, Giglio argues that it only added further fuel to the Islamist fire, sparking a bloody insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula and prompting many to join ISIS and other

jihadist groups. These are well-founded arguments and not new, but Giglio's description of the crackdown sheds more light on a country closely allied with the United States and on the ways in which thousands of Egyptians migrated to extremism.

Part Two, "Terror," details the rise of ISIS and its caliphate as Giglio experienced it. Based in Istanbul, from 2013 to 2016 he reported from the Turkish-Syrian border, eastern Syria, and northern Iraq. His first encounter with ISIS came in 2013, when a Syrian rebel encouraged him to see for himself what this new jihadist group was doing. Giglio crossed into territory controlled by Syrian Kurds, describing the deal they had made with Assad's regime to stay out of the civil war in exchange for regional autonomy. Kurdish forces, led by the People's Protection Units and known by the Kurdish acronym YPG, were defending the area against ISIS invaders, and he visited a town recently liberated after months of ISIS occupation. Residents told him of public beheadings of suspected Syrian government loyalists and imprisonment for offenses such as smoking cigarettes or owning a hookah. "It's a black and white world for them," one said of ISIS. "You can become their enemy very fast."(55)

Through a series of vignettes, Giglio illustrates the hold ISIS took not only on territory but on the minds and spirits of those under its control. One of the most memorable was a phone conversation he witnessed between a regional Syrian rebel commander, Mohamed Zataar, and his opposite number in ISIS, known as Abu Ayman al-Iraqi, in 2014. The two exchanged pleasantries before explaining why the other should quit the fight. Zataar said that he fought for the freedom of the Syrian people; Abu Ayman fought for Islam. They bickered bitterly about alleged affronts perpetrated by the other side such as the mistreatment of prisoners. In the end, Giglio writes, their differences were insurmountable. "Either you cleanse us or we cleanse you," Abu Ayman concluded. (63)

Giglio chronicles the ISIS destruction of the Iraqi town of Sinjar and the cleansing there of the local Yazidi sect through mass executions of men and the systematic kidnapping and raping of women and children. He details the collapse of the Iraqi Army in the face of a much smaller but fiercely committed ISIS invasion and the occupation of Mosul, Iraq's third largest city. He made contacts in Turkey who acted as smugglers supporting ISIS by helping foreign fighters enter Syria and, later, escape the onslaught of coalition airstrikes and advancing Kurdish and Free Syrian Army forces, boasting of how they would often embed them with fleeing refugees. Giglio's descriptions of these soft ISIS supporters—some of whom agreed with the group's goals but rejected its methods, and others who were true believers—is invaluable in providing context for how the group was able to operate so successfully for so long.

The third and final section of the book describes Giglio's observations while accompanying Iraqi Army and Iraqi Kurdish forces as they forcibly retook Mosul from ISIS from 2016 to 2017. This is tense, firsthand combat storytelling, and it helps illustrate the ferocity of ISIS fighters, thousands of whom have acted as suicide bombers. He recounts riding in armored Humvees under attack from mortar and machine gun fire and armored truck bombs, one of which seriously injured him and killed several Iraqi soldiers nearby. Of greater importance than the combat sequences, though, are Giglio's descriptions of Iraqi special forces troopers, men who had trained with US Special Forces and had, in many cases, been fighting for their country for over a decade. Major Salam Hussein al-Obaidi, whom Giglio called "Iraq's most renowned ISIS killer," features prominently, at one point explaining to Giglio why he fights on well after he could have left it to others. "The way we feel is that we are preventing the crisis from reaching our families. From reaching our neighbors, our city, or province. And that is what makes Iraq in the end." (251)

Giglio provides nothing approaching a happy ending, highlighting the utter destruction ISIS left in its wake and the colossal rebuilding and healing that Iraq and Syria will face for years to come. But his observations on the ISIS phenomenon merit careful consideration, even when he fails to provide arguments for how the situation could have turned out better. To his lasting credit, Giglio has produced a book that should serve as one among many good starting points for understanding what happened in those lands that made up the caliphate and possibly as a warning to those whose jobs are or will be to prevent a similar conquest by violent extremists in the future. ❖

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