BOOK REVIEW:

The mind of the Islamic State
by Robert Manne
Redback, Schwartz Publishing: Carlton, Vic; 2016; 192 pp.; ISBN 9781863958813 (paperback); RRP $22.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number 412 MANN 2017

As I write, Mosul has just been liberated from the Islamic State (IS) and the ongoing offensive against IS threatens their hold on physical space in Iraq and Syria. By the time this review is published, those remaining spaces may well have been re-gained by their respective Governments. While having not declared a ‘caliphate’ in other places, the Islamic State as an organisation with a powerful ideology will likely continue to exist and evolve for some time yet. In order to ultimately destroy IS, analysts will need to understand this evolution and devise new strategies. The Mind of the Islamic State is one reference that might inform and assist this necessary process.

What are the ideas that drive IS? How did it develop and organise its unique form of violence? How might those ideas evolve given recent events? In The Mind of the Islamic State Robert Manne shows how IS’s worldview evolved, from the 1950s prison writings of Sayyid Qutb all the way to its quarterly online magazine, Dabiq; self-evidently written by intellectuals steeped in the theological tradition of Islam, with a deep knowledge of the Qur’an, the hadith and major Islamic scholars. His account traces the crucial role of texts such as The Management of Savagery, and figures such as al-Zarqawi, who set out to pit Sunni against Shi’a, tearing Iraq apart. Manne’s study of this worldview starts from the basis that nothing is more dangerous in human affairs than an idea capable of convincing followers ‘of the nobility of mass murder’.

Manne reviews a set of works that argue that true Islam requires Muslims collectively and individually, as a moral duty, to engage in jihad against both ‘apostate’ Muslim sects and against all infidels, until all the world is Islamic. Manne equates IS with the murderous regimes of the 20th century, with one profound difference: unlike Hitler, Stalin or Pol Pot, IS does not exterminate in secret. The executions are proclaimed, the beheadings are broadcast, the propaganda department boasts of the mass killings. “The fate of the Islamic State’s victims is meant to instil fearfully or angrily, with this topic will benefit from reading The Mind of the Islamic State.

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United Service 68 (4) December 2017
Royal United Service Institute for Defence and Security Studies NSW www.rusinsw.org.au