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BOOK REVIEW: INSIDE IS – 10 DAYS IN THE ISLAMIC STATE

Barbora Olejárová*

TODENHÖFER, J.: *Inside IS – 10 Tage im Islamischen Staat*. München: C. Bertelsman Verlag, 2015. 288 p. ISBN 978-3-641-17552-8.

The rise of Islamic terrorism after the 2001 and 2003 interventions in the Middle East and the following process of Arab spring has become one of the most burning security issues of the 21st Century. Nevertheless, the public concerns over terrorism declined after death of **Osama bin Laden**, leader of the terrorist group al-Qaeda in 2011, believing that removal of the leader of this organisation would mean its gradual weakening and disruption. Yet, we already know that al-Qaeda's goals and practices were very moderate compared to the other group accumulating power in the background since 2001 – the Islamic state (IS). The clashes between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims caught the attention of the Western world again only after the Muslim fighters started to bring over their activities to Europe and commit terrorist attacks in the name of the IS directly in the EU member states. Nowadays, the IS is well known for its practice of abductions and public executions of its enemies, especially Western tourists and journalists. Despite the risk, a German born journalist **Jürgen Todenhöfer** decided to take a chance of spending ten days, from 6 December to 15 December 2014, on the territory occupied by the IS, only three months after execution of the American freelance war-journalist **James Foley** in Syria as a response to the American air strikes in Iraq. The outcome of his journey is a book that offers quite unique insight into the running of the IS, its efforts and, most interestingly, into the ideology of its members explaining the relation to the other religious groups including Christians; world-conquering efforts; as well as convictions behind activities of the European converts and suicide attackers.

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Jürgen Todenhöfer graduated as a Doctor of Law at the University of Freiburg and worked as a judge at the Criminal Court of the city of Kaiserslautern from 1972. In the same year, he was elected to the German parliament for the party CDU and remained a member of the Bundestag until 1990. Besides his political career, **Todenhöfer** was active as a journalist, humanitarian and critic of the authoritarian regimes all over the world. He is well-known for his activities in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation in the 1980s; in Algeria during the civil war in the 1990s; as well as in Chile, striving for release of the Chilean prisoners in 1975. His Middle East related activities made him one of the biggest opponents of the U.S. efforts in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003; in Libya during the revolt that toppled the regime of **Muammar al-Qaddafi**, and in Syria over the Syrian war since 2011. As a lawyer, **Todenhöfer** says to assert the Roman principle *audiatur et altera pars* (listen to the other side) and therefore, he interviews both Western political leaders, as well as the so-called enemies of the West, including dictator **Augusto Pinochet** in Chile; **Bashar al-Assad** in Syria or different groups of mujahedeen. This striving for objectivity and common critique of the bloody military interventions of the Western countries, including doubts on how was he able to get so close to **Assad**, **Ghaddafi** or IS and survive, caused that he was often labelled “a supporter of dictatorships” or “terrorist sympathizer”. This critique stems also from his comments on Western democracies, which were reportedly committing unmoral and unlawful actions towards other nations and religious group for power and wealth. However, his opponents are wrong when claiming that he supports the radical Islamists because he voices his negative opinion on terrorism in his books quite clearly. The best illustration of **Todenhöfer**'s understanding of war, terrorism and Western powers are the passages from the book saying that he met many militants and terrorists in his life and they were all reasoning and acting as if someone had brainwashed their minds and repeatedly stated that the IS is a murdering terrorist organisation. However, he questions the definition of terrorism itself when saying, “*Over the last fourteen years, Al-Qaeda killed over 3,300 people in all western countries, in America and in Europe. Bush Jr. killed at least 600,000 people only in wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The war in Iraq was the breach of international law... Is this not terrorism?*” (p. 24) Therefore, the only thing his critics might be right about is his too pacifistic and idealistic view when asking for diplomatic rather than military solution of every conflict.

The book *10 days in the Islamic state* is divided into 10 chapters combining theoretical background information on Islam and terrorism with the author's

practical experience from his ten days long stay on the territory of the self-declared caliphate. The first chapter called *Birth of the Islamic state* deals with the general description of how the IS was formed, beginning in 2004 when **Abu Musab al-Zarqawi** established the organisation called al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) following the U.S. led intervention in Iraq and pledged allegiance to **Osama Bin Laden**. Consequently, he explains development of the IS beginning with power take off by **Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi** after **Zarqawi's** death; setting up of the Jabhat al-Nusra Front in Syria in 2011; split from al-Qaeda in 2013, and finally declaration of caliphate in 2014 after the conquest of Mosul. Author explains also political and religious development in the region influencing formation of the IS and clarifies importance of religion for the relation among Sunni dominated IS and Alawite background of **Bashar al-Assad**. Moreover, **Todenhöfer** develops his arguments regarding formation of the IS. He claims that after removal of the Sunni Baas regime in Iraq and power take off by the Shi'a Prime Minister **Nouri al-Maliki** (2006-2014) Sunni minority in Iraq was oppressed and thus easily radicalised and manipulated by the emerging terrorist organisation. The final ideological victory of the IS in Iraq was then occasioned by the refusal of financial support promised by the United States to the Sunni Muslims in 2006.

The other chapters describe author's preparation for the journey and the journey itself. Large part of the book contains transcriptions of his Skype and e-mail conversations with the German jihadists he managed to contact on the internet. With their help, he finally established contact with the German convert **Abu Qatadah**, who became his conductor over the entire journey. In author's own words, **Abu Qatadah** was one of the most intelligent men he ever met, with deep knowledge of history, politics and religion. Paradoxically, when reading the interview, one can see certain contradictions in **Qatadah's** talk and beliefs including misinterpretation of Quran, selection of certain facts for the sake of the IS and somehow unrealistic ideas on fulfilment of the IS's goal to create an Islamist caliphate across the world. In several parts of the text, **Abu Qatadah** expresses the relation of the IS to Christians and Jews. As the religions of the Book, they can live peacefully in the caliphate together with Muslims in case they pay the so-called protection tax. In certain passage, **Todenhöfer** asks **Qatadah** whether it is okay to kill civilians and he answers "absolutely not". Yet, in the other part, he claims that the Shi'a Muslims, Yazidis, Hindus, Atheists, Polytheists and other religious groups cannot live in the IS like Christians and Jews, because they are apostates and need to convert or die. **Todenhöfer** asks him in a certain part of the text: "And if the 150 million Shi'a of Iraq and the Shi'a

or Iran, that live in this world refuse to convert, it means they will be killed?" (p. 202) His answer is simply - "yes". This part of the book may be considered as some kind of psychological analysis of the mind of a terrorist. **Todenhöfer** tries to understand the reasons why does a European, a German convert to Islam and decides to join the terrorist group. He even conducted an interview with **Qatadah's** mother in order to find out more information about his background.

The stay in the IS alone is described only on about 70 pages of the book. The author was accompanied by his son Frederic and another companion Malcolm, and their security was supposed to be assured by the Safety guarantee directly from the secretariat of the Caliph. In his own words, he did not fear any harm because the IS wants to be seen as a state and breach of a guarantee from the Caliph regarding his security would mean defeat of this image of a sovereign and reliable state. However, he later admitted, that over the whole time in the IS, he was unsure about the authenticity of the Safety guarantee that he got. **Todenhöfer** spent most of his time in Mosul, Iraq, but he also visited the Syrian cities of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. After the numerous discussions with the members of the IS, he warns the readers that the IS is more dangerous than we assume. Yet, he also found out that most of its fighters are illiterate and they do not even know the Quran – main source of their beliefs – and if they do, their interpretation is crooked and illusive.

To conclude, the book offers an extraordinary look into the IS in a way no other journalist brought before and its main contribution is facilitation of a closer insight into the minds of the IS fighters. Given its up-to-date topic and simple style of writing combining explanatory and analytical parts with interviews and experiences from the journey itself, it may be interesting not only for the scholars but also for the wider audience unaware of the topic. The main message of this book is that if we want to defeat the enemy, we need to know him. However, the IS cannot be defeated by bombs. Moderate Sunni Arabs are the only ones who can stop the IS. The author explains political, economic and religious background of the situation in the Middle East and criticizes the barbarous and irrational radical terrorist groups, but also the Western democracies for their activities leading to destabilisation of the region and formation of the IS. Thus, he brings not only the factual information on the development of the situation, but also philosophical muse over the theoretical moral values of the Western democracies, which are often contradictory to their practical policies in the distant regions of the world.