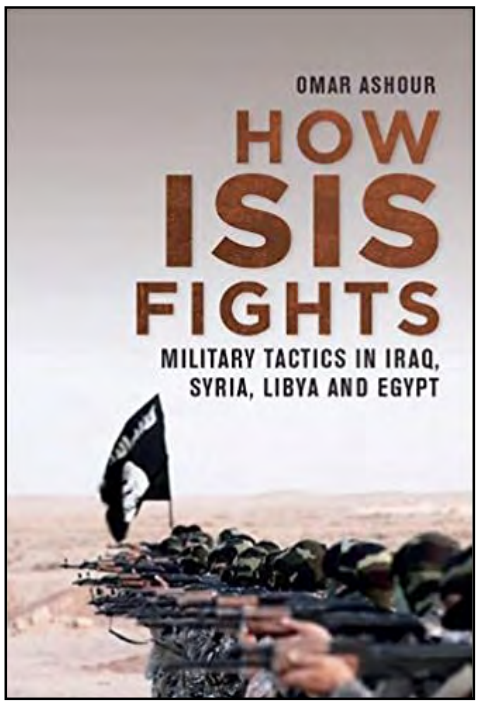
BOOK REVIEW



How ISIS Fights:
Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt

By Omar Ashour

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With the world busy fighting the Covid-19 pandemic and almost no Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terrorist attacks in the United States, United Kingdom, or Europe in the last 18 months, one might be tempted to assume that the extremist organisation is, finally, a part of history. Far from it. ISIS has managed to survive, shift strategies, and even expand in countries such as Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique.[1] The research monograph: *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt* by Omar Ashour, is a thorough examination and critical analysis of the ways in which the group has conducted its military operations across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This examination will assist the reader in gaining a deeper appreciation of the conditions under which ISIS resisted the efforts of the formidable Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, survived the decapitation of its leadership, and how it could potentially strike back.[2] With hybrid warfare on the rise, this book comes at an auspicious time for scholars and practitioners of counterinsurgency strategies wishing to gain a deeper understanding of these issues.

In this monograph, Ashour systemically studies ISIS' strategic shifts, tactical innovations, and combat effectiveness. The reader is best guided to the content of the book by scoping its three research questions: first, how did ISIS fight? Second, why did it militarily endure and expand in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt? Finally, how can we account for the group's combat effectiveness?[3] The book meticulously addresses these questions, and its findings are grounded in doctrinal and empirical data. Ashour informs the reader of his findings from extensive fieldwork, which includes interviews with soldiers and militia fighters who fought against ISIS. The empirical findings are embedded in an extensive critical analysis of ISIS publications and media productions with a specific focus on analysing the group's tactical innovations and modus operandi.

The book aims to contribute to the understanding of insurgent groups' combat effectiveness and offers insights into Armed Non-State Actors (ANSAs) future fighting strategies. The existing counterinsurgency literature relies on 'traditional' factors, such as the support of external powers, sustained domestic support, sanctuary, geography, regime type, and other factors which might determine the success of ANSAs.[4] In the case of ISIS, however, Ashour argues that these factors were not central to its resilience. Instead, ISIS' ability to "effectively shift between conventional, guerrilla, and terrorism warfare, in ways that most ANSAs were unable to achieve, was decisive to ISIS endurance and crucial to their expansion."[5] These strategic shifts were made possible by transferring know-how and disseminating knowledge of tactical innovations to the group's *Wilayat* (provinces) across the region.[6] This agility, adaptability, and autonomy on tactical and operational levels helped the organisation withstand adverse operational conditions in unfavourable grounds for military operations.[7]

Adopting a scholarly approach delivered in an accessible style, Ashour's book first engages with the existing scholarship in order to situate his book against the broader field. The book then analyses a sample of series of high-intensity battles in Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt, examining levels of combat-effectiveness and ISIS' modus operandi in each of these four countries. At the core of Ashour's theoretical and empirical analysis of the group's combat effectiveness lies both tactical ingenuity and strategic adaptation. The two combined, according to Ashour, helped the organisation endure and expand. The book concludes that ISIS excelled on the tactical level by qualitatively utilising its limited resources to achieve military upsets. Nonetheless, the group failed to achieve its ultimate strategic objective of establishing a Wahhabist-style Caliphate politically and militarily powerful enough to survive and potentially expand.[8]

This book fills a crucial lacuna in military, strategic, and counterinsurgency studies. The greatest strength of this work is that it increases readers' understanding of the ways in which ISIS fights and why it has been resilient against eradication efforts. Moreover, Ashour's *How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt* provides contemporary insights into the ways in which armed non-state actors will fight and win battles in an age of hybrid warfare. That makes this book of great interest to scholars and soldiers, as both need the insights it provides.

[1] Omar Ashour, How ISIS Fights: Military Tactics in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 3.
[2] Ibid, 44.
[3] ibid, 4.
[4] For one example see, Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn, The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency. (London: Routledge, 2014).
[5] Ashour (2021), 20.
[6] ibid, 106.
[7] ibid, 15.
[8] ibid, 204 and 210.