BOOK REVIEW:

The mind of the Islamic State

by Robert Manne

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 anticipate 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 paralysing fear into the hearts of its enemies … The killing fields are on proud display", he explains.

This book does not deal in detail with specific terrorist acts, or events in Afghanistan, Iraq, or Syria. Rather, the focus is on the ideology/worldview of some of those involved in these events. It is the ideology and beliefs which motivate individuals, and through these we can try to understand their actions (individual psychology aside).

The lucidity, historical sensitivity and textual interpretation that Manne lays before us across this dark evolution of insurgent Muslim thought are impressive. Especially interesting is how the ideology has evolved since the 1950s, the links between individuals, the building of alliances, and the differences between organisations. For anyone who has followed the news over recent decades, many familiar names appear, but how these individuals have influenced each other has not been obvious. The book is a work of moral and intellectual distinction, because it parses grim debates with close reading, fine discrimination and nuanced evaluation.

Reading between the lines, we can see how those books of the past half-century which Manne has read and thoughtfully analysed, point back to the deep roots of jihad in Mohammed's own practice, in the Qur'an and in the earliest epoch of Islam. As he observes, Sayyid Qutb understood that "the Qur'an delivers its secrets only to those whose frame of mind has been shaped in battle". In short, the one God of Islam is not the God of Abraham, of Micah, of Isaiah – or of Jesus. Mohammed's deity is a god of war and conquest and the Sunnah, the example of the prophet, is one of jihad and the killing of one's enemies and critics. Manne does examine and confront this fundamental point.

Islam did not arise or spread by peace or persuasion, nor did Mohammed preach that it should do so. It arose as a religion calling for the overthrow of all non-Muslim religions and principalities, in order that the 'truth' might prevail. For several centuries, its adherents strove by all means at their disposal to conquer the whole of Europe and Asia. The Ottomans renewed those wars of conquest and took Constantinople, Greece and the Balkans.

Modern jihadists, including the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, seek to revive this tradition of Muslim militancy. It remains active now in many parts of the Muslim world and is not confined to that vicious enclave that calls itself IS. Those who insist that IS is an aberrant form of Islam and its rise the fault of the West must reckon with the dangerous assumption that Islam is the 'final revelation' and that sooner or later the world must and will become Muslim – through jihad and as the 'will of Allah'. In time, the era of al-Qaeda and IS may be reduced to a chapter – or even a paragraph – in the story of this greater contest.

Manne is emeritus professor of politics at La Trobe University. His recent books include *Making Trouble: Essays Against the New Complacency*, and *The Words that Made Australia* (as co-editor). He has written three Quarterly Essays and is a regular contributor to the *Monthly* and the *Guardian*. *The Mind of the Islamic State* includes a glossary, endnotes and a bibliography – but no index.

The contemporary literature on the chaos in the Middle East, on Islam, jihad and terrorism, is vast. The recrimination, conspiracy theory and angry rhetoric that swirl around these topics threaten to disrupt informed and reasoned thinking. Manne has produced a well-crafted and lucid book that can inform and assist finding a way ahead. Anyone seeking to engage thoughtfully, rather than merely fearfully or angrily, with this topic will benefit from reading *The Mind of the Islamic State*.

Marcus Fielding