

*Blood Year*

*Islamic State and the Failures of the War on Terror*

David Kilcullen

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**D**avid Kilcullen has established a reputation for himself as the 'thinking person's counterrevolutionary'. An Australian national, formerly a professional soldier with counterinsurgency expertise. According to his own testimony he served 'the Bush administration in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Horn of Africa and Southeast Asia'. Since then he has served the Obama administration 'in many of the same places as an adviser and consultant to the US government, NATO and allied governments'. Today he heads up Caerus Associates, a private consultancy, and has even been embraced as one of their own by the ubiquitous McKinsey consultancy, the so-called 'Jesuits of Capitalism'. His reputation has been established by his readiness to publicly criticise Western policy: both the original invasion of Iraq, for example, and more recently the US policy of assassination by drone. His earlier books, *The Accidental Guerrilla* and *Out of the Mountains*, established his credentials as an expert in the field of counterinsurgency, and now we have *Blood Year*, an assessment of what Western strategy has achieved. The picture is pretty grim:

'In the northern [hemisphere] summer of 2014, in less than 100 days, ISIS launched its blitzkrieg in Iraq, Libya's government collapsed, civil war engulfed Yemen, a sometime small-town Iraqi preacher named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph, the latest Israel-Palestine peace initiative failed in a welter of violence.... and the United States and its allies, including the United Kingdom and Australia, sent troops and planes back to Iraq.... Thirteen years, thousands of lives and billions of dollars after 9/11, any progress in the war on terrorism had seemingly been swept away in a matter of weeks.'

On top of this Russia had 'reignited Cold War tensions by formally annexing Crimea.... and armed and sponsored

Ukrainian rebels'. Arguably, the situation has continued to deteriorate, not least in Afghanistan, affecting millions of ordinary people who are caught in the cross-hairs.

Unlike some military commentators, Kilcullen does not single out the Obama administration for blame. He rather argues for continuity between the last years of the Bush administration, the years from 2005 on, and the Obama years. Although for political reasons, 'both Republicans and Democrats downplay these similarities....they're striking all the same', he insists. Beginning in 2005, initially Bush, then his successor Obama were primarily concerned to extricate themselves from the wars Bush had started. The strategy followed with some variations since 2005 has failed and, as he acknowledges, he shares in the responsibility for this failure as he 'was part of the team that devised it'.

As far as Kilcullen is concerned the invasion of Iraq was 'the greatest strategic screw-up since Hitler's invasion of Russia'. This is strong stuff. And as for the subsequent insurgency that apparently took the Bush administration completely by surprise, not only was it predictable, but 'it was in a series of increasingly strident papers, briefings and memos by experts in guerrilla warfare, counterinsurgency and stabilization operations.... I can't recall one reputable expert in guerrilla warfare who didn't predict.... some version of the disaster that followed'.

Kilcullen's acceptance of responsibility is part of the forthright persona that he cultivates in his writing. Indeed he often takes the sceptical reader by surprise: for example, observing that British and US criticisms of Assad's appalling human rights record are somewhat compromised by their readiness to 'render' terrorism suspects to Syria for interrogation. In September 2002, the unfortunate Canadian citizen, Maher Arar, was kidnapped during a stopover in New York and flown to Syria where he was 'allegedly tortured for almost a year but later declared innocent of any terrorist connection'. We can safely remove the word 'allegedly' from this quotation; but otherwise Kilcullen's remarks are not what one expects from a counterinsurgency expert working for the

United States.

Similarly, his discussion of Iran notes that 'those of us who served in Iraq always saw Iranian actions as aggressive – understandably, I guess, since they were doing their best to kill us'; but then he goes on to acknowledge

'...that Tehran's motivation to acquire nuclear weapons, sponsor terrorists, launch covert operations and expand its influence across the region may partly have been a completely rational defensive reaction to early US moves in the War on Terror'.

Not only was Iran put on notice as part of 'the Axis of Evil', but Iranians were well aware of 'a history of Western aggression' against their country, going back to the CIA-SIS sponsored coup of 1953. He makes the point that the US had no problem with the Shah's nuclear programme ('the United States gave Iran its first reactor in 1959'), had shot down an Iranian airliner in 1988 and supported Saddam Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War. Moreover, Iran initially collaborated with the US in the War on Terror, supporting, for example, the US overthrow of the Taliban and only becoming hostile in the face of US threats.

One should not get too carried away with such brutal honesty, however, because this is not a radical honesty, but rather a *realpolitik* honesty. Kilcullen speaks truth to power not to humble the powerful, but to enable them to exercise their power more effectively. US imperial interests are best served by an unblinking engagement with the real nature of affairs, rather than with a propaganda version. But this honesty only stretches so far. There is no unblinking engagement, for example, with the problems that the Saudi regime has caused – and will continue to cause – for the United States in the Middle East. Saudi influence in the US (and in Britain) is so strong that the regime's part in contributing to the disasters of the Blood Year and after is not explored. We shall return to this question. And much the same goes for the part played by Israel. Similarly, while he quite correctly indicts the corruption of the Maliki government in Iraq, he does not criticise the even more corrupt Karzai government in Afghanistan, a government

of warlords and drug traffickers, to anything like the same extent for reasons that are nowhere apparent.

On a more mundane level, he does not really acknowledge the part played by the excesses of the US military in provoking the Iraqi insurgency. The Americans tortured prisoners to death in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and it is difficult to believe that Kilcullen was not aware of this conduct. We can be reasonably confident that allegations of torture by the US are true, because they come not from the Left, but from General Ricardo Sanchez, the US military commander in Iraq from June 2003 until June 2004. In his 2008 memoir, *Wiser in Battle: a Soldier's Story*, Sanchez writes that by the end of 2002, 'there is irrefutable evidence that America was torturing and killing prisoners in Afghanistan'. (p. 150) Indeed, 'every level in the chain of command (from Afghanistan to Washington) either knew or should have known....that deaths as a result of torture had occurred in Afghanistan'. (p. 153) This 'harsh interrogation' was then exported to Iraq. It was, according to Sanchez, 'a colossal mistake', but the Bush administration 'created an environment of fear and retribution that made top military leaders hesitant to stand up to the administration's authoritarianism'. He actually describes the Abu Ghraib scandal as 'a grotesque blessing for our country' because 'it forced America to walk away from the uncontrolled interrogation environment that had been established back in 2002 when the Bush administration suspended the Geneva Conventions'. (p. 456) This is an astonishing indictment to come from the man in charge in Iraq. Sanchez describes the Iraq War as 'a national nightmare'. (p. 454)

The biggest problem with Kilcullen's approach, however, is that he actually takes the War on Terror or rather the Great War on Terror seriously as a strategic problem. In reality it was always a convenient ideological construct, used to provide a pretext for US military aggression that was intended to reshape the Middle East, remove inconvenient regimes and establish an unchallenged US domination over the region. In practice, US economic and military power did not prove to be

up to the task and, instead of US domination, what we have seen is the region gripped by a bloody proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Indeed, a very strong case can be made that this war was actually launched by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) acting on behalf of the Saudis. Far from the Saudis regarding AQI as a threat, their deliberate plunging of Iraq into bitter sectarian war was absolutely congruent with Saudi policy. Kilcullen certainly chronicles the bestial atrocities committed by AQI against both the Sunni and Shia communities, deliberately provoking Shia reprisals by their attacks and, if these were not forthcoming, horrifically torturing to death Sunnis, including children, so that the Shia militia would be blamed. This sectarian warfare was, as Kilcullen points out, condemned by Osama Bin Laden, for whom the United States was the main enemy. One of Bin Laden's complaints was that a sectarian Sunni-Shia war would actually benefit the Saudi regime by forcing Sunni Arabs throughout the Middle East to look to it for support and protection.

While the involvement of the Pakistani secret state in supporting the Taliban is now comparatively well-known and widely acknowledged, the role of the Saudis in sponsoring first AQI and later Islamic State (ISIS) still remains hidden, indeed positively taboo. The best way to regard ISIS is as a monster created, at least in part, by a Saudi Frankenstein: a monster that has escaped its creator's control and has become a threat to him, as well as everyone else. Moreover, one has to distinguish between the international jihadis who have rallied to the ISIS cause and the Iraqi Sunni leaders who are using ISIS to fight their sectarian war with the Shia, and who have local – rather than global – concerns. In contrast, the degree of collaboration between the Turkish government and Islamic State is more generally recognised.

One of the most interesting parts of Kilcullen's book is his discussion of ISIS's military performance, in particular the innovative use they make of suicide bombing. In their attack on Ramadi in May 2015, government fortifications were initially attacked by 'six simultaneous suicide car bombs, including

armoured Humvees and an armor-plated truck.... These car bombs, including one driven by a British suicide bomber, devastated the defences with giant explosions which (in at least one case) levelled an entire city block.... Over the next two days, ISIS launched at least another twenty suicide bombs (roughly one every two hours)....' He makes the very important point that, whatever the weaknesses of the Iraqi Army, 'almost any troops in the world' would have been broken by such an attack. As he puts it, ISIS were waging conventional war by *unconventional* means. They had turned the suicide bomber from a dumb weapon to terrorise a civilian population into a smart bomber for effective use on the battlefield, and he compares them to the Japanese Kamikaze attacks towards the end of the Second World War. Such a tactic depends, of course, on the continued supply of international jihadis.

'After fourteen years, thousands of lives and hundreds of billions of dollars, we're worse off today than before 9/11, with a stronger, more motivated, more dangerous enemy than ever', he writes. So what is Kilcullen's remedy for dealing with what amounts to 'the collapse of Western counterterrorism strategy as we've known it since 2001'? We are, he insists, still engaged in 'a Long War' against a growing terrorist threat, complicated by the revival of Russian power, both in Europe and in the Middle East. A defensive stance is not an option and instead he advocates a massive increase in the resources devoted to restoring US power throughout the world, and more particularly 'a full-scale conventional campaign to destroy ISIS'. (It is worth noting that this seems to be the approach advocated by Donald Trump at the time of writing.) The crippling cost of such a strategy, the military losses that would be inevitably sustained carrying it out and the years that Western troops would have to remain in place in order to give it even a slim chance of success, rule it out. Much more likely is more of the same: the United States will wage war by means of proxy armies which it will support with special forces, airpower and, of course, assassination by drone.

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A new edition of his *British Counterinsurgency*  
has just been published.