



Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism

David Kilcullen

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2014 has the potential to go down as a crucial year in modern world history. A resurgent and bellicose Russia took over Crimea and fueled a civil war in Eastern Ukraine. Post-Saddam Iraq, in many respects a creature of the United States because of the war that began in 2003, lost a third of its territory to an army of hyper-violent millennialists. The peace process in Israel seemed to completely collapse. Finally, after coalescing in Syria as a territorial entity, the Islamic State swept into northern Iraq and through northeastern Syria, attracting legions of recruits from Europe and the Middle East. In short, the post-Cold War security order that the US had constructed after 1991 seemed to be coming apart at the seams.

David Kilcullen was one of the architects of America's strategy in the late phases of the second Gulf War, and also spent time in Afghanistan and other hotspots. In *Blood Year*, he provides a wide-angle view of the current situation in the Middle East and analyzes how America and the West ended up in such dire circumstances. Whereas in 2008 it appeared that the U.S. might pull a modest stalemate from the jaws of defeat in Iraq, six years later the situation had reversed. After America pulled out of Iraq completely in 2011, the Shi'ite president cut Sunnis out of the power structure and allowed Iranian influence to grow. And from the debris of Assad's Syria arose an extremist Sunni organization even more radical than Al Qaeda. Unlike Al Qaeda, ISIS was intent on establishing its own state, and within a remarkably short time they did. Interestingly, Kilcullen highlights how embittered former Iraqi Ba'athist military officers were key contributors to ISIS's military successes.

Kilcullen lays much of the blame on Bush's initial decision to invade Iraq (which had negative secondary effects in Afghanistan), but also takes Obama to task for simply withdrawing and adopting a "leading from behind" strategy. As events have proven, Kilcullen contends, withdrawal was a fundamentally misguided plan. The U.S. had uncorked the genie, and it had a responsibility to at least attempt to keep it under control. Instead, the U.S. is at a point where administration officials state that the losses of Ramadi and Palmyra are manageable setbacks. Kilcullen argues that the U.S. needs to re-engage in the region, whether it wants to or not, because it is largely responsible for the situation that is now unfolding. *Blood Year* is an essential read for anyone interested in understanding not only why the region that the U.S. invaded a dozen years ago has collapsed into utter chaos, but also what it can do to alleviate the grim situation.

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