

## BOOK REVIEW

*Only Cry for the Living: Memos from Inside the ISIS Battlefield*, by Hollie S. McKay. Houston: Jocko Publishing & Di Angelo Publications 2020, 436pp.

**O**nly *Cry for the Living* “is not a comfortable read. It is not a pleasant read. It is an important read,” former Navy SEAL Jocko Willink states in his foreword. He is absolutely right.

For many Americans, involvement in Iraq ended in 2011, and they are but dimly aware of the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and subsequent multiyear conflict in Iraq and Syria, a conflict that has not ended. The advance and retreat of ISIS and its vision of a medieval caliphate caused much damage, displaced many people, and continues to gnaw at Middle East stability and peace.

Reporter Hollie S. McKay spent years covering the war against ISIS. She compiled what she termed “memos” of her experiences, covering the years 2014–2018. Scores of these memos, arranged in chronological order, make up this book.

McKay’s travels took her all over Iraq, from Baghdad to the front lines near Mosul and into the Kurdish areas. She met fighters, refugees, displaced persons (she explains the difference), Yazidi survivors of persecution and sex slavery, government officials, war crimes investigators, and many others. Her detailed and vivid memos bring their stories to life and are interspersed with commentary on culture, dress, food, the weather, and other related details. Readers encounter some people multiple times and see the war’s cumulative effects on them.

McKay offers very little of grand strategy or big-picture discussion; her relentless focus is on the people on the ground caught up in these events. She does not shy away from discussing war crimes and other difficult topics. McKay mostly successfully resists the temptation to provide detailed commentary and prefers to let the stories stand on their own for the reader to assess as they wish.

At some point in virtually every memo McKay asks, *what is war?* She immediately provides an answer tied to the experience of the people in that memo. The answers often make a strong statement about the conflict’s impact on those in the region. Taken in the aggregate, they profoundly demonstrate the multifaceted nature of war itself.

All that said, the book does have several limitations. There are periodic spelling and spacing errors in the text. The lack of an index or a detailed table of contents makes the book difficult to use for later reference. One would have liked more information on how the memos were sourced and compiled—were they contemporary to the events, written later from notes, or some combination thereof?

In the end, McKay has made a very important contribution to the story of the fight against ISIS and to the literature of war in the early twenty-first century. This book is highly recommended for anyone interested in modern Middle East

conflicts, the war against ISIS specifically, the nature of war itself, or the human aspect of conflict.

**Christopher L. Kolakowski**

Mr. Kolakowski works as a historian in Madison, Wisconsin. He is the author of five books on the American Civil War and World War II, and a reviewer and contributor to the *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*. The views contained herein are his own.

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