

## Book Review

Camille Tawil. *Brothers in Arms: The Story of Al-Qa'ida and the Arab Jihadists* London: Saqi, 2010. Translated by Robin Bray. 208 pp. £14.99/ \$18.95. ISBN: 9780863564802 (pbk).

Reviewed by Richard Phelps

The story of Osama bin Laden's life is well known, yet a narrow focus on his own itinerary and that of his followers too often overlooks a wider trend among Islamist militants during the 1990s. Al-Qa'ida's history is inseparable from its associates, argues Camille Tawil. His book rightly places the group in a wider context of Islamist militancy in the wake of the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan. Al-Qa'ida was not the only post-Afghan group to emerge and in this fascinating account Tawil recounts the histories of its Algerian, Egyptian, and Libyan *Brothers in Arms*. It is essential reading for anyone wishing to understand the wider revolutionary generation of which al-Qaeda is part.

Tawil is well-placed to do so. For decades, this Lebanese journalist has reported from London on the activities of North African Islamist groups in the Arabic newspaper *al-Hayat*. Throughout the 'Londonistan' era, Tawil gained the trust of, and access to, many insider sources completely unattainable to most Western journalists. It clearly payed off; his book traces the groups of Arab volunteers who had fought in Afghanistan as they coalesced into militant groups dedicated to continuing their struggle and overthrowing the authoritarian Arab regimes that many of their members had earlier had to flee from. Tawil hops nimbly between the Egyptian, Libyan and Algerian experiences of the jihad and allows his interviewees to do much of the talking.

Algeria during the 1990s in many ways offered a template that the conflict in Iraq came to echo in the 2000s. Many Muslims were outraged by the incumbent military regime's cancellation of elections that had seen it trounced by its Islamist opposition in the first round and before that at the municipal level. As rioting and repression led to a chaotic insurgency, the scale of butchery and massacres came to repulse the bulk of those who had initially been sympathetic to the violence. Tawil details the ins and outs of the Algerian struggle from the perspective of the militants and highlights the fratricidal spats between the different Islamist militants and factions.

The Libyan experience of Islamism is the least well known. Not only is Libya an understudied state; the bulk of attention has previously focused on Colonel Gaddafi as an Islamist and a dissenter, rather than the target of Islamist dissent. For the first time here, Tawil outlines the history of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG): from Afghanistan, to Sudan, to Libya and London and finally back to Afghanistan. Its uprising was crushed, and its attempts to kill Gaddafi failed, and the group continued to limp on in exile.

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Tawil's focus in all three case studies is on the violent end of the Islamist spectrum, but his account does not suffer for it. The Egyptian and Algerian jihads have both been examined on their own terms previously, but Tawil places both conflicts in a wider context of uprising. In a number of places the book revises the familiar history of international Islamist militancy, many of which will surprise the less-immersed. By far its strongest feature is the level of detail Tawil is able to bring from the accounts of militants themselves. Shedding light on this revolutionary generation, in one passage he cites a seasoned former Libyan militant who tells of another Libyan who was travelling on a false Tunisian passport but awkwardly forgot the name that was written on it when he was stopped and questioned by a Sudanese policeman (p.94).

*Brothers in Arms* is a much-condensed and updated translated version of Tawil's Arabic book *Al-Qa'ida and its Sisters*. Though much detail has been lost in the cuts from the original, this book nevertheless remains a hugely valuable source for the level of detail it brings from those who experienced the events described. However, its' closing chapter on the jihad in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the Maghreb post-9/11 is too cursory, and examines neither context in sufficient depth to do them justice. Like most revolutionaries, the militants Tawil describes did not gain power. An interesting postscript though, is in the book's final pages where he charts several of the groups' recantations and reconciliations with the ruling regimes. Wisely though, he ends on a cautionary note, since the power structures that such groups sought to uproot remain firmly entrenched.

**Richard Phelps** is a Research Fellow at the Quilliam Foundation (London). He focuses on the history and development of Islamist dissent in the Arabic world.