Book Reviews

Peter Bergen. The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict between America and Al-Qaeda

Reviewed by Richard Phelps

Among the voluminous literature written about Osama bin Laden and his organization, writers who can be trusted appear to be less than common. Peter Bergen however, has already published two books on the subject that have long entered the canon of trustworthy accounts. His first, an oral history of Bin Laden, and his second, a general narrative of Al-Qaeda up to 9/11, are now joined by Bergen's third book on the subject: a history of conflict during the decade since. Bergen stated his aim is to write a "narrative history of the "war on terror", based upon a synthesis of all the open-source materials". True to his word, this is exactly the value of what The Longest War delivers: a generalist synoptic account of the ‘War on Terror’.

In his opening passage, Bergen faults most histories of the “war on terror” for being written from a purely American perspective. Claims that an author’s testimony is based, in part, on interviews with “leading members of Al-Qaeda, including bin Laden”, should usually be grounds for severe skepticism by the reader. In Bergen’s case, however, he is one of few Western journalists to have interviewed the man, back in the 1990s. Indeed, in addition to quoting from the predictable pantheon of stock commentators on all matters Al-Qaeda-related, the high point of The Longest War is that Bergen gives time to the testimony of a number of lesser-known figures.

Bergen quotes Ali Hamza al-Bahlul, a Yemeni who made propaganda videos for Bin Laden, on the reaction of Al-Qaeda members in Afghanistan when the news reports of the 9/11 attacks were first broadcast over the air. Likewise, he quotes Ayman Saeed Abdullah Batarfi, a Yemeni doctor, who provides an account of the battle of Tora Bora from Bin Laden’s side. “I did a hand amputation by a knife, and I did a finger amputation with scissors” to wounded Al-Qaeda’s fighters, the doctor states. Giving airtime to such fox-hole figures, and others such as the Saudi fighters Khalid al-Hubayshi and Gahemin al-Harbi, represents the high point of Bergen’s book; it is a shame that he passes over them quickly in his survey.

In the later chapters however, Bergen falters from his earlier commitment and becomes distracted with the American-centric policy debates over how to continue the ongoing occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Like the histories he earlier faulted, Bergen too becomes side-tracked at times with personality clashes and differing approaches of policymakers and Pentagon officials – all at the expense of the wider picture. In so doing, he neglects to relate the ramifications of the differing sides’ approaches on the overall Conflict between American and Al-Qaeda that the book is supposed to be about. This stands in contrast to the way he introduces the debates over which
trajectory that the jihadist movement has taken – be it leaderless or centrally directed - in the
decade since 9/11. In place of such a tangent, the book would have benefited from a more
regional treatment of Al-Qaeda’s franchises in the past decade, looking at the Arabian Peninsula
and North Africa in addition to Afghanistan and Iraq.

In no small part, Bergen’s book is an account of the strategic errors and miscalculations on both
sides of the conflict. The 9/11 attacks almost destroyed bin Laden’s network, and lost it the safe
haven it had once enjoyed in Afghanistan. Likewise, though the Iraq war was a gift to the jihadist
movement, allowing it to regenerate itself in the heart of the Arab world, it squandered any
popularity capital Al-Qaeda had in resisting the occupation through its wanton and indiscriminate
violence targeting fellow Muslims. Given the opportunity to mess up, Al-Qaeda frequently has
done so. Likewise on the American part, concerning the intelligence failure of 9/11, Bergen
writes “[r]arely have the enemies of the United Sates publicly warned so often of their plans.”
Moreover in the decade since, Bergen depicts the worldwide sympathy for the US in the wake of
9/11 dwindling amid an adventurist foreign policy and a disdain for international legal protocols
on extradition, torture, child soldiers, and prisoner rights.

There can be no mistake about Al-Qaeda and its sisters being products of the authoritarian
regimes found across the Middle East and Central Asia. Though its members vigorously reject
the ruling systems ‘back home’ and opt instead for the austere life of wandering ‘Strangers’, the
organization itself mirrors such regimes quite profoundly in its make-up. Structured around the
personality cult of a front man, the underlying architecture of Al-Qaeda, writes Bergen, is
intensely bureaucratic with its committees, admin, and form-filling. Its appeal may be utopian
and escapist, but its reality is both squalid and mundane.

Bergen suggests that an attitude of “if you are against the terrorists, then you are with us” would
have been strategically more helpful to the US than “either you are with us, or you are with the
terrorists”. Yet the latter is precisely the attitude that was taken by the Bush administration in the
years since 9/11, and it was used to justify sustaining the continued rule of authoritarian regimes
across the Muslim-majority world as valued allies in a “war on terror”.

The author sees the events of 1979 as being of profound importance in inspiring and shaping the
22 year old Osama’s vision of work politics. Indeed, 1979 was a remarkable year in the Middle
East: a peace deal signed between Egypt and Israel, a pro-US authoritarian regime ousted in Iran
by a popular uprising, gunmen taking over the Grand Mosque in Mecca in dissent against the
house of Saud, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. More than three decades later, one can
only speculate on what impact the events in the Arab world of 2011 will have on shaping the
world-views of today’s 22 year olds. Though Bergen’s CNN jargon occasionally gets the better
of him, with passages describing the “feeling that burns inside bin Laden…” a “blind hatred” and
a “fanaticism [that] burned so hot”, Bergen’s assessments of the political landscapes are sensible
and his history of the past decade remains lively and informative.
About the Reviewer: Richard Phelps is an Associate Fellow at the Quilliam Foundation (London). He focuses on the history and development of Islamist dissent in the Arabic world.