

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Black Banners: Inside the Hunt for Al-Qaeda* by Ali H Soufan and Daniel Freedman

Review by: Richard Phelps

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## Book Reviews

**Ali H Soufan and Daniel Freedman. *The Black Banners: Inside the Hunt for Al-Qaeda*. London: Allen Lane / W.W. Norton; 2011**

**572 pp. ISBN 1846145023. £25; US\$ 38.99**

**Reviewed by Richard Phelps**

As a native Arabic speaker familiar with the societies of the Middle East, Ali Soufan was relatively unusual among FBI agents in the pre-9/11 era. Long before 9/11, the Lebanese-born law enforcement officer devoted himself to studying the Bin Laden network and the threat it posed to the US. As a result, he quickly came to serve at the forefront of the US fight against Al-Qaeda. Now having left the FBI to work as a consultant in the private sector, his memoir offers one of the most granular behind-the-scenes accounts to date of the early years of the American struggle against the Bin Laden network.

Like any memoir, there is a predictable degree of self-justification. If only others had listened to Soufan's Cassandra-like warnings about the threat that the Bin Laden network posed, and of the risks posed by the lack of inter-agency cooperation, he laments. Yet such vindication detracts little from the fascinating on-the-ground account he offers at the centre of some of the most significant episodes during the "War on Terror". Soufan is in his element when he discusses what he experienced: the trips he made, the investigations he carried out, the suspects he interviewed.

Two themes stand out from the book in particular, one of which the author tries to make with vigor and the other less so. Firstly, although he does highlight occasional exceptions, the animosity between the FBI and the CIA saturates the book – and is perhaps the central theme. Soufan details persistent personality clashes, and an ingrained and institutionalised unwillingness for the two organisations to help one another in their investigations. *That* such frustrations occurred is common knowledge, and has been well-documented in the official 9/11 Commission Report. What Soufan offers throughout are repeated examples showcasing how such rivalry and hostility was manifested, not just between the FBI and the CIA, but also involving US embassies overseas.

Nowhere is the lack of cooperation seen more than in the book's editing. The manuscript was submitted and approved by the FBI, but Soufan reports that the CIA sought to redact swathes of the text. Committed to publishing the book by a specific date, the result is that the book is published with black lines throughout, thereby indicating what the censors did not want published. In the introduction, the author voices his frustration at this, since most of the material that was censored was already in the public domain. Yet one also senses a degree of relish on his part, since the censor's pen complements the author's prose in highlighting the frustrations he reportedly came up against.

The second theme of the book is asserted less forcefully, indeed almost by coincidence. Throughout the text, the author introduces various figures associated with the Bin Laden network as being brothers or brothers-in-law, nephews, uncles, or husbands of other figures. The picture that emerges is a strong demonstration of Marc Sageman's presentation of terrorist organisations as movements rooted among socially-connected groups of people. In this regard, more than the

glossary of individuals that it offers, the book would have benefitted from a chart that depicts how the network of figures he presents joins together in terms of their relationships.

*Black Banners* is relatively long, and the author's grasp of Al-Qaeda and the Bin Laden network is subtle, detailed, and deep. For the benefit of unfamiliar readers, the book is padded out by lengthy forays into the background of Islamism and Middle Eastern history. Despite the author's background, it is here that he errs – when he shifts from memoir to history. In so doing, in a number of cases Soufan displays an unsophisticated grasp of wider issues: “Wahhabis came from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, Salafis primarily from Jordan, and takfiris [those who advocate the excommunication of self-declared Muslims] mainly from North Africa” (p.12) and the “appeal of an alliance between the Taliban and al-Qaeda was also based on a shared connection to (or, perhaps more accurately, a manipulation of) traditional Wahhabism” (p.58), he writes, for example. By contrast, the book is strongest when he relates the events he himself experienced.

Soufan's ability during his time with the FBI to access and engage first hand with A-Qaeda members and primary documents provides a strong backbone to his account. Among the many volumes published to mark the tenth anniversary of 9/11, Soufan's is a major contribution. Its strength lies in the granularity and personal experience it offers, rather than in providing a broader narrative. The author does not shy from making assertions - some of which may attract controversy, particularly when he accuses a number of individuals who currently remain at liberty despite their involvement in terrorism - and he offers a remarkable account of the fight against terrorism from the perspective of investigatory law enforcement.

**About the Reviewer: Richard Phelps** *an Adjunct Fellow at the Quilliam Foundation (London). He focuses on the history and development of Islamist dissent in the Arabic world.*